

## BOOK REVIEWS

### ***African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era, and Beyond***

by Richard J. Powell and Virginia M. Mecklenburg

Skira Rizzoli and Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2012

255 pages

\$60.00

### ***Helen LaFrance: Folk Art Memories***

by Kathy Moses with Bruce Shelton

S&S Publishing, 2011

192 pages

\$40.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Jayne Moore Waldrop

Two recent books highlight the lives and work of African American artists, including western Kentuckians Ellis Wilson and Helen LaFrance. Both were born in Graves County, but took very different paths in their artistic careers. One left Kentucky, part of the Great Migration north in the early twentieth century, to become an acclaimed artist during the Harlem Renaissance. The other stayed put, drawing from her lifelong memories of rural life as subject matter for her art. One was classically trained, the other self-taught. Together, the books not only flesh out these particular artists, but provide insight into the bigger picture of African American art through a century of profound change.

*African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era and Beyond* by Richard J. Powell and Virginia Mecklenburg is a big, beautiful book full of stories and images of artists and their work from the Harlem Renaissance to the present. The book surveys a diverse collection of paintings, sculptures and photographs in styles as varied as abstract to African-inspired. The book profiles forty-three American artists whose work has been assembled by the Smithsonian American Art Museum for an exhibit by the same name. The exhibit travels to different U.S. museums through 2015.

Powell's opening essay examines the art through both historical and literary lenses, giving context to imagery and metaphor by quoting W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Jean Toomer, all powerful voices leading up to and active during the Harlem Renaissance. Powell writes:

*Indeed, throughout the twentieth century—and even encroaching into our own twenty-first century Facebook movement—Du Bois's metaphor of living "behind the Veil" and Dunbar's poetic refrain "We wear the*

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*mask” are themes in African American arts and polemics that, rather than operate obliquely as mere literary conventions, touch a deep, resounding core within a modern, African American ethos.*

Masks and mask-like images are recurrent themes, from Sargent Johnson’s 1935 copper sculpture *Mask* to Lois Mailou Jones’s 1971 *Moon Masque*, yet many pieces are far from veiled, especially in the photography collection. Photographers like Robert McNeill and Roy DeCarava snapped images—commendable both as art and documentary—of twentieth-century African American life. In its close focus and unique camera angle on a farmer as subject, McNeill’s Depression-era *Spring Planting, Peanut Country, South East Virginia* “herocizes the figure even as it draws attention to the patches on his worn overalls.” DeCarava’s mid-century work aimed to capture “not the famous and well known, but the unknown and unnamed, thus revealing the roots from which spring the greatness of all human beings.” In his portrait *Mississippi Freedom Marcher, Washington, DC*, DeCarava simultaneously both conveys a mask-like image and creates an intimate connection between subject and viewer.

Several artists with Kentucky ties are profiled, from Wilson, who had to leave the state to study art due to segregation laws, to later artists like Bob Thompson, Sam Gilliam and Kenneth Victor Young, who were either born in Louisville or moved there to study at the University of Louisville. Thompson died at a young age while painting in Italy; Gilliam and Young are active still.

Wilson left home in 1917 to study at the integrated Art Institute of Chicago and later moved to New York where his art was widely exhibited during



Ellis Wilson, *Field Workers*, n.d., oil on fiberboard: Masonite, Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of the Harmon Foundation.

the Harlem Renaissance. He became one of the first African American artists to be awarded the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, which allowed him to travel and paint in the South Carolina Sea Islands. Although he never again lived in western Kentucky, Wilson maintained a special connection to Murray State University (or Murray State College, as it was known then). In 1950, a time in which segregation laws would have barred him from attending the school, art professor Clara M.

Eagle organized an exhibit of Wilson's paintings. She also led the effort to purchase *End of Day*, a vibrant portrait of a South Carolina fisherman with his catch that remains in the MSU collection, along with a later acquisition, *Chinese Kites*.

While not as slick and pretty as the Smithsonian volume, *Helen LaFrance: Folk Art Memories* by Kathy Moses and Bruce Shelton, tells the life story of Kentucky artist Helen LaFrance Orr, whose acclaim has skyrocketed with age. Now 93, LaFrance still lives and paints in Graves County. She was a 2011 recipient of a Kentucky Governor's Award in the Arts in Folk Heritage. Moses and Shelton are to be commended for their efforts in documenting her art, including paintings, quilting and woodcarving. Moses' first book, *Outsider Art of the South* (Schiffer Publishing 1999), is considered the definitive work on self-taught southern folk artists.

