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Art

Remembrances of Betty Blayton-Taylor, Studio Museum Co-Founder and Harlem Arts Activist

Betty not only opened doors, she built new doors — doors that, nearly 50 years later, remain permanently open in her students' own backyard.



by Souleo January 23, 2017



Betty Blayton-Taylor (photo © Adjua Mantebea)

On Sunday, October 2, 2016, in the Bronx, **Betty Blayton-Taylor**, an unsung figure in the art world, quietly transitioned into the spiritual cosmos she often conjured in her abstract metaphysical work. She was 79. I first met Betty sometime in late 2012 or early 2013. As curator of AARP New York's first-ever art exhibition, **Lasting Legacy: The Journey of YOU**, I was tasked with finding artists who exemplified the campaign's themes of discovering one's unique talents, exploring new possibilities, and creating lasting legacies. After coming across Betty's work and meeting her at her home, I knew I wanted her in the exhibition. She embraced me with such warmth — a local legend entrusting her work to the vision of a young, novice curator.

As part of my curatorial research, I wanted to get some insight into Betty's background. Who was this energetic woman with a home full of art? It turned out she was, and remains, a big deal. A native of Williamsburg, Virginia, Betty relocated to New York and graduated from Syracuse University in 1959 with a

degree in fine arts. After a teaching stint on the island of St. Thomas, she moved to New York City and continued to hone her skills as an artist. It was at this time that she began to merge her interests in art and activism.

Betty became a founding member of the Studio Museum in Harlem and served on its board from 1965 to 1977. Her mission in co-founding the organization was to advance the careers of artists of African descent and to utilize institutional resources and the arts to serve the broader Harlem community.

In collaboration with Victor D'Amico, (director, department of education at the Museum of Modern Art) and Harlem School of the Arts, Betty established the Children's Art Carnival, an arts education program designed to engage disadvantaged Harlem youth in the arts. (The program was an outgrowth of annual arts workshops held at MoMA from 1942 to 1969 under the same name.) A young Jean-Michel Basquiat was one of the Carnival's students, and both legendary playwright and director George C. Wolfe and Afro-Caribbean dance icon Marie Brooks taught workshops there. Betty served as executive director from 1969 to 1998, and she remained heavily involved for many years thereafter. In addition, she was a co-founder and board member of Harlem Textile Works, an offshoot of the Children's Art Carnival in 1984, which offered fabric design workshops, arts education, and job opportunities. Additionally, she served on the board of the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop.



Betty Blayton-Taylor (photo © Adjua Mantebea)

As an artist, Betty had a productive career as a painter, printmaker, illustrator, and sculptor; her work can be seen in the public and private collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, Fisk University, Spelman College, David Rockefeller, Reginald Lewis, Sidney Poitier, and more.

Despite such an illustrious career, her death went largely unnoticed by the mainstream art world, the press, and even some of the institutions and artists she helped build and elevate. Yet her impact reached across space, time, and spheres of influence. She was a groundbreaking force in helping to establish organizations that have advanced artists and communities. And she laid the foundation for much of this in the 1960s and 1970s, in an America polarized by race and gender politics.

Betty deserves to be remembered, honored, and celebrated. On November 19, a memorial service was held at SGI-USA, Culture Center and the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling in New York City. Her work will be included in the exhibition *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today*, curated by Erin Dziedzic and Melissa Messina, which will open at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri, in June 2017. The Children's Art Carnival is planning two exhibitions inspired by her work, and hopefully more commemorations are to come.

In the meantime, we called upon Lowery Stokes Sims, Marline A. Martin, Omo Misha, robin holder, and Thelma Golden to reminisce about Betty Blayton-Taylor: the artist, activist, friend, mentor, and all-around arts warrior.



Betty Blayton-Taylor, "Oversoul Protective Spirit" (2007), acrylic on canvas (courtesy of Betty Blayton-Taylor)

By Lowery Stokes Sims, independent curator and art historian:

I must have first met Betty in the early 1970s, soon after I started working at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I became a fan and even served on the board of the Children's Art Carnival from 1979 to 1982. I was committed to the organization's dedication to bringing art to children, and in many ways my service on the

board was an extension of my first job at the Metropolitan Museum in the Community Programs department. This was the vehicle through which the museum shared resources with the greater NYC arts communities and actualized verbiage about diversity and inclusion. Betty then went on to be a principle in the founding of the Harlem Textile Workshop, and we had a brief collaboration on a product for the store of the Studio Museum in Harlem that had been initiated shortly before I became director. While the product line was never launched, I still have a prototype of a scarf that is a mainstay in my wardrobe.

