ARVIE SMITH

2Up and 2Back

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2Up and 2Back, installation view
Disjecta Contemporary Art Center
December 8, 2019–February 2, 2020

2UP and 2BACK
CURATOR'S NOTES

Most of Arvie Smith's adult artistic career has been spent in Portland, and his paintings reflect the experience of being a Black man in a state where there is a significant lack of racial diversity. He is aware that many, if not most, of his Oregon viewers have absolutely no idea what it is like to be a person of color in a predominantly white community. Ever the educator, he says, "My intent is to shine the light on the sore of racism, to flip the racial taboos using my dedicated abilities and increasing prominence to make some discernible impact on the social discourse and visual culture of modern America."

Smith's life as a Black man in Portland has not been without injustice. During one of our many conversations, he shared a personal story that sent shock waves through my system. In the year 2000, a scant twenty years ago, Smith went to dinner at a popular North Portland restaurant and bar—a place still well known as a hipster watering hole. His food was served to him undercooked, and he asked that his plate be returned to the kitchen, as the meal was inedible. In the blink of an eye, the server called the police, who descended upon Smith and hauled him outside in handcuffs without so much as an inquiry about his side of the story. This searing experience demonstrated to him that despite his advanced education, his professional position at the Pacific Northwest College of Art, and his integration into the Portland arts community, he was still seen as "other." Smith's paintings, then and now, represent the experience of being seen this way and seek to engender knowledge and empathy on the part of his viewers.

Now, the importance of Smith's contribution to the ecology of Oregon art is being acknowledged and celebrated in an unprecedented exhibition shown in two parts: *2Up and 2Back* at Disjecta Contemporary Art Center and *2Up 2Back II* at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University. Both take their titles from a colloquial idiom that recognizes the glacial pace of social change (taking two steps forward, sliding two steps back). This partnership between the galleries allows for a more thorough, retrospective look at Smith's oeuvre: his early work is being shown at the Schnitzer Museum, while his new work is being shown at Disjecta. As of this writing, Smith does not have commercial representation in Portland—currently, he is represented only by Baltimore's Galerie Myrtis, which was founded by Myrtis Bedolla in 2006 to present politically and socially engaged visual art—so this joint exhibition is significant for many reasons, not the least of which is the opportunity to view his current work in the context of his long and impressive career.

These exhibitions and this publication would not be possible without the generous support of The Ford Family Foundation. I am deeply grateful to Kandis Nunn and Carol Dalu, representatives of the foundation and supportive partners in this project. Once again, The Ford Family Foundation has funded a publication that will preserve the legacy of an eminent Oregon artist. Thank you to Blake Shell, executive director of Disjecta, for stepping forward to present Smith's work. I am deeply appreciative to Daniel Duford for his exhaustive research into Smith's oeuvre, which led to the writing of this catalog. Thank you to Berrisford Boothe for his insight as a curator, artist, and colleague. Thanks to Tracy Schlapp of Cumbersome Multiples for designing this book. Thank you to Julie Kern Smith, who has been instrumental in providing both studio assistance and insights into Smith's work. And, of course, I am indebted to Smith himself for making these paintings, which express his truth and further his mission of fostering greater understanding among all people in contemporary society.

Linda Tesner
Interim Director and Curator
Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at
Portland State University

EMBEDDED TRUTHS:

FIVE PAINTINGS BY ARVIE SMITH

BERRISFORD BOOTHE

This essay examines a handful of selected works by Arvie Smith. Like a stone skipping across the water, it touches the surface of a larger body of deeper meaning, personal observations, and insights gleaned from interviewing the artist and his wife, Julie Kern Smith. Arvie Smith's work is so damn beautiful. It is a beauty in its most potent form. It transcends and often ignores prescribed, fashionable, or popular aesthetics. Rooted in and charged by sensitively rendered figuration, Smith's work resonates and is arresting because it emerges from embedded truths in American cultural history and his own lived experiences. The immovable truth in both is the reality of being an African American male, a state of always being both seen and unseen. It is a state of being that is hitched to a long arc of ugliness, of fear, of oppression, of exploitation, and of ridicule, all of which are stitched together into a tapestry of irrational hatred. In Smith's paintings, the characters and characteristics that narrate the beautiful ugliness that accompanies American Blackness[1] are always expertly rendered. His experienced eye, born into and informed by a childhood in the racist American South and the genteel but equally culpable American North, has always seen what needed to be seen. Long before Smith's mastery of his craft, a steady diet of racial injustice fed his thinking and became the ever-blossoming catalyst for his own heartfelt artistic journey. The catalog of his work over decades is the evidence of that journey. His beautiful works are the sweet, funny, twisted, and painful intellectual and psycholog-

Things that are personal become "taboo" in the art world, and [those things] shouldn't be dismissed.

SHINIQUE SMITH, artist, speaking at the Wadsworth Atheneum's *Afrocosmologies* panel in 2019

1. Uncapitalized, the word *black* in American vernacular reduces diverse cultures of African people to a color. It was taken back, capitalized, and elevated by scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois to formally and specifically describe American Black people. Similarly, the use of the capital letter *B* became a term of pride during the Black Power movement of the 1960s. Using the capital *B* to describe American cultural Blackness in writing is an act of redemption from a history of ridicule and oppression.

Strange Fruit, 1992
Oil on canvas
92 x 70 inches

ical dramas birthed as he visually navigates the thicket of history surrounding the contradictions of race in America.

A line of truth can connect it all.

BERRISFORD BOOTHE

Armed with the knowledge of dynamic symmetry found in Renaissance compositional practices, as well as masterful *and* intuitive color harmony sensibilities, Arvie Smith has become one of the most identifiably gifted, and still inexplicably underrated, contemporary artists. That may be because America's pathology around race and racial constructs is complicated and confusing at best. So a functional and vital symbiosis must exist between the mind, the heart, and the hand when Smith probes such gaping cultural wounds. Many African American artists illustrate this pain in art, but few simultaneously imbue their paintings and works of art with the pleasure of who we are. Arvie Smith holds these ugly truths to be self-evident and represents them through dramatic comedy, sarcasm, and as sardonic narratives. In major works like *Strange Fruit* (1992), Smith presents tragedy through a lens of hatred painted so beautifully, it becomes a kaleidoscope of color and transparency that freezes the viewer in a moment of theatrical poetry. It is a major work about lynching, a form of American terror we elect not to talk about and a dark place from which to begin. But it is exactly Smith's ability to extract beauty from the underbelly of a painful collective history that makes him a contemporary artist who should be considered as important as Robert Colescott or Kara Walker, each of whom have made works of art and built careers that also use racism to mock racism.

Simple things can be antidotes to public blindness.

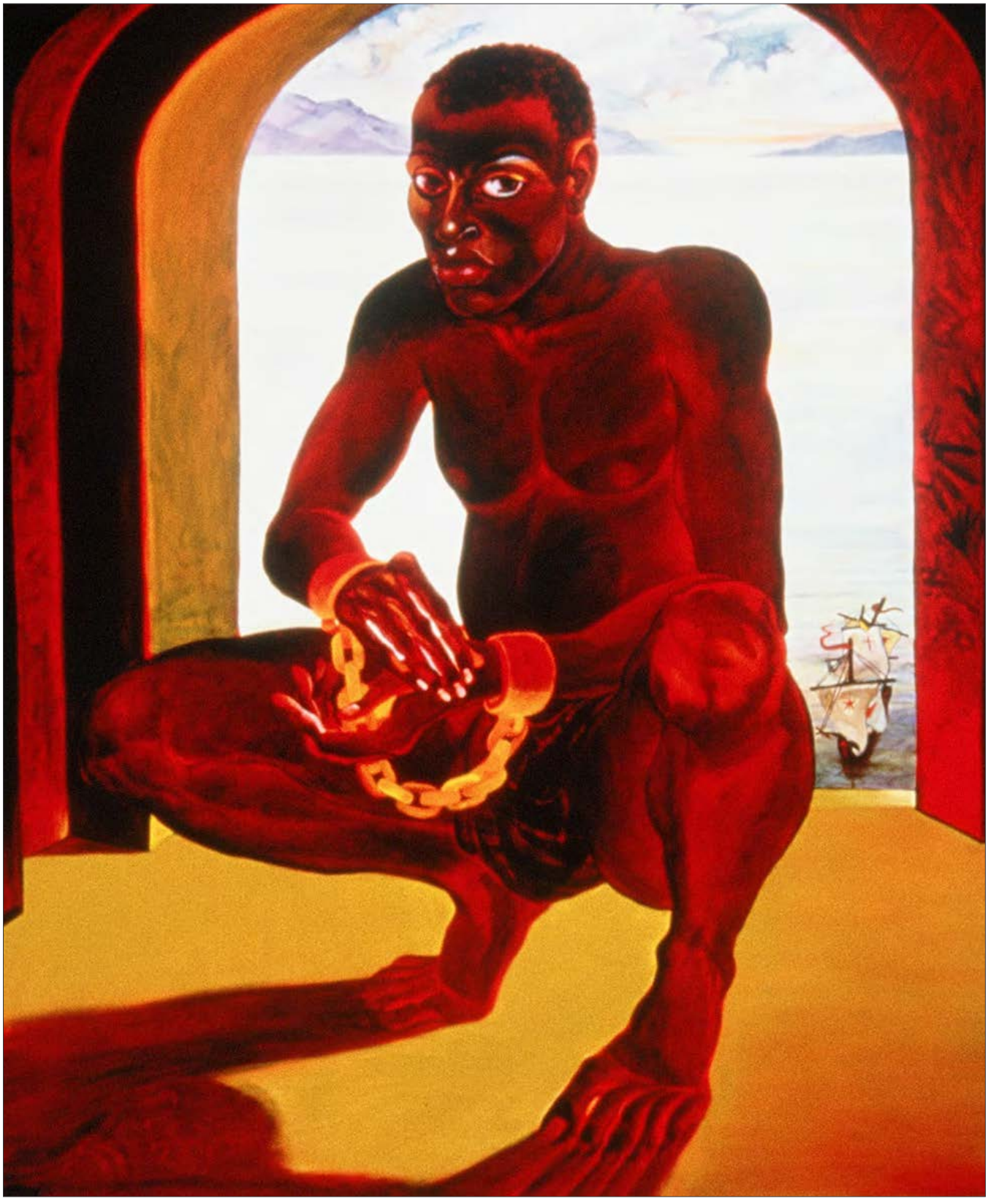
UNKNOWN

These works will be presented in a subjective sequence, although doing so entails the risk of them being perceived as stand-alone narratives. To reduce that possibility, the paintings have been selected specifically to establish linear, historical relationships. Each image exists both independently and as part of an ongoing truth about America itself. That truth: we are a nation still at war with ourselves. And, as Smith illustrates over and over, that ongoing war is still centered on the conflicted, race-based gaze of 'white'[2] Americans at Black and brown Americans. The problem is always "how they see us." The solution is how we see ourselves. In Arvie Smith's works, both perspectives coexist.

Door of No Return

Door of No Return presents the harsh historical truth about the conditions of commerce at Elmina Castle, Ghana, which was one of many points of no return that fed the Diaspora. This moment of inhumane disembodiment is interestingly embodied in the person of a young and physically spectacular Black man. His hands are chained, yet are positioned in such a way as to suggest a space of alchemy between them. These hands will help shape the New World. His facial features are unapologetically Black. He engages us directly and intimately with *his* gaze. The work is a two-way mirror. The subject sees us seeing him. The compositional portal, between the present and involuntary future, posits these questions: Are you OK with this? Are you aware of the brutal, and banal, and terrifyingly personal nature of the slave trade? What could possibly be redemptive about such a dark moment? But Smith paints this scene about a particularly heinous practice in a manner that is incredibly personal. The painting seems to be illuminated from beneath its surface because of Smith's initial red tonal glaze, which produces the perception of an inner

2. Single quotation marks are used for the term 'white' throughout the essay to interrupt the common vernacular trope that signifies a dominant post-slavery racial or ethnic category. Not every 'white' American was accepted as 'white' when they first arrived here as immigrants. The Irish, Italians, Jews, Slavs, etc. were "ethnics" before they elected to graduate into 'whiteness.'



Door of No Return, 1998
Oil on canvas
60 x 50 inches

glow that allows the viewer to see through the subject's skin. This is a Black body, but the vibrant redness of earlier glazes intentionally suggests the blood pulsing throughout his body. As the sun makes the captive's body translucent, it also casts a foreground shadow wherein exists an anguished spirit—trauma as phantasm. In his depiction of this point of captivity, Smith has introduced a metaphysical manifestation, a representation of the rolling tension of Blackness—the rage that must be subdued in order to survive. In *Door of No Return*, a simple scene of inhumane historical portraiture is presented as a subtle, intense dialogue about history, ancestry, race, and spirit(s).

Representation is critical to the maintenance of pride and inherent value. In its absence, African Americans are subject to directed misrepresentation and untruths born of observation or biases digested out of context. These are tactics designed to erode and dismiss human status and deny contributions by Black hands to the actual birth of this nation. There is a massive conceptual gap between being a slave and being enslaved. There is an equally massive and continuing misconception that sees all Blacks as threats within, and to, 'white' society. By extension, the disparity between 'white' imprisoned populations and incarcerated Blacks is seen not as an extension of slavery by immoral 'Black Code' laws during Reconstruction, but instead as part of a popular narrative that requires the untruth that Blacks are inherently more violent. In *Slave Ship*, Smith conflates slavery in America with the gross, disproportionate imprisonment of Black bodies. He explains, "What I'm trying to say is he's a captive, not a slave yet, but a captive—just like a slave. I was doing [this] before there was an emphasis on mass incarceration, but there's always been an emphasis on mass incarceration in our communities. So, it's just become a thing!"

