

Visual Art

Artist Statement

Katherine Ziff

The Bisimbi

These prints are a record of my reflections about the disastrous trauma of human enslavement, which has reverberated for centuries in America. They are also a figurative offering to nature, as a reminder (to myself mostly) of its role in recovery from the effects of the aggressions of humans. In what they describe as their Herculean if not Quixotic undertaking to compile the ways in which knowing and experiencing nature affect well-being, Roly Russell and colleagues (2013) note a *pervasive, visceral understanding that our nonmaterial connections to ecosystems provide rich benefits*. They propose that our connections with nature are forged through many different channels of experience and affect physical, mental and spiritual well-being and identity.

Ras Michael Brown (2006, 2012) has constructed a compelling account of how enslaved Africans brought their religious/spiritual and cultural understandings of nature to Carolina and made vigorous and creative use of their concepts. He introduces with his scholarship nature spirits known in Kikongo as *bisimbi*, who became part of the fabric of Carolina Lowcountry culture by virtue of the particular *time* (Early Period of 1710 to 1744) and particular *place* (Charleston area) of the arrival of enslaved West-Central Africans with their particular *culture* which was defined by *creativity and continuity*. Dwelling in springs and estuaries and rivers and rocks, the bisimbi were a source of other-worldly powers and able to *ensure community, material and spiritual survival and prosperity*. Thought to possess both *terrible and benevolent power*, the bisimbi themselves *were not portable across the Atlantic but the conceptions of them were*.

These images, created in January 2015 alongside a bend in a tributary waterway of the Port Royal Sound of Beaufort, South Carolina, are based

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upon an imaginative resonance with time and place. Created through touch drawing, they are a response to experience, landscape, dreams, and the scholarship of others. Originated by Deborah Koff-Chapin (1996), touch drawing is an intuitive and contemplative way of knowing. I think of it as a knowing of the heart. It is done by rolling water-based oil paint on a board, floating a piece of tissue on top, and making marks with hands, fingers, wrists, fingernails. Technically the technique is monotype. If you use a pencil or other tool for mark making, it is not touch drawing. There is something about the immediate touch of the hands to the work surface that draws forth perceptions and images.

The images are 15" x 20" on tissue affixed to Arches 300 lb. cold press watercolor paper. Each is layered onto another image; two of them (ONE and THREE) have the "ghost" images of the monotypes layered on top. 1/ They are embellished with collage, graphite, and pastels both oil and chalk.

Reckoning with a past of racialized historical trauma demands what Erica Still (2014) calls prophetic remembrance: remembering the past (retrospective) and restoring possibility for a future (prospective). She suggests that we remember that trauma *inheres in the collective recognition of an event* (in addition to the event itself). That we *bring the unspeakable back into the realm of discourse*, that we *remember the inheritance* of the injuries done by the coercive and vicious regimes and structures of the enslavement of Africans and African Americans. And that we engage the future's possibility for creative *proliferation*. Then and now, after all, inform each other.

ONE: The Maafa

Agent: a means or instrument by which a guiding intelligence achieves a result (Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

Image of an agent of human bondage, a blind force doing the will of the economic and political engine connecting peoples, nations, lands, waters, and material goods. Driving and driven by the violent and coercive regimes creating the traumatic history of the enslavement of Africans and African Americans.

TWO: The Middle Passage

She sleeps and dreams of home. If she can sleep she can *be* home, a place of solitude where she is untouched. As she dreams she looks neither

forward nor backward, she drops deep into her heart into a timeless dream state.

THREE: The Bisimbi

A simbi, wearing a river and its tributaries as a veil. Inhabitants of the realm of the sea and of its estuaries, marshes, rivers, and springs the bisimbi offer permanence, connection to the land, a physical and spiritual familiarity.

FOUR: Breath

Dreaming on the beach of children, mothers, home, love. Dancing, the moon at her feet, in a galaxy of shells at the water's edge. The beach is her refuge, a cord between her place in this new land and the heavens swirling with starry beings. Torn, adrift, lost, and given breath again, a gift from the bisimbi.

