

Order the current issue, back issues, and subscriptions at the IRAAA online store.
<http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu/store>



THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART PLUS
 EXTENDING THE COVERAGE OF THE PRINT JOURNAL

FEATURES ▾ HIGHLIGHT ▾ NEWS ▾ STEM/ART ▾ MORE

Feel The Paint And The Emotion

Cliff Hocker

New York City's [Betty Cunningham Gallery](#) will open the first show of its 2016 fall season right after Labor Day. The artist: Beverly Mclver.



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

Beverly Mclver self-portrait, Dorothy P's Sunglasses, 2013, oil on canvas, 36 x 36"

Beverly Mclver is a powerful force in contemporary American art. She applies an impasto of primary oil colors onto canvas to vividly express the emotions of her portrait subjects. Often it is the face of a family member, friend or herself that Mclver paints to explore the human psychological struggle for racial and gender identity. Her work has been reviewed by the *New York Times*, and in 2011, *Art in America* magazine recognized her as one of the "Top Ten in Painting".

New Work, Enduring Themes

In addition to being a successful painter, Mclver is Esbenschade Professor of the Practice of Art, Art History and Visual Studies at Duke University. Summer will bring the artist more time to work on two new series of paintings for her upcoming September show.

In a current series Mclver is painting her 90-year-old father, Cardrew Davis, who lives in Greensboro, N.C., her home town. She didn't know him as a child growing up and only found out about him at age 17. Out of loyalty to her mother — who was angry at Davis for not marrying her and for having to singlehandedly raise three daughters — Mclver didn't cultivate a relationship with her father until after her mother's death. "This is a new relationship in the last five years," Mclver says. "I'm painting about that relationship, and getting to

know him as a man and what he was like as a kid and things like that."



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

Beverly Mclver, Daddy series portrait, 2016, oil on canvas, collage, 48 x 36

Another Mclver series is inspired by a 1950s vintage black doll. A friend had given her a little old-fashioned cloth doll made of dark brown linen fabric, with embroidered eyes and mouth, dressed in old clothing. Over the years, Mclver has received several black dolls as gifts, "But this is the first black doll that I have seen that I didn't think was ugly or scary," says Mclver. "As soon as I saw it, it was like, 'Oh, my God, I love her!' She is like this little black girl that grew up in the projects that I feel I have to protect and take care of. So, I'm painting about the relationship of being a little black child that grew up in the projects in Greensboro and negotiating my life now as a middle-class professor at Duke University."



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

Beverly Mclver, Celebration (Daddy series), 2015, oil on canvas, 60 x 60

The first iterations of these new series of paintings were featured in a show at [Craven Allen Gallery](#) in Durham, N.C., Feb. 20 - April 9, 2016. Mclver says they are not a departure from the themes of her earlier work. "It's a continuation and development, in that I always paint about family," she says. "I painted my sister, Renee, for many years. What it's like to grow up with someone with special needs and epilepsy. So, it's still

about family, but it's now more about my dad and my relationship to him and my relationship to myself."



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

Beverly Mclver, Daddy Sleeping, 2016, collage, oil on canvas, 30 x 40



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

Beverly Mclver, For Little

Mclver's mentally disabled older sister, Renee, is the subject of many of her earlier paintings. In 2004, at a time Mclver's art career was booming, her mother died, prompting her to take on caregiver responsibilities for her sibling. This period of the artist's life is detailed in the Emmy-nominated 2011 HBO documentary film, "[Raising Renee](#)." Mclver is legal guardian of Renee who, developmentally, is at about the second grade level.

Mclver's visual explorations into the inner life of the people she paints might remind some observers of the blues, that powerful musical expression of the emotional experiences of African Americans. In some respects, she says, her work covers similar territory. "I think some of my paintings are really sad, I think some of them are redemptive. I think they are hopeful, never a lost cause, but recognize that being a human being

Girls, 2015, collage, oil on canvas, 36 x 36

is complex and full of this whole gamut of expression from sadness to joy. So, in that regard, they do relate to the blues or what people sang about." When blues guitarist B.B. King was touring, Mclver would go see

him. Soul singer Otis Redding is in her music play list.