Slave Ship

Again, despite such dark and deflating subject matter, Arvie Smith presents us with an image of exquisite beauty punctuated with secondary characters that act as a dramatic and ominous chorus of forms. The central character, the prisoner, wears the striped prison garb that indicts him as guilty. But Smith has rendered him in a profile of immense dignity. He is a beautiful man, chiseled and regal in posture, who looks away from the gaze of the viewer. He is not concerned at all with "how they see us." Most striking and revealing of the man's frame of mind are his hands. They are the form closest to the viewer. His left arm, identical in tone to his face, comes up from the right and clasps his other hand, which is both luminous from the underpainting and reflective of the sun. These hands are representations of delicate strength. All of Smith's work proclaims the same thing: it's not just about the figure(s). The figure(s) become the pigment, the pigment becomes the skin, the skin becomes light. Everything serves multiple roles, which results in a kind of visual dexterity and vibrancy and brilliance that African-influenced art must always have. In *Slave Ship*, Smith offers us a glimpse into his own psychology as an artist. His objective is to depict and play with the elements that he knows will focus us, expose our prejudices, enrage us, and switch our emotions on and off. Beauty isn't static in Arvie Smith's art; it is an orchestrated system for active looking.

Gold Dust Twins

This painting incorporates an iconic and familiar image lifted from one of the innumerable commercial items available during the Jim Crow period of American history. As a contrast to the emancipation of enslaved Blacks, inflammatory and negative imagery such as this became part of the currency of oppression. Derisive imagery of Black men, women, and children was used to sell products and became a new means of metaphysical and psychological ownership. Objectification was an effective throwback to the familiar sentiment of the negationist 'Lost Cause' ideology: a kind of "I used to own you, and still do" wounding of the collective Black ego. A product like Gold Dust Washing Powder has imagery that implies that it is strong enough to wash away what is black and dirty until it becomes clean and white. Think about that. A whole host of images, terms, and brand names were aimed at damaging Black culture's sense of self-worth and legitimate humanity, including 'Sambo,' 'Pickaninny,' 'Jigaboo,' 'Coon,' 'Jim Crow,' 'Mammy,' 'Darkie,' 'Black-Faced Minstrel,' and 'Jolly Nigger.'

Smith appropriates the Gold Dust twins and situates them under a banner with the offer-

Slave Ship, 1992
Oil on canvas
60 x 50 inches

ing "Let Us Do Your Work." Here—as it was for those who found power in producing such negative imagery—subtlety is not an option. A grin is not always a smile. An alligator shows its teeth, but it is definitely not smiling. The showing of teeth has a different meaning when an entire culture is under attack. Each character in this painting bears a smile that hides the rage mentioned earlier—a rage that must be subdued in order to survive. At one end of the arch, across from the Black "savage," is a Christian minister/priest in a pot, being boiled. The silence of the church throughout hundreds of years of vile oppression can easily be read here as its own form of savagery.

Bojango Ascending the Stairs

In the early twentieth century, pejorative and demeaning representations of Blacks were widespread both in commonly available products and in new media forms like radio and moving pictures. *Bojango Ascending the Stairs* is the most compositionally packed and overtly staged of Smith's works so far. The inspiration for this masterwork came from, in Smith's words, "the movie *The Little Colonel*, with Shirley Temple, who is the figure up at the top left. She did a dance scene with Bojangles [Bill "Bojangles" Robinson], and they were dancing up the stairs. Now what we didn't know was that Bojangles was not allowed to touch Shirley Temple. So, I'm turning that on its head." That is precisely what Arvie Smith does in this beautifully choreographed reference to a moment from a "classic"[3] film that made clear what the absolute boundaries were at the time for relationships between Black men and 'white' women. Intimacy was forbidden.

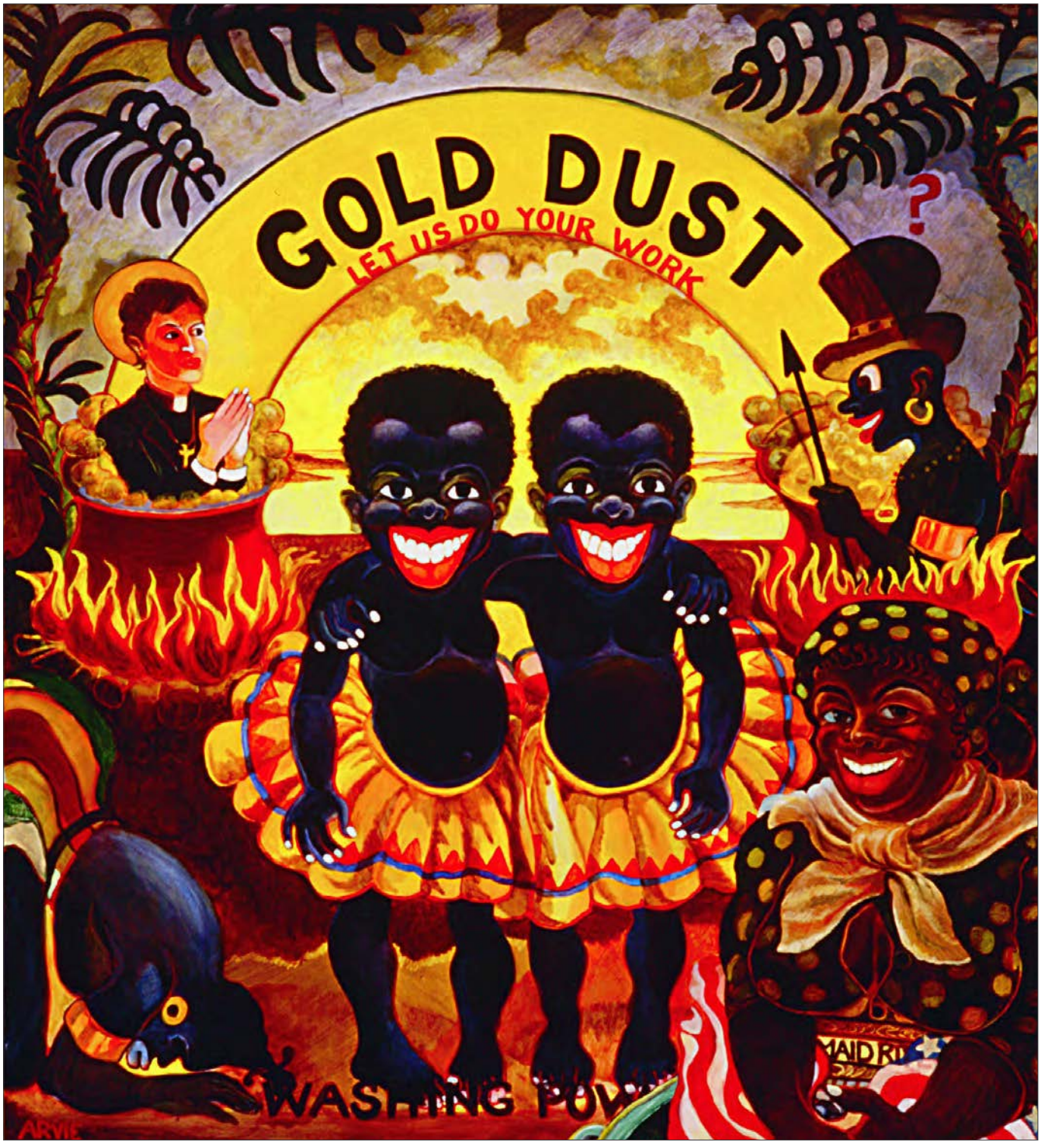
The nucleus of 'white' fear and racism is the fear of the primal Black savage "taking" their pristine 'white' women. So entrenched is this fear that D. W. Griffith made it the dominant plot point in his epic, controversial, and racist 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. Here, Smith tackles this tangled trope of psychological projection. As in the majority of his most complex works, the painting is packed with references. At the top right, in the far distance, are the Massa's mansion and the slave sheds. A trumpeter with inflated cheeks sounds the trumpet, which in cultural and religious contexts cues celebration, jubilee, or a declaration of war with the promise of salvation. The Jemima mammy is a witness to the central act of desire. Shirley Temple, hands clasped, looks past her own "innocence" to the reimagined central act, a more forceful and erotic fantasy involving Bill Robinson. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson's signature routine was tap-dancing on stairs. Stairs take center stage in this drama. The term *bojango,* in contrast, has a lewd urban etymology referencing exposed female breasts *and* sexual organs.

The arms of the one-eyed grinning Sambo contain the radial dynamism of this full-on challenge to intimacy between Black and 'white.' His grin is *not* a smile. His teeth, chomping on his cigar and enclosed by his inflated, cartoonish lips, represent the projected predatory *menace* of Black men—projected onto them by 'white' men. In fact, American history affirms that it was far more common for 'white' men to prey upon the Black female body. Sambo's left hand appears to be spreading a woman's leg. His right arm has just thrown the dice, a gamble that comes up snake eyes: a losing bet.

Arvie Smith loves the female body. He elevates female sensuality and sexuality above objectification. Smith's women understand their own sexual power and display it with potency and confrontational flair. Her nipples erect, submitting to desire, this woman has multiple legs that animate the activity and create a radial dynamism akin to that of Marcel Duchamp's 1912 masterwork *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Embodying desire and intimacy are Bojango's large, oversized hands, underpainted with a red glaze to overtly suggest the heightened blood flow of impassioned eroticism.

We may have visually unpacked this complex work, but Smith's actual meaning remains shifting and elusive. Certainly, he's dealing with taboos. "But," he says, "there's more than one part in there. One is taboos—but if you notice in the lower left corner, there's a lady that's picking cotton." That woman and the average 'white' man observing the scene, and the Confederate flag behind Shirley Temple, are

3. 'White' America enshrines areas of media and culture with this term. Such phrases as "a classic film," "classic rock," or "a classic car," are, for people of color, at times exclusionary dog whistles. *Classic* is a term that rarely connotes Black-centered culture. Placing it in quotation marks here means: "having 'white' cultural value."



Gold Dust Twins, 2004
Oil on canvas
68 x 68 inches

representations of what Smith calls "eye traps." The harsher truths expressed in *Bojango Ascending the Stairs* involve tensions between different classes of Blacks in antebellum America (late 1700s to 1861). "You've got your 'field negroes' picking cotton, and you got your 'house negro' [Bojango], who is kind of an insult—doing whatever," Smith says. "Bojango would have been a 'house negro.' All of the slave rebellions were betrayed by 'house negroes.' So, you [to maintain Black authenticity] want to be identified as a 'field negro,' not a Bojango." Woven throughout this complex stage-set narrative, this cacophony of rhythm and symbolism, is the painful thread of "how they see us."

Betta Dance Now If You Gwana Dance Et All

The colloquial use of the phrase "betta dance now" refers to an event horizon—the moment when indecision and tomfoolery must be replaced by decisive and assertive action. For Smith, the phrase has a family connection. "My great-grandmother, born a slave, was of African and Native American descent. And one of her sayings was, 'You betta dance now, if you're gwana dance at all.' And that's where I got that from." In the image are two women, one 'white' and one Black. The ship of possibility sits silhouetted on the horizon. "It's not a slave ship," Smith says, "but it represents that. It represents commerce, which is what we were." *Betta Dance Now* presents an autobiographical narrative. Painted earlier in his career, it's a master class in color harmony and elegant linear control.

The face of the (literally) colored Black woman is ubiquitous in Smith's catalog of works. Her features are resonant. Smith agrees. "They say that you paint people in your family, and I'm looking at a painting that's on the wall right now, and yes, I'm seeing that face also as kinda like a male face. So yeah, I think you do return to people that look like the people that you see, which is what I've been taught to do." In fact, symbolically speaking, that woman's face is Arvie Smith's.

The other figure is a 'white' female. She has a resolute beauty and a piercing, unwavering stare. Clad in a red-orange tutu, she has visual priority although she is smaller in size and appears behind the larger Black woman. Her erect stature and tense hand, extracting the redness of passion from the light reflected off of her dress, stand in stark contrast to the sinewy, rhythmic dancing movements of her counterpart. What is their relationship? What is the origin story here? Smith explains, "When I first met Julie, she said, 'You're a pretty good artist, aren't you?' I said, 'Yeah, I'm really good.' She said, 'Why don't you quit your job and go to art school?' And it's kinda [her saying], 'You better dance now, if you're gwana dance at all.' You don't get that many more chances."

The girl in the back (inarguably his wife, Julie) is also interesting because she represents to Smith an omnipresent spirit who guides him in intangible and mysterious ways. "She's pushing that figure forward. But you can look at it as the artist who cannot really get away from himself. When you paint a picture, you really expose yourself, and that little white girl is pushing me forward. You know what I'm saying? I'm talking about the forces, they come from somewhere, but I think they have something to do with the universe talking to you. You're not consciously aware of what's going on, but you know something is going on that relates to your cosmic being. There are times when I don't feel that I'm in control of it. In my own situation, where do I get these ideas from? Well, it has to be the courtship."

Art is a jealous muse. Sometimes she's the only one who allows the artist to say what he or she really wants to say. The artist must pay attention. And as in any real relationship, if he or she is dominating the process, and denying the materials their power, and telling them what to do, it doesn't work so well. The more powerful you are with the craft, the more vulnerable you have to be to allow these forces to communicate the truth. At a pivotal point in his career as an emerging artist, Smith listens and takes a big swing toward the greatness he knows he can achieve. Nothing here is about relenting or surrendering. This is a painting that demands that you straighten up your spine and look. Julie Kern Smith recalls, "This was a painting he did for his New York show. His first and only. I think this is a reflection of a kind of 'I'm going for this' [attitude]. This painting, when I look at it—it was impossible for him to put down the palette. He's just going for it!"

Bojango Ascending the Stairs, 2013
Oil on canvas
78 x 68 inches

In this painting, Smith's clever organization of space creates the fundamental chords on which he hangs the melody that his Black female gender-twin dances to. It is such a charged image. It has hints of methods and techniques that will resurface in Smith's work for decades to come. He's been challenged to be his best by the love of his muse, and *Betta Dance Now* makes it irrefutably clear that Arvie Smith has all the moves. He started dancing then and hasn't come close to stopping. "You notice how I'm balancing all of those organic shapes with the ship? And the horizon?" says the mature artist of his earlier work. "I'm really glad you chose this one. It's one of my all-time favorites," says Julie, the muse who inspired it.

