

To Be a Vessel

for the Invisible

Lynn Randolph's deeply personal and surreal artwork uses metaphor as a tool for spiritual healing.

“Mine is a metaphoric world,” Lynn Randolph says, “a chance to reinvent reality in ways that express values and beliefs, through the power of love, empathy, and desire for the common good.” The longtime Houston artist was telling me about her most recent body of work, a series of supernatural paintings titled *Unmoored* that began to emerge after the election of Donald Trump in 2016. It wasn’t the first time that Randolph had made work in response to a Republican presidency: In 2004, her painting *The Coronation of Saint George*—a nod to late Medieval art depicting George W. Bush as an (un)holy icon surrounded by winged, clawed versions of his political allies—was featured on the cover of *The Nation* during the Republican National Convention. That work’s satirical playfulness is tempered by a small but instantly recognizable image that defined the Bush years—an Abu Ghraib prisoner being tortured. It’s a detail that contains the brutal directness of some of Randolph’s other paintings on death, war, and human trafficking, though such dark realities lie far from the universe of *Unmoored*. Here, human figures are shown adrift in the cosmos, communing with mysterious specters on a backdrop of star-studded nebulas and galaxies.

Me Waxing (detail), 1985, oil on canvas, 31 x 27 in.

Lynn Randolph was born in 1938 in New York and raised in the Gulf Coast refinery town of Port Arthur. From an early age, she wanted to escape Port Arthur’s cultural homogeny and “mutate” into a new kind of person, which led her to the University of Texas at Austin. Though the city granted her the new, life-giving freedom she had been after, Randolph felt hindered by UT’s art department. “There was an art school style, and I refused to paint like that,” she explains to me during a phone call. “Abstract expressionism dominated everything. It meant nothing to me.” Like many women artists of her generation, she rejected a formalist mold and crafted her own style of expression over the years that followed.

Randolph married while still a student and moved to Houston in 1963 when her husband found work here. Viewed as a wife and mother first, many did not take her work seriously. A notable exception was Jim Harithas, who directed the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston during the mid-1970s and became a champion for the city’s emerging artists. Harithas conducted studio visits with Randolph, included her in her first museum group show, and even introduced her to the feminist art and politics journal *Heresies*. Harithas, Menil Foundation curator Walter Hopps, and influential feminist critic and curator Lucy Lippard all helped Randolph’s work gain more exposure with audiences outside of Houston in the 1970s and ‘80s. Lippard included her in *Acts of Faith: Politics and the Spirit*, a 1988 exhibition at Cleveland State University, with a number of buzzed-about ‘80s artists including Julie Ault, Jimmie Durham, Andres Serrano, and Martin Wong.

Establishing herself outside of Houston was always an uphill battle, as it was for many artists outside of the New York circuit pre-Internet (and still is). Randolph is critical of the ways so-called “regional” artists are ignored, or pigeonholed, by the institutional art world. She put her energy into building local support for women artists as

a member and, eventually, the president of the Houston chapter of the Women’s Caucus for the Arts (WCA). The caucus got its start in early 1978 after the landmark National Women’s Conference (and with it, the national chapter of the WCA) came to Houston. The conference, with tens of thousands in attendance, was considered a historic moment for American feminism generally, but it particularly resonated with women in its host city. Randolph describes the collective spirit that emerged in the Women’s Caucus as “one of the most powerful experiences of my life,” adding, “I went from total isolation to going to meetings, lobbying for shows, putting panels together, [...] all the things that are so difficult to do if you’re just sitting isolated.”

The Houston WCA, which local historian Pete Gershon labels “the conscience of the Houston art community” during its time, is one of likely several instances of feminist organizing in the U.S. that transformed the conditions of a regional art scene and empowered individual women artists while remaining mostly unknown within accounts of the larger feminist art movement. Randolph’s work has long dealt with the themes associated with more recognizable names in feminist art—like the spiritual/sexual ecstasy in Carolee Schneeman’s work or Nancy Spero’s depiction of the horrors of war and violence against women. Randolph’s formal approach was, for a time, not aligned with contemporary trends. Feminist artists tended to avoid painting in favor of new experimental forms, while a male-dominated “contemporary realist” movement focused on domestic scenes and figure studies. Randolph’s self-labeled style, “metaphoric realism,” developed through years of experimentation with figurative painting and her research into pre-modern styles of visual allegory. Her figurative rendering blends the immediate recognizability of realism with deeply personal, symbolic, and surreal interventions into lifelike images, often showing the human body merging with or in relationship to



Elsewhere in the Tadpole Nebula, 2018, oil on canvas, 46 × 58 in. Photo by ShauLin Hon.



The Coronation of Saint George, 2004, oil on canvas, 48 × 36 in.



Lynn Randolph in her studio, 2020. Photo by ShauLin Hon.



Cyborg, 1989, oil on canvas, 36 × 26 in.



The Laboratory, or The Passion of Onco-Mouse, 1991, oil on board, 10 × 7 in.

non-human beings, and often using herself as a subject in the work.

To younger generations of artists, self-constructing a visual language and prizing personal expressions of meaning over insular ideals of “taste” and art historical progress is common convention, but this wasn’t always the case. Consider the 1978 New Museum show *Bad Painting* curated by Marcia Tucker, which featured painters who “reject traditional concepts of draftsmanship in favor of personal styles of figuration.” The name was meant to be tongue-in-cheek, of course, but some critics didn’t see the irony. In more recent years, this kind of painting has ascended so noticeably that it’s now being criticized as a market-driven trend. The rising popularity of figurative painting surely accompanies deeper shifts that are occurring in the collective unconsciousness of artists: the desire to turn inwards, to tell stories and

construct myths, to reveal visions of other worlds. This attitude, a long-held one for Randolph, considers the canvas as a window into that story rather than a plane of pure aesthetics.

