ARVIE SMITH

2Up and 2Back

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2Up and 2Back, installation view
Disjecta Contemporary Art Center
December 8, 2019–February 2, 2020

2UP and 2BACK
CURATOR'S NOTES

Most of Arvie Smith's adult artistic career has been spent in Portland, and his paintings reflect the experience of being a Black man in a state where there is a significant lack of racial diversity. He is aware that many, if not most, of his Oregon viewers have absolutely no idea what it is like to be a person of color in a predominantly white community. Ever the educator, he says, "My intent is to shine the light on the sore of racism, to flip the racial taboos using my dedicated abilities and increasing prominence to make some discernible impact on the social discourse and visual culture of modern America."

Smith's life as a Black man in Portland has not been without injustice. During one of our many conversations, he shared a personal story that sent shock waves through my system. In the year 2000, a scant twenty years ago, Smith went to dinner at a popular North Portland restaurant and bar—a place still well known as a hipster watering hole. His food was served to him undercooked, and he asked that his plate be returned to the kitchen, as the meal was inedible. In the blink of an eye, the server called the police, who descended upon Smith and hauled him outside in handcuffs without so much as an inquiry about his side of the story. This searing experience demonstrated to him that despite his advanced education, his professional position at the Pacific Northwest College of Art, and his integration into the Portland arts community, he was still seen as "other." Smith's paintings, then and now, represent the experience of being seen this way and seek to engender knowledge and empathy on the part of his viewers.

Now, the importance of Smith's contribution to the ecology of Oregon art is being acknowledged and celebrated in an unprecedented exhibition shown in two parts: *2Up and 2Back* at Disjecta Contemporary Art Center and *2Up 2Back II* at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University. Both take their titles from a colloquial idiom that recognizes the glacial pace of social change (taking two steps forward, sliding two steps back). This partnership between the galleries allows for a more thorough, retrospective look at Smith's oeuvre: his early work is being shown at the Schnitzer Museum, while his new work is being shown at Disjecta. As of this writing, Smith does not have commercial representation in Portland—currently, he is represented only by Baltimore's Galerie Myrtis, which was founded by Myrtis Bedolla in 2006 to present politically and socially engaged visual art—so this joint exhibition is significant for many reasons, not the least of which is the opportunity to view his current work in the context of his long and impressive career.

These exhibitions and this publication would not be possible without the generous support of The Ford Family Foundation. I am deeply grateful to Kandis Nunn and Carol Dalu, representatives of the foundation and supportive partners in this project. Once again, The Ford Family Foundation has funded a publication that will preserve the legacy of an eminent Oregon artist. Thank you to Blake Shell, executive director of Disjecta, for stepping forward to present Smith's work. I am deeply appreciative to Daniel Duford for his exhaustive research into Smith's oeuvre, which led to the writing of this catalog. Thank you to Berrisford Boothe for his insight as a curator, artist, and colleague. Thanks to Tracy Schlapp of Cumbersome Multiples for designing this book. Thank you to Julie Kern Smith, who has been instrumental in providing both studio assistance and insights into Smith's work. And, of course, I am indebted to Smith himself for making these paintings, which express his truth and further his mission of fostering greater understanding among all people in contemporary society.

Linda Tesner
Interim Director and Curator
Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at
Portland State University

EMBEDDED TRUTHS:

FIVE PAINTINGS BY ARVIE SMITH

BERRISFORD BOOTHE

This essay examines a handful of selected works by Arvie Smith. Like a stone skipping across the water, it touches the surface of a larger body of deeper meaning, personal observations, and insights gleaned from interviewing the artist and his wife, Julie Kern Smith. Arvie Smith's work is so damn beautiful. It is a beauty in its most potent form. It transcends and often ignores prescribed, fashionable, or popular aesthetics. Rooted in and charged by sensitively rendered figuration, Smith's work resonates and is arresting because it emerges from embedded truths in American cultural history and his own lived experiences. The immovable truth in both is the reality of being an African American male, a state of always being both seen and unseen. It is a state of being that is hitched to a long arc of ugliness, of fear, of oppression, of exploitation, and of ridicule, all of which are stitched together into a tapestry of irrational hatred. In Smith's paintings, the characters and characteristics that narrate the beautiful ugliness that accompanies American Blackness[1] are always expertly rendered. His experienced eye, born into and informed by a childhood in the racist American South and the genteel but equally culpable American North, has always seen what needed to be seen. Long before Smith's mastery of his craft, a steady diet of racial injustice fed his thinking and became the ever-blossoming catalyst for his own heartfelt artistic journey. The catalog of his work over decades is the evidence of that journey. His beautiful works are the sweet, funny, twisted, and painful intellectual and psycholog-

Things that are personal become "taboo" in the art world, and [those things] shouldn't be dismissed.

SHINIQUE SMITH, artist, speaking at the Wadsworth Atheneum's *Afrocosmologies* panel in 2019

1. Uncapitalized, the word *black* in American vernacular reduces diverse cultures of African people to a color. It was taken back, capitalized, and elevated by scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois to formally and specifically describe American Black people. Similarly, the use of the capital letter *B* became a term of pride during the Black Power movement of the 1960s. Using the capital *B* to describe American cultural Blackness in writing is an act of redemption from a history of ridicule and oppression.

Strange Fruit, 1992
Oil on canvas
92 x 70 inches

ical dramas birthed as he visually navigates the thicket of history surrounding the contradictions of race in America.

A line of truth can connect it all.

BERRISFORD BOOTHE

Armed with the knowledge of dynamic symmetry found in Renaissance compositional practices, as well as masterful *and* intuitive color harmony sensibilities, Arvie Smith has become one of the most identifiably gifted, and still inexplicably underrated, contemporary artists. That may be because America's pathology around race and racial constructs is complicated and confusing at best. So a functional and vital symbiosis must exist between the mind, the heart, and the hand when Smith probes such gaping cultural wounds. Many African American artists illustrate this pain in art, but few simultaneously imbue their paintings and works of art with the pleasure of who we are. Arvie Smith holds these ugly truths to be self-evident and represents them through dramatic comedy, sarcasm, and as sardonic narratives. In major works like *Strange Fruit* (1992), Smith presents tragedy through a lens of hatred painted so beautifully, it becomes a kaleidoscope of color and transparency that freezes the viewer in a moment of theatrical poetry. It is a major work about lynching, a form of American terror we elect not to talk about and a dark place from which to begin. But it is exactly Smith's ability to extract beauty from the underbelly of a painful collective history that makes him a contemporary artist who should be considered as important as Robert Colescott or Kara Walker, each of whom have made works of art and built careers that also use racism to mock racism.

