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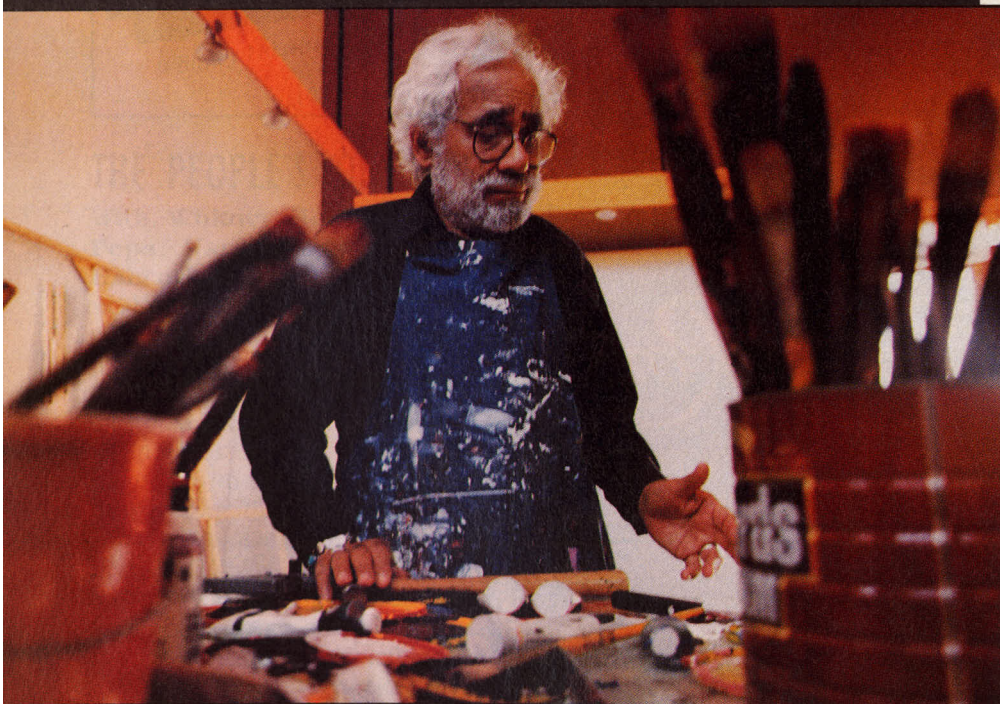
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"The Star: A View From the Pinnacle," by Robert Colescott

ROBERT COLESCOTT ROCKS THE BOAT

by Sharon Fitzgerald



Colescott in his studio in Tucson, Ariz.

When the 47th Venice Biennale commences in mid-June, the U.S. pavilion will offer the world's oldest, most prestigious festival a display of 18 artworks by Robert Colescott. At the last three Biennales, the United States awarded this opportunity for solo exhibition to sculptors. The 71-year-old Colescott is the first painter to represent the United States since Jasper Johns was chosen in 1988, and he is the first African American.

"It is obviously a great honor to be selected. I have that feeling," Colescott says. "I also have a hard time internalizing it in terms of what it means to me.

a symbol of American heroism and replacing it with a cavorting crew of smilin', strummin' and swiggin' minstrels, Colescott had unwittingly unleashed a maelstrom.

"To tell the truth, everybody has liked it and everybody has disliked it," says Colescott. "And those are different people at different times. You get some people who didn't like it at the beginning, and they ended up liking it at the end, and there are some people who liked it in the beginning and didn't like it later on. It has been a crisscrossing and overlapping of people.

"When I first got the idea for that painting, I thought that everybody would get it. I just thought, This is ridiculous; this is funny. There is a layer about

I have gone through so many things—ups and downs. This time, when it's all positive, I really don't know how to deal with it. So I just go day by day and try to do things that people ask me to do, if I think it's appropriate."

When asked what message he thinks his art will convey to this international audience, his response is unequivocal: "Change is constant."

