

FORT GANSEVOORT

F L A U N T

THERE'S GRATITUDE, THERE'S ATTITUDE, AND
THEIR QUILTING SHALL RESCUE THEE

By Constanza Falco Ruez – Issue 183



DAWN WILLIAMS BOYD. "THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD #1" (2022). AS-SORTED FABRICS, COTTON EMBROIDERY FLOSS, AND MIXED MEDIA, IN TWO PARTS. 59" X 59.5". © DAWN WILLIAMS BOYD. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND A FORT GANSEVOORT, NEW YORK. PHOTO: RON WITHERSPOON.

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Artist Dawn Williams Boyd refers to her work as “occasionally humorous and warm hearted. More often controversial, forceful, bitter, and heart-wrenching.” Through the creation of ‘cloth paintings,’ Boyd establishes powerful, unblinking socio-political narratives that make a commentary on the past, present, and future of the world. The works reflect on the urgency of our politically polarized world, inspecting the way humans treat each other and the planet—for the worse.

Boyd’s latest exhibition, *The Tip of the Iceberg*, opens this September at Fort Gansevoort. This will be her first solo exhibition at the gallery’s space in New York City. Additionally, the last leg of the artist’s traveling museum exhibition *Dawn Williams Boyd: Woe* is currently on view at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York. Boyd’s work is included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Equal Justice Initiative and the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama, The Columbus Museum in Georgia, the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, and the Richardson Family Art Museum at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Today, Boyd converses with newer-to-the-scene artist Basil Kincaid, who acknowledges the foundation Boyd established in creating these narratives, affording artists like Kincaid the opportunity to examine their artistic process more deeply and with hard fought, generational backing. Through quilting, collaging, photography, installation, and performance—done with found, salvaged, and donated materials—Kincaid discards social mores, liberating their spirit and allowing freedom of imagination to emerge. Kincaid, too, will be exhibiting in New York this September, with his first solo show in NYC at *Venus Over Manhattan*. The show comprises a series of fabric works that re-interpret bondedness and ancestral communion, wholeness and belonging.

Kincaid studied drawing and painting at Colorado College, graduating in 2010. They have exhibited works with Hauser & Wirth, Mindy Solomon, Kravets Wehby, Kavi Gupta, Carl Kostyál, among many others. In 2019, the artist debuted their first museum performance, “The Release,” at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis. In 2020, Kincaid received the Regional Arts Commission’s Fellowship, and later, in 2021, became a United States Artist Fellow and joined the Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The following conversation explores the links between generations, the ranges of emotion in an arts practice, and how these two’s art has rescued them.

When we decided to have you both, we wanted to have this conversation about the crossing of generations, the links between generations, but also the different ways that you approach art.

Basil Kincaid: One thing that’s been really powerful for me is that I have a deep sense of gratitude for artists like you, Dawn, that have been able to, with your work, tackle things that for me aren’t emotionally sustainable. I remember I made a lot of art that centered on my pain before 2015. And, when Michael Brown was murdered in St. Louis viciously by the police, it was kind of like the straw that broke the camel’s back where I was like, ‘I can’t have my art bringing me down.’ So for now, I have this real gratitude for artists that have been able to make this work that needs to be made to preserve the truth that I haven’t been able to take on the emotional responsibility of making. Like, you kind of lifted the responsibility for me, so I’ve been able to find the quilt as a vehicle to talk about my family and the importance of Black family life and rural Black life, things that often go overlooked. The national conversations, when the news or the media or whatever is speaking about Blackness and Black people, there’s some pain edge, and I wanted to just be able to tell my family stories, and that’s been a major privilege that I’ve gotten because artists before me have taken some of the pressure off.

