

From Urban Dread to Holy Water: Painter David McGee's Manifest for Survival

Chris Becker – Wednesday, January 9, 2019



David McGee *Holy Water*, 2017. Oil, glue, and enamel on canvas. 60" x 48"

Shock is not too strong a word to describe how people reacted at the opening for Houston artist David McGee's September 2017 show at Texas Gallery, *Urban Dread* and *The Complications of Water*, two separate, yet wholly interrelated series of paintings conceived as a dual presentation in the same space. That McGee is a celebrated master of figurative portraiture no doubt confused many viewers who, upon encountering the fifteen atavistic yet meticulously constructed paintings that make up *The Complications of Water*, found themselves wondering, "What the hell am I looking at?" Drawing equally from Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, with an understanding of how certain tropes in Modernism resonate uniquely for black viewers, *Urban Dread* and *The Complications of Water* are a ship's manifest of McGee's metaphorical and psychological journey from land to water and back again. Some historical and conceptual context may offer a "way in" for viewers wrestling to come to grips with such an uncompromising body of work.

Born in 1962 in Lockhart, Louisiana and raised in Detroit, McGee may be best known for his vibrant watercolor portraits of friends, guest models, emcees, and contemporary funk musicians recast as literary and artistic icons. But he has certainly explored abstraction throughout his career. In the 1994 oil and enamel on newsprint painting *Untitled* from his series *Wasteland*, thick, vertical strokes in sickly yellow-green and charred black hang like leaves in a dying rainforest, while tiny paintbrushes, shoes, and sperm, the detritus of a decimated community, float in the foreground, like satellites lost in space. Whether it be a nightmarish wasteland stretching beyond the edges of the canvas, or a portrait of Snoop Dogg as Van Gogh, McGee is highly sensitized to the emotions that colors and shapes can trigger, as well as the disconnect between what a person is seeing versus what they feel. In an interview with Arts and Culture Texas, McGee describes experiencing a sudden, unexpected feeling of anxiety upon first viewing Barnett Newman's *The Stations of the Cross* (1958 - 1966), where thin stripes of black paint vertically divide the white expanse of fourteen nearly square canvases. Later, McGee realized that the black and white colors of Newman's *Stations* are the colors of police vehicles, a "warning symbol" for black men and women. [1]

The thirty 24" x 18" *Urban Dread* mixed-media paintings are also black and white, with hard edged diagonals, squares, rectangles, crosses, and loops evoking the buildings, streets, and signage of an "urban" neighborhood, the word "urban" being a long held euphemism for "African American." A study for the *Urban Dread* series titled *Strike* provides some clues to McGee's process, which included experimenting with painting on burlap covered with newspaper. An excerpt of vintage journalistic copy ("... we're in a war to put the finishing sock to the rabbit punchers of the common people, to the fascists who would like to throw our lives around like a worn out football. . . .") remains visible behind a descending curtain of thickly applied, black enamel paint, dripping into a horizontal stripe of white across the bottom third of the canvas. After much experimentation, McGee chose to paint just on burlap, which he describes as a "rugged, ghetto fabulous" surface, similar to black hair or "locks." [2] McGee has occasionally referred to this series as "Urban Dreads." [3]

The Complications of Water is even more experimental in conception and construction. For McGee, painting begins with journaling, when he makes notes on his latest obsessions, be it poetry, literature, music, or film, notes that may nothing to do with how a particular painting will look, but everything to do with how it will feel. [4] McGee's journals for *The Complications of Water* include several chapter titles and excerpts from Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby Dick*, an "American nekyia" [5] published a decade before the Civil War. One chapter titled "The Whiteness of the Whale" is a highly detailed meditation on "the supernaturalism of this hue" [6] and its role in Western religious rituals and colonialism ("giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe"). [7] White is also the color of some of nature's most formidable predators, including Ahab's elusive whale.

Several of the *Water* paintings reference Melville's novel. In *The Blackness of The Blackness*, layer upon layer of horizontal and vertical blacks nearly cover the otherwise white canvas, and loom like a gathering storm behind a wood crucifix affixed to the lower right of the canvas, the Greek word "tetelestai" or "It is finished," the last words of Jesus on the cross, scrawled across its upper axis. The cross, again in black, is nearly amorphous in *The Baptism of Pip*, and buoyed by wave-like arch of blue in an sea of white. Pip, the youngest crew member aboard the Pequod, is described in *Moby Dick* as "the poor little negro." [8] After falling into the ocean during a whale hunt, he is left behind to paddle in place until his rescue, and experiences a classic psychic crack up. As Melville writes: "The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but

drowned the infinite of his soul.”[9]

Like Ahab and his crew, Vikings were conquerors who traveled by water, and three of McGee’s Water paintings are named, with some variation, after various heroes and gods in Viking mythology. *Floki* pays homage to Loki, the Norse trickster god, whose parallel in West African mythology is Anansi the Spider. Anansi appears in the guise of the dapper Mr. Nancy in Neil Gaiman’s 2001 novel *American Gods*, its 2017 television adaptation being yet another source of inspiration for McGee. In the prelude to episode two, Mr. Nancy, played by Orlando Jones, appears below the deck of a Dutch slave ship and describes, to the horror of its terrified human cargo, what the next 300 years of life in “the land of opportunity, milk and honey” will be like for black people. (“You all get to be slaves! Split up, sold off, and worked to death!”) His advice? Slit the throats of the crew, set fire to the ship, and “Let the motherfucker *burn!*” This sentiment is present in several of the *Water* paintings. Like an image taken from a still to a splatter film, *Incoming Christians* is a landscape streaked with excrement and dried brownish blood, populated only by a weird, half-human half-crocodile creature, like a warning scrawled in the last surviving moments of an exterminated people. Two relatively placid “white” canvases, *Rope and Sail* and the final, 73” x 70” behemoth simply titled *Viking* provide some respite. They are becalmed, though when seen up close, their surfaces are battle scarred, like sails in the wake of a terrifying storm, or the pockmarked skin of some ancient leviathan.

With *Viking*, there is also a feeling the viewer has come to end of a journey, and perhaps a reconciliation, like Ishmael in the epilogue of *Moby Dick*, floating in the sea, clinging to the remnants of the demolished Pequod. “Why then here does any one step forth?” he asks. “Because one did survive the wreck.” [10] The dramatic contrast between the two series (“land” versus “water”) speaks to McGee’s own psychological unmooring, the “night sea journey” described in Carl Jung’s *Symbols of Transformation*. Jung biographer Gerhard Wehr writes: “. . . only one who has accepted this process of mystical death, who has undertaken the soul’s journey to the other side and withstood the voyage on the night sea, into hell, can stand before his fellow men with this experience as one changed . . . and bring them the knowledge of a new life.” [11] With *Urban Dread* and *The Complications of Water*, McGee provides the viewer with a map for survival, and a testament to the continued potential of abstract painting to convey “the moods, ideas, and strategies” [12] of all artists, no matter what their tribe.

[1] "Moving Forward, Looking Back: David McGee at Texas Gallery and HMAAC," by Casey Gregory, *Arts and Culture Texas*, September 21, 2017.

[2] McGee, David, interview by Chris Becker, unpublished, May 15, 2017.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] *Melville's Moby Dick: A Jungian Commentary*, by Edward R. Edinger, New Directions Books, 1975.

[6] *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville, 1851. Reprint, Barnes & Noble Books, 2003.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] *Jung, A Biography*, by Gerhard Wehr, Shambala, 1988.

[12] *Black Art, A Cultural History*, by Richard J. Powell, Thames & Hudson Ltd, London, 1997.