‘Southern Accent’ and the Hidden Stories of the South

Written by Minda Honey

If you ever have the pleasure of speaking with Miranda Lash about art, you’ll notice that she speaks about art the same way knitters loop together strands of yarn. Lash, the Speed Art Museum Curator of Contemporary Art, will tell you about an artist and a work of art, thread in the history, and then she’ll reach for another artist, another work of art, and weave in the past and the future. On and on, weaving and threading, until the discussion begins to take shape—a scarf, a blanket…an art exhibit. Because really, what is an art exhibit if not a curator’s attempt to engage the entire community in discussion? Lash believes, “[Art] is a great way to get people thinking and talking without mandating to them what they should feel.”

I deliberately seek out issues that are hard to talk about,” Lash adds, “because I believe art is this rare space where you can talk about difficult issues. Art opens people up in a way that they might not necessarily otherwise do or be. That’s why we value art.” In her latest exhibit Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art, Lash asks you about an artist and a work of art, thread in the history, and then she’ll reach for another artist, another work of art, and weave in the past and the future. On and on, weaving and threading, until the discussion begins to take shape—a scarf, a blanket…an art exhibit. Because really, what is an art exhibit if not a curator’s attempt to engage the entire community in discussion? Lash believes, “[Art] is a great way to get people thinking and talking without mandating to them what they should feel.”

Co-curating an exhibition always doubles the work and time you put in, rather than taking the load off. But if you have a great partner, it also provides you with another perspective that is invaluable. Miranda is an ideal partner — smart, hard-working, insightful, who defends her beliefs, but also is willing to listen. Their great rapport translated into an exhibit that is regional in focus, but has a national reach. “[W]hile it’s a show about what it means to be Southern,” Schoonmaker explains, “at its heart, it is an American story, not a strictly regional one.”

The exhibit explores the emotional and imaginative power of the South, the ways in which it captured the heart and minds of Americans. “While Trevor and I have endeavored to broaden the conversation about what is perceived as ‘Southern,’ we also wanted to amplify connections between what can be observed about the South and what is felt about the South,” Lash writes in the catalog, “both by Southerners and other Americans.” The exhibit features 60 different artists and more than 100 works of art spanning from the Civil Rights Era to present-day. As a curator who developed her entire career outside of New York and who has always practiced regionalism, Lash offers a unique perspective. “What I can contribute is giving a voice to someone they might not see,” she explains versus a repeat of a Mark Rothko show or another Richard Serra show.

Southern Accent took four years to come together. “A lot of racially charged events happened in the midst of putting the show together,” Lash says. “We had the Trayvon Martin assassination, the growth of Black Lives Matter,” she explains, “and all of that informed the catalog and who we included in the show.” When it came to choosing the artists, Lash and Schoonmaker sought out both established and emerging creators to tell the story of the contemporary South. As for the content of the catalog, the exhibit also includes discussions of the shootings at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida and by Dylann Roof in Charleston, North Carolina. The catalog pairs essays and poems with the artwork from the collection. Lash draws special attention to Womanish, an essay written by Dr. Brittney Cooper, an assistant professor of women’s and gender studies and Africana studies at Rutgers University. It is a piece that explores Cooper’s “Southern black womanhood” through her
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Miranda Lash, Speed Art Museum Curator, of Contemporary Art.
relationship with her grandmother and her experiences in graduate school.

Lash also expects that recent events will shape how the exhibit is received. “The tenor of this country has changed since the election.” Lash says, “I think it will be very interesting to see if that affects how people perceive the show.” The show opens at the Speed Art Museum April 30th and will run through October 14th. In conjunction with the show, the museum will partner with the Louisville Free Public Library on a reading list that pairs Southern novels with their film adaptations. A summer music showcase of female songwriters in the South is in the works, and Wiltshire at the Speed will feature a menu of southern cuisine on Sundays. Put yourself in a Southern frame of mind while you wait for the show to open with the 209-song, 13-hour Spotify playlist curated specifically for Southern Accent.