In the 1990s, Randolph’s correspondence with the feminist theorist Donna Haraway became a years-long exchange that significantly influenced the work of both women. After hearing Haraway speak at Rice University, a friend gave Randolph a copy of her newly published essay “A Cyborg Manifesto.” Randolph decided to create a cyborg painting and send a slide image to Haraway, who was so taken by the work that she phoned Randolph to ask if she could put it on the cover of her forthcoming book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, which expanded on the central ideas of her manifesto and soon became an instant classic in feminist and post-humanist studies. Randolph’s painting imagines

its titular, mythical subject, depicted at first glance as a woman typing on a keyboard. But computer circuitry is housed within the woman’s body and embedded in the surrounding landscape, blurring the boundaries between human, nature, and machine, suggesting, as Haraway theorized, “a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves.”

During their six-year collaboration, Randolph illustrated concepts from essays and manuscripts Haraway sent, most extensively for a book on feminism and technoscience titled *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan@_Meets_OncoMouse™*. Within this project, Randolph can’t be reduced to an illustrator in the traditional sense—it would be more accurate to think of her as a kind of visual translator, one whose interpretations ultimately shaped the evolution of her source text. Her painting *The Laboratory, or The Passion of Onco-Mouse* informed Haraway’s own thoughts on the laboratory mouse (the first patented mammal) and she referenced Randolph’s works in her lectures, projecting images for the audience. In letters to Randolph, Haraway described their collaboration as “dialogic visual and verbal troping,” a “splicing” of ideas, and a “braided argument.” In a talk Randolph gave on their work together, she regards their dialogue as “feminist” rather than “Socratic,” a dance that was only possible in the absence of a dominant agenda: “Neither dancer led nor followed. There was no set choreography.” Though no longer active, their exchange offers a rare example of how the production of art and the production of knowledge might mirror one another, resisting the usual binaries and hierarchies that tend to isolate artistic disciplines from scientific ones.

In more recent years, another kind of unconventional collaboration has defined Randolph’s life and practice. Through a long-term artist residency in the MD Anderson Cancer Center’s palliative care unit, she has created

art in collaboration with terminally ill patients. Randolph’s work at MD Anderson is sponsored by a nonprofit organization called Collage: The Art for Cancer Network, but the role she has taken on is entirely of her own invention. She sees it as a way to extend the therapeutic nature of her image-making to seriously ill patients. “My job is to go into those rooms, very gently and soft-spokenly,” she explains, “and turn myself over to whoever that sacred person is.” She will draw whatever a patient asks her to draw, and while the subject matter might often be predictable (“You don’t know how many times I’ve had to draw Jesus,” she tells me), she is grateful for these experiences and sees them as spiritual lessons. One time a patient requested she draw Mickey Mouse in the arms of an angel. “It would have meaning for no one but her,” Randolph suspects. For that patient, though, the Disney character was a very dear imaginary friend. Randolph understands how real these images are for a person nearing the end of life, and in this work intends “to be a vessel for what is invisible, and to try to make that visible for them in a meaningful way.” Sometimes she takes photos of the drawings she creates with patients and later refers back to them for inspiration to add to her series *Between Worlds*, which features some of her most transcendent work. She hopes to publish a book about this project, and wonders if it could even be considered a new form of art.

Randolph thinks of drawing or painting like this as creating a “soul map,” which she defines as a guide beyond one’s everyday experience and waking comprehension. It’s not necessarily a means to escape reality, but to reinvent it in one’s unconscious—a form of spiritual art therapy, if you will, to contend with the darkness of the current moment. We often returned to that topic during our phone conversations, during which Randolph lamented “the horror of the greedy, materialistic world of extreme narcissism that we’re currently living in.” But she also



Annunciation of the Second Coming, 1995, oil on canvas, 58 x 46 in.



Her Soul's Visit, 2015, graphite on paper, 16 x 22 in. Photo by ShauLin Hon.

called the Black Lives Matter movement “one of the most hopeful events I’ve witnessed in a long time,” saying she is certain it will transform our future. “We need the imagination, more than we need any other tool right now,” Randolph tells me, “it is a sense organ for perceiving the unknown.”

Randolph is not alone in her belief that we are living through a dark age. She didn’t make a satirical painting with Donald Trump as a subject, as she had with Bush, because she viewed Trump as a darker, more serious sign of societal illness. But even Trump’s exit from office can’t heal the brokenness of the deeply divided nation that came into view during his term, which in its final defining moment allowed the COVID-19 crisis to readily expose the cruelty of American capitalism. Some wonder how (or if)

art can respond to such dire and unprecedented instability. For Randolph, a simple answer has arrived: turn your art practice into your spiritual practice and your healing practice, and find a way to help others heal, too. Paintings are soul maps, or perhaps a tool for astral projection, becoming, she tells me, “a way to get elsewhere, to begin something new—a new world.” At the start of our first conversation, she shared an artist statement with me that touched on the ideas behind her recent series, but she read this with the conviction of someone issuing a call to action, and so it became that, too. “When the fabric of our institutions is torn and shredded, and we’ve become unmoored,” she began, “I believe we must call upon our imaginations to construct new architectures of consciousness.”