In Conclusion

This deep dive into the translatable meaning intentionally crafted into these five paintings reveals Smith's mastery of the craft of painting and of placing signifying "eye traps," as well as his necessary passion for speaking truth to the viewer. His paintings are all reflections of the peculiar state of being that is Blackness in America, and being a Black male in particular. Context is the springboard for meaningful understanding. And Smith loads each work for that through compositional dynamism and visually sensual figuration. Yes, he is working with deep-rooted and difficult themes that trigger real emotional ire. But his are not paintings about anger as much as they are using anger, outrage, and the unsettling tensions of Blackness as thematic pathways to redemptive images of hope. Smith points out that he's not making paintings to go over people's couches. No doubt. But interestingly, despite such gut-wrenching themes and scenes, everything Arvie Smith paints, he elevates. His directed, eloquent, and sublimely painterly hand fashions images that pulse with beauty. And these ugly and hate-filled and embarrassing themes are not made beautiful by anger. In the end, Smith works "within an artistic convention, making pieces that I want people to look at. They have to have their identity. They have to be readable, because art is a language, painting is a language, like the English language or German. You have to learn the grammar, which is the drawing and the painting. And the composition is the context/syntax."

The phrase used when making amends is "truth *and* reconciliation." Smith's larger message is one of reconciliation—the healing of the histories that divide us. If we can't talk about what affects our humanity deeply and honestly—if we can't face uncomfortable truths—then we have no mechanism for empathetic understanding. That is why Smith maintains a commitment to beauty in his work. He attracts us to that which is uncomfortable by using the medium and his aggregate skills as points of entry for empathy and understanding—no matter how bitter his narratives seem to be at first glance. Smith says, "My mother told me once: 'Son, never forget who you're dealing with.'" Truth. But he also says, perfectly summing things up: "Until we can see that love in other people, and see that in ourselves, things aren't gonna change. We've gotta see other people in ourselves." Amen.

BERRISFORD BOOTHE is a full professor of art at Lehigh University, where he has taught beginning and advanced studio practice in drawing, painting, and design. Born in Kingston, Jamaica, he has had a visible and well-established presence in the Eastern US art scene for over thirty years, and has carefully crafted a career as a painter, digital artist, printmaker, photographer, installation artist, lecturer, and curator. Boothe is a listed but inactive member of the June Kelly Gallery in New York City; Philadelphia art dealer and consultant Sande Webster continues to represent and sell his work. For a period of five years, he belonged to a collective of professional artists at the Banana Factory Arts Center in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. His work has been featured in exhibitions at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (Hartford, CT); the William Benton Museum of Art (Storrs, CT); the Allentown Art Museum (Allentown, PA); the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (Buffalo, NY); the Fabric Workshop and Museum (Philadelphia, PA); the African American Museum in Philadelphia (Philadelphia, PA); the New Arts Program (Kutztown, PA); and the State Museum of Pennsylvania (Harrisburg, PA).

Betta Dance Now If You Gwana Dance Et All, 1992
Oil on canvas
60 x 50 inches

Poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture-makers—and this ability is the secret of their power and of their achievements. They see what ought to be by their reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS
"Pictures and Progress" (1864–65)

THE WINDOW

DANIEL DUFORD

I. The people outside your window

Arvie Smith was ten years old, devouring a book about the Italian artist Michelangelo Buonarroti in his fifth-grade classroom. Arvie already knew he was a picture-maker. The pictures he most admired had been made on the Italian peninsula nearly five centuries earlier. These paintings told stories of long-dead dukes and rich benfactors, of a judgmental Abrahamic God and the sorrows of his suffering son. However, there was something missing from this world of images. As Arvie said later, "I thought art was about drawing white people." Then a thing happened that set him on his present course: his third-grade teacher Miss Brenner told him to look up from the fifteenth century and see his own times. She said to Arvie, "Draw the people outside the window." And the window opened to a road he has walked ever since.

Arvie Smith grew up in rural Texas. His grandfather was the head teacher and principal of the town's Black-only grade and high school, and a history professor at an all-Black college. Through his grandfather, the idea that education is a source of liberation, resistance, and armor was impressed upon Arvie from a very young age. The tiny grade school he attended was part of the substandard "separate but equal" policies that were central to the Jim Crow era. Just as education was denied to enslaved Africans to undermine their selfhood, patchy education (for freed Blacks) allowed the lie of Black inferiority to stand. Education is power. Books confer secret knowledge, spirited into the leaves of the pages. Time machines and wormholes open up in images and text, connecting centuries from one soul to another. Early on, Arvie was given this secret, and he encountered a world that invited him in. Even now, every Arvie Smith painting is a result of deep and promiscuous research.

His mother moved with ten-year-old Arvie and his siblings to South Central Los Angeles, then to the Watts neighborhood. The people outside his window may have changed, but they all carried history on their backs and in the pores of their skin. Try as the power structure of whiteness might to render these communities invisible, they refused to disappear. Arvie was the kid who designed the football posters, hoping to get an art scholarship. "I realized that it would have been to a ghetto school, and they don't give scholarships to those kinds of school. I was told when I tried to go to an art school, 'We don't need your kind here.'" Instead he enrolled at Los Angeles City College to study art, psychology, and sociology. Arvie worked as a mental health professional in his early adulthood, until he decided to pursue art full-time. When he'd looked out of that window in Miss Brenner's classroom to see who to draw, there was a tacit understanding. "Every white child is elevated above every Black child. I may have a PhD—but when I go out I'm just another Black man on the street." So he paints the people in his community; he paints their history, and their rage, and their pain. Invisibility is not an option.

Untitled, 1988
Oil on canvas
66 x 67 inches

Untitled

From 1986 to 2007, Arvie's studio was located in the White Stag building in downtown Portland, near the Amtrak train station. This area, known as Old Town/Chinatown, has been the holding pen and launchpad for recent immigrants and other marginalized groups for decades. When Oregon became a state in 1859, it enacted stringent race laws corralling African Americans as well as Chinese and Japanese immigrants into this riverside neighborhood. Even today, just outside of boutique hotels and small high-end designer shops, people pushed to the edges frequent the neighborhood's soup kitchens and shelters. One of the earliest paintings in this book is a massive untitled portrait from 1988, part of a series titled *What's the Matter Man? Ain't You Listening?* In this series, Arvie painted portraits of the people who called Old Town/Chinatown home. The Black community of Portland, redlined and sidetracked, congregated in the neighborhood before migrating across the Willamette River to Northeast Portland in the 1930s and '40s. The painting exemplifies Arvie's early work. Painted in urgent brushstrokes, its colors collide, coalesce, and converge. The maelstrom forms the massive face of a Black man. Circumspect and monumental, he confronts the viewer with one yellow and one blue eye. He wears a colored shirt and dark jacket. He is electric. A blue aura and a red zigzag surround him. He is unequivocally of African descent. This marks the beginning of Arvie's deep dive into the imagery of Black maleness.

Boys Night Out

Arvie is a painter whose images emanate from the acute antennae of community hearsay, up-to-the-minute news, and American history. *Boys Night Out* is the raw response to the fatal beating of Mulugeta Seraw by three white supremacists in Portland in 1988. If the previous portrait depicts a Black man confronting the viewer with all of his humanity intact, this thug with the bloody bat is a grotesque apparition of dumb hate. Mulugeta was an Ethiopian student living in Portland. He had just arrived at his apartment building when three white supremacists belonging to a group called East Side White Pride stopped and confronted him. They beat him to death with a baseball bat. The story is as old as the United States: an immigrant student, believing in the bootstrap rhetoric of self-determination, is undone by ignorant white assailants.

The painting is full of urgent rage. Quick, washy brushstrokes create a sense of simultaneous becoming and undoing. The white man's face is a mask of shifting expressions. Mulugeta's pained face is imprinted on the bloody bat. With this painting Arvie joins the ranks of painters who bear witness to political violence, such as Leon Golub (1922–2004), Sue Coe (b. 1951), and Francisco Goya (1746–1828). Like Golub's massive *Mercenaries* series (from the same era), *Boys Night Out* places the viewer's sympathy with the perpetrators, not the victim. Golub has said that this tactic highlights the complicity of the viewer with the system of violence. Arvie pulls off a similar trick by allowing the face of the monstrous neo-Nazi to dominate the frame. But the image of Mulugeta on the bat becomes a reflection, and we embody his pain and distress.

Boys Night Out, 1989
Oil on canvas
60 x 66 inches

Scarecrow

In the past two decades, Arvie's paintings have become tightly packed with colliding symbolism and disparate imagery. *Scarecrow* typifies these more recent paintings. Simultaneously tight and loose, the colors are a virtuosic palette of golden undertones. Even the cool blue sea is alive with a subdermal coal fire. The young man in *Scarecrow*, painted twenty-seven years after *Boys Night Out*, is a direct descendant of the untitled portrait from 1988 (page 17). Dressed in ragged prison stripes and a minstrel's checkered pants, he dances while bound to a broken cross. Arvie renders his oversized hands with a beatific elegance. The man is caught between a forced jig and the daily dance of Black men stopped at gunpoint by the police. He is set up as a Christ figure but is busting out of the chains. Keystone Cops fire from the clouds, and the chaos of religiously motivated colonialism swirls around him.

Crows are trickster figures. Jim Crow is a derogatory character, but he gets to use his buffoonery as a weapon. Lewis Hyde's book *Trickster Makes This World* tells the story from African American folklore of another trickster—the signifying monkey. The monkey antagonizes a lion into starting a fight that ultimately ends in the lion's own death. The monkey, balanced on his branch, yields language more deftly than the literal-minded, muscular lion. "The point of the game is to play with language, not to take it seriously, or better, to stay in *balance* on the line between the playful and the serious while trying to tip one's opponent *off* that balance, dizzied with a whirl of words."[1]

The Jim Crow portrayed here is no mocking shadow, but a powerful resister. His hat on fire, he walks a tightrope, doing his best to stay alive while everything in the world seems to be firing at him. Goddamn if he hasn't got style while the world burns around him.

1. Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 273.

Scarecrow, 2016
Oil on canvas
60 x 48 inches

Piggy Black Ride

The book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* is a collection of horrific souvenir photographs of lynchings throughout the Jim Crow South. Page after page chronicles the celebratory gatherings of white townspeople that followed the torture and killing of African Americans. One of the pictures depicts William Brown's burned body from a September 1919 lynching in Omaha, Nebraska. Arvie has referred to an earlier iteration of this painting as the legend of William Brown. A young Black man burns on a pyre below a crowded stage. A white audience applauds. But the burning body is just a sideshow to the central event.

The main stage features an African American mammy wearing whiteface. She is reduced to the role of pack animal for a blonde-ringleted girl with a riding crop. Joining her on the crowded stage, a black-faced minstrel merrily strums a banjo, a wounded Confederate soldier gestures to stage right, and a grinning Klansman lurks. Behind the two main figures, a down-home Black man kisses a white woman. Miscegenation was once a hangable offense.

One of the most striking features of this painting is the simultaneity of hands and feet. The multiple views of the riding crop and the minstrel's dancing feet create a sickening maelstrom. The burning man and the humiliated woman are forced to perform facing each other through the stage floor. Arvie has a tacit understanding of the performance of race in the public sphere and its very real consequences.

Piggy Black Ride, 2019
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches

La Puttanella

In this painting a white woman and a Black woman sit in a garden—the white woman is sipping wine. They are in their Sunday best. The women are rendered in erotic fullness. Yet unease and contempt fills the space between them. Is this a recognition of the radically different social spaces in which each exists? The title, *La Puttanella*, translates to "the little whore." The radical consequences of this direct gaze by a Black male artist might not be apparent at first. Desire and frankness pervade the image, as does a prickly eroticism in which the balance of power is uncertain.

In antebellum America and the Jim Crow South, white women were perceived to be especially vulnerable to attacks by Black men. Ideas of racial and sexual purity infect white supremacist views. One of the fears most used to stoke violence and apartheid against Black men is the fear of the "contamination" of white women. The majority of lynchings stem from perceived threats to white female virginity. Both Black men and white women live under tight strictures in patriarchal society. As Eleanor Heartney wrote in the January 1993 issue of *Art in America*: "But because Smith is first and foremost a storyteller, he avoids the hectoring tone and simplistic moralizing which so often characterize contemporary work dealing with such subjects. Instead his paintings are full of psychological ambiguities, indeterminate narratives and a powerful pervasive sexuality which disrupts the usual order of patriarchal and racial power."[2]

2. Eleanor Heartney, "Arvie Smith at 55 Mercer," *Art in America*, January 1993, 100.

La Puttanella, 2002
Oil on canvas
66 x 72 inches

Quick Step

In *Quick Step* we are thrown into a jazz club. It could be one of the many jazz clubs that thrived in North Portland during the heyday of the Black middle class in the 1940s and '50s. Quickstep is a style of ballroom dance derived from 1920s jazz dances such as the foxtrot. It can be erotically fluid or high-energy and light. An African American man dances with a blonde woman, who is in mid-toss. Knowing that everything in Arvie's paintings is charged with historical and social electricity, we can be sure this is no ordinary dance. The prohibition of sexual relations between Black men and white women is front and center. The woman could be smiling in pure joy and exertion, or screaming in fear. Arvie keeps the knife's edge of meaning sharpened. The image of the blonde Fay Wray in the 1933 film *King Kong* is a stand-in for white female purity in the hands of an African brute. Ultimately, in that film, the tables are turned on the usual sympathies. Wray's character becomes the conduit to an empathetic view of Kong, but only after he is killed. Everyone wins. Kong is gone and the bystanders get to reclaim their non-racist humanity—safely, and without the further presence of the beast.