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Dawn Williams Boyd: We are like all the other kinds of people in the world. We have family, we have background stories, we have joy, we have beautiful little kids. I'm visiting my first biological grandson. When I look at his face, I see this beautiful little boy, but my mind is warped so that it immediately goes to, 'Well this world is not good.' So, I have tried, and I have finished the set of pieces that will be opening at Fort Gansevoort in September. I told myself, don't start another set of pieces until you find something pleasant to say. You have spent the last several years having these really hard things to say about the world so just sit back, be calm, wait until something interesting that is lighthearted and shows another side of you comes to your brain, and I sat for a month. And nothing came. So, I'm like, 'Okay, fine.' But, you know, lots of other stories happened in the meantime— they outlawed abortion. So apparently my lot in life is to be at least one of the ones who has something to say about what's going on in the world, and how it affects us as people, and how we can find some way to affect what's going on around us. We can't be monolithic, we are citizens of this planet, of the solar system, and we need to be paying attention to what's going on, because we all know if you don't pay attention to what's going on, things will happen to you, and we can no longer afford to have things happen to us.

BK: We need each other. I mean, it may seem corny, but even just the stitching of the quilt, to me, is emblematic of how interconnected we all are, whether or not we may recognize it, or give it the credence that it deserves. I'm shifting now in my work to using old materials. I started with old clothes from myself and my family and friends, and then now, these last couple of years in Ghana, I've been using these Ghanaian materials mixed with the materials from my home. But, now I'm starting this cycle of collecting, but then also using material in these bales, you know, all these second-hand clothes. Also, just like overstock stuff—using something that doesn't sell itself.

DWB: Yeah. Better than having it wind up in the landfill. You're keeping it out of the landfill. That's so important. Because people don't seem to realize where that stuff goes.

BK: Yeah. Landfills and then these African countries, and I'm sure South American countries too, or whatever countries will accept runoff. So today, we were at the market, and I got these bales from the U.K. and you know that it's just fast fashion runoff and excess kind of material. And some of it is brand new stuff. So you have this mix where it may have been worn, or it may have been produced, and then immediately discarded, collecting those materials and finding a way to address serious ecological and economic issues, while still, on the surface, making my imagery from my world. And the materials can tell one story and the surface can tell another story. I feel like quilting is such a great tool because they've always been able to do a wheel like that. You know, it has a surface that can emphasize that there's always another message inside.

DWB: As you say in the history of making quilts, it was all about repurposing and it was necessary for them to repurpose, and it still is necessary. There's nothing really more annoying, angering, than to see something at the Goodwill that still has the tags on them. So they're sitting on shelves, and once they sit there for such a long time, the retailer has got to get rid of them because they can't sell them. So what happens to all that fabric? And you know, it would really be cool if the fabric was wool and silk and cotton because that biodegrades. It's these oil-produced fabrics that are going to be sitting on the earth forever and ever that are the problem. Let's go back to making things out of cotton and silk and wool. It's better for you.

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BK: Linen materials.

DWB: Linen is better for us, it's better for the environment, we don't need to have all this stuff that's made of polyester. We just don't need it. I understand it's easier to make it but at what cost?

BK: I think that's something that points at another powerful thing about quilt making in this time period. Like you say, at what cost? There's so much emphasis on things getting done faster and done more cheaply and quilts, they take the time they take to be great. You can't microwave a good quilt—it takes time and care.

So I think to do slow things in an age that's encouraging us to do everything at such a fast pace, it reminds us, or for me at least, of our nature. I feel like I think it's time for quilts to take more of a main stage in the contemporary art space because making them, they're here and now as we're talking about it, it makes so much sense on so many levels how they address contemporary issues that we're living with. I guess what I'm getting at is that it's worth the time, it's worth the money to slow down. Nothing is ever really free, there's always that hidden cost.

DWB: I'm trying to limit my cloth paintings to grown materials but it's not always easy, especially when you are being given fabrics. I have had to tell people, I'm sorry I would love to take the fabric that you're giving me but it's made of oil and it's not going to fit into what I'm doing and the way that I feel about my work, but if you have any cotton or wool or silk that you'd like to donate to me, I'd happily take those.

BK: I mean each body of work has its particularities, you know. I think it's fine to be particular on what you accept. You're repurposing something is better than repurposing nothing. I was going to ask about your history with drawing because when I'm looking at your work I can tell that you have such a strong drawing background.

