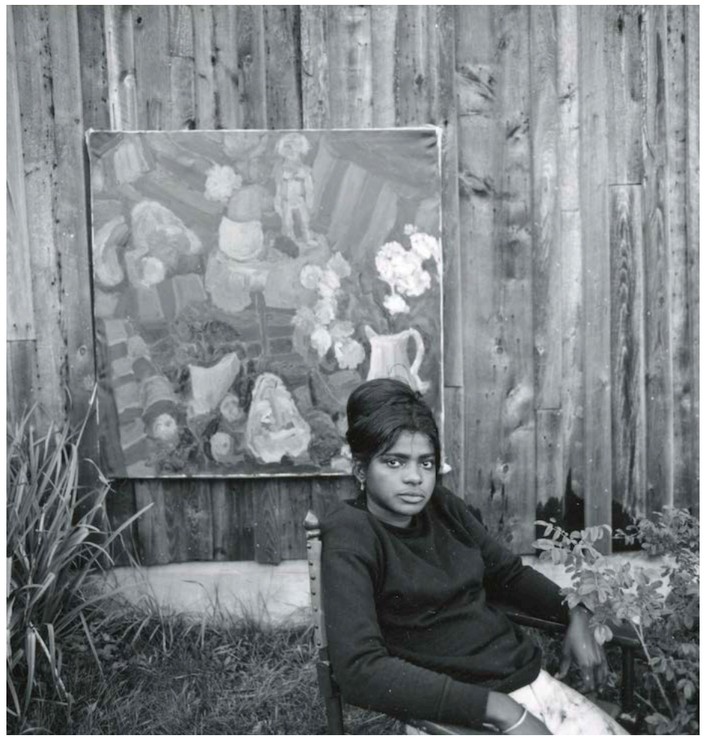
SYLVIA SNOWDEN
M STREET

AMERICAN ART CATALOGUES



Foreword
Franklin Parrasch

The story of Sylvia Snowden is one that's been at the root of my career as a gallerist. In the summer of 1986, I proposed a site for a gallery I wanted to open in Washington, D.C. to the District of Columbia Zoning Board. At first, no one was particularly helpful, and the process was a stereotypical bureaucratic maze. Finally, I made eye contact with a man at a desk in the rear of the room who seemed to be in charge, and I made my way to him. George Snowden greeted me and my proposal to open a gallery with supportive interest. "An art gallery? My sister is an artist!"

From that moment on, the name Sylvia Snowden, at that time a fixture in the burgeoning D.C. contemporary art scene, was permanently emblazoned in my mind. Soon after, I became close friends with the editors of "The New Art Examiner" and with the highly gifted writer, Alice Thorson. Alice was in the process of writing her seminal article on Sylvia, Sylvia Snowden: Engaging Expressionism, which was published in 1988, devoting many a late night to intensely interviewing, and exploring Sylvia's mind and work. I'd like to expressly thank Alice Thorson, and the late George Snowden, for these introductions.

I'm deeply grateful to the efforts of Gavin Delahunty, who fully and enthusiastically committed himself to the urgency of his publication, and to Dr. Rebecca VanDiver for her penetrating insights and historical context. I'm also deeply appreciative to Nathaniel Mary Quinn for his lively and affectionate conversation with Sylvia and to Kathleen Madden for her efforts in coordinating that discussion. The collective energies and expertise of my colleagues/teammates Suzi Schiffer Parrasch, Katharine Overgaard, Chris Heijnen, Misha Sesar, and Mayra Raphaela who, along with American Art Catalogues, have been critical to the execution of this project. Finally, to Sylvia Snowden, for her faith in all of us and our efforts to tell her story - the story of an artist.

Sylvia Snowden: *M Street Paintings*

Gavin Delahunty

> "Where is our abstract space, our space of the real/not real, our own unconscious?" – Elizabeth Alexander[1]
>
> "When you paint something of one person, you also paint something of yourself." – Sylvia Snowden[2]

When you first encounter a painting by Sylvia Snowden, the effect is shocking. Shocking in the same way as the bodies under duress depicted by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Oskar Kokoschka, or Chaïm Soutine at the beginning of the twentieth century. Unlike these artists, however, Snowden is an American who came to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, at a time when artists were searching for new ways to describe modern subjectivity. She was not responding to the horrors of war like Kirchner, Kokoschka, and Soutine—instead, her battle was to be seen and to be known.[3] The reasons for her relative absence from the discussion of American painting are complex, but they are bound up with the historical neglect of women and Black artists from the modernist canon. Snowden's professional trajectory has been subject to the constant changes and uncertainties of life. In a career spanning more than fifty years, she has developed a style that plays with the presence and absence of the figure through strategies of effacement, exaggeration, and abstraction. Snowden's paintings probe what poet Elizabeth Alexander has called the Black interior, the "complex and often unexplored interiority beyond the face of the social self."[4]

Born in 1942 in Raleigh, North Carolina, Snowden's interest in art was cultivated from an early age by her father, Dr. George W. Snowden, a political scientist; and her mother, Jessie Burns Snowden, a Professor of English Literature who taught at Dillard University, Southern University, and Montgomery County High Schools. Snowden attended Howard University, where she studied under David C. Driskell, Loïs Mailou Jones, James A. Porter, and James Lesesne Wells, graduating with a BA in 1963 and an MFA in 1965. At Howard, Snowden was introduced to a variety of expressionist painters by her professors. Kokoschka resonated with Snowden in his handling of paint, his agitated line, and the inconsistencies of scale manifested in the oversized hands, massive torsos, and outsized heads of his figures. Kokoschka's capacity to convey something of the inner tension of the individuals he portrayed struck a chord with Snowden. His *Portrait of Egon Wellesz*, 1911, in the collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, is brought to life by a dynamic network of color and lines that lie just beneath the surface

of the skin. In the face and hands, the underlying branched structure of arteries, veins, and capillaries pulsate with life, in sharp contrast to the earthy background tones of the musicologist's suit. The intensity of Wellesz's gaze, the confidence of the single baby-blue stroke on the shirt collar, and the willowy fingers of the left hand—suspended as if ready to strike the keys of a piano—each play a part in communicating something about this acclaimed composer.

Like Kokoschka's portrait of Wellesz, the paintings in Snowden's *M Street* series are striking for their psychological intensity, violent distortion, unusual color choices, and thick, gestural paint application.[5] These vivid portraits of men and women from a low-income community in Washington, D.C. were produced between 1978, when the artist settled in the neighborhood, and 1988. Living on M Street, Snowden mostly kept herself to herself. Nevertheless, she found "the proud young girls, worn-out women, and jobless men who formed the daily parade outside the artist's window" a constant source of inspiration.[6] She spent a considerable amount of time observing them, before quietly and methodically painting them on canvas and Masonite in the privacy of her studio. In some ways, Snowden was working in the vein of the preeminent visual chronicler of African American experience, Jacob Lawrence; or the pastel portraits of Beauford Delaney, with their vibrant colors and thick strokes of paint. Take the Art Institute of Chicago's *Self-Portrait*, 1944 where Delaney's prodigious use of color conveys: "the demons that plagued him regularly—poverty, loneliness, alcoholism, and mental instability."[7] The mustard yellow background pushes the sitter towards the viewer in a beguiling and assertive fashion. A red cap and jumper top and tail the detailing on the artist's face, ensuring that our attention is directed to the most active passages of the painting, which combine dark lines with a chromatic celerity. The disapproving expression of the artist, combined with the green palette, gives the painting a haunting intensity.

Like Delaney, Snowden uses color and facture to convey the physical and psychological struggles of her subjects. Steve Carter was a local handyman who assisted the artist from time to time with repairs and maintenance work around her home. The power of Snowden's portrait of Carter comes from a thickened mass of coagulated color and an extraordinary composition that relies on a tension between the subject and the frame of the painting itself. Carter is imprisoned. He has been squeezed into a space that exerts an enormous amount of pressure on his body. His head, neck, spine, and joints are twisted; his knees are pressed up against his chest; his elbows are pushed outwards. His left hand

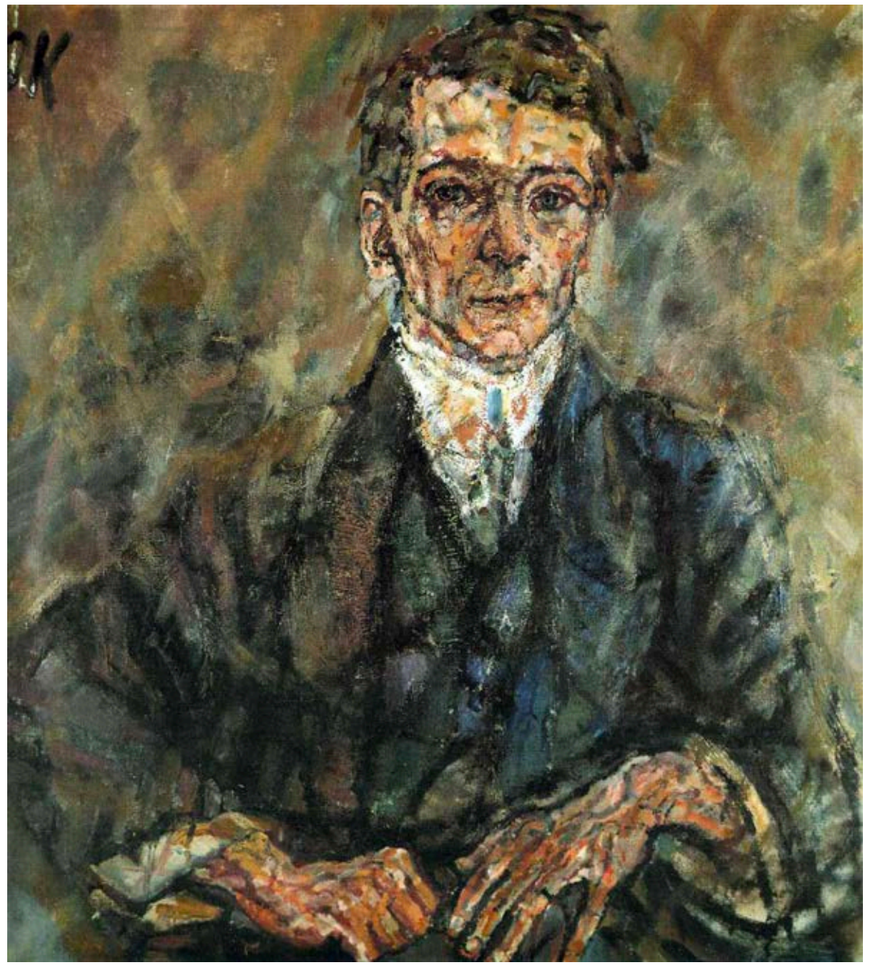
pulls on his inner thigh as if to reduce his physical discomfort. Carter's suffering is amplified by the crimson red paint used to delineate his body against the painting's white background. His upper body has been reduced to a series of red, orange, and mustard yellow lines, evoking swollen lacerations or wounds. The paint is so thickly applied that the folds created in the surface of the picture operate like the collagen fibers of scar tissue. Carter's head, eyes, nose, and mouth are barely recognizable, morphed and distorted out of all proportion to fit the tiny area they have been forced to occupy. With every thick curl of paint, you can feel the intensity of feeling that must have triggered Snowden to create the work. A caricature of sorts, this exaggerated portrait communicates both suffering and absurdity. It is as melancholic as it is excessive.

It is instructive to compare Snowden's approach to figuration with that of one of her teachers at Howard, Loïs Mailou Jones. Jones' *Mob Victim (Meditation)*, 1944, is a portrait of an elderly Black man standing beneath the branches of two trees. The man is neatly dressed in a white shirt and a pair of navy trousers, which are held up with suspenders. As the eyes travel down the painting, the viewer realizes that his hands are bound at the wrists with rope. The title of the work suggests that the man has been unjustly captured and is being prepared for a violent and public act of torture. However, in the face of this humiliation and barbarity he is defiantly composed. Standing with confidence, his shoulders are relaxed, his gaze is directed toward the heavens, his stare is meditative and determined. He is "engaged in an act of internal contemplation" an act of resistance toward the perpetrators of this egregious crime.[8]

If the comportment and expression of Jones' *Mob Victim* belies the horror of his situation, the pain experienced by Snowden's figures is writ large in their bodily gestures. Snowden painted *Rochell Shannon*, 1981—also known as "Bay-Bay"—falling backward with arms flailing, his elongated fingers desperately trying to grasp hold of something secure. She recalls: "Bay-Bay was our neighbor. He was a short boy, extremely smart and a competent swimmer. I heard that he had attended university but later dropped out. This troubled me. Young Black men like Bay-Bay didn't need to be tutored in how to apply themselves. They were naturally bright, dedicated, and hard working. The advantages of a higher education were not made clear to boys like Bay-Bay. If they came up short in any department, it was in their belief that they belonged at university."[9] The overall atmosphere of the painting is one of disequilibrium—an unsteadiness, imbalance, or loss of equilibrium that is often accompanied by spatial disorientation. Snowden's varied palette and

Beauford Delaney, *Self-Portrait*, 1944
Oil on canvas, 27 × 22 ½ inches
The Art Institute of Chicago

Sylvia Snowden, *Steve Carter*, 1982
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite, 61 ½ × 49 ½ inches
Penny Pritzker and Bryan Traubert Collection



Oskar Kokoschka, *Portrait of Egon Wellesz*, 1911
Oil on canvas, 29 ¾ × 27 ⅛ inches
The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

Rochell Shannon, 1981
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite, 48 × 48 inches
The Rachofsky Collection

dynamic mark making add to this sense of instability. The extended right arm is electric. A latticed network of brushstrokes extends from the shoulder to the elbow, the arteries of the forearm pulse blood red before reaching the hand, which is inflamed and discolored with yellow, orange, blue, maroon, and black fingers. Shannon's head is forced into the upper left-hand corner of the picture. The corners of the mouth droop, his eyes rolled back in her head as if fainting or having a seizure. Atypically for the M Street paintings, the painting appears to include the fleshy limb of another individual in the bottom left-hand corner. Could this be the foot that caught Shannon unawares, tripping him up and causing his downfall?

