

Within the World

Contextualizing the art of Alyne Harris

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It is said that each human being is born with a kind of knowing that expands the daily sense-making required to make meaning of one's existence. Beyond hearing, tasting, seeing, smelling, and touching, human beings also operate in dimensions that our vocabulary fails to adequately name. Intuition is one of these senses. The senses provide information so the brain might process the body's location in time and space. Intuition, then, functions as the ultimate wayfinder – knowing directly and clearly without need for affirmation or analysis from others. This is the work of the artist.

How does one process time and space when they are born Black in the deep South? Alyne Harris, born in 1942 in north central Florida, is a true daughter of the South. Her hometown of Gainesville was once the unceded territory of the Timucua indigenous First Nations of the Patano and Alachua people. The city is historically significant as a Confederate storehouse and as a shipping station for plantation-grown cotton. Named for General Edmund P. Gaines, one of the most renowned veterans of the brutal Seminole Indian War, Gainesville is now home to one of the most important living vernacular artists in the region. Why are these facts important? Because with the recognition of being born in swamp country, both Black and woman, Harris and her work can be situated – and approached with a degree of contextual understanding. Harris has gained recognition for her compelling work made from a deep spiritual connection to the veil beyond basic human senses and the specific world she navigates and responds to with deference and awe.

The Curious Burden of Labels and Genre

Like the work of other artists with no formalized art school education and training, Harris's work is suspended by the need to categorize or locate it within a genre. Is she a folk artist? Self-taught? Intuitive, outsider, visionary, vernacular? Perhaps a more important question is how does the artist see herself? While those from her neighborhood and communities assign her varying labels such as mother, Church Mother, neighbor, auntie, and friend, few understand how to contextualize Harris' artwork outside of the neighborhood or city art shows in which she is a longtime participant. Often referred to as "the woman who paints the chickens" or "Ms. Harris who makes the paintings" or renditions of these identities, Harris' work might appear simple – but her role as artist is complex. While she is appreciated as a local artist and resident with maternal and custodial contributions to her community, she is not readily recognized in her community as a significant native daughter whose intuitive visions and colorful memories give shape and meaning to a genre of painting and the labels assigned to her. To those outside of Gainesville, however, Harris is situated staunchly inside one of the many labels applicable to

artists whose works are considered folk, intuitive, visionary, etc. She has been canonized. That is, her work is recognized as an important contribution to a noteworthy genre that is studied, collected, preserved. For a community-based artist whose ubiquitous works have stood with vigor and as a warm blanket of familiarity and comfort over a small town, this inclusion in world-renowned collections and in art history literature is a particular kind of homecoming.

Museums understand the value and importance of artists as unique as Harris, and collectors clamor to purchase these works which can fetch high financial premiums. The artists within these specific genres are featured in dedicated museums such as The Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, Intuit Museum of Chicago, and the American Folk Art Museum in New York. Such works – including Harris – are an integral part of other prestigious museum collections, such as the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, whose collection is a significant national treasure. The celebrated sculptor Anish Kapoor maintains that artists associated with these genres are creating masterpieces using intuition – and that “intuitive intelligence is the highest.”

Blackness and the Intuitive Art of Alyne Harris

While Harris 'work encompasses a multitude of these genres and labels, there are no substantial labels that properly analyze and contextualize Harris 'Blackness and womanhood. In order to truly locate Harris within the art canon (not that she aspires to be positioned there), the role that intuition plays in her craft must be looked at in its totality. There is an urgent need to connect the critical intersections of her identity and lived experience. Born twenty years after the historic racial massacre of Rosewood just down the road from Gainesville, Harris grew up in the shadow of racial trauma, deep civil unrest, industrial growth, and world wars. The Southern region of the United States, particularly in the era that Harris was born, remained the home of ubiquitous “strange fruit” and the political and cultural policies of segregation. While her original foray into making art began by drawing in the sand and mud as a young girl, Harris has shared that as a young woman she essentially responded to the call of God to create. She tells of a traveling evangelist who made a public declaration in church that young Alyne needed to do what God was telling her to do before it was too late – and that the “doing” referred to making art. Guided by a deep inner world that transforms and transmutes a daily life that meanders the rigorous demands of poverty, Harris relies upon her intuition to construct her understanding of the cosmologies of heaven and earth against the backdrop of white evangelical Christianity as interpreted through the Black church experience.

Harris 'often paints in series, and her body of work is surprisingly expansive. Her large masterworks re-imagining and re-envisioning scenes from the Bible are brilliant. There are series which seem to be intuitively painted in response to both God's utterings and an insatiable inner knowing which include angels, demons, cats, chickens, African villages, demon dogs, nature scenes, early childhood life (cotton and farming), and Black church life and community.

Her work might be painted on paper plates, cotton or linen canvas, paper, or canvas boards with acrylic paint. Having painted thousands of works across her lifetime, Harris relies on intuition, cultural references, musings from her porch, and sometimes suggestions from her admiring patrons.

In her works, individual or series, Harris is responding to the situation of being born Black in the segregated South and all that entails, including experiences that by definition were racialized. She paints from a place inhabiting the body of a Black woman making a living as a domestic and custodian. Although her work is neither overtly “Black” nor “female”, it is important that her powerful, whimsical and sometimes dark artistic contributions are viewed through a lens of recognition of the context from which they spring.

A World All Her Own

Fewer Black, southern, women vernacular and intuitive artists are celebrated in comparison to their male counterparts and particularly their white male counterparts. *Between Heaven & Earth* is a reference to the body of Harris 'work in the City of Gainesville collection that depicts Christian allegory – but it is more. It is an homage and subtle salute to the inner world of a local artist whose work is still not fully understood within her own community. More than just the local woman who has shifted among roles as mother, the lady who paints chickens, and local artist, she is a mighty living artist whose intuitive vision and painting practices remain strong. It is important that Alyne Harris and her work be viewed with a sharper, more intense and informed focus. Her work is valuable to Floridians, to the region, and to the whole of vernacular and outsider art. She helps us navigate our own mortality even as she creates and responds to worlds deep inside her own sixth sense of being and knowing.

Dr. Porchia Moore brings a global and academic perspective to appreciating the work of Alyne Harris.