DWB: I am heavily influenced by the Old Masters of Europe. I was telling some young people yesterday, who are art history majors at the gallery, I'm like, 'Oh. I have to tell you guys I hated my art history classes, because the teacher that I had was mostly interested in the architecture from the different cathedral styles and all that.' I was 21, I didn't really care about the building, let's talk about the paintings that are on the sides. Let's talk about the ceilings.

BK: He's talking about Roman and Corinthian pillars and what- not.

DWB: Yeah, and it's a piece of marble that's round. Granted at the top it's pretty interesting, but in the meantime, there are these fabulous paintings on the ceiling and on the walls and on the floors, let's talk about that. She was not into it. Besides, my art history class was at seven in the morning, so of course, that didn't work for me. So, printmakers like Albrecht Dürer, you know, painters like the Michelangelo's and the Da Vinci's who began their work with drawing, and who are really interested in reproducing the human form two-dimensionally, precisely, and who opened cadavers to find out how the muscles worked, how the bones were underneath the skin. That stuff is fascinating to me. So, I began and I have to say I'm a real stickler about drawing and painting the human form. I have a girlfriend who disagrees with me immensely. She makes drawings of humans and I'll just say I'm constantly telling her, 'There's a bone there in that arm.'

BK: And she's like with drawing I can do whatever I want?

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DWB: And that's fine. If you're drawing humans, though, and you want them to be believed as humans, then for me, this is a very personal opinion, you need to take that, you need to understand how humans are. So, tell me who influences you?

BK: I have a lot of influences. So, I guess, I will answer this question in a couple different ways. My first and most immediate influence is my family. My parents, my brother. I find it extremely inspirational watching my parents be in love.

DWB: How long have they been married?

BK: They've been married 41 years and then they dated five years before they got married. They've been together 46 years. That's just, to me, one of the most inspirational things. So that always inspires me to do my best. My brother, he believed in me. I get emotional talking about this. He believed in me before I believed in myself. He always helped keep me on my path. I never knew I would be a professional artist, but I always knew that art was my thing that I was good at. When I was a kid and people asked what you wanted to do when you grow up, I said I wanted to draw every day. I didn't have a dream job, I just wanted to be able to draw every day, and he was the one that made me believe that it would be possible. Then, I've been heavily influenced by Ukiyo-e Japanese woodblock printing. I love that samurai. A lot of the art that I'm drawn to is like telling some mythology or legend, be it real or imagined. So you know, 14th-15th century tapestries.

DWB: Let me interrupt you for a moment. Do you get really pissed off when people use the word 'tapestry' to describe your work versus quilt?

BK: Sometimes yes and sometimes no. I recognize what they're getting at, especially now that I'm like pushing the scale, but tapestries, and I have nothing against this process. Quilting just has such a totally different historical tradition that it's a wildly inaccurate labeling to call a quilt a tapestry. But, I see where people are coming from, but it is frustrating in its inaccuracy. There's artists like Alma Thomas, painter Norman Lewis, Jack Whitten, there's a lot of people, Jae and Wadsworth Jarrel. There's Black artists from the 50s and 60s that inspire me a lot. Then, like you too, I was always taking it into my own perspective. In college, I was equally fascinated and frustrated by all the old white guys that they fed us to learn from, but it would be wrong to say that they haven't influenced my work. The drawings of Degas, there's just these guys you could tell their life was devoted to drawing. Maybe even the passion over the execution, but the execution was there too. So I think it's that devotion. Then I found myself also inspired a lot by just everyday Black folk.

Going back to the theme of the issue, which is emotional rescue, would you say in your art that you are rescuing or is it rescuing you?

BK: I was going to say I'm rescuing myself.