It is a truism that Betty was a strong artist for whom, like many of her peers — especially the women — her art took a backseat to her decision to work on behalf of the larger art community. She received a B.A. from Syracuse University, where she studied painting and illustration, the latter major an accommodation of parental concerns about her financial future. I also like the fact that due to a peculiarity of Jim Crow Laws, her native state of Virginia paid for her to attend Syracuse University rather than having her attend an in-state school. According to her profile on Wikipedia, Betty had to contend with professors who all wanted her to work like them, and she decided to find her own way of working. In the end, her work may be said to demonstrate a personal synthesis of abstract expressionism and color-field tendencies, demonstrating how her independence posed a potent resistance and personal triumph over racism and sexism in terms of expectations and assumptions about women of her generation with regard to their careers.

I remember Betty's contagious sense of humor, her endless smile, and her generous laugh. She was always a joy to be around, even as she was maneuvering you to perform some needed task or provide a needed resource for one of the organizations she founded and loved.



Youth at the Children's Art Carnival in front of a mural they created (image courtesy of Marline A. Martin)

**By Marline A. Martin, Executive Director and Curator, Arts Horizons LeRoy Neiman Art Center;
Executive Director, Children's Art Carnival:**

As told to Souleo

I first met Betty in 1997 as they were doing a search for the new executive director for the Children's Art Carnival. I was one of the candidates and subsequently was appointed to the position. I served there from 1997 to 2010.

My first impression of Betty was that she was a hardworking woman. I remember when I received the appointment, saying, "I have big shoes to fill." Betty's scope was really wide. She had done a lot of work for the Carnival, bringing it into Harlem where it served 5,000 to 10,000 youth per year. She was a champion of the arts.

Jean-Michel Basquiat was one of the Carnival students for a couple of years. He took some classes and was part of a group of young people who were experimenting with their artistry. One of the things I think he really received from the Carnival that made his art appealing was the joy of creativity that is ingrained within children. Instead of going the fine-art route of painting and drawing technique, he found a more expressive way of letting his childhood vision come through his art. I think an amazing thing about the Children's Art Carnival was the philosophy that existed in terms of art education. For Betty it wasn't just about technique. It was more about your spirit and how you add that into your work.

I remember stories she would tell me about some of the artists who came from different parts of the world to the Carnival. People would say anyone looking for work as an artist should go see Betty, because the Carnival became an incubator for emerging people like George C. Wolfe. When George first came to New York, he taught theater at the Carnival. Betty gave him one of his first art teaching jobs. Marie Brooks also taught dance at the Carnival. Whatever your art form was, Betty made it into a workshop. I don't know if there's an artist around who has been successful in their career and not touched or impacted by Betty Blayton-Taylor.

She will be truly missed, and she was truly loved.



Youth during an Open Studio Workshop at the Children's Art Carnival (courtesy of Marline A. Martin)

By Omo Misha, Director, Children's Art Carnival, Curator, and Artist

As told to Souleo

I started working at the Children's Art Carnival in 2002 as a visual arts instructor, then I became the program manager, left for a few years, and I have since returned as director to help rebuild and rebrand the organization.

Although I worked for the Carnival, my real relationship with Betty began after I had left the Carnival administratively and begun to do more curatorial work. That's when we got to know each other and when I got a perspective on Betty as an artist. I didn't know her art before then. So for me as an artist, she has been a great inspiration.

When I think about Betty building and directing the Carnival while simultaneously forging a career as an artist, I realize that people in one sector might not have been as in tune with what she was doing in the other. For me, as someone who wears different hats, I find that really remarkable. I think that is something people should learn from and strive to emulate as an artist. I meet young artists who feel like if they do something else it will take away from their art. But I think all of these things add to your artistic value. I think Betty was an example of that.

At the core of her work as an artist, she was a very spiritual person. That was reflected in her art and the way she taught at the Carnival. She sought, through her own art, to create avenues for people to be more in

touch with themselves spiritually. I think that's why the artwork that came out of the Carnival was so dynamic. Even to this day, I see very few arts institutions that put out the caliber of work I saw coming out of the Carnival. And that is a result of Betty's vision and her activism.

After I stepped away from the Carnival, I received a greater perspective on the organization. I realized how important this work was that she had done. I never got the sense that Betty thought what she was doing was radical and groundbreaking. She just did what came naturally to her. She came to New York as an artist seeking an artistic community, she found an opportunity to teach for the Museum of Modern Art, she discovered something in it that was inspirational, and she continued to build on that by bringing the Carnival to Harlem. I think she was just being Betty. She was strong and outspoken, sometimes to a fault. But it was that boisterous and lively creative spirit that allowed her to open doors.