It has been 22 years since Colescott painted "George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page From an American History Textbook" (1975) and set sail upon a tumultuous sea of artistic notoriety. To the image-conscious mainstream art world, his blackfaced recasting of the 19th-century painting by Emanuel Leutz was a satiric thunderbolt, directed not only at a revered icon of the American Revolution but at the high-brow realm of masterworks. Among the image-conscious, stereotype-sensitive guardians of black art, there was mutinous appreciation, but also respect-yourself concern that Colescott's penchant for tomfoolery veered into treacherous waters.

Hovering at the horizon were unsettling questions about the vision of artists and the domination of satire. Who is impressed by caricature—culture's elite or its disenfranchised? By ousting



"El Tango," 1995.

ROBERT COLESCOTT

tokenism and another about education, and everybody will get it. It never occurred to me that there would be those who wouldn't get it and who might even take offense at it. I just did it with the assumption that this was going to be my historical painting, my bicentennial statement about American history."

Those who "got it" lauded Colescott's daring double-entendres, his manipulation of images meant to insult and demean. Detractors remained unconvinced that fusing racist images with social commentary could diminish the meanspiritedness of such portraits. Remarkably, the artist's reservations cut both ways. "I never painted them with that in mind, that I was offering somebody salvation or offering somebody something to laugh at or to be sad about or anything," he explains. "I just did it as an expression of myself."

"These works became popular because they challenged you. They challenged you to understand them or get mad—one of the two. People dealt with that dichotomy, I think, from a very intelligent and responsive platform."

"It ['GWC'] took on controversial dimensions, which over the long haul is good. That painting has been shown so much. In fact, it has been overexposed. There are a lot of people who don't even know the original painting, 'George Washington Crossing the Delaware.' That ain't bad, in a certain funny, backwards way. If some people had their way, they would have burned it up, and it would have never had a chance."

Although focused on his current work, the artist seems scrupulously aware that the paintings he created between 1975 and 1985 piloted viewers into a tempest. In addition to "GWC," his appropriations during that period included renderings of Van Gogh's "The Potato Eaters" (titled "Eat Dem Taters," 1975), Manet's "Déjeuner sur l'Herbe" (titled "Sunday Afternoon with Joaquin Murieta," 1980) and Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger" (titled "Les Demoiselles d'Alabama," 1985).

"The homage to another artist has always existed," Colescott says. "The idea is that you make a painting that says basically the same thing the artist of the original work has said, but you honor him by wanting to redo the painting."

"Appropriation, as I cast it, is more about taking over a painting and putting it to a very different use

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or giving it a very different meaning than the original artist has done. It may even be contrary to the thread of meaning in that original work. In a sense, I would steal the painting—the idea and the look of it—and put it to my own use."

It was the untouchable nature, the status, bestowed on certain artworks that helped him target the subjects for his transformations. "How could I stand looking at all this high art?" he asks. "And so I made it low. I undermined that art; it was a subversive act. In order to do that to its maximum, I had to pick out artworks that were accepted as important politically or artistically. They represented a certain kind of artwork that we were supposed to admire."

"What I did was to take something that is admirable, mess it up, and make you question everything that the artwork stood for."

Colescott rattled the status quo with each shocking juxtaposition. On the surface, his work might appear ironic, if not humorous. But beneath its veneer of paint-box colors awaits an edgy sardonicism. For example, America's sly emasculations were reversed in "Shirley Temple Black and Bill Robinson White" (1980), which depicts the beloved moppet as a young black girl, pertly shooting the breeze with a white field hand.

"People always deal with the narrative," says midwestern art dealer George N'namdi, "but what drew me to Colescott's work was that they are good paintings. 'If you took away the subject and narrative, looked at them as though they were abstract paintings, they would be very good. They are strong, bold, colors, forms—all those things are impressive.'"