Simple things can be antidotes to public blindness.

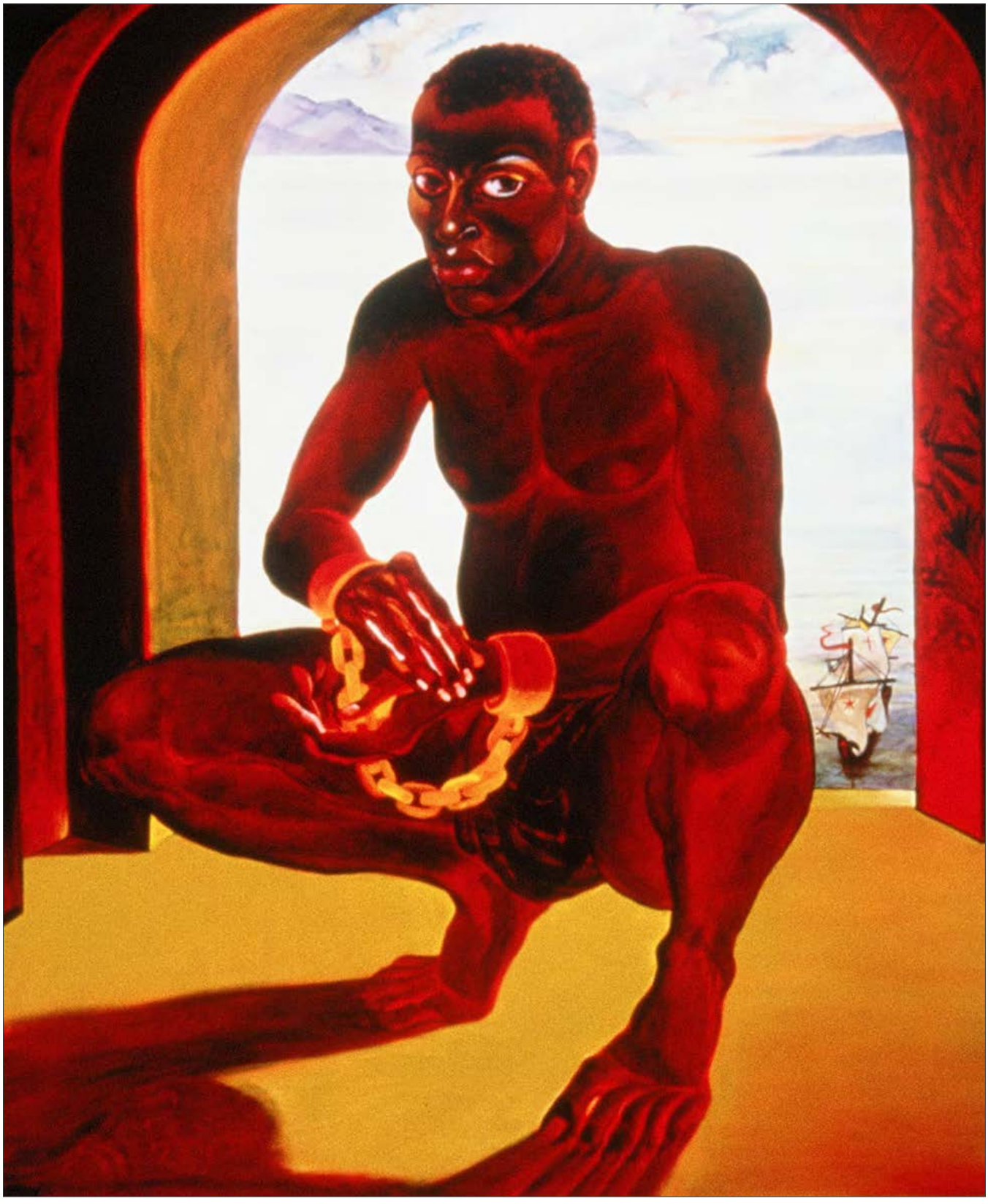
UNKNOWN

These works will be presented in a subjective sequence, although doing so entails the risk of them being perceived as stand-alone narratives. To reduce that possibility, the paintings have been selected specifically to establish linear, historical relationships. Each image exists both independently and as part of an ongoing truth about America itself. That truth: we are a nation still at war with ourselves. And, as Smith illustrates over and over, that ongoing war is still centered on the conflicted, race-based gaze of 'white'[2] Americans at Black and brown Americans. The problem is always "how they see us." The solution is how we see ourselves. In Arvie Smith's works, both perspectives coexist.

Door of No Return

Door of No Return presents the harsh historical truth about the conditions of commerce at Elmina Castle, Ghana, which was one of many points of no return that fed the Diaspora. This moment of inhumane disembodiment is interestingly embodied in the person of a young and physically spectacular Black man. His hands are chained, yet are positioned in such a way as to suggest a space of alchemy between them. These hands will help shape the New World. His facial features are unapologetically Black. He engages us directly and intimately with *his* gaze. The work is a two-way mirror. The subject sees us seeing him. The compositional portal, between the present and involuntary future, posits these questions: Are you OK with this? Are you aware of the brutal, and banal, and terrifyingly personal nature of the slave trade? What could possibly be redemptive about such a dark moment? But Smith paints this scene about a particularly heinous practice in a manner that is incredibly personal. The painting seems to be illuminated from beneath its surface because of Smith's initial red tonal glaze, which produces the perception of an inner

2. Single quotation marks are used for the term 'white' throughout the essay to interrupt the common vernacular trope that signifies a dominant post-slavery racial or ethnic category. Not every 'white' American was accepted as 'white' when they first arrived here as immigrants. The Irish, Italians, Jews, Slavs, etc. were "ethnics" before they elected to graduate into 'whiteness.'



Door of No Return, 1998
Oil on canvas
60 x 50 inches

glow that allows the viewer to see through the subject's skin. This is a Black body, but the vibrant redness of earlier glazes intentionally suggests the blood pulsing throughout his body. As the sun makes the captive's body translucent, it also casts a foreground shadow wherein exists an anguished spirit—trauma as phantasm. In his depiction of this point of captivity, Smith has introduced a metaphysical manifestation, a representation of the rolling tension of Blackness—the rage that must be subdued in order to survive. In *Door of No Return*, a simple scene of inhumane historical portraiture is presented as a subtle, intense dialogue about history, ancestry, race, and spirit(s).

