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ARTH-432

Professor Elder

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### **Painting Through Faith: Self-Taught Artists of the American South**

Exhibition Link: <https://www.artsteps.com/view/608f03fe51f030f9968b0ed0?currentUser>

#### **I. Theme**

The theme for this exhibition proposal is Christianity and its influence on self-taught artists of the American South in the 1970s.

#### **II. Project Proposal**

In this exhibition, entitled *Painting Through Faith: Self-Taught Artists of the American South*, the focus lies on three artists: Sister Gertrude Morgan, Howard Finster, and Purvis Young. Each of these artists represent different areas of the American South, respectively from New Orleans, Louisiana, Rome, Georgia, and Miami, Florida. As this exhibition will show, their religious conviction and desire to create art permeates barriers of location, racial identity, and gender identity. Each artist is represented by 4 paintings that best exemplify their particular style and religious passion. This provides enough context to place the artists in conversation with one another and allow for thought provoking discussion from the visitors and intellectuals.

The theme of this exhibition captures the role of religion in the practices of Southern self-taught artists. More particularly, *Painting Through Faith* investigates how the practice of Christianity and folk art permeated boundaries of race and gender just after the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s. Each work included was created in the 1970s and the included text prompts viewers to view the paintings with the Civil Rights Movement in mind. As

the country was just recently engaged in a period of both terror and hope, these artists offer a unique perspective of how their environment shaped their perspective.

The Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) is the best institution to share this exhibition because of its dedication to their southern community and showcasing local artists. This is clearly articulated by their mission statement, which states that they aim to provide, “compelling experiences centered on human creativity valued for their significant contributions to the individual well-being of its citizens and visitors and to the rising vibrance of the City, County, and Region.” Previous exhibitions that further justify this collaboration include their 2015 show “History Refused to Die: Alabama’s African-American Self-Taught Artists in Context” in consideration of the 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery marches. In addition, the museum was a major contributor to the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s 2018 show “Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor.” By partnering with the MMFA, this project will further advance their current trend to highlight the impact of Southern self-taught artists on the art community.

Diving deeper into the selection of each artist, Sister Gertrude Morgan is an ideal selection because of her role in the New Orleans community. She began her journey as a street missionary in the city. In 1966, she stated that God called on her to paint, sharing visions of what she called the New Jerusalem to come.<sup>1</sup> Each work she created was not credited to her, but in her words, “through his Blessed hands as he take my hand and write ... I just do the Blessed work.”<sup>2</sup> As this exhibition shows, her works in the 1970s were often from the Book of Revelation, showing the New Jerusalem and the Second Coming of Christ. Her depictions of Jesus Christ and God are always as a white man and she paints herself as a black woman, showing the

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<sup>1</sup> “Sister Gertrude Morgan | Smithsonian American Art Museum.” <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/sister-gertrude-morgan-3413>.

<sup>2</sup> “Sister Gertrude Morgan | Smithsonian American Art Museum.”

Eurocentric biblical interpretation often found in Southern Christianity. Morgan's paintings utilize found objects and materials such as cardboard, ballpoint pen, and paper, which allowed her to both paint figures and include text from Bible verses. Each creation Morgan made and attributed to the hand of God encapsulates her experience both in the Christian church and as a Southern woman.<sup>3</sup>

Looking next at the life of artist Howard Finster, there is much in common with Sister Gertrude Morgan. He too began to paint his sermons and Bible stories when, in 1976, "a warm feeling came over [him] to paint sacred art."<sup>4</sup> Finster's lifelong creation, *Paradise Garden*, is perhaps his most famous artwork. Sculptures, paintings, and Bible verses cover the land behind his home in Georgia to create a "Memorial to God." Though the artist is no longer living to add to the space, it remains as a monument to the artist's vision and creativity. Throughout Finster's career as an artist, he painted both Christian-inspired messages, celebrities, and company products like Coca-Cola. Collected in this exhibition are four of his biblical pieces that best represent the Christian influence with which he painted. As the story goes, Finster began to paint because he saw a "perfect human face on the tip of his finger" when he placed a finger in paint, which told him to "paint sacred art."<sup>5</sup> Though he had no formal art training, he felt guided by the word of God to create images of celebrities, as well as visions of Heaven and Hell. Finster's dedication to the medium resulted in thousands of creations, many of which remain in personal collections.<sup>6</sup>

Purvis Young, the third and final artist of *Painting Through Faith*, came to the medium in a different route. His works were often murals, though this exhibition includes four of his

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<sup>3</sup> "Sister Gertrude Morgan | Smithsonian American Art Museum."