"I am a painter," Colescott says. "I express myself through painting. And I tackle different things at different times, although I must say that my focus has stayed steady on the dynamics of race and identity and race as part of the mainstream, the main currents of this society."

"I think it has been about identity and about pride and coming to grips with the way we are perceived, as opposed to the way we are. In myself, I think that is something that worked its way out through experience, but it worked its way out through experience in the painting, too."

"Those paintings broke ground. Now you have a lot of painters—and not only painters, but filmmakers, choreographers and many others in all fields of



"Arabs: The Emir of Iswid (How Wide the Gulf)," 1992.

art—who are dealing with prejudice and stereotyping from the same platform. I did it first.

"All the race-engendered Broadway shows, the novels—all of this stuff might not have happened if I had not broken down the barriers so that we could look at all this foolish stuff and realize that it had to do with white people rather than black people. There are still people who are struggling with it, but there are an awful lot of artists, and most of them younger, who have taken up where I left off. And I left off 20 years ago."

Colescott was a first-generation Californian, born in Oakland in 1925. His parents migrated West from New Orleans in 1919, following his father's tour of service with the 92nd Division in France during World

War I. "I think they made a false start in Los Angeles and then moved to Oakland," Colescott recalls, "partly because my dad was working for the Southern Pacific, and the commissary headquarters was there."

The movement of blacks into this region did not truly progress until the 1950s, however, and Colescott remembers the loneliness he experienced in his youth. The nearest black family lived several blocks away. Desolate in the beginning, the area in which the Colescotts lived was eventually settled by whites, who blocked any further entrance of blacks by establishing neighborhood covenants. When Colescott's grandparents attempted to move nearby, a court order forced them to relocate.

"There were some black institutions," recalls

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Colescott. "There were some churches, and there was a black neighborhood in West Oakland, but we didn't live in that neighborhood. Having a car was extremely important, because we could go where our friends and relatives were. We depended on those relationships a great deal.

"Sometimes on Sundays we would visit Sargent Johnson, who was a friend of my dad. They worked together on the dining car. He was the first artist I ever knew, so I was really impressed by this man who always had some sculpture going on at his house.

"The black community in Oakland was still fairly tight, and people turned inward because they were isolated. I can't say exactly how all of that affected me, although I know that there was a high level of discomfort at times because I felt isolated from most of the kids I was playing with.

"I don't think that a day goes by when I don't think about that. How did that environment influence me and frighten me and make me want to belong to the wrong club? I felt that it was not an easy place to be for us."

He attended the University of California at Berkeley, where he studied history, political science and languages with the intention of finding a job in the foreign service. When a professor informed him that his race would make a career in the field unlikely, Colescott decided to pursue the unlikelihood that he most desired. He refocused his attentions on art and art history.

He received his bachelor's degree from Berkeley in 1949 and moved to Paris, where for a year he studied with the French master Fernand Léger. "He was a man of few words," says Colescott, "but the spare criticisms, critiques, that he gave all added up to telling you his feelings about monumentalism—about this big, simple structure of a painting, these large simple forms, strong outlines, a few pure colors, and the use of neutrals, like grays and whites and blacks.

"When I got there in '49, I was working in a geometric, abstract way. I'd had teachers at Berkeley who had influenced me in that direction. Léger would not look at that stuff. He had been an abstract painter for a while, but he felt that it didn't communicate ideas to people. I really listened to him, and I thought, Well, I want the man's attention, and so I am going to work with the figure again."

Upon returning to California, Colescott earned a master's degree at Berkeley and spent the next few years teaching art in the Pacific Northwest. For 43

years he juggled the demands made by teaching and by his own artwork. He was Regents' Professor of Art at the University of Arizona when he retired from teaching in 1995.

"My first teaching job was seventh grade, up in Seattle," he says. "The one thing I really knew was that I was not a teacher, I was an artist, and that the only difference was that

the artist does the work. So I would come home from teaching and become like Superman going into the phone booth: I would take off my suit and tie, put on my jeans and my beret and my sandals. After dinner I'd go down to my basement studio and paint until 2 and 3 in the morning. I accepted the fact that I taught, but I wouldn't accept the fact of being a teacher.