Representation is critical to the maintenance of pride and inherent value. In its absence, African Americans are subject to directed misrepresentation and untruths born of observation or biases digested out of context. These are tactics designed to erode and dismiss human status and deny contributions by Black hands to the actual birth of this nation. There is a massive conceptual gap between being a slave and being enslaved. There is an equally massive and continuing misconception that sees all Blacks as threats within, and to, 'white' society. By extension, the disparity between 'white' imprisoned populations and incarcerated Blacks is seen not as an extension of slavery by immoral 'Black Code' laws during Reconstruction, but instead as part of a popular narrative that requires the untruth that Blacks are inherently more violent. In *Slave Ship*, Smith conflates slavery in America with the gross, disproportionate imprisonment of Black bodies. He explains, "What I'm trying to say is he's a captive, not a slave yet, but a captive—just like a slave. I was doing [this] before there was an emphasis on mass incarceration, but there's always been an emphasis on mass incarceration in our communities. So, it's just become a thing!"

Slave Ship

Again, despite such dark and deflating subject matter, Arvie Smith presents us with an image of exquisite beauty punctuated with secondary characters that act as a dramatic and ominous chorus of forms. The central character, the prisoner, wears the striped prison garb that indicts him as guilty. But Smith has rendered him in a profile of immense dignity. He is a beautiful man, chiseled and regal in posture, who looks away from the gaze of the viewer. He is not concerned at all with "how they see us." Most striking and revealing of the man's frame of mind are his hands. They are the form closest to the viewer. His left arm, identical in tone to his face, comes up from the right and clasps his other hand, which is both luminous from the underpainting and reflective of the sun. These hands are representations of delicate strength. All of Smith's work proclaims the same thing: it's not just about the figure(s). The figure(s) become the pigment, the pigment becomes the skin, the skin becomes light. Everything serves multiple roles, which results in a kind of visual dexterity and vibrancy and brilliance that African-influenced art must always have. In *Slave Ship*, Smith offers us a glimpse into his own psychology as an artist. His objective is to depict and play with the elements that he knows will focus us, expose our prejudices, enrage us, and switch our emotions on and off. Beauty isn't static in Arvie Smith's art; it is an orchestrated system for active looking.

Gold Dust Twins

This painting incorporates an iconic and familiar image lifted from one of the innumerable commercial items available during the Jim Crow period of American history. As a contrast to the emancipation of enslaved Blacks, inflammatory and negative imagery such as this became part of the currency of oppression. Derisive imagery of Black men, women, and children was used to sell products and became a new means of metaphysical and psychological ownership. Objectification was an effective throwback to the familiar sentiment of the negationist 'Lost Cause' ideology: a kind of "I used to own you, and still do" wounding of the collective Black ego. A product like Gold Dust Washing Powder has imagery that implies that it is strong enough to wash away what is black and dirty until it becomes clean and white. Think about that. A whole host of images, terms, and brand names were aimed at damaging Black culture's sense of self-worth and legitimate humanity, including 'Sambo,' 'Pickaninny,' 'Jigaboo,' 'Coon,' 'Jim Crow,' 'Mammy,' 'Darkie,' 'Black-Faced Minstrel,' and 'Jolly Nigger.'

Smith appropriates the Gold Dust twins and situates them under a banner with the offer-

Slave Ship, 1992
Oil on canvas
60 x 50 inches

ing "Let Us Do Your Work." Here—as it was for those who found power in producing such negative imagery—subtlety is not an option. A grin is not always a smile. An alligator shows its teeth, but it is definitely not smiling. The showing of teeth has a different meaning when an entire culture is under attack. Each character in this painting bears a smile that hides the rage mentioned earlier—a rage that must be subdued in order to survive. At one end of the arch, across from the Black "savage," is a Christian minister/priest in a pot, being boiled. The silence of the church throughout hundreds of years of vile oppression can easily be read here as its own form of savagery.

Bojango Ascending the Stairs

In the early twentieth century, pejorative and demeaning representations of Blacks were widespread both in commonly available products and in new media forms like radio and moving pictures. *Bojango Ascending the Stairs* is the most compositionally packed and overtly staged of Smith's works so far. The inspiration for this masterwork came from, in Smith's words, "the movie *The Little Colonel*, with Shirley Temple, who is the figure up at the top left. She did a dance scene with Bojangles [Bill "Bojangles" Robinson], and they were dancing up the stairs. Now what we didn't know was that Bojangles was not allowed to touch Shirley Temple. So, I'm turning that on its head." That is precisely what Arvie Smith does in this beautifully choreographed reference to a moment from a "classic"[3] film that made clear what the absolute boundaries were at the time for relationships between Black men and 'white' women. Intimacy was forbidden.