Betty Blayton-Taylor, "Ancestors Bearing Light" (2007), acrylic on canvas, 30 inches round (courtesy of BettyBlayton.com)

By robin holder, visual artist:

As told to Souleo

I met Betty in 1978 when I was 26. I was working with the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop as the coordinator and then the assistant director for the workshop. Bob never had enough money to pay anybody, so anytime he was short on funds he would send some of us up to the Carnival for Betty to give us part-time gigs. Betty was also a board member for the Workshop and did her prints there when she had the time.

After I went up to the Carnival one day, I began working there on and off as a teaching artist. I recall that she was always in dire straits financially with the organization because she was very idealistic and overextended herself. She would do things first and then see how she would finance it. Betty was always diligently writing grants and reports and projects. One day I went up to her little office on the third floor of the brownstone. She was really happy and said, "I got rid of our deficit." I said, "That's fantastic. How did you do it?" She picked up a pencil and said, "I just erased it." I thought that was hysterical. She had such a good sense of humor.

I connected with Betty right away. We became friends largely because of a real commitment to and interest in the spiritual nature of life and how that can be reflected in artwork. At the same time, she had some serious personal problems, but regardless of that fact, she was able to stay focused. That's what was so remarkable about Betty. There was always a real dynamic energy she was giving to the Carnival, one that, at times, you sensed she would have liked to direct to her own work as an artist.

A difficult thing that has to do with elitism in the art world is that community art is often regarded as "lesser than" the arts. Betty was the founder and director of a community-based African-American organization, and because of that I hope she is not sidelined in importance, [because she was] a genuinely gifted and hardworking abstract painter. Sometimes I wonder whether, if Betty had spent more of her life developing her work, and if there was more of a receptive art world to female African-American artists, she might have been more high profile.

The experimentation she did with transparent layering of shapes and color and circular canvases was quite important. She had this high skill level of being a painter with a very exploratory approach to the imagery that she developed. When I look at her work, I know it's her work. She was able to create her own visual language, which is the work of somebody who has something to say and is an original.



Founding members and staff of the Studio Museum in Harlem, including Betty Blayton-Taylor, second from the right (courtesy of the Studio Museum in Harlem)

By Thelma Golden, Director and Chief Curator, the Studio Museum in Harlem:

Betty Blayton-Taylor was a singular artist, educator, activist, and advocate. The Studio Museum in Harlem is incredibly proud of her important role as a founder and longtime champion of our institution. Without question, her commitment to artists of African descent continues to animate nearly every aspect of our work, and it inspires my work as director every day.

As a founding board member of the Studio Museum in Harlem, Betty championed the museum before it even existed. She had a clear vision of the power and possibility of art and artists to impact a life, a neighborhood, a world. She served on the Studio Museum's board from 1965 to 1977, during which — in addition to her membership on the executive committee as secretary — she advocated for both the ideals of the museum and the very real challenges of sustaining a fledgling nonprofit, work she knew well from co-founding and leading the Children's Art Carnival.

When Betty articulated her initial vision — to create the kind of museum that could meaningfully serve her Harlem students in their own neighborhood — there was no precedent for an institution of this kind. As an educator, she was deeply committed to creating access for young people frequently discouraged from entering museums and visual arts institutions in New York City. And as an artist, she created works that have engaged and inspired audiences around the world, including here at the Studio Museum.

Betty not only opened doors, she built new doors — doors that, nearly 50 years later, remain permanently open in her students' own backyard. She is sincerely missed, but her legacy will continue to guide our

planning and preparation for the Studio Museum's next half-century, and beyond.

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Art

Remembering Margaret Rose Vendryes, Creator of the *African Diva Project*

In every role she held, Vendryes advocated for marginalized people and celebrated the cultural contributions of the Black and queer communities.



by Souleo
2 hours ago



Margaret Rose Vendryes at the inaugural group exhibition at Warburton Galerie, Yonkers, NY, November 10, 2018 (courtesy Jacqueline Herranz Brooks)

On Tuesday, March 29, 2022, **Margaret Rose Vendryes**, a revered Black queer artist, scholar, educator, and curator, died from acute respiratory failure. She was 67. I became aware of Margaret when I included her work in my article, "**40 amazing**"



black artists to watch in 2014.” When I came across Margaret’s website I was drawn to her works in *The African Diva Project*. The mixed-media series reimagines images of Black celebrities by adding classical African masks. The ceremonial masks are traditionally worn by men, but Margaret placed them mainly on Black women icons (e.g., Donna Summer and Janet Jackson) along with gender-nonconforming celebrities such as RuPaul and Billy Porter. The series challenges notions of gender, race, sexuality, and power while celebrating the ancestral legacy of these figures.

