Liberation and evolution: Beverly McIver

Hollis Walker | For The New Mexican
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Beverly McIver, *Black Face Blue Dress* (c. 2002), oil on canvas, courtesy Turner Carroll Gallery

details

▼ *Beverly McIver: Retrospective*

Opening reception 5-7 p.m. Friday, Feb. 10, runs through March 10

Turner Carroll Gallery, 725 Canyon Road

505-986-9800, turnercarrollgallery.com

▼ *Beverly McIver: Dear God, Loving in Black and White,* and *Renee*

Gallery talk by retrospective curator Kim Boganey

1 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 11; retrospective monograph book signing by McIver, 2 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 11

Turner-Carroll CONTAINER, 1226 Flagman Way

505-995-0012, containertc.org

Artist Beverly McIver has been told many things about her painting. Critics have said it is "too personal." Exhibit visitors have told her it's "too scary." Some have asked, "Are you in therapy?" Others have declared, "You're so mean" and "That's not godly at all."

But the hardest reproofs to hear have come from other Black women, McIver says. More than once she's been told, "You're part of the problem." They mean racism.

McIver's in-your-face imagery transgresses unspoken rules about how Black artists and creative people should represent racial identity. She has painted herself as a clown in whiteface; in blackface; and in blackface in erotic encounters with a white man. She has depicted her late mother Ethel as an "Aunt Jemima" figure, referencing Black women's historic relegation to domestic servitude.

Yet McIver's brightly colored, loosely articulated works — often close-up portraits of family members and herself — have earned her representation in leading American galleries, acquisitions by major museums, including the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, and numerous residencies and solo exhibitions in the United States and abroad. Her work bears some similarities to the style — though not the palette — of the late British painter Lucien Freud.

"Like Robert Colescott, Kara Walker, the Guerrilla Girls and early Sue Williams, Beverly McIver has no time for the play-nice rules of political correctness," writes New York Times critic Roberta Smith in 2003. "The rough-surfaced, oppressively hued paintings in her New York debut address issues of racial stereotype head on, with intriguing force. … Working from set-up photographs of herself, Ms.

McIver makes the clown mask/blackface seem both normal and aggressive; she is pushing her blackness forward, as if to force white people to acknowledge that it is the determining fact of her existence, but that she is herself at ease with it."

Since 2014, McIver has been a professor of art, art history, and visual studies at Duke University. Previously, she taught for 12 years at Arizona State University. She also has been the focus of two documentaries, including the acclaimed *Raising Renee*, a 2011 film about her struggle to care for her developmentally disabled older sister. (The film can be viewed on Amazon Prime and will be screened on a loop at CONTAINER during one of two Turner Carroll exhibits opening in February.) The other was a documentary for Italian television, *Beverly McIver e il colore nero* (and the color black), made while McIver was on a 2017 yearlong residency at the American Academy in Rome.

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McIver didn't come by her success easily.

She was born in 1962 in Greensboro, North Carolina, a town famous for 1960s lunch-counter sit-ins and the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, in which members of the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party shot and killed five anti-Klan demonstrators. She and her two sisters were raised in Greensboro's Morningside Homes projects by their single mother, who supported them by working as a maid in white households. As a child, McIver played with white dolls, since Black dolls weren't widely available at the time.

Beverly McIver (2022), photo Artsuite

During school desegregation, McIver, now 60, was bussed to a high school in a wealthy white neighborhood. When classmates' parents offered her a ride home, she would have them drop her off near a nice house, then walk the rest of the way so they wouldn't know where

she lived. Nevertheless, she said she did not feel bias from her classmates and made several white friends.

“I basically studied white people and learned how to interact with them and not be so different so I wouldn’t be frightening to them,” she says. The experience also allowed her to adopt middle-class values and decide to go to college, since all the other students were college bound.

In a high school class, McIver learned clowning, and, along with her white classmates, she performed in whiteface, which allowed to her to feel as if she fit in. “They don’t see my blackness,” McIver recalls, “and they don’t feel threatened … and this false sense of relationship is formed.”