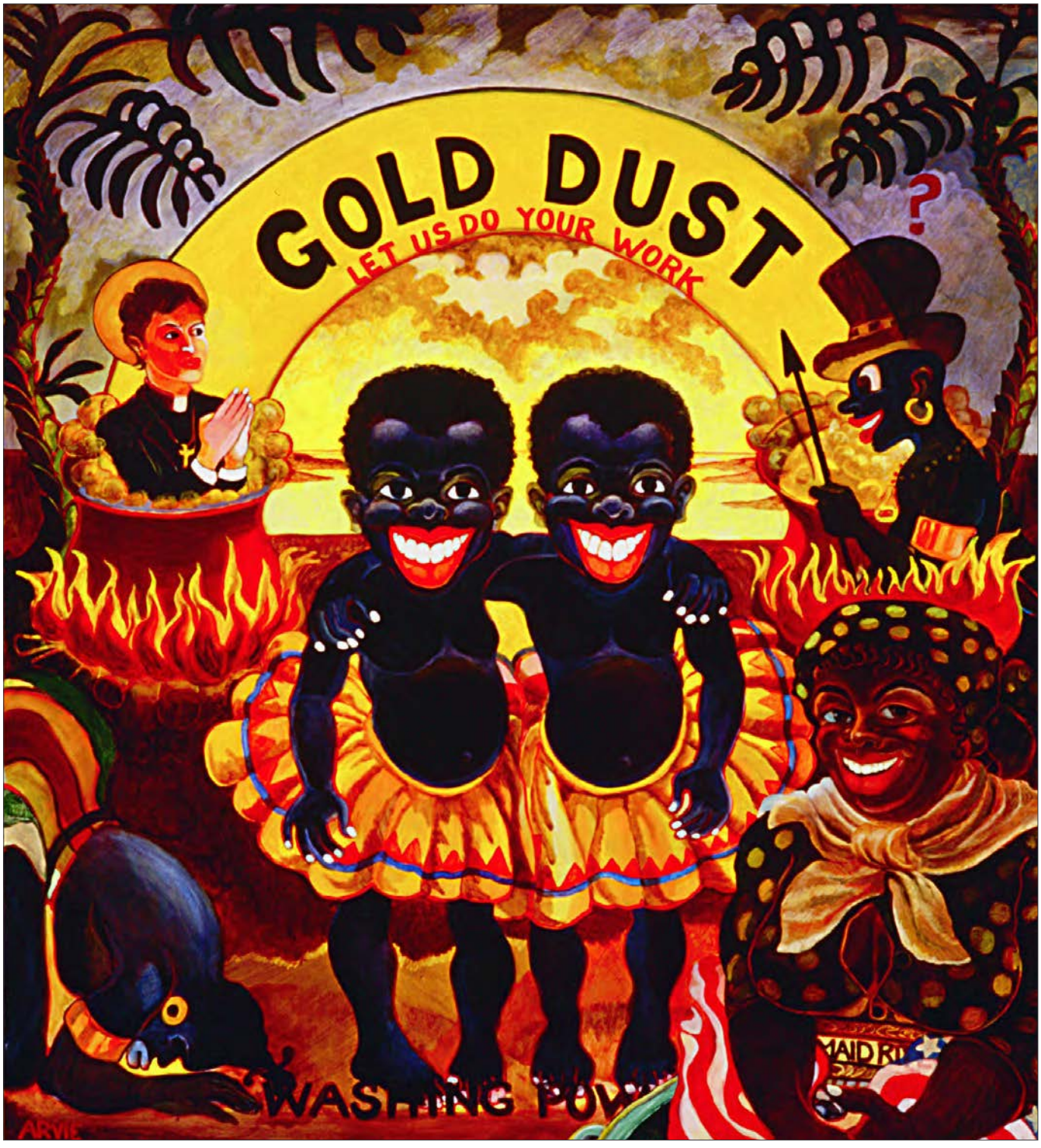
The nucleus of 'white' fear and racism is the fear of the primal Black savage "taking" their pristine 'white' women. So entrenched is this fear that D. W. Griffith made it the dominant plot point in his epic, controversial, and racist 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. Here, Smith tackles this tangled trope of psychological projection. As in the majority of his most complex works, the painting is packed with references. At the top right, in the far distance, are the Massa's mansion and the slave sheds. A trumpeter with inflated cheeks sounds the trumpet, which in cultural and religious contexts cues celebration, jubilee, or a declaration of war with the promise of salvation. The Jemima mammy is a witness to the central act of desire. Shirley Temple, hands clasped, looks past her own "innocence" to the reimagined central act, a more forceful and erotic fantasy involving Bill Robinson. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson's signature routine was tap-dancing on stairs. Stairs take center stage in this drama. The term *bojango,* in contrast, has a lewd urban etymology referencing exposed female breasts *and* sexual organs.

The arms of the one-eyed grinning Sambo contain the radial dynamism of this full-on challenge to intimacy between Black and 'white.' His grin is *not* a smile. His teeth, chomping on his cigar and enclosed by his inflated, cartoonish lips, represent the projected predatory *menace* of Black men—projected onto them by 'white' men. In fact, American history affirms that it was far more common for 'white' men to prey upon the Black female body. Sambo's left hand appears to be spreading a woman's leg. His right arm has just thrown the dice, a gamble that comes up snake eyes: a losing bet.

Arvie Smith loves the female body. He elevates female sensuality and sexuality above objectification. Smith's women understand their own sexual power and display it with potency and confrontational flair. Her nipples erect, submitting to desire, this woman has multiple legs that animate the activity and create a radial dynamism akin to that of Marcel Duchamp's 1912 masterwork *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Embodying desire and intimacy are Bojango's large, oversized hands, underpainted with a red glaze to overtly suggest the heightened blood flow of impassioned eroticism.

We may have visually unpacked this complex work, but Smith's actual meaning remains shifting and elusive. Certainly, he's dealing with taboos. "But," he says, "there's more than one part in there. One is taboos—but if you notice in the lower left corner, there's a lady that's picking cotton." That woman and the average 'white' man observing the scene, and the Confederate flag behind Shirley Temple, are

3. 'White' America enshrines areas of media and culture with this term. Such phrases as "a classic film," "classic rock," or "a classic car," are, for people of color, at times exclusionary dog whistles. *Classic* is a term that rarely connotes Black-centered culture. Placing it in quotation marks here means: "having 'white' cultural value."



Gold Dust Twins, 2004
Oil on canvas
68 x 68 inches

representations of what Smith calls "eye traps." The harsher truths expressed in *Bojango Ascending the Stairs* involve tensions between different classes of Blacks in antebellum America (late 1700s to 1861). "You've got your 'field negroes' picking cotton, and you got your 'house negro' [Bojango], who is kind of an insult—doing whatever," Smith says. "Bojango would have been a 'house negro.' All of the slave rebellions were betrayed by 'house negroes.' So, you [to maintain Black authenticity] want to be identified as a 'field negro,' not a Bojango." Woven throughout this complex stage-set narrative, this cacophony of rhythm and symbolism, is the painful thread of "how they see us."

Betta Dance Now If You Gwana Dance Et All

The colloquial use of the phrase "betta dance now" refers to an event horizon—the moment when indecision and tomfoolery must be replaced by decisive and assertive action. For Smith, the phrase has a family connection. "My great-grandmother, born a slave, was of African and Native American descent. And one of her sayings was, 'You betta dance now, if you're gwana dance at all.' And that's where I got that from." In the image are two women, one 'white' and one Black. The ship of possibility sits silhouetted on the horizon. "It's not a slave ship," Smith says, "but it represents that. It represents commerce, which is what we were." *Betta Dance Now* presents an autobiographical narrative. Painted earlier in his career, it's a master class in color harmony and elegant linear control.

The face of the (literally) colored Black woman is ubiquitous in Smith's catalog of works. Her features are resonant. Smith agrees. "They say that you paint people in your family, and I'm looking at a painting that's on the wall right now, and yes, I'm seeing that face also as kinda like a male face. So yeah, I think you do return to people that look like the people that you see, which is what I've been taught to do." In fact, symbolically speaking, that woman's face is Arvie Smith's.