<sup>4</sup> "Howard Finster | Smithsonian American Art Museum." <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/howard-finster-1543>.

<sup>5</sup> "Howard Finster | Smithsonian American Art Museum."

<sup>6</sup> "Howard Finster | Smithsonian American Art Museum."

paintings to show a different side of the artist.<sup>7</sup> Young's career began as he served a prison sentence in Florida for a felony committed as a teenager, when he studied artists through books and began to paint.<sup>8</sup> As he said when asked about his artwork, "I don't like the luxury I see of a lot of these church people while the world is getting worsen."<sup>9</sup> Young was critical of the church community, though his paintings are still connected to Christianity. His experience in prison and in poverty shape his works, showing a different perspective of the role of religion in self-taught art. While Morgan and Finster directly quote Bible verses for their art, Young's focus is on community, struggle, power, and hope. With an urban perspective, Young's works offer a different view of religion expressed through self-taught art, expressing stories of his own life rather than retelling Bible stories.

In order to strengthen this exhibition, included research topics are the Civil Rights Act of 1965, social and political issues impacting religion and racial and gender identity, and Southern culture after the Civil Rights Movement. This information is incorporated into the artworks' labels to provide socio-historical context to the artists and their works. The artists' own writings, interviews, and other outlets of their own perspective are also vital to providing a full picture for the art. In all, this exhibition shows how self-taught art and religion combine in a way that engages the audience and shares the life of each artist. With the MMFA's mission being to engage the region, *Painting Through Faith* is an ideal exhibition for this space. Morgan, Finster, and Young connect the South and encapsulate the history of self-taught art in the 1970s.

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<sup>7</sup> "Purvis Young | Smithsonian American Art Museum." <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/purvis-young-6327>.

<sup>8</sup> Weber, Bruce. "Purvis Young, Folk Artist Who Peppered Miami With Images, Dies at 67." *The New York Times*, April 24, 2010, sec. Arts. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/arts/24young.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Weber, Bruce. "Purvis Young, Folk Artist Who Peppered Miami With Images, Dies at 67."

### **III. Exhibition Wall Text**

The American South is home to a rich history of culture and religion, particularly Christianity. Much of the area's songs, landmarks, and artworks are tied to Christian practices. Religion is something many can relate to and understand, even when the exact practice may differ from person to person. Human nature drives us to find something bigger than the world around us to believe in, even if that belief is that nothing exists beyond our life on Earth.

Self-taught artists Sister Gertrude Morgan, Howard Finster, and Purvis Young express their Christian faith through their paintings. These artists have roots across the South, being from New Orleans, LA, Rome, GA, and Miami, FL respectively. Not only do their hometowns influence their practice, but so does their racial and gender identity. What this exhibition shows is a connection beyond individual identity and extending to a regional experience. Each artist did not have formal training in their medium, but instead was drawn by something bigger to create and express their stories.

Painting on found objects such as cardboard or wood, lack of access to materials was not an issue they let stop them. What makes these self-taught artists notable is their determination to create. Each style is unique, including a combination of figuration and text to tell stories. Morgan, Finster, and Young were all painting in the 1970s, just after the height of the American Civil Rights Movement. Seeing these stories in the context of both hope and terror adds depth to their meaning and shows the role of faith in the American South.

#### IV. Included Works and Object Labels

##### A. Sister Gertrude Morgan

1. *Jesus is my air Plane*, 1970, 18 x 26  $\frac{3}{8}$  in (45.7 x 67 cm), tempera, ballpoint pen and ink, and pencil on paper. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr., and museum purchase made possible by Ralph Cross Johnson, 1986.65.187

Using basic materials like pen and paper, Sister Gertrude Morgan creates a scene of salvation in *Jesus is my air Plane*. The artist includes a self portrait of her flying an old style plane with Jesus seated just behind her. Across the painting, Morgan used pencil to record Bible verses articulating the promise of Jesus guiding Christians to the “Kingdom of God.” Her own interpretation of this sentiment is found in the upper left corner, where she shares the work’s title and explains that Jesus will take her to “that Promise land.” Morgan appears to be flying out of a depiction of Heaven on a hilltop, which is surrounded by both black and white female winged angels. Below where they fly, the piece shows others resting on the hill and going about their lives in the city streets. Painted in 1970, just after the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act were passed in the U.S. to grant full civil protections to black Americans, this work can be seen as a promise of hope after turmoil, triumph over pain and terror.