(Enlarge Image)

Beverly Mclver, Mom Holding Renee, oil on canvas



(Enlarge Image)

Beverly Mclver, Happy Renee, oil on canvas, 48 x 36"

In 2015, Mclver traveled to Cuba among a group of 18 artists and curators. Their tour bus took them visiting Cuban artists in their studios. The trip made a deep impression on Mclver, and ideas from that experience are still percolating.

"I'm going to try to return to Cuba in November and spend some time down there. For some reason, just being there felt really authentic to me. It felt like it was very familiar, I don't know, like home," Mclver says. Her reaction was not simply a flashback of seeing decades-old cars. "We never even had those kind of cars, because we were so poor. It was a combination of the people and the landscape, the buildings, the food -- everything felt very, very familiar. So I have no idea what that's about, but I want to go and investigate it."

The vibe Mclver sensed in Cuba was not the same as the one she'd gotten on her journeys to Europe. "Cuba was very different," she says. "You know, I didn't feel like I was representing black people. I didn't feel like I was discriminated against. I didn't feel any of the things I felt when I went to France, to Paris, last summer and ran into some discrimination. I've been to Germany and other places, but Cuba was very different. It felt right. If I could live there, I would."



(Enlarge Image)

Beverly Mclver, Renee Asleep at Macys



(Enlarge Image)

Beverly Mclver, Diptych 1 (Renee series), oil on canvas

So far, Mclver has had time to create only one Cuba-inspired painting. "It's a simple painting of a light switch that I saw in an artist's home when we were there. But there is something very, very beautiful about it because it was just a light fixture on the wall," says Mclver. "Basically, it reminded me of a Franz Kline painting. It was black and white and fairly abstract. I took a picture of it, and I made a painting of it. But nobody knows it is a light switch. Everybody said, 'Oh, that's an abstract painting.' So I hope to do more of that with the landscape that I saw. You know, just the abstraction that I saw in simple everyday objects."

At a time when many artists do all sorts of mixed media, found-object, multimedia and three-dimensional installations, Mclver continues to successfully paint on canvas. "I really like the purity of just painting and working from basically a primary palette and creating work that has a long tradition, a European tradition," says Mclver. "I've always prided myself on mastering those skills. I mean, painting, just pure painting, is really hard — which might be why a lot of people don't do it. Everybody has access to taking photographs. If you have a camera, a phone, you have access to taking photographs. It's quick and instant and a sort of quick gratification. Painting it takes a little bit longer to achieve completion."

Mclver does, however, employ the camera as part of her longer creative process. Whereas the old masters made sketches and preparatory studies before committing oil to canvas, she snaps photographs. "What I do is I take pictures, and then I sort of collage them or set them out and then I start working on the canvas. But with

the idea that they can change or mend and grow and be whatever they need to be."

For Mclver, painting is not a static process of executing a design that is already worked out in detail. It's dynamic. "It's more of a discovery while I'm doing it. I have some general ideas. I want to paint a doll. But then the doll dictates, or my inner voice dictates, what those positions will be and how it will appear. All that stuff is open for inner discussion," says Mclver.

Beverly Mclver's advanced painting students were exhibited in a companion show to her recent exhibit at Craven Alley Gallery. She believes art students should become entrepreneurial in their approach to their work and not be afraid to pursue art as a career. "It's about thinking about your art as a small business. They should write a business plan, think about being in shows and networking and think about all the things that people who own a small business do. It's important for them to

understand the market and put themselves in positions where that can make money on their art," she says. Entrepreneurial actions include developing a relationship with a gallery, having an online presence, hosting workshops, giving a lecture or doing anything related to their art that they can make money from. "I think that is real important."

Cliff Hocker is an independent writer who lives in Richmond VA.



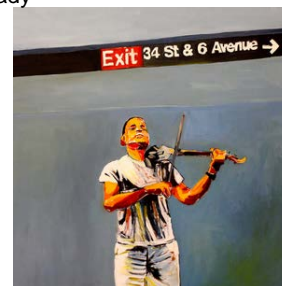
(Enlarge Image)

Beverly Mclver, Kim's Recovery, 2014, 40 x 30



(Enlarge Image)

Beverly Mclver, Bill T. Jones, oil on canvas



(Enlarge Image)

Beverly Mclver, Street Sounds, oil on canvas

