

***Contemporary Images, Ancient Traditions:
The Art of Laura James***

By Donna Thompson Ray

Color. One of the first impressions upon viewing the paintings of artist, Laura James, is the color: bold oranges, dynamic greens, meditative blues, and receptive yellows. Form. The conveyor of color: circular, squared, cylindrical, and triangled. Line. Designing the stages of understanding, reason, and values. Each element leads the viewer into a conversation about time, place, and experience; and linking relationships of people, events, and the natural environment. In the art of Laura James you will find transformative compositions emphasizing agency and tradition in contemporary settings.

From her beginnings as a photography enthusiast, Laura James has been influenced by narrative and the lives of ordinary people. She draws inspiration from visual and cultural materials of Black history and modern art. She incorporates iconography from ancient traditions and employs sources from literature, religion, and history. James thoughtfully weaves these influences into an insightful record of personal narratives accessible to various audiences. Like many artists who are women, the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of women, occupy a significant space in her oeuvre.

Laura James was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, the daughter of Antiguan immigrants. Her childhood centered on educational pursuits, especially religious study. She began studying art in high school. During her college years, she worked at a photography store that afforded her access to monographs of well-known fine art and documentary photographers: Henri Cartier

Bresson, Roy DeCarava, Man Ray, and Dorothea Lange. While pursuing independent study in the history of photography, James exposed herself to new scholarship in Black history and culture, in particular, she studied the Rastafari Movement, an independent religion tied to pan-Africanism, and unites a common destiny for all African people through liberation struggle. Through her intense cross-disciplinary study, James recognized an innovative and accurate way of representing Black people, visually. Today, after a decade of continuous study and production, her work has evolved into two distinct bodies that she identifies as secular and religious.

James's religious work is drawn largely from her study of the Bible, its parables, lessons, and stories, and Ethiopian art and history. She is fascinated by Ethiopia's history as the only Christian country in ancient Africa. That history countered her childhood religious study, which gave White missionaries credit for bringing Christianity to Africa in later centuries. During childhood, James diligently read the Bible. She memorized the poignant stories of David and Goliath, Joseph, and Daniel. In those stories, James imagined the people of the Bible as European, a reflection of the culturally predominant images of biblical figures. In Ethiopian art, history, and culture, James witnessed a reflection of Black people that would have a profound impact on her understanding of Black history and the foundations of Christianity.

In the fourth century, Christianity was widely practiced in Ethiopia. The biblical Arc of the Covenant is reportedly housed in St. Mary's Church in Axum. In 1930, Ethiopia coronated Haile Selassie I as emperor. Selassie I was a descendent of a royal biblical line, King Solomon and Queen of Sheba. The ancient traditions and biblical references have distinguished Ethiopia as

the “African Zion.” In examining the history and culture of Ethiopia and its rulers, James became intrigued by one particular form of visual culture, Ethiopian Christian Art.

Drawn from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Ethiopian Christian Art is the pictorial art of Ethiopian history and culture. The art dates back to the early 14th century. Produced with great detail and splendid colors and form, religious lay men were commissioned by the church to copy scrolls, also known as Magic Scrolls for their healing powers, and other forms of Ethiopian Christian Art (illuminated manuscripts, crosses, and panel paintings). In Ethiopian Christian Art, James, for the first time in the history of her religious study, witnessed popular images of Christian iconography that included majestic representations of Black people. Modeled from Ethiopian Christian Art and her deepening faith, a number of James's early works focused on the theme of guardian angels.

In *Names of Angels 2002*, James paints the progressive colors of African liberation struggle: red, green, and gold. With swirling text identifying the names of angels, James suggests the myriad of celestial energies that help guide our daily life. These are angels that are documented in sacred texts as well as those ancestors forever bound in our hearts and memories.

Each angel radiates its own unique qualities -- from the texture of their hair to the shape of their eyes and skin complexion. The eyes are particularly mystifying. They serve as the doorway to the spirit. “[Laura] has different types of guardian angels,” says one collector. “Her early work with angels was unrefined. Her style has evolved into a simpler representation. It makes the work more interesting.”

