Welcome to Beyond the Paint with Bernadine. A show that engages you with female artists through works that expose the astonishing beauty of women's inner lives. My hope is to introduce you to a part of the art world you may never have known. Together we will give these women makers and artists a voice and set them in their rightful place in the canon of art.

If you enjoy this series, please take a moment to subscribe. Is there a woman artist you would like to see exposed on this podcast? If yes, I would love to hear from you. Email me at bernadine@beyondthepaint.net. Thank you!

Welcome to Episode 85: Harriet Powers: Giving a Voice to Her Life through Appliqués on Quilts

In the wake of the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers and the protests that followed seeking justice, I began to think about the women, female artists and their response to racism in America. For the month of June, I am creating a mini-series highlighting 3 women artists and makers whose works visually stare down racism, illuminating and confronting social injustice and racial inequality. I am wrapping up this mini-series with the 19th century quilter Harriet Powers. Please check out Episode 83 for a dive into the figurative painting and multi-media works by Emma Amos and episode 84 centered on the 20th century sculptor, teacher who created representations of black people resonant in their beauty and humanity, Augusta Savage.

Harriet Powers was a black female maker and slave from Georgia, who transformed a traditional communal art, quilting, into a remarkably free and creative expression. Quilts made by slave women were crafted during the daylight hours under the eye of their female owners, employing Euro-American design traditions. Like other black women slaves in their personal time at night by candlelight, she labored to provide practical clothing and bedcovers for her family. What I want you to experience are surviving quilts she made that form an aesthetic divergent from traditional designs, imbued with strong colors, stripes, shapes, patterns, asymmetry and elements of African mythology. They are immersed with symbolism and charged by spirituality and the passion of the God she honors within her work. (Michelle Cliff) She gives a voice to her life through appliqués on quilts—this involved sewing pieces of cut fabric on a background square, the series of squares are then sewn together, areas without a design were frequently quilted in a decorative pattern or border. The reason I refer to her as a “maker” is because quilters and needlework fell under the category of craft in this period. It is not part of the canon of art in the 19th century—It is the emergence of the folk art movement in the 1920’s that inspired new found appreciation for aesthetic qualities of early needlework and quilting. After the 1970s quilting and other textile arts became elevated to fine or high art.

As you will experience in surviving quilts she created after she was emancipated, Powers weaved narratives drawn from oral traditions through complex iconography in her detailed, colorful scenes. One fascinating association with Powers quilts are the appliquéd cotton cloths and techniques made by the Fon people of the Republic of Benin in Africa. The Fon people created large wall hangings in honor of their kings featuring appliquéd animals like lions, buffaloes, bird, sharks—these symbolize the king’s identity. She parallels these African traditions and storytelling with pictorial compositions containing animals within illustrated events. One of the sources of this African knowledge represented in Powers visions was through her parents. They had been brought from Africa as slaves; carrying with them traditions of the regions they lived. When they arrived Harriet’s parents were mixed with populations of slaves from other places and cultures of Africa—This cultural mixing, as the writer Michelle Cliff asserts, “is important to keep in mind when trying to understand how Powers learned the method by which she represents her visions, and the sources of the various elements in her vision, because it is syncretic work, taking from a variety of cultures.” From the Fon wall hangings we can see corresponding elements in Powers quilts—she uses flat, colored, abstracted, bulky figures, formed through curvilinear shapes; figures and objects arranged at various angles; What she brings to her seemingly ordinary figures and objects new and deeper levels of meaning, endowed with power and imagination

Let’s take a closer look at “Pictorial Quilt.” It is composed of fifteen cotton blocks, worked with pieces of beige, pink, mauve, orange, dark red, gray-green and shades of blue, each pictorial block depicts both Old and New Testament events such as stories of Jonah and the Whale and the Crucifixion of Christ. She also represents actual events such as the falling stars of November 1833 when 10,000 meteors fell across the eastern seaboard of the United States. it is interesting she included amongst the biblical stories this bit of folklore. The quilt is part of the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts or MFA. In describing this work, I am able to use Powers words, her description. Quoting from the MFA website, “Powers is thought to have orally dictated a description of each square of her quilt to Jennie Smith, who had purchased the first quilt Powers made, Bible Stories, and arranged for it to be exhibited at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta in 1895. This second quilt, titled “Pictorial Quilt” is thought to have been commissioned by a group of "faculty ladies" at Atlanta University, and given (together with Powers' descriptions) as a gift to a retiring trustee.

Let’s dive in and allow her words, her plain spokenness, wash over your senses as you experience this extraordinary quilt. She describes her work, commencing from the top left square, reading subsequent squares from left to right.

First Row

1. Job praying for his enemies. Job crosses. Job's coffin.  
  
2. The dark day of May 19, 1780. The seven stars were seen 12 N. in the day. The cattle wall went to bed, chickens to roost and the trumpet was blown. The sun went off to a small spot and then to darkness.  
  