The dancers are the only mixed couple in the club. The Black musicians stay onstage and play for the white audience members. Compositionally, the two figures become one spider-like mandala composed of upturned legs and splayed arms. It is pure energy and sound. I mentioned Arvie's approach to hands and feet in P*iggy Black Ride*. Here, you see the importance of hands and feet as expressive tools. The woman's upraised hands are clearly articulated and rendered in pink, ochre, and periwinkle. The man's hands are brown, red, and golden. One hand is impressed into the soft white thigh of his dance partner. The articulation suggests a muscularity and purpose. The hands become extensions of the personalities of the figures. The dance is both smooth and gravity-laden. As in all of Arvie's paintings, contradictions are layered one on top of the other.

Quick Step, 2019
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches

The Role of the Negro in the Work of Art

America I shower in the bright-
est bathroom in the house but it's the bathroom
With the lowest water pressure most of the time
Your mighty rivers dribble down my chest and
Back in "The Dry Salvages" T. S. El-
iot describes "the river with its car-
go of dead negroes, cows and chicken coops"
Because the river is like time Ameri-
ca a "destroyer" and "preserver" and
Like time America it's swollen with what
You eat most of the time I don't feel like
I'm getting clean your rivers dribble in
Bright light preserver and destroyer when
I am seen how will I survive being seen

SHANE McCRAE (2019)

II. Painting my truth

The painter Robert Colescott (1925–2009) returned to Portland to lecture at the Pacific Northwest College of Art in 1984, while Arvie was a student there. Colescott had a deep history in Portland, as he'd taught at Portland State University from 1957 to 1966. Colescott had had to wrestle with being a Black academic in a primarily white city. Arvie would need that model for his subsequent career.

After his lecture, Colescott took Arvie (who had no money) out for a beer. Now keep in mind that Colescott's work threw politeness out the door. He used the ugliest of society's racial stereotypes and fears about Black male sexuality to create his acerbic, satirical paintings. Arvie came away thinking, "Oh, you can do that." Here was the first person to show Arvie that he could reveal what was truly inside without the polite varnish. Such an impulse was always there, of course. The evidence exists in a list of paintings from an early exhibition of Arvie's work set up by his best friend's mother at the Black bank in his neighborhood. The titles included: *A Place of Refuge, The Whipping Post*, and *Yes on Proposition #14*. They reveal the unwavering magnetic north of Arvie's inner compass—even at the tender age of seventeen. Colescott simply kicked away any final obstacles.

"My voice is art. I try to use it to engage people to maybe think differently. In using that voice, I try to do it in a way that people will hear it." After Arvie attended graduate school in Baltimore, his paintings took on a new urgency. An invisible audience is not what drives his work. The images must come from a truth that he sees in the world. In that sense, his life's work has been a negotiation with an art world that fancies novelty over longevity and conceptual cleverness over difficulty. Like politicians, the main spokespeople for the art market hollowly tout their desire for hard content, but the proof is in the pocketbook. Arvie's take: "I don't want to paint pretty pictures for someone's couch." Constant adjustment to an indifferent system is required.

Mainstream American culture is squeamish about sexuality, unless it represents white male power or is used to sell cars. The country's Protestant roots have deemed sensuality suspect and unhealthy. A woman's sexuality requires protection. In my discussion of *La Puttanella* and *Quick Step*, I mentioned the cultural loathing associated with Black men looking at white women—let alone painting them. These cultural assumptions are soaked in visions of malice. Colescott's most well-known paintings address the taboo, and Arvie also refuses to shy away: "What I found out in my long career is that people don't like Black guys painting white nude women. That's one that I come up against, and I have to think about it. But I'm not going to censor myself."

Whiteness seems invisible because of its default position of power. Economic, legal, and social conventions all grow out of the perception that whiteness is the stable state of natural equilibrium. As a result, the world of images populating our media and fine art is one in which Blackness is an aberration that assaults the norm. As W. E. B. Du Bois writes in *The Souls of Black Folk*, "The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self."[3] For painters to address this situation, they must flip the script. The discomfort provoked by these pictures pokes the eye of whiteness. The images awaken the ability to see the world differently. The most radical resistance that artists can perform is to tell their own story without fear of reprisal. Arvie's paintings happen to be masterful and beautiful both in spite of and because of the layers of rage, pain, and sadness embedded in the subject matter. Out of this stew comes an unbridled, joyful voice.

Like Arvie's *Scarecrow*, barely holding onto his rope, the African American painter must balance truth-telling and fetish. By diving headlong into the image sewage of oppressive power systems, the artist ends up walking that tightrope. What happens when the artist's work is processed through a mar-

3. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 5.

ket that hopes to categorize and fetishize the pain of the work? In the Shane McCrae poem that opens this section, McCrae asks: "when / I am seen how will I survive being seen."

Eclipse of the Sun

Now eighty-one years old, Arvie has lived a life that includes an education in a segregated, one-room schoolhouse; racial uprisings in the 1960s; the election of the first Black president; and now, a metastasized racism seeping out of the pores of the body politic. His paintings reflect this upheaval. The violence and racism stuffed into the toilets of culture for decades have backed up the system and are flooding the bathroom floor. At the center of this painting, two lovers kiss passionately. He is Rastus, from the Cream of Wheat box, wearing the checkered pants of a minstrel. The kiss is based on the iconic photograph by Alfred Eisenstaedt of a US Navy sailor kissing a nurse in Times Square on V-J Day at the end of World War II. It is a quintessentially American picture, signifying American exceptionalism, male virility, and national ebullience.

In Arvie's world, this *supposedly* unified view breaks apart. The Nazis who were defeated in the war are being courted by the new president and march openly in the streets. Confederate zombies rise from the putrid ground of America First, devouring the brains of a once "patriotic" citizenry. The painting is a national fever dream. Columbus is trapped in the swells of a rising ocean; a portion of Goya's painting *The Third of May 1808* appears in the background, recalling the history of resistance to colonial powers. For many people, the most shocking aspect of the picture is the frank and open sensuality of the kiss between a Black man and a white woman. Systemic racism and wrongheaded colonial brutality be damned.

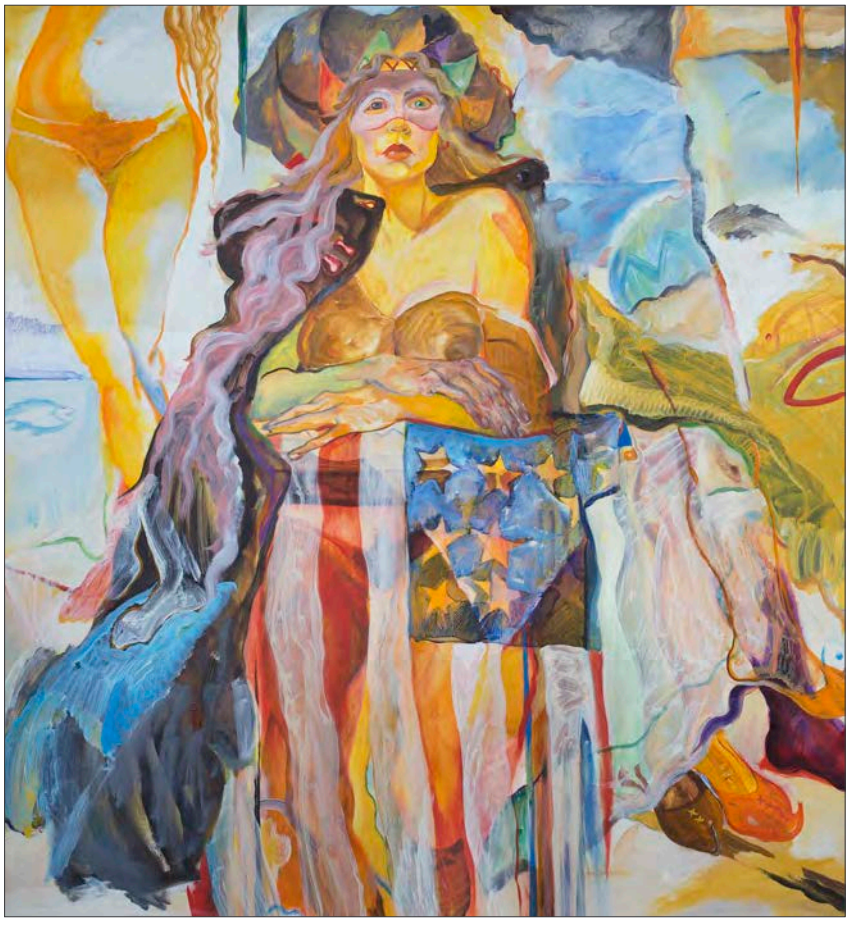
Eclipse of the Sun, 2019
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches

Truth Tellers

Many of Arvie's paintings from 2019 feature the motif of a stage or a tableau. They are set in an eternal chitlin' circuit. Paintings such as *Piggy Black Ride* and *Little Strong Man* organize the action within the structure of main stage, offstage, and under the stage. From this reference to theater, certain sets of metaphors arise that spotlight the roles we each play as stock characters in a national drama. Here, the reluctant actors play the parts of sexual objects: prostitute and buffoon. Peering from backstage, but, curiously, as a not-quite-corporeal apparition, a manager schemes, his pockets full of cold cash. Onstage, a Black man is dressed in the patchwork clothes of a clown—or a minstrel. Arms crossed and petulantly smoking a cigar, he resists the entreaties of his companion. Arvie speaks about this depiction as a response to stereotypes of the lazy Black man and the unsupportive Black woman—racist tropes that arose out of Reconstruction. Humiliation is a powerful tactic in suppressing a people's power.

The other two women recall *La Puttanella*, from 2002. But here the relationship between the two women is clear. They are both chattel of sorts, but only one has a chain on her ankle. This staged play contains a mystery. Pictured beneath the stage is a roiling sea. Is this assembled cast of players performing seaside, or is that the swell of truth and rage burbling at high tide beneath the floorboards?

Truth Tellers, 2019
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches



Election Year

The year 1988, the last year of Ronald Reagan's presidency, was the finale of a decade marked by renewed jingoism. The Reagan era thwarted a progressive agenda in full career during the 1970s, replacing it with shoulder-padded promises of prosperity through trickle-down economics that only exasperated income inequality. It is a comforting but futile parlor game to imagine the continuation of a climate-forward Carter presidency, or Geraldine Ferraro as the first female vice president. Our society's foundation hasn't recovered from the conservative termite infestation of the 1980s, and in some ways the Trump presidency grew out of that scourge. When *Election Year* was painted, George H. W. Bush (Reagan's vice president) was running for election, and the Republican party's tactics to discredit its political rivals were in version 1.0. Many of the same players who went on to perfect the propaganda of Fox News were cutting their teeth by discrediting Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis.

With its open fields of liquid color swirl, the painting exemplifies Arvie's earlier work. Its erotic overtones achieve an ease. Lady Liberty is a masked, hypersexualized Mardi Gras–goer. She is part Wonder Woman and part *Playboy* Playmate. In later paintings, the rancor of the double-consciousness expressed by Du Bois will be more present. Here, there is a protective vulnerability. Lady Liberty crosses her arms over her breasts and hunches her shoulders. Something of that predatory decade seeps into the statuesque figure. Joy, desire, and menace mingle within single brushstrokes.

Election Year, 1988
Oil on canvas
67 x 61 inches

Two Eves, 1992
Oil on canvas
96 x 69 inches

Two Eves

Cultures steeped in Judeo-Christian stories use the concept of original sin as a form of social control. Women carry the legacy of Eve, who, as the progenitor of humanity, represents the contradiction of being both the pure mother and the great deceiver. This Eve is white. The mythic underpinnings of this cultural prejudice inform the so-called Christian values of contemporary US politics. Arvie has stated his impatience with religious institutions that read the Bible literally and ignore overwhelming archaeological evidence that the first humans were African.

White Eve wears a bowler hat and stripper's lingerie. Black Eve is plumed with massive angel wings of red, white, blue, and orange. The Eves are defiant. Chthonic power resides in this deity in the form of the winged Eve who holds the pale shadow of her white sister. This painting marks a shift in Arvie's image-making. While the openness of the pictorial space is still present in *Election Year*, the more defined forms and tighter compositions that typify his later paintings first appear in *Two Eves*.

Best Man

While Arvie's paintings weave the warp of his life and the weft of the larger political landscape, the artist rarely references himself directly. *Best Man* feels like an autobiographical exception. It is a picture of the young artist in a state of alert resignation. His avatar wears a bespoke gold suit and a medallion depicting Julius the Monkey from Paul Frank's designs (a logo that reminds Arvie of illustrations from the book *Little Black Sambo*). We recognize the women who flank him, twisting his body: the white prom queen/stripper with a belt full of cash holds one shoulder, while the African American woman seems to hold back the audience. A closer look at her outstretched palm suggests she is pressing her hand against glass. This spectacle takes place not only onstage, but also in an enclosed vitrine, similar to the glass cages that displayed Indigenous people in natural history museums during the nineteenth century.