The other figure is a 'white' female. She has a resolute beauty and a piercing, unwavering stare. Clad in a red-orange tutu, she has visual priority although she is smaller in size and appears behind the larger Black woman. Her erect stature and tense hand, extracting the redness of passion from the light reflected off of her dress, stand in stark contrast to the sinewy, rhythmic dancing movements of her counterpart. What is their relationship? What is the origin story here? Smith explains, "When I first met Julie, she said, 'You're a pretty good artist, aren't you?' I said, 'Yeah, I'm really good.' She said, 'Why don't you quit your job and go to art school?' And it's kinda [her saying], 'You better dance now, if you're gwana dance at all.' You don't get that many more chances."

The girl in the back (inarguably his wife, Julie) is also interesting because she represents to Smith an omnipresent spirit who guides him in intangible and mysterious ways. "She's pushing that figure forward. But you can look at it as the artist who cannot really get away from himself. When you paint a picture, you really expose yourself, and that little white girl is pushing me forward. You know what I'm saying? I'm talking about the forces, they come from somewhere, but I think they have something to do with the universe talking to you. You're not consciously aware of what's going on, but you know something is going on that relates to your cosmic being. There are times when I don't feel that I'm in control of it. In my own situation, where do I get these ideas from? Well, it has to be the courtship."

Art is a jealous muse. Sometimes she's the only one who allows the artist to say what he or she really wants to say. The artist must pay attention. And as in any real relationship, if he or she is dominating the process, and denying the materials their power, and telling them what to do, it doesn't work so well. The more powerful you are with the craft, the more vulnerable you have to be to allow these forces to communicate the truth. At a pivotal point in his career as an emerging artist, Smith listens and takes a big swing toward the greatness he knows he can achieve. Nothing here is about relenting or surrendering. This is a painting that demands that you straighten up your spine and look. Julie Kern Smith recalls, "This was a painting he did for his New York show. His first and only. I think this is a reflection of a kind of 'I'm going for this' [attitude]. This painting, when I look at it—it was impossible for him to put down the palette. He's just going for it!"

Bojango Ascending the Stairs, 2013
Oil on canvas
78 x 68 inches

In this painting, Smith's clever organization of space creates the fundamental chords on which he hangs the melody that his Black female gender-twin dances to. It is such a charged image. It has hints of methods and techniques that will resurface in Smith's work for decades to come. He's been challenged to be his best by the love of his muse, and *Betta Dance Now* makes it irrefutably clear that Arvie Smith has all the moves. He started dancing then and hasn't come close to stopping. "You notice how I'm balancing all of those organic shapes with the ship? And the horizon?" says the mature artist of his earlier work. "I'm really glad you chose this one. It's one of my all-time favorites," says Julie, the muse who inspired it.

In Conclusion

This deep dive into the translatable meaning intentionally crafted into these five paintings reveals Smith's mastery of the craft of painting and of placing signifying "eye traps," as well as his necessary passion for speaking truth to the viewer. His paintings are all reflections of the peculiar state of being that is Blackness in America, and being a Black male in particular. Context is the springboard for meaningful understanding. And Smith loads each work for that through compositional dynamism and visually sensual figuration. Yes, he is working with deep-rooted and difficult themes that trigger real emotional ire. But his are not paintings about anger as much as they are using anger, outrage, and the unsettling tensions of Blackness as thematic pathways to redemptive images of hope. Smith points out that he's not making paintings to go over people's couches. No doubt. But interestingly, despite such gut-wrenching themes and scenes, everything Arvie Smith paints, he elevates. His directed, eloquent, and sublimely painterly hand fashions images that pulse with beauty. And these ugly and hate-filled and embarrassing themes are not made beautiful by anger. In the end, Smith works "within an artistic convention, making pieces that I want people to look at. They have to have their identity. They have to be readable, because art is a language, painting is a language, like the English language or German. You have to learn the grammar, which is the drawing and the painting. And the composition is the context/syntax."

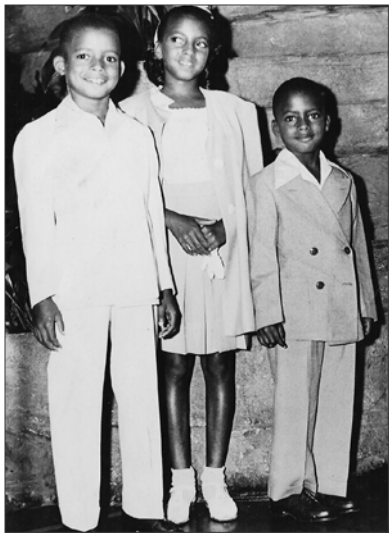
The phrase used when making amends is "truth *and* reconciliation." Smith's larger message is one of reconciliation—the healing of the histories that divide us. If we can't talk about what affects our humanity deeply and honestly—if we can't face uncomfortable truths—then we have no mechanism for empathetic understanding. That is why Smith maintains a commitment to beauty in his work. He attracts us to that which is uncomfortable by using the medium and his aggregate skills as points of entry for empathy and understanding—no matter how bitter his narratives seem to be at first glance. Smith says, "My mother told me once: 'Son, never forget who you're dealing with.'" Truth. But he also says, perfectly summing things up: "Until we can see that love in other people, and see that in ourselves, things aren't gonna change. We've gotta see other people in ourselves." Amen.

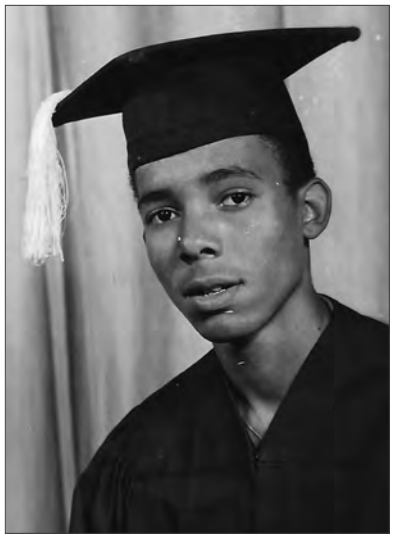
BERRISFORD BOOTHE is a full professor of art at Lehigh University, where he has taught beginning and advanced studio practice in drawing, painting, and design. Born in Kingston, Jamaica, he has had a visible and well-established presence in the Eastern US art scene for over thirty years, and has carefully crafted a career as a painter, digital artist, printmaker, photographer, installation artist, lecturer, and curator. Boothe is a listed but inactive member of the June Kelly Gallery in New York City; Philadelphia art dealer and consultant Sande Webster continues to represent and sell his work. For a period of five years, he belonged to a collective of professional artists at the Banana Factory Arts Center in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. His work has been featured in exhibitions at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (Hartford, CT); the William Benton Museum of Art (Storrs, CT); the Allentown Art Museum (Allentown, PA); the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (Buffalo, NY); the Fabric Workshop and Museum (Philadelphia, PA); the African American Museum in Philadelphia (Philadelphia, PA); the New Arts Program (Kutztown, PA); and the State Museum of Pennsylvania (Harrisburg, PA).

