

FORT GANSEVOORT

METAL



Words by Emily Harle – December 21, 2020. Metal Magazine. Photography courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

Artist Dawn Williams Boyd's unique style of fabric art employs a combination of quilting, embroidery and beading to stitch a representation of America as experienced by minority groups. Her latest series, *The Trump Era*, specifically focuses on xenophobia and immigration, but her work has also explored feminine sexuality, the Black American experience, as well as forgotten moments from American history. Today, we discussed the origins of her signature cloth paintings and the role of the artist in the United States' ever-changing political landscape.

How did your interest in art begin, and what prompted you to utilize your artistic skills for political and social activism?

I am the child of a woman who, because she had a family to care for and a career in education to maintain, only allowed her own creativity to emerge in dribs and drabs – making clothes for herself, brown paper dolls for her daughter and bulletin boards for the hallways of her schools. Only once her children were grown was she able to fully express herself artistically. I currently reside in that expression. My own path to artistic expression began as a process of elimination. I don't dance or sing or have an ear for languages, but in my junior year in high school I discovered an ability to recreate the human form in papier-mâché. It was a true 'eureka moment' and I consciously ordered my life toward art from that point forward.

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My political work resulted from a shortcoming in my education. My mother, Dr Narvie Williams Puls, PhD, was a social studies teacher who lived in the segregated south her entire life. She purposefully protected my brother and me from the reality of being Black in this country – we never rode in the back of a bus and the only white people we regularly encountered were the nuns and priests at our elementary school.

That's wild, could you tell me a bit more?

All that changed in 1966, when I integrated in my high school D'Youville Academy and became its first Black cheer captain. The lack in my education occurred at Stephens College which did not offer African or African American History or Women's Studies departments. Unlike many of my peers, I missed out on that revolution in higher education which became common in the early 1970s. It was only after I graduated from college and moved to Denver, Colorado that I fell in with a group of Black artists, whose lives had been shaped by that revolution that I became aware of what I had missed and set about correcting that lack.

I realized early in that self-education that I was probably not the only person, Black or white, who lacked knowledge of the true history of Black life in the United States. Because I am a visual person and realizing that a lot of people don't read, I used pictures to tell just enough of a true story to pique your interest so that you are motivated to do your own research into the facts.

Your signature cloth paintings utilize a unique combination of your existing skills as a painter and brightly coloured, textured fabrics to tell a visual story. What interested you in utilizing fabric textiles rather than traditional canvas painting?

I never really cared for painting on canvas. The whole preparation process – building the frame, stretching and sizing the canvas, then sanding down the layers of gesso, incorporating the myriad unguents and driers into the paint and still getting an unsatisfactory result was a huge bore! I wanted to draw on a rigid surface and paint immediately! Frustrated, I switched to canvas boards but they only came in geometric shapes, so then I started using cardboard but it had built-in biodegrading chemicals, so I changed to plywood but it was much too heavy to hang and transport.

In 2001, I was asked to provide a teacher's workshop on Faith Ringgold who painted on canvas but instead of stretching her canvas over a wooden frame, framed her work in patched fabric and rolled it into a tube to transport it. Flashbulbs went off in my brain! Why not make the entire image out of fabric? It allows me to combine the sewing skills learnt at my mother's knee with all the painterly skills of using line, color, value, perspective with the added fillip of physical and virtual texture that is inherent in the fabric. Making my images from fabric also eliminated all the weight, shape, size and transportation issues; the chemicals with which the fabric is preserved (formaldehyde) can be washed away but, with careful handling, the object will still last for hundreds of years. Issues on how to display this medium had already been solved by other textile artists.

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Your cloth paintings employ a mixture of quilting, embroidery and beading, amongst other techniques. Can you expand on how you acquired these skills, and tell us more about your creative process when implementing them?