Even more physical and aggressive in her application of paint than her predecessors, Snowden refused the urge to embellish or disguise the brutal realities facing the Americans she encountered on M Street. The toughness of her subject matter finds its material counterpart in the thick carapace of paint on a solid Masonite substrate that constitutes each painting. A highly trained and accomplished draftsperson, Snowden developed a distinctive impasto style that twists and bends her figures beyond naturalistic representation. Although triggered by her daily interactions with her neighbors, her paintings are abstractions that resonate far beyond the stories of the individuals whose names they bear.

When Snowden began the M Street paintings, the American economy was suffering from high inflation, high unemployment, an energy crisis, a declining dollar, high government spending, and hemorrhaging jobs to overseas competitors because of deindustrialization that had been accelerating since World War II. To tackle these issues, President Jimmy Carter addressed the nation from the Oval Office on July 15, 1979, describing what he deemed a "crisis of confidence." Although he never used the term, the address would quickly be dubbed the "malaise" speech. It was an honest and soul-searching speech in which Carter acknowledged a growing anxiety in the country due to an erosion of its citizens' self-belief. When Carter claimed: "it's clear that the true problems of our nation are much deeper—deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recession," he was referring to the cruel succession of shocks and tragedies America had been subjected to for more than a decade. These included the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.; The Kent State shootings, the Watergate scandal; and the agony of The Vietnam War, which had recently ended in ended in acrimony and shame. Snowden's paintings are the visceral embodiment of

the social and economic illnesses afflicting American society at the time, as well as her subject's individual desires, ambitions, vulnerabilities, and fears.

One of the first things the viewer notices when looking at the painting *Leroy Dickerson*, 1981 is that the subject's arm is swollen, sore and discolored. Dickerson is clutching his right arm as if it is in pain. This gesture, combined with the squatted seating position, hunched shoulders, sunken cheekbones, bulging eyes, and slack-jawed mouth, present a character who looks demonic and frightening and at the same time helpless and lost. Dickerson is an excellent example of how Snowden used individuals as sources of inspiration to probe broader problems affecting the neighborhood. In the early 1970s, heroin had a devastating effect on Washington, D.C., leading to countless overdoses and deaths. Snowden witnessed the epidemic first-hand on the M Streets. Historically, addiction has been portrayed as a moral weakness, a failing on the part of the individual to rein in their temptation and vices. While Snowden's portrait of Dickerson does not hold back on the suffering caused by drug abuse, Snowden was mindful not to portray Dickerson as repugnant. She observes: "I don't think that any of us have a completely wonderful life. There are things that happen in our lifespan that can be very negative and there are things that can be extremely stressful and that happens in everybody's life I don't care what type of background one comes from."[10] For the artist, treating illicit drug use as a moral failure and insinuating that individuals who use drugs deserve contempt, risks actively condemning and alienating members of society in dire need of public health support. Dickerson's oversized right arm is reaching out in search of empathy and compassion and Snowden through her art is willing to oblige. At its core, the painting demonstrates the need to treat all human beings as creatures of intrinsic, incomparable, and indelible worth.

Clarice Little, 1985 is an unsettling portrait combining the real and unreal, antipathy and empathy. Boldly rendered in acrylic and oil pastel on paper, Little appears to be suffering from some chronic inflammatory disorder affecting her bones, tissue, and joints, including those in her head, arms legs, and hands. Snowden remembers: "Clarice was already a well-built woman. But when she became irritated or angry her body would seemingly swell even greater and out of all proportion."[11] Little's face is emaciated and skeletal with yellowish bile spurting from her mouth. Two large sagging breasts consume her torso while awkward arms dangle from her sides, drawing attention to two oversized arthritic hands with knotted and contorted fingers. Both legs appear to be buckling under the

Loïs Mailou Jones, *Mob Victim (Meditation)*, 1944
Oil on canvas, 41 × 25 inches
Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust

Sylvia Snowden, *Leroy Dickerson*, 1981
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite, 48 × 48 inches
Private Collection, Texas

Sylvia Snowden, *Clarice Little*, 1985
Acrylic and oil pastel on paper, sheet: 30 × 22 inches
Kathleen Madden + Paul Frantz Collection, New York and London

Willem de Kooning, *Woman and Bicycle*, 1952-53
Oil, enamel, and charcoal on linen, 76 ½ × 49 ⅛ inches
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

overwhelming weight and pain of these afflictions. What is most unsettling about this picture is that the radically disfigured anatomy gives us no sense of Little's age. She is portrayed as a faceless, ageless representation of inner-city poverty, a reminder of the grim mortality rates, hardship and despair that affect working-class America.

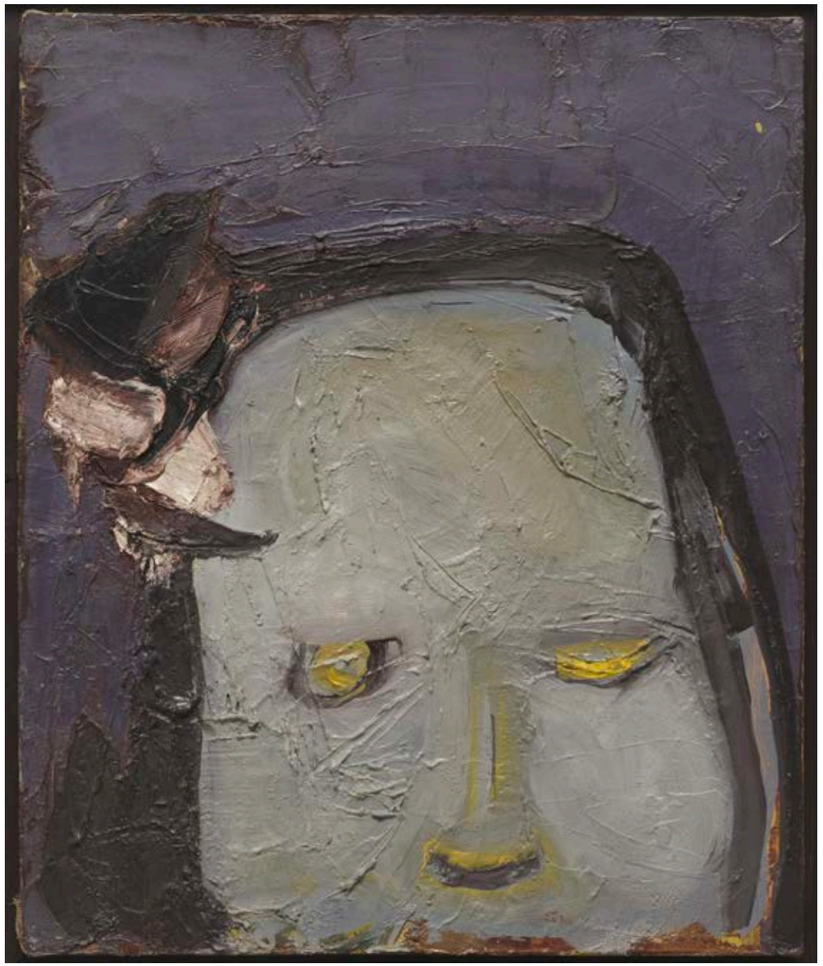
Formally, *Clarice Little* recalls Willem de Kooning's *Woman* series made between 1950-53. De Kooning was an important touchstone for Snowden but the intensity of suffering in *Clarice Little* gives the painting an emotive, dynamic significance that exceeds any straightforward comparison to the figural compositions of de Kooning. A more helpful and perhaps unexpected association can be drawn between Snowden and the artist Eva Hesse. Between 1960 and 1961, Hesse created a series of extraordinary figurative paintings that focus on the head—or the head, shoulders, and upper torso. In these works, which are believed to be self-portraits, Hesse achieves tremendous emotional impact by combining jagged, callused strokes with carefully calculated details to articulate details such as the eyes, eyelid, nose, and hair. "If in some of these portraits, there is pathos, many seem humorous, almost satirical. Hesse exploits the capacity for costume, gaze, posture, and general demeanor to radically alter the affect of a given persona...in an earnest search for self."[12] Snowden, like Hesse, knows exactly when to step back from a figural composition before it dissolves completely into a mass of frenzied lines. This intuitive ability thwarts our expectations of predictable forms and imbues each painting with a great deal of psychological and painterly tension.

In a revealing 1990 interview, Snowden was quick to tackle the moral questions raised by her portrayals of others, stating "I am trying to depict a realistic part of their life. I'm not there to belittle, or humiliate, or expose anything that would be damaging to them."[13] Snowden makes it clear that she doesn't consider her subjects "defective" in any way. She is uninterested in pathologizing people. For her, the M Street paintings are an attempt to engage with those unlucky enough to have fallen through the cracks in the social safety net, people in unstable, low-paying jobs who are disproportionately affected by mental health issues, substance addictions, and domestic violence. Snowden's paintings capture a frenetic energy in her subjects that reflects their disenfranchisement and the social and economic conditions that have determined their lives. What makes these paintings so prescient is that sadly, not much has changed for the "working poor." A recent survey found that in 1979, Black women in the bottom tenth income percentile earned today's equivalent of $10.22/hour, whereas in 2019 they earned only $10.35/hour. Although M

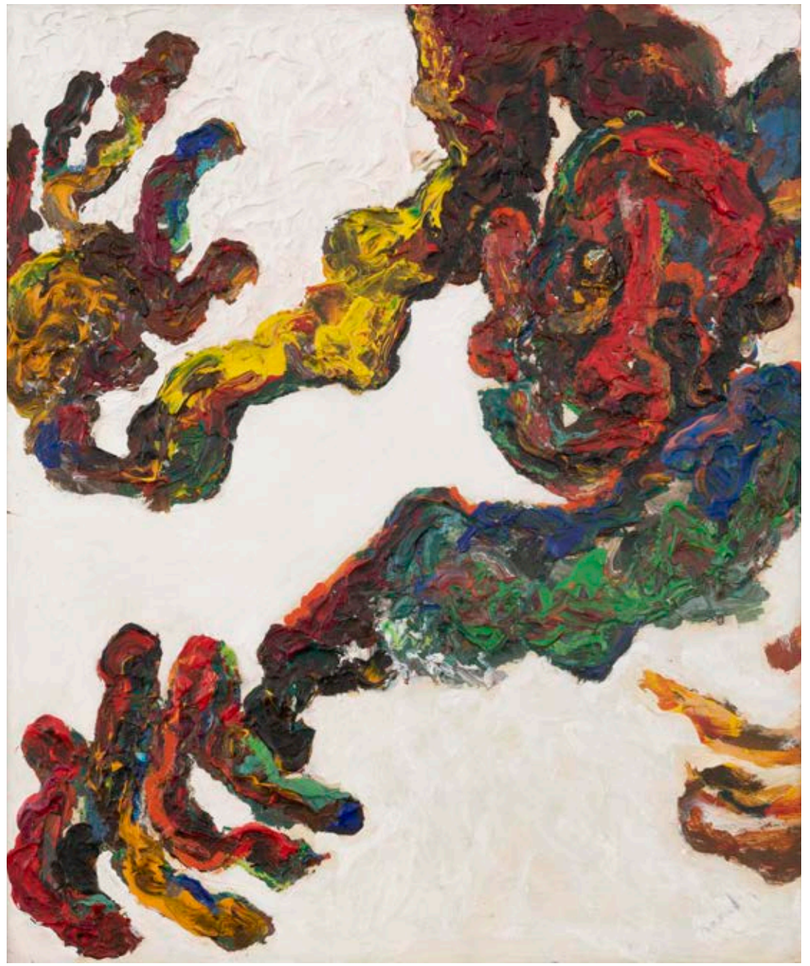
Street has been transformed into a bustling and desirable neighborhood, the subjects Snowden depicted continue to suffer in other, yet to be gentrified, boroughs.