After producing a number of angel paintings, James went on to paint such well-known biblical stories and figures such as the Last Supper, Noah, the Tower of Babel, Ruth, Mary and Jesus, and the Last Judgement. “Laura James has developed a signature style,” notes Danny Simmons, artist, philanthroper, and founder of Rush Art Gallery and Corridor Gallery in New York City. “There is beauty in her brush strokes. [And] how she handles form...the abstraction of water and fish...is unusual.” Simmons, a collector of James’s religious work such as *Jesus Walks on Water* (1998), identifies the transformative role of James’s work. “Jesus and the Apostles are black. [They] are people of color. The prevalent images of [Christian] religion do not reflect that.” “She is traditional, modern, and contemporary.” To be sure, James’s adaptation of Christian narratives and Ethiopian Christian iconography does not end in her religious art production.

In 1997, James began a series of paintings featuring women as angels. Historically, angels are seen as messengers of judgement and spiritual guidance. The first painting in this series, *Black Girl With Wings*, has become one of her more popular pieces. In this and other works like *Brooklyn Angels* (1998) and *Guardian Angel* (1998), James employs the symbolism of Christian art to a contemporary setting. *Brooklyn Angels* shows a golden winged woman in a floral dress on the rooftop of a residential building. Groups of pigeons surround her while she glances over the ledge. She sits, waiting, perhaps for other birds to collect around her. Dimmed by misty gray skies with transparent clouds and birds in flight, *Brooklyn Angels* suggest a hurried anticipation for events occurring in the spiritual realm. The transcendental nature of James's composition links her work to modern art movements such as Surrealism, art drawn heavily from the unconscious state -- dreams and fantasies.

Among other interests, Surrealists celebrated the naïve, primitive work of untrained artists functioning outside of mainstream Western culture. Women artists such as Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and Leonor Fini (1908-1996) are identified or exhibited with Surrealists, although they were not official members of the group. Yet the Surrealists were the most progressive avant-garde artist group to embrace the social and artistic contributions of women. James demonstrates elements of Surrealist symbolism in works such as *Maypole Mother* (2001) and *The Sitter* (2001).

Both paintings present a woman sitting, waiting, a common theme in James's work. The images include children or duties of motherhood such as knitting. However, the main figure is also characterized in a conflicting position. Cast in a spider's web or with a rope tied around her neck, these images symbolize the burden of restricted roles for women. The notion of escape is symbolized by cotton ball clouds and birds gliding through bright sun-lit skies. "This is one of the more creative pieces produced by Laura," says an avid collector. "The colors are unusual [*Maypole Mother*]...they glow and play on each other." "I appreciate every element."

Other works such as *The Party* (2002) and *Sleep and Dream* (1998) show similar representations of women and children, and the relationship of the natural environment to physical and psychological space. James's representation of women's bodies offers another accessible discussion on women's roles and responsibilities.

Similar to painter Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), James paints the female form in earth tones, deep colors, and broad lines, drawn from non-Western traditions and ethnographic studies. Her

women are full-breasted, of solid build, spirited, and sexual. Identified within biblical or contemporary narratives, James's women are leaders in the home, workplace, and community. Their activities extend beyond those usually associated with women of a particular experience: they fly, lay on beaches, swing, and entertain. In leisure time scenes, romantic encounters, and portraits, James depicts her feminine subjects in the world in which she and other women like her live. Her attention to the many frames of a woman's life are likened to artists Leonor Fini and Faith Ringgold (1930-).

Fini focused much of her work on sexual distinctions and opposites. Active from the 1920s through 1990s, Fini made an effort to move away from traditional representations of women i.e. women as symbolic of nature (caregiver, nurturer). She demanded a more accurate description of women and their place in society, showcasing their various life experiences and contributions. Her work sought to minimize the differences between the sexes. To be sure, James's women – who are often seen in the natural environment – are only partially defined by their immediate circumstance. Their roles transcend the sphere of nature to embrace a resolute and confident feminine existence; fearless heroines able to overcome physical and psychological obstacles such as Faith Ringgold's liberated women artist from *The French Collection* (1990-1997), Willia Marie Simone, and her daughter, Marlana, from *The American Collection* (1996-2000). Willia Marie and Marlana represent women struggling with an oppressive legacy rooted in race and gender bias. Yet they are triumphant in transforming circumstances and events to reflect their own dreams and point of view. That form of confidence and self-actualization is represented in James's portrayal of female sexuality.

