



Renée Elizabeth Neely-TANNER

Speculative Ecologies

*The Intimate Bond of
Freedom and Green*



BROWN



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RUTH J. SIMMONS
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF
SLAVERY AND JUSTICE
BROWN UNIVERSITY

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Director's Note

Over the last decade, the Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice – thanks to the Heimark family – has had a robust exhibition program. Our recent 10th anniversary retrospective exhibition, *Racial Slavery, Marronage and Freedom*, precisely posited and elaborated the work of the Center, not only our visual program but our scholarly and public humanities focus. This current exhibition, *Speculative Ecologies The Intimate Bond of Freedom and Green* by Providence-based artist Renée Elizabeth Neely-TANNER, is a moment – an opening, if truth be told – of another aspect of how racial slavery marked and shaped the contemporary world.

The various European settler colonial projects with their forms of domination of human life through Indigenous dispossession and racial slavery also began the systematic devastation of Earth. To build plantations – to take possession of Indigenous land under the mantra that property which was not “mixed with labor” could be seized – was a distinct moment not only in Atlantic history but in the history of us as humans. Today, our attention, rightly focused on racial slavery and Indigenous dispossession, sometimes misses the inauguration of the ecological damage that settler colonialism wrought. This exhibition draws our attention to this lacuna but does so while distinctively making it clear that the freedom of the enslaved was linked to the ecology of locations contiguous to the plantation, yet far away from the master's eyes.

Each of these abstract pieces with their rich complex color composition embedded within color codes demands our attention because they tell a story. It has often been understood that abstract art does not tell a narrative story, that it is non-representational. Yet place these remarkable color composition beside their titles and new life and meanings saturate the visual codes of the piece. This is a unique feature of this artist's work: titles and paintings embrace each other in a narrative tale, but one in which the viewer's imagination can freely construct. There is something about abstract art done by Black artists. If in the 1950s African American abstract art was what one art historian has called “symbol-laden,” the abstraction of this exhibition is rich in colors which then need to be decoded. In the decoding, the titles are clues.

Throughout the exhibition racial slavery and freedom are juxtaposed. And within that juxtaposition is the ecology. The reference to the Dismal Swamp in Virginia does not only pertain to the actual swamp, but also includes the nearby plantations from which enslaved people would often have to “steal away” to reach the swamp as a means of escape. This exhibition points us to a different story about the plantation – yes, a space of extraordinary human bondage, but also a space in which the destruction of earth began as the drive for the immense profits from enslaved labor squeezed all life from the land.

In this exhibition, attention to Earth is attention towards freedom. As the artist tells us, the Maroons who inhabited the Dismal Swamp built a thriving ecosystem. The planters and the elite were not able to do the same for they had a different frame about Earth, people and land.

For us at the Simmons Center, we embrace the now global struggle to recalibrate our perspective about Earth and we give thanks to this exhibition which links intimately a new vision about Earth and freedom.

I would like to express my gratitude to Renée for sharing her work with us. Additionally, I would like to extend my thanks to the individuals who have dedicated their efforts to make this exhibition possible, including Erin Wells, Benjamin Kaplan, and the Simmons Center staff.



ANTHONY BOGUES

Director, Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice at Brown University



Renée Elizabeth Neely-TANNER

Renée Elizabeth Neely-TANNER grew up in the Black community of Berkeley, across the Elizabeth River from Norfolk, VA. The culture and sociality of that experience has shaped her world view as an artist and a person. TANNER references her mother Allison Virginia Tanner Neely, who is an ever present witness to her life and work.

Originally a member of the Class of 1976, she returned to Brown to receive her AB in English Literature and Cultures in 2012. She has an MLIS in Library and Information Science, Simmons University (2014).

Neely-TANNER's art practice continues to evolve in non-traditional ways, not unfamiliar to many BIPOC artists. Grounded in observation and research, her work has moved from clay and pastel to acrylic. Her intermittent studies include: The Arts Student League; The Bridgeview School of Fine Arts; The Greenwich Art Society; and AS220.

Neely-TANNER exhibited in the opening of the Granoff Center for Creative Arts (2011); *Race and Indigeneity in the Americas*, Watson Institute (2018); *Dreamscape Archive* (virtual exhibit/performance 2020); *The Black Biennial*, RISD Museum (2022); and *Centro Cultural das Mulheres da Mare, Quilombo Conceição das Salinas*, Bahia, Brasil (permanent installation 2022). Her work is in private collections in CT, GA, FL, MA and RI. She received a BIPOC Leadership Award, Arts Connect International, Boston (2021).

Neely-TANNER served as Project Archivist for The Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice (2014-2022). As the Center's 2023 Heimark Artist in Residence, her solo exhibition, *Speculative Ecologies The Intimate Bond of Freedom and Green* brings her collaboration with the Center full circle.

“Freedom is a feeling....”

—Nina Simone

Artist Statement

Nina Simone said “Freedom is a feeling....”

I am always thinking about what freedom looks and feels like: spiritually, emotionally, physically, metaphorically, spatially. My work explores questions that move from personal to collective memories of time, space and place. The answers (though entirely unpredictable) work themselves out on canvas. I love the beauty of unpredictability.

