THE JASMINE GARDEN SERIES

An Interview with artist Barbara Bullock by Berrisford Boothe, Chief Curator, Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art

Boothe: How did you come to start the Jasmine series?
Bullock: I woke up this morning, thinking, "someone's going to ask me how I started the Jasmine Garden series." I was working at Ile Ife Model City's cultural arts program*. It was about to close. This was the late '70s. I wasn't able to really work the way I wanted to, and I wanted to birth new work, just being able to say, artistically, where I am now. I thought, I am going to do an erotic series. Because I want to talk about love. I felt at that point in time, where I was spiritually and mentally, I really need to do this.

Boothe: How old were you at this time?
Bullock: I was in my thirties. I thought, I am going to creatively, mentally, physically do the research and create a culture of people living in South Africa. It is going to be inclusive of everyone and everything I know about eroticism.

Boothe: About eroticism?
Bullock: Yes, about eroticism. First, I started writing about it. I created names and people and started talking to people. I would go to bookstores, you know… in the areas where men are all hunched over in corners, and I would be like, "I'm looking at those pictures too." I was so open, and I felt like I was going in all these different directions, but I loved research. I started doing drawings and met a lot of people—straight people, gay people… And I would go to bath houses in New York, gay bars in Atlantic City. I would be asked to leave, but I would tell them that I was doing research. I would do drawings and use my imagination.

Boothe: Were you trying to create a language about eroticism, sexuality, and femininity?
Bullock: There really was a language. I had names for people, and how they loved each other…

Boothe: So, you had stories within the overarching idea, you made up characters, etc.
Bullock: I was really in love with and inspired by Japanese eroticism. I read many books. It was amazing to me, because they all stated that all the samurai warriors had to know the art of love, and it felt so different from Western ideas of love. Many of the books illustrated this culture: fabric, design, painting, pottery, hair design, jewelry, love letters, tea rituals, incense, and of course, love potions. That really inspired me.

Boothe: So, it was a general awakening within you, as a person, as an artist, and as a woman—what you didn't know about the way the rest of the world thought about love, eroticism, and sexuality. Were you chasing that, or was it something different?
Bullock: I felt like that was something the world really needed. The world really needed to talk about love. This was before AIDS. It was so open. I began to do all these drawings, and I had a couple of exhibitions, and the exhibitions were always crowded. I was amazed at all the people who would come, who wanted to see the drawings. It's hard to talk about something that you feel physically, at that point in time. I couldn't do it now. That's where I was then. It was the start of my really being able to work in my studio every day.

Boothe: Was this part of you trying to shape yourself as an artist and trying to approach the lines and borders of things you hadn't thought about, or that hadn't been part of your upbringing?

Bullock: The way I was brought up was pretty open, and could share anything with my mother. My father was not as open as my mother.

Boothe: Was it a sexual awakening?
Bullock: I'm pretty sure that's pretty much what was happening. I had friends who were all going in different directions. Some were probably in the closet; some were very bold about their lives. They would actually come to me, and be like "Barbara, this is happening this evening, and we would love to see you there." I had to make up my mind about what I wanted to see and what I didn't want to see. It was serious for me. It was the other part of dance for me… What people could physically do. Most of my drawings came out as people embracing.

Boothe: They're sort of knotted and intertwined, right?
Bullock: Yeah, I really loved that feeling. I was in a group exhibition at a university. There was a piece from Jasmin Gardens, 7ft x 8ft, entered into the exhibition. The university was upset about my choice to exhibit this painting. The work was exhibited. Many of my male friends were angry with me.

Boothe: About what?
Bullock: Because I did this erotic series. They felt it was wrong for me as a female to do this erotic series. And I could tell as I was walking through the exhibition. There were a couple of people that I had known for years who would not speak to me. There was one guy who was a photographer and he was over at one end of the room, and all of a sudden, he started running toward me. He picked me up and he hugged me and said, "I'm so glad that you did this," and I said to him, "you may be the only one here."

Boothe: Did people feel betrayed or did they feel like it wasn't your right, as a woman, to talk about sexuality?
Bullock: Yeah, they felt it wasn't my right. In fact, they said: Why would you do black people doing that? Why not other people?

Boothe: So there's an intercultural shame that you took black bodies and painted them in a point of sexual ecstasy?
Bullock: The painting that I exhibited at the university—they told me, "We didn't think you were going to bring these paintings. We thought you were going to do something else." There were many people who were angry with me. I could not believe what people were saying to me.

At the exhibition, an older woman came to me. She said she loved what I was doing (she loved my work). Little children from Philadelphia would come and sit by the paintings, and said that it looked like Fairmount Park. They loved it, they said, "this is what happens at the park!"

Boothe: The piece that we have, the watercolor, that has these dancing female figures that are elongated and sinewy… That quality in them is more about their eroticism, like Eldzier Cortor's paintings. The bodies seem like they've got sexual power. Is the image that we have part of that series when you started investigating? Or was the Jasmine Garden series part of something else.
Bullock: They are a part of Jasmin Garden series. The Jasmin Garden series was large and inclusive. There were a few paintings called "Choose Me," and they were dancers, almost like the Wodaabe (who I found out about later), the men in that culture that ask the girls to choose them, based on their beauty. I did many drawings using my memory and imagination.

