

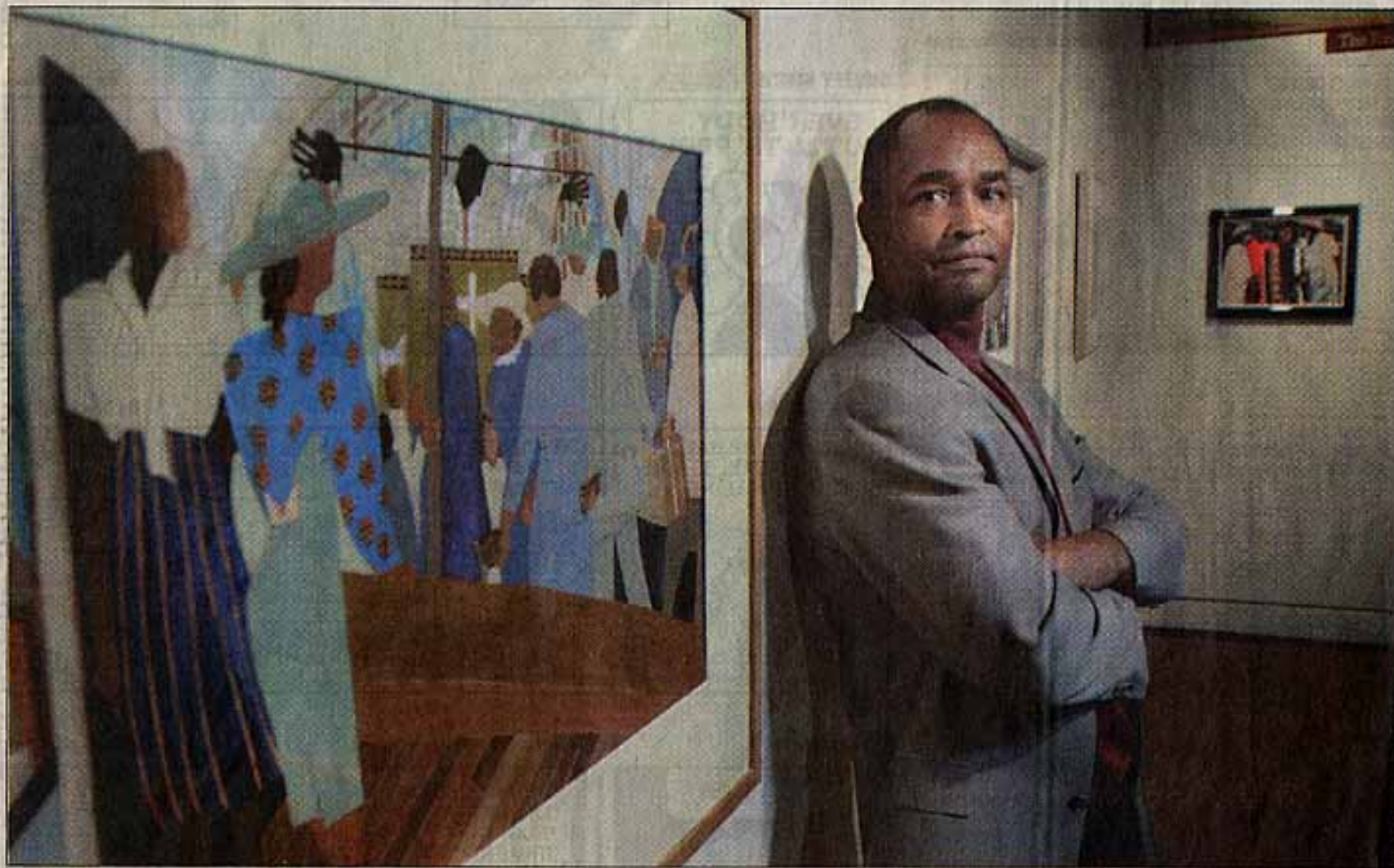
LIFESTYLE

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MIKE DeVRIES/THE CAPITAL TIMES

Above: Artist Jerry Butler has a show of his artwork on display in the Civic Center, including his collage painting "The Flock". Below: Butler's collage images of jazz musicians have been used for several Isthmus Jazz Festival posters, including this piece for the 1999 festival.

COLLAGE MATERIAL

Exhibit pieces together story of life, love and struggle

By Kevin Lynch

The Capital Times

Jerry Butler has struggled — as an artist, as an African-American, and as a man. Yet he has the calm, friendly demeanor of a man at peace with himself. That may be an illusion, but his art goes a long way toward articulating a man's inner self.

