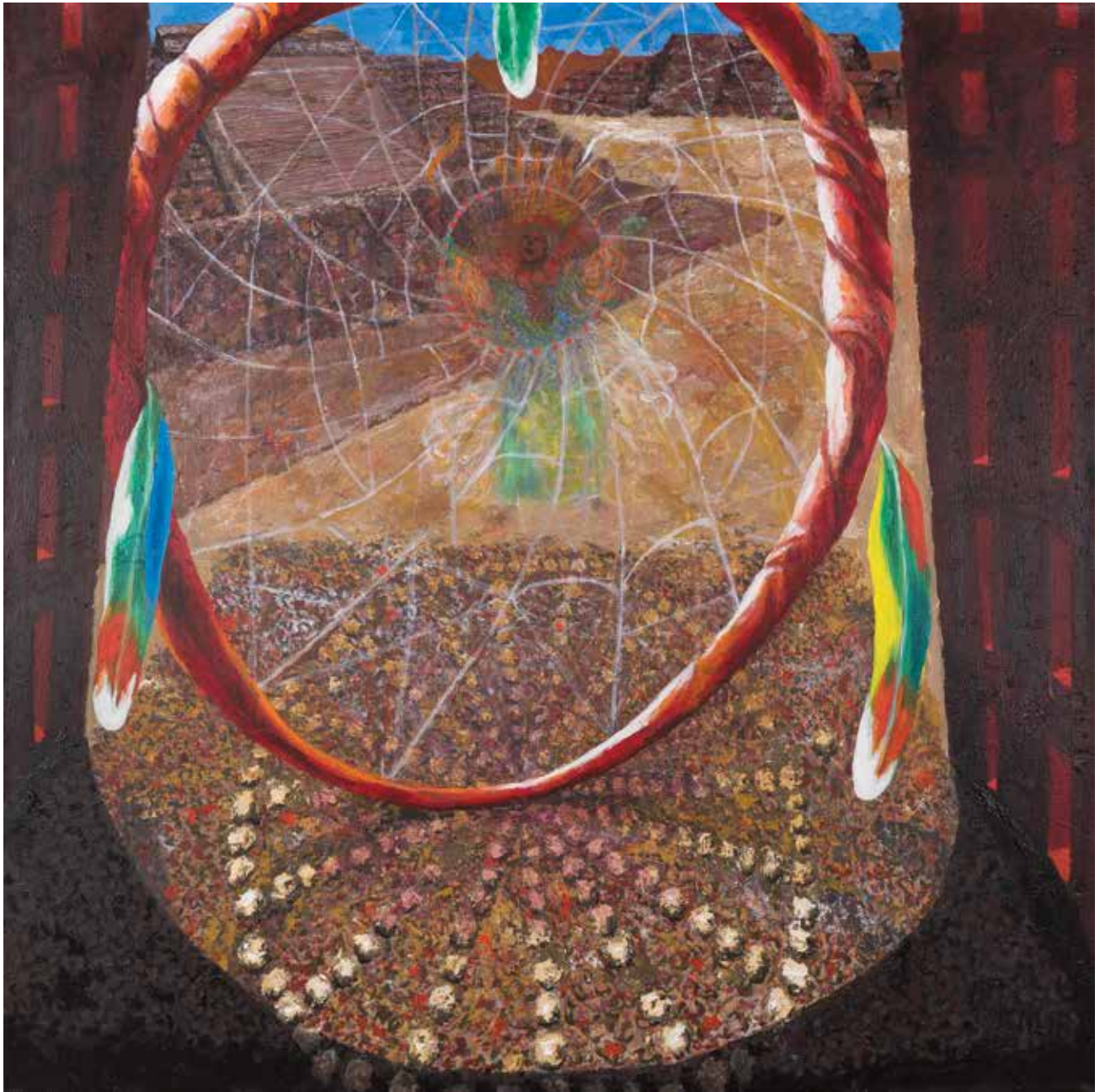




PASSAGES:  
KEITH MORRISON  
1999-2019



*Other Gods*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.

PASSAGES:  
KEITH MORRISON, 1999–2019

June 15 – August 11, 2019

American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center

Washington, DC

Curated by Judith Stein





## FOREWORD

Washington was lucky to have Keith Morrison in our part of the world until the mid-nineties, when he left for California to become dean of the San Francisco Art Institute. An outsized presence here, he was more than a triple threat as an artist, writer, curator, and educator. His leaving left a big hole in our community that we were never quite able to fill.

And now we have him back, if only for a few months. *Passages: Keith Morrison 1999–2019* shows his work has only gotten deeper, richer, and more relevant since he left us.

His art is a highly intelligent gumbo, tasty and transformative. It connects us through the dark passages he illuminates for us, from the Caribbean back to Africa, and then around to DC, San Francisco, and Philadelphia, mining Yoruba orishas, talking drums and jazz, and highlighting urban styles from church hats to hoodies.

I am indebted to Sam Gilliam, who suggested I find out what Morrison has been up to in the intervening years. Curator Judith Stein also did a wonderful job selecting the show, and her interview with Morrison in this catalog, made in collaboration with performing artist Germaine Ingram, has given us a window into the multilayered world of one of its treasures. On behalf of the students, faculty, and friends of American University, and all the art lovers in the DMV, thank you.

Jack Rasmussen  
Director and Curator,  
American University Museum  
at the Katzen Arts Center,  
Washington, DC

*Monument of Spirits*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 in.

## CURATORIAL STATEMENT

*Passages: Keith Morrison, 1999–2019* surveys thirty paintings and watercolors by the Jamaican-born Keith Morrison. A magician of color and space and a teller of tales, fanciful and real, Morrison focuses on the tangible and spiritual components of culture. His subjects encompass Afro-Caribbean and Meso-American art and architecture, as well as the somber history of the Middle Passage. By turns mystical, meditative and joyous, Morrison's work invites our entry into the rich visual world of his making.

Morrison was seventeen in 1959 when he moved to the United States to study art at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago, where he would earn his bachelor's and master's degrees in art. His early paintings were black and white abstractions, influenced by the prevailing expressionist style of his teachers, and by his admiration for Ellsworth Kelly's crisp, non-representational forms, and Richard Diebenkorn's lyrical geometry.

Morrison enjoyed a successful career as an abstract painter for twenty years, all the while thinking about how his art might more directly engage his African and

Caribbean heritage. In the eighties, his practice shifted to narrative imagery, a direction he continues to explore with diverse subjects. These enigmatic, figural compositions range from imaginative recreations of his Jamaican boyhood, fanciful tributes to legendary jazz musicians, and meditations on hoodie-clad youth.

Exactly four hundred years ago, the first African slaves arrived in the colonies a year before the Mayflower brought the pilgrims. Many of Morrison's paintings transport us back in time to the moments before embarkation. Calling on his formidable power as an abstract painter, the artist delineates cramped, empty spaces with restricted vistas framed by windows and bars. Morrison situated himself—and by extension, we as viewers—looking out as one world closes, and another opens.

Judith Stein  
Curator



*The Magic Fountain*, 2012.  
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 in.



