

Orangeburg County Fine Arts Center in Orangeburg, SC, Features Works by Floyd Gordon

Orangeburg County Fine Arts Center in Orangeburg, SC, will present *Floyd Gordon: Sixty Years of Retrospection*, on view in the Lusty Gallery, from Nov. 2 through Dec. 23, 2022. A reception will be held on Nov. 9, from 6-8pm.

Beginning with his childhood crayons and coloring book, to creating posters for his school's teachers, to experiencing a spiritual awakening after landing in the night at Nuremberg, Germany, awed by this city a blazed with bright lights, Gordon understood he had always nurtured a unique relationship with color. From his earliest memories colors were vivid and alive. He observed them interacting with one another, absorbed their sensory beauty, their celebration of the natural world, and was stirred into expression by apparitional prisms.

"My first-grade teacher gave me a coloring book and crayons and when the coloring book was finished, I had to start drawing things because color was my focus. I loved colors and colors are still my focus and that's what excites me to paint. Bright colors I use to paint with. And when I started drawing things to make sure I could use that paint, that's when I realize this is something I want to do for the rest of my life," says Gordon. If he needed affirmation of his affinity with colors, he found it after a military flight to Germany. "And I saw all those beautiful colors of Nuremberg city lights. That's when I knew those would be the colors. Red, blues, greens, I would be using the rest of my life."

The multi-colored lights dominating the skyline of a German city was not the only experience Gordon would have to help him keep the faith in himself as he set out to become an artist. He recounted another encounter even more deeply personal. "While I was on the border (on guard duty) in Germany, God spoke to me. Just like we're talking right now. And he told me, I want you to paint the rest of your life. And I heard the voice. It was like an epiphany. And wow! I got so animated. I was walking in three or four feet of snow, and it seemed like it was hot to me."

Putting his dreams on hold, Gordon would find work in an Orangeburg County fabric mill until he took off for New York. Ambitious and confident once he settled, he opened a gallery in Hollis, New York. It stayed open for about three years not making much of a profit, but he gained valuable experience. "It made me realize it was possible to have a gallery." So, he came back to Orangeburg and not long afterwards re-enrolled at Claflin University and earned his degree, and where he revealed he intended to open an art gallery. His dream was met with derision. "He doesn't know what he's talking about," was the general consensus. His response, "I don't know what I'm talking about either but I'm going to open me an art gallery in Orangeburg."

Gordon continued to paint and then in 1980, came his first show and his first big break. "I entered a festival in Walterboro, SC, called the Rice Festival." He won second place with a painting titled, *The Power of a Teardrop*. This was the opening for the much bigger show at the Piccolo Spoleto Festival in Charleston, SC, where he continues to exhibit each year. This annual return may never have happened if Gordon, with nearly two weeks without a sale, had packed up and returned to Orangeburg.

"The first thirteen days...the show only last seventeen days. I stayed for thirteen days without making a dime. The other artists said, 'Floyd if I was you, I wouldn't come back to this show anymore. I would just find something else to do. I said, oh no, I'm coming back.' On the thirteenth day, I made thirteen hundred dollars. On the thirteenth day." That was all the encouragement Gordon needed to take his paintings on the road. Their sales and his reputation would grow over the years, establishing him as one of South Carolina's most successful and well-known artists. His techniques would establish his unique style and his subjects, narratives and vivid themes would make his work instantly recognizable.



Work by Floyd Gordon

What does he think he offers in his paintings? "Everybody who buys my work says they feel my presence. That's why they buy it. Because they feel a part of me in the painting. I've had people stand up in front of my paintings and start crying. All my work people seem to gravitate towards it because of the colors and the feelings that they give off," says Gordon.

Events, people, places inspired Gordon's imagination as is illustrated in the 364-page volume of his work spanning a sixty-year period. However, his use of vibrant colors, set off by euphoric hues juxtaposed in landscapes and landscapes with figures, bring to life the many narratives that are impressions and memories of his years, and the seasons, living on and off the land. Gordon is deeply influenced by this time and his works present these scenes with a reverence that makes even the long, hard rows of work and relentless manual labor as an Eden-like existence removed from the harsh economic realities and inhumane restrictions of the Jim Crow South soundlessly ominous beyond these horizons.

Gordon acknowledges it all. "My paintings represent a remarkable journey from the cotton fields and years of Jim Crow to the contemporary middle-class scenes of my native South Carolina. In many ways my art reveals the conflicted, complicated reality of the change in the Deep South...a glimpse into the often-hidden world of ordinary people."

