

Your Leisure

Kaleidoscope

Dancing
at the
Savoy
at the
museumBy Gwen Ifill
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THE BARE STONE walls of the Museum of Art's Hazel Ann Fox Court reverberate with sound, but the room is silent.

Dancing couples shimmy and dip across the wooden floor, but none of them moves a muscle.

Maybe some street sounds filter in through the venetian blinds. Maybe the dancers watch themselves in action in the mirrored walls.

We are in Harlem's legendary Savoy ballroom, but we are in Baltimore.

Richard Yarde's three-dimensional exhibition, "Savoy," brings to life images and memories of an era in the black American cultural existence that are too often blurred by time.

Yarde, a 43-year-old Boston painter, says he aims for historical perspective in his works, which have depicted such subjects as evangelist Sweet Daddy Grace and prizefighter Jack Johnson.

His recreation of the Savoy, the block-long Harlem dance hall which flourished from 1926 until its closing in 1959, is more conceptual than actual. The dancing figures are not quite-life-sized styrofoam cutouts. One side of the styrofoam is covered in muslin, which was then painted in very thin oils to suggest watercolor.

"The color is really arbitrary," he said. "It's my own choice. Some things I've altered to make the piece visually stronger."

"I'm essentially a watercolorist. This is the most complex thing that I've done, and it's the only piece I've done where I didn't work on every single part of it."

The faces of the black dancers are actually tinted bluish-green, a technique which serves to remove the scene one step further from reality. The mirrored walls, the patterned rug (actually silk-screened carpet), hanging venetian blinds and patterned canopy define the dance floor's space.

The paintings of the dancers are drawn from old photographs, Yar-



Richard Yarde's exhibition, "Savoy" is a re-creation of the famous Harlem ballroom.

de said, and in costume and action, the figures are meant to depict a span of time, not just recreate one evening's enjoyment.

But even though the band against the back wall in the piece is only styrofoam, the feeling is that there should be music there.

"A lot of people have said that," Yarde said in a telephone interview from the University of Massachusetts at Boston, where he teaches. "I made a decision to want it to be pri-

marily a visual piece. If there were too many other things going on, you'd be sidetracked to some extent."

Distraction is not a problem when viewing Yarde's work. As with sculpture, the viewer must walk around the entire installation to appreciate it from all angles. But as in a painting, all of the painted images are two-dimensional.

In Baltimore, it took four "installationists" three days to assemble Yarde's exhibit, where it measures

42 feet by 19 feet. With added carpet, it can be made to measure 60 feet by 42 feet. It opened to the public this week and will be at the museum until March 20.

"My work since about 1972 has focused on African-American history," Yarde said. "I had done a number of pieces . . . trying to translate my feelings about those figures into some kind of visual statement."

Yarde came up with the idea to recreate the spirit of the Savoy in 1979 while he was teaching at

Mount Holyoke College in western Massachusetts. The people there aided him in getting a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the installation, as it is called, began to take shape.

"I knew what I wanted to do," he said. "I tried looking through random scenes. I wanted to use as many photographs of dancers from the actual Savoy that I could. I tried with costuming to show the period from the '20s to the '50s."

One couple, dressed in corresponding browns, appears four times in different positions on the dance floor. This technique, Yarde said, is meant to convey a sense of movement.

"It's one thing what the *Intention* is," Yarde said, laughing a bit. "It's another thing what comes across."

Yarde said he would like to add more to his exhibit after it leaves Baltimore for a summer-long showing at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

"It needs a couple of additional things," he said. "I hope to complete a wall mural and two more dancing couples."

The spirit is there, Yarde said, and at least one friend of his who frequented the Savoy tells him that there is a sense of recognition in Yarde's re-creation.

"I have a pretty strong feeling from the reaction I've seen that it certainly brings back memories," he said. "The Harlem renaissance is there, and it [encompasses] quite a span of history."