Dawn Williams Boyd in her studio. (Photo by Tony Wang. All photos courtesy of Fort Gansevoort, New York)

Dawn Williams Boyd weaves social activism into powerful artworks

By Angela Oliver – September 5, 2024

Boyd's sheltered upbringing at a Chamblee private school was broken wide open when she moved to Colorado, met Black activists and radicals and found her calling as an artist.

For Dawn Williams Boyd, art imitates life. Her large-scale woven works — she calls them cloth paintings — boldly confront social ills from racism to classism to homelessness.

Lately, though, her interest in science fiction literature reminds her that life often also imitates art.

"Decades ago, science fiction writers wrote about the time that we're in right now. This was their future," says Boyd. "It has been said that these things would happen — the downfall of democracy, the ecosystem being ruined, the taking back of rights. It's happening. (My art work) is about paying attention."

Massacres on Black Wall Street.

Boyd is in the midst of creating a nine-piece series about fear and racism: the fears of Black folks and white folks' fear of losing their power, she says. She hopes it will encourage people to think more about human survival. "It's not important what color a person's skin is, what class they're from, what political group they belong to," she says. "What's important is that we are all humans on a planet that we are destroying."

Deep, vibrant colors cover every inch of her mostly cotton and polyester masterpieces, some embellished by beads, buckles, buttons, sequins, flag pins, lace or other elements. She leaves no empty spaces — and little room for misinterpretation.

"I show images of history, particularly of this country, with regard to the effect that African Americans have had on society and the effect that society has had on us," she says.

Nurture — her depiction of a dark brown bosom — tears between the reverence of Black women as a source of life and the exploitation of their breast milk to feed children who would soon be taught to hate them.

Bad Blood: Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments – Macon County, AL 1932-1972 recalls the deadly medical study of poor Black men who were lied to. In it, Black men somberly carry their fellow in an open casket, flanked by a grieving nurse and red devil in a lab coat holding a syringe.

Baptizing Our Children in a River of Blood details the target placed by law enforcement on Black bodies, and the inescapable threat of death because of it. It shows many mothers, some holding their children, some holding their hands up, in a sea of dark red. In the center stands a stark-white police officer forcefully gripping a Black woman.

The Uninhabitable Earth.

Dawn Williams Boyd knew she wanted to be an artist in high school, but it wasn't until years later that she began to use her art as social commentary.

While her earliest years were in an Atlanta housing project, her family moved into a home in Mozley Park soon after, Boyd, 72, said she had a sheltered childhood.

"My mother was a social studies teacher, but, until the early '70s, African American history was not taught in public schools," she says. "So it was not something that I learned in high school or in college."

In 1977, love led Boyd to Denver, where she was radicalized; friendly games of bid whist came with political awakenings.

"I moved to Colorado and met these people we'd play cards with," she says, remembering a couple who were part of the All-African People's Revolutionary Party, a Pan-African Socialist political party founded by former Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah. "They were very intelligent, kind of radical. They were the first people I ever met who had dreadlocks. I asked questions. They told me stories. And as I read more, I realized how much I didn't know about the history of our people."

The couple had spent their college years in Black studies and attending protest marches and rallies, "a totally different world" than Boyd had experienced, though they were the same age, she says.

Boyd's revelations about race relations never occurred to her during childhood, she says. Her parents taught in Atlanta Public Schools, but she and her brother attended private Catholic primary schools. Boyd spent her first

three high school years at the bygone D'Youville Academy, an all-girls Catholic school and convent on the grounds of a former plantation in Chamblee.

"These were nuns from New York, and my classmates were just teenage girls," Boyd says. "It was probably a lot more interesting for them than it was for me."

The Trump Era: American Gothic.

Boyd says she didn't encounter racism, but through her time there and at the all-women Stephens College, where she earned her bachelor of fine art in 1974, she did get to know White people quite well.

"I learned a lot about the differences in how Black folks and White folks lived, and that's helped me in life and in my art," she says.

Her first marriage ended, but living in Denver also gave her a new love in fellow artist Irvin Wheeler. They founded and ran ULOZI (Swahili for "Black art"), a Black arts collective that organized exhibits and was instrumental in getting works by Black and Latino artists into the Denver airport when it was built in 1995. ULOZI started in 1985. Boyd and Wheeler were married in 2001. And, in 2010, life rerouted them to Atlanta and back into Boyd's childhood home.
Atlanta has been good to them. And 2020, despite the horrors of the Covid pandemic and shutdown, was good to Boyd.

Boyd's Sankofa *includes photographs of her family.*

That year, Adam Shopkorn happened upon Boyd's website during his after-midnight scrolling. He contacted her with interest in representing her at Fort Gansevoort, his gallery in Manhattan. That led to a virtual exhibit in the fall of 2020, as well as the negotiation for the Metropolitan Museum of Art to purchase her work *Sankofa* in 2021.

Shopkorn was excited to help Boyd realize her vision for her work, she says. He started by getting it into several private collections. But Boyd wanted to focus on museums so that more people could view and learn from her work.

"In addition to the collectors, my art needs to be in a public forum, at places where my grandchildren can see it," she says. It's important to me that little kids on a school trip can walk into a museum and see a piece of artwork by a woman who looks like them."

Boyd's work is also in the permanent collection at the High Museum of Art and the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, among others. She has long exhibited in solo and group shows throughout Atlanta and in Colorado, Brussels, Berlin and unique places like the Brown v. Board Education National Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas.

Her art has changed course over the years, whether by working across mediums or trying more lighthearted subject matter at the request of a stranger. Around 2007, a young Black man approached her in Denver during a her solo series about lynching and the Civil Rights movement.

"He loved my work but said it was so depressing," Boyd says. "I understand that. But there are other artists who are doing images of Black love and family and uplifting things. Someone needs to tell the children who are coming

up that it's not all about that. That there is a reason why that kind of art exists. That it is, in fact, a reaction to the reality of where we are."

Smoke Filled Rooms.

She encouraged him to see her work as educational and necessary. But he also compelled her to take a break from her usual realm to create *The Things That Kids Do*, a series of playful moments between children and teens. Her *Ladies Night* series celebrating women enjoying a night out was another attempt at "showing that I'm not all doom and gloom," Boyd says. "I have a light side."
She's open to exploring that more. She and her husband hope to do a joint show about families one day. They've been collecting images of their three children and six grandchildren and thinking of ways to create.

"What I would love to do — assuming that the November election goes the right way — is not talk about the heavier things anymore. Because of the way I'm built, it's always gonna keep coming back, but I'd like to take a break and see what else I have to say."