The first part of the book reads like a diary, filled with LaFrance quotes on many aspects of her life and career, including her nickname, Frankie, and thoughts on her five marriages. LaFrance was encouraged to draw by her mother, who made pigments for the young artist from natural items like walnuts, dandelions and berries. She also started carving as a child, making dolls for her younger sisters. LaFrance had no formal art training. Her family owned a farm, and she was well acquainted with the work required to keep a farm going and the family fed. These early memories inspire her art:

*Using the twin tools of her memory and her own imagination, Helen LaFrance recreates her past—chronicling people at work and at play in everyday life. Her domestic interiors, her landscapes, memorable events, and church subject matter come from the time of dirt roads...before two-lane blacktops, where transportation meant mules and horses pulling wagons, before the automobile dominated the landscape, before televisions appeared in the living room. She recreates what she grew up with in visual images.*

A chapter dedicated to LaFrance's visionary and biblical paintings, probably

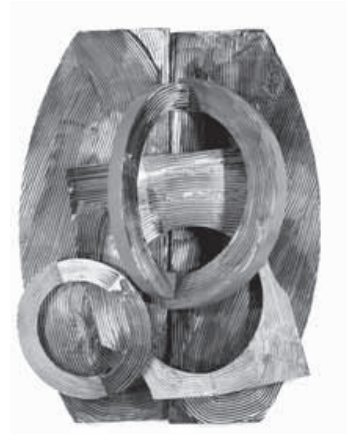


Bob Thompson, *Enchanted Rider*, 1961, Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection.

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some of her least known works, is of particular note. At some point in her career (unfortunately, a weakness of the book is that few paintings are dated), LaFrance painted a series inspired by her interpretation of the Bible. The fantastical style, with images of Jacob's ladder reaching to heaven, lakes of fire, and chariots driving through turbulent maelstroms, is quite unlike the detailed memory paintings of rural life for which she is best known. The biblical paintings, which demonstrate a broader view of LaFrance's imagination, were featured in a recent solo art show at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville. Overall, the book is a valuable reference work about LaFrance and her art.

As someone who grew up not far from where Ellis Wilson and Helen LaFrance were born, I'm excited that these books shed light on their compelling life stories and celebrate their art. Ellis Wilson, like many other African American artists, was overlooked in my college-level modern art history classes, and very little was said of folk or outsider art. Books like *African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era and Beyond* and *Helen LaFrance: Folk Art Memories* correct this oversight by portraying an art world that is open and accessible to many viewpoints, including those right in our own backyard.



Sam Gilliam, *The Petition*, 1990, mixed media, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the James F. Dicke Family, © 1990 Sam Gilliam.

### **Go Love**

by Michael Gills

Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2011

177 pages

\$14.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Jacque E. Day

More than a decade ago, during an informal discussion, someone said to me, *Americans don't know how to write about grief*. Regrettably, I let the statement pass without argument, but the exchange inspired a quiet quest, a prove-you-wrong list of contemporary authors that Catherine Barnett, Jessica Handler, Robert Goolrick and many others would come to occupy. *Go Love*, a debut novel by Michael Gills, has made my list. Gills takes on grief with such clarity and precision that death becomes an ever-present companion, and grief is the uninvited guest.

In *Go Love*, Gills, a prolific short-story writer whose prose blends the harsh, and often profane, with a lyrical voice rooted in the southern tradition, illuminates the complexity of a father-son relationship fused by history and bound by Josephine, wife to O.W. Harvell and mother to Joe. Evocative of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, *Go Love* brings us close to the wet, raw mess of death, from the intimate rot and smell to the family's job to do right by the dead. The news of his mother's unexpected drowning comes to Joe Harvell in coastal Florida, where he'd gathered with his wife's family for a baby shower. When Joe takes off with wife and daughter in a not-authorized-for-interstate-travel rental truck, he has a thousand miles to deal with the specter of Josephine half-boiled in an Arkansas hot tub, and to work himself up to the question he doesn't want to ask: did his adoptive father, O.W., kill her?

