

STEFANIE JACKSON

“He was haunted by the plight of his people... In the end, the systematic otherworldliness of surrealism did not win him over; instead, he harnessed surrealist techniques to the cause of *négritude*.” — Aimé Césaire

In 1977, I studied French literature in Paris. There, I came across Césaire’s *Lost Body* poems, illustrated by Picasso, and Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes. My artwork reflects their inspiration.

The conflicting demands of modernism and a commitment to *négritude* are reflected in my theme of dismemberment. Many of my figures are missing limbs, suggesting violence to the black body, or a spiritual lack of wholeness. Yet it also evokes a sense of endurance. I juxtapose disparate elements and fluid, overlapping time sequences to create an imaginary space to interpret lived experiences. My paintings exist in a dream zone, provoking a break from reality.

My paintings rely on introspection and a suspension of disbelief to transcend superficial looking. Every one of my paintings has a specific inspiration. The concept of surrealism, magic realism and *négritude* all work together. Growing up in Detroit, moving to New York, New Orleans, and now Georgia, I have experienced the Great Migration in reverse. As Langston would say, “I’ve known rivers.”

Most of my paintings are composed as stage sets, the characters and scenery evoking a kismet of dream, memory, and reality. Ralph Ellison states the following in an 1968 essay on the work of Romare Beardon— “Beardon seems to have told himself that in order to possess the meaning of his Southern childhood and Northern upbringing, that in order to keep his memories dreams and values whole, he would have to recreate them, humanize them by reducing them to artistic style. Thus in the poetic sense these works give plastic expression to a vision in which the socially grotesque conceals a tragic beauty, and they embody Beardon’s interrogation of the empirical values of a society, which rocks its own ideals through a blindness induced by its myth of race.