"I wanted to solve the problems of paint. I kept trying to learn how to use my brush with some sense of strength and energy and personality, and so I painted all kinds of things: I painted figures, I painted still lifes, I painted flowers, I painted landscapes. I just painted everything."

In 1964, he was selected to be an artist-in-residence at the American Research Center in Cairo, Egypt. When the appointment ended in 1965, he remained in Egypt and taught at the American University until the Six-Day War forced him to leave the country in 1967. He retreated to Paris and remained there for four years. Still, the time spent drenched in the richness of Africa, during which he had witnessed both culture and light, had transformed him.

"I felt freer in Egypt and more involved with ideas about culture and cultural overlays," he recalls. "There were experiences there that I thought were fundamental to my art and my identity. Some very positive things happened to me. Walking down the streets in Cairo was to be walking among people like myself. Everybody—the president of the country and on down—was a person of color.

"In terms of art, I was looking at 3,000 years of art history, and it was the art history of people of color. I came into contact with the narrative form because Egyptian art had a strong narrative sense to it; it was really important to tell a story. And the sense of monumentality that Léger kept trying to poke at me was so well-illustrated in Egyptian sculpture and architecture that it kind of put the pieces together.

"What it did to my sense of color is also interesting. I had been living in the Northwest, and my color had gotten grayer and grayer, greener and greener. When I went to Cairo, I found color again. Very bright, pure color. I think that the sense of ambiguity and mystery that a lot of the works of art represented has



"George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware," 1975.

stuck with me in terms of what I do today."

Pivotal to his exploration of Egypt were his visits to the Valley of Queens, the burial site of the ancient civilization's female rulers. "My paintings coming out of that period were really quite poetic, and they were about spirits," Colescott says. "The paintings became abstract because the figures and the spirits of the dead did not necessarily stand on two feet, and so it encouraged me to be very liberal about the way I saw form, human form, and the environment. Elements could play off one another in almost any way because I was talking about a spirit world, where the body is secondary."

"A lot of the works that I have been painting over the last 10 years have a lot to do with those ideas—those poetic ideas about the Valley of Queens."

Indeed, there is a floating, dreamlike quality to Colescott's latest works that nearly subdues his characteristic besiegements of form and theme and color. In "A Taste of Gumbo" (1990), the base of the painting is filled by a black woman's face, in profile, her drowsy eye deciphering an enigmatic thought overhead. She sees snippets of Creole culture encircled by a strand of orange crabs: a shack on the bayou that's a stone's throw away from garbage and debris, a man playing a fiddle, another holding four aces, and yet another covering his eyes with chained hands.

At the center of this montage is a white woman,

pristinely lifting a spoon to her full red lips. Each colorful symbol drifts above the daydreamer, rhythmically forming a seamless cartoon bubble, linked to her by one declarative sigh: "Gumbo."

Following the presentation this summer in Venice, the artworks displayed will begin a two-year tour of the United States. The exhibition's title, "Robert Colescott: Recent Paintings," should be a signal to those still rooted in bicentennial memories of the artist's past. During the ensuing years, Colescott has gathered more stories to tell; he has also discovered new dimensions of long-standing concerns. He has not relinquished his license to provoke. "I think that provocation is part of what happens in 20th-century art," he says. "Especially in this half of it."

"I don't think that it is something that I do; I think it's something that does me. If I'm a part of this century, and if I'm a part of this last 50 years and I am working to understand myself and how I relate to this whole thing, I don't think that I can avoid provoking some kind of response—and perhaps a disturbing response."

Sharon Fitzgerald is a scholar-in-residence at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City. Her last article for American Visions, "Quadrasonic Echoes of History," appeared in the February/March 1997 issue.