But *Go Love* is not a whodunit; neither is it a primer on coping with a parent's death. It is the story of one man's journey to the core of his personal struggle. During the drive to Lonoke, Arkansas, the delta land of Joe's childhood, Gills reveals the backstory amid a series of first-person narratives, shifting vantage points skillfully between Josephine and young Joe through their early years together, through a difficult birth that nearly kills them both, through his natural father's attempt to snatch them back, through Josephine's on-again, off-again, sometimes violent and often unstable marriage to O.W., a man whom Joe—as a boy—had both relied upon and feared. Gills folds comfort, tension, a keen sense of liberation and a striking landscape into passages like this one, where O.W. has taken young Joe from his mother in an attempt to win Josephine back:

*O.W. was driving for Monarch—hauling piggyback boats—the summer he sort of kidnapped me, and I first saw the west—the first time I'd remember it, anyway—from the cab of his Peterbilt. I kept up with the states we entered and departed by sticking state stickers from the truck stops on a green suitcase with my mother's smell on it. I'd wonder about her and Jimmy and baby Traceleen, look up at the Milky Way and feel like I was drifting into pieces, little islands of myself coming apart. Then in the dark, I'd watch the midget television up under the dash, and think about the way O.W. did things, how he chewed food and forged his log books and farted while he pissed. His every move alien to me as the dusty Wyoming mesas where, at any moment, a hoof or an ear would twitch and there would appear a herd of antelope shining where before had been nothing at all.*

As present life emerges in the narrative, Gills reveals an adult Joe's conflicted feelings about facing the circumstances of his mother's death. In

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Lonoke, Joe must enter the room where Josephine had installed the Jacuzzi, where she had, according to O.W., “Drowned. Of a heart attack,” the room once occupied by Joe’s younger brother Jimmy, who died in a drunken car crash years earlier. (“What I’m thinking, deep in my gut, the question and the answer: what happens to a human body left half a day in 104 degree chlorinated hot tub water?”) And Joe must face O.W., his remaining stake in the past, whom Joe feels on some level has been killing Josephine for years.

The book’s title is the clue to the driving force behind *Go Love*, a simple instruction, the mother’s advice that Joe calls forth in so many ways throughout the story. The title reveals a struggle at its most basic, with “go” representing a pushing-away, and “love” a pulling-toward. Through a carefully crafted narrative and, in places, heart-stopping language, Gills peels away the layers of Joe’s self-revelations that he could no more save his mother than he could his brother, that O.W. will be the only father he ever knows, that he can be a better man. Gills delivers each milestone, and the book’s penetrating ending, with a whisper rather than a bang.

### ***What the Zhang Boys Know***

by Clifford Garstang

Press 53, 2012

201 pages

\$17.95 (Paper)

Reviewed by Zac Cunningham

After *In an Uncharted Country*, the pressure was on Clifford Garstang to once again capture lightning in a bottle. I am pleased to say that with *What the Zhang Boys Know*, he accomplished just that. He calls *Zhang Boys*, his second book, a novel in short stories, and much like *Tonto and the Lone Ranger Fistfight in Heaven* by Sherman Alexie or *Last Exit to Brooklyn* by Hubert Selby, Jr., it reads like a mosaic. Though each story can easily stand alone, one intertwines with the next, creating a unique reality in which every hardship and victory one character feels ripples out and affects everyone else.

Each story in this collection centers on a different inhabitant of Nanking Mansion, a complex of condos in Washington, D.C. that has become home to numerous down-and-out, lovelorn lost souls searching for happiness in an increasingly hostile world. Garstang’s central character is Zhang Feng-qi, a Chinese immigrant and recent widower who is desperately trying to find a new mother for his two young sons. His story of becoming a single parent and the sole caretaker of his fresh-off-the-boat, elderly father serves as the backdrop for the rest in the collection. Garstang tells each of their stories—

from that of the divorced lawyer who knocks a hole in his wall to create a balcony before he discovers how ugly the view is to that of the pregnant young woman who suddenly finds herself alone in the world and experiences a sexual awakening—with grace and empathy.

