

FORT GANSEVOORT

NEW YORK
Amsterdam News

Dawn Williams Boyd's cloth paintings are lessons in U.S. history

By Karen Juanita Carrillo – November 10, 2022



"Massacre on Black Wall Street" (assorted fabrics and cotton embroidery floss 59 x 118 inches, 2022)

The work of Atlanta-based artist Dawn Williams Boyd is currently on view at Manhattan's Fort Gansevoort art gallery. The show, which only lasts until Nov. 19, features 12 of Williams Boyd's famed cloth paintings—pieces she's constructed from sketches, paintings, textiles, and designs. The work is both beautiful and provocative.

"The artwork that I do is, frankly, a result of things that make me mad," Williams Boyd explained in an interview with the Amsterdam News. "There are just some issues that get under my skin."

Many of the pieces take on a political stance. In "All Through the Night: America's Homeless" (assorted fabrics, cotton embroidery floss, and mixed media 39 x 61.5 inches, 2017) the artist shows a family: homeless, bundled in blankets, yet together. Williams Boyd says she was inspired by stories about the thousands of Americans who remain unhoused—and the fact that large numbers of them are children. "I was really interested to see that the shelters that exist are inadequate to the task of housing everyone—even everyone who wants to be in a shelter—and that they are segregated by gender." She said she read about a mother with several sons who was not allowed to be in the same shelter with her juvenile boys.

FORT GANSEVOORT

"It occurred to me that there would be families who were unhoused because they had fathers and sons and mothers and daughters would have to split up in shelters, and who would not want to do that. So, you know, they would live in their cars or, you know, live over a grate or live in a cardboard box. ...I needed to find a way to say something about those statistics that people would be able to relate to."

In "Voting Rights. What's Next?" (assorted fabrics and cotton embroidery floss; 59 x 60 inches, 2022) the artist said she wanted to portray the young, entrepreneurial Black boys who traditionally sell water on Atlanta's street corners and at traffic lights. The city often harasses these kids because they regularly dart out into traffic, but Williams Boyd admires them. She wanted to depict them as being part of the voting rights efforts in Atlanta, Georgia.

"During the 2016 election, the lines in the Atlanta area, the voting lines, were outrageous," recalled Williams Boyd. "Even with that, people came out to vote in droves. They talked on the radio about people who were in line for eight hours. So, I'm thinking, well, how do you stand in line, waiting to do something for eight hours? You know, you have to use the bathroom, you have to eat, you have to check on your kids. So I put the two things together and imagined that there were young men who were too young to vote yet had the idea of volunteering their services, their stock, what they already had to offer in a nonpartisan way as their present to those of us who can vote. And they were trying to do their part to encourage others; they were there to, you know, give you a potty break, they were there to hold your place in line, they were there to give out snacks and food. In both instances, like I said, things just kind of pissed me off. And so, in order to work out that passion, that anger, I have art flashes and they'll just come to me, 'Well, you should say this about that, and you should say it in this way.'"

Almost all the work on view at Fort Gansevoort was completed this year. Williams Boyd says she works in an assembly line style: at the beginning of each year, she writes down all her ideas in a little black book. She sets aside the projects she wants to work on and then does them all at the same time. So, if she's working on 10 different pieces, she'll do 10 sketches; blow up those 10 sketches; transfer those 10 blown-up sketches to tracing papers; do the embroidery on all 10 pieces; and put the tube on the back of all 10 pieces.

When she works on a piece like "COVID Scream" (assorted fabrics, cotton embroidery floss, and mixed media 59 x 59 inches, 2022) she can turn to fabrics that are bright and beautiful while presenting a moment of pure agony.

"Massacre on Black Wall Street" (assorted fabrics and cotton embroidery floss 59 x 118 inches, 2022) is Williams Boyd's homage to the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre—and to the many other prosperous independent Black towns that have faced terror from white mobs. "This is a part of American history that some Americans are deliberately downplaying because they will 'feel guilty' about something," she noted. "They don't want to own up to the reality of what their ancestors did. They want to say, well, you know, I wasn't there, why am I being blamed? It's not about being blamed, it's about taking...about acknowledging that the reasons that we have the race problem in this country that we have is because of what your ancestors did to my ancestors and the result of what you, however unknowingly, are doing to me and mine."

Williams Boyd has seen her work go to both collectors and museums. "The reality of the fact is that collectors are where the money is," she acknowledged. "However, those collectors—the ones that I have interacted with—are the type of people who are willing to share their pieces with the public. Some of them have donated them to museums and have said that they are willing to share."

FORT GANSEVOORT

"I like having my work in museums because that means that more people will have a chance to see it. ... But I'm always happy to talk about my work at schools. I was just at Sarah Lawrence: my traveling exhibit, 'Woe,' is there until the first part of December. It's important for me, especially with the educational pieces, the historic pieces that talk about things that actually happened, it's important to me that the story be shared with young people because they're not going to get that in school. And I think it's extremely important for the future of this country and the world, for people who are children now—who are going to be voting adults in a few years—that they know where we came from, what happened in the past. Because that's what will explain what's happening now." "Dawn Williams Boyd: The Tip of the Iceberg" is on view Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. at Fort Gansevoort New York, 5 Ninth Ave., New York, NY, 10014 through November 19, 2022. For information, phone: 917-639-3113 or email: gallery@fortgansevoort.com.