While Snowden has resisted political readings of her work and distanced herself from the role of social commentator, class, race, and gender are everywhere at work in these powerful paintings. *Salvation*, 1982 is a remarkable painting, not just because of its evocative title—which is somewhat unusual for Snowden—but because, in the artist's words, "it is not about a person. It is about a feeling."[15] In this painting, a figure with its head turned imploringly to the viewer, arms splayed, palms facing upward, occupies the entirety of the picture. What remains of the subject's body lingers out of the frame, but the figure appears to tumble from top right to bottom left, as if he has fallen or is on his knees in a gesture of pleading. Two large swatches of blood red ooze across the forehead and from the bridge to the tip of the nose, leading the eye to a small chalky white triangle that could be a fragment of a broken tooth or an awkward attempt at a smile. Historian Genna Rae McNeil describes how "too often, for African Americans in the United States the reality has been one of closed doors as well as blocked passageways, physical and psychic assaults, or pathless journeys." For this reason, McNeil suggests the concept of salvation has a unique meaning for African Americans. This concept of salvation is backed up by three critical elements. "First, salvation is a revolutionary spaciousness and freedom through the assertion of inner authority, breaking bonds of confinement and invalidating the reality of dead-ends. Second, to transpose terrors, absurdities, angst, depression, and all manner of external and mental demons into a new harmonious song. Third, to live acknowledging the reality of infinite creative possibilities, the inexhaustibility of hope, and a divine invitation for all persons—regardless of race, class or sex."[16] These features of salvation can be usefully applied to the painting *Salvation*. The painting has a surety borne out of Snowden's experience. While the figure suggests someone who is struggling to cope, the act of painting makes a space—psychic, physical, and spiritual—in which Snowden can function as a free being.

Reflecting on figurative painting by Black artists, Elizabeth Alexander observes that the desire for positive imagery "places constraints on what a black artist might feel free to envision and find in that subconscious space."[17] For Alexander, these limitations have resulted in a "vogue for a stereotypical black realism" that leaves little room for abstraction or surrealism.[18] Snowden's M Street paintings break through these restrictions to establish a space that is at once real and not real—a space where incisive observation



Eva Hesse, *Untitled*, 1960
Oil on canvas, 18 × 15 inches
Museum of Modern Art, New York



Sylvia Snowden, *Salvation*, 1982
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite, 48 × 40 inches
Jaime and Andrew Schwartzberg Collection

meets speculation, extrapolation, and fantasy. Although rooted in her interactions with the residents of M Street, these paintings take on a life of their own, speaking as much to the artist's own subjectivity and the socio-political conditions in which her work was formed. They create the kind of inner space described by Alexander, one "in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn't, or should be."[19]

FOOTNOTES

1 Elizabeth Alexander "Toward the Black Interior" in *The Black Interior* Graywolf Press, 2004 p. 7

2 Sylvia Snowden interviewed by Chuck Forsman in "What Follows: On Art and Artists" interview series produced by the University of Colorado, Boulder, 1990. Video copyright the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, www.vdb.org, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

3 At the outbreak of World War I, Kirchner experienced a physical and mental breakdown, Kokoschka was seriously wounded in battle and Soutine fled Paris in 1918 fearing anti-Semitic violence.

4 Alexander, p. 4-5.

5 The name "M Street" refers to a major road in the U.S. capitol divided into four parts NW/NE and SW/SE. Snowden held two exhibitions titled *M Street: Part I* simultaneously at Zenith Gallery and Howard University in 1979 that were followed by *M Street: Part II* at 10th Street Gallery in 1980.

6 Alice Thorson "Sylvia Snowden: Engaging Expressionism" *New Art Examiner* October 1988

7 Michael D. Plante "The Silence of Delaney's French Abstraction" in *Beauford Delaney: From New York to Paris* The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2004 p. 76

8 For a detailed look at the series of single figure portraits made by Mailou Jones in the 1940s see Rebecca VanDiver "Routes to Roots: From Black Washington to Black Paris" in *Designing a New Tradition: Loïs Mailou Jones and the Aesthetics of Blackness*, 2020 The Pennsylvania State University Press pp 97-99.

9 Artist in in conversation with the author December 2021.

10 Sylvia Snowden interviewed by Chuck Forsman in "What Follows: On Art and Artists"

11 Artist in in conversation with the author December 2021.

12 Linda Norden "Getting to "ICK": To Know What One Is Not" in *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective* Yale University Press, 1992 p. 57

13 Sylvia Snowden interviewed by Chuck Forsman in "What Follows: On Art and Artists"

14 Adewale Maye & Asha Banerjee "The Struggles of Low-Wage Work." CLASP: The Center for Law and Social Policy Fact Sheet, June 2021 https://www.clasp.org/publications/fact-sheet/struggles-low-wage-work-0

15 Artist in conversation with the author December 2020

16 Genna Rae McNeil "Waymaking and Dimensions of Responsibility: An African American Perspective on Salvation" in *The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption* Quinton H. Dixie and Cornel West (eds.) Beacon Press, 1999

17 Alexander, pp. 7-8.

18 Alexander, p. 7.

19 Alexander, p. 5.

In conversation:
Sylvia Snowden & Nathaniel Mary Quinn
moderated by Franklin Parrasch
June 11th, 2021

NMQ: Hi Sylvia. Great to speak with you.

SS: Oh, I'm glad you are calling.

NMQ: Yes, of course! Well, how you doing?

SS: I'm fine. It's raining here. I like the rain.

NMQ: You're based in D.C., right?

SS: Yes, I live here., Nathaniel, where are you located?

NMQ: I am located in Brooklyn, New York.

OK. So Kathleen Madden bought your painting. She called me and told me about you. I was really blown away by it. I think you are masterful.

SS: Oh, that's very kind of you, very kind. I really appreciate that.

NMQ: You use oil pastel and gouache?

SS: What I do is that I paint in series. I used to use acrylic, oil pastel and sometimes gouache. Right now I'm just using acrylics. I'm an oil painter, and I prefer oil, but I had children, and babies don't like turpentine, so I had to stop using oil.

NMQ: It appears to me that you are somehow mixing acrylic and oil pastel together?

SS: Acrylic and oil pastel together. Yes.

NMQ: How do you do that?

SS: What do you mean how do you do it? Put on some paint, put on some oil pastels. That's how you do it. What you were thinking I guess is that I mixed them together? It's not mixed together, it's one on top of the other. I paint one and then I paint the other, to make it grow as much as I possibly can, but it's not actually mixed into something that I use together.

NMQ: Thank you for explaining that because I really thought that you found this way to mix it together, and I said, "Boy, that's amazing."

Another thing I noticed with your work which is very impressive, is how you seem to be able to get a really nice thick picture with your materials.

SS: I paint with very, very, very thick paint. I do, I do. I enjoy the texture.

NMQ: I was so blown away because here's the thing, I've never seen it done before. I mean, I look at a lot of art and I've never seen that done with those materials.

SS: Well, listen that's nice of you to say.

NMQ: It's very impressive.

SS: Thank you.

NMQ: It really is, and [something] I have never seen. I mean some artists who apply paint a certain way, you look and you take pleasure in looking at it, but when I saw your work, I thought, "My God, this is almost sculptural," you know?

SS: Yes, it is, as a matter of fact. You understand that.

NMQ: And it's coming off the surface of the canvas or the paper.

SS: Exactly, the positive space in my paintings comes off the surface.

NMQ: That is correct. And you, listen I don't blame you for protecting your process, I would do the same thing but I will tell you it is absolutely stunning. It really is and I don't know any other artist who has been able to do that, not in the way that you do it. Some artists do it and it's sort of cheap, but the way you do it, it's so natural, genuine.

SS: I'm glad you said that because my painting is me. It is me and I know there are different styles coming to vogue. I know that people have written about my work over the years and there was one point that a person reported out that my work is expressionistic and that is my personality. It doesn't change with the flavor of the month. My personality doesn't change, so it is very much a reaction to a relationship to the subject matter.

NMQ: And what normally is your subject matter in the work?

SS: It goes between two things. I can use the figure, which I'm not using right now. And I will probably go back to the figure. It goes from one to the other. You know, my emotional self gets exhausted with the figures and then I go to the non-figure and then I get exhausted and my emotional self does, I'll go back to the figure. And I do that also with the number of people I come in contact with. Right now, I don't come in contact with that many people. I stay in. I really took to heart that Covid. For a long period of time, I just have not had a lot of contact with people and therefore did not paint people.

So, when I get back into being around people again, I will paint people again. Because all the people that I paint, I know, and I paint my relationship or how I feel about them. I'm not passing judgment, but understanding what I think. I don't want to get into any foolishness about, "Well, if you make a statement, the next pass is a judgment." I'm not saying somebody is good or bad, right or wrong, anything like that. This is just part of it. The elements within the personality that I see.

NMQ: We have that in common in our art practice, because I approach my work in the same way, I make people that I actually know. And I'm not trying to paint a portrait of the person. I'm trying to paint the essence of them, the energy, the spiritual link that I feel, so I'm not passing judgment on them. As you said, I'm just trying to find a way to articulate a certain kind of truth that you kind of sense with people that you know.

SS: I don't have to completely know you for a long time. I'm not in love with everybody. Don't get me wrong. I like people. And I like to get to know them, to know certain things about them and that's what I paint.

NMQ:
Well, that makes me feel very good because I have a similar approach in my thinking of my work. So that makes me feel like a million bucks, because I have such reverence for your work. I just think it's incredible. I've never seen anything like it.

I just have so many questions now. When did you start painting? When did you start making art?

SS: When I was a very young child. My mother would go shopping and bought watercolors. And I started painting that way. I mean, it was for the entertainment of me, you

know, while she was gone. So [that's] the earliest I can remember using paint, with tin watercolors. You know what I'm talking about?

NMQ: Yes, ma'am.

SS: And I've been painting ever since then. And not until I went to college, and my father asked me what I was doing: "We've got to think about what you going do in life." So I said I wanted to go into art and my father said, "I don't know how much money you going to make with that, but I will support you." And I am very, very fortunate to have the parents that I have. They supported me and I mean they really did, and I have so much appreciation, love for them and they taught me how to support my children. And all through school my parents supported me, supported my art. Both the emotional needs, encouragement, and monetarily. I'm proud my parents had that foresight.

NMQ: It's a beautiful thing. You've got a beautiful thing.

SS: You should have met my parents. I did a whole show about them, a whole series about them.

NMQ: I would count that as a blessing, you know? My parents I think had a hard time. Well, my mother was always very supportive of me as an artist. She believed in me. But if I had to imagine all the thoughts that she may have had, it is possible that she could have had a hard time believing in the concept of an artist making some money. You know normally the tradition is that you go to school, you become a doctor, or a teacher, or a lawyer, or something like this, these fields where you can make some money, but the arts fields, at least in those days, were not seen as fields that could produce a kind of living.

SS: It's the opposite. I think of an artist as being poor, you know, with the loaf of bread and a bottle of wine, that sort of thinking.

NMQ: I mean I was a teacher so I know about that!

SS: I taught until I had to retire. I taught on the college level because twelve to fourteen, depending on where you teach, hours a week is considered full-time job. So I could devote myself to what I really wanted to do and that was to paint. I felt a responsibility to teach the students I had and not everybody feels that responsibility. But I felt responsible to teach the students what I knew, to make sure they learned. [But] I told

somebody the reason why I teach is because I don't have to work forty hours a week and man did I ever catch the devil for that.

NMQ: They were on you for making that statement?

SS: Yes, damn, because they were more about education than they were about art, but if they were more about art, they would've understood it.

NMQ: Once again, I feel like we are from the same tree because, I just wanted to teach, and after teaching I just wanted to leave and make my art, that's it.

SS: I never mix the two, and for years I would not teach painting. I taught art history. Today, I can teach the survey of art history without ever looking at a book. That did not take away my art energy.

NMQ: I was a teacher of kids who are considered at-risk. Kids came in to learn about professional development, to get ready for a job interview, internships, and to change that behavior so they can avoid interfacing with the criminal justice system. I was proud of showing [them] the way to take their skills into the workforce, you know, "you can sell cars. You can."

SS: Tell me about it. Where I live now, I've lived forty-two years and where I live now it's no longer considered the ghetto. Now the white people live here it's not the ghetto. The same old houses, you understand me.

NMQ: It's more money for the same houses.

SS: I couldn't afford to live in my house now. But anyway, what would happen? I would see people who played numbers -- and the way they could remember those numbers and compute those numbers – and the way that that would have carried them so far if they were allowed to participate in this society in a way that a lot of people do.

NMQ: Yeah. My thing was this: I never judge them, I never humiliate them, and never put them down for what they did. That doesn't mean that I did not acknowledge the sort of criminal element and what they did.

SS: Criminal meaning against the law.

NMQ: Yep. Also have a certain humanity in my relation to them. I understand the context of a person, the neighborhood they grew up in, a family structure: maybe the father went to prison, maybe the older brother was a gang member, so the little brother wants to kind of emulate the big brother. I get that. I get that whole dynamic, but I wanted to highlight to them some certain truths. For example, you're a drug dealer, cool you sell crack or weed, or whatever. I say, you know that people that go to Harvard, [to learn how] to build a clientele, how to sell a product, but you getting a free form of education. You can take the same skills into a different industry and make legitimate money. A lot of kids they got hip to that game. They understood where I was coming from and a lot of them end up doing that. They start their own little business and things like that.

SS: They started their own little what?

NMQ: A coffee shop, you know having the entrepreneurial spirit because they already have that spirit in them anyway. Another thing I would tell them is this: I would always talk about the pursuit of one's dreams. This energy is consistent at all facets of life. If you keep doing it, you will make it. It's going to happen.

SS: Absolutely correct.

NMQ: Let me ask you this. How would you place your works in the canon of art history? I'm curious to hear about that.

SS: I am a structural abstract expressionist. For me abstract expressionism, it's very subdivided into three categories, plus with symbolic and actions, and my art is based on the structure and I also make use of German expressionism with my figurative work. When people utilize those terms, if you submit to the people who write about art, it's not meant for people who make art, it's for people who write about it because they can put it into a particular category. For me painting with the figure and non-figure is good enough. Do you understand?