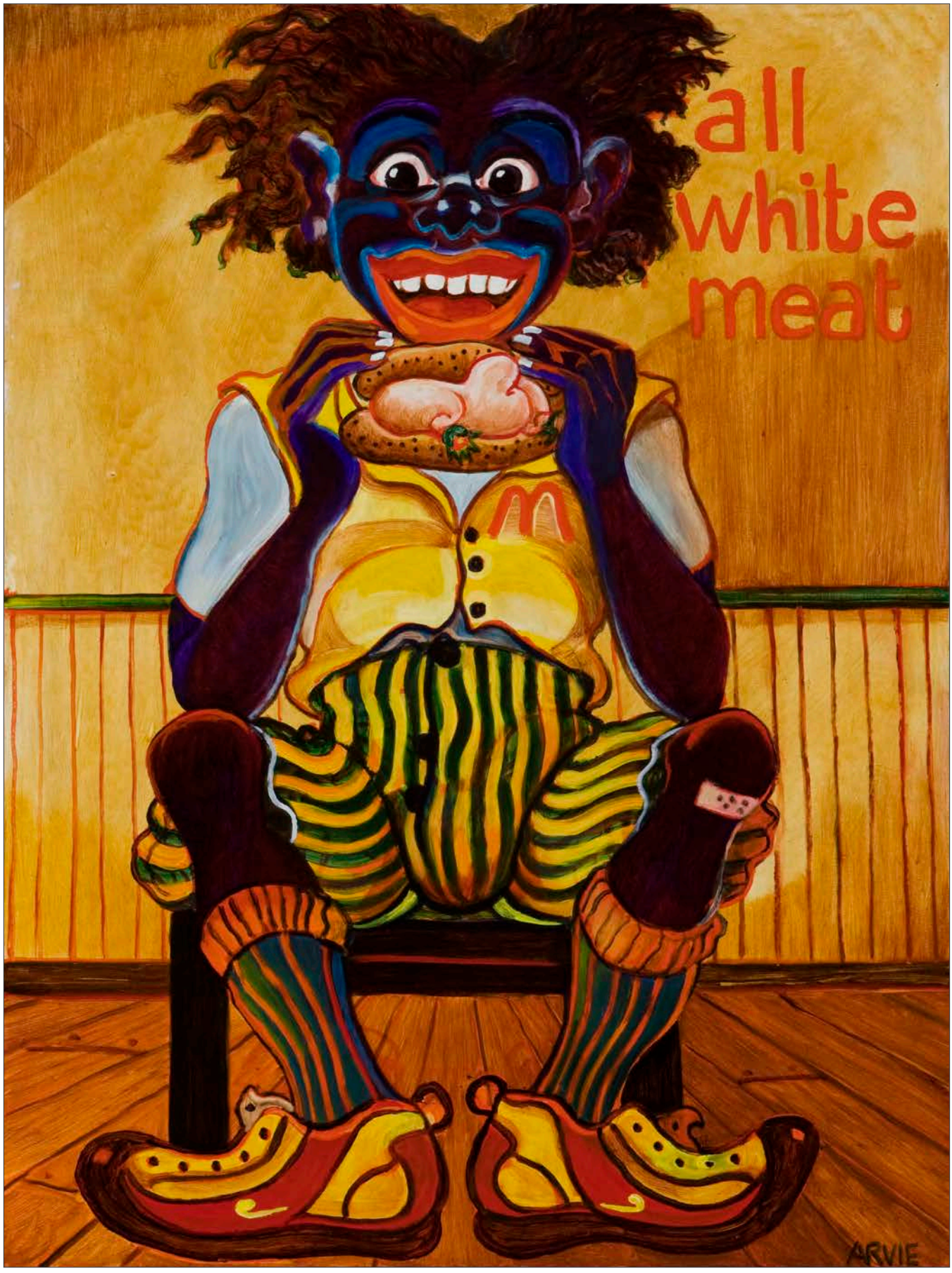
Best Man, 2017
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches

All White Meat

Stop and think. *Branding* is an awful term—ubiquitous in our everyday speech and attached to the sale of everything from clothing lines to political figures. Contemporary artist Hank Willis Thomas sees the connections between the iconography of sports branding, slavery, and Jim Crow and makes them explicit. Nike swooshes are etched into the skin of Black athletes. During the 250 years of slavery, *branding* meant searing living flesh with a mark of ownership. The scar removes human agency and announces to the world that this being no longer lives, but is chattel. Instead of slaveholders, we now have corporations vying for our fealty.

Arvie reclaims the African American faces used to brand commercial products. Rastus (the Cream of Wheat chef), Aunt Jemima, Sambo, and yes, even Paul Frank's monkey are illustrations that Arvie absorbs into his world in order to render them powerless. In the Algonquin tale "The Listener," the hero is served a stew that contains all the pain and heartache of the world. He cannot leave the frozen hut until he drinks it, out of deference to his host, the witch. Sipping the brew through the hollow shaft of his arrow allows him to take in the pain in little bits—not enough to kill him, but enough to satisfy the witch. This ingestion is akin to what Arvie is up to when he presents a figure that resembles an exaggerated Buckwheat eating a sexualized chicken sandwich. Corporate brands are extensions of systemic oppression, and they must be dismantled, sip by awful sip.

All White Meat, 2009
Oil on canvas
40 x 30 inches


all
white
meat
ARVIE

Attention, African-American apparitions hung,
burned, or drowned before anyone alive was born:

please make a mortifying midnight appearance
before the handyman standing on my porch
this morning with a beard as wild as Walt Whitman's.

Except he is the anti-Whitman, this white man
with Confederate pins littering his denim cap and jacket.
(And by *mortify*, dear ghosts, I mean scare the snot out of him.)

TERRANCE HAYES, "Black Confederate Ghost Story" (2015)

III. Even in death it's the same shit all over

It is a humid summer day in Waterford, Virginia, a national historic site founded by Quakers. The village was an abolitionist stronghold within the slaveholding Confederacy. We have just finished the first Ground Beneath Us Summer Fellowship Institute, a convening of artist fellows that culminates with a public presentation at the historic John Wesley Church. The church was built by the freedmen after the Civil War, and no longer has a congregation. For the final presentation, I have interviewed Arvie, who is the 2019 fellow, about his paintings. The conflicts and contradictions that slavery wrought in our culture are ever-present, which makes the location of this conversation—a historic African American church without a congregation—poignant. Arvie's paintings are like geologic layers of pain laid bare and shakily interpreted. Virginia's slaveholding history is held in this village, and even while the narrative has been whitewashed, the bones refuse to stay buried.

The next morning, we visit the Union of Churches Cemetery just off Fairfax Street to pay respects at the African American graves. The "union" in the name refers to the different religious sects and congregations brought together in this cemetery. Both Union and Confederate dead lie under the same earth. The only disunion is racial. As we walk under the boughs of centuries-old trees, we cross from the stately marble gravestones of the white community to a rickety gate that divides the cemetery. On the other side, there are a few headstones, but mostly provisional wooden planks and roughly carved stone markers that indicate the final resting places of the town's Black citizens. Mary Kennedy's stone is lovingly inscribed by hand. The tenderness of remembrance outweighs the paucity of the means used to express it. Arvie leans against the fence separating the two necropolises, standing on the Black side and looking toward the white. While cows low in the shade in the adjacent fields, he shakes his head and says sardonically, "Even in death, it's the same shit all over."

The Lynching of James Byrd Jr., 2002
Oil on canvas
66 x 72 inches

The events that shaped places like Waterford began in 1619. In fact, the four-hundredth anniversary of the first arrival of enslaved Africans to Virginia took place just a few weeks after our visit to the cemetery. In the seventeenth century, indentured servants from Europe worked alongside Africans, building the economic foundation of the fledgling colonies. As fields were planted, differences in the treatment of workers quickly took shape and led to a hardening of cultural divisions between these willing and unwilling immigrants. Slavery hadn't been institutionalized yet. Colonial landowners had taken the land from Indigenous peoples, and they intended to exploit this "uncultivated" landscape—first to survive, and then to make their fortunes. Workers held more value than gold, and it didn't take long for their bodies to be thought of as commodities. The cultural and economic soul of the United States flows in large part from that landing at Point Comfort in southern Virginia.

The Africans who toiled this land had been captured and kept in "slave castles" on the Gold Coast of West Africa while they awaited their grim passage across the Atlantic. In 2005, with the support of a project grant from the Regional Arts and Culture Council, Arvie and his wife, Julie Kern Smith, traveled to the still-existing slave castles in Accra and Elmina, Ghana, and Île de Gorée, Senegal. They were profoundly affected by their visits to the slave cells, where men were separated from women, women from children. Arvie says, "That was very difficult to see. Now you know it's real: you've been there and you can see it." The four-hundred-year-old castles are massive stone fortresses overlooking the seaside. Many of them have been destroyed or converted into government buildings in an attempt to bury the shame and reclaim a sense of heroic morality. Take a look at the architecture of the modern penitentiary system, and you'll see those slave castles standing on the West African cliffs. Arvie says, "Black people are more ashamed of their history than white people."

The legacy of slavery, the Civil War, and its aftermath permeates every aspect of American life.

An African American person moves through the world carrying the weight of this narrative. The horror of over two hundred years of slavery was followed by the brief hope of emancipation and Reconstruction. But the old Slave Powers quickly upturned the narrative, and Reconstruction was undone. Decades of brutal Jim Crow laws were briefly brightened by the civil rights struggle. Within a generation hope unraveled again, and in 2017, white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and Klan members marched openly and violently in the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia. President Trump, very much like the awful Andrew Johnson who followed Lincoln, openly courts the reanimated Slave Power. Two steps up and two steps back.

2Up and 2Back

Since the first Africans were brought over to the Americas as cargo, their descendants have faced generations of obstacles. Every spring forward is met with a reverberating snap backward. Two up and two back is the seesaw path that Arvie tracks in this painting. Four figures march arm in arm on a tiny cliff. The monumentality of the figures and their triumphant poses suggest a heroic celebration of cultural ascendance. The three African American figures move as one, while an elegant white woman moves counter to her companions. They seem to be stuck in an endless round robin. The three forward-facing figures are velvety, conjoined by a gold chain. The man has appeared in many of Arvie's paintings. Proud, dressed to the nines, and walking with purpose, he holds one end of the chain. The woman in the middle wears whiteface. She is ready for church in her Sunday dress and gold cross. The third woman, blue-skinned and enrobed in see-through saffron cloth, holds two staffs. The whole history of a people is contained in these three personages. The tiny cliff face feels precarious, but as Arvie says, "You can't go on without some form of optimism."

The endlessly circling march that the three figures are engaged in resembles the trajectory of the hapless stovepipe-hatted man in the bay below. He sits in a dinghy (resignedly flying the flags of both the Confederacy and Catholic Spain) as it circles down into a whirlpool. Charybdis is swallowing white supremacy, and he appears to feel fine as the annunciating angel blows some kind of blues. Arvie seems to be saying that if it were a contest of longevity and perseverance, you should lay your odds on the folks on the cliff. That little rickety boat is destined to drown.

The Lynching of James Byrd Jr.
Manumissions

On June 7, 1998, James Byrd Jr. was murdered in Jasper, Texas, by three white supremacists. They dragged him behind their pickup truck for three miles. Until his captors swerved the truck into a culvert and his head and arm were severed, Byrd was alive. The sickening murder received national condemnation. Texas enacted a hate crimes law in the wake of the trial. Two of the murderers were executed by lethal injection, and the third man is serving a life sentence and won't be eligible for parole until 2038. The outcry surrounding the crime suggested that this act of violence was an outlier. However, believing that racially motivated brutality belongs only to the pre–civil rights era is willful ignorance. In *Boys Night Out*, Arvie chronicled the murder of a Black man who was beaten to death by three white supremacists a decade before Byrd. The shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012, the choking of Eric Garner in 2014, and the ongoing murders of countless Black men show that lynching is alive and well. It wasn't until 2018, a full twenty years after Byrd was killed, that the Senate passed anti-lynching legislation, called the Justice for Victims of Lynching Act. In Arvie's words, "We left the South to have the freedom not to be lynched."

Byrd is painted in the style of a Depression-era Black bumpkin. Our view is from the pavement as the truck speeds off in the upper-right corner and the chain goes taut. Klansmen look on impassively. The bodies of the three frontal figures are painted with the numbered targets of a shooting-range placard. One is African American, one Native American, and the third Asian. Like *Boys Night Out*, this painting shakes with a red rage.

The crowd in the bottom left of *Manumissions* is based on souvenir photographs. White communities took picnics to lynchings and commemorated the events with postcards. Here, Arvie throws back the curtains of complacency and complicity to reveal the evergreen violence that stalks African Americans.

2Up and 2Back, 2019
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches

Manumissions (diptych), 2006
Oil on canvas
66 x 120 inches

Agitate Agitate Agitate

"Every time I enter into a new body of work I need to start a new round of research . . . Information is power, you know people will come at you when there's something they want to hide," Arvie explains. This painting was commissioned as part of the exhibition *At Freedom's Door: Challenging Slavery in Maryland*, while Arvie was artist in residence at Baltimore's Morgan State University, in collaboration with the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture, the Maryland Historical Society, and Maryland Institute College of Art. Baltimore is the port city that gave the great abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass his first taste of freedom. He escaped north through Baltimore with his wife, Anna. Douglass went on to become one of the nineteenth century's most accomplished writers and most photographed people. He understood the need to counter the derogatory images of Black people that justified the continued enslavement of Africans. Harriet Tubman, who stands at his side, was nicknamed "General" for her perilous forays back into slaveholding territory to lead people out of bondage along the Underground Railroad. Douglass and Tubman have been rendered smooth through canonization—let us not forget that they were considered dangerous radicals.

Benjamin Banneker, who holds an almanac, is less well known. He was a scientist, mathematician, farmer, and astronomer. His almanac contained weather forecasts, tide tables, lunar tables, and commentary. *The Old Farmer's Almanac* grew out of Banneker's example. In his 1793 edition of the almanac, he included his exchange with Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson: "I suppose it is a truth too well attested to you, to need a proof here, that we are a race of Beings who have long laboured under the abuse and censure of the world, that we have long been looked upon with an eye of contempt, and that we have long been considered rather as brutish than human, and Scarcely capable of mental endowments."[4]

The three figures stare defiantly at the viewer. "Agitate, agitate, agitate" was one of Douglass's rallying cries for abolitionists. The burning ship in the harbor belches a funnel of smoke that reveals a dark, biblical inferno. In the roots below are underground tunnels. Africans are bound in the most gruesome torture devices. Our Lady of Guadalupe oversees their pain but does nothing. Arvie has borrowed that visual motif from Diego Rivera's (1886–1957) fresco *The Blood of the Revolutionary Martyrs Fertilizing the Earth*, part of his 1926 mural cycle at the Autonomous University of Chapingo, Mexico. In Rivera's work, Mexican revolutionary leaders Emiliano Zapata and Otilio Montaño lie underground in red winding cloths. The companion to that panel is titled *The Agitator*, directly linking the revolutionary spirit of Tubman, Banneker, and Douglass to Mexican independence. Martyrdom and heroism are two sides of a coin worn thin from abuse.

4. "To Thomas Jefferson from Benjamin Banneker, 19 August 1791," Founders Online, National Archives, accessed December 28, 2019, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-22-02-0049.