In *Speculative Ecologies The Intimate Bond of Freedom and Green*, I create a landscape of spiritual and physical freedom through the lens of history. This body of work is grounded in my research of the historic Maroon communities of the Dismal Swamp on the borders between Virginia and North Carolina. This vast ecosystem of black water, cyprus, and juniper stretched outwards and touched the communities on its perimeters. After the Civil War, the Maroon settlements disbanded and the freedom seekers integrated into the BIPOC communities on its borders where I grew up.

This history is the cornerstone of *Speculative Ecologies....* My goal is to evoke and share the intangible feeling of “quitting slavery” and the personal power of “coming loose” from whatever binds us.

I spend a lot of time thinking about and choosing color. The color leads me. My art making combines a variety of non-traditional methods. I use carpenter tools, bamboo screens, sponges, large palette knives and brushes and hemp. Each painting is a series of layers, built up with acrylic paint and mediums. Again, this is all an intuitive experiment. I admit that it takes some courage to put it out there. Once that happens, whatever the outcome may be, I know when it's done.

Each painting is its own narrative. I use a series of marks (that repeat throughout my work) to think about language, pictographs and mapping. These markings voice the silence of Maroons, Saints, Elders and others who are still with us.

The Heimark Artist in Residency program has afforded me everything I advocate for all BIPOC artists: resources, time to experiment and develop, and most important – visibility.

I invite you to speculate with me on how freedom feels.



*Snow Geese on Lake Drummond, Great Dismal Swamp*¹

A Landscape of Freedom

"I am glad to say also that numbers of my colored brethren now escape from slavery; some by purchasing their freedom, others by quitting..."²

Captain Moses Grandy,
a highly skilled and once enslaved
pilot on the Dismal Swamp Canal

Women, children and men; African, African American, Native American, Irish (and others) bonded under one common goal – freedom. These were the Dismal Swamp³ Maroons of Virginia and North Carolina. Their settlements within the ecosystem of wet and woodlands thrived for hundreds of years before the American Civil War.

only then
when we sit together
in the hush
of the highground
will we begin
to tell the stories
of how we've overcome

Renée Elizabeth Neely-TANNER

¹ United States Fish and Wildlife Service, <https://www.fws.gov/media/snow-geese-lake-drummond-great-dismal-swamp-lowie-usfwsjpg>

² Grandy, M. *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy; Late a Slave in the United States of America*. C. Gilpin, London, 1843 p 69.

³ *Dismal Swamp and Great Dismal Swamp* are used interchangeably in conversation and literature.

"Channeling the Jubilation of Freedom"

Renée Elizabeth Neely-TANNER, in conversation with Prof. Geri Augusto

Geri Augusto [GA]: You and I have had many conversations before, here in your apartment, about your work and the things that influence it. Today, I'm delighted to take advantage of the opportunity of your show at the Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice to reprise some recurring themes in depth and explore some new ones. I want to start by asking you to walk us through your artistic process, and the relationship that your current workspace may have to that process.

Renée Elizabeth Neely-TANNER [RN]: I'm happy to do so! I am a self-taught artist and the process of art making has really unfolded throughout my life. There were intervals that had to do with personal challenges that prevented me from a straight path to where I am today. Let me begin by talking about the work that's going to be in this exhibit. This is my fourth iteration of work. The first started with sculpture, about 20 years ago. By the second iteration, around 2019, I was working with pastels in portraiture. I started working with acrylic in 2021. You've seen some of that on my website. Working in acrylic was a radical change from clay and pastel. It was a kind of epiphany, a decision to try something new. Like many artists – I think I speak for many artists here – trying something new has a lot to do with your space, your materials, your resources. To be frank, I didn't have a lot of resources at the time, and we were in the pandemic. So I decided I'm doing my own artist residency; and give *myself* a fellowship.

GA: Tell me a little bit about that self-determined residency. I remember it, but the concept may not be familiar to people who don't have the kinds of struggles for resources that many artists of color; especially older or younger artists have.

RN: Yes, I do want to say something about that. As you know, I am an independent scholar and I've published a good amount of work. I've been giving talks about the Dismal Swamp for over a decade. So how does this relate to artmaking and that residency? Well, I had been shopping the idea of getting a grant to write a book. At the same time, I had entered several competitions with my pastel work, which is very different from what I'm doing now. I got one rejection after another. It was brutal. As a BIPOC artist, and an older artist – I told myself: "Wait a minute, let me turn this around. Let me make something positive out of these devastating experiences. I'm going to give myself an artist's residency. I'm going to take intentional time; use the resources I have; and make the space I have conform to what I can produce." I did that for almost a year. What I achieved, now that I look back, was a process of development. The body of work that's on my website now is a result of that. One of the pieces that I did was accepted into RISD's first Black Biennial Exhibition. And now I am here, with this wonderful residency at the Simmons Center. I believe that year of concentrated work pushed me forward. When I look at those paintings, I see the differences that not having enough money for quality paints, brushes and canvas etc. makes. Art is a very expensive pursuit!

GA: Could you elaborate on that?