I learned to bead and embroider – both with floss and with ribbon – by reading books in my local library. I prefer books because I can utilize them whether I have electricity or Bluetooth or a Wi-Fi signal. In my work, quilting is just a practical way to keep all the layers together. I rarely use all over quilting stitches, either by hand or by machine, because I don't want that added texture to interfere with the surface quality of my work. My technique is more akin to collage than painting, though it is approached in the same way as I approach my acrylic paintings. Cloth painting is a layered, additive process, but once the final layer of fabric has been secured I think about where I want to add more texture (cowrie shells), definition (embroidery) or movement and light (beads and sequins).

Early in my development, I determined that embroidering the features of my figures was easier than trying to manipulate teeny-tiny bits of fabric. Line drawing with floss allows me to use my drawing skills to accentuate facial expressions and thereby tell the story in a more human to human way than gestural but blank egg-headed figured can.

You often use donated or second-hand textiles in your work. Do you feel it is important for artists to use recycled materials where possible, and why?

We should always recycle our used clothes. There are people less fortunate than we are who can only afford to pay a dollar for my fifteen dollar shirt. Just because the 'style' has changed again is no reason to throw our slightly used clothing in the trash. Today there are many new companies, in addition to the Goodwill, that provide training and jobs rehabbing our used objects and clothes.

A huge percentage of the clothes we buy new ends up in landfills, which would be cool if most of the fabric was biodegradable cotton, wool or silk. But most massed produced clothing is synthetic

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polyester (plastic) and even when it finally breaks down, microscopic pellets end up in the runoff groundwater, the ocean and our food.

I am forced to purchase some fabrics – I use a lot of brown cotton for skin tones, for example, but I hunt down clothing outlets for old fashioned patterns and textures which oftentimes are not produced anymore. Often my finds are labor-intensive because it has to be de-constructed before I can use it, but when you consider the cost of a yard of new lace versus that same lace which has been carefully detached from someone's old prom dress or wedding gown, it is just worth it on so many levels. I use white and light color cotton sheets as the base for my cloth paintings. My husband uses old cotton as rags for applying stain to his woodworking projects. You can use cut up fabric to stuff dolls instead of that plastic-based foam. Our ancestors made rag rugs – I just saw some new ones at the Habitat for Humanity Restore last week.

Make a quilt from all your old t-shirts or jeans and donate them to the unsheltered. There is no limit to what would be better than throwing it away!

You have previously stated that the traditional format of most 'fine' art was too confining for you. How do your unconventional materials and techniques allow you to express your creativity unhindered by limitations?

Most of my work ends up in a square or rectangular format, at least at the top, simply because of the necessity to hang it on a wall and because I have not yet figured out how to create multi-form hanging elements/systems. You'll notice, however, that where I can I have done my best to eliminate the straight line and the ninety and forty-five-degree angles, even if only at the bottoms or sides, of my pieces. When I was working in cardboard and plywood I could cut away the straight lines but that often weakened the remaining surface. Shaping the edges of fabric is only limited by the amount of patience needed to make three layers match the same curve. The surface can be manipulated in ways I haven't even explored yet in addition to the layering, embroidery and beading I have already mastered. One of my goals is to create a fabric piece that we can walk into.

As an artist who tends to channel political messages in your work, why do you believe it is important for artwork to be used for activism, rather than purely for aesthetic purposes?

The times we are living in call for everyone to choose a side, to have something to say – good or bad! We, as humans, as the proprietors of this ball of dirt we are clinging to as we hurtle through the unbreathable ether are on the cusp of determining how our future as a species unfolds.

Right now, we need to decide how we will have enough food, water and air and what the quality of those necessities will be for our generations. Will we live in peace or war? Will we continue to denigrate and deprive our fellow humans because of something none of us can control like the color of our skin or the place we are born or the gender we prefer to love? What are we going to do when the water rises too high or the fires burn up all the oxygen or the winds knock down our edifices?

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Yet many of us can't or don't read or have access to the scholarly words being written about these issues. Some of us are struggling so hard just to put bread on the table that we don't have the time or the mental space to even wonder about these things. The powers that be will, as they have throughout history, continue to accumulate and hoard their wealth and power, unwilling and unable to change for the good of the masses until those masses rise up and snatch their wealth and power from them.

So, in your opinion, what is the artists' role in all of this?