NMQ: Yes, ma'am.

SS: The people want to break it down more and more and more. Now I can, but I don't want to.

NMQ: I understand.

SS: Thank you very much. It's just not necessary, it's repeating what somebody else has written in art history, and over and over again it's the same thing.

NMQ: You said earlier you have children?

SS: Yes, I have. I have two children. One left some time ago. My son was shot to death some years ago. I have a daughter who is living with me now, though she lives in New York, she's visiting now.

NMQ: You say your son was shot to death? I'm sorry to hear that.

SS: It's very, very, very painful. Young Black boys, twenty years ago, young Black boys being shot, right, left, and center. It was just awful and I had police detectives who on my son's case said really quite frankly, "If it were white boys who are dying at this rate, they would have stopped a long time ago." And he said that, he was white, and he sat down and told me and explained to me how all of this is going on, and how they are actually not concerned, anybody who killed Black boys -- they let him out of jail in a minute almost in the hopes that they continue the killing. But yep. I don't want to go too much into that, but that is something I have never forgotten. Him telling me all this stuff, and his face and his eyes.

NMQ: Yeah, I understand.

SS: To tell the truth about this, but anyway that's that rage. You know what I mean? Extremely painful and it's times that I cannot explain. I will find myself crying because this, it's lost and there's nothing left.

I did a whole show about him -- a hundred forty-three pieces in it.

NMQ: You said how many pieces?

SS: One hundred forty-three pieces. I worked very hard. These were pieces that were paintings, there were pieces that were three-dimensional and made use of shapes and three-dimensional forms. Objects like his tricycle. I painted them and made them into art objects. His shoe, his baseball mitt, his rocket pig, all those things. So, what I was trying to do is show his life from the crib to when he was shot with that Glock, that's what I was trying to do. My emphasis was to paint the preciousness of life. Not just my son -- life itself, so I was using my son as the vessel.

NMQ: So you essentially chronicled his life while also highlighting the fragility of life. Also telling his story, but from a humane perspective, like this is more than what just happened. This was a human being with a life, yes, connection to the community, right, aspiration.

SS: I don't remember every little thing I've done, every painting; but I remember everything I did for him. I remember everything I did for his life.

NMQ: When, did you exhibit that show?

SS: I exhibited at the Corcoran Gallery.

NMQ: Do you still have that body of work in your possession?

SS: I have all the three-dimensional works, and a lot of the paintings. When I don't sleep well I think about the paintings, and I think about how I did them. I think about my son and what it represented.

NMQ: How about your daughter? Is she an artist?

SS: We have understood perfectly -- that only one poor artist per family.

NMQ: Well, I wouldn't count you as a poor artist now.

SS: You don't know what I am.

NMQ: I know your works are very enriching. I know that and they came from you. So that means you are a very enriching human being.

SS: You are kind, I was a bit nervous about talking with you. I'm not talking to anybody I don't know.

NMQ: Why are you nervous talking to me?

SS: Not you as a person, it's not you. It's me as a person.

NMQ: I understand. Well, I was excited to speak with you. And I was compelled, at the very least speak to you because for me as a young artist, I want to learn from the best.

SS: How old are you?

NMQ: I am forty-four years old. And to me, it's an honor, it really is, it's an honor.

SS: You're kind.

NMQ: Well, I can only tell the truth. I'm not trying to be kind. I'm just telling the truth.

Maybe you can give me a few jewels of wisdom?

SS: No, no, no, honey. I don't have any jewels of wisdom, I don't have any pearls of wisdom. But one thing I told Franklin [Parrasch], is that you push yourself. You advance. That is a very good quality. See, you are your best believer and I admire that in a person. I can tell by when we talk that you are a good friend, you are a good friend to yourself, that's good and you believe in yourself and that's good and you don't take other people's negative opinions about you or your work and that's good. So I can't give you any pearls of wisdom.

NMQ: This is more about life in general. You know?

SS: I don't have any pearls of wisdom. You gotta understand this. I'm going to give you this pearl: If I had them, I would have written books about them. I wouldn't be talking to you, you understand?

NMQ: Yes, ma'am. Yes, I do. All right, I understand it and I respect it.

So how have you been doing? The pandemic -- how did you hold up last year?

SS: We got vaccinated and stayed in.

NMQ: Have you seen anything like this in your lifetime?

SS: Yeah. The polio and influenza.

NMQ: What was it like, during that time, do you recall?

SS: Same sort of thing. It's the same sort of thing that I recall, but I don't sit down and

dwell on this negativity of what I went through and what the world was, I do not. Today is the day that has to be lived. For me.

NMQ: So, another thing I noticed -- there's a certain spirituality I sense in your practice, in your work.

SS: I'm glad you sense that.

NMQ: I bring that up because David Hammons talked a lot about art practice being quite spiritual, I believe in it. I think there's a great deal of spirituality that is embedded in making art. Now that may not be the case for every artist. But I know for me as an artist, I think you are the same way, there is a spirituality embedded in the making of the work in that process, in the creation of the work, I do believe in that and I see that in your work.

SS: Good for you. I don't dwell on that myself but of course I'm much older than you are. And probably given that up and probably when I was forty-four, I did dwell on that but I don't anymore. So I don't even relate to what you're talking about. Now about taking my work, whether it is spiritual or not, of course it is. And that's the end of that for me at this stage of my life, you know, but if I were your age, you're doing what you supposed to at your age, you know, I did the same thing.

NMQ: The reason I bring it up is because it was quite a journey for me to accept that about myself.

SS: Accept what?

NMQ: The spirituality in my work.

SS: What do you mean acceptance?

NMQ: Okay. Because, you know, in the art world...

SS: I don't know about the art world. Now I know about things in the world but not the art world.

NMQ: Okay, all I'm saying is that there always seems to be this, just kind of weight and attention placed on a theory behind the work, you know. And language...

SS: Okay. Let me make this statement. People who make art make art, the rest of it are nothing but parasites.

NMQ: I'm glad you said that. There you go. You summed it up very clear. Very happy. That's a jewel of wisdom.

SS: Is that a pearl?

NMQ: You just did it, you just gave me a pearl. See, I knew you had it in you. You just gave it to me!

SS: Don't you come up and say, "Well see I said it." Because I will find you and correct that.

How did you get your middle name Mary?

NMQ: My name is Nathaniel Mary Quinn. My mother's name was Mary Quinn. My mother passed away when I was fifteen years old. She never had formal education. So when I was in high school all the graduates got a graduation ring, and you can inscribe whatever you want it in that ring, that was when I thought, "Let me put down 'Nathaniel Mary Quinn' so it's like my mother is also getting a high school diploma." And it's been that way ever since.

SS: That is very nice, that is.

NMQ: Because my mother never went to school. She couldn't read or write. I know that my mother was there for my education.

SS: Well, the thing about that, it's true for a lot of Black people because of the law. It was against the law to learn to read and write, as you know. It still permeates. This is why education is extremely important to us.

NMQ: To me it is the most important element in society. Because, when I was a teacher working with the at-risk youth, my students could not read or write, and one of my proudest moments in my life to this day, and even to think about it now, nearly brought tears to my eyes. I had this student, I don't remember his name, but this young man could not read or write. Now, there is a correlation between crime and illiteracy, that's been proven. Lot of guys are in jail, they have a hard time reading, and writing,

can't read and write. They are known as being functionally illiterate. Because when you cannot read and write, you cannot decode mainstream language, so you are almost forced to go into the underworld of society.

SS: Elvis Presley was functionally illiterate, and he was white.

NMQ: Come on. This is America. So I used children's books to teach this young man how to read. You know, we started with small two and three letter words.

SS: It is shameful that in this country people do not know how to read or write. It's not a Black thing, it is a poverty thing and not necessarily Blackness now. But it's shameful and it's so terribly crippling for the whole society.

NMQ: I agree. Now when I was teaching this kid, I worked with him every day, and I remember the first day, finally, when he read his first sentence from beginning to end, I cried and I looked at him and I hugged him and I said, "Let me tell you something. A person can take your shoes, they can take your shirt, they can take your house, but no one can ever take from you your education. They cannot steal that from you. That is yours. That is yours forever."

SS: I understand you. Another thing that's good about you is, a lot of us don't love ourselves. You love yourself. And I think that's a positive thing for you, very positive.

NMQ: Well, you know, I believe in self-care and I always say, I'm very comfortable in my own skin.

SS: I know it, I can hear it. That's good.

NMQ: I'm very comfortable in my own skin and, and you ought to be comfortable in your skin. Because, you know, this is the way God made you. This is who you are.

SS: You can't talk about "ought to be." No, you can't. It would be good if everybody was, but that's not "ought to be." That's not where it goes, you know?

NMQ: Well, you know, listen, you're born in the world, the way you are and you are dealt a certain set of cards, and you can take it upon yourself to try to shape the kind of future you want. And along the way you get a lot of help, you know, nobody lives on an island.

Even this conversation is helping me tremendously because the kind of fulfillment that I get just from talking to somebody like you with the masterful skill set that you have, it lets me know that such a thing that you are doing with your paintings is possible. It's within reach -- it actually exists. That makes me a more fervent believer. That's a beautiful thing. To me, that's God. I see everything as a potential blessing, an opportunity. And I want to learn. I always try to learn because then that gives me the reinforcements to be, maybe, a blessing to somebody else someday, and to help other people rise and build and be their better selves. I think a lot of times people are born kings and queens. We just learn to become peasants. And you should never be that way, you know.

SS: We're all peasants. What is this about kings and queens? I don't understand that. When I was growing up in the sixties and everybody talking about Black people to feel better about ourselves, talking about we are kings and queens, that's what it sounds like -- but that was way before you were born.

NMQ: Well I think we are all born great and it is a matter of holding on to it. I don't really believe in the concept of luck. I believe in hard work, a good work ethic meeting up with opportunity. That's it. And if you think you're going to get through life being lazy? You can forget about it, you got to work.

SS: You're sounding more and more about pulling yourself up by the bootstrap. I'm not being critical of you, you just sound more and more like that, you know?

NMQ: So what are your plans for today?

SS: Well, when I end talking with you, I'm going to lie down and think about it. Then I'm going to get up and see what the rain has done to my flowers outside, and then I'm going to come back and think about you some more. I'm going to go into my studio and look at the painting I'm working on and maybe work, maybe not.

The Art Education of Sylvia Snowden

Dr. Rebecca VanDiver

"The second blessing of my life—besides my parents—was to study art at Howard University." – Sylvia Snowden

Painter Sylvia Snowden eyed an artistic career from an early age. When she was a junior in high school, her father asked what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. The teenage Snowden responded, "Art." Years later, she recounted, "I didn't know I wanted to be a painter," but she understood the value of a broad art education. She said, "You have to go into art…and experience design, and experience painting, and experience printmaking to know what type of art you want to do."[1] In 1959, Snowden enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., graduating with a studio art B.A. in 1963 and a M.F.A. in 1965. The Howard University Art faculty who taught Snowden–Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël, James A. Porter, David C. Driskell, Lila Asher, and James L. Wells, believed in providing students with a traditional studio art education. Students took a scaffolded mix of drawing, printmaking, painting, design, theory, and art history courses which offered a comprehensive foundation. Upon her graduation, Snowden joined the influential lineage of Howard-trained artists and art historians, including Alma Thomas (the department's first graduate), Elizabeth Catlett, Malika Roberts, Lillian Burwell, and Mildred Thompson who preceded Snowden, not to mention the numerous others who followed.[2] Snowden's Howard training established a classical base from which her expressionist aesthetic, displayed on the pages of this catalogue, has emerged, and evolved.

Born in 1942 in Raleigh, North Carolina to educators George W. and Jesse B. Snowden, Sylvia spent her childhood in the deep South on the campuses of two Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) Dillard University in New Orleans and Southern University in Baton Rouge, where her parents taught Business and English, respectively.[3] She played with watercolors as a young girl and would later explain, "My mother was attracted to color, and I grew up in a home with the use of strong color."[4] Sylvia was thirteen and in the seventh grade when the family relocated to Washington, D.C., where her father had a position with the Federal Housing Administration.[5] Snowden started high school at Georgetown Day School ultimately graduating from Western High School. Snowden's childhood exposures to art and college campuses served her well in young adulthood.

When Snowden entered the first-year class at Howard University, known colloquially as "the Mecca," the HBCU had long been a hotbed of Black intellectualism. She quickly

declared a major in art. The well-regarded Art Department maintained a sterling reputation for its training of artists, public school art teachers, and art historians. James V. Herring established the Department of Art in 1921 and served as chair until 1953, when he handed the reins to James A. Porter, the department's second graduate. Porter remained chair until his 1970 death. The core faculty comprised of Herring (painting and art history), Porter (painting and art history), Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël (watercolor and design), and James Lesesne Wells (printmaking) had been in place since the 1930s and offered a robust studio program. Snowden's instructors also included Lila Asher and David Driskell, who joined the faculty in 1947 and 1962.[6] The faculty maintained professional careers outside the classroom, exhibiting widely and garnering national acclaim. Yet, they remained dedicated teachers devoted to their students' training.