Betta Dance Now If You Gwana Dance Et All, 1992
Oil on canvas
60 x 50 inches

Poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture-makers—and this ability is the secret of their power and of their achievements. They see what ought to be by their reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS
"Pictures and Progress" (1864–65)





ARVIE SMITH: A CHRONOLOGY

COMPILED BY
ARVIE SMITH &
JULIE KERN SMITH

1938
Born on September 26 to Eola Page and Connie Smith Jr. in Houston, Texas, the second of three children.

1941
After his parents separate, moves to Roganville in Jasper County, Texas, with his mother and his siblings, Iris and Charles. Lives with his grandparents and great-grandmother—she was African and Native American and had been born a slave in South Carolina.

1943
Attends George Washington Page School in Clear Creek, Texas, a separate but equal all-Black school founded by his grandfather. Primary grades meet in a one-room schoolhouse and are taught by his grandmother. His grandfather serves as the principal and the teacher at the high school, which is housed in the church.

Uses copper tooling to make an image of his horse, for which his great-grandmother gives him high praise. His grandfather gives him a book on Michelangelo, which he copies almost cover to cover.

His mother moves to Los Angeles to look for work and create a home for Arvie and his siblings.

1948
Moves to South Central Los Angeles with his siblings to join their mother.

Attends all-Black schools, beginning with the 20th Street Grammar School. Participates in the Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, and Sea Scouts over the course of several years. Mr. Bess from the Boy Scouts takes a special interest in him and becomes a father figure.

Miss Brenner, Arvie's grade-school art teacher, tells him, "Draw the people you see outside the window."

1954
Moves with his family to East 42nd Place. The Dunbar Hotel, a historic chitlin' circuit venue, stands across the alley, marking the heart of the Los Angeles blues and jazz scene. Prostitutes and pimps gather on the lawn outside Arvie's home. At night, he and his friends peer through an opening in the security door to see the likes of Ike and Tina Turner and B. B. King perform.

Joins a neighborhood gang made up of athletes. Converts from the Baptist faith to Catholicism.

1955
Exhibits art at a nearby Black-owned bank in a one-person show organized by his best friend's mother. The priest from his family parish attends the show and, in response to a painting titled *The Whipping Post*, says, "Don't you think that's been done enough?"

1956
Is injured during his senior year in a gang-related encounter. With the help of his teacher Mama Campbell, he manages to complete his coursework while in the hospital so he can graduate with his class. Graduates from Jefferson High School.

Approaches the admissions office at Otis Art Institute to apply for admission. He is told by the front-desk receptionist, "We don't need your kind here." Enrolls at Los Angeles City College instead, taking classes in art, psychology, and sociology. Works as a hospital orderly.

1958
Marries Mildred Prescott and has two children, Seth (Kevin) and Kim. Marriage ends in 1963.

1958–60
Responds to matchbook ad for Famous Artists School and is accepted into program. For $300, receives three books and monthly critiques by mail. Works as a mailman and janitor.

1966
Marries Mazie Dyson and has twin children, Mark and Mario. Marriage ends in 1971.

Takes night classes in art at UCLA. Is accepted into and completes psychiatric technician training program through state mental hospital. Works as trainee at same hospital.

1971
Moves to Venice Beach.

1972
Leaves the Los Angeles area and moves to Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco. Travels north up the West Coast, living in communes in the Lower Fraser Valley, British Columbia, and in Moyie Springs, Idaho. Paints portraits at a pub in Port Coquitlam, BC.

1976
Settles in Portland, Oregon, and works as a psychiatric aide and counselor in a hospital, a drug and alcohol treatment program, and a residential youth treatment program.

1980
Meets co-worker Julie Kern while working at Parrott Creek Ranch as a youth counselor.

1981
Studies flute and ballet and performs with liturgical dance troupe.

1982
Accepted into the Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), where admissions director Bonnie Laing-Malcolmson says his portfolio is the best she's ever seen. Studies under Gordon Gilkey, Anne Johnson, Paul Missal, Sherrie Wolf, and Christy Wyckoff, who become major influences on his art and approach to teaching, as well as lifelong friends.

1984
Meets Robert Colescott at his lecture at PNCA and connects with him occasionally until Colescott's death in 2009. Colescott introduces him to the Phyllis Kind Gallery in New York City. Colescott's focus on issues of race and identity, and his manipulation of space and form to visualize ideas and emotion in his paintings, resonate with Smith and reinforce his own use of expressionistic interpretation rather than realistic representation in his paintings.

1985
Studies painting at Studio Arts Center International (SACI) in Florence, Italy, with abstract expressionist Jules Maidoff. Develops a lifelong friendship with Maidoff. Serves as a teaching assistant in printmaking. Studies printmaking at Il Bisonte and makes prints at director's studio in Fiesole. During winter break, travels from Sicily to Tunisia by boat. Kisses the ground of Africa when he disembarks.

1986
Graduates with a BFA from the Pacific Northwest College of Art. He is the first African American to graduate from the school in its seventy-seven years.

Marries Julie Kern. Teaches painting in PNCA's extension program and works as a house painter.

1989
Paints *Boys Night Out*, based on the fatal beating of Mulugeta Seraw by three white supremacists in Portland, Oregon, in 1988.

1990
Is admitted to the MFA program at the LeRoy E. Hoffberger School of Painting at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) as a Philip Morris Fellow. Becomes a teaching assistant to Grace Hartigan, abstract expressionist and then director of the Hoffberger School. Arvie admires Hartigan for the visual and emotional power of her work and her devotion to her art, and is honored by her interest in his work.

Leslie King-Hammond, dean of the graduate program, introduces Arvie to artists David Hammons, Lowery Sims, Joyce Scott, and Elizabeth Talford Scott. He meets Berrisford Boothe, who also studied at MICA.

1992–95
Exhibits at numerous venues in Maryland, including the School 33 Art Center, the University of Maryland, the Howard County Center for the Arts, and the Rockville Art Center, with curators Leslie King-Hammond and Eleanor Heartney.