Soon thereafter, I included Margaret’s work in my touring exhibition, ***i found god in myself: The 40th Anniversary of Ntozake Shange’s for colored girls***, and more recently in the 2021 exhibition *Styling: Black Expression, Rebellion, and Joy Through Fashion*. Over the years I learned more about Margaret. She was born on March 16, 1955, in Kingston, Jamaica; her family later settled in Queens, New York. In 1997 she became the first Black woman to earn a PhD in Art History from Princeton University. John Wilmerding, her dissertation advisor, recalls her being, “... one of the most multi-talented and successful students to go through Princeton’s graduate program.” He continued via email, “She made a significant mark as an artist. Her ebullient personality and raucous sense of humor were expressed in her colorful and exuberant figurative collages. She was a persuasive and energetic lecturer and teacher and an indelible colleague, who will be missed in many quarters.”

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Margaret Rose Vendryes, *Igbo Billy*" (2020), from *The African Diva Project* (courtesy the Estate of Margaret Rose Vendryes)

In 2008 she published **Barthé, A Life in Sculpture**, the definitive art history book on the groundbreaking sculptor Richmond Barthé, and from 2015 to 2021, she served as the chair of the Performing and Fine Arts department and director of the Fine Arts



Gallery at York College. She also founded the [Southeast Queens Biennial](#) and the Jamaica Summer Artist Residency at York College. Margaret served on the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art Board of Trustees from 2014 to 2022, and on June 1, 2022, she was to begin her new role as Dean of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University.

In every role she held Margaret advocated for marginalized people and celebrated the cultural contributions of the Black and queer communities, pushing for more inclusivity and equity in art institutions and for more diverse permanent collections. Despite her outstanding accomplishments and prominent academic and institutional positions her passing has been largely, and unaccountably, overlooked by numerous art publications. Yet, as the testimonies below confirm, she is immortalized in the hearts and minds of those she impacted within the art world.

The following statements have been edited for length and clarity. All are via email correspondences with the author, unless otherwise noted. A studio visit with Margaret can be watched [here](#).



Margaret Rose Vendryes at her studio painting (photo courtesy Jacqueline Herranz Brooks)

Alyssa Nitchun, Executive Director, [The Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art](#)



Margaret sat on the [Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art's] Board Search Committee that hired me. We naturally fell into a rhythm where I had Margaret on speed dial consulting her on my greatest challenges and celebrating even the most mundane of triumphs. Margaret was unflappable, possessing an almost sage-like clarity and a razor-sharp sense of humor. Along with her wife, Jacqueline [Herranz Brooks], Margaret regularly came out for all Leslie-Lohman gatherings; together they were impeccably chic and filled with joie de vivre.

As a trustee and queer artist and educator, Margaret embodied the trajectory and growth of Leslie-Lohman. Her passion for the arts, expertise, and love of our community were critical in shaping Leslie-Lohman into the queer, diverse, responsive, engaged institution that it is today. From our artist fellowship program to the artists we collect and exhibit, Margaret's vision created a more diverse and rigorous contemporary art museum devoted to today's LGBTQIA+ artists. Margaret's legacy will live on abundantly in the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art's continued growth and expansive vision.

Tammi Lawson, Curator, Art and Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

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I met Margaret 25 years ago as a patron using the collections at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, while she was working on her dissertation, *Representation of the New Negro: The Black Body as Metaphor in Modern American Art and Literature*. She was particularly interested in accessing the bevy of works and information we have on sculptor Richmond Barthé. Margaret spent many months devouring correspondence in his archive, reading his artist file and studying his sculptures. Margaret's stellar research on Barthé [assisted by a yearlong Schomburg Scholar in Residence fellowship] resulted in writing a seminal biography, solidifying her as the Barthé scholar.

We continued our professional relationship even as she became a professor Her students loved and respected Margaret because she knew what she was talking about as she generously shared her knowledge.

When I went to graduate school, I called upon Margaret to write a letter of recommendation and she did so with pride and enthusiasm. Margaret was as beautiful in spirit as she was in looks, and had a great smile to go along with a hearty



laugh. She just had a can-do attitude and she wanted the best for everyone. She signed off on her emails to me: “All Good Things, M.”