Water symbolizes fertility, healing, and creativity in James's *Woman in Water* 2001. James suspends a bather in a body of water awaiting the arrival of her lover. She is painstakingly reflective, posed in a cave-like surrounding with moon light touching the water's surface. Her bathing suit in fluorescent white matches her eyes. Her youthful breasts and arms rest on the water anticipating the arrival of her lover. Like other portraits, *Woman in Water* captures a potentially melancholy experience with the promise of renewed strength and faith. In *Minerva* (1991) James capitalizes on the idea of faith and the belief in self.

Minerva presents a robust female figure exchanging eye contact with her viewer, as in the famous gaze of Manet's *Olympia*. She is dressed in a yellow and red stripe dress with a red handkerchief on her head. Her skin tone is dark chocolate. Surrounded by bright colors and geometric forms, her portrait recalls the work of artists such as William H. Johnson (1901-1970), Romare Bearden (1911-1988), and Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000). Her torso dominates the picture frame. She sits with legs wide open, save for her arm covering her crotch; her elongated breasts outlined by the stripes in her dress. Her toes and hands are wide matching the contours of her calves and arms and suggesting a life of hard labor. She sits staring at her viewer in a fearless manner awaiting criticism or invitation. Like many women of her generation, she has weathered the difficulties of abusive and loveless relationships. Her security rests in her own ability to protect her body, mind, and spirit.

Like many of the intimate portraits and epic narratives explored in her work, James is interested in evoking dialogue with her audience. She likes to see her work in public spaces and glean new insights from viewer's reactions. In recent years, James has received commissions for a series of paintings that have brought her work to new audiences.

In 2000-2001, James was commissioned by the Roman Catholic Church to illustrate the *Book of the Gospels*, those chapters of the bible narrated by four apostles: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Published in the United States by Liturgy Training Publications, the *Book of the Gospels* is read every Sunday and is known for its rich illustrations. James's contribution to the new U.S. edition demonstrates the Roman Catholic Church's commitment to engage communities of color. The new edition also marks a change in the traditional style of painting used to illustrate these pivotal narratives from the Bible. An outgrowth of that publication has afforded James calendar images based on the *Book of the Gospels*; national solo exhibitions; and noted accolades and testimonials within the Roman Catholic Church and other religious denominations.

In 2002-2003, James received a commission from the Newark Community Corporation (NCC) to construct a series of paintings commemorating the corporation's 35th anniversary. Established in 1967, NCC is one of the largest community development corporations in the nation. The series looks at Newark's development since the '67 riots. Housing, education and youth, arts and culture, health, and political activism are depicted in a series of 13 paintings. James's commitment to progressive politics and social uplift is shown in her detailed images of Newark residents and community leaders. In a kaleidoscope of dynamic colors, round forms, and pensive eyes, each figure possesses a key role in the painting's composition. "You have to peel through layers of conversation, layers of narratives in Laura's work," says Marilyn Hawthorne, James's manager. "There is great detail even in the background. She portrays the ordinary in a new light."

Through commissions, solo and group exhibitions (MOCADA, Union Theological Seminary, Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYC) publications (Dorling Kingsley's

Eyewitness Christianity and Oxford University Press's *Illustrated History of the Bible*) and public lectures (Art Institute of Chicago) James has created a body of work that has universal appeal and sustainability. Her work is featured in private and public art collections, most notably Reverend Calvin Butts of Abyssinian Baptist Church; the Hatch-Billops Collection and The Bridgeman Art Library.

An avid reader and visual storyteller, James is committed to producing images "that teach." She is working on a new series of work emphasizing the role of music in the Bible and another series looking at the psychological legacy of slavery in the Caribbean. From traditional to contemporary subjects, Laura James accesses the framework of the human experience to include a broad audience worthy of self-representation and cultural agency.

To find out more about Laura James and her artwork, visit her Web site, The Art of Laura James, at <http://laurajamesart.com>.

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