rhythm in relief
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Cover Art: *Jazz Man/Be Bop, Be Bop*, 1991, stained wood, 51 ¼ x 15 x 2, collection of Gilbert Young
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Finally, we greatly appreciate the use of the fine short film “Chisel” by Jeffrey Hill. Jeff has done great work presenting on film some of Kentucky’s finest folk artists.

There will be something forgotten
And something we should forget.
It will be like all things we know.
A stone will fail; a rose is sure to go.

~Arna Bontemps (1902-1973)
from Length of Moon
Marvin, 1989, painted and stained wood, 26½ x 14½ x 2¾, collection of Pearl Williams

Twin Pearl, 1990, painted wood, 45¼ x 21 x 2, collection of James and Patricia King
LAVON WILLIAMS is a big man, and typically quiet. But, his work has a lot to say. When we conceived of this project some three years ago, just after launching our last major traveling exhibition, we didn’t know how much it had to say, but we had an idea that seemed full of possibility. Even then we could hear a far echo at the end of a winding road, we just didn’t fully understand what that voice (or those voices) were trying to tell us.

Few projects inspire the excitement we’ve encountered as we navigated towards a fully formed exhibition on LaVon Van Williams, Jr., and his extraordinary art. For KFAC, it’s been an invigorating exploration, confirming once again that there are surprises around every bend. On the way, we took road trips to Winston Salem and Atlanta, and multiple excursions north to Cincinnati and Columbus; as for Lexington, we lost count.

We tried to imagine: travel up the Saint Johns River through to Lake Monroe; life in segregated citrus towns, before the National Voting Rights Act of 1965; an older blues man down from Swainsboro in north Georgia and his young bride; the clear-cut logging and hardscrabble lumber mills, deep, clear springs and turpentine stills of Jim-Crow-era Wakulla County in the Florida panhandle; the darkest times, bullwhips, auction blocks, slave quarters; and back, across the ocean in 18th, to ancient connections and native birthrights, to times believed holier, crystallized as legend in the collective memory.

People talked to us in awe—over the phone from Massachusetts, New York, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Ohio, Illinois, Texas and Colorado—about LaVon’s work.

Numerous anecdotes enriched our understanding as we tried also to imagine the artist as a child and picture the roads he traveled on his way here, on his way home. We talked to LaVon’s sister Pearl Williams, in Manhattan, and his cousin Dr. Stephen Wright, in Sanford, Florida, both of whom helped illuminate our way and lead us forward. Ms. Edna Williams spoke eloquently about her artist son, her voice becoming soft as she described how slave symbolism embedded in a particular work continues to stir deep emotion despite daily viewing.

Along the way, the exhibition took on a life of its own. Originally planned as a showing of 30-40 pieces it grew, almost organically, to an exhibition of over 60 works of art created over a period of 25 years. For us, this trip has been a learning experience and a privilege.

And while the opening of this exhibition represents the end of one journey, it also signals the beginning of another. At a time of transition for folk art in Kentucky, LaVon Williams’ work stands as a signpost for a younger generation of artists and collectors that practically screams, “Turn Here!” LaVon, while entirely self-taught, is taking us someplace new; his work tells us that folk art need not grow only in a self-imposed and self-contained cultural vacuum. Through LaVon, we find that folk art in Kentucky has finally and thoroughly broken the decades’ long public assignation as only rural and primitive.

~ Matt Collinsworth & Adrian Swain

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A SIGN AT THE CROSSROADS

Oh My Mother, 1993, painted, stained wood, 47 x 21¾, collection of the artist
THE VALUE OF ART lies in its ability to hint at the mysteries of the universe, rather than providing answers. If the artist is unable to strike that chord, now or for some future generation, the work will forever remain an enigma; it will be dismissed and forgotten as if it were nothing more than self-absorbed scratching of a persistent itch.

Regardless of when we live, all of us are products of our time. We may embrace or reject our world; that is our choice. But however we respond, we see the world around us through a lens ground by our own experience, shaped by the specifics of the moments in which we live. We cannot escape this, and this is true for all of us, artists and non-artists alike.