Margaret Rose Vendryes and Jacqueline Herranz Brooks at Dead Horse Bay, 2015 (photo courtesy Jacqueline Herranz Brooks)

Jacqueline Herranz Brooks, PhD, Adjunct Professor, City University of New York (CUNY)

I met Margaret in 2003 when I was about to graduate with my BA at CUNY and took her writing-intensive class on contemporary American art. That year, I had the opportunity to enjoy her not only as an electrifying critical lecturer and helpful editor, but also as a curator of the exhibition *Women on Top: Breaking Barriers, Resisting Limits!* In 2004, we coincided on the Center for LGBTQ Studies (CLAGS) conference where I understood Margaret’s take on difficult topics concerning race theory, queer aesthetics, and the limits of authenticity. Our first collaboration was 10 years later, in 2014. Margaret curated my show at the Fine Arts Gallery at York College, titled *Maldita Pared: Fotografía y texto de Cuba*, and we did an interview for the International Review of African American Art (IRAAA) Margaret was generous with her time, space, knowledge, and resources. I read bell hooks’s work from Margaret’s library, and thanks to our conversations and gallery visits I lea



about Black women artists working in abstraction and artists of color making conceptual art.

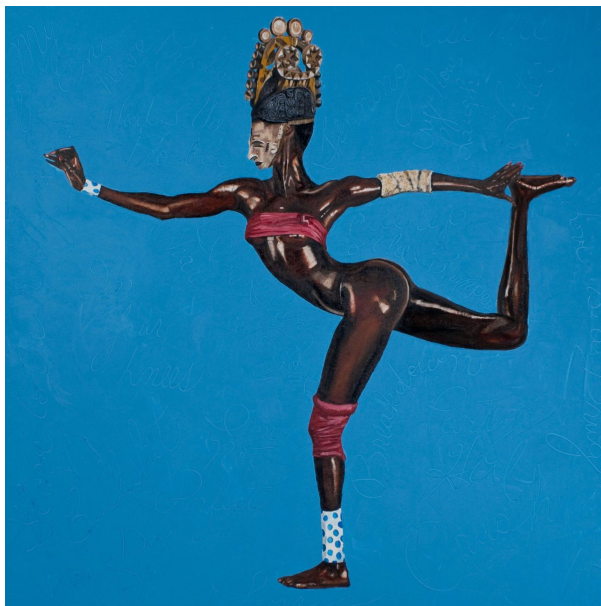
Margaret was game. In 2014, “Punu Janelle,” her then recently finished painting of Janelle Monae from her series *The African Diva Project* was included in the exhibition *Bridging Boundaries: Redefining Diaspora*. Margaret was concerned about the shipping costs, and I suggested we use the subway to transport her painting from Queens to the Postcrypt Art Gallery at Columbia University. The next day, Margaret was dressed in black, wearing a pair of hand-painted spectator shoes and fuchsia gloves, ready to take the **adventure into the critical performance realm.**

It was deliciously comforting living with Margaret. She knew all the songs and dances to them well. We shared spiritual practices and argued about ideological beliefs. She was clever, passionate, and laborious. After we began our romantic relationship in 2010, we were still in love, and got married on July 31, 2020, in the courtyard of the same building I now live in. I miss Margaret in her sexy physical form. Margaret was a great lover.

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She was also a hybrid experimenter who created a category for herself as an artist-historian. Last year she created a new body of work using her photography and her stream-of-consciousness reflections on what it means to transform a personal, intimate archive into something public containing new language. It is difficult to frame her legacy. But it is stimulating to think about the scope of her work that will continue to astound. Margaret was honest, coherent, and committed to advocate for change.



Margaret Rose Vendryes, "Igbo Grace" (2010), from *The African Diva Project*, oil and cold wax on canvas, 48 x 48 inches, Phillip Hales collection (courtesy the Estate of Margaret Rose Vendryes)

Roger C. Tucker III, Founder, Tucker Contemporary Art

Margaret came into my life through my oldest daughter, Ara, during her student days at Princeton. She shared that her professor showed one of my photographs in class. Margaret was the professor. Fast forward to 2011: Ara informed me that Margaret wanted to formally launch her fine art career and suggested that we get together. My art advisory firm, Tucker Contemporary Art, represented her and mounted her New York City exhibition, 33 1/3: *Pushing the Needle*, featuring her iconic *The Af*

