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## Art in Review; Elizabeth Heyert

By GRACE GLUECK

The Travelers Edwynn Houk Gallery 745 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street Through July 23

What's odd about Elizabeth Heyert's extraordinary, nearly life-size portraits of black people, you realize after a second or two, is that they all have their eyes closed. But of course! Though they appear to be standing up, they are dead, and lying in their coffins. Elaborately attired in outfits ranging from formal dress to sports outfits, replete with hats and jewelry, they are dressed for burial as if for a gala wingding, as well accoutered in their way as the dead of prosperous ancient Egyptians.

The set and costume designer for their opulent repose is a Harlem mortician named Isaiah Owens, one of the last upholders of a fading custom, still observed by some blacks, of paying respect to the dead by seeing them off in sartorial splendor, no matter what their actual lives may have been.

Thus, one Daphne Jones (1954-2003), in life a prostitute and crack addict, is beautifully clad in a chiffon-y blue gown and jacket, beaded and embroidered, with white lace gloves on her hands. A white chiffon scarf wraps her neck, earrings dangle from her ears, her face is tilted to one side wearing an expression of peaceful repose. Her 22-year-old son, James Earl Jones, who died violently less than a year later, is presented quite differently, in a white Sean John track suit, a do-rag on his head topped by a New York Yankees cap tilted rakishly to one side. His jacket pocket is stuffed with money; other tributes from his friends, like photographs, CD's and notes, fill his coffin.

The 31 portraits here -- obtained with family consent and a free photograph of the loved one, while selling at the gallery for \$5,500

each -- were taken by Ms. Heyert, who is white, from high up on a ladder that straddled each coffin. Each "sitting" took about three hours, with eight-minute exposures. Originally moved by the idea of "death being an occasion for which you'd put on your finest," she came to believe that the portraits were not about death, but about people's lives and their sharing of "family, faith, traditions." She felt, she said, that she had come to know their stories.

There is, indeed, what you might call a team spirit about these pictures that is touching. Looking at them you almost feel the breath of "Our Town," Thornton Wilder's play about a New England community whose dead speak. Ms. Heyert gets credit for being alive to the possibilities of these pictures, and for making them with such elegance and restraint. GRACE GLUECK