Agitate Agitate Agitate, 2006
Oil on canvas
68 x 68 inches

Fact Checker

Like many of Arvie's paintings from 2019, the images in *Fact Checker* grew from a crack in the underworld that released all the horrors of American life. The first parents, Adam and Eve, oversee a cacophony of institutional abjections. A lascivious monk in drag draws a racist cartoon of an African woman. A prostitute leans over and rubs his chest. The serpent in the garden is an aggro rattlesnake hoarding gold coins. A Nazi/Confederate deep-sea diver rises from the turgid water. Lincoln, so often depicted as the great hero of American history, is here too, slapping a young enslaved boy who sits on a burning building. The sixteenth president was a reluctant emancipator, dragged into that position by the entreaties of activists like Frederick Douglass. Lincoln flanks one corner and faces Trump, the idiot inheritor of the Republican party. The party that was formed to counter Southern slaveholding Democrats is now firmly in the hands of those same forces. In 2019, the Republicans openly court white supremacists and merrily roll back any civil rights gains they can. Trump's white power grab is based in large part on the smudging and discrediting of facts. He claimed that he could "shoot someone on Fifth Avenue" and not be censured. Will Trump's impeachment put his impunity to the test, as it did for Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's slavery-loving successor?

Realities collapse in this picture. Pop culture, church doctrine, and canonical bits of American history swirl and coalesce around each other. The facts cancel each other out and reveal misleading reads. What is evident is the roiling stew of competing Americas. Who gets to tell their story in this catastrophic storm? As Arvie says, "I can't just go into the studio and spit in the wind. I have some narrative I'm trying to get across. Sometimes I try to fit quite a few narratives in one piece. Someone described my work as 'crowded canvases'—well, they're crowded with ideas."

We all need a corrective narrative from time to time. Terry Bisson imagines an alternative to John Brown's failed raid and the Civil War in his speculative historical novel *Fire on the Mountain*. In its pages, Harriet Tubman and John Brown lead a successful insurrection at Harpers Ferry, which leads to the establishment of Nova Africa, a vibrant African-centered socialist country occupying the former southern United States. When the characters find a conspiracy theory novel called *John Brown's Body* that describes our country's actual history, it sounds like a disaster. A character named Grissom says,

> "It's a white nationalist fantasy . . . what if the war had been started not by abolitionists but by the slave owners? . . . Lincoln is the great Emancipator."
>
> "Who does he emancipate?"
>
> "Me," Grissom laughed. "He emancipates the whites from having to give up any of the land they stole. From having to join the human race."[5]

5. Terry Bisson, *Fire on the Mountain,* 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009), 143–44.

Fact Checker, 2019
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches


USA

Circus Circus on 5th Avenue (diptych), 2019
Oil on canvas
72 x 120 inches

What, from the slums
Where they have hemmed you,
What, from the tiny huts
They could not keep from you—
What reaches them
Making them ill at ease, fearful?
Today they shout prohibition at you
"Thou shalt not this"
"Thou shalt not that"
"Reserved for whites only"
You laugh.

One thing they cannot prohibit—
The strong men . . . coming on
The strong men gittin' stronger.
Strong men. . . .
Stronger. . . .

STERLING A. BROWN, "Strong Men" (1931)

IV. Who shows up at 3 AM in the studio?

On a mild March day I interview Arvie in his studio. The windows are open in the attic of the Craftsman bungalow he has lived in for twenty-two years with Julie, his wife, partner, and manager. Their dog, Celebrity, is in the yard below, barking at passersby. I can see the neighboring rooftops from the open window. The room smells of linseed oil and turpentine, mingled with incense.

The attic studio is packed tight. On one wall, above a daybed, is a hunter's shirt and hat from the Dogon people of Mali, given to Arvie by his lifelong friend Omar Cissé of Mopti, Mali. Arvie also has a hunter's whisk given to him by the chief hunter in Soni Cieni, Mali. It is made of boar's tail and used as a scepter, designating a position of power. A rack full of recently finished large canvases takes up one wall. One side of the studio is stacked with art books. A ceramic bowl made by Portland artist Baba Wagué Diakité, one of Arvie's old friends, sits on a table. It is filled with fresh plums, oranges, and pears waiting to be eaten. Scattered throughout the shelves and ledges are souvenirs from Arvie and Julie's African travels, as well as items they've collected that symbolize society's endemic racism: Sambo figures, golliwog dolls, Aunt Jemima and Cream of Wheat labels. Cards from Arvie's early art shows are tacked over a computer desk. His tray of paints sits center stage. A box of oil-paint tubes in various stages of use sits beside his brushes. He uses lunch trays lined with disposable paper palettes for color mixing.

For all the darkness in his paintings and the abundance of objects in the room, Arvie's studio is light-filled and warm. A painter's garret is a hopeful, nostalgic place. It is filled with the pleasant odors of the painter's alchemical art and the accumulated detritus of a lifetime of looking at things. As art historian and critic James Elkins says: "Painting is a bodily art, much closer to itself than mythmaking or even the spidery fantasies of alchemical stories . . . The studio comes before art history: at first painting *is* the illicit scene, and only later a story told about it. Painters don't read about these lurid scenes in some curious book: they live them in everyday life."[6]

We begin by returning to a comment from an earlier conversation. Arvie mentions his late-night painting sessions and who shows up at 3 AM. He says that you need to understand the larger historical context of his exploration to know who is rummaging around the floorboards with him. He gestures to the memorabilia and collectibles, saying, "Even back in Marcus Garvey's time, we were trying to get rid of these universally derogatory images of Black people. You know, I had these as a kid: the cereal box, the cookie jar, the Christ in church. If you think, 'That's what I look like,' you think, 'There's something wrong with me.'" The paint, the brush, and the canvas are the conjuring tools he uses to draw forth the spirits, ghosts, and ghouls that haunt the ether of the American subconscious.

6. James Elkins, *What Painting Is* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 161.

Little Strong Man

The painting *Little Strong Man* is up on the wall and in process in early March. We are looking at the painting in its infancy. The overall palette is one of tertiary pastels. Brownish-mustard, pink-white, peach, and a splash of pistachio form the underlying grid of color that will eventually become deeper and more varied. A man in a striped suit menacingly lords a whip over a naked girl who's trying to cover herself. At this point in the process, the man's race is indeterminate. By the time it's finished, his ginger beard and blond hair will mark him as unequivocally white.

We begin with that figure. Arvie says that he's been thinking about strong men. "Trump loves these strong men, these dictators. They're really awful people. Well, the planters were really awful people. The slaveholders were really awful people." The strong man of the title is a cocky young planter. He stands over the prepubescent girl with an air of unquestioned privilege. The girl is flanked by a priest. She is hemmed in by male power. Arvie draws us toward the church's complicity with oppressive power systems.

When I first see the painting, the girl's skin is a light peach color. She almost seems to be smiling in the underpainting. In the finished painting she is rendered in a dark blue-black. Her fear and shame radiate. Arvie refers to this as the #MeToo of slavery. Young girls and women were used by their white owners. Rape was sanctioned by the church. He calls this the real original sin. "The reason I look the way I do today is the original sin. It was horrific." These stories live in Arvie's familial memory.

The strong men represented by tin-pot dictators like Trump (who appears in a portrait in the attic of the stage set) and the planter are quite different from the strong men in the poem that introduces this section. In another stanza of his poem "Strong Men," not included above, Sterling A. Brown acknowledges this history.

> *They branded you,*
> *They made your women breeders,*
> *They swelled your numbers with bastards. . . .*
> *They taught you the religion they disgraced.*[7]

Brown's strong men are the true powerhouses: they keep coming despite the false strength of the planters, driver men, and politicians.

7. Sterling A. Brown, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, ed. Michael S. Harper, 2nd ed. (Evanston, Ill.: Triquarterly, 1996), 56.

Little Strong Man, 2019
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches

Elements of the Game

Elements of the Game demonstrates Arvie's painterly vocabulary. The painting effortlessly upends our expectations of spatial correctness. The man and the woman at the table playing chess sit impossibly close to each other. Their legs collide, not in an erotic way, but claustrophobically. Rastus (Cream of Wheat) stands behind the Klansman's chair, but he is too small. At first glance, the blonde adolescent girl standing beside the female chess player seems to have two right hands. But when looked at more closely, it's clear that her elbows are bent to align her hands in a particular way. She makes a complex hand gesture revealing sexual excitement as she watches the game being played for the life of the woman's child. It's a game the woman appears to be winning—but chess is a game of deception.

These are not mistakes. This is evidence of a painter at the height of his power. After decades of painting and teaching composition, Arvie is able to riff off of forms and let them out to play when need be. These techniques ask the viewer to do some slow work. Including skewed perspectives or multiple limbs—as he does elsewhere, in works such as *2Up and 2Back* and *Quick Step*—tweaks the viewer's assumptions. It allows for multiple viewpoints to be presented simultaneously.

Arvie's paintings are examples of the "bodily art," as Elkins describes it. Armed with thorough research, a lifetime of experience with painting, and his late-night meditations, Arvie is able to construct images that are rife with meaning but not bound by a single one. Moments like the right hands that *seem* to be doubled, or the crowded, entangled legs, become pleasures that open up multiple doors. And while we're wondering what the anxious Klansman and the single mother are up to, we finally notice a freight car of prison cells rolling by in the background. The elements of the game are very dire indeed.

Elements of the Game, 2019
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches

Saturday Night Fish Fry

Like singers who interpret preexisting songbooks, visual artists have refrains and phrasing that can be repurposed endlessly. Arvie's return to the racist pop-culture imagery of collectibles and memorabilia is certainly an attempt at cleansing. Painting is an exorcism. But from the standpoint of a painter's practice, these images have also become familiar forms that can be stretched and arranged to wear the paint that is the artist's voice. Arvie begins his paintings by covering the canvas with a red ground. The red underpainting serves as a chromatic radiant-heating system. We can speak of colors as "hot" or "cool." A painting by Arvie Smith is heated with an expertly applied palette of warm colors. The heat is both formal in terms of the color and symbolic in terms of cultural signifiers. Subject matter and color merge. The golds, ochers, cadmium reds, and oranges in *Saturday Night Fish Fry* typify this approach. Even the lumbering kelly-green Klansman in the background has contact heat. How different this image would be if it were dominated by cool blues or neutral colors. When I consider the difference between the early stages of *Little Strong Man* and the finished product, the intensity of hue becomes an important signifier. Think about Arvie's use of a hot palette as the phrasing of a musician. Which note they choose to draw out and which to speed along makes all the difference between the sublime and the ridiculous.

Saturday Night Fish Fry, 2006
Oil on canvas
48 x 48 inches

Hopefully you'll see what we've always seen. People actually believe all those stereotypes. All the images of mammy and Cream of Wheat were part of the system of making us the "other." These were supposedly representations of Black people. Those cookie jars I saw as a kid, that was normal. I was just concerned with: How can I get one of those cookies without my grandmother catching me? People used those things day in and day out . . . The image of the slave was the darkie: happy and hypersexual.

ARVIE SMITH, March 18, 2019

Birth of a Nation, 2006
Oil on canvas
48 x 48 inches

Slave in a Box

"I am trying to open a dialogue around these derogatory images. What makes them continue? Why do we need these?" Arvie says. "In order to separate the workers they had to come up with a concept of white people. White people didn't exist before 1681. They were invented to divide the workforce. It didn't elevate the white folks; it made a new bottom—us."[8] In *Slave in a Box*, Arvie continues to expose the ubiquitous corporate symbols that have become so familiar in our commercial landscape, we forget their origins. The Colonel from Kentucky Fried Chicken is a not-quite-rehabilitated plantation owner; Rastus and Aunt Jemima represent comfort food, visual holdovers from the dream of the beloved and benign house slave. Images comprise the artist's basic grammar. The roles of the sacred and the profane are always at odds in fine art. The profane image-world of our daily lives is punctuated with derogatory stereotypes. One might hope to make aspirational imagery, but the vulgar reflects our on-the-ground reality. There is power in the muck of commercial images. This is Arvie's *prima materia*.

8. This is a reference to Bacon's Rebellion, an early racially unified rebellion by workers against landowners in Virginia. The uprising led to the implementation of new race laws in 1681.

Slave in a Box, 2004
Oil on canvas
60 x 68 inches

Honkie Tonk

I live next to the tennis courts at Irving Park. The park was once part of the heart of the African American community in Portland. A group of older men have been playing tennis there together for decades. One of the most instructive matches I've ever seen was between a young man and a regular—a heavyset man in his late sixties. The young man, muscular and cocky, played wildly. With twisting motions and grunting effort, he crisscrossed the court, looking like a character in one of Arvie's paintings. The older man stood back as if he were holding court, putting the ball exactly where he wanted it. He hardly broke a sweat. Looking at the work of an artist with the experience that Arvie has is like watching that match. Arvie knows just where to put the paint. He knows composition inside and out.

Composition is the spatial framework of a painting. A painter who can't compose is doomed, no matter how electric their technical prowess might be. In Asian traditions, compositional philosophy tends to center the image. In European traditions, a premium is put on dynamism. Arvie has explored the history of European painting deeply. One of his go-to role models is the muralist Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975). Benton, like Robert Colescott and the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974), and José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949), used compartmentalization as a pictorial strategy in his paintings. In his epic murals chronicling American life, Benton could seem almost too frenetic. But he knew how to create compartments within the larger composition. This is how Arvie approaches his canvases. Notice how the dancer's outstretched hands become the architectural dividers of discrete sections. The microclimates in the painting have their own compositional logic. The upper left-hand corner is its own cell, very much like the panel of a comic. The man in the foreground serves to move the viewer from outside the painting into the picture plane.

In the hands of a less talented artist, this amount of information would overwhelm. In Arvie's pictures, each section has its own beat. In the documentary *Triumph of the Underdog,* Dannie Richmond, the drummer for jazz bassist Charles Mingus, spoke about trying to impress his would-be boss with his wild drumming. Mingus said to his young acolyte, "When you walk into a room, do you just start yelling *rarrrrarara*?" waving his arms wildly. "No, you say, hello, my name is . . . and you build from there." Whether placing a ball or keeping a beat, Arvie has the touch.