RN: I'll give you a concrete example. The residency at the Center has allowed me to make larger pieces. I started out with paintings that were 18 x 24 inches. I've expanded to 36 x 36 inches, which is my preference. Working on a larger canvas requires much more paint. I could easily acquire both of these things during my residency which made it possible to produce the paintings in this show.

Music, Hemp, and “Unpredictable” Colors

GA: Take us through what happens once you decide on doing a piece. Particularly, if I may say so, since this apartment is also your studio. What happens up in here? [Figure 1]

RN: [Laughing] Well, I have a basic approach. It can vary somewhat, but there is a basic way I start. There's always music in my apartment. I have a broad, eclectic playlist. It can be Fela Kuti, it can be Thelonious Monk, a lot of Horace Silver, Howlin' Wolf, Tim Maia, Fatoumata Diawara, Nina Simone, Oliver Nelson, Santana, Vivaldi, and so many others. My brother and I were classical musicians growing up. So, the music is going, and usually I'm thinking about something that has to do with my research. Mainly concepts around freedom. It can be personal



COURTESY OF PROF. GERI AUGUSTO

freedom. It can be our broader historical freedom. There's something about art making that is freeing for me. My paintings take some time; not the actual putting the paint on canvas – it's *getting* to that. If you look at my work, it has a lot of texture. I use a variety of acrylic mediums to create a heavy layer of texture first. I use sponges, large palette knives or industrial tools. I start out with a very loose concept. I don't know what the end is going to be.

GA: No idea?

RN: I do have something in my mind, say a landscape or an event. I don't know exactly what the outcome is going to be, or how it's going to be communicated. When I say communicated, I literally mean that I spend a lot of time thinking about color. I choose based on an intuitive feeling about what I want to evoke in the work. I'm not a technical colorist. Let me show you something that I think will help what I'm saying make sense. [Shows a notebook of experimental color swatches.]

GA: So, each painting has a page?

RN: Yes. If you look at these pages, you can directly link them to each painting.

GA: Every single sheet is an experiment with colors...

RN: ...and relates to a painting that I've done. This takes more time than putting the paint on the canvas! I love color. I love what the paint itself can do, which can be very unpredictable.

GA: How so?

RN: Well, I mean whether it's thick or thin; whether it runs or peaks; whether I blend it with another color or use alone; whether I use a palette knife or those very large paint brushes. [Points across the room.] I really consider myself a sculptor first, so my approach to painting is not at all traditional. I'm fascinated by the effect of layers, and the surface of reliefs. It's a building up process, very much like sculpture. I approach painting as if it were problem-solving. I have an idea in my mind. Whatever I produce is going to be a solution, an answer to something. I can't always tell you beforehand what the exact question is that I'm working on. I look at painting as working through something; whether it ends up as a narrative or something else. What you see in the end is the answer to that question.

Fig 1. Artist's current studio.

GA: I've been fascinated for a long time with your experimentation with materials. I have seen you using some that I would not connect with painting. Part of it is explained by an approach that is sculptural and architectural. Do you experiment with materials whether that results in a painting or not?

RN: I have a fascination with hemp, and I have collected rolls of it. I'm interested in hemp because historically it was used to make sails for shipping. In the 1700s or maybe earlier, the remnants of sails were stretched to make artist canvas. So, you see hemp has a connection to canvas. Also hemp was first considered as a cash crop from the Dismal Swamp. George Washington was part of an investment venture to cultivate hemp there. The venture failed for environmental reasons. I've made two paintings using hemp. One is in this exhibit: *The Cusp of Everything*. [Figure 2] It's a painting that is very dear to me because it had several iterations, and ended up very differently. When you live in your studio you look at your work a lot! Over time I changed it. I experimented with soaking strands of hemp in indigo paint and dragging it across the canvas. That's why you see striations of indigo across the painting. In another painting I used a lint roller wrapped with hemp to embed paint across the canvas...

GA: I do know that painting. You've just mentioned a couple of things that I want us to come back to, including the Dismal Swamp, but let's stick with your art process for a bit, and the materials you use.

RN: I started with sculpture, which I completely love. I'm not doing any now, because of space. My apartment is set up as a sort of hybrid studio. What you're looking at now is set up for painting. I may go back to sculpting at some point, but it would involve rearranging my studio space. I also love soft pastel. It's very beautiful, and also very expensive! [Points to cases across the room.] But I don't use it now because there is a fine dust that comes up when you're using it. It was making me cough. I realized I needed a better ventilated studio space so I've stopped using soft pastels for now. I occasionally use oil pastel which is dust free. Honestly, whatever medium I'm working with at the moment is my favorite! Acrylic is very adaptable to my studio space. It dries quickly without fumes. Also the beauty of acrylic is its versatility. I feel like there's a lot ahead of me in this medium...

“My Practice Comes from Observation and Research”

GA: Have you had any formal art training? I think you use the expression self-taught.

RN: Exactly. I am very proud to say that I am self-taught. By that I don't mean that I've never had any kind of instruction. I mean that overall, my practice has evolved by observation and a lot of research. Thank God for the Internet! I listen to artists talking about their work, in their own words. This is so important to our development as artists – to hear others' challenges and achievements. My studies over the years have been in open studios. You just go in and there's a live model to work from. The experience is wonderful.