# A CONVERSATION WITH KEITH MORRISON

March 10th, 2019

Keith Morrison, talking with Curator Judith Stein and Germaine Ingram

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*Germaine Ingram is a performing artist and cultural strategist. Among her current projects is Sounds of the Circle, a project that honors the collective genius of an “inspired circle” of jazz innovators who lived and created adventurous music in North Philadelphia in the mid-20th Century.*

**Judith Stein (JS):** In looking at your art of the last twenty years or so, I noticed that many of the paintings and watercolors describe transitions, literal or metaphoric. My title, *Passages: Keith Morrison 1999–2019*, speaks to that aspect of your practice.

In the course of your career, you made the transition from abstraction to figuration. What was that process like?

**Keith Morrison (KM):** I had never seen an abstract painting when I came from Jamaica to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1959. Brilliant people were working with abstraction, and so, like everybody else, I learned abstract art.

During the Vietnam War, I heard a talk by Harold Rosenberg—who’d just gotten back from Brazil—who said, “There’s a war going on, and all we can talk about is the disposition of the picture plane.” That resonated with me because it gave me confidence that perhaps there’s a different way to be a painter. It took me twenty years to leave abstraction. I admired many abstract artists and still do, but thought I should seek a different path.

Gene Davis was internationally recognized for his hard-edge color paintings. But it’s less well-known that he also did portraits and cartoons. When I described myself to him as “a closeted figure painter,” he said, “why do you have to be in the closet? Just go there! My generation had to be in the closet, but you don’t have to be.” So, I allowed myself to try it out.

In a sense, I do abstract paintings filled with other things. When I make a choice in a figurative composition, abstract concerns often govern it. If necessary, I just change the subject matter. An abstract artist I’ve always loved was Richard Diebenkorn, particularly his views of Ocean Park, out of the window.

As an abstract painter, I always wanted to create a way in for my viewers. A device I used for years was a rectangular abstract shape, which was a kind of abstract portal. It wasn’t until I started figuration that I got to its essence as an opening, a door, looking out. In *Door of No Return IV: Predators*, for example, I sited myself inside looking at the future. In *Door of No Return VI: Rule, Britannia!*, the ship sails a British flag. I had heard a talk about how the British would say that slavery was something the Americans did, not



themselves. I thought about where they believed all those plantations and British wealth came from, not to mention the British patriotic song, “Rule Britannia.” Then I came up with my own Rule Britannia painting.

**JS:** Can you talk about camouflage as a concept in your art?

**KM:** It’s probably interchangeable with or related to chimera. Camouflage is more literal. While objects may be camouflaged, chimeric, disoriented space expresses anxiety. It took a while for me to recognize what I was getting at in my paintings. I remember once giving a talk about my work and I was talking about ghost imagery. And the audience was kind, because after I left, I realized that they didn’t really know what I was talking about. But many Caribbean and other people I know talk about ghosts.

At times I sense a specter in the corner of my eye, or in my imagination. I’m addressing the anxiety of perceiving something that is not there. It’s a concept I’ve tried to work out in paintings where the image is transient or illusive. You think you’re looking at one thing, but in fact you’re looking at something else. Spatial disorientation is the essence of my painterly anxiety.

From childhood I’ve had an interest in the relationship between what’s there, and what isn’t. Once I was toying with a scorpion and didn’t recognize what it was until my mother told me it was a very dangerous thing. I grew up playing in the woods. People who are from the tropics or the south talk about the reality of walking in the bush where all kinds of things grow. Something which looks like a piece of grass might turn out to be a centipede.

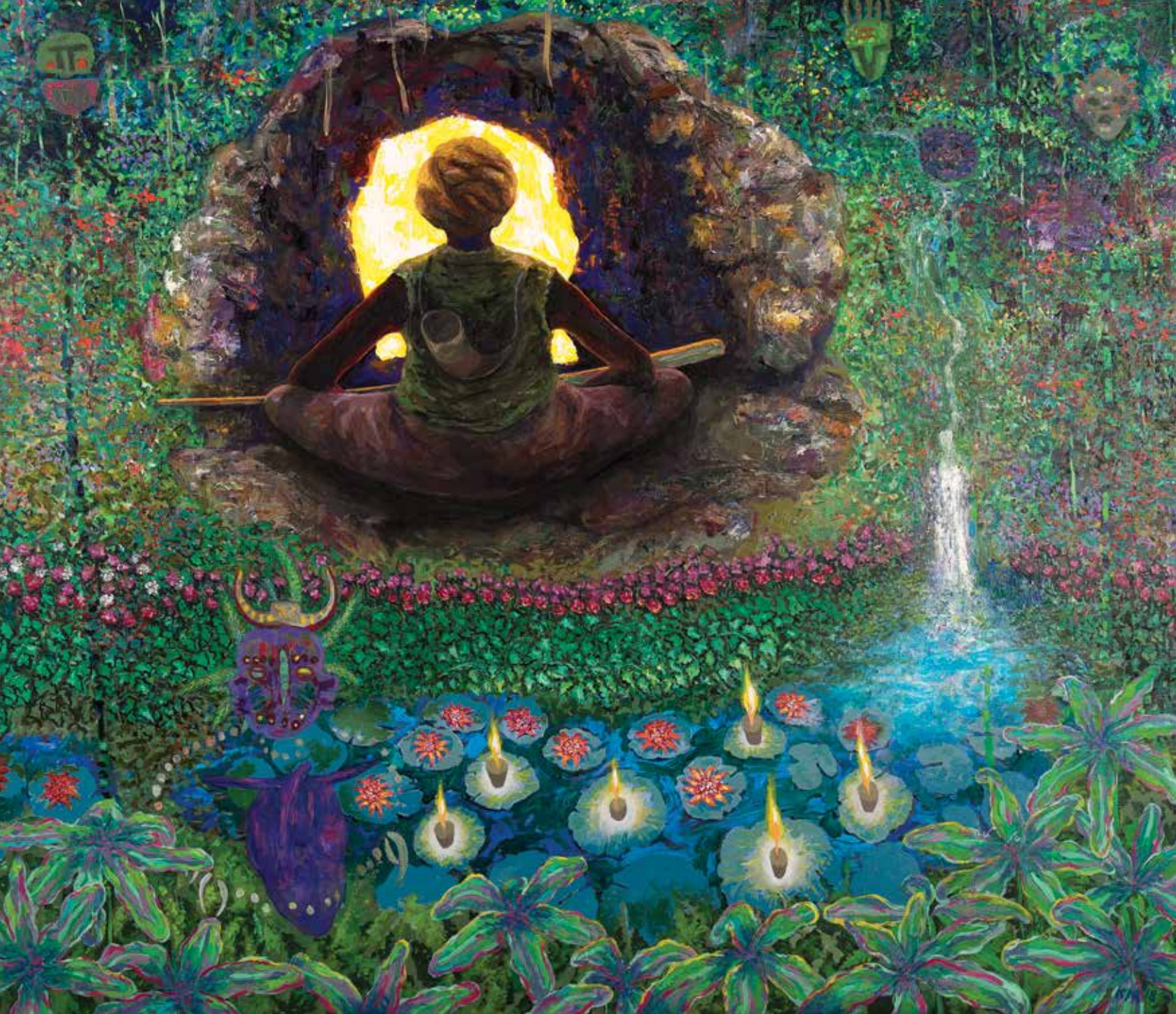
This happened to me when I was eight or nine. The painting *Scenes of Childhood* contains something about that memory. I used camouflage in a less literal



*Door of No Return IV: Predators*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 in.

sense, by doing a visual counterpoint. Colors which appear to be moving one way are in fact moving another way. This is done by virtue of a secondary color, which either confuses you or leads you to make a mistake about what you think you’re looking at. Visual counterpoint is a little bit like in music—something going one way but at the same time can go the other way.