McIver had no plans to become an artist as a young person, but she did like to draw, and, as a senior, made pencil sketches of several of her high school pals that were displayed at the school.

It wasn’t until undergraduate school that she took a painting class as an elective and was told by her teacher, Elizabeth Lentz, that she had real promise as an artist.

In some of her early paintings, she portrayed herself in whiteface, drawing on her clowning experience in high school.

Years later, at a dance festival in Durham, North Carolina, she saw white people wearing blackface and had a “eureka!” moment. “What? I could wear blackface and be a Black clown? So going out the next day to a Halloween store and finding that black grease paint was … liberation,” she says. Afterward, she began painting herself in blackface — sometimes including symbols stereotypical of racist views of Blacks, such as watermelon — and found her visual queries about identity were disturbing to many people.

Beverly McIver, *Healing* (2015), collage and oil on canvas, courtesy Turner Carroll Gallery

“Beverly has taken on these personas, like the blackface,” says Turner-Carroll galleries co-owner Tonya Turner-Carroll, “to work out

and drive home a lot of different narratives about her own life. [Photographer] Cindy Sherman was doing that with her photographs and videos [saying], 'This is what I am trying to act out, so people can see what I'm projecting.'"

A personal turning point came a few decades ago when a friend gave McIver two Black cloth dolls she found online, a boy and a girl. McIver was enchanted by the Black girl doll, which she named Gracie, and began painting portraits of the doll and images of the doll cradled in her arms.

"I was like, 'That's me, there she is, the Black girl I've been trying to protect, who has navigated my way to where I am and stood by me. She has healed herself and feels okay about being Black,'" she says. "So, Gracie changed lots of things for me."

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SWEETHEART OF A PRIZE

Artist Beverly McIver's mother died of pancreatic cancer, and as a donation to the Cancer Foundation for New Mexico in her honor, McIver will create a personalized oil sketch after her *Dear God* series. The sketch will be offered as part of a live auction package to be sold to the highest bidder at the Sweetheart Auction, says Jodi Vevoda, a foundation board member helping to coordinate the upcoming annual gala.

The McIver live auction package will include a Feb. 12 brunch for 10 at Turner-Carroll's CONTAINER for the buyer, a companion, and eight friends. The brunch is sponsored by Prull Custom Builders.

McIver will create the oil sketch — inspired by the winning bidder's statement, prayer, or wish — live during the private gathering and will incorporate the winner's words into the artwork. Kim Boganey, curator of the traveling retrospective, *Beverly McIver: Full Circle*, will briefly talk about the artist during the event.

The painting package is the first of its kind to be auctioned at the gala, Vevoda says, adding that some 800 people are expected to attend the fundraiser this year. — H.W.

Details

▼ 20th Annual Sweetheart Auction

Benefitting Cancer Foundation

for New Mexico

5:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 11

Santa Fe Convention Center,

201 W. Marcy St.

Tickets at the door are $50, $500 table; 505-955-7931, cffnm.org

▼ Live auction bid offsite: cffnm.org/ sweetheart-auction/live-auction/

Proxy bidding sign up: Executive Director Vince Baca (505-545-3090) or Sonja Thorpe Bohanan (415-717-9998)

McIver's work is currently the subject of a retrospective, *Beverly McIver: Full Circle*, curated by longtime friend Kim Boganey, an independent curator and museum, arts, and culture manager for the City of Ontario, California. The exhibit opened at Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in February 2022 and is traveling the country. Some 50 works from that exhibit are now on display at Turner-Carroll Gallery and Turner-Carroll CONTAINER.

Paintings at Turner-Carroll on Canyon Road represent a continuum of her artwork. At CONTAINER, three series — *Dear God, Loving in Black and White*, and *Renee* — will be on exhibit. In both locations, viewers will see in McIver's oil paintings the expressionistic, gestural style that animates her subjects, as well as her intuitive grasp of their humanity.