Artists have always been at the forefront of political change, identifying and focusing in on the issues that negatively affect their communities. We are no different and it is our turn. How can you make images of 'happy little trees' when the trees are burning all around us? How can you paint doe-eyed children when someone's babies are being shot down in the streets for all the world to see? How can you photograph rainbow-colored sunsets on the beach when the colors in the sky and the foam on the beach are caused by the chemicals spewing from the inland factories? How can you portray the tide rushing in when the water is rising all around us?

Your artwork aims to encapsulate the experience of being a Black American woman in modern-day society. Can you tell us about your personal experience with gender and race, and how this influences your identity as an artist?

Actually, I have been incredibly blessed in my life and in my artistic career. I was born and matured just in time to benefit from the Black Power, Black is Beautiful and Women's Rights movements. I was in the right places at the right times with the right credentials and training to take advantage of opportunities that came along, frankly, due to the struggles of those that came before me.

I have worked hard, made the right connections and piled up my rejection letters and stepped upon them in order to see my way forward. I have never let my race or my gender prevent me from achieving my goals, and I have done what I can to prepare a way for others to follow along behind me regardless of their gender or race. But I am neither blind nor deaf. I don't have to be overweight with high blood pressure and diabetes to know that I live in a food desert.

I had choices about the number of children I gave birth to, but I can see the right-to-lifers camped outside my local clinics with their signs and their photos of mutilated babies trying to scare my teenaged neighbors into continuing pregnancies they cannot afford. I can look out my window and see the green leaves on the trees and the azaleas still blooming here in late November. I have voted in every election for over 50 years but I can see and hear those fools in the White House and Senate demanding that the ballots in the most significant election in a generation be counted over and over and over until they get the results they want.

Today, on the radio, they said that a quarter of a million Americans – Black and white – have died from Covid-19 in the last nine months. As a Black American, I know that a high percentage of that number were Black and brown people and that will continue to be true of whatever number of deaths we reach before this pandemic is over. As a Black woman with grandchildren who cannot

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go to school or socialize with their peers, I realize that they and our society will be irrevocably changed.



Your 2019 series *The Trump Era* highlighted the systemic racism facing minorities, provoking the viewer to consider how the pre-existing oppression in America has been encouraged and normalized under Trump's administration. Can you walk us through your thought process behind the series, and expand on how you have witnessed the growth of racist ideals in the United States over the past few years?

Seventy million Americans voted for Trump two weeks ago; even after he excused white nationalist protestors who marched in the streets in Charlottesville; even after he sucked up to and attempted to emulate the world's dictators and human right deniers; even after he caged immigrants and separated them from their children; even after he repeatedly lied to his own constituents about the severity of the pandemic; even after he has denied the obvious changes to the climate and pulled the country out of the Paris Climate Accord; even after his comment about grabbing women by their genitals; and even after saying that he could shoot someone on the street without consequences.

The Trump Era series is not just about the re-emergence of the acceptance of legalized expressions of racism. It is about the issues which affect us as a nation, a planet and a species. My point in enumerating these issues in my series is to acknowledge that they existed before Trump but because of him and his keepers, they will not only continue to exist after Trump but will have been exacerbated in the scant four years of his presidency.

Looking back on the time before 2016, I felt that we had been working through some of the problems facing our society – like racial and gender inequality, immigration, climate change and

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potential nuclear disaster. We didn't have all the answers yet, but like-minded people were working towards solutions. Backwards lookers and foot draggers were being gently encouraged to get with the program and participate in the 21st century.

And then Trump comes along with his 'Make America Great Again' slogan which I interpreted as 'Let's Go Back to When Father Knew Best and He was a White Man'; when 'white' was 'right', LGBTQAI were just letters in the alphabet; when the killing of Black men and women was a sport – just some good old boys feeling their oats.

Following on from my previous question, we have just seen a historical American election, with the highest voter turnout in twelve decades, where Trump failed in his bid for re-election. Do you believe the democrat victory will lessen the rise of xenophobia in the US, and what do you hope to see change in the next four years now Trump is out office?

