

Art Breathes

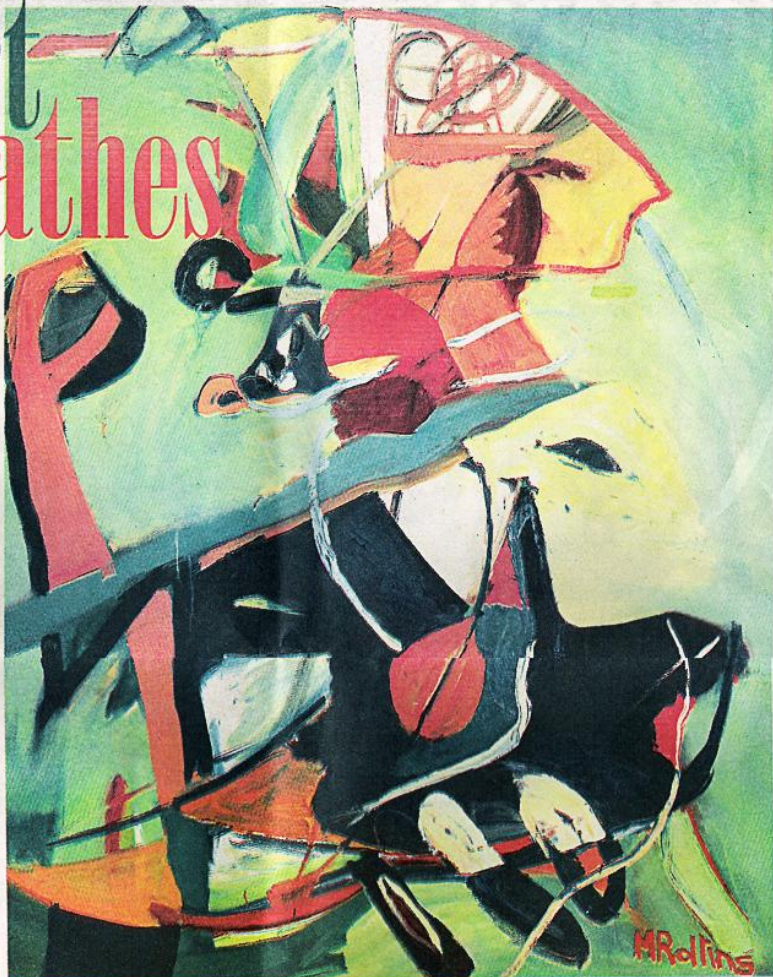
BY LEISHA CHEN-YOUNG

It may seem an unlikely place for an art exhibition, but it couldn't be more ideal if it was built specifically for the show.

Set beyond the entrance of The Shoppes of Rose Hall, past the restaurants, cafés, jewellery stores, gift stores and clothing stores, past the mammoth water wheel, the show fills an underground, raw, concrete space, illuminating stark white walls with colour, energy and a vibrancy that speaks to the Caribbean, but is wrapped in a New York, urban slang.

The artist may not look or sound Jamaican on the outside, but Jamaica has played a huge part in who she is today. Monique Rollins is excited about showing in Jamaica. Excited that the country has so far been so accepting of her work, but all the while, a little apprehensive. While her intense blue eyes radiate with laughter, there is a sense that she is a little guarded, a little wary of how Jamaica will see her work.

Although it's abstract, it's very expressive, full-palette, flowing with movement and energy," Rollins tells SO of her work. As she sees it, her work is a personalised vocabulary that she has built up over years of creativity. They speak to the whimsical dynamics of motion, whilst drawing from the private expressions and emotions she has internalised throughout her life. The oil on canvas pieces are contemporary works, oversized, and overflowing with a spirit that emanates strongly from this 28-year-old. She is protective of her work, proud though to walk interested visitors through the show.



The Power Walker, oil on canvas

On first sight, the show is an assault of colour, but not a violent one. Although they are pieces that do not speak to the viewer immediately (and may not speak to some visitors at all, which Rollins accepts as part of the contemporary art process), on closer inspection, the textures and shapes give colour and form to such themes as childhood memories, politics and religion. Take for example, *The Power Walker*, a piece that draws from the oft-times 'violent energy' and movement of power walkers the artist often sees from her Brooklyn home, an energy that also corresponds to living in New York City.

"Artists are sensitive people," she says, "we tend to internalise

everything that we are surrounded by, whether it be emotions, music, politics, it always comes out when we create." And while it may be a subconscious and deeply personal thing, it is not something that she hides. Being an artist means communicating on some sort of level, and that is what she does with her work. In fact, with personal responses to a number of artists, from Paul Klint and Pablo Picasso to Arshile Gorky, Rollins explains that it is almost impossible not to respond to the uniqueness of this internalisation. "Responding to the work of these other artists, is how I respond to life," Rollins says. "It is almost impossible not to respond to this raw and authentic look at life. It's necessary."



Dyptich, oil on canvas. (Photos: Leisha Chen-Young)



From left: Ravens, charcoal and conte crayon on canvas; Idea Sketch, oil on canvas; Lime Snail, charcoal and conte crayon on canvas.



Jamaica Triptych, oil on canvas.



Play, oil on canvas

While a number of the pieces were created specifically for the show, the exhibition also allowed her to show some older pieces - creating a retrospective of sorts

Having spent her holidays in Jamaica, growing up, Rollins credits her parents for the breadth and depth of her creative nature. Daughter of Rose Hall's Michelle Rollins and the late Sir John Rollins, she laughs, throwing her head back, much like her mother. But while she is deeply proud of her family she hopes that her body of work can be seen through eyes independent of the 'Rollins lens.' I have always wanted to do a show in Jamaica," she says, "and be a part of the Rollins community by showing what I am doing." But it had to be the perfect body of work and the perfect space. This was the time. Being familiar with the space in advance, Rollins created with the raw concrete in mind. It enabled her to work on scales she had not before, bringing her work to a whole new dimension.

She does add, however, that her family has been a tremendous support. In fact, Rollins explains that her mother has shown impressive interest in her talent, joining the Collector's Committee at the National Gallery of Jamaica, as well as studying

books, to learn the vocabulary of modern art — educating and immersing herself in modern art. "She wants to participate in my world," Rollins says of her mother Michelle. "She's made such a great effort to study what I do, to understand it. That's a wonderful mother and friend."

While a number of the pieces were created specifically for the show, the exhibition also allowed her to show some older pieces — creating a retrospective of sorts. By doing so, viewers are able to decipher the journey Rollins is taking through her work. While she calls it a visual version of a diary, it also shows her growth and understanding of art. Talking about the different mediums, the scope of the exhibition allows visitors to compare her work on different canvases, from the series of small, light, airy and playful watercolour collages she created whilst in Florence, Italy, to some of the larger pieces she created specifically for the show. "Oil takes longer and builds patience," she says, "you have to really earn your images with oil. The brush

strokes and texture become part of the work, and you have to learn to embrace them. Charcoal is great for getting down your ideas quickly. It's heartbreaking to choose, but different mediums draw me at different periods. It depends on what I need creatively." In truth, it is not the type of work that appeals to all audiences and Rollins knows that some people will love her work, while others will hate it. However, it is suggested that her pieces be viewed with an open mind without necessarily looking for an answer. Drink in the movement, the textures and forms, and the artistic experience is complete. This in turn is what Rollins hopes people will take away from the show. Love or disgust, either way, the art is drawing a response from its viewer, an essentially important element when it comes to creating. The pieces don't necessarily need to be beautiful," she says. "In fact, they can make you cringe, but they must draw a response. They must have a heartbeat, they must be living and breathing on the wall."