

Curlee Raven Holton: Journey

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Introduction

What does it take to be a legend in your own time? A lot.

One has to have one's fingers on the pulse of the times, and still have a nose for what is coming in the future. And, to be this sort of person, one needs a strong spiritual foundation while living with a strong love for the beauty and 'terribleness,' to use the poet Amir Baraka's phrase, of the material world. The artist is witness, is soothsayer, is a mirror the way a river reflects a changed image, and the artist is also the town crier, sometimes the canary in the mine, always the eye that looks deep.

Curlee Raven Holton is an artist, with all these qualities and more, who shows us glimpses of his strong spiritual world while pulling us into materiality through line, color, and colliding dimensions. The dimensions are of diverse nature: there is the surface and the depth of a rendering on paper, canvas, or other materials, for sure. There is also the social dimension and story that emerge from these environments: stories about identity, love, anger, distress, loneliness or crowds, and stories about being a human being classified as 'black,' as African American or 'other.'

Holton is a Master Printmaker who works in diverse mediums. He has led a distinguished career that includes his appointment to the David and Linda Roth Art Professorship at Lafayette College in 2010, his leadership in creating the Experimental Printmaking Workshop at Lafayette in 1996, and more than fifty one person exhibits within the United States and abroad. His work is in many private and public collections including the Cleveland Museum of Art, Yale Art Gallery and the Library of Congress.¹ He has shown in Jamaica, Japan, Mexico and Costa Rica. He is a well respected expert of the history of African American art, as well as on contemporary African American visual artists, and has championed Latin American contemporary art consistently and with enthusiasm during his career. Faith Ringgold has said, "He creates exhibitions like he creates art, with a compelling force and directness," (*Tellin' It Like it Is*, 200?). A gifted teacher as well as

artist, he has led workshops throughout the United States and in the Caribbean and Latin America. In fact, Holton has presented over 70 public lectures on his work, African American Art, and contemporary printmaking.² He has been invited to contribute to scholarly journals and other collections, and has traveled to Italy to present demonstrations and lectures on art-making and the creative process.

Early Career

Where does an African American artist come from? What does he or she draw from? How does it happen? What does the black American experience have to do with it? How does, if it all, African American art reflect dialogues within that community, or between that community and others? In Curlee Holton's work we sense history pulling, as we sense his work pushing against history and stereotypic dialogue. At times his paintings and prints are speechifying, 'testifying, bearing witness, expressing and demanding humility, and also engaging us in existential questions of human fragility, of the human condition. After all is said and done, we know that we are looking at, and experiencing, visual narratives of the universal truth of the human condition. Holton suggests to us the advantage of knowing one's humanity, its limits, its secrets, and its futures and possibilities. This work entails the genius of looking through the window of one experience to the world, of engaging the world through an experience of interpretation not based on doubt but on conviction that yes, I did see *that*. I *did feel* that. That *did* happen.

Holton himself says that "After boot camp training, I was stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, where I was assigned to the Second Cavalry Mechanized Division. After completing my regularly assigned duties, I would draw in my spare time... I was selected to give art lessons to soldiers who had just returned from Viet Nam, who were either injured or addicted to narcotics. This connection, with what was called special services for GIs and their families, led me to submit a painting for the 5th Army arts competition for which I received an award. I believe this was one of those important moments of self-validation that helped me to establish a greater sense of self-confidence in my artistic talents."³ Elsewhere, the artist confides that "As a young artist, I was often encouraged to find my own voice. As a mature artist, it became clear that it was not merely having a voice or a technique but a song to sing, a subject to investigate, a project worthy of one's sacrifice of time, energy, and passions. For me, that purpose has been to better understand humanity by better understanding myself."⁴

Curlee Holton went on to study at the Cleveland Institute of Art where he received his BFA in Drawing and Printmaking, and at Kent State University where he received his MFA. He quickly moved on to solo and group exhibits (a list is provided following this text), and his work drew the attention of collectors around the country.