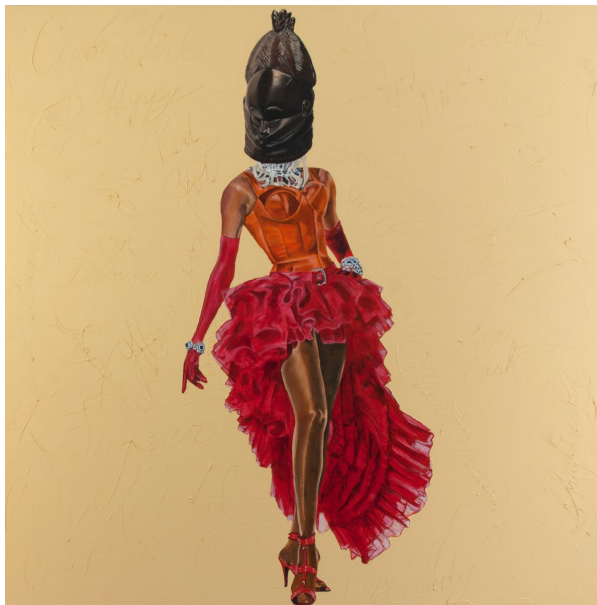


Diva Project paintings. This began a partnership that lasted a decade as we mounted additional exhibitions across the country, published two catalogues, filmed video interviews, and presented live art talks.

Margaret and I became close friends. I could text her at 6:00 am about a movie I'd just seen and she'd usually text back in five minutes with her take on that movie or recommend I check out something equally as interesting. We bonded over art, books, music, movies, architecture, and interior design. The breadth and depth of her interests, passions, and skills inspired all of us to learn and do more.

The composition and mixed media of her paintings referenced techniques across the entire millennia of art history. Margaret's remarkable impact in academia and art can be enjoyed through her paintings, is documented in her writing, and is witnessed in the students and artists she taught and mentored over decades.

Margaret was brilliant, fearless, funny, and indefatigable. Her gifts of time, treasure, and talent to students, artists, academicians, and art institutions will be sorely missed. Above all, her *African Diva* paintings remain the living legacy that I will remember fondly when I think about my good friend, Margaret Rose Vendryes.



Margaret Rose Vendryes, "Sowei RuPaul" (2012), from *The African Diva Project*, oil and wax on canvas, 48 x 48 inches, Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art Collection (courtesy the



Estate of Margaret Rose Vendryes)

Dréya St. Clair Thompson, interdisciplinary artist, speaker, diversity champion, and founder of #TransIsWorthy (as told to the author)

I met Margaret in 2014 at an event I produced. I was at a crossroads in my professional life. I had put a soft pause on my artistic life to focus on nonprofit fundraising and development spaces. At that event I discussed my experience as a gender-nonconforming immigrant from Jamaica and, her being Jamaican-born, she identified with me as a queer Black woman and artist. Soon thereafter she became my mentor. She challenged me to become more rigorous in my practice and to delve deeper into the underpinnings of my artwork.

Eventually she became my first art patron when she bought the piece “Empire” (co-created with Tavet Gillson). Margaret then donated the artwork to the permanent collection at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art and secured me a spot on the Museum’s board.

While I was on the board with Margaret, I witnessed as she pressed what it means to be inclusive in a space that was historically dominated by White males. She advocated for ways to invite people of disadvantaged backgrounds onto a board and to contribute in ways beyond the financial, since she understood that was not feasible for some people. She pushed for people to understand that you can’t just invite Black trans people on a board without understanding the systemic issues that community grapples with and how they would fit in on a board. Building community in the arts as a Black queer person is not easy. But she had a way of making community and a space for others. Before diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives were a trend she was already doing this work.

I am fortunate to have known Margaret. Now, when I look at her work in my home, I feel her presence continuing to mentor me, and for that I am eternally grateful.





Margaret Rose Vendryes working on "Punu Supremes" at Hampton Court, 2022 (photo courtesy Jacqueline Herranz Brooks)

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Art

Interviews

Upcycled: A Conversation With Willie Cole



by Souleo May 1, 2013



Willie Cole, *From Water to Light*, installation at Prospect Street Fire House, Newark (2013) (all images courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York)

When I first made contact with [Willie Cole](#) it was to request that he submit a piece for an exhibition I curated, [Art Enology](#). Here I was, a novice curator, reaching out to a living legend for an exhibition that was launching in a mere three months. I never expected him to say yes. I just wanted him to know that I existed, admired his work, and would hound him until he gave in to being part of one of my exhibitions. Fast-forward six months and Cole was one of the exhibiting artists in the first-ever AARP exhibition I curated, [Lasting Legacy: The Journey of You](#).

Needless to say, I'm still intrigued by the man who transforms everyday items (e.g. irons, bicycles, and shoes) into works of art that challenge us to see beyond the perceived physical limitations inherent to the purpose of any object.

The New Jersey native rose to prominence in 1989, and since then his work has been the subject of several one-person museum exhibitions including: Miami Art Museum (2001), Bronx Museum of the Arts (2001) and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1998). Cole was one of the featured artists in *Reconfiguring an*

African Icon: Odes to the Mask by Modern and Contemporary Artists from Three Continents, which opened in March 2011 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.