2. *Dada God, Dada Jesus (self-Portrait with God & Jesus)*, ca. 1970. Watercolor, graphite, and ballpoint pen on paper. 8  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 11 in. New Orleans Museum of Art, Gift of Maria and Lee Friedlander, 2000.104.

In *Dada God, Dada Jesus (self-Portrait with God and Jesus)*, Sister Gertrude Morgan paints herself before her own depictions of God and Jesus. Their conservation and embrace takes place to the left of a red toned seat, suggesting the throne of God. The space behind the figures is undefined, filled with blocky strokes of red, blue, and green paint. In pen, Morgan identifies herself as “the little Bride in a conversation with her dadas.” This is in reference to a vision she had in 1965 when the Holy Ghost told her she was the chosen bride of God.<sup>10</sup> After taking her vow, she both wore and painted herself in all white. Her vision of Jesus and God is always as a white man, which reveals the Eurocentric influence of her

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<sup>10</sup> “Sister Gertrude Morgan | Smithsonian American Art Museum.”

Christian practice. Considering the European roots of American Christianity, it is no surprise that Morgan's own practice held onto the white, European personification of God.

3. *The Throne of God*, ca. 1970. Acrylic and/or tempera, and ball point pen ink on paper, 12 x 19 in. New Orleans Museum of Art, Gift of Maria and Lee Friedlander, 2001.296.

*The Throne of God* depicts and quotes the fourth chapter of the Bible's Book of Revelation, which completes the Bible by telling of a second coming of Christ to Earth. Sister Gertrude Morgan does not include herself in this painting, making it read as a true illustration of the Bible rather than a story from her own religious experiences. God is seated in the upper register, beside an open door in which the speaker of the Book of Revelation uses to enter Heaven and view the scene Morgan paints. This chapter of the Bible also mentions "four and twenty elders sitting," "seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God," and "four beats full of eyes before and behind," which Morgan paints in detail.<sup>11</sup> The artist's attention to detail follows the scripture's depiction, which any practicing Christian would notice immediately. Her choice to include the text of the chapter as well shows that this piece is part of her missionary work. She does not expect the viewer to know the verses by heart, but instead illustrates the story to provide a fuller understanding of the religion.

4. *New Jerusalem*, ca. 1970, acrylic and tempera on cardboard. 12 x 19 in. American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Sanford Smith and Patricia Smith, 1986.21.1.

Sister Gertrude Morgan began her dedication to Christianity through street preaching and missionary work in New Orleans, Louisiana. In 1966 she reported God calling her to paint and share visions of the New Jerusalem, saying "through his Blessed hands as he take my hand and write ... I just do the Blessed work."<sup>12</sup> As she served her community, Morgan painted her visions and the words of the Bible to further her work. *New Jerusalem* is one of

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<sup>11</sup> Rev. 4:1-11

<sup>12</sup> "Sister Gertrude Morgan | Smithsonian American Art Museum."

many works with this title. Morgan repurposed cardboard to create the work, showing her use of found materials to express her religious passion. In the lower left, Morgan painted a self portrait preaching towards a New Jerusalem, a reference from chapter 21 in the Bible's Book of Revelation.<sup>13</sup> Below the artist shows people moving up from their graves. In the text above, Morgan quotes Bible verse 1 Corinthians Chapter 15, verses 51-52: "Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep," referencing the Christian belief that, after death, one's soul returns to Heaven to be with God. Throughout the work, Morgan uses text to repeatedly reference the "Promised Land," sharing the hope of a better life after death that fuels the Christian faith.

## B. Howard Finster

1. *The Lord Will Deliver His People Across the Jordan*, 1976. Enamel on fiberboard, 30 1/8 x 26 5/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr. 1988.74.6.