I almost never listen to music while I’m painting because I don’t like to paint music. Years ago, like everybody else, I tried to paint music. But when I looked at the result, I said, “What is that?!” The music sounded great but the art... and besides, visual art is not music. An eye is not nearly as sophisticated as an ear. Well-trained ears can tell what each instrument is doing in



*Queen Nanny of the Maroons*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 in.

hundred-piece orchestras. Artists take advantage of unsophisticated eyes by tricking you.

**JS:** Yes, *trompe l'oeil*, “fool the eye.” Recently I found myself thinking about the French phrase “entre le chien et le loup” when looking at your paintings. The expression literally means the time of day—dusk, when your eye can’t distinguish “between the dog and the wolf.” But it signifies more than light levels. The French use it to express the edge between the

domestic and the wild, the familiar and the comfortable, the unknown and the dangerous. It seems you enjoy guiding viewers to that place of uncertainty.

**KM:** I do. I came at it first with music. When I was fifteen, at boarding school in Jamaica, a teacher introduced us to what I thought was a long, interminably boring thing. I said, “What is this? Fats Domino and Elvis last three minutes.” He said, “It’s Brahms.” I didn’t know what that was. Then he played a piece

by Rachmaninoff, and again I asked, “What is that?” He said, “Imagine somebody in his coffin, buried alive. He’s awake and not dead. He realized there is dirt on top of his coffin, and he is suffocating, and trying to get out.” I thought to myself, “That’s a fascinating image. Can music actually do that?”

So, I began listening to all kinds of music. Music has really been an important part in my life. When I was fourteen, my friends—who were older—were listening to what we called “jazz.” It was really R&B. I didn’t know what it was, so I went out and bought a record of Louie Jordan and spent all summer listening to it. Early on I took an interest in what music could do. I remember trying to do drawings like that. It was kind of silly, but it was instructive in that it led me to different ways of making more complex compositions.

**JS:** For me, the complexity of your compositions gives viewers a connection to the complexity of your content. Although your paintings are narrative, they don’t provide a specific story. Multiple, contradictory truths coexist in your work.

**KM:** If I listen to a symphony, there are many stories, there’s an aura; or if I read a poem, I may not understand what the poet said literally. So, when I say “narrative,” I don’t mean telling a literal story. When the red transitions to the green and the purple, it’s a visual narrative but not derived from a literal story, or that merge back into literal stories.

I’m a great opera lover. I like how, say, Mozart, Wagner or Verdi, convey meaning and you don’t have to understand Italian or German to know what’s going on. There are translations, but you don’t even need them. Beforehand, I would read the libretto, but listening to the opera, I didn’t know what they were saying. The music can take you into that kind of poetic dimension. When I talk to my friends who do abstract

painting, we can talk about the same thing. Although there are literal narratives in the world, I think of it on another level. I think of the surface nuance and how it can tell you something with thin paint and thick paint, or scratches of the brush, or depth of field. All those kinds of things I think about as part of the nuance.

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**Germaine Ingram (GI):** Perhaps you could talk about your painting of *Nanny of the Maroons*.

**KM:** Nanny of the Maroons is one of the great Jamaican heroines. She is mentioned in British records in the eighteenth century, and we know the British regarded her as a fearsome character. She’s sometimes called Queen Nanny. While some say she was born a slave in Jamaica, others describe her as a free woman who was a descendant of Ashanti royalty. Many Ashanti warriors were sold into slavery and taken to Jamaica. Some say she came as free woman to observe what the British were doing with slaves and then joined the slaves and became a maroon. But no one can verify her origin.

She didn’t physically fight, but in the first Maroon War, she was the brilliant strategist behind the guerrilla warfare tactics against the British. There’s money printed with her image and people do facial portraits showing what she may have looked like, but I didn’t want to do that.

We know Nanny was married and was a small woman, in her fifties at the time of the war. The British described her as ugly and wearing a girdle. It is said that during the war she took no prisoners—her group had no place to keep them, so she had them assassinated. But she always sent one back to tell about the horrors. She was feared because of her knowledge of African medicine, religions and witchcraft, which

people found very frightening, and she used that as a tactic as well. Nanny developed the use of the horn, the Abeng, which the British didn't have. With it, the Maroons could send messages for miles and communicate in the mountains. The Jamaicans call the Abeng the first cell phone!

**GI:** When I first looked at your painting, and thinking about your childhood in Jamaica, I recalled Marlon James' book, *The Book of Night Women*, that I just adored, and your image captures me in a way that his words did, with this group of women with their power and persistence and spirit of resistance.

**KM:** Thank you.

**GI:** Your images emerge, and camouflage. I am working on a project now that is ten years in the making, to look at the history of evolution the Yoruba practice in Philadelphia since the mid-twentieth century—all the different expressions of Yoruba spirituality and expressive practice from Trinidad, Jamaica, Cuba, Brazil and Puerto Rico. We're investigating how the proximity of these practices has affected the transference and evolution of these practice here, and also how the aggregation of these practices from a singular diasporic culture has impacted the arts and cultural landscape of Philadelphia.

**KM:** That's wonderful.

**GI:** I was just wondering if you would talk about Yoruba spirituality, which you mention in your writings.

**KM:** The Yoruba are fascinating people. They centered in Nigeria, but they came all the way from the east, from the Indian Ocean. They traveled for centuries via vibrant pathways, all over the continent. My British education taught me that Africa was a dark place with dense forest where nobody went, except

maybe Tarzan! That's a narrative from my parents' generation, and mine too—nothing happened, and then the slaves were captured on the seashore and taken away. A recent movie of *Robin Hood* had scenes of London as a primitive village in 1150, and I thought to myself that in 1150–1350, there were cities in Africa, such as Timbuktu, Songhay and Benin that were said to have libraries and streetlights! The Yoruba were among the great African people of such times. There were others, of course. But, it's interesting how the Yoruba were so involved with transformed the world.

**GI:** Yes. Our project will end in the fall of 2019. One of the things that's emerged is something that comes out of Stuart Hall's writing, especially his lectures at Harvard, the notion that this black idea of diaspora is a metaphor for inclusion, the capacity to move and accept what exists wherever the Yoruba spirituality landed, rather than insist on overwhelming what was there, or appropriating what was there. And this other idea, proposed by Omi Osun Joni L. Jones and Rachel Harding, among other Yoruba scholars, concerning the orishas (emissaries of Olodumare or God almighty) doing what needed to be done wherever they landed. There was a sense of distributed agency, shared agency to utilize, to express the orishas in a way that responded to whatever issues or challenges, wherever the faith landed.

