

AUNT CHLOE

2020 ISSUE YEAR

Donna Woodley: On Painting Black Humanity

Donna Woodley is an artist on the rise. Her work has recently been displayed in the Frist Art Museum in Nashville, the SkyPAC Southern Kentucky Performing Arts Center in Bowling Green, and the galleries at the University of Tennessee, Martin and the University of Memphis, among others. Aunt Chloe spoke with her about her journey to working artist, her influences, and the themes in her art.

AUNT CHLOE: Please discuss your beginning as an artist... How long have you been drawing and painting?

WOODLEY: My initial career was in accounting, but I quickly figured out that I wanted to do something more creative and was also seeking my purpose. So I enrolled in a drawing class shortly after finishing Tennessee State University and did quite well. That drawing class always remained with me. Fast forward some years later, I was laid off from my accounting job and decided to switch gears by returning to Tennessee State University to obtain another Bachelor's degree in studio art.

AUNT CHLOE: How did you make the leap from hobbyist to aspiring artist to working artist?

WOODLEY: Traveling down this journey has been an amazing experience. I started making work just for pure enjoyment. The leap from hobbyist to aspiring artist happened when I enrolled in the art program at Tennessee State University. There, I was afforded opportunities like working as a teaching assistant at the Frist Art Museum and assistant to the gallery director of the Hiram Van Gordon Gallery at TSU, which opened my eyes to a whole new realm of possibilities of becoming a working artist. The thought of doing something that I love for a living became my drive to succeed. After graduation, I was accepted into a low-residency graduate program at Lesley University in Boston, where earning an MFA transitioned me from aspiring to working artist and, later on, a professor.

AUNT CHLOE: Who have been your biggest influences? Why?

WOODLEY: My mother is my primary influence. She's awesome! I've watched her as a successful corporate executive, she's an amazing singer, and an all-around fighter. She's taught me to fight for what I want and to never give up. I am also influenced by artists such as Fahamu Pecou, Barkley Hendricks, Beverly McIver, Jenny Saville, and Alice Neel. These are artists who paint in a way that I connect with visually as well as contextually. I love the way that Fahamu Pecou activates the negative space in his portraits with the way he poses himself in the composition. Some of the figures in his paintings touch all four sides of the canvas which create interesting negative space. The figure in Jenny Saville's painting is usually monumental which is of great interest and influence to me.

AUNT CHLOE: In terms of artists that influence you, you speak specifically about how you have connected with Fahamu Pecou and Jenny Saville's art. Can you go into a little more detail about the art of the others you mention as influences—Barkley Hendricks, Beverly McIver, and Alice Neel, and how they have motivated you?

WOODLEY: Sure! Barkley Hendricks is someone who I admire greatly as an American artist. He spoke to a particular era in his portraits—the 70s. The tone of his portraits presents this nostalgic feeling that takes me back to my time as a kid admiring my family and how they moved with such style and confidence during those times...especially my mom. I love the way he used acrylic paint to create such a rich and flat background coupled with using oil to paint the figures in his work. It makes for a great contrast of shape and depth. After his death in April 2017, I learned that he made lots of studies through the use of photography. He'd pose the figure in many different ways, some subtle and some drastic, to see what would work best for the larger scale painting he made. That process is amazing to me because he left us a glimpse into his mind and possibly how it worked.

Beverly McIver is someone who I learned of during my undergrad time in the art program at TSU. I love how she captures the aura of her family members in her paintings. She often paints her older sister, Renee, who has some mental disabilities, in addition to painting her father. She promised her mother who is now deceased that she would take care of Renee and is keeping that promise as her legal guardian. She made a documentary in 2012 titled *Raising Renee*, showing her life and her family's. I am drawn to Beverly McIver because I love that she incorporates her family into her practice. It's almost like she had to in order to balance her work and her family responsibilities. Whenever I view her images, I can feel love, labor, fatigue, and pain all at the same time.

Alice Neel is a favorite of mine. Her work is amazing! She has a way of making a portrait that straddles between representational and abstract that I love. She combines shape and depth by outlining the figure in some areas, but creating depth within those outlines. So she might outline the leg, but the way she painted the actual leg was more naturalistic and showed depth. She also painted lots of mothers and children, which spoke to her thoughts about herself as a mother. She seemed to be a very funny lady and I love that she was able to gain success at a later age as a female painter in an art world full of masculine energy.

