

Pure Builders

A Community of Urban Artists is Stirring Things Up
At the Black Market Design Center

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By Cleis Abeni

"I just call us 'pure builders.' We can take the shade of the world and build it up so that it's mad beautiful—and useful, too!" Like any great gallery curator, Tyeakia knows how to sell the product. Standing in the rhombus-shaped doorway of her new design center in North Philly—head wrapped Caribbean-style in a bright scarlet scarf, hourglass figure outfitted in a orange-and-blue striped tube dress—Tyeakia is the very essence of urban cool. Stretching her arms out toward the explosion of colors around her, she breaks it all down in a clear, sweet, firm voice: "It's not a question of why we're doing all this! This is our lives. Open just six months now, in 1998, and we got over 13 artists in this space, living here, showing stuff here—just here. And all different media. You're asking me why Black Market? Because this is the new 21st-century generation of urban black people's design in Philly and, from the walk, to the hair, to the fabric, and the walls—everything is artful."

And sure enough, in a North Philly neighborhood characterized by glaring contradictions (huge, lumbering Temple University surrounded by countless blocks of abandoned, trash-filled buildings), the new Black Market Design Center at Fifth and Cecil B. Moore is a vibrant hub of life, an intensely artful space. Visitors won't notice the gallery right away. Like Mpozi Mshale Tolbert says (one of the center's featured DJ artists and a frequent photographic contributor to *City Paper* and *Vibe*): "You have to wanna be here. To seek out the goodness." Around the corner from the Greater Straightway Baptist Church, the free medical center and the R.W. Brown Community and Crime Prevention Center, the gallery is nestled inside a warehouse right across the street from a block-long mural with a neon-colored graffiti splash of cocky, baggy-trouserred B-boys.

Like the FakeHaus at 39th and Lancaster and The Pearl of Africa Black Art Gallery in South Philadelphia, Black Market attracts a variety of people—new jack kids caught up in the hip-hop vibe; dashiki-clad poets; white boys with blond dreadlocks; sexy, smart sisters in dyed curls. The gallery also attracts Philly's black urban intelligentsia: the underground record makers, graffiti artists, street-mag writers, metal workers, DJs... the list goes on and on. Says Tyeakia: "It's about design. We're designers. Nobody can classify us. We all do so many things... metalworking, fashion, fine art. I just call it design for the black people—from the Caribbean, Ethiopia, here, our people. We're just trying to show something of ourselves."

Tyeakia (who goes only by her first name) and her co-partner Calvin Batts have come a long way from "squatting out" in abandoned buildings in North Philly. Batts is a wood and metal worker and Tyeakia a visual artist, but both insist that their lives defy easy classifications. When asked how she made her living during the years before opening Black Market, Tyeakia speaks of an "eclectic" background: she was homeless, yet she also studied art at Temple. In 1990, Batts and Tyeakia traveled to Paris and made connections with black painters like Abraham (another first-name-only artist who showcases his paintings at Black Market). While in Paris, the partners formed Ballistics, a company whose purpose was to promote and sell their fashion designs, metalwork and traditional canvas creations (as well as the artwork of other black expatriate visual artists) to Parisian and New York patrons. After four years, the couple returned to the States and built new business contacts in New York City. Back in Philly, they rented a warehouse in a blitzed-out neighborhood where rents were extremely affordable, locating themselves on a block that had been a nexus of underground artistic, social and political action since the '60s.

Black Market is similar in intent to the Pan African Community Education Center headquartered on the Temple campus. Flyers advertising the center's classes in GED preparation, African languages and politics sit on the table by the main entrance to the gallery. But while the Pan African Center is supported by Temple, the Black Market supports itself. Besides selling paintings, clothes and other artwork to buyers from Philadelphia and New York, each of the artists who use the space for performances or who showcase their work have different arrangements with Tyeakia to keep the space financially afloat. Some, like Mpozi, use the place to "crash" in exchange for helping with construction; others pay for work by donating artistic materials (wood, fabric and metal).

A little something from the many artists involved with the gallery is literally everywhere in the space: on the walls, on the floor, in the structure of the building and the songs rumbling from the DJ spin table. On the weekend of the annual Philadelphia Caribbean Festival on Penn's Landing, Black Market threw Afrocentric parties round the clock. On Saturday, Aug. 22, the gallery hummed with the voices of little kids coloring on construction paper and grooving to a live band. Then there was the oral poetry of the Black Melodies—the brainchild of wordsmiths Taj and Dimaka. On Sunday, the space lit up with the DJ sounds of Mpozi and Ras Tully of Lion of Juda, Philadelphia's premiere reggae group.

To get to the heart of the action, visitors maneuver down the long corridor by the mailboxes, past the little kids who, with their family, live in the building (and who make scribble-art on the big etching paper intentionally put up on the walls), up the stairs and around the corner. There they encounter a space (designed by Tyeakia and Calvin) that's continually remaking itself, with movable walls-on-wheels that hang like slabs of earth from chains on the ceiling. In a sloping, paint-splashed corner near the entrance, Derve's fashions—in fabrics from the Caribbean and West Africa—hang from a jeweled coat rack. On the far north wall is an untitled painting by Troy Williams bursting with the greens, yellows and black of African flags and textured with paper pasted on to the canvas. On a table by the two-way window mirror sits the wide-brimmed straw hats used in the filming of a kung fu C-movie (Return of the Dark Ones) shot in and around the gallery's premises.

On one side of a hanging wall are Abraham's earth paintings—canvases made with herbal pigments coated onto pulp-paper in a rich web of animal symbols. On the other side is a nine-tiered bookshelf (with books filed "according to the wind," says Tyeakia). Calvin's metalworks—weighty sculptures of warriors on horseback—guard the south side of the studio. And, at the mouth of the workroom is a body-size hole in the wall, where, Mpozi says, he sometimes awakes to watch the sun rise on the wire fences and graffiti wall below, "letting in and out everything I have in the world."

Outside the gallery, before the Caribbean party, some of the intelligentsia have arrived. Going only by his organization's acronym, veteran graffiti artist King SAPOSES (Sudanese Apache Players On Societies Extra Strong) is working with the gallery to sponsor a zine showcasing his trademark angular script. With his co-partner Donald Indio (who rapped "with motivation we bond and no permission wez bomb"), King SAPOSES remarked that he is working to put a dent in the "half-steppers"—white kids like Espo of NYC's On the Go magazine who toured Philly in the early 1990s to pick up the "graf" mural art and script. According to SAPOSES, these kids are now making "mad" money from computer and Internet translations of time-honored street designs. Says SAPOSES: "That's what [the gallery] gives us, the Nubians. The stuff to work with to crack people who don't understand where it comes from, who haven't been to where it is—the streets."

The name "Black Market" conveys a mix of influences, from underground to urban to commercial. The artists involved in the Market reflect that eclecticism, but they also share a common bond: they're making work, and creating lives, that honor the black experience. Notes Tyeakia, cooing by the beverage table in the workroom: "We are open for business."