His series *The Son of a Sharecropper*, is more than a glimpse when these works are studied in detail. He is "sharing" his life as he grew up on a farm in the rural south. "As a young boy plowing fields, I wondered if this laborious task was all I had to look forward to." There was the sugar cane to be cut, cotton to be weeded and picked, peanuts to be pulled up, butchering, and harvesting when at the end of the season debts had to be paid and any profits left at the mercy of the landowner. Gordon's vivid abstracts and distinct and blurred red, greens and blues figurative paintings tell the days and the seasons. *Kelly's Truck* driven and paused in a field, its penetrating colors, and accessories, are surrounded by the bright, effusive, and celebratory colors of autumn.

The richness of his paintings is enhanced, according to the artist, by his use of both black and white paint. "My thing with light is the contrast between bright and dark." He references a painting, one of many painted of Edisto Memorial Gardens in Orangeburg. "The only way I could make that painting do what I want it to do is use a lot of black. There's more black in that painting that people realize. Black against white. I use five times as much white in a painting than most people use. My primary colors in a painting are red and white. I use more white than red in any painting that I do. All my colors are based on white. If I don't have white paint, I can't paint. I've got to have white. White and red. If I run out of white and red, I can't paint." *Glorious Fields of Cotton* demonstrates how Gordon uses black and white in his paintings. And, in this work, the red is the significant figure in the foreground, uniting the red, accenting places on the ground, with the red streaks in the sky.

In demand and traveling from show to show over the years, meant long spells of a solitary existence. That in addition to the solo hours painting. Gordon admits it can be a lonely combination. "It's a very lonely profession because this is something you've got to spend a lot of time alone. Of course, I don't mind because I like listening to music.

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Art to me, to be able to paint, I have to have a distraction. I can't sit in a room all alone and quiet and paint. I play music twenty-four hours a day if I have to paint. And that way I can concentrate even better when I paint."

However, music is much more than a distraction to ward off silence and loneliness as Gordon pauses and reflects further. "Music and colors go together because when I hear music, I can see colors. I like listening to music and I start seeing the colors." And what music brings the colors that are picked up by his brushes and end up on his canvases? "I like R&B. Fast upbeat music when I paint. That helps me to paint the way I paint. I love jazz. I love all genres of music. I listen to rap."

Music greets visitors to Gordon's gallery, a dream realized years ago. He is reflected in the paintings that surround him. Presenting himself in a still-life setting as he considers his life's work. His artist hands shape into a steeple at times, emphasizing the quietness of his thoughts. Then, deep into



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describing his relationship with colors, Gordon's fingers, hands are leading syncopated movements and bold expressions that find their way into those blast-of-colored shapes, lines and curves that define his abstracts, and abstracts with dominant figures that give us works like *The Band Leader*.

In summary? "It's been a wonderful journey. It's been quite a journey," says Gordon.

For further information check our SC Institutional Gallery listings, call the Center at 803/536-4074, or e-mail to (vglover@orangeburgarts.org).

Columbia Museum of Art in Columbia, SC, Features Works by Elizabeth Catlett

The Columbia Museum of Art in Columbia, SC, is presenting *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett: From the Collection of Samella Lewis*, on view through Jan. 22, 2023.

Organized by Landau Traveling Exhibitions, Los Angeles, CA, and the August Wilson Center for African American Culture, Pittsburgh, PA, the exhibition celebrates Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012), a sculptor and printmaker widely considered to be one of the most important African American artists of the last century.

"Catlett was an exceptional artist, equally attentive to both form and content," says CMA Curator Michael Neumeister. "You could track many of the major social shifts of the 20th century through the lens of her work. It is energizing to bring that to Columbia."

Drawn from the personal collection of

artist and art historian Dr. Samella Lewis (1923-2022), the exhibition features more than 30 prints and sculptures and honors a half-century of Catlett's artistic activism in support of women, African Americans, and Mexican laborers. Using a stylized Modernist approach to figurative works, Catlett addresses themes including Black identity, motherhood, civil rights, and labor - issues she tackled with more freedom by emigrating permanently to Mexico.

The granddaughter of enslaved people, Catlett was born amidst segregation in Washington, DC. Her father died prior to her birth, and she was raised in the orbit of supportive and nurturing women: her mother, a trained educator who worked as a truant officer to provide for her children, and her maternal grandmother, who com-

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