



Prof. Bev McIver on painting, family and fragility

By Dillon Fernando on June 15, 2015



Beverly McIver, new professor in art, art history and visual studies, at her studio in her Durham home. Special to The Chronicle

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There's a clandestine beauty hidden behind the faces of people in our lives. Each individual's thoughts, worries, aspirations, state of being radiate what it means to human, and how as humans we struggle to

communicate these thoughts and manifest their sentiments in reality. Professor Beverly McIver captures such nuances of humanity through her paintings.

McIver, Esbenshade Professor of the Practice in Studio Arts in Duke's Art History and Visual Studies department, just finished teaching her first semester at Duke. She has gathered accolades including being named as one of the 2011's "Top Ten in Painting" by Art in America and has had her work reviewed by the New York Times. She was featured in an HBO documentary entitled "Raising Renee," which chronicles her experiences taking care of her older sister, who has a mental disability, as McIver's art career grew. The Chronicle spoke with Professor McIver to discuss her artistic inspiration, her experience at Duke and her recent trip to Cuba.

[LINK to RAISING RENEE](#)

The Chronicle: Thank you so much for speaking with us! Could you start by telling us a little about your background?

Beverly McIver: I grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina in a housing project called Morningside Homes, me and my two sisters with my mom who was a single parent and we were poor. I mean, we were on welfare for a time and we lived in the projects, so the interesting thing was that I got bussed, because of desegregation in the South, to predominantly white schools K through 12. So I would leave the projects, get on the bus and go to these really nice white schools that had air conditioning and that had nice facilities.

TC: What was it like to go to a nearly all-white school, especially coming from your background?

BM: I think for me it was the saving grace. I think that what it instilled in me was that college was very important after you graduated because that's what my middle class white friends were doing, and I think it gave me an opportunity to see that there's something better—something more beyond the projects. It gave me hope that I could actually break that cycle of being in the projects. So for me it was a good idea, and it showed me a different kind of life.

TC: What influences your inspiration for your art?

BM: I paint people. The inspiration comes from people like family members such as my oldest sister Renee, who is mentally disabled. She's 55 and has the mindset of a third grader and also has epilepsy. Our mom died about ten years ago so I'm now her legal guardian, which means I became a parent without having a baby. I painted Renee for many years at the beginning of my career. My mother was domestic worker in the South and continued to work until she died ten years ago. I've painted about that, about my mother raising white children for the people that she worked for.

I like to paint about fragility currently. I had a cousin who had both of her legs amputated because of diabetes. I've painted about her first initially with one leg and then losing the other and being in the hospital and then getting around on an electric wheelchair. I don't think we're paying much attention to diabetes enough.

TC: What is like essentially being the parent to your older sister? Is it a seamless transition? Was it difficult?

BM: Renee is really fabulous. She's thinks I'm the cat's meow, but has been challenging because I am a single woman and I chose not to have children so that I could focus solely on my art career. For my life to be interrupted in that way by having to take care of another human being, it's challenging and difficult. But it's rewarding. I wouldn't change it because she's given me more than I've lost.

TC: You recently went on a trip to Cuba. What was that experience like?

BM: Oh my God, it was fabulous. I'm still digesting. I went with a group of eighteen artists and curators. A woman who I worked with at Arizona State University organized it. There were eighteen of us that went and she arranged for us to go to different artists' studios and speak to the artists in their studios, which was fantastic and lovely. We went to an outdoor opera, which was also nice until it started raining on my head!

We were on a tour bus together. Local people catch their buses—they stay out in the sun forever—and when they get on the bus then there's no air conditioning, the windows are down, and usually there are no seats. So when we would drive by with our tinted windows and air conditioning, that was really horrible. They're standing and then we would drive by along with several other tour buses that looked just like ours. It was this clear division between the haves and the have nots. So that was a little hard.

TC: Do you think you've gleaned any insight or new perspective that will influence your art from your trip?

BM: You know, I think Cuba's going to be the biggest impact on me because you know I have been poor. Not as poor as Cubans are but you know I grew up in a housing project, so that divide where I was actually on the air conditioned bus or eating in the nice restaurant is definitely going to impact my work. I think the landscape, the color, the vibrancy of the water, the buildings and the people I'm sure are going to have a huge impact on my work. I just don't know how it's going to manifest itself.

TC: In your first year at Duke, what is your impression of the students?

BM: I think that they are eager to learn, and it's been fun. It's very different from when I worked at North Carolina Central University because at Central, you're talking about first generation going to college. They want to be artists majoring in art, perfecting their crafts and creating a portfolio. At Duke, not a lot of students are majoring in art. They are minoring in art or are taking arts because they love and they've seen a lot of it around the world in their travels. But the students could be pre-med or engineers—a variety of majors. There is a difference in how to teach somebody who's not going to put together a portfolio and pursue their life as an artist, but instead be someone who invests in art in the

future as a collector, a curator, or donate back to the art department at Duke. It's important but a different belief.

TC: What is your relationship with the students you've had this year?

BM: I think they love me (laughs). I think I'm different from what most of them are used to. I come from a very different background and lifestyle than most of them, and I think they find me refreshing. They are curious, and they want to learn and see the value of what I bring to the table—which is very different than what others bring to the table. I had 12 students, and four of them made it a point to bring their parents by my studio to meet me. I think that's pretty significant. My students, I believe, appreciated the experience because I sure did. It's a two-way street, and I was learning things from my students about places they had traveled and their experiences. That always keeps it interesting, when education works both ways.

TC: Many of your paintings bring light to race and class issues. Especially in light recent events on campus this past year such as the noose incident, what are your thoughts in the way administration is opening up discussion about race?

BM: It's a big discussion, and I think that as long as Duke is looking to continue it, and not just doing it because there's a noose hanging in the Bryan Center, then it's a really good start. My feeling is the administrators at Duke are not going to be tolerant of any form of discrimination. I like that. My colleagues are nice, considerate and aware. I have not faced discrimination thus far [here at Duke], and that's not true for every university where I've worked.

TC: What are your hopes for incoming and current students at Duke?

BM: I hope that more students will take painting. The comments that I heard in my class from people majoring in like psychology or pre-med were, "Oh my God, I love this class! This doesn't even feel like work." I had a couple of PhD students, one in philosophy and he said, "Thank you, this is the best class I've taken." And they were good paintings! I hope more students will be more open to the idea. At Duke, many students are afraid to take risks, failing, going outside of the lines, but those are all the skills you need to be a good painter. I feel like I've accomplished with many of them that it's okay if you mess up. Just do it again. It's oil paint. Just scrape it off. Just getting over that hurdle was a huge accomplishment for both me and the students.