Tonya Turner-Carroll, who owns the galleries with husband Michael, says she wanted the two exhibits to tell different stories.

The Canyon Road location highlights work that describes McIver's "evolution as an artist and as a Black woman growing up in the South," she says. At CONTAINER, the exhibit will focus on the three series. Images from *Loving in Black and White* have been censored from some museums in the South, she says. Not so here.

Surprisingly, McIver hasn't received much media coverage. That may be about to change, Boganey says.

"Beverly's work is like an untapped source. People are just now knowing and understanding and appreciating her work. I know a lot of artists of color, African American artists in particular, who are trying to drive home issues of equity and understanding racism in the world we have now. But Beverly has been doing this in her work for years. She has been using her own life story to tell life stories about African American life. It's time. It's finally time."

Neither the acclaim nor criticism has deterred her from following her path. Her paintings express deep feelings that arise and then erupt on the canvas. She recalled the first time it happened, while she was an undergraduate at North Carolina Central University under the tutelage of Lentz. McIver had been painting still lifes similar to Lentz's work, but, she says, "eventually you have to stop copying your teachers and figure out your own voice."

Soon after, she began her first very personal series of paintings, of her sister Renee.

"I was in my studio, painting Renee, thinking it's kind of heroic that she's managed to cut out a life for herself … then all of the sudden I was scratching her face out" with the paintbrush, McIver says. "It scared me so bad. I dropped the brush and tried to go to bed and go to sleep. I couldn't understand why that happened." After all, she loved her sister. McIver showed the painting to Lentz and told her what had happened.

Her mentor told her, "Whatever you do, just keep painting. Don't let it scare you; keep doing it.'"

McIver completed her bachelor's degree in painting and drawing at NCCU in 1987 and a master's degree focused on the same subjects at Pennsylvania State University in 1992. While at Penn State, she met the renowned artist Faith Ringgold, who would become another mentor.

Over the ensuing years, McIver has learned to trust her inner voice.

"It won't allow me to just go out and paint my cat, though I'll have those kinds of thoughts," she admits. Instead, she continues to be compelled to paint whatever comes up from within.

Since then, McIver has painted her sister's portrait hundreds of times. Sometimes the images include a vague background figure.

“It’s me, trying to come out from behind my sister’s shadow,” she explains. The paintings have helped McIver reconcile her relationship with Renee, who was sometimes violent when they were children and whose needs as an adult have controlled much of McIver’s life. The artist promised her mother that she would care for Renee and has kept that promise; Renee has lived with her in the past and may do so again.

McIver’s father also lived with her, in his final years. He died a year ago. She painted many portraits of him, too.

While McIver’s paintings of family members are certainly powerful, her self-portraits are perhaps the most revealing. She has painted herself in the throes of depression; preparing for breast-reduction surgery; dancing; interacting with Renee; praying, including written prayers; and expressing nearly every variety of human emotion.

Can she imagine a time when she might leave the portrait behind?

“My inner voice right this second is saying no,” she says, “but yes, if it comes up. I would really like to say I have more control over what I paint, but that’s not the truth. Whatever comes up, comes out.”

Beverly McIver, *Renee in her Purple Dress* (2010), triptych, oil on canvas; courtesy Turner Carroll Gallery

Despite the criticism she sometimes faces as a result, McIver is uplifted by the responses she encounters at her exhibits. They often mirror what she was feeling when she painted a particular canvas, she says. When her retrospective was on exhibit at Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, a man approached her.

“He was a middle-aged white male with a beard and a flannel shirt; somebody you would say, ‘Um, do you have a rifle and a Confederate flag hanging in your truck?’ But he was crying. He says, ‘Your artwork is so powerful, and it’s bringing back memories of my life.’

“I totally appreciated him. I loved hearing that. That’s my real blessing. I’m dealing with things [in the paintings] that have happened to me, but they didn’t happen to me specifically because I’m Black, but because I’m human.” When viewers respond like he did, “Then I know I’ve done my job.”