Reflecting the rigor and seriousness of the faculty, the Department of Art's courses were "directed quite definitely toward professional objectives in art practice."[7] Undergraduate art majors like Snowden were required to take 135-course hours in studio, theory, criticism, and art history. Although students chose a concentration of Painting, Design, Graphic, or Public School Art (teaching) tracks, all took the same set of introductory studio courses, among them: "Art 1: General Graphics," "Art 2: Fundamentals of Design," and "Art 3: Ceramics." The curriculum dictated that students also take a theory course, "Orientation to Art," which explored "major diversions and subdivisions of contemporary art practice" as well as the second half of the Western Art History survey (Renaissance to Modern).[8] Upon selecting a specific track, Painting in Snowden's case, studies became more specialized and advanced. [Fig. 1] Other students in the Department of Art with whom Snowden took classes or passed in the hallways included painter Mary O'Neal Lovelace (B.A. 1964), printmaker Lou Stovall (B.A. 1965), painter/flutist Lloyd Garrison McNeil (M.F.A. 1961), Evelyn Marie Page (B.A. 1961), Yvonne Carter Pickering (B.A. 1962), Starmanda Bullock (B.A. 1965), and Michael Auld (B.A. 1966) among others.

Changes on campus and within the curriculum in the 1960s impacted Snowden's undergraduate experience and opened avenues for further study. During Snowden's sophomore year, 1960-1961, the Department of Art merged with the Department of Drama and the School of Music to form the College of Fine Arts. The merger coincided with a move into the newly constructed Fine Arts Building across campus. With this development came more graduate degrees, including an M.F.A. in Studio art.[9]

Howard students also enjoyed off-campus activities that enhanced their artistic training. Classes made regular use of local museums and galleries—the Howard University Art Gallery, Phillips Collection, and Barnett-Aden Gallery, and some even traveled further afield. For instance, after her junior year, Snowden spent the summer of 1962 on a Howard-sponsored tour of France led by her professor Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël. A self-avowed Francophile, Pierre-Noël had spent a transformative sabbatical year in Paris and delighted in bringing her students on a jaunt through her favorite city.[10] The summer was an art student's dream. The group took classes Académie de la Grande Chaumière, from which Snowden received a certificate of completion. [Fig. 2] They viewed architectural and art historical sites, visiting Nôtre Dame, Versailles, the Louvre, and the Musée d'Art Moderne.[11] The tour also ventured to Nice, San Tropez, and Venice, Italy. The trip opened students' eyes to European art and architecture and introduced their brushstrokes to French artistic training methods. Critics would later comment on Snowden's distinct use of color as a combination of Parisian color, Impressionist light, and a Washingtonian "spin."[12]

Returning to campus in the fall of 1962, Snowden found a new faculty member on the department's roster. David Driskell, a 1955 Howard graduate and Porter's prodigal son, had joined the faculty and was teaching Painting I, Illustration, and Landscape painting.[13] Snowden frequently acknowledged Driskell's long-standing influence on her practice:

> Mister Driskell was never too busy, too tired to talk with his students about anything. I took Landscape Painting from Mister Driskell at Howard University. I painted autumn trees, using all of the colors one associates with fall. I can still call to memory that image. Mr. Driskell came into the studio, looked at the painting, picked up a palette knife and moved the paint all over the canvas. I was so upset. This was the time of existentialism and the me, me, my and I period. That act hurt. He destroyed my effort. But I grew from that experience. Which expanded my mode of expression and I never painted trees the old way, my way, again. Growth is often painful.[14]

His stylistic inspiration is visible in Snowden's 1963 *Crucifixion* [Fig. 3], perhaps completed for her senior show. The haunting skeletal figure that dominates the narrow vertical canvas measuring fifty by twenty-four inches is reminiscent of Driskell's seminal

BACHELOR OF FINE ARTS DEGREE PROGRAMS

Program in Painting

(135 Semester Hours)

I	First Year	II
English 1 or 2 3		English 3 3
Orientation to Art 3		General Graphics II (Perspective). 2
General Graphics (Art 001) 3		Design I 3
Social Science 3		Social Science 3
Natural Science 3		Physical Science 3
Military Science 1		Military Science 1
[or] Physical Education 1		[or] Physical Education 1
17		16

I	Second Year	II
English 11 3		Language 4
Language 4		Painting II 3
Painting I 3		Anatomy (Art 008) 3
Life Sketch I 3		Graphic Arts I 3
Introduction to Art I 3		Social Science 3
Soc. Sci. Sec. 3		Introduction to Art II 3
Military Science 1		Military Science 1
[or] Physical Education 1		[or] Physical Education 1
21		21

I	Third Year	II
Language 3		Language 3
History of Art 3		History of Art 3
Humanities 3		Painting IV or Life Drawing I 3
Painting III 3		Ceramics or Sculpture 3
Ceramics or Sculpture 3		Humanities 3
Life Drawing III 3		
18		15

I	Fourth Year	II
Painting V 3		Painting VI 3
Materials of Painting 2		Illustration or Silk Screen Printing 4
Watercolor I 3		Fine Arts Criticism 3
Philosophy 3		Art Elective 3
College Elective 3		
14		13

Program in Design

(135 Semester Hours)

I	First Year	II
English 1 or 2 3		English 3 3
Orientation to Art 3		General Graphics II (Perspective). 2
General Graphics (Art 001) 3		Design I 3
Social Science 3		Social Science 3
Natural Science 3		Physical Science 3
Military Science 1		Military Science 1
[or] Physical Education 1		[or] Physical Education 1
17		16

I	Second Year	II
English 11 3		Language 4
Language 4		Design III (Art 109) 3
Design II (Art 004) 3		Watercolor II 3
Watercolor I 3		History of Art 3
History of Art 3		Social Science 3
Social Science 3		Military Science 1
Military Science 1		[or] Physical Education 1
[or] Physical Education 1		18
21		

I	Third Year	II
Language 3		Language 3
History of Art 3		Design VI 3
Painting I 3		History of Art 3
Design V (Art 112) 2		Art III 3
Ceramics or Life Sketch 3		Graphic Arts 3
Humanities 3		Humanities 3
17		18

I	Fourth Year	II
Design VI 3		Design 313 3
Graphic Arts 3		Illustration 4
History of Art 3		Fine Arts Criticism 3
Philosophy 3		Art Elective 3
College Elective 3		
15		13

Figure 1: "Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree Programs," Howard University Bulletin 1963-1964, Volume XLII, January 15, 1963. Courtesy of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University Archives, Howard University, Washington D.C.

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1. Lois Mailou Jones	Place du Tertre, Montmartre	15. Adolphus Ealey	Femme de Pigalle
2. Lois Mailou Jones	Nude No. 1	16. Adolphus Ealey	Objets Chinois
3. Lois Mailou Jones	Port de Cannes	17. Clintona Jackson	Etude en Rouge
4. Lois Mailou Jones	St. Germain des Pres	18. Clintona Jackson	Le Modele en Jaune
5. Lucille Roberts	Beach, Cannes	19. Rufus Wells	En Promenade
6. Lucille Roberts	Cafe Terrasse	20. Rufus Wells	Etude
7. Lucille Roberts	Docks—St. Tropez	21. Brenda Dendy	Fille de St. Germain des Pres
8. Lucille Roberts	Pont Marie	22. Brenda Dendy	Nature Morte eux Pomme
9. Lucille Roberts	Place du Tertre	23. Gail Hansberry	Nature Morte
10. Lucille Roberts	Courtyard, Chaumiere	24. Carolyn Byrd	Terrasse du Cafe
11. Etta Lee	Montmartre	25. Sylvia Snowden	Trois Nus
12. V. Pierre-Noel	Un Coin de la Seine, Paris	26. Sylvia Snowden	Dans L' Atelier
13. Geneva Bess	Nature Morte en Jaune	27. Lawrence Bruce Hayes	L' Amour
14. Adolphus Ealey	Madame Gabrielle	28. Etta Lee	L' Abbaye

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Figure 2: "Americans in Paris" Exhibition Poster
Courtesy of Sylvia Snowden

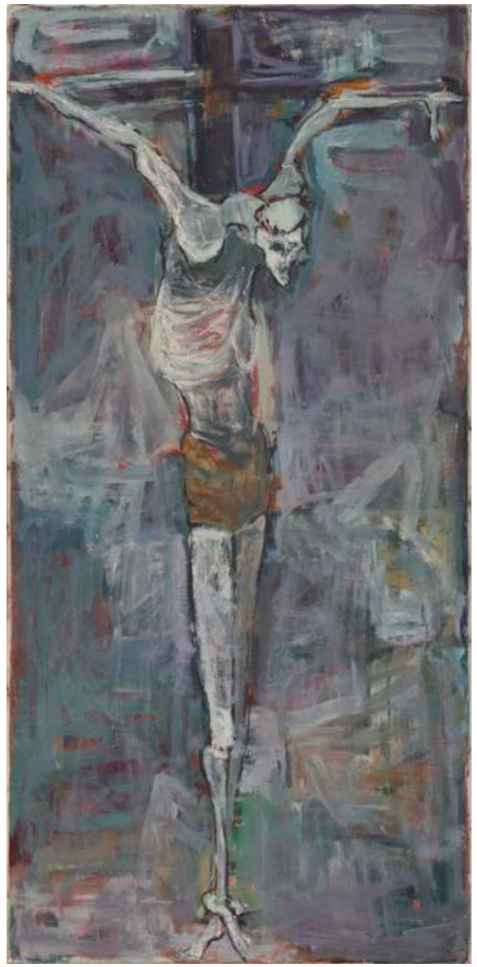


Figure 3: Sylvia Snowden, *Crucifixion*, 1963
Oil on canvas, 50 × 24 inches

Figure 4: David Driskell, *Be Hold Thy Son*, 1956
Mixed media on canvas, 46 × 36 inches
Collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C.

painting *Behold Thy Son* from 1956 [Fig. 4], made in response to the brutal 1955 murder of Emmett Till. More than twenty years later, Snowden would lose her son Malik Butler to an act of violence and created a body of paintings that celebrated his life and explored the facets of her grief.

Art, aesthetics, politics, and education became increasingly intertwined for Snowden as the 1960s progressed. Her artistic training occurred during a pivotal moment in African American history and the ongoing struggle for African American civil rights. Her undergraduate graduation in 1963 marked the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. 15 She began her graduate studies in August of 1963, the same month that millions descended on the nation's capital for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

At first glance, Howard University's 1960s M.F.A. requirements do not appear to reflect the politicized climate of the era. Mandated courses for the M.F.A. included an art theory course, "Art Criticism," the research-intensive "Seminar in Research in the Fine Arts," and a "Thesis Seminar" for which students produced a written thesis to accompany their studio portfolio. As a painting student Snowden also took Illustration, Advanced painting, Life Painting and Composition, Advanced Mural Painting. A helping of art history courses, Modern Painting and Sculpture in Europe, Italian Renaissance Art, and Baroque Art and Architecture, rounded out the graduate curriculum.[16] The Department's pedagogical approach, namely its inclusion of Western (read white Euro-centric) art alongside courses in African American, Latin American, and African art history, ensured that students possessed a broad knowledge of artistic traditions. However, as the Black Arts and Black Power movements took hold in the mid-1960s, Howard and its Art Department were not immune from demands to re-orient the curriculum towards one that was decidedly more Afro-centric.[17] [Fig. 5]

The trajectory of Snowden's training shifted in 1964 when she followed in David Driskell's footsteps and spent the summer at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in rural Maine.[18] In contrast to the traditional approach of Howard's Department of Art, Skowhegan's pedagogy was radical and encouraged experimentation. Founded in 1946, the school welcomed a mix of resident artists and students to its bucolic campus every summer. The school's long-standing goal is "to develop artists by offering an honest, supportive forum for divergent viewpoints."[19] Of the school, art critic Calvin Tompkins said, "Becoming an artist is a risky thing to do; being one is much riskier. Skowhegan seems

to foster an attitude for risk-taking of all kinds."[20] Students spend the summer taking optional classes, experimenting in their studios, enjoying campus grounds, and attending lectures given by faculty and visiting artists. [Fig. 6] In the summer of 1964, Snowden would have heard talks from James McGarrell, Alex Katz, Ben Shan, William Zorach, and Sidney Simon.[21]

Returning to Howard in the fall Snowden came armed with new aesthetic ideas and stepped onto an increasingly politicized campus. To address the needs of the students, Driskell introduced a new course, "Aesthetics and Modern Art," which was titled as such because a class called "Protest Art" would not have passed muster at the Black university.[22] The seminar provided a needed opportunity for students, including Snowden, to discuss the heightened political climate in relation to their artmaking. Such classroom conversations shaped art, politics, theory, and practice in ways that would serve the students well as they left campus.

1965, the year of Snowden's M.F.A. graduation, marked the start of her professional career as an artist and art teacher, but also the concurrent rise of the Black Power and Black Arts movements, which saw increased calls for Black racial solidarity and activism (aesthetic and otherwise). [23] Following Snowden's graduation, Professor Loïs Mailou Jones helped Snowden get her first teaching job at Delaware State College where she also mounted her first post-Howard solo exhibition, "Birds of Prey by Sylvia Snowden." The teaching gig at Delaware State is one of many Snowden has held during her long career. She has graced the classrooms and studios of Cornell University, Morgan State University, Yale University, and even returned to teach at Howard University. Snowden elsewhere has explained how she does not like to teach painting as it takes away energy from her work. However, she remains grateful for the immense amount of time the Howard faculty spent mentoring her and her classmates.[24] While Snowden's student years in Howard's Department of Art may not have instilled a passion for teaching, they did shape her formation as a painter.

