

History, perspective crafted into artist's work

Catisha Marsh
Sentinel-Voice

A 5-ton, 13-foot tall Alex Haley stares calmly ahead with a gentle, look on his face.

He looks grandfatherly — sitting down, getting ready to tell you that story about how many miles he had to walk to school.

But as lifelike as he is, it's a statue.

"Two delivery guys came in when I was working on Alex Haley," said sculptor Tina Allen, creator of the larger-than-life bronze work. "They were about 16 or 17, young black guys. I climbed down off the statue and looked up at this big Alex Haley. 'I feel better,' I said. They said at the same time, 'I feel better, too'."

And feeling better is what it's all about, Allen says. She only sculpts African-Americans because she says it's her mission to raise the consciousness and lift the spirits of people of African descent.

"Sculptures make you feel so much better," she said. "Our (black people's) accomplishments get swept under the rug in this country. These works remind America

of our contributions. They heal the person who was hurt and the person who hurt."

Las Vegas will get the chance to experience Allen's work firsthand. She will sculpt a 12-foot statue of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that will stand outside of the Community Resource Center on Martin Luther King Blvd. and Carey.

Allen started painting at age 5. At 10, world-renowned sculptor William Zorach discovered her talent and took her under his wing.

The New York-born Allen went to the School of Visual Arts, then to the University of Alabama and later honed her skills at New York's Pratt Institute and studied at the University of Venice in Italy.

Allen developed two distinctive forms of expression.

The first she calls the "Historical Body of Representational Sculptures." It depicts the people in the African diaspora who should be lauded for their accomplishments. For Allen, molding her lifelike figures is "writing our history in bronze."

The second is "Symbolic Abstractions," comprised of

freely flowing symbolic figures that embody cultural moors and celebrate African physical beauty

"Art should do more than decorate. Art is about icons, symbols, ideas. It's like a stop sign. It makes you pause and take notice," she said.

Allen emphasizes traditional African features in her works, intent on creating a new aesthetic that champions African-ness and blackness.

"I'm pro-black," she said. "But that doesn't mean I'm anti-anybody. Black artists have got to make the effort to control the aesthetic. We can't get mad at other people for not singing our song."

"When we celebrate our physical looks, we're sending a message to our children to appreciate our features and respect our potential. Our children must be able to say, 'greatness comes out of people who look like me,'" she said.

Allen's career got a boost in 1986 when she won a national contest and received an \$85,000 commission to create a 9-and-one-half foot statue of A. Phillip Randolph.

Since then, she's produced statue after statue, including



Photo special to Sentinel-Voice

Tina Allen works on a nearly 13-foot tall sculpture of "Roots" author Alex Haley.

life-size busts of Martin Luther King, Marcus Garvey and a bust of Malcolm X.

Among notables who

collect her work are Nelson Mandela, Denzel Washington, Hilary Clinton, Angela Basset, Harry

Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Muhammad Ali and Bill Cosby.

"We have to lift the prestige of people who look like us," she said. "That makes you more proud of how you look when you see a huge statue who looks like you."

Allen recently completed a statue of Sojourner Truth that was unveiled in Battle Creek, Mich.

"Sojourner Truth — it's as if her spirit is so damn glad to be lifted again," she said.

She credits divine inspiration for her talents. "I honestly believe the thing is God. He's flowing through me to bring to light again the beauty of these souls in black containers," she said.

"I study them," she said of the containers.

"I put pictures of them up all around. I load my spirit with them and I just keep working until they look back at me."

"We don't have it rough," said the mother of three, who resides in Los Angeles.

"Our ancestors didn't have no psychotherapy or anything like that. They healed themselves through love. They survived because they believed in the future."

Lawmakers, parents, students teleconference on state exam

Sandra Douglass

Special to Sentinel-Voice

As of Friday, 1,501 seniors still had not passed the math portion of the state proficiency exam.

Disgruntled parents have bombarded lawmakers with phone calls the last two weeks angry that their children can't pass the revamped test.

The Assembly Education Committee meeting was beamed to the Grant Sawyer Building Wednesday and participants were able to share their stories of approximately 8.8 percent of all Nevada seniors, 1,501, failed the math portion, and 4.9 percent, or 829, failed both the math and the english portion of the proficiency exam.

Thirty-two percent of the failing students are special education students.

Last year, 98 percent of Nevada seniors passed the proficiency exam, compared to 86.2 percent this year. The reason, parents say, is that the 1997 Educational Reform Act of 1997 created tougher academic standards.

The 1999 senior class was the first to take the revised exam.

The Assembly Education Committee addressed the issue of the large numbers of non-graduating seniors two weeks ago, voting to decrease the passing score for the mathematics section of the exam from 61 to 57, which would mean that 500 seniors would graduate from Clark County.

The measure to decrease the math passing score was criticized by a representative of Gov. Guinn and by Senate Majority Leader Bill Raggio.

According to interviews in the *Review-Journal*, both think reducing the score

would lessen the importance of a high school diploma and send a negative message to hard-working students.

The effort to change the passing math score died Saturday due to a lack of support.

Education chairman Wendell Williams wants reprieves for students who have completed the necessary 22.5 credits to graduate and those who were offered scholarships to universities and other institutions but must decline because they can't pass the proficiency test.

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