**KM:** Stuart Hall was from Jamaica, as you may know. What I find interesting about what you just said is the positive possibility within disruption. It has been said to me that many of my paintings aren't very positive. One of the things that I enjoyed about doing the painting *Nanny of the Maroons* is that it is positive within a diaspora, with a situation of crisis that leads to a reorganizing of culture. Similarly, *Transcendence* started to be about burning plantations. I've done things about this subject before, and I don't like doing



*Transcendence*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 76 in.

the same idea again. And so, I got into it, I challenged myself to move on from that imagery of people burning to people building. In *Transcendence* there is a sense of a diaspora, people scattered and displaced who form a new whole. The slaves who are working the plantations are building these mansions and other beautiful things for their slave masters. They weren't incompetent—they were suffering pain. My idea was to do a painting about spiritual survival in physical misery. The laborers in the field are in misery. The spiritual survival is in the people making pots. Perhaps both groups are the same, but in their minds as slave laborers they imagine the beauty of making pots in order to survive and to retain their dignity. For me, the

idea of pottery has been central to Africa for centuries. Pottery was taken on the Silk Road to Greece for much Greek pottery was made in Africa. African women have been making beautiful pots for centuries. I came up with this idea of ceramics as a metaphor for a spiritual motivation. As you were saying, people take their ideas with them, and make a spiritual monument out of that.

**GI:** And this idea that African spirituality as distinguished from, say, Christianity, embraces what existed *before*, rather than imposing or attempting to impose something new and demonize what existed before. And these stones...





**KM:** In a sense the essence of jazz is like that. It takes what's there and transforms that.

**JS:** Seeing *Free for All* again today, I've freshly noticed its abstract components, not just in the composition itself, but in the way you applied the paint. We read the marks as independent from representation. The singer you imagined wears a magical garment with dots that suggest its effervescent surface but also have a life all their own.

**GI:** What's the inspiration for it?

**KM:** The inspiration is music, although I didn't paint the music. The inspiration is Art Blakey—you name just about every major young jazz musician of his generation, and they all came through Art Blakey, so I decided to do an homage to him. These people are invented, and the challenge was using the red piano and getting the figure...

**GI:** Looks like she's rising out of the piano.

**KM:** With my paintings, I am always concerned with how the viewer enters. In some, you enter through the doorway, in others, through the rocks. You may come in through a window or an enclosure. There is a thing about enclosures, that is, an anxiety, a need to have things that the viewer is very conscious of, that you are entering the painting. I often do that. I'm not sure of the origins of that, but it persists.

**JS:** In Chinese landscape paintings, the artist usually gave viewers a way in, a winding path your eye could follow in and up into the distance.

**GI:** Something popped in my head—I'm fascinated by a model I saw for a church or synagogue designed by Louis Kahn. It had an ambulatory. You entered through

*Free for All*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 in.

the ambulatory and walked around it before stepping into the congregational space. Someone once asked him why he did this and he said that before you enter an intense experience you need the space to separate yourself from the outside, and you need the opportunity to circle this experience that you are about to enter.

**KM:** Thank you for that, I am a great admirer of Louis Kahn, and I've never thought about that.

**JS:** Kahn's ambulatory was an area of transition, of passage. Keith, you invite us to transit from our space to the space of the painting.

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**KM:** I am not a dancer, except socially; I don't act, but I love the theater; and I love the sense of the proscenium. I'm always thinking about spatial parameters, and how to transform it. The playwright Arthur Miller once said that American theater is about space, and for a long time I didn't understand what he was talking about. Then I realized that many American playwrights talk or write about transforming place, or in Eugene O'Neil's case, time going from night to day. Many of my painter friends, whose work I admire, talk about space all the time. But for me personally, that is somewhat of an artificial limitation. Talk about my use of space—so what? What's *in* that space? It was never enough for me to simply say that my art is about space and spatial changes. Rather, my art is about things in life that I place in space.

**GI:** Hearing your comments, I thought about interpersonal space, not necessarily geographic space, but interpersonal space. And that's true for dancers too, about the relationship we make between ourselves and the environment...

**KM:** In *A Caravan for Ouidah*, you're literally in the caravan yourself, when it comes forward, you're literally there. It's not like you're independent of it, you're a part of it. The building is a slave-holding place just outside of Benin, Nigeria. It looked like a sepulcher. Of course, the caravan is on the African side of the slave trade, suggesting that Africans were taking other Africans to be sold to Europeans at Ouidah. I didn't want to paint the slaves, but rather, their essence. I wanted to suggest the spiritual things slaves took with them from Africa, not their actual bodies or the pain that they were experiencing. They brought to the new world many ideas, so I wanted to show the spirit of what they were carrying with them. They carried the spirituality, imagination, improvisation, style and soul of the African diaspora—qualities that would transform the Americas and influence European and Asian cultures—qualities they would take back to pollinate aspects of the very African continent from which they came.

**JS:** What about the hooked stick in the center of your composition?

**KM:** This is the beater for the African talking drum. For me, it's also a metaphor for lynching. It's hanging there, foreboding in a way, but it's from a drum. How do people survive slavery spiritually? They carry ideas in their minds...a sense of ritual.

**KM:** In the watercolor *Magi*, you'll see a mosque and variations of different kinds of animals. They could be camels, but they are fictitious animals. And if you look, I've used camouflage. There's a figure here, a crucifixion. One of the things I was thinking about was T.S. Elliot's poem, "Journey of the Magi," which focused on the Magi's return to the desert. Elliot says it was a birth unlike any death, which is a fascinating image, and sparked my imagination.



**GS:** These look like Christian crosses here in an image that you say is a mosque.

**KM:** But what happened in that time and what happens now, is that Christianity and Judaism were intertwined. Sometimes fighting, sometimes harmonious. The Roman Empire included both; before it became Christian, the empire was inclusive; people had different kinds of religions and they were tolerant of one another. But later they said if you don't become Christian, you're condemned to hell. Earlier, these cultures didn't necessarily agree with each other but were always interrelated. Jamaica has churches, synagogues and mosques, although these are newer. People don't know that Jamaica was the first place in the New World where the Jews were permitted to own land. In earlier centuries, many Jews escaping persecution came to Jamaica. In fact, I've only recently learned that I have Jewish relatives!

That part of culture fascinates me, I mean that which comes from a healthy unknowing. We sometimes lead our lives based on information that is confusing or, although we don't know it, may not be true. In African American culture an example is of a slave saying that God told Noah, "No more water, the fire next time." But sometimes others said God told it to Moses. Because slaves weren't allowed to read, passing stories by hearsay naturally lead to confusion and misinterpretation. But misunderstanding is a natural human condition and it contributes to the formation of culture. Any culture. A continuing theme in my work is that ignorance, confusion and myth join truth in the making of all cultures.

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**JS:** Your watercolors, which are smaller in scale than your paintings, invite viewers to step up close. Please talk about *Chacmool*.



*A Caravan for Ouidah*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.  
*Chacmool* (detail), 1999. Watercolor on paper, 30 x 40 in.