One of Garstang's central themes is the life-affirming power of art. Two of his four characters are visual artists, one an art collector, and one a writer. Nathan, a middle-aged author dealing with the loss of his ex-wife and his adopted daughter-turned-lover, uses his writing to analyze and understand the beauty of living in a world where men can still commit horrible atrocities. Calvin, an alcoholic painter haunted by a failed love affair, sees a face in one of his paintings that he equates to an old flame, but before he can bring himself to destroy his precious work, he discovers that the face could just as easily be that of his new love. Garstang eloquently expounds throughout the book on the therapeutic qualities of artistic endeavors, how they can heal the brokenhearted and give hope to the inconsolable.

The writing in *What the Zhang Boys Know* is crisp, purposeful, and occasionally cinematic. Garstang expertly flexes his vocabulary and voice to fit each individual character, and through the use of multiple points of view, we get a much more holistic assessment of Nanking Mansion, D.C., and its inhabitants. We are treated to the complex relationships that come from living in such tight quarters with people from all walks of life, from the animosity and jealousy two men feel toward each other as they compete for a woman's affection to the empathy and care the other residents show Feng-qi after he loses his wife.

One of the greatest examples of Garstang's writing prowess can be found in the story that lends the book its title. "What the Zhang Boys Know About Life on Planet Earth" demonstrates that love and heartache are not lost on children. Indeed, the Zhang boys are more observant and privy to the lives of their neighbors than anyone else, and through their innocent eyes, we gain a deeper understanding of the book's message of hope. As they struggle with the loss of their mother and pray for her return, they do what they can to console their father. What they know is that life doesn't stop when the heart gets broken and that the world, though often scary and confusing, can be an inspiring place.

Though each of the book's heart-wrenching stories deals with loss and the "deep quiet of absence," Garstang is determined to prove that life is filled with beautiful and wondrous occurrences. Chance meetings lead to love affairs. Losing a loved one can create self-reliance. And in our darkest hours, we, as humans, can care for one another selflessly. Perhaps the theme of *Zhang Boys* is best expressed in a line of dialogue from Nathan, the writer, as he explains one of his early books: "In the end, they're all just love stories."

## ***Resisting Elegy: On Grief and Recovery***

by Joel Peckham

Academy Chicago Publishers, 2012

144 pages

\$19.95

Reviewed by Jessi Randall

*Resisting Elegy: On Grief and Recovery*, a collection of nonfiction by Joel Peckham, centers on the death of his wife, Susan Atefat Peckham, and his oldest child, Cyrus, in an auto accident in Jordan in 2004 while his wife was on a Fulbright. It is, at once, both tragic and lovely. Though Peckham is writing about a subject that is truly awful, a loss that cannot truly be put into words, he writes with an honesty and brilliance that will draw in even the most aloof reader. This collection is not the sugar-coated, fluffy stuff of typical elegy, as Peckham admits in the final essay, but a means of honoring the dead with the truth. *Resisting Elegy* succeeds in capturing the raw, honest feelings of a man who is suffering emotionally and physically—he sustained major injuries in the accident, himself—but at the same time, living and trying to raise his surviving son.

Prior to writing *Resisting Elegy*, Peckham was a well-established poet. That background in poetry shines in these essays with Peckham utilizing vivid poetic language to convey his feelings. In *Satellites*, he writes, “there is still so much beauty in the world. Being in love again, having control of my life again, feeling like a good father and good man—these these feelings send me into phases of euphoria and complete happiness. Then the fact of what happened comes crashing in, and sometimes the physical pain. And the manic swells and troughs take over.”

In “The Neverland,” Peckham writes that “grief is never about the event,” but the guilt that is created by the events that have come before it. Peckham lists his own guilts: that of falling out of love with his wife prior to the accident, of allowing his oldest child to ride, sans seatbelt, in the front of a touring van, of allowing his mother-in-law to interfere in the day-to-day of their lives. In a way, the whole collection serves as a means of assuaging his own guilt about the events he cannot control—the look between the children’s caretaker and the bus driver that wasn’t quite right, the moving on that onlookers to his life cannot grasp—and it is these brief glimpses into his life that make this work capable of being universally understood. Readers from all walks of life will identify with the “whys” that Peckham is forced to ask himself, most significantly—“why me?”