Most artists create from deep within their interior world, which bustles with the primordial soup of senses, filtered or unfiltered by the processes of thinking and interpreting. Without the personal filtration of thought, this world would remain a garbage dump of disassociated sounds, sights, smells, tastes, and emotions. We think to establish some semblance of order out of chaos.

The creative stance of artists varies from reflections of an extremely personal, individual circumstance to a broader, exterior, and less personal perspective. Regardless, the relative success of an artist will hinge on how well he or she is able to frame insights in a context that resonates for those who see their art.

LaVon Van Williams’ art is a voyage of exploration into personal and cultural identity. If the quest for personal identity is explicitly human, it is also a particularly American preoccupation. Genealogy is more popular than ever, as increasing numbers of Americans research their ancestry for clues to their own identity. In a country as ethnically diverse as any, cultural identity has become increasingly fragmented and obscured. Is it unreasonable to want to know what you are made of and where you come from? Is it asking too much to want to know the simple facts?

Snake on a Bass, 1997, painted and stained wood, 52¾ x 23 x 2, collection of Linda Larrimer

"O" Monk, 1989, painted wood, 32 x 21 x 2, collection of Fran & Bob Rothman
IN TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES, ancestry is most often communicated through the oral tradition, handed down through the generations by word of mouth. When the foundations of social order were stable, with change happening very gradually, individuals in traditional societies understood their place in the world. With traditional societies increasingly eroded, this understanding has become more ambiguous, more tentative.

This is a useful backdrop against which to examine the sculpture of LaVon Williams. In a very real sense, this is the focus of LaVon’s art: the search for answers to basic questions about personal identity: Who am I? Where did I come from? Who are my people? What is my cultural identity? What is expected of me?

America is often described as a nation of immigrants. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines the word immigrant as “a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence.” If, as is generally understood, immigration implies that this relocation was intentional, arriving slaves were not immigrants. The term “nation of immigrants” by definition ignores the experiences of traditional African-Americans and of the Native-Americans who lived here before colonization.

Williams is African-American. For African-Americans the quest for personal and cultural identity is particularly complex. Unlike later waves of immigrants from all over the world (including more recent arrivals from the African continent), most African-Americans are descendants of men and women who were forced into captivity from diverse, traditional communities in Africa, transported involuntarily to the Americas to serve as slaves. That alone sets them apart as Americans.
BUT, TRADITIONAL LIFE on the African continent was not a generic experience. Contemporary culture evolved from the wholesale mixing of individuals, as slaves, from numerous, distinct, separate, African cultures, some of which were mutually inimical in their native lands. (Imagine conflicts that might arise if French, Germans, Italians, English and Irish were herded together like cattle, chained in confined spaces, and sold.)

Factor in the very concerted effort by American masters to strip slaves of their personal identity to break their will, stamping out native customs, suppressing native languages, erasing native cultures. Then, we should begin to get a sense of the conflict out of which contemporary African-American culture has taken shape. Add to that the legacy of Jim Crow and the century-long conflict necessary to wrestle simple, legal equality from the majority culture(s). It is illuminating, therefore, given these monumental challenges that African-Americans have contributed so significantly—many would argue dominantly—in shaping the broader American culture of today.

Culture is dynamic, responding and reacting to forces brought to bear on it, adapting to accommodate change, evolving so as to remain relevant and vital. It can be fragile, but can also be capable of withstanding great assault. The metaphor of the river as culture flowing down through time is particularly appropriate to the art of LaVon Williams. The river (culture), shaped by outside forces, is continuously replenished (by rain? other cultures? God?), becoming a new river each day, always evolving, never the same. This river of dreams, of clues to the past, and of personal identity exists only in the individual imagination, and it is a different river for each of us. LaVon’s art explores this river. His sculpture charts its waters, and his chisels record its ebb and flow.
LAVON VAN WILLIAMS, JR.

If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn.
~ Charlie Parker

LAVON VAN WILLIAMS, JR., was born July 10, 1958 in Lakeland, Polk County, Florida, where he lived until the age of 10. He was the youngest of five and the son of a teacher and a nurse. Following his parents’ divorce, his mother moved the family to Denver in 1968, where he finished his schooling in 1976 and was a high school All-American basketball star. That fall he came to Lexington where he attended the University of Kentucky on an athletic scholarship, playing on the UK basketball team that won the NCAA championship in 1978.

In 1980 he graduated from UK with a degree in Sociology, and left to play pro ball in Italy and Japan before returning to the US. In the mid 1980s he returned to Lexington and has lived there ever since. Married with two daughters, he works for Fayette County Schools.
THE ARTIST WAS INTRODUCED to carving as a child. His mother, Edna (Wright) Williams, grew up about eighty miles northeast of Lakeland in Sanford, where the family visited on a periodic basis. In Sanford, LaVon’s great uncle, Luke Wright (1893-1979), was a woodcarver. LaVon’s older half-brother, Dave Wright, was inspired to begin carving after watching Luke at work. Dave, in turn, taught LaVon how to carve.

Edna Williams recalled that LaVon was, early on, characterized as an “Old Soul.” He was willing, happy even, to sit quietly among older adults, listening and absorbing what was being said. Old souls were attentive and thoughtful, she said, and held deeper convictions about what they felt and what they believed in.

A self-described “fifth-generation wood carver,” it is tempting to think that Williams’ carving is a part of some continuum of carving rooted in regional, African-American vernacular tradition. Extensive research has led us to conclude that this is not the case.

Family members vividly remember Luke carving over the years and that wood carving was an important part of his identity. How he began carving no one seems to know, but he was apparently the only woodcarver in the family at that time. Luke’s father had moved the family to Sanford, from rural Wakulla County west of Tallahassee in the Florida panhandle, sometime after 1896 when Luke was just a young boy. However, research into wood carving as a tradition in Wakulla County has drawn a blank. While the factors that influenced the work of Luke Wright as a woodcarver are unknown, all indications are that he took it up as a pastime, as a means of self-expression. Luke, Dave, and LaVon each produced work that is markedly different from the others’ (notwithstanding early collaborations between LaVon and his brother), and it seems most likely that what they hold in common is the work itself, the activity of carving. Family oral history initially implied a Gullah connection in coastal South Carolina. However, despite isolated examples of wood carving within the Gullah population of South Carolina, there is no evidence to suggest that Gullah woodcarving traditions influenced Luke’s work.

For over 20 years, Williams has maintained his own studio, separate from the family’s home, in a small house located in a transitional neighborhood bordering commercial and industrial properties. He works there evenings and weekends on a regular basis. At any time, the house may contain several completed works, carvings in progress, works long completed but half forgotten in one of several back rooms, and an eclectic potpourri of small works by other artists.
I start in the middle of a sentence and move both directions at once.
~ John Coltrane

WILLIAMS BEGINS with a rough line drawing on paper. Each carving starts out as a flat, rectangular panel, an inch or more thick, made by laminating several boards together, edge-to-edge. The general layout is then transferred to the surface in pencil, before the carving begins. Luke Wright carved with a knife. Dave has used both knife and chisels. LaVon carves exclusively with mallet and chisels, working from larger to finer chisels as a piece evolves.

The carving is performed rhythmically, controlling the force of each strike of the chisel—akin to someone playing pool, sizing up a shot with the cue before actually striking the ball—tap, tap, TAP...tap, tap, tap, TAP. With the preliminary drawing as a guide, the form of each piece slowly emerges as wood is removed. The form evolves from the initial drawing as the envisioned image is reconciled with the wood in shallow relief. Many of his works incorporate negative space, holes where all the wood has been carved away when that fits the composition. It is not uncommon for him to set a piece aside until he resolves a particular issue in his mind’s eye before he resumes carving.

Once the actual carving is completed, he usually applies stains or paints with a brush or a rag, though some works are left unpainted. Some of his carvings are one-sided, made to be hung on a wall, while others stand upright, anchored in flat, rectangular oak bases. On free-standing pieces there is usually a ‘front’ side, but the back side also is often carved, frequently with the same depth of detail.
AS AN ARTIST addressing broad issues of personal identity, Williams is by no means unique. Identity is a common and logical subject for artists that has wide-ranging possibilities. Artists may seek to establish or clarify their identity, to celebrate it, or to explain it through their art. LaVon’s work is triggered by history, by community lore, by cultural tradition, or by personal experience, and any one piece may draw from several of those sources. Although the issue of personal identity is certainly a driving force in his work, with a few exceptions (When I was Young I Could Fly) Williams’ work focuses overwhelmingly on the external world rather than on his own, personal life.

The dominant preoccupation in his work is the exploration of a broader story, the saga of the African-American people. His focus ranges from slave ships departing the coast of West Africa to events, issues and iconic individuals in the present day. All of it is intrinsic to clarifying aspects of his own identity, his nationality, ethnicity, and personal culture—American, African-American, descendant of slaves, son, athlete, husband, father, teacher, artist, human being. His choice of subjects is selective. He is an artist not a historian, and his approach has been neither sequential nor chronological. His choices have been intuitive, portraying those elements of the story that most resonate in his imagination.
WILLIAMS HAS PORTRAYED slavery, which is at the heart of this African-American narrative, indirectly, and primarily through the use of symbolism. Look closely at many of his carvings; spaces that would otherwise be blank or empty are instead filled with abstracted African-American faces or heads viewed from the side (ancestors, male and female), with foot prints (the soles of anonymous feet), and the palms of anonymous hands. At first glance, these images are obscure, requiring one to focus intently. They then become more easily recognizable. Executed economically with a few chiseled lines and pieced together at all angles, these symbols become iconic with repetitive use. As sacred symbols, they invoke a secondary narrative beneath the more obvious, outward subject of the piece. In a few cases (Ammunition Box and Amelia’s Papers), these symbols make up the entire composition. The impact is intense, totally arresting, forcing us into quiet reflection.

Ammunition Box, circa 1990, painted, stained wood, 13 x 39½ x 12⅛, collection of Margaret Williams

Amelia’s Papers, 1990, painted, stained wood, 37 x 19, collection of the artist
DESPITE THE TRAGEDY of American slavery and its continuing impact on African-Americans, LaVon seems successfully to have avoided sentimentality in portraying it. While slavery in America is an obvious hot-button issue, the challenge for the artist is to offer new insights and to avoid gratuitous use of the subject as an easy means of attracting attention.

How, then, does LaVon present this saga? Departure from the African coastline is featured in a number of pieces. *Leaving Her Home* depicts an anchored slave ship, seen from the shore. In the foreground the bare-chested torsos of four figures are stair-stepped, descending through vegetation from the upper right of the frame as though part of a captive line on their way to board the ship. On the ship, four figures lined up, their arms reaching upwards in desperation, stand behind a closer figure with forearms leaning on the ship’s railing, who is staring intently back towards the land. Two abstracted faces peer from behind.

*Jumpin’ the Broom* refers to the practice of jumping over a broom, a ritual common in many traditional African-American wedding ceremonies. How it originated is unclear. Scholars disagree as to the origins of jumping the broom in any specific ethnic group in Africa. However, we do know that a broom was traditionally waved over the heads of the bride and groom in at least one culture in what is now Ghana. Regardless, the ritual is well known to many African-Americans and dates back at least to the time of slavery.6
BUFFALO SOLDIER carvings (Good Night, Lovin, and Cowboy) pay tribute to the role of African-American cavalymen in the conquest of the American West. Beyond that, they stand as a reminder of the often overlooked role played by African-Americans in the United States military. The term “Buffalo Soldiers” is believed to have been coined by Native Americans as an honorific, in recognition of the warrior bravery of African-American soldiers that they encountered on the battlefield. Black soldiers fought as far back as the Revolutionary War, and African-Americans fought in the War of 1812. During the Civil War, there were all-black units in the Union Army, though they were, not surprisingly, under the command of white officers. The establishment of all-black units was formalized in the US Army after the Civil War with passage of the Reorganization Act of 1866. In spite of segregation and racism within the armed services, African-Americans played key roles in every US military engagement since Independence. Public recognition of the contribution and military achievements of African-Americans has been sparse, but Buffalo Soldiers have acquired a minor, mythical status through the popular media since 1960.
OTHER WORKS PORTRAY specific scenes and situations familiar to many African-Americans. LaVon has, for example, long been intrigued by the tradition of rent parties, and he has portrayed and reinterpreted the subject a number of times. Rent parties are thought to have originated in New York during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Increasing numbers of southern blacks migrated north, creating an escalating demand for housing. Many urban landlords exploited this need by raising rents, asking as much as three times what had previously been charged to white renters.

The population density in many parts of Harlem soared. Rent parties were held to help raise the rent. Partygoers paid a small admission fee to dance and socialize and would pay extra for food and drink. Alcohol was usually available, but with Prohibition in full swing, details of the time and location of rent parties were closely guarded and passed on only by word of mouth. It was generally thought that the police were more inclined to bust a gathering of blacks in Harlem than raid a speakeasy patronized by whites elsewhere in the city.

Actually, LaVon first heard of rent parties in Denver in the early 1970s when he was in his early teens. The population of Denver at that time was growing, fueled in part by the influx of people from small towns in Texas. They staged rent parties for the same essential reasons. Kids his age would hold dime parties, modeled after rent parties, to which the admission charge was ten cents.

Rent Party is a whirlwind of ecstatic movement. Male and female figures are intertwined, their arms and legs thrust up, out sideways, or down, at unlikely angles, lost in the ecstasy of dance. In portraying these figures, the artist has broken free of conventional proportion so that limbs, hands, and feet are typically larger than life. Arms may extend far away from torso, sometimes across the entire top of a piece if that distortion serves the artist’s need. Ironically, the complex interrelationships of these dancers are made more vivid and real through abstracted, non-realistic portrayal. These figures are highly demonstrative as they translate music into movement. Here, there is no beginning, no end. Dancers become one with the dance, and movement becomes inseparable from the music. The dance asserts the inner strength of the dancers, both physical and spiritual.

Rent Party, 1991, Painted wood, 54 x 44¼, collection of Vivian & William Turner
Opposite: Rent Party, 1995, painted, stained wood, 40 x 17, collection of Heather Rae Byer
IN A SERIES OF CARVED PANELS, The Devil Is Always Trying To Close The Gate (#s 1-3), LaVon portrays scenes from a church service. Despite stark differences in activity, these church scenes have much in common with his depictions of the rent party. They all exude a similar, ecstatic energy. Where partygoers gave themselves over to the music, here religious celebrants abandon themselves to the Lord. #3 shows six figures standing or seated in the choir area, behind a low carved panel barrier that separates them from the rest of the congregation. At center is a pulpit. The vertical surfaces of panel and pulpit are decorated with the familiar, iconic head symbols, arranged at different angles, reminding us once again of ancestry.

#1 and #2 depict different groups of worshipers, carried away by the Holy Spirit. Men and women have risen and are moving in religious ecstasy. They dance, they sing, they are demonstrative. In #2, which features two men and two women, the upper female figure appears to be pushing firmly down on the shoulders of the men seated below, as though she were imposing restraint on passion that had gotten out of hand. There are also similarities of visual rhythm in the composition of these two outwardly very different subjects. This is in no way coincidental.

I'm a devout musician.
~ Charlie Parker
AS A YOUNG BOY in Lakeland, Florida, Williams has recalled several times watching, from the outside, the service taking place inside the Holy Pentecostal Church in the nearby neighborhood of Lake Ridge. Raised a Baptist himself, he was struck by the fervor, the intensity of the celebration. He was captivated by the energy and conviction of the congregation. Across town, in Black Bottom, he also remembers an establishment known as Vick’s that functioned as a general store of sorts, located adjacent to the citrus groves. At night, the building became a juke joint patronized in part by citrus workers.

LaVon remembers the rhythms of the music coming out of the juke joint as almost identical to those at the church service. This was the dawning of an understanding: while the words of hymns and blues tunes were quite different, the music to which those words were set was almost identical. Without the lyrics, the music was a common denominator, a unifying cultural currency that was expressly African-American.

Music became increasingly important in LaVon’s life. His father was an avid jazz fan who bought many of the latest records. His paternal grandfather, Kato Williams, had been a bluesman, a guitar player and singer, originally from Swainsboro, Georgia. The release of Marvin Gaye’s LP, *I Want You*, in 1976, marked a turning point for LaVon. The album cover was illustrated with a painting of a crowded juke joint, *Sugar Shack*, by artist Ernie Barnes (1938-2009). That album cover crystallized things for LaVon. As soon as he saw it he says, “I just knew, right then, that I wanted to be an artist.” The exuberant energy of Barnes’ dancers must have triggered childhood memories for LaVon.

Researching artists whose work was related to LaVon’s or who might have influenced his work, we essentially came up empty handed, with the exception of Ernie Barnes. While LaVon’s overall subject matter is quite different from that of Barnes’, the abandon of LaVon’s dancers (and those worshipping in church) closely reflects the uninhibited energy of the dancers in Barnes’ juke joint. LaVon took that energy and reconfigured it for his own use.

The importance of music as a medium for cultural transmission is evident from the sheer number of music related pieces LaVon has produced. From specific, identified musicians (“O” Monk), to anonymous players of the trumpet (Jazz Man / Be Bop, Be Bop), bass, piano, guitar, and sax, music runs like life blood, as a main theme or as undercurrent, through much of his work. His dancers (Twin Pearl and Koko Slow Dance III), rent partygoers, church celebrants, pall bearers (Oh Mary Don’t You Weep), all are dependent to some degree on music.

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*Fat Boy*, 1999, painted, stained wood, 48½ x 29½ x 3½, collection of Christopher M. Haines
Jazz Man / Be Bop, Be Bop, 1991, stained wood, 51¾ x 15 x 2, collection of Gilbert Young

Sitting In For Memphis Minnie, 1989, painted wood, 23 x 19 x 7¾, collection of Mary Lu & Dick Aft

Simply Mr. Johnson, 1989, painted wood, 22 x 11 x 13, collection of James and Patricia King

Racine, 1990, painted wood, 50½ x 17 x 4½, collection of Mary Lu & Dick Aft
LAVON HAS SAID that looking at art is not always easy. “It’s like listening to the Blues. Oftentimes it’s not easy to listen to the Blues. The Blues can be hard.” In the late 1980s, LaVon made a series of individual figures (see Baby Girl, Lover Man, and The Great Lover) all of them with jet black faces. This was a direct and intentional reference to Aunt Jemima, of pancake syrup fame, and to the ubiquitous black-face bell boy figures (see Henry, Love Letter #3) and yard jockeys common in the south. Viewed negatively by many people as undesirable caricatures or racial stereotypes, LaVon embraces Aunt Jemima, the lawn jockey and bell hop statues as cultural icons to be proud of. Several collectible, cast iron Aunt Jemimas can be found around his studio. Where others choose to take offense, LaVon recognizes no insult, embracing them in honor of the countless, anonymous thousands that they have represented in real life.

All of his work revolves around the human figure, and all those figures have conspicuously large hands and feet. These are specific symbols that LaVon has adopted and used throughout his work. Large hands represent strength, large feet convey stability. Again, LaVon is drawing on that reservoir of childhood memories, those vivid impressions of the citrus workers around Lakeland, Florida, who were also the inspiration for the ribbed, white socks and heavy work shoes worn by the male figures in most of his carvings.
LAVON HAS BEEN seriously active as a sculptor for over 25 years, creating a significant body of work that is consistent and distinguished. His work addresses large issues that are important, often with breathtaking poignancy. He is highly articulate when asked about his work, but he is reticent as a self-promoter, too preoccupied with creating the art to use his time arguing its merit.

LaVon’s work is extremely complex, often a frenzy of movement. The intricate human interrelationships he presents frequently require us, first, to spend time focusing on individual figures, to disentangle them one from another, before we take stock of their interactions. In doing so we can single out and observe individuals within the broader context of the crowd. These works of art are culturally rich. They are, indeed, iconographical treasure troves of symbols and cultural markers familiar to many African-Americans that are embedded in the work. For those not familiar, these symbols are right there, in the work, available for us to decode if we are sufficiently curious and motivated.
Talking about music is like dancing about architecture.
~ Thelonious Monk

AN AMALGAM OF displaced African cultures, African-American ‘culture’ evolved as separate and distinct from mainstream Euro-American culture. It survived through strength and resistance, despite repeated efforts to eradicate it, despite mistaken, fanciful and arrogant, Euro-centric assumptions that it would in time disappear as African-Americans became assimilated. One key to its survival was the maintenance and use of an alternate vocabulary of signs and symbols not known or understood by whites. Given African-Americans’ violent and haunting past, it is appropriate, necessary perhaps, that decoding and fully engaging in the mystery of this art should require that one respect and acknowledge the existence of a culturally-specific vocabulary.

This was the vocabulary inherited by LaVon. He has studied it, and put it to use creating works of art. And yet, even without this cultural context, his carvings are compelling, at once seductive and austere. We are drawn in by their vague familiarity, and struck at the same time by their edginess, a discordance that rattles us and compels us to keep looking, as we will keep listening when a jazz riff rips us away to strange and unfamiliar terrain of the imagination. LaVon’s art is unresolved. Individual works can therefore remain alive to us, offering up new insights with the passage of time.

You can be up to your boobies in white satin, with gardenias in your hair and no sugar cane for miles, but you can still be working on a plantation.
~ Billie Holiday

LAVON WILLIAMS’ ART is particularly relevant to our times. The recent election of a President with African ancestry was exciting but it would be a big mistake to interpret a “major step in the right direction” as the onset of a post racial era. But if that was the situation, there is no logical reason to imagine why a culture long under assault and yet vibrant in its own right should willingly yield its jubilant groove, to explain itself and become more widely accessible. And, if Americans do ever achieve that ‘Promised Land’, it will feature a reconfigured multi-cultural landscape in which African-American culture is accorded its rightful prominent place.

Now in his early fifties, LaVon Van Williams is at the top of his creative game. There is greater fluency in how he presents his subject, more economy in his physical touch. As matters of identity come more crisply into focus, his work speaks out more eloquently and with more targeted subtlety. We are led to wonder whether certain people were not in fact put on this earth to bear witness through art. Be that as it may, a blank wooden panel is still a blank wooden panel, a blessing and a curse. LaVon understands this burden of responsibility. To steal from the words attributed to legendary drummer Ed Thigpen about the role of the musician, LaVon would tell you:

Artists “…should never forget that we’re blessed.
We have a special gift that people can enjoy through us.
We’ve had the good fortune to receive this and pass it along to others.”
ENDNOTES

2Phone conversation with the artist’s mother, Mrs. Edna Williams, April 23, 2009
3Gallery talk by the artist at Kentucky Folk Art Center, February 9th, 2009
4Phone conversation with the artist’s mother, Mrs. Edna Williams, January 22, 2009
5Email from Dr. Stephen Wright, the artist’s cousin, November 12, 2008

“Dundes, Alan. “Jumping the Broom’: On the Origin and Meaning of an African American Wedding Custom”, The Journal of American Folklore, 1996.” The broom was endowed with spiritual significance among certain African peoples. The practice of jumping the broom is also a well documented wedding tradition among Romany people, more often referred to as “Gypsies.”

6Brown, Jerold E., Historical Dictionary of the U.S. Army, (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press) 2000. The Reorganization Act of 1866 directed that four of 45 planned infantry regiments and two of ten planned twelve-company cavalry regiments were to be composed:

24th and 25th Infantry Regiments. All-black regiments remained active until the United States Army was formally desegregated during the Korean War, in 1951.

8

9Conversation with the author, February 9th, 2009. When asked whether unsupervised, young teenage kids could have been a prescription for trouble in the early 1970s, LaVon remarked that most mothers were strict parents, who ruled with a very firm hand. If they got themselves into trouble, they could expect to face the consequences.

10Gallery talk by the artist at Kentucky Folk Art Center, February 9th, 2009
11Conversation with the artist at his home, April 21, 2009.
12Ibid

Robert Johnson, BBQ & Women, 1995, painted wood, 23 x 19 x 1¼, private collection

Girl Jumping Rope, 1989, painted wood and metal, 38 x 26 x 8, collection of Mary Lu & Dick Aft