He's the head of the art department at Madison Area Technical College. He gained acclaim and visibility for illustrating two Zino Press books for children. In the first, "Sweet Words So Brave," his collages helped celebrate the story of African-American literature. For the second, "A Drawing in the Sand," Butler illustrated and wrote a brief history of black visual artists. Both of these powerful, beautiful books provide essential enlightenment for young people about America's culture.

Butler has also designed the last three posters for the Isthmus Jazz Festival, images which are used extensively in the festival's promotion. The three original collage paintings are also on display in the new exhibit of Butler's work,



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which enlivened last weekend's Isthmus festival and will remain on display on the Civic Center's third-floor Crossroads Gallery through Oct. 31.

The show's images are playfully engaging, like partly finished jigsaw puzzles of the soul. Arrange them in your mind's eye, and they begin to reveal the warmth and sadness beneath Butler's easy smile — the face of a handsome, intelligent man born in rural Mississippi who came north to make a life for himself.

Butler is grateful for his successes, he says, in his modest manner. His parental joy and pride are evident in the skilled pen-and-ink portrait of him included in the show, done by his teenage daughter Vanessa.

"She has so much talent as an artist," marvels Butler, a widower. "But she really wants to be a dancer."

Butler's own artwork has only begun to sell in the last few years. That's among the least of his concerns. He spoke of art, race and life in a recent interview in the Crossroads Gallery.

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Butler

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TCT: I'm surprised to hear your work hasn't sold very well because it has fairly accessible modern style with a real human vibrancy that should appeal to many people, both black and white.

JB: It's about the vitality of life; it's not about black or white. I use those subjects because they're common to me, and I draw from my experience. But it's also figurative art. Many people may think that's passe, but I think it's timeless.

TCT: I think your "Self Portrait" collage accomplishes what the cubists tried to do — show different, simultaneous perspectives on a human. With your photo fragments, the viewer sees several faces, and each pulls you deeper into who that person is. I've seen Romare Bearden do this and his work is fascinating.

JB: Yes, he's one of my idols, he and Jacob Lawrence. They were masters at using space and movement, and making it meaningful. My work is about the enjoyment of life and individuals, like in the jazz posters. They're groups of three different people, but they work together like a jazz composition, and they're more than individuals.

Everything I do is about life, but I can't talk about anybody else's life. Mine is too difficult to live right. (He laughs.)

TCT: But you do it symbolically — you suggest stories that include other people.

JB: Yes, but this is only a fraction of who I am. There is my community work, and as a parent and a family member. So sometimes I go back and find things. I have portraits of my first wife, who has been dead for 20 years. She died of cancer. We had several wonderful years together. These portraits are about our relationship and her joy in living.

TCT: What do you feel about your piece "Wedding Day"? Your late wife has a fragmented face and there are two elderly women right behind her, and other, happier people in the background. The two women seem to be reliving their joy and their loss.

JB: The two women represent those who were very close. They take on this sort of stewardship, so afterwards they walk along with her into the next world. They won't let anything happen to her. I almost put a veil over her face, but that would've been too heavy-handed.

You have to learn when to stop. That's also why I leave some spaces blank. Those help to convey feelings. It took me a long time to learn not to make everything look so polished and finished.

TCT: That quality allows each viewer to contemplate and interpret it.

JB: My son saw it and he thought it was just perfect.

TCT: Have you remarried?

JB: Yes, but that didn't work out.

TCT: What sort of influences do you have? There seems to be a tradition of African-American artists working in colorful collage styles. Does it come from African art or cubism?

JB: Yes, there is a tradition

like that. I started doing very muted collages, and right after graduate school I had a bunch of shows in Cincinnati. When I came here I had a big show at the Madison Art Center in 1974 or '75, with Aaron Bohrod. That was a huge honor. I did more political stuff back then. As a boy, I first started out doing murals for churches in Mississippi.

Eventually my collages started to become much more colorful because I started getting a real command of color. Bright red does not mean you're going to have a bright painting. Sometimes a bright painting is black or white.

TCT: The collage of three men as chained slaves ("Three Generation Self Portrait") is intriguing and powerful. They're all in the same body, but you see three faces. I sense three different characters— one is meek, one is wary, one looks courageous and forthright.

JB: Yes, and you go through that cycle individually and then it repeats itself through generations. Some things never change. Or some things we don't want to fix. We do fix things that we want fixed. When we went to the moon, we said, 'All right, and vrrroom!' Whether you want to fix something depends on where you are standing.

TCT: What important things do you tell your students?

JB: Just work hard. If you work hard long enough, you're gonna get to something. And that's life.

Art is also about struggle. You look at Van Gogh; he struggled a lot, and you can put up a Van Gogh anywhere and people know. It fills up a room with its power.