Peckham admits that he is worried—as are others, like his mother-in-law—these essays will do more harm than good because they pinpoint imperfections in the relationship he had with his wife. This worry is confirmed when he receives an email from a former friend—“I know that your life has changed and you have formed new alliances”—but, still, Peckham must tell the story he needs to tell. It haunts him to know—as he acknowledges in “Satellites”—that he could not be the perfect man for Susan and that he was “a dark and bitter man with which to share a home.” This acknowledgment that the couple was not perfect, or perhaps even happy, generates a sympathy and understanding from a reader that another approach might not.

Also in “The Neverland,” Peckham integrates passages from the children’s tale *Peter Pan*. He makes the assertion that “the lost boys” could be viewed as children who have been lost in a wonderful, yet frightening place: when you play at it by day with the chairs and table-cloth, it is not in the least alarming, but in the two minutes before you go to sleep it becomes very nearly real. He wonders, indeed, if Cyrus was a boy quite like Peter who thought “dying will be a wonderful adventure” and imagines that Susan lives with the lost boys, and reads them bedtime stories. This, he muses, is a lovely way to explain heaven to his surviving son. Perhaps, really, the lost boys are better off, and it is those left behind who are really at a “loss.”

### ***Ship of Fool***

by William Trowbridge

Red Hen Press, 2011

95 pages

\$18.95

Reviewed by Mick Kennedy

In *Ship of Fool*, William Trowbridge charms readers with a pseudo epic voyage. Readers follow the hero Fool communing with God and descending into Hell in “Fools Paradise,” among many adventures. Trowbridge undercuts the notion of highbrow epic through witty indulgences.

The mythic voyage unfolds like a triptych. In the first and third sections, the poems features Fool and his shenanigans; in the central section, the poems are more ostensibly autobiographical. The undercurrent of slapstick comedy throughout educates readers on the preposterous carnival ride that we all experience trying to reach paradise.

In “Playing the Fool,” which appears in the first section, God muses Fool into an instrument of His liking, hoping for a return on the investment:

*God makes Fool His Stratocaster. "Purple Haze,"  
He commands, and "Blue Hawaii" twangs  
down to earth, creating Muzak, hemorrhoids,  
and the Super Bowl halftime show. . . .*

Unfortunately, Fool bungles each assignment. Devolved to a kazoo, all Fool can muster is "'Revelation,' unleashing / Chaos and, with a blinding electric pop, / Old Night. 'Fine,' says God. 'Thanks for nothing.'"

Pop-culture references give readers footing in these somewhat silly slippery moments while the title of the book hovers in the periphery: the title itself produces a voyeuristic relationship between readers and Fool. We are "on board" with the comedy, but we do not (actually) inhabit the vessel. Fool suffers indignities at the hands of God similar to those of other mythic heroes, without any reward.

In the middle section, Trowbridge adjusts the aperture to bring readers into the action, especially through his occasional use of the pronoun "you." More to the point, he does not allow us to so easily find humor. We agonize with incompetent model building in "Balsa" or accordion playing in "Prodigy," the first rickety writing in "The Palmer Method," the physical assault in "Bully," and the goodbye to youth in "The Class of '59." These are balanced with other comedic poems, such as "Pantsing Bobby Freeman in Fifth Grade," "Naked in Public," and perhaps most spectacular, "Movie with the Guys, 1956," in which the speaker is jilted by a girl who ends up making out in the backseat of a car "for the whole school to see."

In the third section, we return to the dreamlike travails of Fool. Trowbridge offers us "The Juggler" wherein Fool masters three red balls and moves on to "three chainsaws on full razz. A cinch, so he adds / another, plus an ocelot, and two bicycles." As his confidence grows, Fool increases the number and size of the items aloft, until we find Neptune and Jupiter included. God's "not too pleased / at such levity encroaching on His grandeur. / Zap, Fool finds himself empty-handed, / waking from a dream his analyst will say / symbolizes masturbation." I include this excerpt, for it absurdly describes what one might call "overwriting." Not that Trowbridge has transgressed; it's rather that attempting to please the muse can lead to some trouble. Indeed, Trowbridge exemplifies the best work that poets do: layered allusions that do not become cumbersome, a confidence in composition, balanced organization where one poem or section will not cast shadows on another, and an eye for levity. This Fool is worth following.