Willie Cole, *From Water to Light*, installation at Prospect Street Fire House, Newark (2013) (all images courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York)

In his latest exhibition, **From Water to Light**, he presents his newest artistic obsession: water bottles. With these materials he redefines recycling as reincarnation, repurposing over 10,000 recycled water bottles to create chandeliers and rooms filled with a spiritual aura.

From Water to Light will be on view until May 31, as the latest exhibition presented by Sumei Multidisciplinary Arts Center at the new Prospect Street Fire House gallery in the Ironbound section of Newark.

* * *

Souleo: *When we first spoke months ago you stated that you started using everyday objects because they were readily accessible and practical in terms of economics. With your current exhibition you are focused on recycling as reincarnation. So does the use of everyday objects now have a more spiritual motivation for you?*

Willie Cole: The objects that I use I see as them finding me, more so than me finding them and looking for an object. I see an object and suddenly I recognize what I can do with the object. So in that sense there is an energy or spirit connection to the object. I am exploring the possibilities of these objects. The water bottle is a new object but in terms of shoes, bicycles, steam irons and hairdryers I scratch the surface of these things when I begin to use them.



Willie Cole, *From Water to Light*, installation at Prospect Street Fire House, Newark (2013) (all images courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York)

S: *So how did the water bottle find you?*

WC: I have a friend who has a beautiful pond in his front yard and he has fish in his pond. We're drinking water and when my bottle was empty I began to shape the bottle into a fish. That made all the connections between plastic and recycling, the ocean and all that stuff. That's how I decided to use the water bottle as a building block. Using it now is somewhat a political act because I am adjusting and solving a problem, the problem of too many plastic bottles in landfills. Then I began to think about the basic element of life, which is water, and it comes in a bottle. When we drink the water we replace the liquid in the bottle with air, our breath. To me that becomes your spirit. Water is a life force and it ties into my philosophy on life that all things are one and the same thing.

S: *There is a strong spiritual element to all of your work and you tap into that with this current exhibition through the idea of transcendence and reincarnation. So what spiritual elements and teachings had the greatest impact on you with this project?*

WC: With this project I would say Buddhism or something like Buddhism. For years I have been inspired by West African religions but never practiced it. I had practiced Buddhism for many years. I think there is only one sort of spirituality and different practices are created. They all are pretty much the same teachings or different aspects of the same teachings.



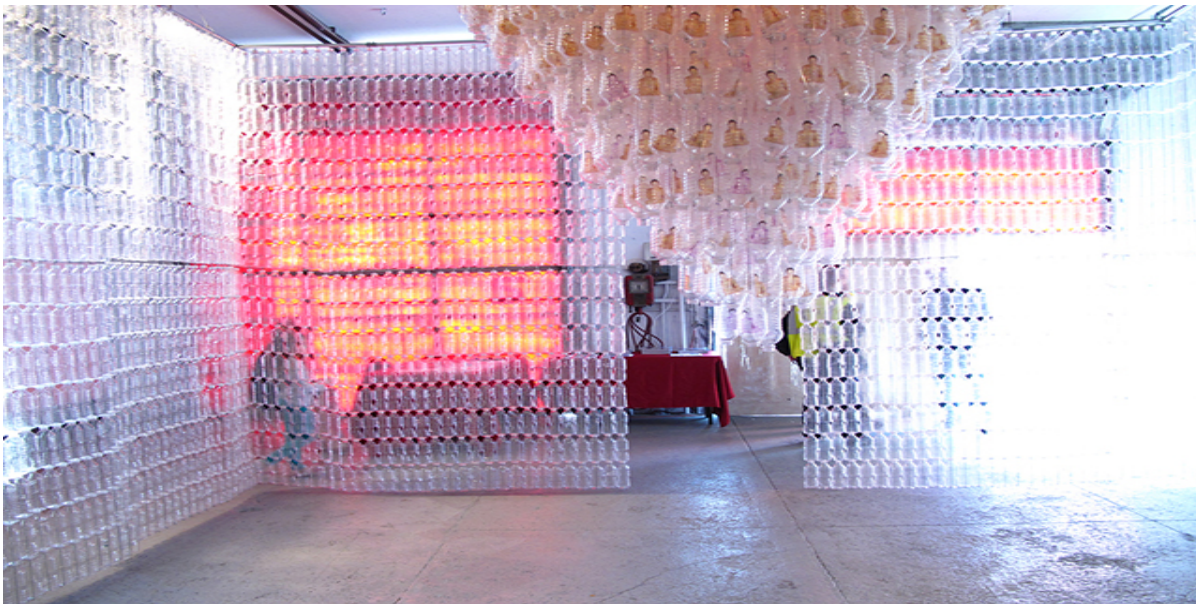
Willie Cole, *From Water to Light*, installation at Prospect Street Fire House, Newark (2013) (all images courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York)

S: *It's the idea of oneness that all energy comes from the same source.*

WC: Yes. If you think about life on a molecular level, if you break anything down it's all the same particles and made from the same minute energy.