AUNT CHLOE: You consider yourself to be a "portrait painter." Why do you gravitate towards portraits in particular? Is there another style or medium in which you like to work?

WOODLEY: I gravitate towards painting portraits because I have great interest in people and humanity, and I believe that everyone has a story. Painting portraits allows me to metaphorically tell that story through my images. I generally work in oils but I am exploring watercolor.

AUNT CHLOE: Are there any themes or motifs that you consistently like to explore in your art? Do you examine any concepts specific to the Black female experience?

WOODLEY: Yes, most of my work examines concepts specific to Black female experience. It confronts American societal norms of beauty which historically have been opposite of the way Black women look. Also, I aim to debunk the notion that an "ethnic" name is tied to negative characteristics and stereotypes of Black people. So just as Elizabeth is considered a "normal" name, Taquita should also just be seen as a person's name and should not come with a set of stereotypes. These are just a couple of the themes that I like to address.

AUNT CHLOE: You are currently exploring images of Black men and toilets in your art. Can you discuss why you chose this combination and what it signifies to you?

WOODLEY: I was thinking about how people often say "I'm going to go and sit on the throne," and how I could tie that into Black men and notions of royalty. The theme stems from the combination of royalty in our ancestry, America's perception of black men, and Black men's perception of themselves. The toilet represents either a real throne or a pseudo-throne depending on the viewer. With the recent murder of George Floyd and a countless number of other innocent victims at the hands of the police, I feel that the way that Black men are perceived in America and who they really are versus who they are perceived to be is a topic that should be addressed in the work.

AUNT CHLOE: In discussing your exploration of Black men and toilets in your art, you mention that the toilet represents either a real throne or a pseudo-throne. Can you elaborate a little? What (in the paintings) distinguishes it from being simply a toilet or an object to just sit on? Or, even an object to disparage?

WOODLEY: The tension between the toilet serving as a throne versus a pseudo-throne is an idea that came to me from thoughts of our African ancestry and knowing that we as Black Americans descend from royalty in conjunction with our American history. So our royal African ancestry allows the toilet to represent ideas of an actual throne.

Now the notion of a pseudo-throne is a way of discussing the tension between America's perception of Black men versus Black men's perception of themselves. The way that America experiences Black men and the way that Black men experience themselves are often opposite. Within the Black community, Black men are educated, have jobs and careers, and have achieved some degree of financial success. But there's no question that Black men are devalued, feared, and ignored severely within American society even as adolescents, as we've seen countless times over the last few years with the loss of Black lives at the hands of white policemen. On top of that, there's economic inequality and power discrimination by whites towards Blacks that has a longstanding history. When Black folks have succeeded in building power and wealth, it has been destroyed by white folks as proven in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Rosewood, Florida, to name a couple [of places]. So there is a huge discrepancy as I see it between perception and self-perception that is very gray. This is how the toilet can toggle between representing an actual throne and a pseudo-throne at the same time.

The other thing that I love, is the swag of Black men which speaks to self-perception. Historically, this swag that Black men carry is innate no matter where they are in their lives. I've seen homeless Black men literally strutting down the street like they owned mansions. Some Black men have likely built themselves up in their minds to counter the oppression from which they are still suffering over generations going back to slavery that gives them the confidence that they need to live and survive. This also speaks to [the notion of] the toilet as a pseudo-throne.

The last piece is the object itself, what it represents, and its function. A toilet can be as ornate or plain as its creator or owner wants it to be. During the Dada era, Marcel Duchamp transformed a urinal into art, which caused a huge uproar in the art world, resulting in new ways of thinking about art. But whether made of solid gold or plain white porcelain, its function is universal. It's used for bodily waste, most people have some version of it, and it's often referenced in a tongue-in-cheek manner as a throne. So in that context, I thought it was a fitting symbol to pair with the Black figures in the series "The Royal Court."

(Interview by Elyce Strong Mann)



Photo by Aisha S. Kaikai @ishpicturesque