**KM:** I first saw this image of Chacmool, the Mayan fertility god, in a Henry Moore sculpture. Moore had never been to central America, but he saw a picture of it and he used the image in two or three works. I became captivated by this supine fertility figure. The watercolor *Chacmool* is somewhat tongue-in-cheek: I modernized the figure with nose rings and earrings. There are also different kinds of camouflage. The slithering snake, the figures which come through,



*Scourge of the Predator*, 2003. Watercolor, 30 x 40 in.

the train running on the side—they all change the central circular space, where the supposed vestal virgin was put. It becomes more like a lake and Chacmool becomes a contemporary figure relaxing. It's more satire than anything else.

**GI:** I didn't expect the color of your watercolors to be so dense.

**KM:** Yes, it's just straight watercolor, no pastel. I haven't painted many watercolors recently because I've had tendinitis.

**JS:** *Sunday Morning* is another watercolor I'd like to enter.

**KM:** When I lived in Washington, I'd often see African American women going to church on Sunday, and

they wore fascinating hats. So, I started doing things like *Sunday Morning*, evoking these hats, with an African implication. I really like Craig Marberry's book, *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats*.

**GI:** About a year ago, the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton did a musical production called *Crowns*, adapted from the book. My good friend Dianne McIntyre did the choreography.

**KM:** I did several paintings about hats.

**JS:** The hats came out of your imagination?

**KM:** Yes.

**JS:** Your plants seem tantalizingly recognizable.

**KM:** But I invent them, I don't really look at plants.

**JS:** Here's a watercolor called *Scourge of the Predator*.

**KM:** It's related to the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse, about death, burial and the trumpets of hell. Since I was a child, I've been fascinated with the culture of hell. Growing up as I did, people talked about going to hell all the time, and about what hell was like. There was more talk about hell than about heaven.

**KM:** This one is called *Jerusalem*. The imagery is a mixture of churches, mosques, and synagogues, all put together on top of a chess board. It's an accurate chess board, with chess pieces shaped like Cycladic figures. The chess pieces are warriors. I chose Cycladic figures for the chess pieces because they are ancient and seemingly timeless. I got the idea from Igor Stravinsky who wrote some of his dramatic pieces in Latin because, he said, it was an ancient but universal language and so impersonal. I wanted the same of my chess pieces that denoted war as a common and timeless human tragedy, so I chose the Cycladic images. Chess is a war game. You can't really see the chess pieces—they are camouflaged in all the buildings.

**GI:** Is it important to you that people understand the embedded messages in your work?



*Slow Boat*, 2003. Watercolor on paper, 40 x 30 in.

**KM:** I am happy if my art is received on different levels—some may be attracted by the formal composition, and others interested in the narrative. Some of the messages are not specific. For instance, I've had people look at *Jerusalem* and say, "That's about war, isn't it?" But people who don't know about chess may not think that. I'm interested in viewers looking at the surface and seeing the complexity of shapes, colors and forms. My challenge is to do a very complex thing with very complex figures with ambiguous space. Is it flat? It's on an inclined plane. It's abstraction. If people get that, I think they get the most of it. Once you do a work of art and it leaves your hands, it's public, and



*Boyz*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 in.

people can take from it whatever they want; and people bring to it and take what they need.

**JS:** *Gumbo* takes a different approach.

**KM:** Sometimes I have viewers enter paintings through a doorway or frame them within a circular form. There's a circular form in *Gumbo*, but it's less obvious. The people on the periphery are the disciples and friends of Christ at the Last Supper, feasting on chicken and drinking blood. Presumably this is a Rastafarian Christ—he is drinking the blood. It's African, sacrificial. In Roman Catholic theology, transubstantiation



*Hoodie*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 in.

describes the literal transforming of Christ's blood into wine. Some of the people I painted here are lovers. There's also a ghost in it, the specter of death.

Here's *Slow Boat*, another chess composition. I was playing chess when I did this and *Gumbo*. It's a tongue-in-cheek title... (sings) "I'd like to get you on a slow boat to China..." These are lovers going down a canal in a boat, and the other images are things I've worked with over the years. Of course, though, this is not about China, but, rather, a mixture of Egyptian and African/African American imagery.

*Market II* is one of four paintings I did on markets. I grew up going to markets. As a boy, I spent time with my maternal Grandma. On Saturday mornings the farmers would come down with huge baskets of produce and ask permission to park their donkeys in her yard. Then they tied up the animals and took their baskets to the market about half a mile away. I began to associate donkeys with markets. In west Africa I noticed that the men would stay back on the farm, plowing and planting. The women are the business people. Some drove Mercedes-Benzes, for they made a lot of money. The Jamaican farmers of my youth didn't make much money, but theirs were not unlike the west African market systems I later saw.

**GI:** Your articulation of the baskets is special.

**KM:** The tableau is a cart. It's very seldom that I do things in the middle of nowhere. There's always some kind of constructed context defining space, place.

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**JS:** You've used a panorama view in *Hoodie*, a device that allows you to explore form as though it were abstract field painting. The background brushwork is lush and evocative.

**GI:** Can you talk about your choice to zero in on full-length, frontal figures in *Hoodie* and *Boyz*?

**KM:** *Hoodie* came as a result of the Trayvon Martin killing. He wore a hoodie, as so many young men do. It came to be associated with Black youth, although all youth may wear it. *Hoodie* is racially and sexually ambiguous on purpose.

*Boyz* was done at the same time. What's going on happens on several levels. There's the instant fear that many people—black people included—have

when they see black kids dressed like that, coming down the street. When I lived in Washington, if I saw such a person sometimes, I'd walk on the other side of the street. There's a certain impact this image has. But ironically, they are dressing in defiance. They seem to say, "I'm defying this whole establishment thing. I dress the way I want. I dress half naked if I want to."

There's no eye contact with the viewer. Their defiance is perhaps a sense of their insecurity. These things are in my mind when I see them. Many of the kids who look like they're big and bad and tough, are insecure underneath. People think they're violent. Maybe they are, maybe they aren't. But violence has no face. The prettiest people can often be the most violent. Jeffrey Dahmer looked like a beautiful, all-American person.

It's interesting to me that we react to the kids in hoodies as if they are evil, like they are bad people. I myself have been the object of suspicion, and followed in stores. I can imagine if you're a teenager, you're poor, it could lead you to insecurity, and defiance. That's what I was getting to in that painting.

Both paintings come out of our time, inspired by the spate of attacks on young African American men. They're about the black young men who seem to pose as they walk the streets. Their dress code seems threatening to many people—untied gym shoes; loose clothing, cut on purpose; shaggy hair; and hoodies. The style and dress code are usually ascribed to the lifestyle of low-income people. Affluent people copy their mannerisms and dress and it became the essence of urban style. Such black male youth are often regarded as the scourge of society, but are nonetheless the style makers. They are seen as social deviants, but everyone wants to be like them. Everyone from LA to New York—from London to Accra—want to dress like them. They are the trendsetters of swagger, fashion and soul. I wanted to paint this irony.