Honkie Tonk, 2015
Oil on canvas
68 x 78 inches

Frederick Douglass

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
this man, superb in love and logic, this man
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

ROBERT HAYDEN (1966)

V. *I know you*, I used to be you

Artists play multiple roles in our culture. They hold an inner vision and speak truth to the world. This is what's going on during the 3 AM hauntings in the studio, waiting to see who shows up. It's the alchemical work of the conjurer—at once lonely and strangely comforting. Quiet work, dedicated work. Paint, and watch, and listen, in order to speak to the spirit world. The next requirement is to leave the solace, to let image and voice join the larger cultural song. Here, images and ideas meet the grist. And for those artists willing to extend further, it is the act of mentor and teacher. This outreach requires empathy—putting one's own vision aside so as to truly connect with other artists.

Arvie taught at the Pacific Northwest College of Art for over twenty years. Several generations of working artists count him as their principal inspiration. His students are fortunate to have worked with such a master painter. Arvie holds himself elegantly. He is over six feet tall and always dresses with style. He regularly wears a trim vest of mud cloth that was made in Mali, where he and Julie worked for many years with the Ko-Falen Cultural Center. His long hands clack with beaded bracelets as he gesticulates. He often sports a wide-brimmed leather hat and a long leather jacket. He is apt to stand back and let the little red roosters and the showboats pop off before wading in. When he does wade in, it is with a quiet authority that draws attention to his own well-earned gravitas. There is a tendency among white male professors to perform a kind of "working-class hero" persona. The uniform consists of a black T-shirt, worn blue jeans, and black boots or Stan Smiths. There's something to be said for someone who dresses not as his long-passed teenage self, but as the respected elder he is. I taught with Arvie for many years at PNCA. I can remember walking past his one-on-one critiques. He would sit beside the student, leaning in toward them no matter what level they were at, and speaking to them as an equal. Even in casual conversation with Arvie, what seems to be still, reflected water soon reveals incredible depths.

The Hustler, 2019
Oil on canvas
40 x 30 inches

Listen Up, 2019
Oil on canvas
40 x 30 inches

Forgotten Dreams, 2019
Oil on canvas
40 x 30 inches

There are other students who benefit even more from Arvie's mentorship. "The [education] system is designed for you to stay behind," he tells them. These are the kids who link Arvie's past to his present. Arvie spent thirteen years working with Self-Enhancement, Inc., an organization devoted to guiding underserved youth that's located near his North Portland home. Beginning in the late 1960s, the city undertook an urban renewal project in North Portland that razed hundreds of middle-class Black homes to make room for a hospital, a highway extension, and a sports arena. The community never fully recovered. SEI was founded in 1981 as a basketball camp in response to this weakening of the communal fabric, but has since grown into an organization offering meaningful year-round programs: after-school classes, educational support, community outreach. Arvie was uniquely suited to work with these students. His first career was as a counselor. His own background gave him a window into their needs. Arvie describes working with the kids at SEI and seeing some of the same kids at Jefferson, the high school a few blocks from his studio. "I see a kid [at SEI] and he's doing good, and he's glowing. At Jefferson, this kid is having a problem. I think, *I know you*, I used to be you."

Project Hope

Arvie created the collective Project Hope using funds set aside by Oregon's Percent for Art program. The project showcased the artwork of more than a hundred of the teenagers detained at Portland's Donald E. Long Juvenile Detention Center for committing Measure 11 crimes from 2007 to 2009. Measure 11 was passed in 1994 during a craze for draconian crime bills. It was a "one strike and you're out" bill. Juveniles fifteen years old and over were charged as adults. The consequences of this reactive, fearful surge of crime bills are still being felt today. Communities were gutted as they lost a generation of adolescents whose youthful mistakes removed them from their families during one of the most formative times of their lives. Being in the same space as these young men had an impact on Arvie, who says, "I was always aware I could go home at night." The goal of the project was to channel all of the diverted creativity and will of the incarcerated youth into something approaching hope. One thinks of Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem":

> What happens to a dream deferred?
>
> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore—
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over—
> like a syrupy sweet?
>
> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.
>
> *Or does it explode?*[9]

Whether teaching college students, kids in after-school mural programs, or incarcerated youth, Arvie always comes from the same foundation. "For education, you get the fundamentals. I think you need to know how to draw. You need to know formal issues and how to put things together. But what I really try to get at with these students: What's your purpose? How do you get people to their own truth?" One of his students in Project Hope had a reason to use those drawing tools. He asked Arvie, "Can you help me do a drawing where I fly out of that window?"

9. Langston Hughes, "Harlem," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 426.

Project Hope mural, 2010
Donald E. Long Juvenile Detention Center, Portland, Oregon

Still We Rise

It has been a long road for Arvie since he first looked out his own window under Miss Brenner's watch. He's received a rapid series of accolades and recognition. In 2016 he was given an APEX exhibition at the Portland Art Museum. The exhibition put two of his most powerful works front and center: *Strange Fruit* (1992) and *Hands Up Don't Shoot* (2015). The two paintings bookend a long-running story that was now throbbing like a raw wound in the public consciousness: the direct line from Jim Crow lynchings to present-day police brutality. The APEX show coincided with a contentious political year. Since 2015, Black Lives Matter and other movements calling for racial parity and justice have emerged with fiery vigor. Several high-profile murders of Black men at the hands of police spotlighted the long history of racial violence in the United States. It was the end of Barack Obama's hopeful two-term presidency. We were balancing on a pin. The first African American president could be followed by either the first woman president or a regression to the ugliest of America's reactionary, racist tendencies. At the time, we assumed we'd take two steps up. Instead, we took two steps back.

If the broader art world had been sidestepping Arvie for years, it had now caught up with him. The painter Kerry James Marshall's massive multi-city retrospective *Mastry* caught the attention of the wider culture when it opened in 2016. Marshall's historically infused Black figuration became the standard-bearer for a new generation of African American figurative painters, including Amy Sherald and Kehinde Wiley, who were chosen to paint the official portraits of Michelle and Barack Obama. In 2017, Oregon Governor Kate Brown awarded Arvie the prestigious Governor's Arts Award.

Arvie's work proves prescient. In a February 12, 2018, article in the *New York Times*, artist Dushko Petrovich writes,

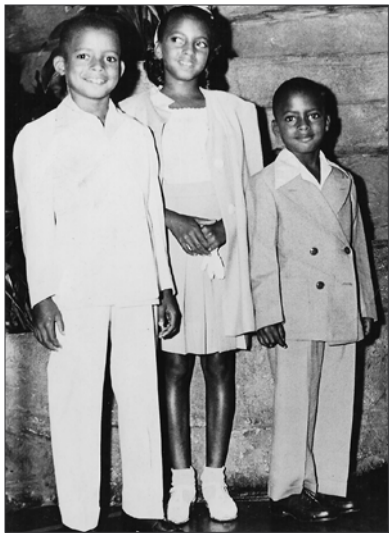
> And there is another reason for figurative paintings' resurgence as well: We live in a time in which reality is almost daily warped in ways that were unimaginable even 18 months ago. We have swiftly entered an era where the very notion of truth, or facts, is considered fungible. As we reassess the various power structures that landed us here, it is stabilizing and reassuring to look at the work of an artist who is clearly in control of her craft, who is able to depict a reality that is material and grounded in recognition—of seeing, in the Facebook age, a painting that looks like who it is meant to.[10]

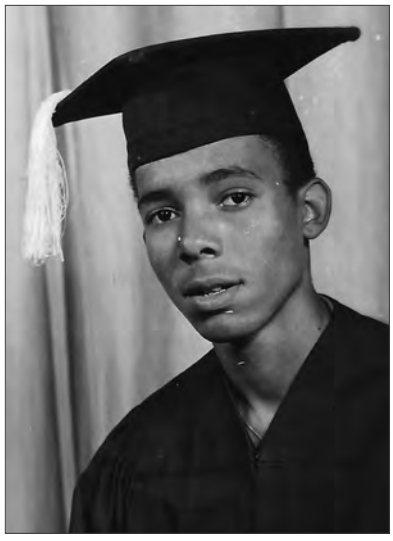
In 2018, Arvie created two large-scale public commissions in North Portland. *Still We Rise* graces the wall of Natural Grocers on NE Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. The Garlington Health Center mural, titled *Albina My Albina*, is a more modestly scaled piece located several blocks down the boulevard on a side street, NE Morris. Both works prominently celebrate the African American community that thrived in North Portland. They act as telegraph poles at two ends of the thoroughfare, connected to one another and constantly, stubbornly transmitting the fact that the people who lived here cannot be erased. Society may have taken two steps back, but the murals' message reverberates through the city: "Still we rise."

DANIEL DUFORD is an artist, curator, writer, and teacher. He tells stories drawn from North American history and mythology. He is a 2019 John Simon Guggenheim Fellow, a 2010 Hallie Ford Fellow, and a recipient of a 2012 Art Matters grant. His work has been shown nationally at such venues as the Orange County Museum of Art, MASS MoCA, the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, the Bellevue Arts Museum, and the Boise Art Museum. He has held residencies at the MacDowell Colony, Crow's Shadow Institute of the Arts, and Ash Street Project, among others. Duford has taught at Reed College and the Pacific Northwest College of Art. He currently teaches at Portland Community College, Rock Creek.

10. Dushko Petrovich, "The New Face of Portrait Painting," *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, February 12, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/12/t-magazine/portrait-art-painting.html.

Still We Rise, 2018
Porcelain on steel
15 x 24 feet





ARVIE SMITH: A CHRONOLOGY

COMPILED BY
ARVIE SMITH &
JULIE KERN SMITH

1938
Born on September 26 to Eola Page and Connie Smith Jr. in Houston, Texas, the second of three children.

1941
After his parents separate, moves to Roganville in Jasper County, Texas, with his mother and his siblings, Iris and Charles. Lives with his grandparents and great-grandmother—she was African and Native American and had been born a slave in South Carolina.

1943
Attends George Washington Page School in Clear Creek, Texas, a separate but equal all-Black school founded by his grandfather. Primary grades meet in a one-room schoolhouse and are taught by his grandmother. His grandfather serves as the principal and the teacher at the high school, which is housed in the church.

Uses copper tooling to make an image of his horse, for which his great-grandmother gives him high praise. His grandfather gives him a book on Michelangelo, which he copies almost cover to cover.

His mother moves to Los Angeles to look for work and create a home for Arvie and his siblings.

1948
Moves to South Central Los Angeles with his siblings to join their mother.

Attends all-Black schools, beginning with the 20th Street Grammar School. Participates in the Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, and Sea Scouts over the course of several years. Mr. Bess from the Boy Scouts takes a special interest in him and becomes a father figure.

Miss Brenner, Arvie's grade-school art teacher, tells him, "Draw the people you see outside the window."

1954
Moves with his family to East 42nd Place. The Dunbar Hotel, a historic chitlin' circuit venue, stands across the alley, marking the heart of the Los Angeles blues and jazz scene. Prostitutes and pimps gather on the lawn outside Arvie's home. At night, he and his friends peer through an opening in the security door to see the likes of Ike and Tina Turner and B. B. King perform.

Joins a neighborhood gang made up of athletes. Converts from the Baptist faith to Catholicism.

1955
Exhibits art at a nearby Black-owned bank in a one-person show organized by his best friend's mother. The priest from his family parish attends the show and, in response to a painting titled *The Whipping Post*, says, "Don't you think that's been done enough?"

1956
Is injured during his senior year in a gang-related encounter. With the help of his teacher Mama Campbell, he manages to complete his coursework while in the hospital so he can graduate with his class. Graduates from Jefferson High School.

Approaches the admissions office at Otis Art Institute to apply for admission. He is told by the front-desk receptionist, "We don't need your kind here." Enrolls at Los Angeles City College instead, taking classes in art, psychology, and sociology. Works as a hospital orderly.

1958
Marries Mildred Prescott and has two children, Seth (Kevin) and Kim. Marriage ends in 1963.

1958–60
Responds to matchbook ad for Famous Artists School and is accepted into program. For $300, receives three books and monthly critiques by mail. Works as a mailman and janitor.

1966
Marries Mazie Dyson and has twin children, Mark and Mario. Marriage ends in 1971.

Takes night classes in art at UCLA. Is accepted into and completes psychiatric technician training program through state mental hospital. Works as trainee at same hospital.

1971
Moves to Venice Beach.

1972
Leaves the Los Angeles area and moves to Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco. Travels north up the West Coast, living in communes in the Lower Fraser Valley, British Columbia, and in Moyie Springs, Idaho. Paints portraits at a pub in Port Coquitlam, BC.

1976
Settles in Portland, Oregon, and works as a psychiatric aide and counselor in a hospital, a drug and alcohol treatment program, and a residential youth treatment program.

1980
Meets co-worker Julie Kern while working at Parrott Creek Ranch as a youth counselor.

1981
Studies flute and ballet and performs with liturgical dance troupe.

1982
Accepted into the Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), where admissions director Bonnie Laing-Malcolmson says his portfolio is the best she's ever seen. Studies under Gordon Gilkey, Anne Johnson, Paul Missal, Sherrie Wolf, and Christy Wyckoff, who become major influences on his art and approach to teaching, as well as lifelong friends.

1984
Meets Robert Colescott at his lecture at PNCA and connects with him occasionally until Colescott's death in 2009. Colescott introduces him to the Phyllis Kind Gallery in New York City. Colescott's focus on issues of race and identity, and his manipulation of space and form to visualize ideas and emotion in his paintings, resonate with Smith and reinforce his own use of expressionistic interpretation rather than realistic representation in his paintings.

1985
Studies painting at Studio Arts Center International (SACI) in Florence, Italy, with abstract expressionist Jules Maidoff. Develops a lifelong friendship with Maidoff. Serves as a teaching assistant in printmaking. Studies printmaking at Il Bisonte and makes prints at director's studio in Fiesole. During winter break, travels from Sicily to Tunisia by boat. Kisses the ground of Africa when he disembarks.