As of today, Trump is still in office insisting that the ballots be recounted again in states like Georgia where I live. He has not conceded and even though many of his fellow Republicans are deserting him like rats deserting a sinking ship, his constituency is still insisting, without evidence, that the election results were fraudulent. States are still certifying election results and the apparent winner – Biden/Harris – are still prevented from accessing critical information and persons who would enable a smooth transition. Moreover, with more than sixty days left in his administration, Trump seems intent upon wreaking as much havoc as possible before January 20, 2021. We still wake up every morning wondering what new crazy thing he has said or done while we were sleeping!

Even once ensconced in the White House the Biden/Harris administration will wage an uphill battle similar to the last six years of President Obama's administration if Georgia fails to elect two Democratic senators. Even if that scenario occurs there is so much backtracking that needs to be done to correct the errors Trump has made, particularly with our international policies, that it may take them four years just to return to square one. And then there is the question of the US Senate election in two years and then whether Trump and the Republicans will try to regain their power in 2024. Since he only served one term Trump is entitled to try for another term, so we are not out of the woods yet.

First things first will be the eradication of Covid-19. The promise of an efficacious vaccine will be moot if Americans won't take the drugs. The US government has a poor history with regard to medical experiments performed on its own citizens and those of its neighbors – the syphilis experiments in Guatemala in the 1940s and in Tuskegee, Alabama from 1932 to 1972 – are just two examples.

Then there is the economic crisis caused by Trump's lies to US citizens in March 2020 and his refusal to put the welfare of the people of this country ahead of his ego and the personal gains of his cronies.

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Your work has also been known to provide a social commentary on the topic of female sexuality, such as your Ladies Night series. Do you believe it is important to destigmatize women's sexual expression, and how can art be used to initiate this change?

The important issues concerning the women of the world have more to do with continuing to demand our rights as humans and citizens – education of ourselves and our children, equal pay, control over our own bodies with regard to reproduction and especially here in the US, the high levels of childbirth mortality in mothers of color.

You have assisted in founding Ulozi and are heavily involved with the Sankofa Art Collective, Black artist collectives which aim to promote African American visual artists. How did you get involved with these, and can you tell us a bit more about their missions?

Ulozi, which is Swahili for 'Black arts' was founded in the late 1980s as a response to the Denver Black Arts Festival's (now the Colorado Black Arts Festival) need for an in-house core group of Black visual artists. Over the next two decades Ulozi provided educational workshops for member artists and opportunities for artist to exhibit original artwork in venues that included the festival itself, local hospitals, schools, businesses, galleries and the Denver Art Museum. Many of the Denver area arts and humanities institutions – DAM, the museum of Natural History, etc. – depended upon Ulozi to create programs that would appeal to local people of color. Ulozi established interactive activities within the Festival's Children's Pavilion on behalf of these entities. We established our own gallery space, Ulozi House, in the historic Five Points neighborhood just east of downtown Denver.

When the current Denver International Airport was under construction, the city's Percent for the Art monies enabled the purchase of over seven million dollars in original artwork from artists around the country. We discovered that only two Black visual artists and only one Hispanic artist had been award money grants to place artwork in the airport's collection. We prevailed upon Wilma Webb, the wife of the city's first Black mayor and the head of the search committee, to allot \$230,000 of the remaining funds to Ulozi and CHAC (Chicano Humanities and Arts Council) for a nationwide search for artists to install two murals that now reside in the airports north terminal. Ulozi's chosen artist was Marcus Akinlana of New Orleans, LA whose mural Mile High and Rising portrayed Black Americans panning for gold and homesteading in the state. Though heavily involved with Sankofa Art Collective, I was not one of its founders. Its mission was essentially the same as Ulozi's – to foster and promote the work of Black visual artists in the Denver area.

On that note, are there any Black artists who inspire you or your work, who you recommend our readers scope out?

My primary source of artistic inspiration is Faith Ringgold who is directly responsible for my current work in fabric. If your readers would like to go more in depth into the work of Black female visual artists I suggest Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi, Lauren Austin, Ruth Miller, L'Merchie Frazier, Bisa Butler, Li Hardison, Charly Palmer, Marcus Akinlana and Alfred Conte.