

INTERVIEW

David McGee by Chris Becker

Painting Black life as a form of storytelling.

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David McGee, *Blackbird*, 2023, watercolor on paper, 60 × 40 inches. Photo by Allyson Huntsman. Courtesy of Bechtler Museum of Modern Art.

David McGee's debut institutional survey, *The Griot and the Nightingale*, collects three decades of his artmaking. The journey begins with *The Wastelands*, a collection of sickly, abstract paintings from the mid-1990s that evoke youth's propensity for self-immolation. McGee's ongoing creative momentum is apparent in his most recent works, *Avenging Angels* (2022–24) and *Shadow Men* (2022–25), which are masterful watercolor portraits of Black women and men in historical costume whose countenances range from hard-won pride, to the acquiescence of subservience, to the promise of bloody violence. There are also moments of buoyancy and wry humor. *The Gloria Paintings* (2018–21), a delightful series of oil-on-burlap abstractions of flowers, clouds, and musical notes, is a loving homage to McGee's mother, "a fountain of support and sustenance."

Born in 1962 in Lockhart, Louisiana, McGee grew up in Detroit, Michigan, returned to the South in the 1980s, and had his first solo exhibition in 1986 at Houston's legendary Barnes-Blackman Galleries. I met David in 2010, and we bonded through our mutual appreciation of music, film, and literature as sustenance.

Chris Becker

You've said the title of your survey, *The Griot and the Nightingale*, refers to storytelling and poetry.

David McGee

It goes back to the show I had at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in 2001 entitled *15 Minutes: The Ballad of Then and Now, Paintings by David Wayne McGee*. We had a griot storyteller come out in the galleries and weave stories around the different paintings I had made. I have always been interested in that kind of deity. I am also thinking about the poets I like, including Dante, T. S. Eliot, and Derek Walcott, and their storytelling. Both Eliot's and Walcott's poetry connect back to Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. That kind of storytelling features a person who witnesses something, and no matter how difficult the witnessing is, survives to tell you about it.

CB

In order to take that journey and be a witness, Dante needs Virgil to be his guide.

DM

Right. And the great love of his life, Beatrice, realizes that he, Dante, needs to go through this. He is a person with a lot of faults and personal challenges with his integrity.

CB

He's not like Ulysses.

DM

Right, right. He's fickle! To paraphrase: Beatrice tells Virgil that you need to lead this man because he needs to see these things. And for the people who bear witness and live to tell great stories, there is a price to pay. It's not easy, and you don't come out unscathed.

Another thing is that the language of storytelling needs musicality.

CB

Griots are singers.

DM

Right, the griot sings, and when you're telling stories for people to remember, you sometimes need poetic devices. Painting is a poetic device. Music is so powerful. It can take the listener to all kinds of places and has a physical effect on the body. But painting is a different kind of effort. When you're telling deep, complicated stories via painting, you need all kinds of devices to engage the viewer. It could be surface; it could be color. To tell a story intimately, you need to figure out what kind of device in the painting will make the viewer investigate its stillness. That's the griot in me trying to tell this story through painting.



David McGee, *The End of Summer*, 1999, oil on canvas, 70 x 60 inches. Photo by Brad Trone. Courtesy of Bechtler Museum of Modern Art.

CB

Is it too pat to say the griot and nightingale represent an interplay between African and European storytelling and poetry?

DM

The crash between the two makes perfect sense to me based on how American art has interwoven both of those components, especially in Black culture. The storytelling you hear in blues music comes from West Africa. The nightingale is a historical device that, for the great romantics like John Keats, William Wordsworth, and William Shakespeare, was the muse for their written words. Ironically, only male nightingales sing. I thought that was interesting with my own dynamic and thinking of Robert Johnson and other blues musicians.

CB

As a painter, you get to these devices by writing. You don't do sketches or studies.

DM

That goes back to the years I spent as a child reading the *World Book* encyclopedias. Reading those books and looking at the images had more of an effect on me than I realized at the time. For some reason, I felt that to be engaged in my practice I needed to not see anything illustrated first. I came to that as a young person. I felt that if I did sketches or studies, I was rehearsing, and I didn't want to rehearse. So I would write the whole scenario for a painting, read it aloud, and then look for the material to fit the story I wanted to tell. It was like casting a film. I would write the script and then cast the part.

CB

In your early work, you cast yourself.

DM

Sometimes you say: Well, nobody can play this part but me! (*laughter*)



David McGee, *Up Drives Black and the Fall of Babel*, 2017, oil on canvas, 60 × 48 inches. Photo by Allyson Huntsman. Courtesy of Bechtler Museum of Modern Art.

CB

Writers and critics typically want to unpack and explain the meaning of a painting. When you revisit your work, do you find you're still cracking the code and seeing things you hadn't seen before?

DM

It's surreal to see and revisit all of these paintings together. The only way I can look at paintings I've made is to divorce myself from the making of the work. Otherwise, I can't look at it without thinking, Oh, man. I could have painted that better. I'm trying to figure out how to revisit the work without being the author of it. I don't know if that's possible. Here's the tricky thing about painting: if you have a certain kind of technical skill, you can overdo it. That's why I used commercial house paints when I was younger because they took the slickness out. Sometimes, I can overthink when painting, and the poetry gets lost.

CB

You've said that what is absent in a painting is just as important as what you put in a painting.

DM

The perfect example of that is the images on white paper in my *Avenging Angels* series. When I put these people, male or female, on a white piece of paper, there may also be a branch, or some birds or butterflies, but you still don't know where these people are. There's no sunlight or moonlight to set a mood. I'm taking components out, which only intensifies the image and adds mystery because what people want to see, you refuse to give them. But you're giving them the most important thing.

CB

Any musician will tell you that what's not there is so important. That's how you get a groove; that's how you get Led Zeppelin or Miles Davis. When Bob Dylan's song "Murder Most Foul" came out, you texted me: "You need to hear this." This song was another key to *The Tarot Cards* (2018-22), correct?

DM

The Tarot Cards are Dylanesque. (*laughter*) There's the image, and the word, and then there's the takeaway. The rerouting of your mind. People are used to images being labeled by language. This is *this* thing. Well, what happens if this is not that thing? Then another thing is born out that rerouting.



Installation view of *David McGee: The Griot and the Nightingale*, 2026. Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, Charlotte, North Carolina. Courtesy of Bechtler Museum of Modern Art.

CB

The trickster is often present in your work.

DM

Sometimes, I feel like I have nothing to do with that. (*laughter*) There's just something in me. I cannot help it!

CB

We're all kind of fucked up in some way. But there's something to be learned by not turning away from that.

DM

To be a fully formed human, one must be vulnerable. It's like what Iago tells Othello, "What you know, you know." Don't pretend like you don't know this shit. Knowing what you know about yourself is the only way to be an artist. And this is what Dante learned: that it was a privilege to see all of this and discover that you are not as smart as you thought you were. All these people in hell could be you.

"You have to have the courage to look down into your past not knowing how far you're going to go or if you will ever come back up."

— David McGee

CB

To quote James Baldwin, "You could be that monster. You could be that cop."

DM

You have to have the courage to look down into your past not knowing how far you're going to go or if you will ever come back up. That's what a griot does. That's what an artist does! There's a static to being a human being that can be hard to deal with when everything is surface value. It's an internal, locked-in syndrome. But artists penetrate it, as do musicians, poets, and filmmakers. We penetrate the heart's surface to show you a different kind of body politic. Without that, I don't know how people can survive.

David McGee *The Griot and the Nightingale* is on view at the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, Charlotte, North Carolina, until August 23.

Chris Becker is a Houston-based composer and writer. He creates scores for dance, film, and mixed-media installations, and writes about visual art and music for a variety of print and online publications, as well as his Substack, *Night and Day*. Becker is the author of the critically acclaimed book *Freedom of Expression: Interviews with Women in Jazz*, and a contributor to *Punk Ethnography: Artists & Scholars Listen to Sublime Frequencies*.