GA: Where was this?

RN: My first open studio was in the '90s at The Art Students League, NYC.

GA: Is that where you met the Ukrainian sculptors?

RN: That was in 2004. I wasn't living in New York, though I was still working there. I was very excited to find a recently started art school in Long Island City. At that time, The Bridgewater School of Fine Arts had two incredible sculptors from the Ukraine. I took their intense week-long workshop. That's



Fig 2. *The Cusp of Everything*



Fig 3. *Memory* in artist's studio. Created at The Bridgeview School of Fine Arts.

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Fig 4. Artist (second from the left) at The Bridgeview School of Fine Arts.

PERSONAL ARCHIVE OF THE ARTIST 2004

Emotion Is Not Abstract

GA: You mention realism, which is a discussion we've had before. I'd like to know how you see it – that split made in some art historical work between figuration or representative work, versus abstract. Some artists have told me that this is a kind of fault line that critics and historians like, but that for them, it's a rather fuzzy, if not meaningless, division. What are your thoughts about this? Are there artists you admire who are emblematic in either of those genres?

RN: That's a little hard, but I think it's a great question. The kind of work that I'm doing now might be considered abstract. It's not figurative, it's not representational. You may not say "Oh, I recognize that!" For me, it's not abstract. It's the outcome of whatever I'm thinking about: history, ecology, personal and collective challenges, traumas and triumphs. These are not abstract concepts. I believe that when you engage with my work, you will feel what I'm communicating. I also believe (hopefully) you will bring your own narratives to that experience. I don't think with labels. I really try to create work that has no boundaries or chronologies.

Colors: "An Apocalypse of Joy"

GA: So, examples whom you admire...

RN: Many artists of many backgrounds. Alma Thomas comes to mind. For this body of work Joan Mitchell is key. I first read about her in *The NY Times* last year. It was one of those rare moments – a true artistic apocalypse of joy! I immediately purchased *I Carry My Landscapes With Me*. Here was someone using all the colors I gravitate towards in a strong, bold way that was completely free! She has been an inspiration to me.

GA: What are those colors?

RN: Any shade of blue: cobalt, indigo, turquoise. The whole blue spectrum. I love blue, the deeper, the more fantastically engaging to me. What I noticed about Mitchell's work was that she used very bold colors. She was criticized for making such beautifully colorful work. I appreciated her reply (here I recall from memory): "I'm not in this to make ugly work!" The other thing I love about Mitchell is the different ways she uses the canvas as a backdrop. I experiment with this in my work. The white space becomes a kind of tool. It becomes a part of the narrative when you're not painting the entire canvas.

where I made this. [Gestures to bust on the bookshelf] [Figure 3] I was working two jobs at that time. When I moved to Connecticut I joined a sculpture studio at the Greenwich Art Society. Here in Providence, I was extremely glad to find an open studio at AS220. Unfortunately because of the pandemic I only went once. I love working from live models because it forces you to concentrate on what is before you. It's nothing like what you see on television. It's not sexy or erotic, or...[Figure 4]

GA: It's work.

RN: It's just work, very tactile. It's attention to anatomy. Many of the representational sculptors I love have observed medical operations and dissections.

GA: That reminds me of something you once said about small paintings versus large, when I saw you had moved to making larger works, and I asked if that switch meant anything, besides of course that it took more money...

RN: [Laughs.] Well, two things happened. I had always *wanted* to go larger. When I finally did that, I switched to a square, instead of the rectangle canvas I had been using before. Using a square gives you a completely different perspective. A rectangle dictates what you're going to do. You know, like are things going to go vertically or horizontally? But if you're working on a square, you don't have to make that decision. You have a space that is equal on all sides, which for me was amazingly freeing. I don't have to think about which direction I'm going in. I can use the whole space. There's equality there.

GA: And a figurative artist whom you admire?

RN: Barkley Hendricks. He was a master of subtle emotion. His oil paintings of African Americans are incredible. I also love his photography.

GA: Research seems to drive a lot of your work. I'm wondering, when you say research, do you mean that you are working through history? Can you talk about the role that history, if I'm right, plays in your work and in your creative process?

RN: You're absolutely right. I'm an archivist by profession – well, I'm an artist by profession now, because I'm not doing archival work. The two come together because my creative work is very history-based. Most of my ideas come from material I've already researched or want to explore further.

GA: I'm wondering if that history extends to your own childhood experiences, and we'll get to that in a minute. But could we talk about your formal training in literature at Brown – interrupted, but taken up and finished later – and how that may have influenced your artwork? You've published short stories, poetry and a play. So, you've created in the literary arts as well as the visual arts. I've often looked at your work in both and wondered: are your paintings in any way, poems or plays? And do your poems paint?

RN: That's a very good question! Yes, I would say that's true, especially for the body of work in this exhibit. All of them are lyrical answers to some concept that I was thinking about, and those concepts are in the titles of the works. They are all historically based, whether it's our broader history or my personal history.

GA: And your masters degree in library and information science, how does that figure in?

RN: Whatever I'm doing, I want it to be creative, whether I'm writing an article, a poem or painting. There is a lyrical aspect that I want to communicate.

