Stories of the past come alive on canvas

"I've never picked cotton. I've never even seen a cotton field," artist Sharon Johnnie Williams, 35, confides with a good-natured grin while standing in the midst of canvases revealing a period that vanished long ago.

The paintings, celebrating African American history and culture, are scattered about the living room of her modest Kaplan home. The recent collection of S. John (Sa-jon) Artworks is done in the "primitive art" style — simple, innocent, charming and possessing a child-like quality. Some are serious, others delightfully humorous.

"If I feel it, I can paint it," she says. And her paintings are alive with emotion.

One of Williams' favorites, titled "Sun Down," depicts seven field hands leaving a cotton field at the end of a working day. Their backs appear tired and stooped. Another of the dramatic paintings, titled "Market Place," is a busy scene.

"A lot of them came from memory of background, stories I guess that I just carry with me," Williams explained, referring to those handed down by her parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

A graduate of Kaplan High School, she attended USL and Gulf Area Vocational Technical School and presently works as a mental health technician in the psychiatric unit at Abram Kaplan Memorial Hospital. The artist describes herself as a shy person, lacking confidence in her talent because she has never had professional art lessons.

"I can't tell when I picked it up because I've always done some form of art work," Williams continued. "I always did like drawing from an early age."

Two years ago, she began using oils and the public demand for her work has increased with around 150 paintings sold. Her art shows — during Black History Month and at the National Black Business and National Black Caucus — have all sold out, she says.

"It is amazing that I can capture somebody's attention on canvas," Williams says, describing the joy she feels while listening to a group of admirers discuss her work. "It's surprising to me. I never thought of my art as a market. It was just something given to me. It's a gift you need to share."

The painting, "Misery," shows a woman dressed in white praying. "Tough Love" depicts a poor woman seated in a wooden chair with three punished children around her.

"We had a very tough upbringing," the creator of the image explains. "The boys could go and the girls couldn't. But I appreciate that now."

One of eight girls, Williams also had three brothers. Several of her humorous paintings include females strutting or pouting in amusing situations. Some of her works are perhaps the most beloved of her subjects, such as "Baptism," and in "The Stoop," a painting of a woman watching a group of admirers discuss her work.

"Mirror, Mirror" demonstrates the need for more than one full-length mirror in a household full of women. "No Way To Act" depicts two well-dressed, young women pouring with backs to each other, hands on their hips, pursed lips and noses in the air.

And then there are others that offer a glimpse into different areas of life. In "Resting," people reposing under the coolness of shade trees. "The Stoop" shows a woman washing on the back step of a house. And in "The Fall," some well-dressed sisters walk hand-in-hand to church or a special occasion.

"The Yard" shows people dancing with a cut watermelon nearby on a picnic table. "Hallelujah" has people joyfully singing and dancing. "Attitude" has four women wearing long, white dresses and big hats walking in a row with arched backs and extended buttocks. There are also "Baby Carriage," "Somewhere" and "Expression."

"Mystified," done in 1992, is not for sale. A young black girl sits on a tree stump in a green field looking beyond the wood fence that holds her in. The artist is asked to explain.

"She's just sitting down gazing or punished, locked in the yard and can't go no further," Williams says with a knowing smile.

"Is that you or one of your sisters?" she is asked.

The artist is reluctant to respond, but grins. Her attitude is warm and friendly.

"We were poor but we were rich. We had the things that money can't buy," she explains.

Many of the people in her paintings exhibit this emotion.

"If they're not happy, they're laid back," Williams adds.

Another of the artist's assets is her ability to fully imagine a painting before she begins and then complete the work in a single sitting. Many of her paintings are completed in just a few hours.

"I cannot sit before the same canvas with the same story I've been doing for two months," she says. "It's got to be done and out of the way."

On the wall behind her sofa hang many items, among them a fancy mirror, her beloved "Mystified," as well as portraits of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X although, she says, she does not agree with the violence associated with the latter's early years.

"I wasn't brought up with anger, so I don't have anger in me," she says.

Another keepsake that catches the eye is a painting by the artist Ellis Wilson, titled "Baptism." And in 150 other homes and offices hang the works of Sharon Johnnie Williams — as far away as California, she says, and in such places as government buildings in Baton Rouge.

"I've sold to senators, commissioners, assistant commissioners," Williams says. However, she likes to keep the pictures priced so that the average person can afford them or at least a print. The prices range from $100 to $1,000. Already the artist has been offered three contracts by art dealers, she says, but has refused.

Williams hopes to expand her work to include greeting cards. Among those encouraging Williams are a sister in New Orleans and her husband, Stanley. Her parents did not live to see their sixth child's artistic success.

However, the stories of their ancestors, passed down from generation to generation, live on the vivid canvases of "Sa-jon" celebrating African American History and Culture.

"A painting has to have movement," Williams says. "It has to tell a story."

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