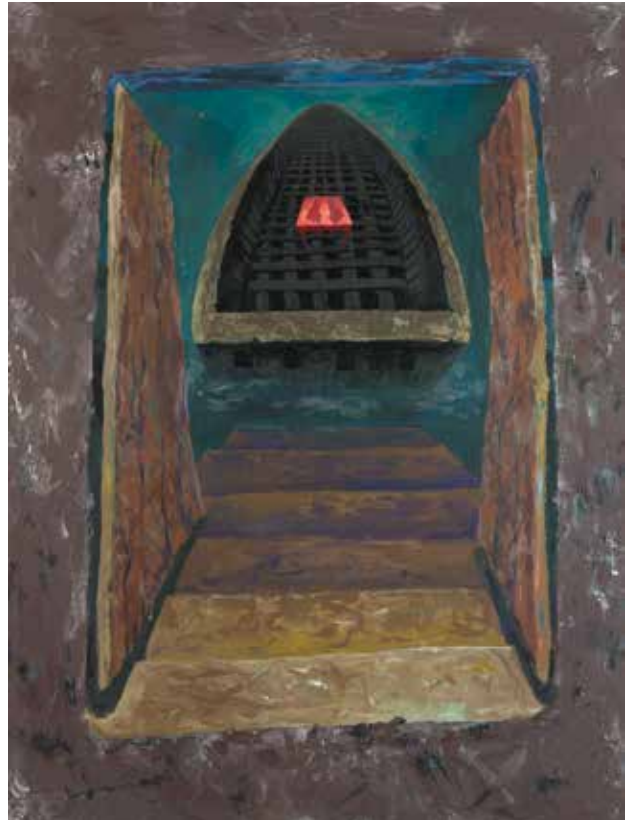
*The Door of No Return I*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 in.



*The Door of No Return II*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 in.



*Door of No Return IV: Predators*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 in.



*Door of No Return V: Slave Block*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 in.

Opposite: *Door of No Return VI: Rule, Britannia!*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48 in.







*Middle Passage II*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.

Opposite: *The Middle Passage VII*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 in.

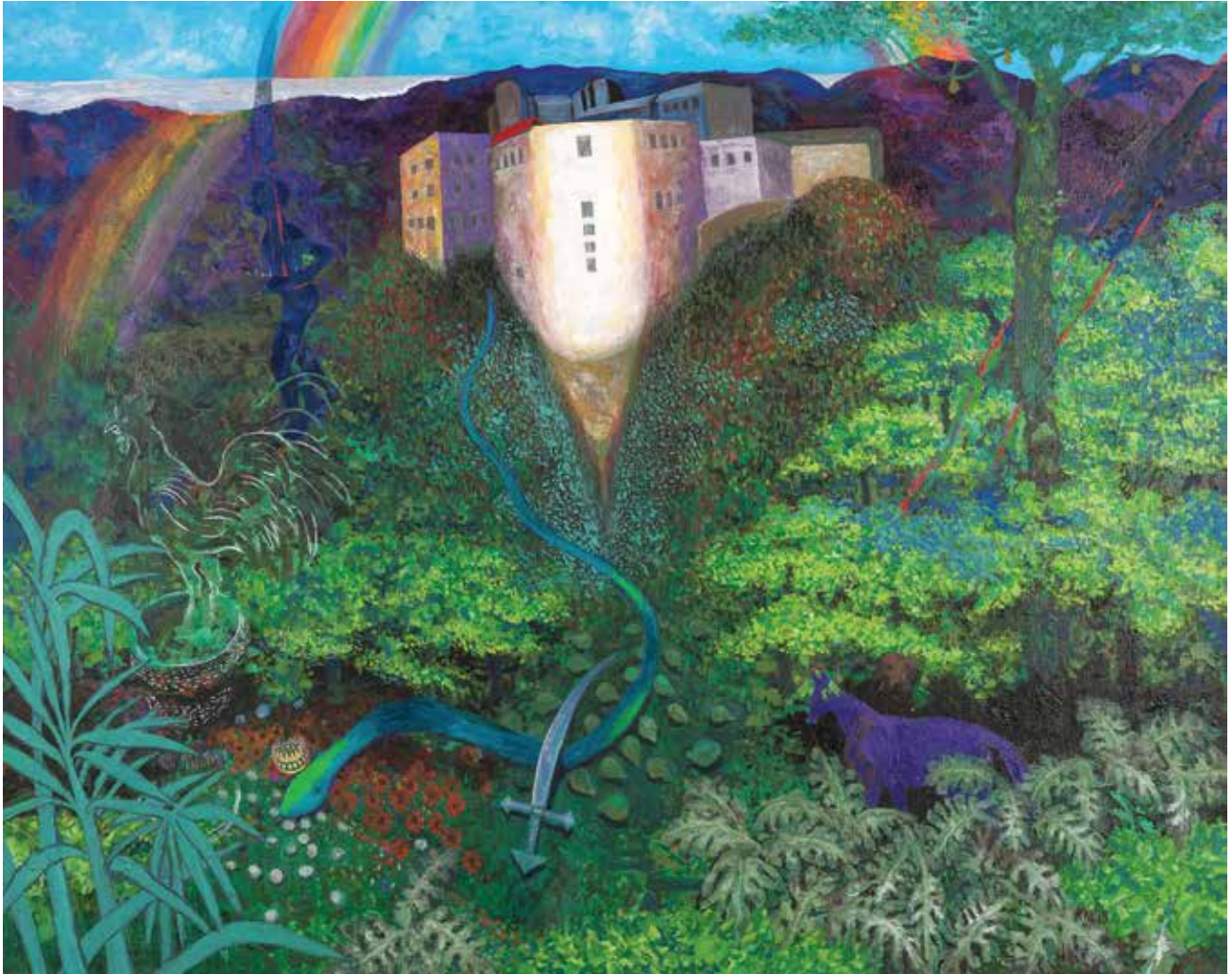


*Katrina*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.



*Atlantic*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.





*Kingdom of the Loa*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 in.  
Opposite: *Boyz*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 in.



*Scenes of Childhood*, 2011. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in.



*Songs of Our Fathers*, 2012. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in.