Holton was born in Mississippi, and though his family soon moved north to Cleveland, Ohio, they did not leave the black culture of the deep south behind. This fertile environment of the 'black belt,' has produced so much of American music, specifically jazz, the blues, and spirituals, just as surely as it has made a mark on many African American visual artists. In Curlee's case, we feel it in the bright colors, the strong lines, and rhythmic repetitive patterns that characterize so much of his work. But, we also see the art of storytelling, the oral text traditions that brought Brer Rabbitt, and other narrative imports from West Africa. Many, if not most, of Holton's pieces tell us stories, or parts of stories, or perhaps are made to remind us of important stories. This narrative strength, coupled with the employ of primary colors and precise fields of dark hues, recalls the vibrance and lyricism of jazz and its predecessor, the blues. These qualities come through in such works as "Blind Spots II," a lithograph, "Close Quarters II," a multimedia piece, his painting "Intrusion," and in much of the work of his Blues Series, such as "Quilt." The haunting image in "Shango and the American Dream," reminds us of stories of 'haints' and spirits as it also engages us in difficult ideas about America and American symbols, in this case joined with a figure that seems to have wandered off of an early twentieth century rural advertisement. The same diaphanous world returns in his paintings "My Father's Heart is in My Chest," and "Apparition." These scenes almost taunt the viewer, and suggest that just beyond view, magical and portentous things are happening.

Christine Oaklander has written that "Although Curlee grew up in a close-knit community, hanging out on the streets with neighborhood kids, at home there were high expectations for proper behavior and academic success."⁵ This push and pull of a close-knit, insular community and a somewhat raucus 'group' childhood experience, of high parental expectations in contrast to enjoyment of music, dance, and other art-making has been a common characteristic of the black community. One could say that these experiences, and the art they eventually inspired, exist in the same epistemological universe as the texts by Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of *Between the World and Me*,⁶ as they also recall the works of literary giants Richard Wright and James Baldwin. Certainly, the watery, clouded and dreamy works like "Apparition" are not without their thematic counterparts in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The kernel of Holton's approach is somewhere between these ontologies of black being and his own sensitivities as a trained, disciplined, and expressive artist who seeks the world through his own eyes, on his own terms.

Before closing, I want to mention the theme of redemption that also runs through Holton's work. His corpus is not limited to visual conversation about the sad, the lonely, the angry or the tragic. Much of his work engages imagined tomorrows and the hopeful 'now.' I am thinking of his painting "Silence," and others such as "English Only," where the central figure seems to look out of the canvas with a reserved smile, or the mixed-media "Blessings from Foreigners." Likewise, while most would think of the images that he compiled on the

theme of Othello as tragic, I find there is something triumphant in these renderings of the famous Moor from Shakespeare. Holton's Othello is solid, he is contemplative. He seems to master his world, and to own his destiny.

His most recent work continues with this theme of tragedy and triumph. One of the most exciting is his painting "Patty Will Save Me." This work recalls earlier styles and places its subjects firmly in the center of the canvas; two figures gaze directly out to the viewer.

The colors and structure of this painting combine the complexity of composition (as well as the almost whimsical use of line) of the Othello series, with the nuanced color palette of works such as "English Only" and "My Father's Heart is in My Chest," in a strong and resolute way that again puts us in front of the artist as witness and interpreter.

Curlee Holton's work engages a universal gaze, showing us the humanity of all human circumstances, big or small, known or mystery.

¹Robert S. Mattison, PhD., Lafayette College, 2009

² ibid

³ "When Did I First Become an Artist?," in *A Visit to My House: A Personal and Public Narrative, 30 years of Art* (2012)

⁴ *In the Shadow of Contemplation* (201?), Noyes Museum of Art of Stockton College,

⁵ Essay, Christine Oaklander, PhD, Noyes Museum of Art exhibit catalogue

⁶ TaNehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015