FIVE: A Way Forward.

A simbi, *guardian of springs and souls, spiritual benefactor*, intermediary for the *permanence and potency of Nature*, gifts a *claim upon the landscape* to those who ask and listen.

1/ The "ghost" image is a secondary image from a single monotype print produced as follows. Removal of the first print from a paint-covered plate (in this case a large sheet of Plexiglas®) leaves spaces where paint has been removed and forms a new image. One places a second sheet of paper, in this case archival quality acid-free tissue, on the plate and transfers this image left on the plate to the tissue with the hands, a soft brayer or a baren.

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ONE: The Maafa

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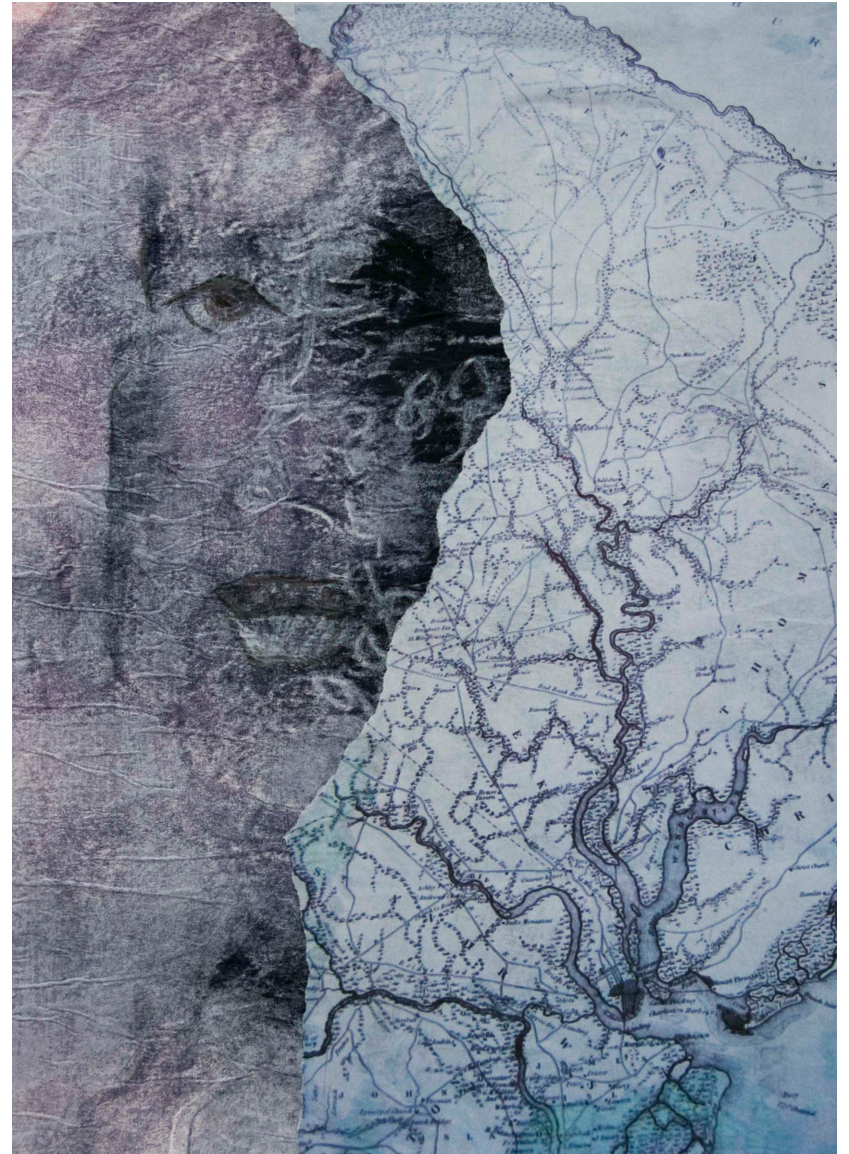
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