Snowden's 1966 painting *Untitled* [Fig. 7] is representative of her post-Howard aesthetic. The abstracted canvas of flesh-toned figures rendered in heavy impasto reflects her on-going search for and development of an expressionist visual language. On the evolution of her aesthetic Snowden reports, "Although I am able to paint in different styles, as I learned in the thorough training at Howard University, expressionism is my style. It

Figure 5, Students protesting at Howard University in 1968
Figure 6, Skowhegan Students "Lakeside," 1964

Figure 7, Sylvia Snowden, *Untitled*, 1966
Acrylic, oil pastel on Masonite, 30 × 21 ⅛ inches

is a communication between the canvas and me, which is governed by the intellectual and emotional states acting as one, a unification; examination of the subject matter and its treatment, figurative or without figure." In 2019, Snowden's alma mater acknowledged her contributions to the field of African American art when the Department of Art bestowed the 30th Annual James A. Porter Award on the distinguished alumna. Snowden could not get "here" without the art education she received "there" at Howard.

FOOTNOTES

1 "Art in the Community/Sylvia Snowden." 26:47. April 2, 2019. #ARTICOtv Episode 306, WHUT TV, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjEHDOBasI4.

2 The Howard Art Department's legacy is deep and wide; it holds special significance in its training of numerous Black women artists. See: Lisa Farrington, "Women Devoted to Excellence," in *A Proud Continuum: Eight Decades of Art at Howard University.*

3 Both Dillard University and Southern University are HBCUs. Snowden would later memorialize these Southern experiences in a series of small-scale acrylics titled *Dillard*, *Southern,* and *Baton Rouge–New Orleans* (1989-1991) Rowell, 85. Elizabeth Kastor, "Finding Her Muse in Malik," *Washington Post*, April 17, 1994.

4 "Sylvia Snowden and Nathaniel Mary Quinn in Conversation," moderated by Franklin Parrasch, June 11, 2021; "Artist Spotlight: Sylvia Snowden," National Museum of Women in the Arts, January 21, 2018, https://nmwa.org/blog/nmwa-exhibitions/artist-spotlight-sylvia-snowden/.

5 George Snowden was a Washington, D.C. native and a graduate of Dunbar High School, the first public high school for African Americans in the United States. "George W. Snowden, Housing Official and Professor," *Washington Post*, February 24, 1995.

6 For more on the history of Howard University's Art Department: Rebecca VanDiver, "Art Matters: Howard University's Department of Art from 1921 to 1971," *Callaloo* 39, no. 5 (2016): 1199-1218 and Carolyn Shuttlesworth-Da-vidson, ed., *A Proud Continuum: Eight Decades of Art at Howard University* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Gallery of Art, 2005).

7 *Howard University Bulletin 1963-1964*, Volume XLII, January 15, 1963; *Howard University Bulletin 1963-1964*, 288.

8 *Howard University Bulletin 1964-1965*, Volume XLIII January 15, 1965, 313; *Howard University Bulletin 1963-1964*, 289.

9 Lloyd McNeil, the renowned jazz flutist, received the inaugural M.F.A. in 1962. Charles Rowell, "Talking Howard University, DC-MD, and Visual Art: a conversation," *Callaloo* vol. 39, no. 5 (2016), 1158-1159.

10 Rebecca VanDiver, *Designing a New Tradition: Loïs Mailou Jones and the Aesthetics of Blackness* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020).

11 Other tour participants included: Adolphus Ealey, who would later direct the Barnett-Aden Gallery founded by James V. Herring and Alonzo Aden, Rufus Wells, Clintona Jackson, Brenda Dendy, James Rivers, Bruce Hayes, Mrs. Lucille Roberts, Mrs. Etta Lee, and Mrs. Geneva Best. Howard University, "The Bison, 1963," *Howard University Yearbooks,* 106.

12 Paul Richard, "Sylvia Snowden's Local Color," *Washington Post* September 26, 1985.

13 Julie McGee, *David C. Driskel: Artist and Scholar* (Pomegranate Art Books), 61.

14 "Sylvia Snowden Remembering David Driskell," in "David Driskell's Students," David C. Driskell Center for the Study of Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and & the African Diaspora, accessed January 31, 2022. https://driskellcenter.umd.edu/david-c-driskells-students.

15 Leslie King-Hammond, *Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artists* (MidMarch Arts Press, 1995), 269.

16 *Howard University Bulletin 1964-1965*, Volume XLIII January 15, 1965, 313; *Howard University Bulletin 1963-1964*, 301.

17 VanDiver, "Art Matters."

18 Howard University nominated one student each year to receive a scholarship to attend the program. The departmental nomination was highly coveted. Julie McGee notes that twenty-six Howard students attended Skowhegan between 1947 and 1974. McGee, 20.

19 In 2021, Snowden returned to Skowhegan. More than 4,456 participants and 603 faculty artists have spent time at the school now in its 75th year.

20 "History," Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, 2021, https>//www.skowheganart.org/history.

21 It is unclear whether Snowden was the only artist of color during her summer as the institution does not keep such demographic records. On can find a list of each summer's participants on the school's website.

22 David C. Driskell, Interview with Author, January 2019.

23 Keith Morrison, *Art in Washington and its Afro-American Presence: 1940-1970* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Project for the Arts, 1985), 36. The Department would find its footing once again in the 1970s when Jeff Donaldson took over as chair.

24 "Art in the Community/Sylvia Snowden."

25 "Artist Spotlight: Sylvia Snowden."

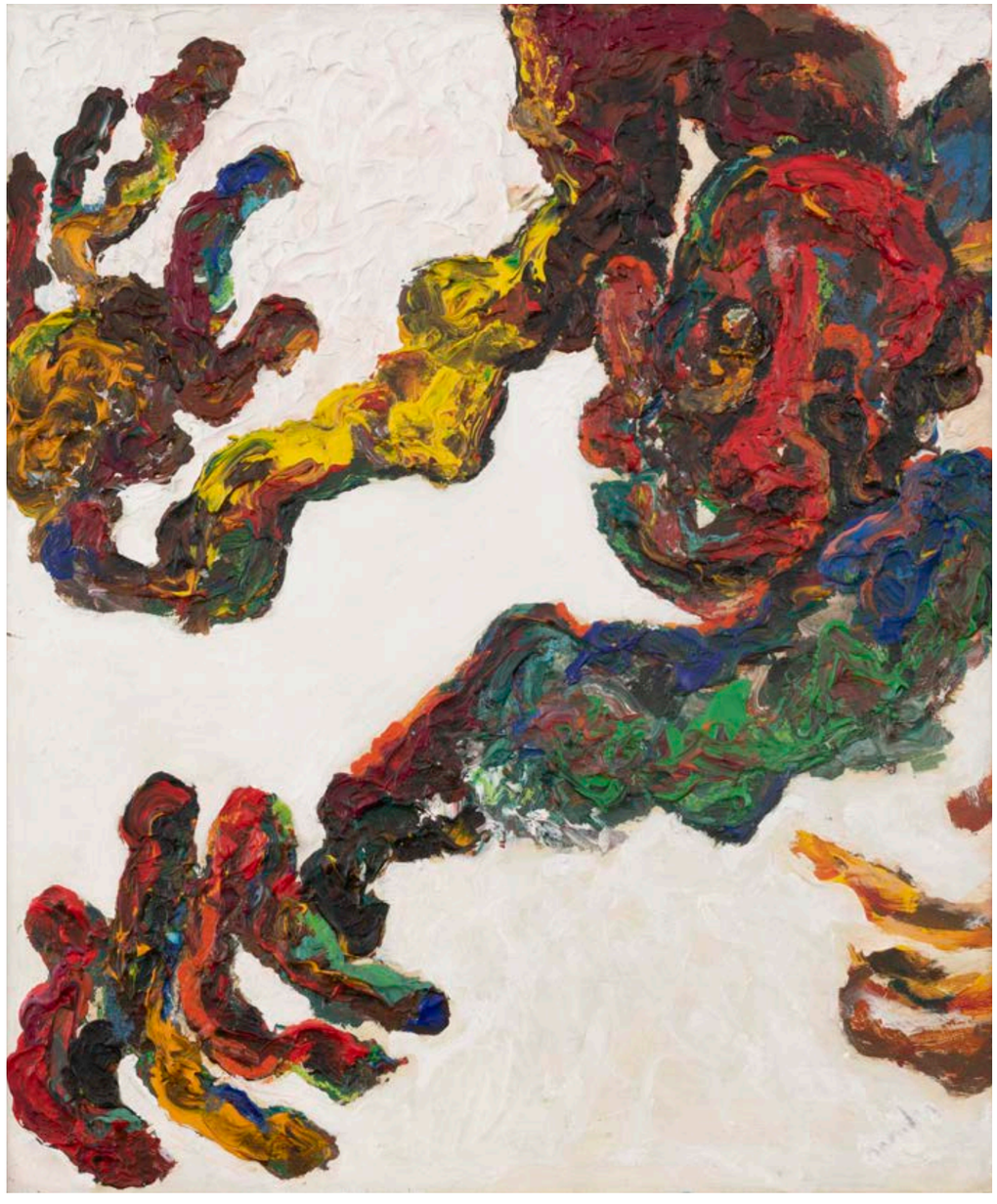
Rochell Shannon, 1981
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
48 × 48 inches
The Rachofsky Collection

Leroy Dickerson, 1981
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
48 × 48 inches
Private Collection, Texas

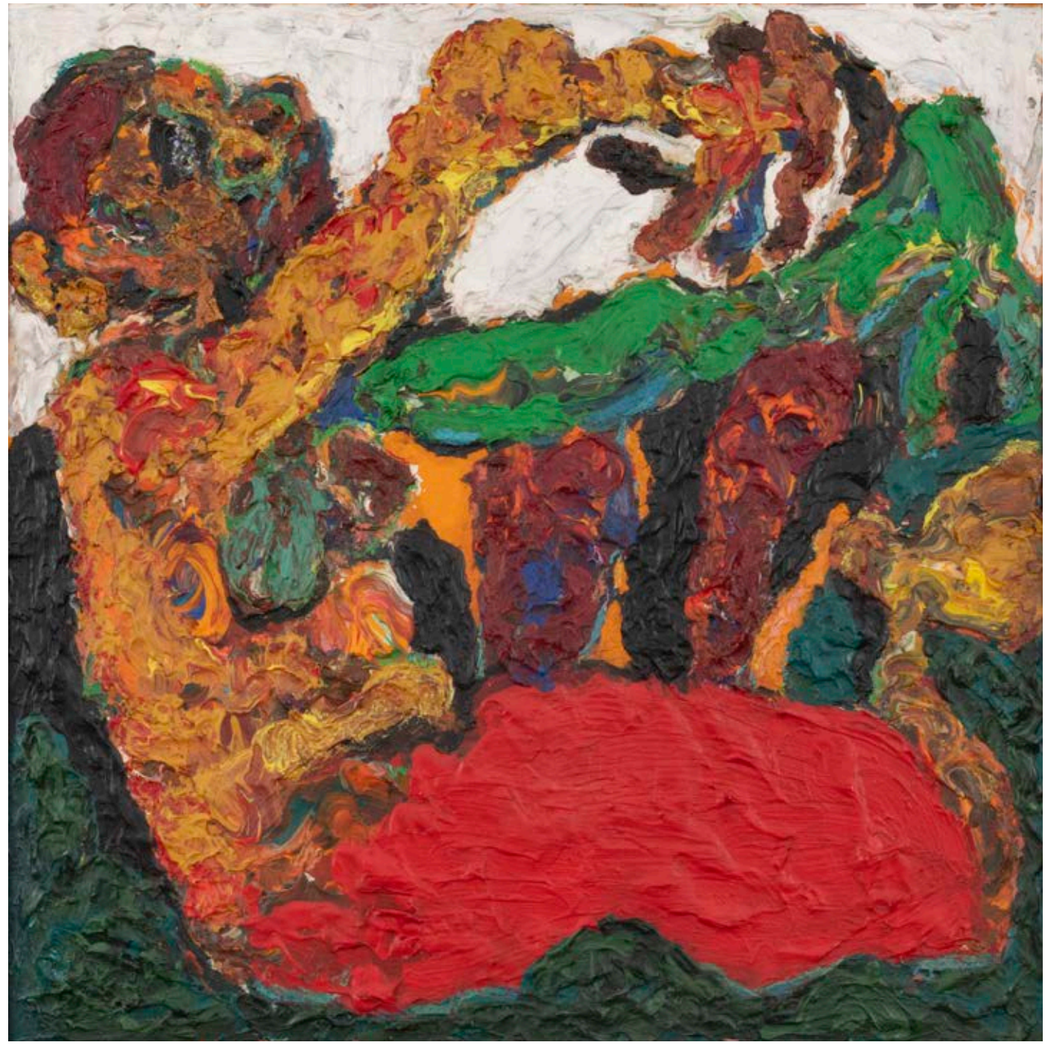
Charles Copeland, 1982
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
48 × 59 inches

Irvin "Magic" Johnson, 1982
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
50 × 53 inches
Private Collection of Timothy C. Headington

Patricia Ann Lee, 1982
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
36 × 48 inches