Boothe: Do you think the men were angry because your role of investigating female sexuality, particularly the eroticism of women of color, undermined their power to objectify the body. When I think of that painting, I think about celebration. I can see eroticism in it, but it's not what I saw first. I saw a relationship between the name of "the garden," the women dancing and the way they defy air, the way their bodies seem exuberant, pushing out, not folding in… Not being exhibitionist. I don't feel it's an exhibitionist image. These lanky bodies in space, is that from African imagery?
Bullock: Jasmine Gardens was African. That's where I chose the people to be. I wanted the "gardens" to be in a free, sensual, open environment. I could create that culture. I wanted it to be in a place where I could actually say what they were doing. I couldn't do the Western thing. I didn't feel that at all.

Boothe: So, you put them in a mythical place where the sensuality and sexuality belong in that space.
Bullock: In an African setting, I could place them floating in gardens. I would look at the images, writing, and environment. In this series, the whole culture was there. I felt like, "what am I doing that's not right?" I couldn't understand their negative response. It went on for a long time. It was a few years before the guys spoke to me again.

Boothe: Now it's decades later. What do you think about it now?
Bullock: I think it was simply about the fact that I was inclusive of straight and gay. I believed in what I was doing (my work), and I could never-not do this, not continue this Garden series.

Moore: Do you think part of it was that you were opening a door to a much broader definition of sensuality and sexuality?**
Bullock: This was Civil Rights period. At that time, you have the Black Panthers, the Chicago artists. They did not want to see themselves like that. And the art was also gay. The Gardens were inclusive. This was upsetting to some people. I would be invited to speak to the Black Gay Society in Philadelphia. I remember it was this large venue with men on one side and women on the other. They would question me, and I would show them all the slides of the series, and they were so glad that I created this series. They wanted to see more.

Boothe: The heterosexuals were the ones with the problem, then.
Bullock: A year passed; I was invited to do a solo at the university. I couldn't believe it, after everything I had gone through. It was an emotional time, hearing the things people were saying. I began working on a new series and as I was showing the curator the slides, he was disappointed to not see the erotic work. That's the art world for you. After that I saw a lot of nudity, a lot of erotic work. I continued doing drawings until I moved onto something else and went into another period in my work.

Boothe: I find it interesting, how you mentioned that it's a civil rights period. We as a people were fighting a national and justified war for our basic civil rights, and part of that civil rights and the the right to express ourselves. Fighting for the rights for a culture to be considered the same, but at the same time, "we'll tell you how to represent us during the time of this fight." But during that fight for civil rights and our stated identity, you find yourself wanting the right to talk about your and all female sensuality, gay sensuality, the bi-person's sensuality.

Moore: There's a lot of literature about the conservatism of radical movements. The Black Panthers were doing wonderful things, but were very misogynist, and against women.

Bullock: I was a member of the Black People's Unity Movement in Philadelphia. There were historians who taught classes on the history of black people. There were young people who were learning about their culture. I remember being told we have many jobs, and they approached me and said, "You are an artist," and asked me to draw black men as warriors. I did drawings of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. There was a strong relationship with Malcolm X. Finally, I had to leave. I felt I was being used. I couldn't be used as an artist. There was a lot going on in Philadelphia. We were fighting for our rights on so many levels.

Boothe: That's' a unique position to be in, to be a woman coming into her own sensibilities as a young artist, in a ripe period of her own sexual and erotic life, when the larger culture is fighting for "larger issues." From what I understand, this series is a way to put your foot in everything: in your femininity, in your erotic thoughts about culture, in your thoughts about sex—not just black sex, per se—just sex, and the role of women in sex, celebrating the body as an object of sexual desire, and the lines that distinguish sex, pornography and eroticism. You must have been clashing left to right, day-to-day, because as a woman talking about women (like the theme of the show "Women X Women"), these are images that represent your internal dialogue at a period when it was difficult for women to speak about their sexuality, sensuality, and place in the erotic world. So, you had to create your own erotic world, which was the Jasmine Garden series. I know it was difficult, but did it piss you off? Did you lean into creating this world harder?
Bullock: I almost had a nervous breakdown. I remember the newspapers in Washington covered the exhibition. They really put my work down. Some artist at the university spoke to reporters. They just didn't understand. What bothered me was being shunned by these brothers. But the gay community was the most open community that I have ever met. They were all individuals, they would communicate with me.

Boothe: Why do you think black men, in particular? I'm sure you had beef with black women too, but why do you think black men had such a problem with it?
Bullock:
Because they see themselves as fighters, warriors, men struggling for every right. I've met so many amazing men and women. We are more than who we are told we are as men and women. I wanted to create that freedom.

Boothe: Time has gone, and now we can look at it through a different lens. Why were the black men so uncomfortable? Your large painting 'Dark gods,' and in some of the other ones, there's the intertwined act of having sex and there's your work where eroticism and sensuality transcends just depictions of sex. It has to do more with how you configure the bodies, depictions of the bodies in relation to one another, whether one has dominance over the other… Those are things I look for beyond nakedness. I just don't understand why they didn't see that.
Bullock: I did a lot of men and men, women and women, and I think that really disturbed them. They were warriors as far as they were concerned. They didn't see themselves like that.

