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Dawn Williams Boyd Stitches Together a New American Story

The Atlanta-based artist isn't afraid of discomfort. Combining classical painting compositions with distinct fabrics, Dawn Williams Boyd creates beautiful imagery that confronts America's dark past.

By Rose Courteau - November 18, 2022



Dawn Williams Boyd, *Massacre on Black Wall Street*, 2022.

Photo: Ron Witherspoon/©Dawn Williams Boyd/Courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

There aren't many photos of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, when white mobs razed the city's affluent Black Greenwood District. Though it's been described as one of the largest single instances of State-sanctioned violence against Black people in American history, the relatively few images that exist of its aftermath are black and white, and mostly bodiless. Limited by the era's technology and prejudice, they fail to capture the depth or scale of the tragedy.

For this reason, the artist Dawn Williams Boyd chose to make *Massacre on Black Wall Street*, one of a dozen paintings included in the "The Tip of the Iceberg," which is on display until December 17 at Fort Gansevoort in New York. Measuring nearly five-by-ten feet, the work presents the event as a narrative panorama: a group of white men cock and aim their guns as townspeople hide, surrender, or lie dead on the ground above a cache of human skeletons buried beneath them, while a plane decorated

with American flag and Ku Klux Klan insignia flies overhead, dropping Molotov cocktails on the city's buildings. Unlike most paintings, however, Boyd's are made with a collage of fabrics, cut and stitched together with intricate detail. Looking closely at *Massacre on Black Wall Street*, you might fall down a rabbit hole, noticing its ingenious deployment of each fabric, like the delicate lace panels used for a storefront's windows or the black and brown batik bearing Ghanaian Adinkra symbols that serves as a tree's bark—and a subtle reference to Greenwood District's African roots.

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It's striking, I tell her, to see something so horrible depicted so wonderfully, in a medium that inevitably conjures the comfort of quilts and all the womanliness that they imply. "Grandmotherly," offers Boyd, finishing my sentence. She hears comments like mine a lot. "I love the dichotomy of this beauty representing such an ugly thing," she says. "I want to tell you a story that you want to listen to."

Boyd was visiting New York from Atlanta, Georgia, where she lives with her husband, fellow artist Irvin Wheeler. It's also where she spent her childhood, which included enrollment as the first and only Black student at a Catholic girls's highschool located on a former plantation. The school shut down after her junior year, but not before her biology teacher was tasked with creating an arts curriculum. The first assignment? Create a papier-mâché bust of a classmate.

"That was my Eureka moment," says Boyd. "My portrait of Debbie Walsh was the only one in the room that actually looked like the person." When she left home to study fine art at Stephens College in Missouri, her mother, an educator and lecturer, was supportive, but encouraged her daughter to professionalize her artistic ambitions.

"I didn't do that," says Boyd, who gained representation with Fort Gansevoort in 2020. Instead, she took a position after college at the Atlanta Regional Commission, and, later, at United Airlines in Boulder, Colorado, where she worked as a reservationist for 29 years until her retirement in 2009. During that time, she raised a family and continued making art—sometimes on the job, where office management periodically assigned her to make posters for internal use. ("I had a whole little cottage industry going," she laughs—almost any task was better than answering phones.) She also co-founded an artist collective, ULOZI—the Swahili word for voodoo dark arts—that championed Black artists in the area and acted as a paid consultancy to surrounding institutions attempting to broaden their outreach to non-white audiences. "I was oftentimes token," says Boyd. "I used to say that I was a triple threat: I was female, I was Black, and I was talented."

It was through community involvement that Boyd came to adopt cloth as her primary medium, when, in 2001, she was asked to lead a workshop on the textile art of Faith Ringgold in honor of Black History Month. While preparing for the class, Boyd learned that Ringgold often demounted canvases from their frames before sewing quilt pieces onto their borders. The technique addressed two fundamental challenges that Boyd had continually confronted in her traditional painting practice: namely, that she has never had a knack for stretching canvas; and shipping frames and other rigid materials—including the plywood that she had, for a time, adopted as an alternative to canvas—was prohibitively expensive. Inspired by Ringgold's innovation, she took it further and scrapped canvas altogether, using fabric, thread, embroidery floss (and, occasionally, beads and other accents) for her designs. "I get to indulge myself," she says. "I can go into a store and see a gorgeous piece of fabric and find a use for it. I can liberate it from the bolt."

Boyd's work defies simple categorization. Though some might describe her paintings as quilts, she doesn't refer to them as such. They offer little by way of a quilt's traditional function, for one thing; devoid of fill, the works aren't designed to keep you warm. Neither does Boyd feel quilting accurately describes her process, which remains rooted in the principles of classical painting in which she trained. The term quilt "gives you a specific connotation," says Boyd.

It's worth considering why an artist might feel compelled to distinguish her work from, say, the slippery category of "craft" to which a quilt might be assigned. In 2005, the critic Margo Jefferson suggested that debates over art versus craft felt increasingly passé. As evidence Jefferson cited "The Quilts of Gee's Bend,"

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a large collection of quilts made by generations of Black women in an isolated area in Alabama of the same name; The Whitney showed the work in 2002-2003, and their unique abstractionism introduced many to a new way of seeing textile art. That seminal show inspires "The New Bend," which features the work of 13 contemporary artists, including Boyd, practicing within, and sometimes shattering our notions of the textile tradition, on view at Hauser & Wirth in Los Angeles this fall.

Boyd used to write down ideas for paintings in a small notebook that she carried with her, though after misplacing it—a "terribly devastating" loss—she now keeps a running list on her phone. At the beginning of each year, she reviews it and formulates a new series organized, usually, around a title. The result can be an entire story arc, as with "Ladies Night," a series of four cloth paintings begun in 2009 that depicts groups of women as they groom themselves and enjoy a night out at a fictional "Billie's Bar and Grill." Sometimes she works topically: "The Tip of the Iceberg" draws its themes from the many evils society tolerates but whose consequences are rapidly compounding beneath the surface of daily perception. Boyd made most of the works in the last year, with some exceptions, such as *All Through the Night: America's Homeless*, which uses panels of textured tan cotton to portray a cardboard box sheltering a family. (Scraps of an old log cabin pattern quilt gifted to her by a friend serve as the family's blanket and add a dash of material self-reference to the tableau.) Some, like *In Fear For My Life*, inspired by the murder of Tamir Rice, illustrate specific historical events. Others play more purely with abstraction, such as *Ka Orda*, which imagines the dichotomous god of Chaos and Order in L.E. Modesitt Jr.'s fantasy novel *The Mage-Fire War* as half Black woman and half white man, the latter pieced together with gender-bending soft pinks. Many showcase organza, Boyd's favorite fabric. Diaphanous and shimmering, in her hands it becomes the atmospheric cigar smoke in *Smoke Filled Rooms*, and smog in *This Uninhabitable Earth*.

The second time we spoke, in October, Boyd was back in Atlanta but preparing to visit New York again to discuss "Woe," another collection of hers on display at Sarah Lawrence College. After making art for decades with little recognition, she's enjoying her new, larger audience—"It's about time!" she says—though of course its attendant engagements take time away from her painting. Right now she's in the early stages of two small series, one called *Fear*, which reimagines iconic photos associated with race relations in America, and one called *Families*. (She's waiting for the dust to settle from the 2024 presidential election cycle before she delves back into overtly political commentary.) She wouldn't say much more about either project at the moment, except that she has "made a commitment" to use some of the fabric she's had stored away for a long time but resisted cutting. "You know, stop hoarding that fabric and then go ahead and use it for something."