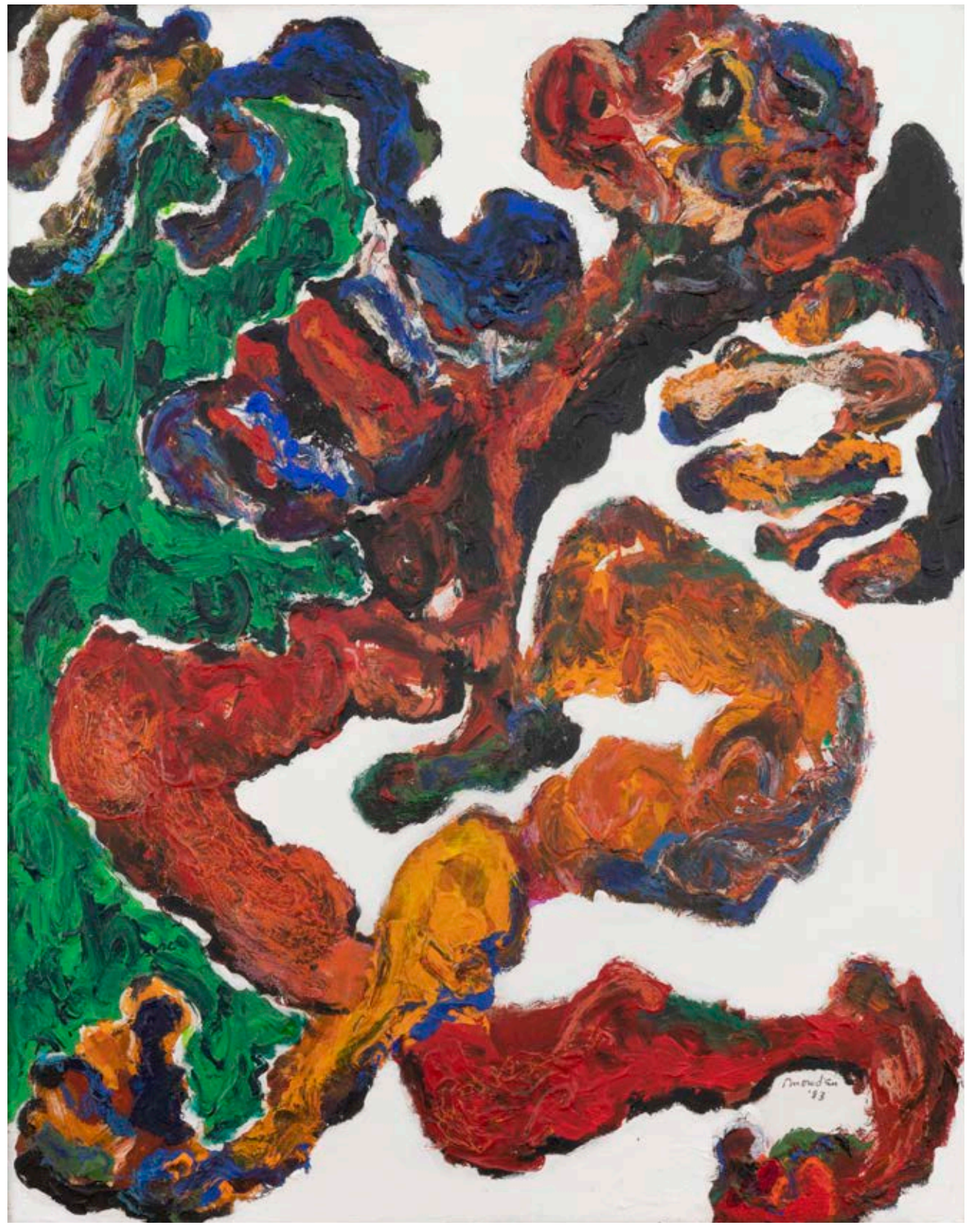
Salvation, 1982
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
48 × 40 inches
Jaime and Andrew Schwartzberg Collection



Sandra Billups, 1982
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
48 × 48 inches

Steve Carter, 1982
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
60 × 48 inches
Penny Pritzker and Bryan Traubert Collection

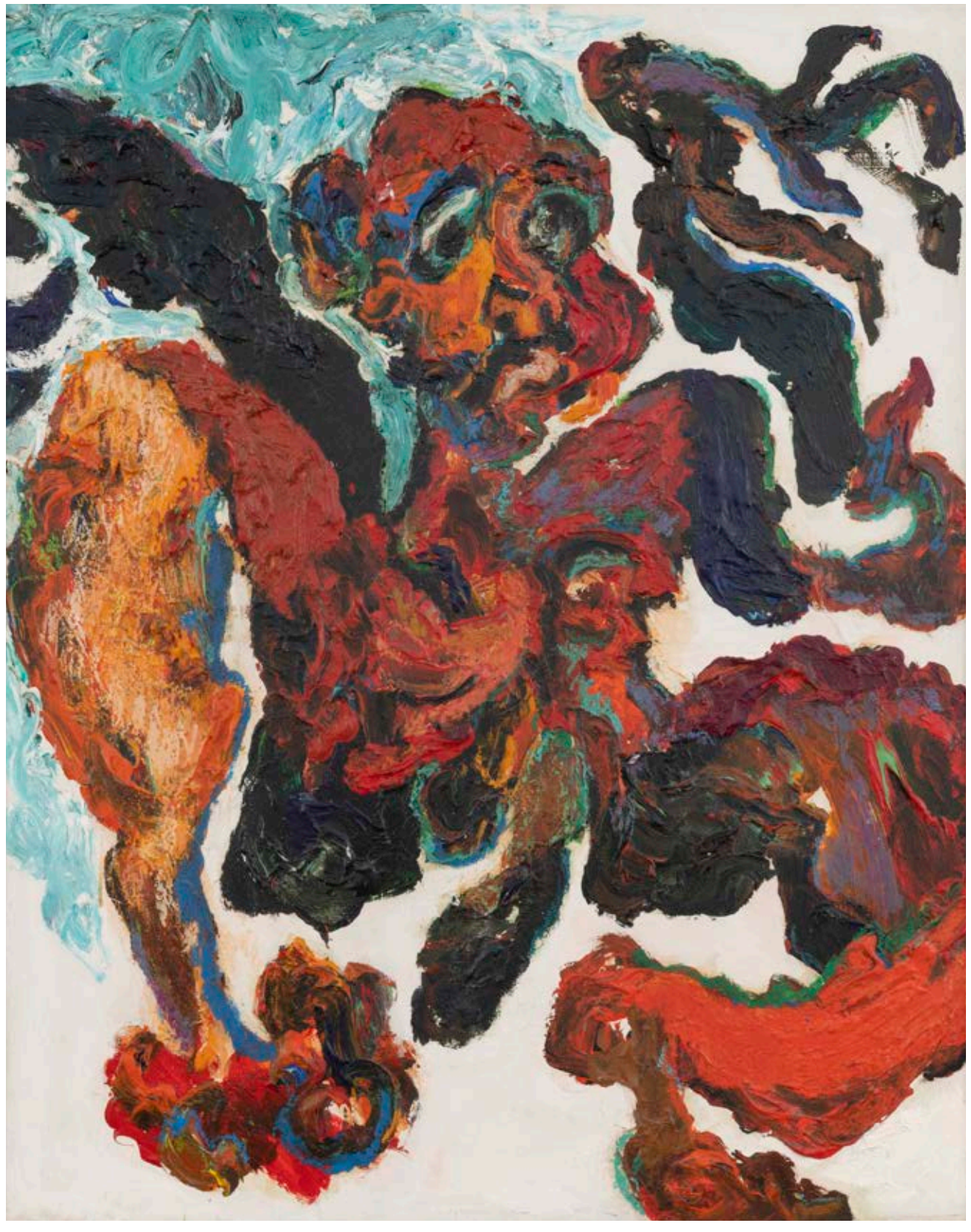
Alice Shannon II, 1983
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
48 × 60 inches
Private Collection of Timothy C. Headington



Clarence Moore, 1983
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
60 × 48 inches

Faye Tony #1, 1983
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
36 × 48 inches
Collection of Donald Thomas, San Antonio, TX

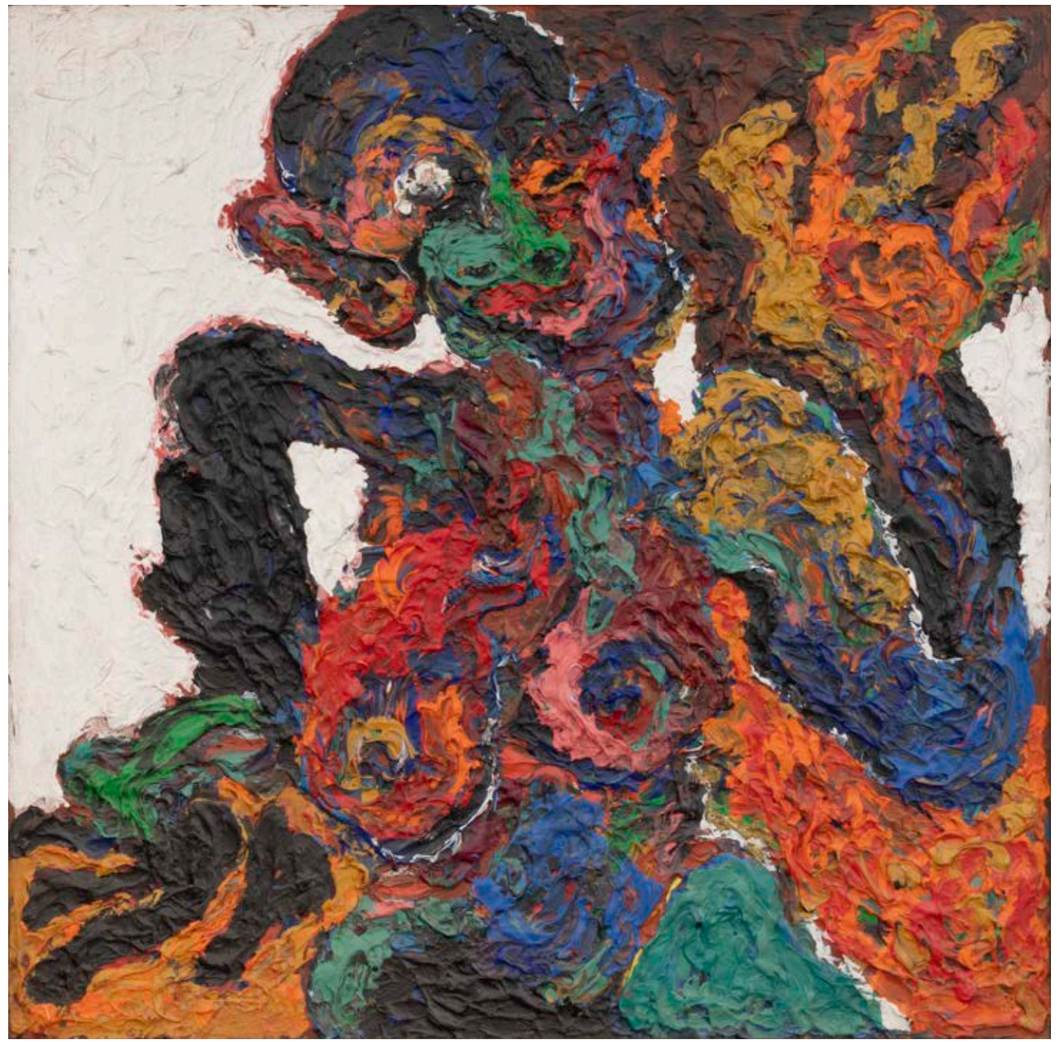
Ethel Moyd, 1984
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
48 × 48 inches



Nathan Jackson, 1984
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
48 × 38 inches

Paula Black, 1984
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
36 × 48 inches

George Chavis, 1984
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
48 × 48 inches

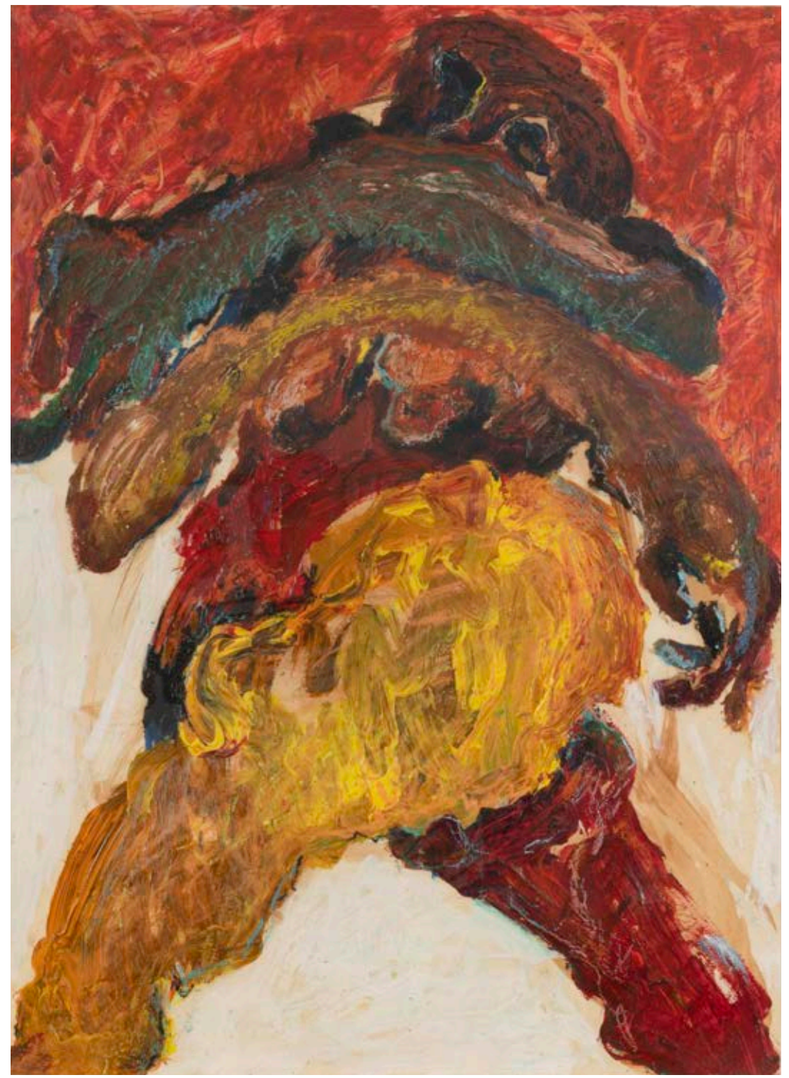


Beverly Jones, 1985
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
48 × 48 inches
Private Collection