1993–94
Accompanies Grace Hartigan to her summer home in Maine. Makes frequent visits to SoHo in Manhattan and stays at Hartigan's apartment on Mott Street.

Meets artist Bob Blackburn. Visits Blackburn's printmaking studio in New York City and is offered the opportunity to work with him in a residency.

Meets journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault, who visits his studio, begins collecting his work, and extends an invitation for Arvie to stay at her home in uptown Manhattan. Hunter-Gault coordinates the in-home sale of Arvie's works to a close circle of collectors. She delivers his painting *Everlast* (1993) to Nelson Mandela in Freetown, South Africa, as a birthday present.

1993

Solo exhibition at 55 Mercer Street Gallery in SoHo, reviewed by Eleanor Heartney in *Art in America*. With Julie's help, Arvie transports work from Baltimore to New York City in a U-Haul truck. Sally Lawrence, then president of PNCA, attends the opening and asks Arvie to deliver that year's graduation address.

Arvie meets artist Alison Saar and works on *Catfish Dreamin'*.

1994–95

Teaches painting in the BFA program at MICA.

1994

Meets Ntozake Shange at a poetry reading. Creates *Crack Annie*, an expressionistic painting based on Shange's poem of the same name.

Has a solo exhibition at Temple University Gallery, curated by Grace Hartigan and reviewed by Eleanor Heartney.

1995

Returns to Portland to resume long-term involvement with PNCA as a member of the painting faculty despite Grace Hartigan's discouragement. She advises Arvie not to leave Baltimore to go to a city with a weak art market, saying, "You'll be a big fish in a little pond."

Holds a faculty position in PNCA's painting department from 1995 to 2014.

1995–2009

Exhibits in Portland-based galleries, including Beppu Wiarda, Blackfish, Quartersaw, and Alysia Duckler. Beppu Wiarda, which represented Arvie, closes in 2009. To this day, Arvie has been unable to find gallery representation in Portland.

1995

Selected to participate in the Oregon Biennial at the Portland Art Museum.

1996

Arvie's work is shown in *Artscape: A Fifteen-Year Survey of Baltimore Art*, curated by George Ciscle.

2005–12

Travels to West Africa to study the slave castles of Ghana and Senegal with a grant from the Regional Arts and Culture Council (RACC). Meets up with fellow Portland artists Baba Wagué Diakité and Ronna Neuenschwander, who are visiting family in Bamako, Mali. Becomes a founding board member of the Ko-Falen Cultural Center, serving artists' families in a neighborhood outside of Bamako. Journeys extensively throughout Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Ghana, and Guinea. This travel provides validation and reinforces a belief in genetic memory.

2005

Baltimore curator George Ciscle comes to Portland for a studio visit and discussion about a future residency with MICA, in association with the Maryland Historical Society and the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture.

2007–8

Serves as resident artist for *At Freedom's Door: Challenging Slavery in Maryland* at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum and the Maryland Historical Society. Creates the painting *Baltimore My Baltimore* (2008), now held by the Lewis Museum. PNCA president Tom Manley visits Baltimore and invites Arvie to present the exhibition at PNCA.

Meets Myrtis Bedolla, who is studying at MICA.

2008–9

Is commissioned by RACC to work with Measure 11 youth, predominantly youth of color, who are serving time at the Donald E. Long Juvenile Detention Center. Works on Project Hope with over a hundred youth to create five major works. These murals are currently displayed in the Multnomah County Courthouse and at the detention center.

2011

One of the murals created in Project Hope is displayed in *Walls of Heritage, Walls of Pride: African American Murals* at the Oregon Historical Society in Portland.

2013

Arvie's work is featured in *Highlights of the Lewis Museum* at Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport.

Myrtis Bedolla invites Arvie to be represented by Galerie Myrtis in Baltimore.

2014
Retires from PNCA, professor emeritus.

2015
Receives award for Outstanding Performance Outside the Profession from the Oregon Art Education Association.

Creates the painting *Hands Up Don't Shoot* based on the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri.

2016–17
Work is shown in a solo APEX exhibition at the Portland Art Museum (PAM), curated by Bonnie Laing-Malcolmson. PAM acquires *Strange Fruit* (1992).

Reconnects with Berrisford Boothe, principal curator for the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art. Boothe acquires work by Arvie that is shown in PAM's *Constructing Identity* exhibition. Meets Lewis Tanner Moore and begins a friendship with him.

2017
Receives Oregon Governor's Arts Award for Lifetime Achievement, for which he was nominated by the Portland Art Museum. Is commissioned by the City of Portland to create a mural for Portland's Soul District, entitled *Still We Rise*.

Receives Culture of Caring Award from Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare in recognition of his community development and advocacy.

2018
Delivers commencement speech and receives an honorary doctorate in art from the Pacific Northwest College of Art.

Is commissioned by Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare to create a mural in the Albina neighborhood: *Albina My Albina*.

2019–20
Linda Tesner curates two solo exhibitions of his work: *2Up and 2Back* at Disjecta Contemporary Art Center, and *2Up 2Back II* at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University. A grant from The Ford Family Foundation funds the exhibitions and catalog.

Creates the painting *Circus Circus on 5th Avenue* in response to the increase in racial divisiveness throughout the United States.

He is invited to show at Willamette University's Hallie Ford Museum of Art in January 2021.

Receives a fellowship from the Ground Beneath Us, an art fellowship and residency program in Waterford, Virginia, with an exhibition planned for 2020.

Myrtis Bedolla introduces Arvie to printmaker Curlee Raven Holton of Raven Editions, who agrees to print *Dem Golden Slippers* (2007).