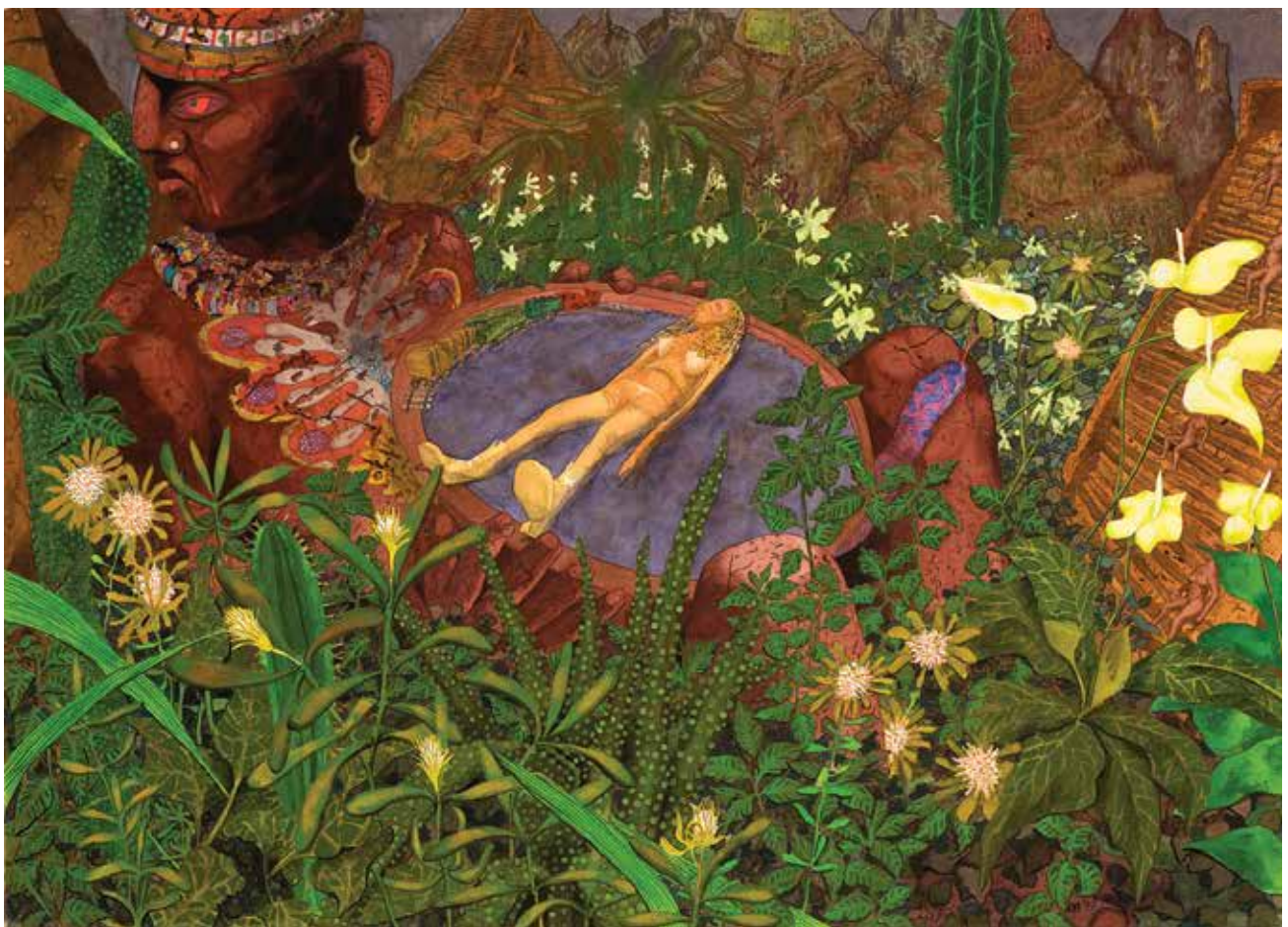


*A Caravan for Ouidah*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in.





*Sunday Morning*, 2005. Watercolor on paper, 40 x 30 in.



*Chacmool*, 1999. Watercolor on paper, 30 x 40 in.

Opposite: *African Tango*, 2000. Watercolor on paper, 40 x 30 in.

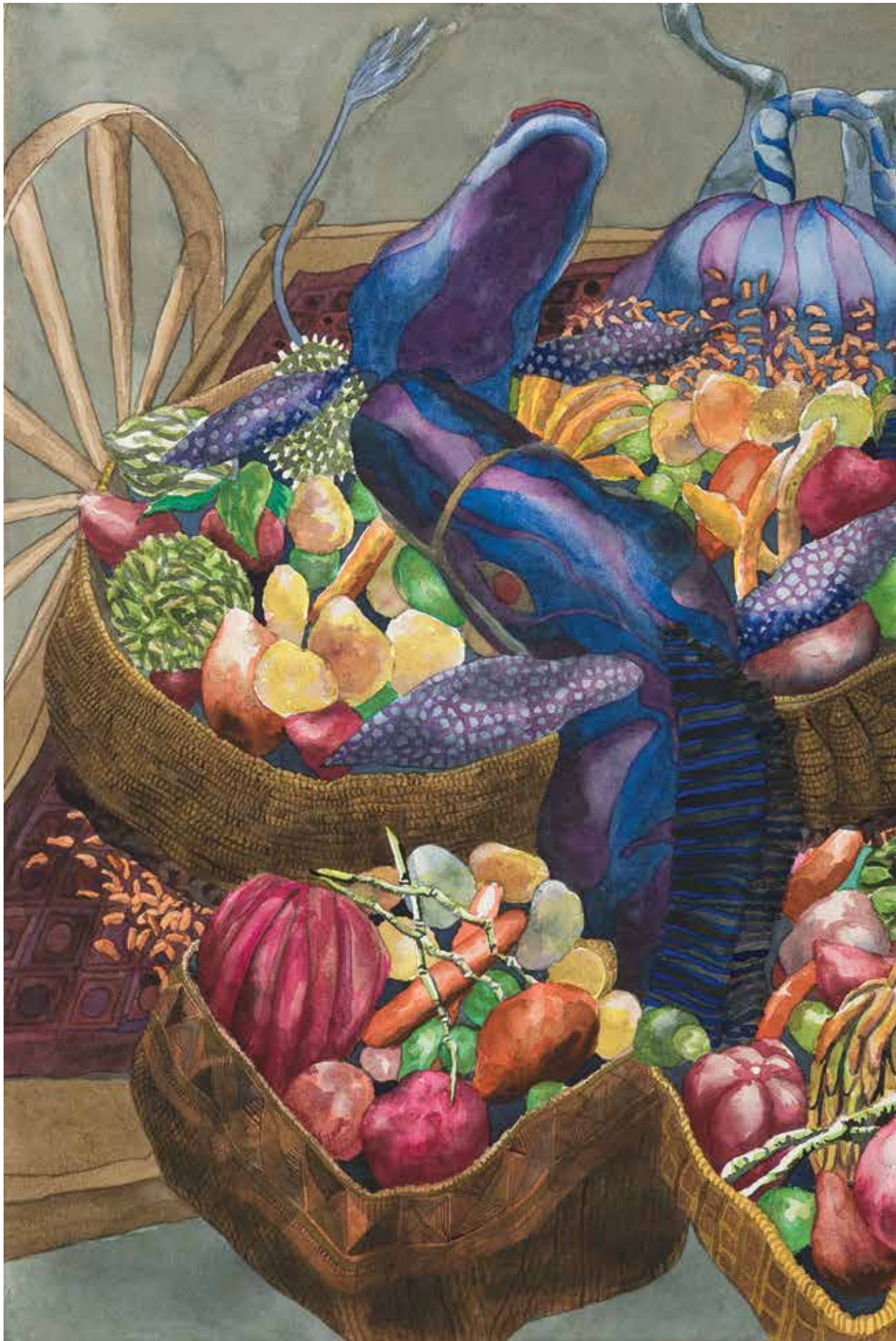




*Sound the Knell Slowly*, 2001. Watercolor on paper, 40 x 30 in.