DWB: The art is definitely rescuing me. I can't imagine. I had someone ask me in a previous interview, 'If you weren't an artist what career would you have chosen?' When art chose me I was at the point in my life where I needed to, at least I felt like there was pressure to make decisions about how I wanted to

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spend the rest of my life, and frankly I didn't have a clue. I needed rescuing. I needed to find something that I was really good at, at that moment in my life. Out of the blue, a thing happened that changed the next 50 years of my life, and if that one instance hadn't happened I really can't imagine where I'd be. I had no interests that would have sustained me for this long. I had no skills that would have played into the way I was going to spend my life. So thank God that someone out of the blue decided we should, in the high school that I was in, we should have an artistic element. When we've never had one before. 'We should introduce art, it would be a good thing,' and they did it one time. 50 years later and I'm talking to you guys about art. So yes, it's definitely rescuing me. Now, whether or not I'm rescuing art that is to be seen. Check back with me in 100 years then we'll see.

BK: I am waving my church fan at all that you have said. I know for me art has saved me too. You know a lot of my work deals with belonging to art, making art, the trance state of artmaking is what kind of protected my childhood. Protected my coarse nature. I was laughing because when you said the 'no applicable skills,' and the thing that you've always only been good at, that's been the same for me too. I joke, and I haven't made this joke in a while, but I guess it was four years in, I had quit my last job, and it was a point of like, 'If I don't do this and give it my all, sink or swim, I'll regret it later in life.'

On top of that, at the time, it was medicinal. If I don't spend this amount of time making art every day I would probably lose my mind. I would lose my ability to function and I noticed it happening in my last serious job in 2013. I noticed how like the whole structure of it was degrading my mental, physical, and emotional well-being. So I'm like, 'If I am to live and thrive I'm going to have to do it as an artist.' My dad always no worthwhile thing is going to be necessarily easy. It may become, you may develop a sense of effortlessness over time, and I guess that's what you can equate to skill. Things become easier because you accumulated experience, but nothing is ever easy. It's never easy to do the right thing. A lot like the art world only gets to see so much. You know, you may show eight to however many pieces a year but there's so much more to the art than that. The time that I get to just be, that's such a gift that I get to experience, because of my life as an artist. This time to think and process and really feel things, those are all privileges that I get because of this path I've chosen. I think art is therapeutic even as a hobby, but like for me and for a lot of people I know that have careers in art, it wasn't like just something you chose to do.

Speaking about how your work affects the viewer... Dawn, new show at Fort Gansevoort, *The Tip of the Iceberg*, talks about the way humans treat each other and the planet. You know, I feel like the past couple of years obviously with the pandemic and now monkeypox, *Roe v. Wade* and all of these things, it's kind of like we're seeing the world ending around us. How do you think that affects the emotional connection the viewer has to your art or to art in general now?

DWB: I'll say two things. One, apparently people are reacting positively to it because I don't have it anymore—other people do, which is a wonderful thing. It's not sitting around in my studio and I do have to thank the people at Fort Gansevoort for that, because for many years it sat in my studio. For me to enjoy it and for the occasional person to enjoy it in Atlanta or Denver. I have had people come up to me, particularly with some of my historic work, and tell me, and this always blows me away, older people will tell me, 'I've lived through that time,' or 'Something like that happened to someone I know,' or 'I was around when that happened,' and my interest is not only what's happening to the individual, but how society, how the rest of us are viewing what's happening.

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So I hope that people, particularly the show that's opening at Fort Gansevoort, I hope that we are far enough along in the process now. When I first had the idea for these pieces, it was two or three years ago, and a lot of what I hadn't imagined that would happen, but I could sort of see, is let's say... the tip of the iceberg of it happening, and now that iceberg is closer to the surface because these things happened. It's no longer something that's going to happen in our children's lifetime. It's happening right now. And it is going to have a negative effect on our children's lives. I mean, how are the children who were born in 2020, and who have lived the first two years of their lives practically in isolation, what kind of adults are they going to be? The children who are being traumatized because it's so hot, because the earth is burning in places, or it's flooded in places. Those children who are having to migrate because the land won't support them any more, because there's a war where they live. What kind of adults are they going to be? 20 years from now it's going to be weird because they have begun their lives in trauma.

