

Faces of the Freedom Rides

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Charlotta Janssen's portraits of civil rights-era protestors make a powerful statement assembled around the walls of the Downtown Public Library's open, airy Courtyard Gallery.

Using a palette restricted to teal, black, white and orangey iron-oxide rust, and infusing archival materials as collage, Janssen elevates decades-old mug shots into art. *Threads of a Story: History Inspiring Art* remains on view through Oct. 9.

Her paintings should be observed from a distance to appreciate the interplay of composition and color, then studied up close to explore the references contained in the collages.

The mug shots featured in Janssen's paintings come from two civil rights-era episodes: the yearlong Montgomery Bus Boycotts of the mid-1950s and the 1961 Freedom Rider bus rides that attempted to integrate Southern bus station waiting rooms. Many of Janssen's source images were taken in 1961 and filed away by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission until being put online by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in 2002.

Source images

"I'm not a historian, I'm an artist, and as an artist you work with your impressions, your general impressions," Janssen says.

Inspired by the inauguration of President Obama in 2009, Janssen wanted to find a way to thank the civil rights pioneers who had made the event possible.

One of the people she eventually spoke to was Ernest "Rip" Patton Jr., who had been a 21-year-old Freedom Rider from Nashville. He encouraged her to include lots of the female Freedom Riders because he felt they had often been overlooked. He also suggested she use the names of the individual riders instead of referring to them collectively.

Janssen chose her subjects based on a number of criteria but often simply because she was drawn to the expressions on her subjects' faces, the determination or fear.

Her paintings are interpretations of a historical moment. Her aim, she says, is to intrigue viewers. "That is what a painting should do ... a painting is an expression of a moment, it has a reference to a story. Often if you say less, you say more."

The paintings started off as simple portraits done in Janssen's signature palette, with granulated iron mixed into the acrylic paint.

"I starve the initial image of color so the collage could have its own level of

awareness, its own level of being," she explains.

After completing a composition , Janssen mists the canvas with solutions of copper, the rusting agent. This reacts with the iron, changing blue hues to chartreuse and adding jolts of color to blouses, jackets and other parts of the paintings.

Next, the paintings get a coat of varnish before Janssen adds the collage elements.

'Noise and music'

Janssen's use of collage grew as the series progressed, as she found more material and got more and more inspired by what she learned and by the participants she met.

In Hank Thomas, a page from a newspaper forms the pattern on Thomas' shirt, and an old Greyhound advertisement is in the background of the portrait. Newspaper clippings, vintage ads and type-written sheets of songs and other information are also incorporated into the paintings.

These and the other collage elements add context as well as texture to the portraits. Janssen refers to these as "noise and music," noise being the negative reactions, resistance and violence the Freedom Riders and other civil rights pioneers faced. The songs they sang are part of the music -- sometimes literally incorporated into the paintings via typewritten song sheets.

After a couple of years and 82 paintings, Janssen says she's ready to explore other themes in her work. On the other hand, she's reluctant to abandon the Freedom Riders because they've given her so much. "When you meet them, it makes you want to be a better person because they can really be inspiring," she says.

IF YOU GO

What: Threads of a Story: History Inspiring Art, mixed-media paintings by Charlotta Janssen

Where: Courtyard Gallery, Nashville Public Library, 615 Church St.

When: through Oct. 9

Hours: 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday; 2-5 p.m. Sunday

Admission: free

Contact: 862-5800 or library.

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