The South and its contributions are often overlooked or trivialized by the art world, Lash points to the omission of Southern artists from the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Biennial 2014 to make the point. However, the Whitney Museum managed to include, “nine artists who lived or worked in Europe.” With the omissions in mind, Lash saw Southern Accent as an opportunity to tell the untold, to display the unseen. “I love exploring hidden stories,” she explains. “I’m a firm believer that there’s great art everywhere.”

While the South is often seen through the misleading racial binary of black and white, Southern Accent includes artwork representative of the immigrant, Native American, Asian American, and queer communities that also call the South their home. “We wanted to show how the South has changed over time,” Lash explains, adding, “It has one of the fastest growing Latino and Asian populations in the country.” The inclusion of immigrant communities was informed, in part, by her personal experience. “I am the child of immigrants,” Lash says. “My mother is from Mexico. She came to the U.S. as a young girl.
Top left: Skylar Fein - *Black Flag*, 2008, wood, plaster and acrylic, 43.5 x 72 inches.

Bottom left: Walter Inglis Anderson - *Hummingbirds*, 1955, watercolor on paper, 8.5 x 11 inches.

Right: Amy Sherald - *High Yella Masterpiece: We Ain't No Cotton Pickin Negroes*, 2011, oil on canvas, 59 x 69 inches.
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She worked very hard and became a doctor. I am who I am today because of her. I feel very strongly that immigrants are the backbone of this country and I wanted that expanded vision of the South to be a part of the show.

The immigrant experience is showcased in the work of Diego Camposeco, who is also a child of Mexican immigrants. “His work shows people working in tobacco fields” says Lash, “because many of the people who work in our agricultural sector, especially in the South, are Latinos.” Southern queer communities are captured by Catherine Opie, who photographed Durham’s queer community. Jeff ey Gibson, a Choctaw-Cherokee painter and sculptor, presents I PUT A SPELL ON YOU, a punching bag overlaid with glass beads which points to both the historic and the contemporary presence of indigenous peoples in the American South. “The e’s a beautiful video in the show by Jing Niu,” Lash adds, “about Chinese Americans who moved to the South and have setup chains of Chinese restaurants.” The work of several black artists, including Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, and Gordon Parks add to the expansive collection and spotlight persisting racial tensions of the South.

But Lash and Schoonmaker were cautious about the exhibit maintaining a balance between criticism and celebration. The South is a complicated place, filled with tragedies and triumphs, and the art emerging from the regions speaks to this complexity. “At times when you’re critical of something it drowns out other things that you’re trying to say,” Lash admits, “and there are pieces that are critical of the South. And I was worried that people would focus exclusively on those.” That, at least in Durham, was not the case, “I was so happy to see people coming to the show because they were proud that they were from Durham and they were excited to see a show that was about the South. They left the show feeling like the South is an amazing complex, diverse place,” Lash shares. “The reviews coming back saying we clearly love the South — that was a huge validation.”

Southern Accent will pair beautifully with another Southern-focused show at the Speed: Southern Elegy: Photography from the Stephen Reily Collection. Reily, originally from New Orleans, is now based in Louisville. His collection of photos span from the Civil War to the present. Th photographs feature place — landscapes, buildings, natural sites — with very few people. Lash says of the exhibit, “It’s telling the story of the South through sense of place. Stephen Reily has a very nuanced and complex understanding of the Southern landscape as being a place of beauty but also a site of so many atrocities.” Lash is pleased Southern Elegy will run alongside Southern Accent, “It focuses on how do we understand the South’s past whereas Southern Accent is how do we think about the South in the present and towards the future. So, they’re perfect complements artistically.” The exhibit features 75 photographs, among them, Deborah Luster’s Tooth for an Eye series that depicts sites of murder in New Orleans, acknowledging this city’s continuing struggle with crime and violence.

“Field Bling,” a poem in the Southern Accent catalog by Ada Limón, expresses a narrator’s awe at fireflies, “I call them field bling,/I call them,/fancy creepies.” Out West, there are no fireflies, no lightening bugs for the children to capture in jars and use as makeshift nightlights. Stumbling upon a field of magical, twinkling fireflies on a warm night is a truly Southern experience. But there are also no mosquitos out West, the pesky bloodsuckers that make certain night-excursions come at a price. The symmetry is the South, where we mix the pain and blood of our dark past with a hopefulness for our future and a glimpse of magic in our present.