Boothe: It was like you were speaking out of turn, like how dare you speak about something so insular to our community, as our sexuality and the way we see ourselves?
Bullock: At that time, as black artists, we were always asked to paint about our people. I think for them, they wondered why I was doing this and not talking about how great we are. Sort of like the same formula of Ebony Magazine thing. But that's not who we are. That's not how I grew up knowing those people.

Boothe:: This notion of being very conservative…

Moore: If you're in a struggle for acceptance in the mainstream, then your definition of acceptance is subsumed by the mainstream definition. You can be seen as threatening the narrowed fight to let the good negroes be good negroes.
Bullock: I think artists don't spend a lot of time trying to figure people out. Everybody sees different things in artwork. When something hits you that you really want to do, there's a reason why. Even with Katrina, with Trayvon Martin…you have to realize, "This is you, this is your brother." I can't tell you how many times I stood over black men in the street after being shot, working in North Philadelphia. I would stand, looking at them while we waiting for ambulances to show up. You go from Katrina to this other thing, like *Driving While Black,* to Trayvon Martin, looking at his mother and father at the trials. That's what black art is. Me as a female, I'm looking at the mother…

Boothe: So the Jasmine Garden series, was a way to create a set of characters in a particularly sacred space where all aspects of sexuality and sensuality that belong to you and your thinking could be brought into form. You weren't trying to paint something for somebody, you were painting an environment where you could evaluate and investigate your ideas of sexuality and sensuality as a woman.
Bullock: It's where you are at the time. This is what life is, and this is how you're living, what you see. That's what I want to do because that's what I could trust.

Boothe: Had you been to Africa before this series?
Bullock: No. But once I went to Africa, every man there was after me. Africa fit like a glove.

Boothe: Tell the story you told me last time about how when you first went to Africa they could spot you from a mile away, because the colors you were wearing (if anyone knows you, the colors you wear are always incredibly bright and saturated), but when you went to Africa they could immediately recognize your work as African American because your work wasn't bright enough. You were telling me their work was uncompromisingly bright.
Bullock: The reds and yellows were something parents would tell kids not to wear because it was too bright and didn't go with their colors. Of course, we know, that it's really good for your color.

Boothe: How many times did you go back?
Bullock: About 10 times. Whenever I would go, I only had $35 in my pocket. I ended up stayed in places where prostitutes stayed. I would stay in really cheap hotels where the rats were so big that I pretended they were dogs. I ate everything in the markets, so I should've gotten sick, but I didn't.

Boothe: It seems like in your travels, and as well as in this invented space, you're only interested in making something that's authentic. You're not preaching, you're just trying to find ways to speak truthfully about your understanding of sexuality and sensuality. You're not trying to couch it, which is what maybe makes them upset. It's not coy—a bit of an ankle—it's this idea of you having these figures that are celebrating their corporal selves, and the ecstasy that comes from that might have been too much for that time.

But I suppose that's what Ann Lalik really loves about this piece, is that it really is an image of women (and women of color) by a woman in the context that a woman sees those bodies and that sensuality and sexuality and that fantasy. It's not a woman illustrating, beautifully, other women within the context of how men see women and see sexuality. This is a truly circular space of

women and gender fluidity. These forms can go male or female, and that's seen more as "soft" in our culture, than strong men. In your work, those stratifications of power were missing, which makes it funny that they would ask you to paint them like warriors because they were missing how many cultures in Africa are matriarchal. The Wodaabe are the tallest, most beautiful men in the world because the women go around checking their teeth, their eyes, and the whole thing of being a man is how to beat another man in a contest of who is the most beautiful. And that's not gay because that's what birds do, what peacocks do, what fish do—it's men putting on a show to attract women.

Bullock: If you were to get on a bus in Africa, men are walking around holding hands, hugging, kissing, it's a totally different culture. When I went to Africa with some brothers from north Philadelphia, they had problems where an elder put his arms around them and it made them feel uncomfortable. In other countries, they touch each other, they are aware of each other. Powerful men are walking and holding hands.

Boothe: The act of being a life-long artists, especially male in this context, making art you have to be comfortable with being vulnerable. We live in a Western culture, where being comfortable with being vulnerable isn't a thing unless you're gay. There is comfort in not being the one in power, and that is not the Western male. It's bold strokes, and splashing, and scraping… It's not a delicate thing. It's either that hyper-masculinity, almost violent masculinity to make something great, or it's the complete opposite with the French beret-wearing types. I wonder how many of these great artists died early because of toxic masculinity.

Bullock: Well, Pollock drove his car into a tree.

*In 1969, world-renowned dancer and civil rights activist Arthur Hall transformed a vacant storefront building in Northeast Philadelphia into a community meeting space for dance and artistic expression. He named this space Ile Ife Black Humanitarian Center, meaning "Land of Creation" in the Yoruba language.

**Lewis Tanner Moore was also part of the conversation with Barbara Bullock.