*The Lord Will Deliver His People Across the Jordan* uses text and figuration to detail the Christian view of life on Earth versus salvation after death in Heaven. Below the river, Finster fills the green land with text of suffering on Earth, including "polution," prisons, and stealing. With an image of Jesus in the middle of the water, the piece builds up to high towers and churches with paths labeled kindness, love, peace, and "eternal life." The small human figures below on Earth are then replaced with angels above, seen walking and flying around Heaven. From this work, Finster's devotion to Christianity becomes clear. The artist first began painting after decades spent preaching when God called him to "paint sacred art."<sup>14</sup> Much of his career as a painter became dedicated to sharing sermons and Bible stories, taking his practice as a preacher into the visual art realm. He frequently used found objects as his medium, evidenced here by his use of fiberboard in place of a traditional canvas.

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<sup>13</sup> "New Jerusalem." American Folk Art Museum. <http://collection.folkartmuseum.org/objects/703/new-jerusalem?ctx=46291a7d-ff8a-41f0-9c2b-796840c789e0&idx=4>.

<sup>14</sup> "Howard Finster | Smithsonian American Art Museum."

2. *If A Shoe Fits, Wear It*, 1977. Acrylic and enamel on metal, in original pyrographed wood frame and backing, 13 ¾ x 19 ⅝ x ½ in. American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Jacqueline Loewe Fowler, 2018.19.23.

Howard Finster often painted his own portrait into his works, seen in *If A Shoe Fits, Wear It* in the top of a light brown loafer. This work, while there are references to Christianity, connects more to his own practice as a preacher rather than to direct Bible verses. Finster sets the scene with a background of dark storm clouds and a large shoe before a few people in the foreground around a small home. Often in Christian services, the preacher will create metaphors to express meaning. On the toe of the loafer, Finster writes “If a mans soul is shoed with the Gospel he can walk over the pin point of the devils pitch fork.” From this, we can tell Finster paints himself as protected from danger, or the stones below the shoe, because he is a believer in Christ. Before becoming an artist, Finster began his career as a Christian preacher at age 16. He then picked up a radio program, a newspaper column, led tent revivals, and preached at many churches. Knowing his religious conviction and dedication to preaching, it is no surprise that these same sentiments appear in his artwork.<sup>15</sup>

3. *Better for a Man to Have a Mill Stone Tied about His Neck and Cast into the Midst of the Sea Rather than to Offend one of God's Little Children. Be Careful Please*, 1968. Paint on wood, 21 ½ x 28 ⅜ x 1 ¾ in. American Folk Art Museum, Gift of M. Anne Hill and Edward V. Blanchard, Jr. 1998.10.22.

Howard Finster’s famous story about how he began painting after dipping his finger in paint, seeing a perfect human face on his fingertip, and having it tell him to “paint sacred art” is thought to have taken place in 1976.<sup>16</sup> However, this work is dated 1968, bringing that story into question. *Better for a Man* shows a group of faceless figures on a ship, casting one crewmember into the sea with a 700 pound millstone around his neck. The text and story here is a near direct quote from chapter 17, verse 2 of the Bible’s Book of Luke. In this story, Jesus is directly telling his followers to exercise caution when someone near to them sins, or makes a

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<sup>15</sup> “Howard Finster | Smithsonian American Art Museum.”

<sup>16</sup> “Howard Finster | Smithsonian American Art Museum.”

mistake. However, Jesus advises, if they repent, or recognize their error, they must be forgiven. Considering this work's date, perhaps Finster was sharing this story as a warning for those instigating racially motivated violence in American in the 1960s. "Be careful please" is emphasized in red, putting pressure on the individual to watch their behavior.

4. *AND THE MOON BECAME AS BLOOD*, 1976. Enamel on fiberboard, 29 ½ x 30 ⅛ in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr. 1988.74.7.

*AND THE MOON BECAME AS BLOOD* is the second painting in a triptych or three part piece that Finster created. This series paints visions from Saint John in the Bible's Book of Revelation, the last writings in the text. Throughout the work, Finster quotes verses from Revelation to explain his imagery. The black sun and bodies of water turned to blood create a sensation of terror. Sailing on the sea is a small ship with three figures lying dead. Two angels fly above the scene, pouring blood into the sea and river. Deep red figures in the ocean appear to be sharks circling, drawn out by the presence of blood. With a dark color palette and many repetitions of Bible verses mentioning blood, Finster uses his work to visualize the Christian vision of the end of the world. Thinking of the turmoil of American life in the 1970s, it is interesting to see such a prevalence of imagery focused on the end of days. Perhaps such heightened presence of racial tension and terror fueled Finster's sermons and turned him to find evidence of fear as predicted by the Bible.