Now it's not as though they are the only ones. I mean, children were born before or during, when the Mississippi River flooded and the great migration happened. There were children who were born in 1918 that caused a lot of people to die in great droves. There's people who survived the Holocaust who were little kids. So as Basil said earlier, not just Black folk, but humans, in general, are survivors. We find a way, but we are changed when we survive these traumatic experiences. So I'm hoping to live longer than that to see my grandson and his cohort be 20-year-olds and see how they're living. What does their world look like 20 years later?

Basil, in your work you say freedom of imagination is a critical component of the creation of art. And, same question, how do you think seeing that the world is falling apart around us affect our imagination and our freedom to think and to create?

BK: I definitely feel like the imagination and its space is under siege. I would talk to my friends all the time about how the way we interact with the internet is becoming a prosthetic imagination. I have worked with kids and you try to get them to just draw something out of the imagination and immediately they want to go to the phone. Say you say draw a bird. Now you can invent any kind of bird. It doesn't have to be some preexisting bird. You can just make up a bird, but their immediate instinct is to just Google 'bird,' and then pick a bird they like, and then start replicating the one they like from this pixelated image. I'm like, 'You know, the definition of your imagination, if you hone it, is far higher definition than any device that we can fabricate', so it's interesting that you ask about the imagination, because I feel like everything about contemporary life—pretty much everything about it is damaging to the imagination. We don't spend hardly any time in nature. How often are your bare feet touching Mother Earth? That in itself activates your imagination. Social media. I've had to, in the last four months, take a major hiatus off of social media. Even though it's an extremely effective economic tool. But, the way it ends up working is like every fraction of a second you're confronted with a new idea, a new thought, a new projection, some meme. The mechanics of thought manipulation. Now we use these terms so casually, but it's really programming the way that we think, the way that we generate what we're capable of. What we're capable of imagining is shrinking and shrinking and shrinking as a collective. Without the ability to imagine a new potential reality, that potential reality cannot be. So if I want to exist in a world that doesn't operate under sexist, heterosexist, racist, ableist norms, I have to spend time imagining that world, which right now is just a science fiction place.

DWB: The thing about it is, though, that your statement is that without the ability to see alternatives, but that is exactly where we are right now with the world. Alternatives are being offered to us from various

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locations, people who have studied, who know, who have been paying attention, and the powers that be are so stuck in maintaining their power that they are—I'm not even going to say unable—they are unwilling to imagine a different way to make money and maintain that power that isn't a detriment to everybody including themselves because they live on this planet, too. Their children are being endangered and their churches are being endangered.

Any last words?

DWB: Go see some artwork. Figure out whatever trip-up you have in your life, someone has done some artwork about it somewhere. Or better yet, as Basil said, put the damn phone down. Go sit in the grass. And if there's no grass near you, go find some. Think about what you want to do but don't think about it the way that you've been thinking about it. Open up that little, there's a little door in the back of your head that says 'other'—open that little door and see what's in there because there's another alternative to whatever it is that's going like a rabbit around your head. Open that little door and see what alternative is, and maybe you will find a better, more effective, more right-thinking way to do whatever it is you're trying to do.

BK: Normally, I would end every interview with the same story but I'm going to say something different this time. Something that's been heavy on my heart lately is the people you love, or the people that you care about, or the people that you appreciate, tell them immediately, tell them while you can. Be thankful, you know. Even before my career was a career I was still thankful. Even when I had to squat in fucked up living situations, and didn't have what I thought would be ideal to make my art, you find some way and be thankful. I've spent a lot of my life dealing with depression, and one thing that the art has always done for me is activated this space of thanksgiving. I don't know how that relates to art, but I think gratitude relates to my personal art practice, but hopefully, you lead from a space of gratitude that could open some potential door for you. I still get to wake up every day and do something that I love doing. If I didn't have that gratitude, then I would not have my seat at the table now. I'm a firm believer in that. I think if I had a fucked up attitude when times were tough, then I would still be having tough times.