*Gumbo*, 2001. Watercolor on paper, 30 x 40 in.





*Market II*, 2005.  
Watercolor on paper,  
30 x 40 in.



*The Tango*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 41 x 45 in.





*Jerusalem*, 2002. Watercolor on paper, 40 x 30 in.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

My artistic vision is affected by the culture and history of the Caribbean, where I grew up. Some of my ideas use the past as metaphor for the present. Others are issues of our time, in the US or abroad, but usually suggest relationship to cultural legacy. The Caribbean was the trading center of the Transatlantic slave trade by which Euro-American wealth was created. The first Africans did not come through Ellis Island. And they came before the Mayflower. They came by slave ships. Whether in expressions of pain or joy, comedy or tragedy, complexities of the Transatlantic slave trade formed much of the character of the Americas. From African relationships to the Middle East and the Mediterranean, to slaves' journeys across Africa to the Atlantic and the Americas, the Transatlantic slave trade and its effects upon our time form quadrants for my artistic vision.

I began as an abstract artist, but my work evolved into figuration. My mature work blends both. My paintings most often tell metaphorical stories. An idea hits a spark and I begin to draw and paint it. But it is unusual for my original idea to stay intact

as I work. In spite of my original intention, my paintings evolve through passages of compositional and narrative transition that lead me to make choices: keep the original narrative and adjust the composition to fit it, or, bend the original idea to the challenges of the composition. Invariably I follow the clues of the composition and adjust the story, sometimes changing it entirely. The result is a tension between the real and imagined, the literal and the abstract.

As an abstract painter I made compositions across the flat pictorial surface, seldom breaking into 3-dimensional, illusionistic space. My early foray into mixing abstraction and figuration followed what many others did: abstract the figure 2-dimensionally and put it into cubist or flat space. But I wanted three-dimensional, not flat imagery. And I wasn't interested in Cubist space. After a time, I learned to blend abstract spaces and 3-dimensional figuration into one, alternating the literal and non-literal, seamlessly. I found my voice.

Each of my paintings evolve into something I didn't originally plan. Each evolves into a surprise. Like magic. My paintings

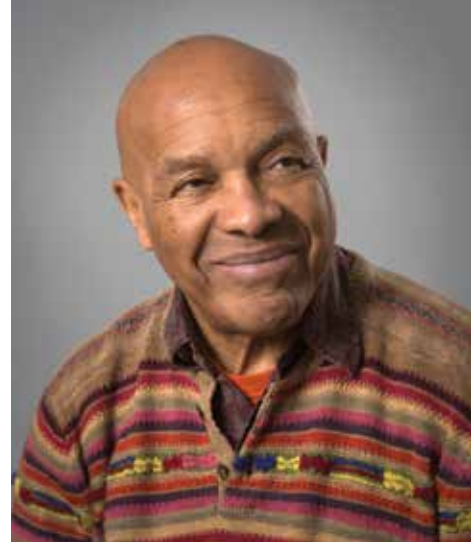
tend to have a portal. This I have come to realize, is my deference to the picture plane, but also a recurring psychological anxiety about enclosures. It's like my vision comes out of the mouth of a metaphorical cavern. This cavern opens onto an incline plane that forms tableau and narrative. The incline plane provides me a panorama view, from which I explore abstract variations as though it were a 2-dimensional surface. This tableau may have openings to different tableaux, different caverns, complex and unexpected dimensions of space, which become theatre for variations or extensions of a narrative. Then behind all that is often a wall, like the back of a proscenium, but sometimes the wall opens like another cavern with space to infinity. Perspectives, proportions and angles shift unexpectedly. It's like a kind of origami. I am not interested in Surrealism as much as in misdirection and chimera. The result are spaces and figures that intertwine into abstract stories that are more metaphorical and psychological than they are literal. They are intentionally poetic.

## KEITH MORRISON BIOGRAPHY

Keith Morrison, b. Jamaica, 1942, is a painter, printmaker, author, critic, educator and administrator. He has exhibited worldwide for five decades. His works are in such collections as the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago; the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, the Pennsylvania Academy; the Museum of Modern Art, Monterrey, Mexico; the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the National Gallery of Art, Jamaica. He has exhibited in such in such as the Jan Cicero Gallery, Chicago; Brody's Gallery, Washington, DC; Harris Brown Gallery, Boston; Bomani Gallery, San Francisco; the University of Delaware Museums; the High Museum; 511 Gallery, NYC; Cavin Morris Gallery, NYC; the Bronx Museum, NYC; Alternative Museum, NYC; Miller/Geisler Gallery, NYC; the DeYoung Museum, San Francisco; the Havana Biennale; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Mexico. He represented Jamaica in the

Caribbean Biennale in Santo Domingo, and in the Venice Biennale.

His art has been written about in numerous newspapers, periodicals and catalogues and has been featured on TV and in film. Some publications that include his work are: *African Diaspora in the Cultures of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States*, University of Delaware Press; *Mortality/Immortality*, the Getty Museum; *Myth and Magic in the Americas: the Eighties*, Museum of Modern Art, Monterrey, Mexico; *Mixed Blessings*, Lucy Lippard; *Free Within Ourselves*, Regina Perry; *Contemporary Visual Expressions*, David Driskell; *Caribbean Visions*, Samella Lewis; *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century*, Richard Powell; *African American Art from the Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights Era and Beyond*, Virginia



Mecklenburg, Smithsonian Institution; *Caribbean Art*, Veerle Poup-eye; *African–American Art*, Crystal Britton; *The Long Hard Struggle*; essay “A Transnational Artist with a Jamaica Soul”, Judith Bettelheim, *African Arts Magazine*; *Art in Chicago: The First 50 Years*; *Washington Art Matters: Art Life in the Capital 1940–1990*, Washington Arts Museum; and his biography: *Keith Morrison*, Rene Ater, Pomegranate Press.

## DR. JUDITH E. STEIN BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Judith E. Stein is a writer and curator specializing in post-WWII American art. She is a graduate of Barnard College, and earned her Ph.D. in art history from the University of Pennsylvania. Her recent biography of the Chinese American art dealer Richard Bellamy, *Eye of the Sixties, Richard Bellamy and the Transformation of Modern Art* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), won the Athenaeum Literary Award. As curator at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), she organized shows for Bettye Saar, Judy Pfaff and Raymond Saunders, among others, as well as the award-winning exhibition, *I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin*, seen in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She co-curated *The Figurative Fifties, New York School Figurative Expressionism*

for PAFA, and *Picturing the Modern Amazon* for the New Museum. Her essays are included in *Making Their Mark, American Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970–1985; The Power of Feminist Art; Richard Artschwager, Up and Across; and Self-Taught Artists of the 20th Century: An American Anthology*. A former arts reviewer for NPR's *Fresh Air* and *Morning Edition*, Dr. Stein has written for *Art in America, Art Asia Pacific, Art News*, and *The New York Times Book Review*, among others. She is the recipient of a Pew Fellowship in the Arts in literary nonfiction and a Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. She is the co-president of the American section of the International Art Critics Association (AICA-USA).

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Back cover: *Hoodie*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 in.  
All images courtesy of the artist.



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