S: *As an artist that concept must give you freedom to create anything from all sorts of objects as you've done with shoes, steam irons and so forth.*

WC: It does. I say that I can make anything out of everything and everything out of anything. I challenge myself to do that. Sometimes it takes longer than I'd like which is why I work in series as I try to master the thing. I made art out of irons for 15 years before I switched to bicycles. I do shoes steady now since 2005 but it's all the same thing to me. It's a different object on our level of everyday perception but once you see it as a particle the possibilities are endless.



Willie Cole, *From Water to Light*, installation at Prospect Street Fire House, Newark (2013) (all images courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York)

S: *At the exhibition, viewers can donate their own recycled water bottles as a show of support to the environment. As an artist do you see part of your role as moving people to action on important issues?*

WC: Not all the time. Mostly it's about awareness. My intent is usually discovery to prove to myself that everything is everything. In the case of the water bottles I want it to be bigger than art in a gallery. But also I need the materials. My installation took 10,000 water bottles and my production rate is dependent on how many bottles I get.



Willie Cole, *From Water to Light*, installation at Prospect Street Fire House, Newark (2013) (all images courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York)

S: *There are presently large bodies of water bottles floating in the ocean like islands. Much of your work is said to be a critique of the consumer culture that creates situations like this. So how does this project fit into that recurring theme?*

WC: Consumer culture is not my deliberate catalyst to make anything, but it is a critique of my work that I've accepted because I use objects consumed by everyday people. I hate shopping since there are too many things to choose from. To me it represents an order and the ego. Culture is driven by the ego of the shopper. So much of what life could or should be about is masked by our obsession with buying and owning and wanting something we can't afford. The water bottles are my conscious attempt to make political awareness.

S: *On your website the tagline is “contemporary artist, perceptual engineer, ecological mechanic and transformer.” Do you ever find yourself having to negotiate between these identities or are they all just one?*

WC: They are one but they are names given to me by others. I thought they were interesting since I never cared for the word artist anyway. I am more of a perceptual engineer. I change the way people see everyday objects the same way advertisers change the way we see the world. In the 1970's I was a painter and had a son in 1978. He would watch “The Transformers” and when the toy cars came out I found it inspiring. I saw first a car then a lion and it made me think about transforming objects and that's why I use that word [transformer]. They are all aspects of what I do but they are the same.



Willie Cole, *From Water to Light*, installation at Prospect Street Fire House, Newark (2013) (all images courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York)

S: I read a quote from you that pretty much stated that you feel as if you don't fit into the African-American art movement because artists transcend labels. Yet it's arguable that much of the art world is not as enlightened as you'd hope. So how do you handle that duality of wanting to transcend race but knowing race is still and may always be a factor in the art world?

WC: The thing I am pushing against is my own self-limitations. I recognize that labeling is part of marketing. But if you look at most of my work outside of steam irons it's not about race or growing up in the ghetto of New Jersey. I am exploring greater things than that. I've been post-black since the 1960's. We are black and making art but that shouldn't be a label. We should be artists until it's important to say that we are black. I want people to see my art as art. America has this fascination with the other and wanting to label the other. They've categorized to control the world and the way we see the world and our symbols of beauty. From 1955 to 1968 I was very unattractive because black awareness hadn't kicked in yet. I had a big nose, nappy hair and big eyes. But after 1968 I was suddenly a handsome brother. I was born colored then I became a Negro, then Afro-American, then black and then African-American. They all had to do with how other people saw black people.



Willie Cole, *From Water to Light*, installation at Prospect Street Fire House, Newark (2013) (all images courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York)

*S: People may not know this but you started a band in 2006 called, **BlackGomez**. How does being in a band inform your role as an artist?*

WC: BlackGomez is me and my kids. It is a one-man band but my two daughters do harmonies in the background. I don't make money at it. I need some creativity that is not about earning money. It has more freedom to me. I play the guitar and had one my whole life. Music especially, non-vocal, it takes you to a

certain place. I listen to ambient music for meditation and to relax. I listen to jazz too as it's expansive with concepts. Bebop takes chord structures and changes the melody. That's what I do with my objects and improvising on the visual harmonics of the object.

From Water to Light *continues at the new Prospect Street Fire House gallery (56 Prospect Street, Newark, New Jersey) through May 31.*

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