Art OF OUR TIME

SELECTIONS FROM THE ULRICH MUSEUM OF ART
WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
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and Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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Content
Radcliffe Bailey’s dense multimedia works interweave narrative fragments of African American history with the artist’s own experiences as a black man. Typically, he creates a complex layering of painted marks, written words, photographs, found objects, glitter, dirt, and resin to form an associative collage. Bailey likens his improvisational method to practicing and performing jazz. Producing several works simultaneously, he builds a layer on one and then moves on to others before returning to add the next layer. Balancing quick and slower tempos, he allows for both spontaneity and reflection.

In 1999 Bailey completed seven untitled eighty-by-eighty-by-five-inch works mounted on wooden panels; they are collectively known as the Kindred series. Each panel holds a centralized photograph culled from Bailey’s grandmother’s collection of family tintypes and from his own images of African sculptures. Set into the panel behind a sheet of Plexiglas, these photographs are surrounded by the artist’s signature web of painted and collaged elements. Each piece in the series honors a different aspect of African American history.

The Ulrich Museum commissioned Bailey to create a similar work, this one honoring the history of African Americans in Kansas. After doing research at the Kansas African American Museum in Wichita, he produced Exodus. Like works in the Kindred series, this one is richly inlaid with symbols both historically and personally specific.

Across the wide border of Exodus, a complex network of meandering lines recalls branches, roots, rivers, and roads as they weave over and under rectangular patches that suggest quilt blocks and plots of land. The title is contained in a patch at the lower left, and the date 1879 appears at the upper right. Together these elements refer to the so-called Exodus of 1879, when some six thousand African Americans fled white oppression in the South. Many of them settled in Kansas, encouraged by the Homestead Act of 1862, which offered individuals titles to parcels of undeveloped land for farming, and by the state’s legacy as a pre-Civil War bastion of the anti-slavery movement. The photograph at the center is an enlarged vintage image of men who might well have been descendents of people who arrived in 1879: African American members of the Wichita YMCA Orchestra and Glee Club.

Bailey’s choice of photograph acknowledges both the significant role music has played in African American history and the artist’s own relationship to that history and to music itself. In other works, he has paid tribute to jazz legends Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker. Of his own visually syncopated style, he has frequently said, “What I do may not even be called art. It may be called music.” Other facets of Exodus are personally meaningful, too: the pale green color repeated across the panel refers to Bailey’s grandfather’s favorite room, and the butterfly is a loving nod to the artist’s young daughter. By incorporating personal symbols in a painting about Kansas, Bailey, who lives in Georgia, recognizes his connection to a larger historical narrative and celebrates culture’s evolution from an amalgam of both individual and collective stories.

Emily Stamey

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003). Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Loving to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vikki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarm, won the Hornick Book Award and Prize. Emily Stamey, the Ulrich Museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art, is the author of Johan Gruw-Bentheim: The American Prints (2001) and The Prints of Roger Shimomura: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1968-2005 (2006). Her scholarship centers on ethnic identities and social themes in American art.