1986
Graduates with a BFA from the Pacific Northwest College of Art. He is the first African American to graduate from the school in its seventy-seven years.

Marries Julie Kern. Teaches painting in PNCA's extension program and works as a house painter.

1989
Paints *Boys Night Out*, based on the fatal beating of Mulugeta Seraw by three white supremacists in Portland, Oregon, in 1988.

1990
Is admitted to the MFA program at the LeRoy E. Hoffberger School of Painting at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) as a Philip Morris Fellow. Becomes a teaching assistant to Grace Hartigan, abstract expressionist and then director of the Hoffberger School. Arvie admires Hartigan for the visual and emotional power of her work and her devotion to her art, and is honored by her interest in his work.

Leslie King-Hammond, dean of the graduate program, introduces Arvie to artists David Hammons, Lowery Sims, Joyce Scott, and Elizabeth Talford Scott. He meets Berrisford Boothe, who also studied at MICA.

1992–95
Exhibits at numerous venues in Maryland, including the School 33 Art Center, the University of Maryland, the Howard County Center for the Arts, and the Rockville Art Center, with curators Leslie King-Hammond and Eleanor Heartney.

1993–94
Accompanies Grace Hartigan to her summer home in Maine. Makes frequent visits to SoHo in Manhattan and stays at Hartigan's apartment on Mott Street.

Meets artist Bob Blackburn. Visits Blackburn's printmaking studio in New York City and is offered the opportunity to work with him in a residency.

Meets journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault, who visits his studio, begins collecting his work, and extends an invitation for Arvie to stay at her home in uptown Manhattan. Hunter-Gault coordinates the in-home sale of Arvie's works to a close circle of collectors. She delivers his painting *Everlast* (1993) to Nelson Mandela in Freetown, South Africa, as a birthday present.

1993

Solo exhibition at 55 Mercer Street Gallery in SoHo, reviewed by Eleanor Heartney in *Art in America*. With Julie's help, Arvie transports work from Baltimore to New York City in a U-Haul truck. Sally Lawrence, then president of PNCA, attends the opening and asks Arvie to deliver that year's graduation address.

Arvie meets artist Alison Saar and works on *Catfish Dreamin'*.

1994–95

Teaches painting in the BFA program at MICA.

1994

Meets Ntozake Shange at a poetry reading. Creates *Crack Annie*, an expressionistic painting based on Shange's poem of the same name.

Has a solo exhibition at Temple University Gallery, curated by Grace Hartigan and reviewed by Eleanor Heartney.

1995

Returns to Portland to resume long-term involvement with PNCA as a member of the painting faculty despite Grace Hartigan's discouragement. She advises Arvie not to leave Baltimore to go to a city with a weak art market, saying, "You'll be a big fish in a little pond."

Holds a faculty position in PNCA's painting department from 1995 to 2014.

1995–2009

Exhibits in Portland-based galleries, including Beppu Wiarda, Blackfish, Quartersaw, and Alysia Duckler. Beppu Wiarda, which represented Arvie, closes in 2009. To this day, Arvie has been unable to find gallery representation in Portland.

1995

Selected to participate in the Oregon Biennial at the Portland Art Museum.

1996

Arvie's work is shown in *Artscape: A Fifteen-Year Survey of Baltimore Art*, curated by George Ciscle.

2005–12

Travels to West Africa to study the slave castles of Ghana and Senegal with a grant from the Regional Arts and Culture Council (RACC). Meets up with fellow Portland artists Baba Wagué Diakité and Ronna Neuenschwander, who are visiting family in Bamako, Mali. Becomes a founding board member of the Ko-Falen Cultural Center, serving artists' families in a neighborhood outside of Bamako. Journeys extensively throughout Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Ghana, and Guinea. This travel provides validation and reinforces a belief in genetic memory.

2005

Baltimore curator George Ciscle comes to Portland for a studio visit and discussion about a future residency with MICA, in association with the Maryland Historical Society and the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture.

2007–8

Serves as resident artist for *At Freedom's Door: Challenging Slavery in Maryland* at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum and the Maryland Historical Society. Creates the painting *Baltimore My Baltimore* (2008), now held by the Lewis Museum. PNCA president Tom Manley visits Baltimore and invites Arvie to present the exhibition at PNCA.

Meets Myrtis Bedolla, who is studying at MICA.

2008–9

Is commissioned by RACC to work with Measure 11 youth, predominantly youth of color, who are serving time at the Donald E. Long Juvenile Detention Center. Works on Project Hope with over a hundred youth to create five major works. These murals are currently displayed in the Multnomah County Courthouse and at the detention center.

2011

One of the murals created in Project Hope is displayed in *Walls of Heritage, Walls of Pride: African American Murals* at the Oregon Historical Society in Portland.

2013

Arvie's work is featured in *Highlights of the Lewis Museum* at Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport.

Myrtis Bedolla invites Arvie to be represented by Galerie Myrtis in Baltimore.

2014
Retires from PNCA, professor emeritus.

2015
Receives award for Outstanding Performance Outside the Profession from the Oregon Art Education Association.

Creates the painting *Hands Up Don't Shoot* based on the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri.

2016–17
Work is shown in a solo APEX exhibition at the Portland Art Museum (PAM), curated by Bonnie Laing-Malcolmson. PAM acquires *Strange Fruit* (1992).

Reconnects with Berrisford Boothe, principal curator for the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art. Boothe acquires work by Arvie that is shown in PAM's *Constructing Identity* exhibition. Meets Lewis Tanner Moore and begins a friendship with him.

2017
Receives Oregon Governor's Arts Award for Lifetime Achievement, for which he was nominated by the Portland Art Museum. Is commissioned by the City of Portland to create a mural for Portland's Soul District, entitled *Still We Rise*.

Receives Culture of Caring Award from Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare in recognition of his community development and advocacy.

2018
Delivers commencement speech and receives an honorary doctorate in art from the Pacific Northwest College of Art.

Is commissioned by Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare to create a mural in the Albina neighborhood: *Albina My Albina*.

2019–20
Linda Tesner curates two solo exhibitions of his work: *2Up and 2Back* at Disjecta Contemporary Art Center, and *2Up 2Back II* at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University. A grant from The Ford Family Foundation funds the exhibitions and catalog.

Creates the painting *Circus Circus on 5th Avenue* in response to the increase in racial divisiveness throughout the United States.

He is invited to show at Willamette University's Hallie Ford Museum of Art in January 2021.

Receives a fellowship from the Ground Beneath Us, an art fellowship and residency program in Waterford, Virginia, with an exhibition planned for 2020.

Myrtis Bedolla introduces Arvie to printmaker Curlee Raven Holton of Raven Editions, who agrees to print *Dem Golden Slippers* (2007).

CHRONOLOGY PHOTOS

page 74
left: Arvie Smith, Houston, Texas
center: Arvie, Iris, and Charles Smith at Clifton's Restaurant in Los Angeles, California, Easter Sunday, 1950
right: Arvie Smith, high school graduation, Los Angeles, California, 1956

page 75
left: Arvie Smith and Julie Kern Smith, Baltimore, Maryland, 1992
right: Arvie Smith, 2006

page 76
left: Arvie Smith and Julie Kern Smith, Portland, Oregon
right: Arvie Smith, Sahara desert, Mali, Africa, 2008

page 77
Arvie Smith in his studio, Portland, Oregon, 2018 (photo by Intisar Abioto)

Arvie Smith, 2018
photo by Intisar Abioto

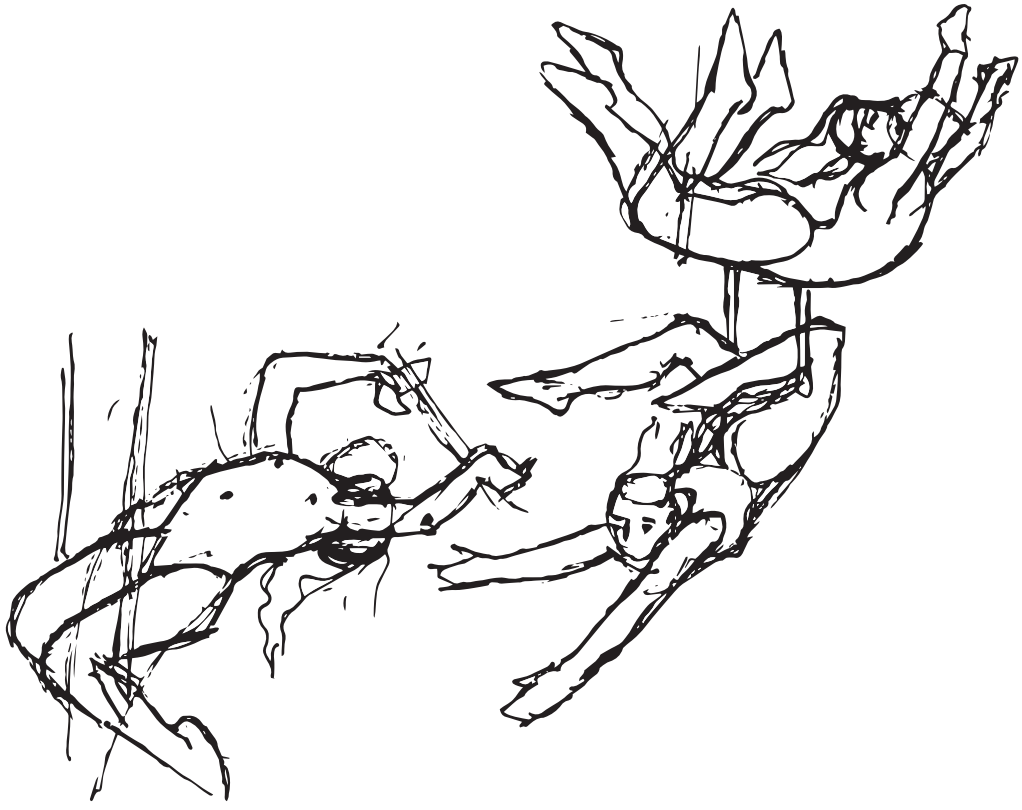
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As an octogenarian, I spend more time than ever before identifying influences and guides in my life and experiencing a deep sense of gratitude for them. In 2017, while preparing comments for the memorial service for Sally Lawrence, former president of Pacific Northwest College of Art and an essential figure in my career as an arts educator, I started to internalize the notion that none of us get to where we are on our own. I thought the making of art was a solitary act, but what about those other people who came into my life and stayed with me, even after our physical selves had parted? What about my great-grandmother Harriet, born a slave; my grandmother Hattie, a teacher at the separate but equal school; my grandfather George, founder of a Black separate but equal school, as well as a college professor and farmer; and my mother, Eola, who encouraged me from the start? My sister, Iris; my brother, Charles; my aunts; my children; and my nieces and nephews always hearten me. My teachers—Miss Brenner, Mr. Bess, Grace Hartigan, Anne Johnson, Gordon Gilkey, Paul Missal, and many others—continue to challenge and urge me on. There are my students, who taught me how to be a better teacher. My African ancestors and their culture, resilience, and beauty give me my reason to paint. Viewers of my work, patrons, advocates, representatives, and friends are always looking for hope in my work, and, on a good day, help me to find it. And not least on this list is my loving wife, Julie, who tends my career, keeps me on track, provides me emotional support, and helps me understand the white perspective. My regrets to all who have not been mentioned here, for on any given day, they are with me too.

Acknowledgments for this book start with curator Linda Tesner, who believed in me and my work, leading to the *2Up and 2Back* exhibitions and this book. Abounding gratitude to her for her vision of what could be and her tireless leadership in bringing it into a reality far beyond my expectations. My colleague Daniel Duford, a brilliant painter and writer, is the lead writer for this book and the bellwether who has championed this project from the very beginning. Berrisford Boothe, a gifted artist, educator, curator, and lecturer, has provided a luminous narrative to accompany my paintings, one that could not be replicated and will forever elevate my work to its ultimate potential. Tracy Schlapp, book designer and masterful architect of this catalog, moved us to "yes" at every turn. Julie played an instrumental role in advising, critiquing, and researching to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of this book. Allison Dubinsky served as our skillful editor. Blake Shell and Disjecta Contemporary Art Center came forward to provide the most spectacular venue for and presentation of my most recent work. Credit goes to Linda Tesner and the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University for continuing *2Up and 2Back* with an exhibition of my earlier work. Kandis Nunn and Carol Dalu and The Family Ford Foundation provided funding for this project. It's hard for me to parcel out acknowledgment and thanks, for without the entirety of people's belief in me, without their support and inspiration, I would not be where I stand today.

Thank you to everyone.

—Arvie Smith



Arvie Smith: 2Up and 2Back

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Interior illustrations: Arvie Smith, studies for *Circus Circus on 5th Avenue*, ink drawings

This book was made possible through a generous grant from The Ford Family Foundation, and was published to coincide with two exhibitions in Portland, Oregon: *2Up and 2Back* at Disjecta Contemporary Art Center, December 8, 2019–February 2, 2020; and the companion show *Arvie Smith: 2Up 2Back II* at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University, March 5, 2020–May 16, 2020.

Hands Up Don't Shoot **is Arvie Smith's response to the recent high-profile shootings of Black males by police in the United States, particularly the 2014 shooting of a Black youth by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. In incidents such as these, law enforcement agents have used a level of force that hasn't been seen publicly since the civil rights movement. This painting exemplifies and distills Smith's ongoing interrogation of the image world of contemporary America. Here, the repression, violence, and rigged systems that characterize our culture are on full display. The exhibition** ***2Up and 2Back*** **follows the trajectory of Smith's picture-conjuring practice, as well as the uneven, frustrated path of African Americans throughout history—just when a high point is achieved, someone emerges from the wings to yank it away. In the face of it all, Smith displays both incendiary pictorial beauty and biting humor.**

Front cover: *2Up and 2Back*, 2019, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches
Above: *Hands Up Don't Shoot*, 2015, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches