

## The Light that Persists: Mississippi Artists in 2020 - SAAC Juried Exhibition

I am a historian. I've always been interested in visual art and culture, both the people who created art and those who documented culture. As a curator, I am constantly looking. In fact, a curator is trained to see. Anyone working in a museum should be looking, looking, looking. As the juror for the Starkville Area Arts Council exhibition, I was interested in looking for those artists who display technical proficiency, and more importantly, who project through their art a sense of themselves and their environment. As a historian, it is important for me to think about the great artists, critics, supporters, and documentarians who captured pivotal moments in American history. While I examined the works presented, I asked myself three questions. Who is this artist? Where are they from? What inspires them?

In 1936, Walker Evans (1903-1975) the American photographer and photojournalist, in partnership with writer James Agee, documented three white tenant farming families in southern Alabama during the Great Depression. As a result of their environmental study, the two men published the groundbreaking book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Its detailed account of the families paints a deeply moving portrait of rural poverty. Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and photographer Eudora Welty (1909 –2000) documented Mississippi's rural poor and the effects of the Great Depression. Both Evans and Welty used the camera to document the life and times of marginalized Americans with tenderness while also illuminating a sense of place and optimism about the human spirit. These documentarians left an enduring body of work that scholars continue to examine and internalize.

My academic interests have centered on visual artists and how they engaged the world around them. Specifically, I am interested in American artists who practiced between 1960 and 1975. These artists responded to the American Civil Rights Movement through their work. Their interpretations of the world around them have long fascinated me. Those fascinations lead me to study the extraordinary collection of modern art at my beloved Alma Mater, Tougaloo College. Tougaloo was founded in 1869, by the American Missionary Association (AMA). The AMA, based in New York, was an integrated group of abolitionists who sent agents to Mississippi with the purpose of establishing a college for freed persons after the Civil War. Tougaloo College was chartered on the principle of being “*accessible to all irrespective of their religious tenets and conducted on the most liberal principles for the benefit of our citizens in general.*”

During the turbulent 1960s, a group of New York activists, curators, and critics involved in the struggle for civil rights formed the New York Art Committee for Tougaloo College. In the spring of 1963, the committee began shipping works by modern American and European artists to the College, forming the first collection of

modern art in Mississippi. This was a watershed moment for the state because the New York Art Committee sought to bring modernism to Mississippi during a time of profound social change in America. Members of the New York Art Committee were Dore Ashton, Stephen Ashton, Fritz Bultman (1919-1985), Jeanne Bultman Jeanne Reynal (1903-1983), Tommy Sills (1914-2000), Adja Yunkers, (1900–1983) and Joan Hall with Warren Marr II functioning as a liaison between the United Church of Christ and the committee. In a letter written by the New York Art Committee for Tougaloo College to Dr. A. D. Beittel, then President of the College, Dore Ashton outlined the objectives of the committee:

*To provide a collection of paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints and other fine art objects which would serve not only the teaching needs of Tougaloo College, but also the cultural needs of the area. Our hope is to provide the nucleus of a cultural center. Eventually it is hoped that this collection would serve a broad area around the city of Jackson as an interracial oasis in which the fine arts are the focus and magnet.*

Artists have always been truth-tellers during moments of profound change. Walker Evans, James Agee, Eudora Welty, and the members of the New York Art Committee for Tougaloo College left profound legacies that force us to take a closer look at critical moments in our nation's history.

An exhibition such as this one not only provides artists with greater visibility in the state, it also offers us a glimpse into the art-making process during a global pandemic and the Black Lives Matter Movement. It is my hope that this exhibition offers the viewer a provocative experience of one historian and curator's vision of contemporary art in Mississippi.

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