CHRONOLOGY PHOTOS

page 74
left: Arvie Smith, Houston, Texas
center: Arvie, Iris, and Charles Smith at Clifton's Restaurant in Los Angeles, California, Easter Sunday, 1950
right: Arvie Smith, high school graduation, Los Angeles, California, 1956

page 75
left: Arvie Smith and Julie Kern Smith, Baltimore, Maryland, 1992
right: Arvie Smith, 2006

page 76
left: Arvie Smith and Julie Kern Smith, Portland, Oregon
right: Arvie Smith, Sahara desert, Mali, Africa, 2008

page 77
Arvie Smith in his studio, Portland, Oregon, 2018 (photo by Intisar Abioto)

Arvie Smith, 2018
photo by Intisar Abioto

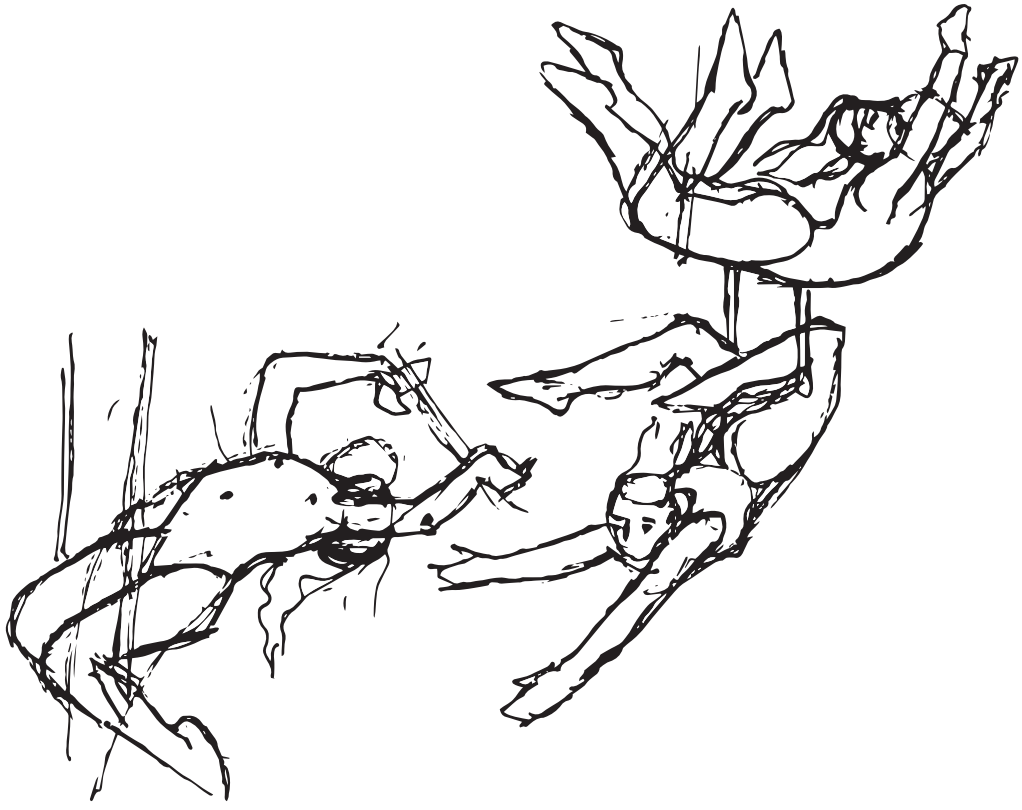
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As an octogenarian, I spend more time than ever before identifying influences and guides in my life and experiencing a deep sense of gratitude for them. In 2017, while preparing comments for the memorial service for Sally Lawrence, former president of Pacific Northwest College of Art and an essential figure in my career as an arts educator, I started to internalize the notion that none of us get to where we are on our own. I thought the making of art was a solitary act, but what about those other people who came into my life and stayed with me, even after our physical selves had parted? What about my great-grandmother Harriet, born a slave; my grandmother Hattie, a teacher at the separate but equal school; my grandfather George, founder of a Black separate but equal school, as well as a college professor and farmer; and my mother, Eola, who encouraged me from the start? My sister, Iris; my brother, Charles; my aunts; my children; and my nieces and nephews always hearten me. My teachers—Miss Brenner, Mr. Bess, Grace Hartigan, Anne Johnson, Gordon Gilkey, Paul Missal, and many others—continue to challenge and urge me on. There are my students, who taught me how to be a better teacher. My African ancestors and their culture, resilience, and beauty give me my reason to paint. Viewers of my work, patrons, advocates, representatives, and friends are always looking for hope in my work, and, on a good day, help me to find it. And not least on this list is my loving wife, Julie, who tends my career, keeps me on track, provides me emotional support, and helps me understand the white perspective. My regrets to all who have not been mentioned here, for on any given day, they are with me too.

Acknowledgments for this book start with curator Linda Tesner, who believed in me and my work, leading to the *2Up and 2Back* exhibitions and this book. Abounding gratitude to her for her vision of what could be and her tireless leadership in bringing it into a reality far beyond my expectations. My colleague Daniel Duford, a brilliant painter and writer, is the lead writer for this book and the bellwether who has championed this project from the very beginning. Berrisford Boothe, a gifted artist, educator, curator, and lecturer, has provided a luminous narrative to accompany my paintings, one that could not be replicated and will forever elevate my work to its ultimate potential. Tracy Schlapp, book designer and masterful architect of this catalog, moved us to "yes" at every turn. Julie played an instrumental role in advising, critiquing, and researching to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of this book. Allison Dubinsky served as our skillful editor. Blake Shell and Disjecta Contemporary Art Center came forward to provide the most spectacular venue for and presentation of my most recent work. Credit goes to Linda Tesner and the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University for continuing *2Up and 2Back* with an exhibition of my earlier work. Kandis Nunn and Carol Dalu and The Family Ford Foundation provided funding for this project. It's hard for me to parcel out acknowledgment and thanks, for without the entirety of people's belief in me, without their support and inspiration, I would not be where I stand today.

Thank you to everyone.

—Arvie Smith



Arvie Smith: 2Up and 2Back

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Interior illustrations: Arvie Smith, studies for *Circus Circus on 5th Avenue*, ink drawings

This book was made possible through a generous grant from The Ford Family Foundation, and was published to coincide with two exhibitions in Portland, Oregon: *2Up and 2Back* at Disjecta Contemporary Art Center, December 8, 2019–February 2, 2020; and the companion show *Arvie Smith: 2Up 2Back II* at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University, March 5, 2020–May 16, 2020.

Hands Up Don't Shoot **is Arvie Smith's response to the recent high-profile shootings of Black males by police in the United States, particularly the 2014 shooting of a Black youth by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. In incidents such as these, law enforcement agents have used a level of force that hasn't been seen publicly since the civil rights movement. This painting exemplifies and distills Smith's ongoing interrogation of the image world of contemporary America. Here, the repression, violence, and rigged systems that characterize our culture are on full display. The exhibition** ***2Up and 2Back*** **follows the trajectory of Smith's picture-conjuring practice, as well as the uneven, frustrated path of African Americans throughout history—just when a high point is achieved, someone emerges from the wings to yank it away. In the face of it all, Smith displays both incendiary pictorial beauty and biting humor.**

Front cover: *2Up and 2Back*, 2019, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches
Above: *Hands Up Don't Shoot*, 2015, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches