

**A Child's Eye, an Artist's Mind, and a Man's Heart: Romare Bearden's "Profile/Part I: The Twenties"
Series by Dr. Lisa Gail Collins**

What is it?
I'm trying really to remember
The clock has stopped
Now I can never know
Where the edge of my world can be
If I could only enter that old calendar
That opens to an old, old July
And learn what unknowing things know . . . ¹

Readers of The New Yorker were privy to an epic treat at the tail end of November 1977. Sixteen pages of the weekly magazine were devoted to the life of sixty-six year old Romare Bearden. Inspired by the artist's 1975 "Of the Blues" exhibit of collage paintings, writer Calvin Tomkins had studied the art and interviewed its creator to craft a thick profile piece on Bearden titled "Putting Something Over Something Else," a salute to Bearden's own description of "the art of painting."² Structured around five places in time--Pittsburgh in the 1920s, Harlem in the 30s and 40s, Paris not long after WWII, New York in the 1950s, and Canal Street in the 60s--and composed of rich vignettes, Tomkins's essay mapped key people, places, and events that had made Bearden Bearden.

Romare Bearden directly replied to this tribute, with encouragement from gallery owner Arne Ekstrom, by envisioning a new body of work that--like Tomkins's essay--would be structured around time and place and composed of rich vignettes. Within a year of his profile in The New Yorker, Bearden had created a series of twenty-eight collages profiling the first chapter of his life--his childhood memories of the late teens and early 1920s. Titled "Profile/Part I: The Twenties," this intimate autobiographical series of collages hung at Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery in Manhattan from November 8th to December 16th, 1978.³

"Profile/Part I: The Twenties" was an imaginative reply to Tomkins's essay. Yet Bearden's series of collages responded with a crucial retort. While Tomkins's tale of Bearden's life had begun in Pittsburgh and largely focused on New York, Bearden evoked his young years in the North, but he anchored his early life's tale firmly in the South. Divided into two sections, "Mecklenburg County" and "Pittsburgh Memories," the first

¹ Untitled poem by Romare Bearden published in Myron Schwartzman, "Romare Bearden Sees in a Memory," Artforum 22 (May 1984): 64.

²² Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: Putting Something Over Something Else," The New Yorker 53 (28 November 1977): 53-77.

section includes twenty-four collages while the second includes four. Memories of largely rural Mecklenburg County, North Carolina dominate the series. When asked by literary scholar Charles Rowell about his close identification with the South, which was the site of his birth and some summers, but not his primary childhood residence, Bearden explained: “The South happens to be where I was born, and I think the memories are indelible. There could be other places, but for me it is Mecklenburg County.”⁴

In 1978, from his Canal Street home and his Long Island City studio, the sixty-six year old artist wandered his mind back to Mecklenburg County, North Carolina and, secondarily, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and translated his vital memories through collage to create his series of childhood recollections. Collage, a method and medium well suited for expressing the layers, edges, and hues of remembrance was also, as Ralph Ellison suggests, an art form fit for Bearden’s desire to keep his youthful memories whole and true. Of this, Ellison wrote:

Bearden 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.⁵

Figure 1 – Maudell Sleet’s Magic Garden

One tale Bearden evoked in his series was his memory of a woman named Maudell Sleet. As an adult, he remembered a widowed woman who had valiantly run a farm and exquisitely tended a garden by herself. He also remembered that, as a child, he had seen this woman as infused with a magical exuberance due to her green thumb and her generous offerings of just picked fruit. Handwritten text accompanying the collage reads: “I can still smell the flowers she used to give us and still taste the blackberries.” Titled Maudell Sleet’s Magic Garden (Figure 1), this vibrant collage vividly suggests Bearden’s warm childhood memory of fecundity and abundance. Smaller than a sheet of paper, the collage is intimate in size and monumental in color. Rich reds, oranges, yellows, and greens form the lush layered world that the gifted gardener enlivens. The woman, attuned to her gorgeous handiwork and radiant with its bounty, strikingly resembles Alice Walker’s 1974 memory of her own mother and her garden. In her classic essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”--written four years before Bearden’s exhibit--Walker reminisced about her mother:

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible--except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty.⁶

³ Romare Bearden most likely saw “Profile/Part I: The Twenties” as the first of a decade-by-decade survey his life’s recollections. In 1981, he exhibited a second chapter, a series of nineteen collages, titled “Profile/Part II: The Thirties” at Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery.

⁴ Quoted in Charles H. Rowell, “‘Inscription at the City of Brass’: An Interview with Romare Bearden,” Callaloo 36 (Summer 1988): 430.

⁵ Ralph Ellison, “Introduction,” in Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections (Albany, NY: The Art Gallery at the State University of New York, 1968), unpaginated.

Alice Walker also reminisced about her mother's garden:

And I remember people coming to my mother's yard to be given cuttings from her flowers; I hear again the praise showered on her because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia--perfect strangers and imperfect strangers--and ask to stand or walk among my mother's art.⁷

Alice Walker's landmark essay is a strong and tender call for seekers to look both "high and low" for creativity and spirituality, which Walker sees as "the basis of Art" and, using her own journey as a model, she guides us to the overlooked riches of gardens and quilts."⁸ Bearden's recollections of Mecklenburg County reveal a similar affinity. His memories of gardeners and their gardens comfortably coexist with his memories of quilters and their quilts. Of his own sensual textile history, Bearden remembered growing up under and around quilts, and he remembered women gathering together to make them. Perhaps drawn from a stitch of these memories, a bold quilt is prominently featured in the foreground of a collage called Miss Mamie Singleton's Quilt (Figure 2) and accompanying text reads: "She was famous for her quilts." Composed of scraps of colorful materials from everyday life, the patchwork quilt serves as an apt metaphor for Bearden's own craft. Concerning the tie between collage and the quilts typically made by women, Bearden explained: "After all, working in collage was precisely what the ladies were doing."⁹

Figure 2 - Miss Mamie Singleton's Quilt

While the quilt, the walls, and the hue of the central figure's skin in this work suggest African American life, its subject matter--a ritual of everyday life--and especially its spiritually-infused stillness evoke the domestic interiors of Dutch "Old Master" paintings such as those by Vermeer, one of Bearden's artistic heroes. Like Vermeer's mid-seventeenth century painting The Milkmaid, the subject of Bearden's collage is a woman quietly absorbed in daily life. In both works, sturdy women inhabit rustic and harmonious settings, perform tasks that involve pitchers and other vessels, exude tranquility, and slightly bow their luminous cloth-covered heads toward the ground. Similarly, in both works, we, as viewers, are asked to intrude on these private

⁶ Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1974), chap. in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1983), 241.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 233, 239.

⁹ Quoted in Romare Bearden: Origins and Progressions (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1986), 4.

scenes of domestic life with their associations of purity and cleansing, so we might be reminded that tenderly performing the ancient rites of everyday life can invite the divine.

While silence and stillness saturate this collage, Bearden was also an aficionado of music and sound. Trains, with all their implied noise, charge through the artist's work. Symbols of progress, adventure, hope, and encroachment, Bearden called trains "journeying things" and succinctly explained their importance: "Trains are so much a part of Negro life. Negroes lived near the tracks, worked on the railroads, and trains carried them North during the migration."¹⁰ The artist's childhood memories are ripe with locomotive lore. His great-grandparents lived near the busy Charlotte, North Carolina tracks and he fondly remembered his great-grandfather taking him to watch the trains and imagine their passengers and cargo. Bearden reveled in the sounds of the train--its pitched whistle, pulsing rhythm, low hiss, and loud roar--and dreamed of running one.

Figure 3 – Daybreak Express

Four collages in "Profile/Part I: The Twenties" feature trains. Titled after a Duke Ellington song, Daybreak Express (Figure 3) shows a black woman asleep in a Matisse-worthy room while a train outside her wide-open window plows by. Here the energy and dynamism of the train heading north contrasts with the languid nature of the slumbering woman facing south. Head atop a plump patchwork pillow, the feminine nude lies in opposition to the charging masculine train. Belying the balance and order of its composition, the collage reveals a clash of opposites: feminine and masculine, nature and culture, interior and exterior, tradition and change. Train intruding on her solo sleep--and with no suitcase in sight--the woman embodies cultural theorist Hazel Carby's crucial point that "Migration for women often meant being left behind."¹¹

When Bearden's series hung at Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery in early winter 1978, each of his collages was accompanied by text written directly onto the gallery wall. The fruits of collaboration with writer Albert Murray, who also edited the titles of the collages, the texts were spare narrative statements that grew from conversations between the two men. Accompanying Daybreak Express, in Bearden's handwriting, were the words: "You could tell not only what train it was but also who the engineer was by the sound of the whistle." Bearden's interest in working in series, matching individual works with legends, and visualizing the trains so

¹⁰ Quoted in Tomkins, "Putting Something Over Something Else," 74.

¹¹ Hazel V. Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," Radical America 20:4 (June-July 1986): 15.

central to African American life visibly echoes the work of his friend and colleague Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), particularly Lawrence's "The Migration of the Negro" series of 1941. Composed of sixty small paintings--each accompanied by spare and suggestive text--Lawrence's series chronicles the mass movement of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North through figurative painting and social science-leaning text. Bearden's series, which combines collage and more personal text, creatively converses with Lawrence's acclaimed work. As the two men were friends and working in studios one floor apart on Harlem's 125th Street when Lawrence was completing his series, it is likely that Jacob Lawrence's work served as an inspiration for Bearden's autobiographical epic.

The sixty paintings that make up Lawrence's "The Migration of the Negro" series can be divided into three groups: images that depict the South, images that depict trains and the act of migrating, and images that depict the North. The twenty-eight images that comprise Bearden's series can be similarly ordered: twenty of the collages suggest the South, four collages, while anchored in the South, reveal trains and their associations with movement and migration, and four evoke the North. The final four collages in Bearden's series focus on the artist's memories of his formative times in Pittsburgh where he spent some summers and completed high school while living with his maternal grandmother. Accompanied by the text: "The mills went 24 hours a day with three 8-hour shifts," the first collage of the closing "Pittsburgh Memories" quartet suggests the fate of southern men who hopped northbound trains.

Titled Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket (Figure 4), this Pittsburgh-based collage evokes the world of the boarding house Bearden's grandmother and her husband ran for migrants new to their steel mill neighborhood. Denser and drabber than Bearden's southern compositions, this interior scene shows a threesome (perhaps a young Bearden with his grandmother and step-grandfather) centered around a table and under pictures, possibly of kin. On one side, a young worker descends the stairs with arm outstretched and large brown hand ready to grab his waiting lunch bucket. Meanwhile, out the window, the fiery factory with its smoke, heat, and noise ominously awaits the man who is likely new to a strictly punctual and unforgiving clock. Alit by the factory fire, the standing woman's expression befits Bearden's memory of boarders' first encounters with the brutal factory furnace: "They didn't realize, when they first started, the terrific heat from those furnaces. They'd strip

to the waist, and when the furnace doors opened, the flames would lick out like evil tongues and scorch them,” he recalled.¹²

Figure 4 – Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket

One story Bearden frequently told of his life was that a vulnerable and unpopular boy, the son of a prostitute, had taught him how to draw. The story goes that one summer day in Pittsburgh while teenaged Bearden was living with his grandmother, the boy, Eugene Bailey, had shown Bearden some drawings he had done of the brothel where his mother labored. Impressed and excited by his new friend’s drawings as well as their forbidden subject matter, Bearden exclaimed: “You did this? Can you teach me to do it?”¹³ Soon after, at Bearden’s grandmother’s insistence, Eugene and his pet birds moved in with the family. Within the year, however, Eugene had tragically passed away. The final collage in Bearden’s “Pittsburgh Memories” quartet and the closing collage of his series relates young Eugene’s funeral.

Titled Farewell Eugene (Figure 5), this dense collage reveals a crowd of mourners gathered under a full hot sun, heads bowed in grief as they stand around a casket crowned with red flowers and the brown earth prepared to house it. Accompanying text reads: “The sporting people were allowed to come but they had to stand on the far right,” suggesting that even communal anguish requires harsh separations. Yet life and hope are also present in this composition, as the casket rests beneath a tree, a symbol of life, and white birds circle the sky. Perhaps the pigeons and doves Eugene had taken under his wing, the released birds serve as symbols of freedom and hope. Bearden called birds, like trains, “journeying things,” and the free-flying birds suggest the deceased’s graceful ascent to heaven from earth.

Figure 5 – Pittsburgh Memories: Farewell Eugene

In addition to creating this elegiac collage, Bearden also wrote a poem honoring Eugene Bailey’s memory. A passage reads:

Nothing like this was necessary,
Eugene
I stand here among these tombs,
holding this flower
which will fall endlessly into this
open earth

¹² Quoted in Tomkins, “Putting Something Over Something Else,” 54.

¹³ Ibid.

that rejects nothing.¹⁴

This poem with its vision of layering, of petals accumulating in dug earth, lyrically evokes the essence of Bearden's intimate autobiographical series of 1978. During his interview with Calvin Tomkins, Bearden described "the art of painting" as "putting something over something else." This description of painting as textured and layered also eloquently describes the art of collage and the act of memory. Layering cut and torn paper over cut and torn paper to reveal something new mimics the process of remembrance, where we create something new out of accumulated memories we cannot forget and those we wish to remember. Tenderly working with layers of memory and materials, and wielding scissors, glue, paper, and paint, Romare Bearden cut and paste himself whole by intimately drawing from his childhood memories, his artist's mind, and his man's heart.

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¹⁴ Untitled poem by Romare Bearden published in Romare Bearden. 1911-1988: A Memorial Exhibition (NY: ACA Galleries, 1989), 30-31.