GA: Let's go back to some other influences on your work. You're from the South, from the state of Virginia. Take us back to that, and to the Dismal Swamp.

Being from the South Influences *Everything*

RN: I'm glad you brought that up, because being from Virginia and from the South influences *everything* about me. I have not lived there for many years, but I consider myself foremost a Virginian of African descent. I want to emphasize that I was born in 1954, under widespread segregation. I was fortunate to live in a tight-knit community and have Black teachers from the first grade to the 11th. My teachers, the people in our church, and our neighbors all took an interest in a young person whom they thought had something, and encouraged and pushed you. This instilled discipline in you. All of that is a part of me. It has informed everything about me, and given me the confidence to surmount challenges I've faced.

I was raised in the Pentecostal Church. A very small congregation that at one time had members who were formerly enslaved. One was a relative. Until I was 18, believe it or not, I was a Sunday school teacher! So, a lot of my work comes from a very deep spiritual core.

GA: Now, take us into the Dismal Swamp. I know that you went there as a child, but I sometimes think you still travel there in your mind's eye. What do you see when you're there?

RN: My relationship to the Dismal Swamp is one that I share with people in the area I'm from, Tidewater. That's southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina. We don't say "The Great Dismal Swamp." That's an academic term. We just call it the Dismal Swamp or nothing at all. When I was a very young child, I used to travel with my godmother from Norfolk to Camden, where her mother lived. To get across the border, you had to go through this wetland, traveling at that time along a very tiny two-lane highway. I would keep my godmother company on the long drive. We traveled for miles with the woods on either

side of us. What I remember most as a child was this incredible silence. It was overwhelming. We always went in the daytime, very early. You didn't want to be there at night with only the headlights of your car. You didn't want to get into a dangerous situation. I never told her this feeling. My father and his friends hunted there. Growing up I never had a conversation about this place. It was around 2012 that I discovered its historical significance to our community as African-Americans; to the Native American communities of Tidewater, and to our national and global history.

Nat Turner and other freedom seekers used the Dismal Swamp as a place of strategic planning and refuge. I always hesitate to say rebellion, because it's not a rebellion if you're taking back your freedom. It was a major route of the Underground Railroad, which in Tidewater was not on land but via the many waterways around and through the swamp. Then I learned about the thousands of Maroons: self-emancipated people, who chose to live there for hundreds of years before the Civil War. That was a revelation to me – to learn that a landscape I thought so silent, as a curious child, was anything but silent. We had not been told its history.

“I Quit Slavery”: Painting Black Ecologies

GA: This interest in Black ecologies is one that we both share, and we've had innumerable conversations about that. When did it become central to your artistic work? [Figure 5]

RN: My interest evolved very quickly beginning with my research on the Underground Railroad in Tidewater, Virginia. I read the oral histories of formerly enslaved Virginians in the WPA project of the 1930s. One was Charles Grandy, my great great uncle. They talked about escaping into the woods and the swamp. I read Herbert Aptheker, and several bibliographies. Africans who came into the area were always creating safe havens in opposition to slavery. The geography became a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural space of long sustained communities. I would be remiss if I did not honor the Powhatan, Tuscarora and many Nations of Virginia and North Carolina who for thousands of years before the settler invasion knew this ecosystem intimately. This is why I titled my work for this exhibition, *Speculative Ecologies The Intimate Bond of Freedom and Green*. I've marveled at how these freedom seekers chose to live in this challenging ecosystem. Their adaptation to, and dependency

on their environment was essential to their freedom. I call it a unique position of environmental stewardship. That is not a term one would have used back then. All of their combined knowledges: traditional knowledges from Africa; the knowledge of Indigenous peoples of Tidewater; and those things learned from European contact, allowed them to form sustainable communities that lasted hundreds of years. Until recently, it was thought that the Dismal Swamp Maroons did not leave an archeological footprint. In 2004 an American University based archeological dig began. They found small artifacts. When I read that, I thought it was incredible. These freedom seekers successfully used their environment to sustain themselves; to hide “in plain sight” and never be found. I really try to evoke the emotions of their achievement in my work. [Figure 6]

GA: I hope one day we have a chance to talk more about those Black geographies, on record, and for us...

RN: Me, too. The idea of speculative ecologies is deeply emotional for me. I hope that when looking at my paintings you will feel that intangible experience of “quitting slavery” or the beauty of capturing personal freedom. [Figure 7]



Fig 5. *I Quit Slavery* (detail).



Fig 6. *The Intimate Bond of Freedom and Green* (detail).



Fig 7. *Coming Loose, a vision of personal freedom* (detail).

Maroon Synesthesia, Black Diasporadas, and Art History

GA: I think people who see the exhibit will appreciate that dimension. It reminds me of something that I've been trying to work with for a while, with respect to the sacral arts created by African and African diasporic people – the need to think about this art synesthetically, and to reflect on which things can and should be exhibited, and which not. That is quite a curator's conundrum, especially in the case of sacral art which can only be activated by those specially trained and initiated, and was never intended to be in a white cube. I'm sensing that this may be something that viewers of your exhibit may get – a kind of synesthesia of maroon spaces, from your work. It may be interesting to ask them afterwards. But let's go to another notion that you introduced me to some years ago, Black women artists whom one scholar called “diasporadas,” who had to travel abroad to really be able to develop their work, made desperate by some of the limitations that we've spoken about – economic but also the constraints of racial and gender discrimination. I'm thinking of Elizabeth Catlett and others. Can you talk about some of these women who have influenced you?

RN: Let me talk about just one, Nancy Prophet. I think she's well known here because she is from Rhode Island. Her background is, I believe, Narragansett and African American. I came across her almost 20 years ago, when I was beginning to work with sculpture and looking for someone from our community for confidence. Her artistic career was brilliant, but tragically short because of financial challenges. Her handwritten diary about her studies in Paris is in the John Hay Library. I have read it several times. It was a horrific experience of privation. She studied with famous sculptors, but was marginalized because of her lack of steady support. Unfortunately, like so many BIPOC artists, past and present, her life ended very sadly. I took strength from her achievements as the first woman of color to graduate from RISD and creating the art department at Spelman University. When I look at Prophet's beautiful work, I don't see sadness, I see someone of enormous talent and determination.

GA: What about Black women art historians – are there any whose work has been particularly educative or inspirational for you?

RN: Samella Lewis and Lisa Farrington, to mention just two whose work I turn to. These are Black women art historians



ARCHIVES OF THE JOHN HAY LIBRARY

Fig 8. Professor Michael Stephen Harper

talking about the artists as artists, which is how artists want to be talked about.

Coming Back to Brown

GA: There's something else which I think will be interesting to the people who come to the exhibit and beyond. You are a Brown alum. What has that meant for your work?

RN: My initial time at Brown was in the seventies. Brown was a good fit for me. It was the most open-ended liberal atmosphere I had ever experienced. There was a feeling that you could pursue anything at that time. Coming from Virginia to Brown was both a culture shock and heaven! I could design my own curriculum, which for me as an avid reader was amazing! I took classes at RISD and modern dance. I attended readings of extraordinary poets of the time: Sterling Brown, Ai, Robert Hayden, and of course, Michael Harper. I literally felt like Alice in Wonderland!

GA: Can you say a bit more about Professor Harper? [Figure 8]

RN: I feel very close to him. He had just come to Brown in the seventies, and was a figure to be reckoned with. He was both my advisor and my professor in creative writing. Michael Harper, Gayle Jones, Melvin Dixon and I authored the first edition of *B.O.P. Blacks on Paper* (1974). I believe it had three printings. Harper opened a world of Black literature to me that was not a part of my education in Virginia. I am very proud that he recognized my potential as a creative writer. And most importantly he

was the person who encouraged me to return after 32 years to complete my degree at Brown. The painting *Ode to a Freedom Seeker* is all about him.

"Color Leads Me": A Tradition of Spiritual Freedom

GA: Let's talk now about the paintings that you have produced for the Heimark Residency, which I find quite striking in their use of color. Some seem to resonate with, or one might say conjure for you, the very idea of freedom. I'm thinking about that linking of green and freedom, in *Victory Shall Be Mine* or those shades of blue in *Navigating Freedom*. Can we talk about your relationship to color?

RN: I love this question because – how can I put it? I follow color. It leads my art making. When I look at color it has an intangible almost spiritual...

GA: Something coming together that the colors then take over?

RN: Yes. There are five different shades of blue in *Navigating Freedom*. This painting is an ode to thinking about the rivers and peninsulas where I grew up. It's my first experiment with large palette knives, there are no brush strokes in this work. So the ideas of historical freedom and personal freedom all came together... [Figure 9]

GA: An epiphany of personal freedom?



Fig 9. *Navigating Freedom* (detail).

RN: Yes and I love blue!

GA: And that spiritual element? It seems that a kind of working through the lexicon of the Black church is always present in your work.

RN: There was a huge spiritual component to my early life. *Victory Shall Be Mine* references a gospel song we sang in Church. It's a song of spiritual liberation. As you said: I am "channeling the jubilation of freedom." Imagining the other side of darkness through vibrant color. Imagining how it must have felt for our Ancestors. . .

GA: To be free...

RN: Yes.

GA: What about *Let the Saints Say...?*

RN: That was a particularly hard title to come up with. When I finish a painting it's untitled. I live with them for many months. Sometimes I continue to work on them until I feel they're finished. I kept looking at that painting. It had a narrative but I couldn't quite get it. I concluded it was a message from those Elders in the Church we call Saints.

GA: There is such a resonant conversation here to be had with Afro-Brazilian artists. *Povo do santo* – people of the saint – is what the community of believers call themselves in the Candomblé religion there.

RN: It is very much an African religious tradition. It will be interesting to see how people who visit the exhibit finish the title that I have left open.

GA: I can't resist asking, as we are coming to a close: what divinities reside in your space now?

RN: Very simply, I believe that every living creature has a soul and a striving.

"Shouldn't That Space Be Available to Everyone?" On the Politics of Art

GA: Can we finish with just a brief note on how you see the politics of art?

RN: Sure. Here in Providence I've worked on several projects to center the needs of the BIPOC artist community. What are those

immediate needs? Studio and living space; working wages; money for supplies; time to develop and lastly visibility. Additionally I don't believe in the labeling of "high" or "low" art based on one's adjacency (or non-adjacency) to powerful institutions as a mark of quality. These labels further marginalize communities that do not have that access. I feel there is *good, really good and great* – and many works achieve beauty! For me The Heimark Artist Residency has afforded me all that I advocate for others and I am deeply appreciative.

GA: Final question. What's on the horizon now for you, or rather, to borrow from one of your visual ideas, what are you *on the cusp of*, as an artist and as a writer?

RN: I'm thinking about the "brotherhood of the sea" during the period of slavery. Many enslaved men worked on the waterways of coastal Virginia and North Carolina. They signed on as seamen because it was a space of freedom. While I was researching this exhibit I became aware that this same region was a haven for pirates! That's a lot to unpack and I'd like to spend time exploring those narratives.

GA: Sort of like Rediker's "motley crew." Anything else?

RN: I'd like to end by saying that I sign my work: Renée Elizabeth Neely-TANNER as an ode to my mother Allison Virginia Tanner Neely. She is my constant guardian. I've enjoyed our conversation. Thank you!

PROF. GERI AUGUSTO

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Faculty Associate, Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice

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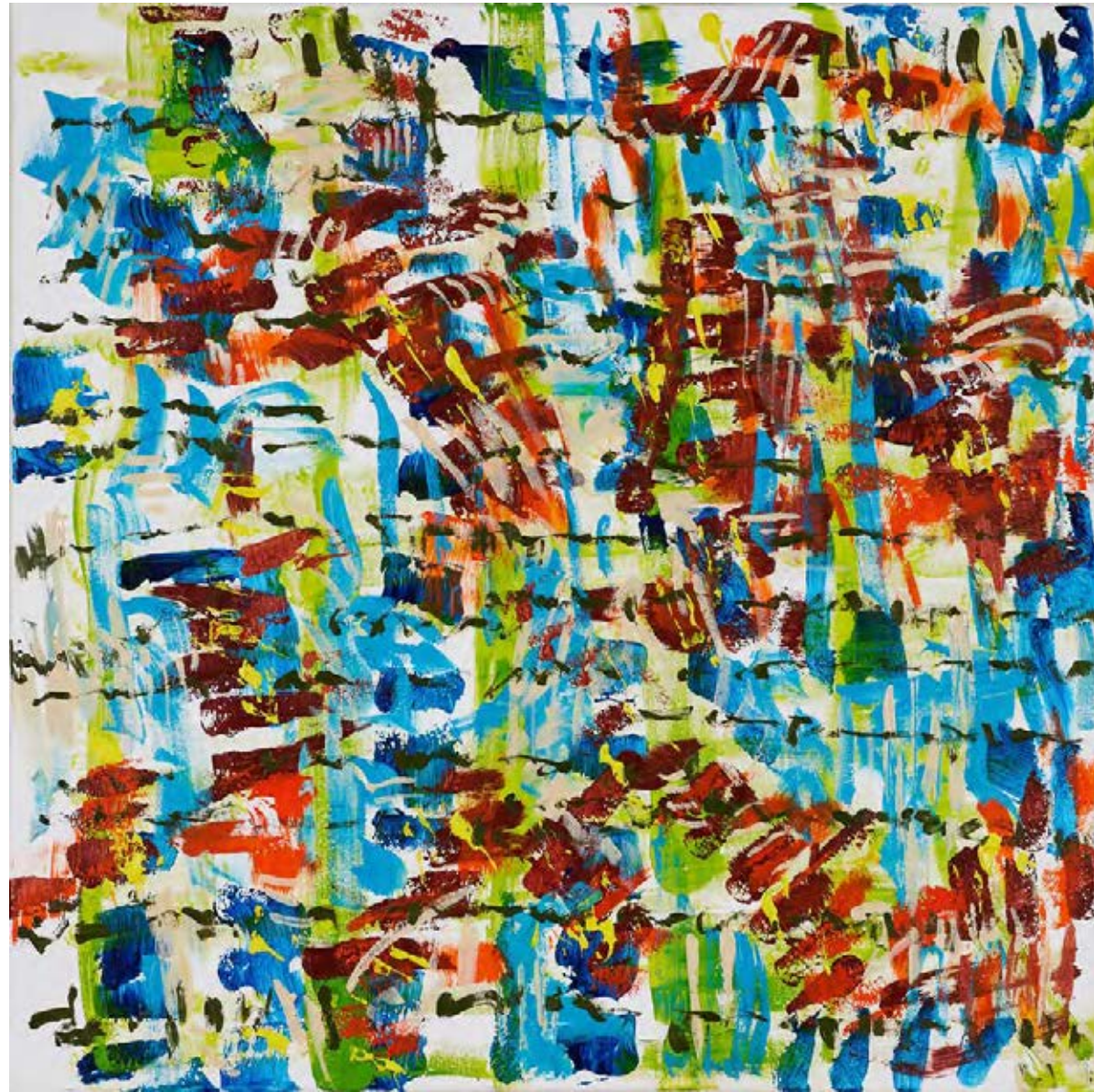
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Exhibition Artwork



Ode to a Freedom Seeker for Michael Stephen Harper (1938-2016)
acrylic on canvas
36 x 36 x ½ inches
2023



Navigating Freedom
acrylic on canvas
36 x 36 x ½ inches
2023



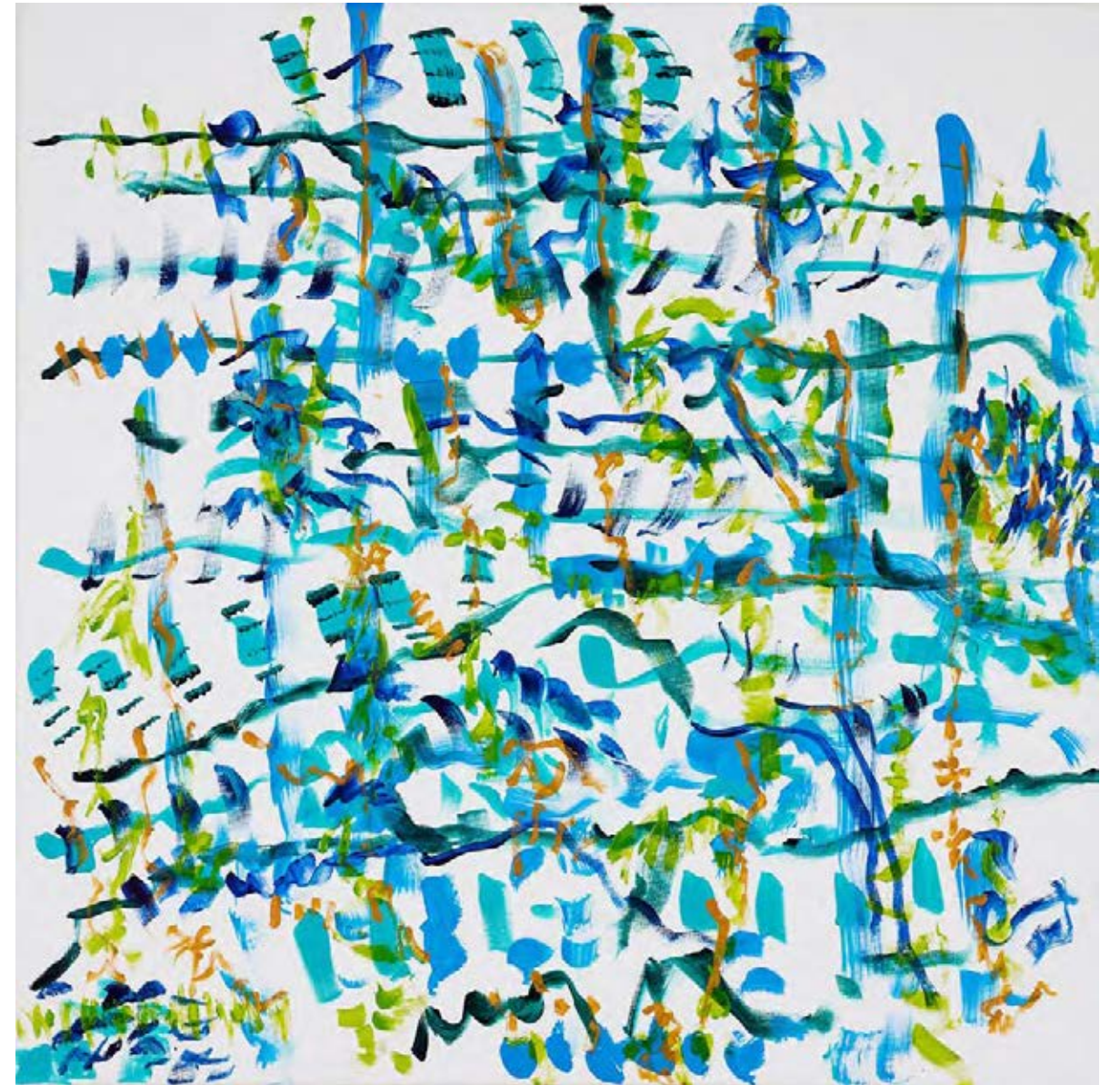
Do You Feel Like Shouting?
acrylic on canvas
36 x 36 x ½ inches
2023



I Quit Slavery
acrylic on canvas
36 x 36 x ½ inches
2023



Maroon Pictograph, Step In Union!
acrylic on canvas
36 x 36 x ½ inches
2023



The Other Side of Darkness
acrylic on canvas
36 x 36 x ½ inches
2023



Let The Saints Say
acrylic on canvas
36 x 36 x 1 inches
2023



Coming Loose
a vision of personal freedom
acrylic on canvas
36 x 36 x 1/2 inches
2023



Victory Shall Be Mine
acrylic on canvas
36 x 36 x ½ inches
2023



The Intimate Bond of Freedom and Green
acrylic on canvas
30 x 48 x ½ inches
(Diptych)
2023



The Cusp of Everything
acrylic on canvas
24 x 30 x ½ inches
2023



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Theodore Roosevelt Neely, Sr.

Theodore Roosevelt Neely, Jr.

Mrs. Nancy C. Goncalves

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