Clarice Little, 1985
Acrylic and oil pastel on paper
sheet: 30 × 22 inches
Kathleen Madden + Paul Frantz Collection, New York and London

Faye Tony #2, 1985
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
58 × 48 inches
Private Collection

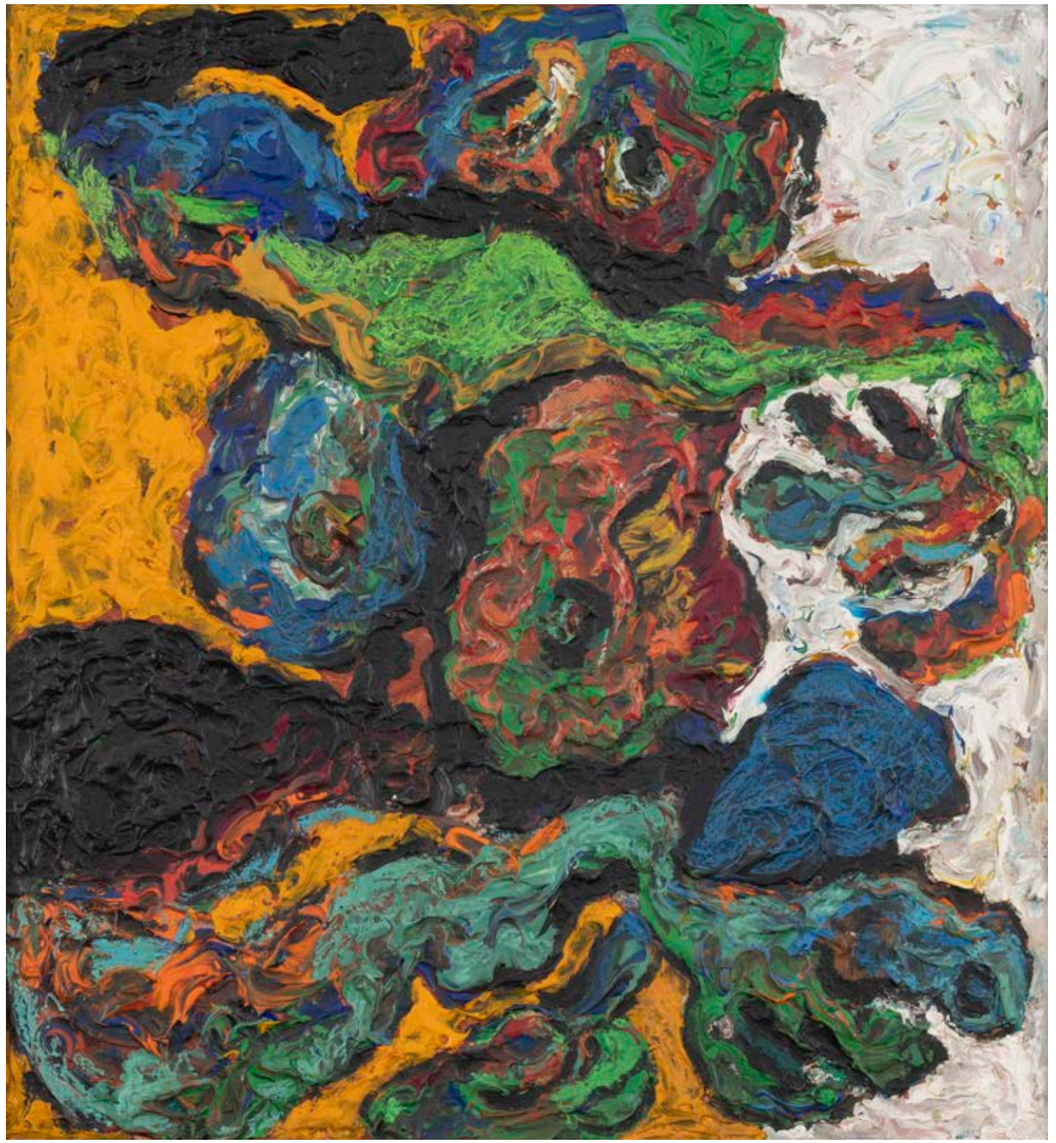
Michelle, 1985
Acrylic and oil pastel on board
sheet: 22 × 30 inches
Private Collection



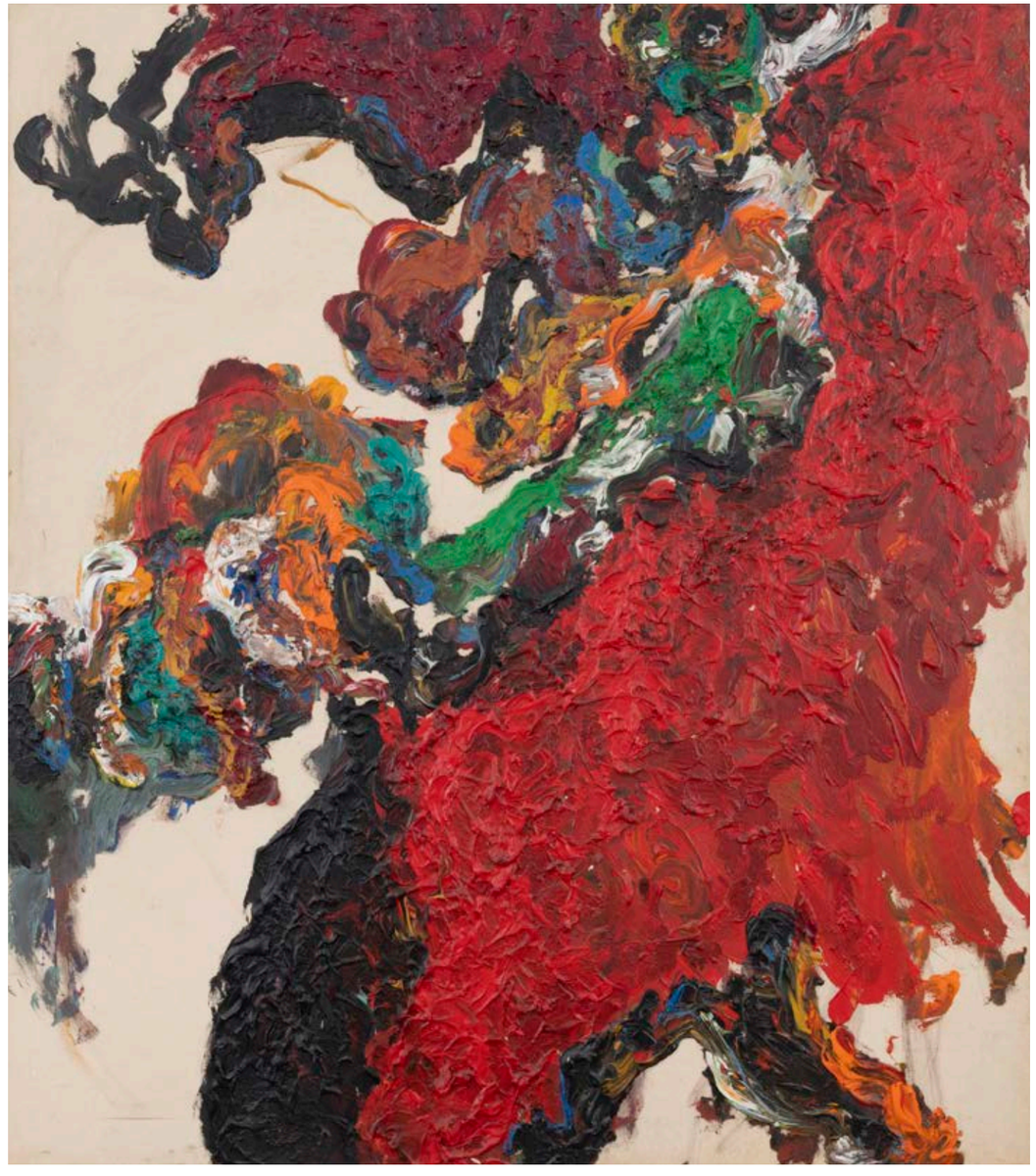
Beverly Johnson, 1985
Acrylic and oil pastel on paper
sheet: 30 × 22 inches
Private Collection, New York

Alice Shannon, 1985
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
34 × 48 inches

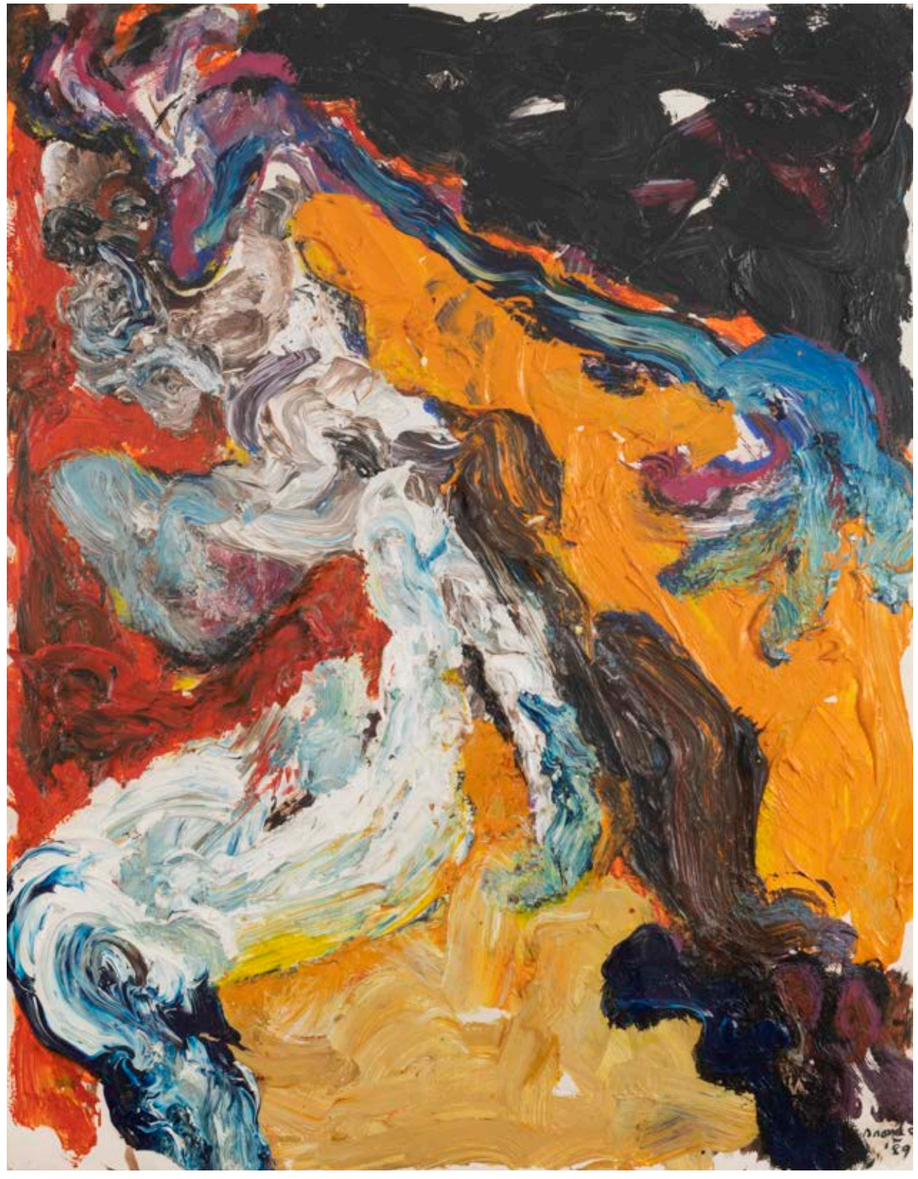
Darlene Shannon, 1986
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
48 × 54 inches



Ruby Townsend, 1986
Acrylic and oil pastel on Masonite
48 × 44 inches
James Toth Family Collection



Maggie-M Street, 1987
Acrylic on raw canvas
78 × 67 inches
Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody



Untitled, 1989
Acrylic and oil pastel on paper
sheet: 40 ¼ × 32 inches
Private Collection

Sylvia Snowden
M Street

Published by
American Art Catalogues

First Printing, April 2022

ISBN: 979-8-88589-822-5

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