### C. Purvis Young

1. *Say It Unto The Angel That Came To The Men*, 1972. Paint on wood, 96 x 48 in. High Museum of Art, Museum purchase and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

Centered in this work is the bust of a white man with closed eyes, surrounded by a light pink halo. Considering the work's title, this man is a personification of Jesus Christ, the center figure of Christianity. Young paints many faceless figures floating and dancing around him in a spectrum of races. As a black man in Miami who had gone through the prison system, Young often

painted stories of struggle and racial strife. When asked about this work, he said “I liked to show good peoples, the heroes, like that. They fight for a cause. They done good things ... They’re not necessarily just black peoples. I got good white peoples in my paintings.”<sup>17</sup> With his own perspective in mind, it is clear that Young’s choice of skin tone was intentional for all of the figures seen here. Created just after the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, *Say It Unto The Angel That Came To The Men* reflects both the power of America’s Christian community and the hope felt after a period of extreme racial tension.

2. *Christ in the Wilderness*, 1972. Paint on wood, 23.5 x 43 in. Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

Artist Purvis Young began his arts career as a teenager serving a prison sentence for armed robbery.<sup>18</sup> During his time in a Florida prison, he studied classical art masters such as Rembrandt and El Greco, teaching himself how to paint based off of their works. Seeing the intense emotion captured in *Christ in the Wilderness*, his classical influence is no surprise. Young paints a bust of Jesus Christ with rough lines, texture, and an expression of pain. Christ is shown with a yellow halo behind him and a messy scene with tones of red and orange. This Biblical story of the Temptation of Christ is when Jesus is said to have spent 40 days and nights fasting in the wilderness and resisting temptation of sin from the Devil. Christians often share this story to remind themselves of struggle and strength during times of weakness. Young when asked about his paintings shared, “I don’t listen to the Man, I look up to heaven. It’s a habit I got. I paint Jesus Christ a lot. I admire Rembrandt, and he painted a lot of pictures of Christ.”<sup>19</sup>

3. *The Struggle*, 1973-1974. Acrylic on wood, 88 x 77 in. Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Gift of the Grumbacher-Viener Collection in memory of Nancy Grumbacher. 2014.15.

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<sup>17</sup> “Say It unto the Angel That Came to the Men | Souls Grown Deep.”

<https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/purvis-young/work/say-it-unto-angel-came-men>.

<sup>18</sup> Weber, Bruce. “Purvis Young, Folk Artist Who Peppared Miami With Images, Dies at 67.”

<sup>19</sup> “Christ in the Wilderness | Souls Grown Deep.”

<https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/purvis-young/work/christ-wilderness>.

Young's career began with the painting of murals, so it is no surprise to find works like *The Struggle* with such a large size. This work draws upon Young's experience living in Miami by incorporating many elements of urban life. Small buildings are stacked close together, crowding the scene alongside cars, trucks, and passersby. At the center of the work, two shirtless male figures appear entangled in a fight. Scattered throughout the bottom half of the piece and the frame, Young paints figures with little detail all holding up their hands. In *The Struggle*, he paints the reality of marginalized people living in Miami and, more broadly, in the United States. Despite the hope frequently characterizing the country after the Civil Rights Movement, in reality, white dominance continued and remains today. Young sought out knowledge from art books, history, and contemporary news, so he could "paint the truth." When interviewed about his art career he said, "I get a lot of my ideas sometime just riding my bicycle around, just looking at reality, looking life right straight in its face."<sup>20</sup>

4. *Say It To The Eye*, late 1970s. Pen and house paint on paper mounted on Masonite, with found wood frame, 30 x 17 in. Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

Young's work here centers around a large sketch of an eye looking to the right floating above a crowd in a light blue sky. The crowd below is a jumbled collection of dark black lines. Figures come together out of shaky brushstrokes, suggesting movement and tension among them. Finding a sense of perspective feels difficult in this work, but one figure seems apart from the crowd and approaching the eye. Young frequently used the motif of a large eye above a crowd to represent the oppressive gaze of the white man over everyone else in America.<sup>21</sup> With this motif in mind, as well as the recent past of the Civil Rights Movement, Young paints the reality of life in America even after a period of triumph and hope. While laws may have changed in favor of marginalized people in the country, the reality of racism, violence, and oppression remained.

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<sup>20</sup> "Purvis Young | Souls Grown Deep." <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/purvis-young>.

<sup>21</sup> "Assemblage of Crowd Scenes."

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