

"Monrovia: In Constellation"

By Rebecca Banner-Addae

The night time sky, with its constellations and groupings of stars visible to the eye, has always fascinated humans. In Liberia, like in most other cultures, the encompassing night sky has inspired rituals and tales reaching beyond the tangible.

"Monrovia: In Constellation" is a tribute to Liberia. The roughly 5 1/2 by 8 1/2 foot painting recreates an accurate delineation of the stars and the moon as they shone at 10 p.m. on 26 July 1847, the day the Republic of Liberia was founded.

"I yet have the joy to visit Monrovia in person," says the New York based painter, Ellen Frank. "But from artistic dreaming and lengthy conversations [with scholars and artists knowledgeable about Liberia] we decided that the night sky is inspiring to the people of Monrovia and throughout Liberia, transcending ethnicities and belief systems."

"Monrovia: In Constellation" is part of the series, CITIES OF PEACE TM honouring the history and culture of cities

around the world, which in recent times have experienced immense conflict and suffering including Baghdad, Hiroshima, Jerusalem, Kabul, New York and Sarajevo.

The series is intended as a celebration of the exceptional capacity of humans in transforming pain into beauty. Frank and a number of international interns work with the technique known as illumination. "For centuries, societies diverse in culture and religion have had this timeless craft in common,"

explains Frank.

"It's a union of words and pictures with paint and precious metals and it has been used for documents as varied as the Koran, a Hebrew Haggadah, a New Testament manuscript, Indian romance, and medical treatises."

Palladium leaf, moon gold and aquarelle were used on linen to create "Monrovia: In Constellation". The physical landscape of Monrovia, drawn from a circa

1849 map, is indigo blue like the deep night. The patterns in the moon gold and the palladium leaf are inspired by Liberian fabrics.

Visit www.efaf.org for exhibition dates and information on the Ellen Frank Illumination Arts Foundation, a public benefit organisation, whose purpose it is to build a culture of peace and understanding through art.



Slum Survivors

Reviewed by Sulaiman Momoda

In the sprawling Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya, residents have to scrape a living outside the formal economy for survival. "Slum Survivors", a documentary produced by the Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN), tells the stories of six people who live in Kibera and their remarkable courage in the face of extreme poverty and misery.

The 30-minute documentary begins with a woman in labour who gives birth in an unhygienic environment as she cannot afford going to hospital. The baby boy is destined to grow up in the harsh and filthy slum where life is huge challenge, more so for single mothers.

One of the female slum dwellers featured in the documentary supports her family by doing odd jobs such as laundering clothes for the rich.

She sometimes returns home with nothing and laments that at times she

hates herself and feels like committing suicide. Amidst the harsh conditions and hard times, the slum dwellers hope one day God will come down and change their situation.

Kibera slum is notorious for crime. Unemployment is very high among the youths who turn to crime for survival sometimes with tragic consequences as some of them either end up in prisons or are killed. One of the youths says he is most times haunted by crimes they commit.

In addition to diseases such as HIV/AIDS, which claim the lives of dwellers, frequent fire accidents add misery to their lives. Although the documentary was produced long before Kenyans recently went to the polls to elect a new government, Kibera is one of the areas that had been affected by the post-election violence in the country. The documentary is dedicated to the people of Kibera and to the memory of one of those who helped in its making but was shot dead in a random killing in the slum sometime last June. It is estimated that worldwide about a billion people live in slums with about a million living in Kibera.

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