3. The serpent lifted up by Moses and women bringing their children to look upon it to be healed.  
  
4. Adam and Eve in the garden. Eve tempted by the serpent. Adam's rib by which Eve was made. The sun and the moon. God's all-seeing eye and God's merciful hand.  
  
5. John baptizing Christ and the spirit of God descending and resting upon his shoulder like a dove.  
  
Second Row  
  
6. Jonah cast over board of the ship and swallowed by a whale. Turtles.  
  
7. God created two of every kind, male and female.  
  
8. The falling of the stars on Nov. 13, 1833. The people were frightened and thought that the end had come. God's hand staid the stars. The varmints rushed out of their beds.  
  
9. Two of every kind of animal continued...camels, elephants, "gheraffs," lions, etc.  
  
10. The angels of wrath and the seven vials. The blood of fornications. Seven-headed beast and 10 horns which arose of the water.  
  
Third Row  
  
11. Cold Thursday, 10 of February, 1895. A woman frozen while at prayer. A woman frozen at a gateway. A man with a sack of meal frozen. Icicles formed from the breath of a mule. All blue birds killed. A man frozen at his jug of liquor.  
  
12. The red light night of 1846. A man tolling the bell to notify the people of the wonder. Women, children and fowls frightened by God's merciful hand caused no harm to them.  
  
13. Rich people who were taught nothing of God. Bob Johnson and Kate Bell of Virginia. They told their parents to stop the clock at one and tomorrow it would strike one and so it did. This was the signal that they had entered everlasting punishment. The independent hog which ran 500 miles from Georgia to Virginia, her name was Betts.  
  
14. The creation of animals continues.  
  
15. The crucifixion of Christ between the two thieves. The sun went into darkness. Mary and Martha weeping at his feet. The blood and water run from his right side.

I want to point out one of the squares, first square in the first row, Job praying for his enemies. What captured my attention are the two crosses in the upper corners of the frame. Crosses are not part of the biblical story. Powers called them “job’s crosses.” Deferring to the scholarship by the writer Michelle Cliff, there is reference to the “two calamities which Job had to bear; the loss of family and home, and the physical pain in which he was subjected.” In the last square or frame of the quilt is the Crucifixion of Jesus; the redemption of man through the suffering of Christ. The quilt navigates a journey through visual symbols, bookending two stories, two biblical events, one from the Old and the latter from the New Testaments. stories of suffering to r from suffering to redemption. The narratives Powers weaves are a metaphor for her life, for the lives of slaves who suffered. Her representation of the crucifixion, is this Powers assurance to other black people the promise of deliverance from the powers of the slaveholder? It is a hopeful ending for the righteous.

Powers was born in 1837 as a slave and emancipated from slavery after the Civil War. She married a farm Armistead Powers, bearing nine children, only three survived to adulthood. They did own land, about four acres, but it was poorly managed and in 1895 her husband left; Powers ultimately lost the farm. She never remarried and most likely supported herself as a seamstress. She died in 1910.

Needlework and quilting were household activities expected of women in the 19th century. This handiwork becomes a focus for progressive women’s political organizing, connecting “the domestic sphere and the public world of social action.” It was women who drew attention to abolitionist causes. Sarah Grimke famously declared “May the points of our needles prick the slave owner’s consciousness.” In the literary world, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote Uncle Tom’s cabin, Sojourner Truth was a leader in abolitionist reform. Slogans on needlework samplers and quilt patterns like the Slave Chain displayed reform thought in the production of visual culture. This included the Women’s Rights Movement, especially in the North. The influence and power of women’s domestic art and art inspired by traditions outside the Western canon,. Like the quilts by Powers, this type of art shows art’s aesthetic importance, influence and historical purpose. (Whitney Chadwick).

I want to leave you with the contemporary artist Peggie L. Hartwell, quilter who composed a homage to Harriet powers in her work “Ode to Harriet Powers,” 1995. It includes in the center a replica of the only known photograph of Harriet Powers. And on either side of the portrait of Hartwell’s tribute includes squares of pictorial arrangements similar to the engaging asymmetrical forms that we experienced in Powers quilts. Her website is in the podcast notes. <https://www.peggiehartwell.com/>

Thank you so much for being a part of this series highlighting and amplifying the voices of black female artists. I will continue to inclusive of women artists and makers of all races and ethnicities. So thank you.

Starting next month, mid-July I will be expanding this podcast series to include monthly conversations with contemporary artists. My inaugural episode will be with figurative painter Elisa Valenti, in August, painter who reflects on the connections between art and social media Laurence de Valmy and in September Meg Hitchcock, a text based artist. I produced a short podcast episode, number 10. I will include a link in the notes. Also coming soon stone carver Barbara Segal.

Thank you for listening. You can see the works discussed on my website @beyondthepaint.net and on Instagram @beyondthepaintpodcast. Resources for this episode include the Boston Museum of Fine Art, The Smithsonian, writings by Whitney Chadwick (Women, Art and Society), Samantha Moreno, Jamaican-American writer Michelle Cliff, Cheryl Rivers and Carol Crown . They are listed in the podcast notes. Thank you.

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