

ART BEAT

Portraying 'saints' of Civil Rights Movement

The United States, for all its glory, is a nation that was built upon genocide, slavery and segregation. The glacially slow-moving response to those atrocities, started centuries ago by good-hearted and right-minded folk, sputtered along and occasionally picked up speed, growing with a beautiful and tender ferocity in what would come to be known as the Civil Rights Movement.

Artist Pamela Chatterton-Purdy has created a series of sometimes haunting mixed media works that both mourn and celebrate the men, women and events of the Movement. Skillfully appropriating the look and deeply layered approach of traditional Catholic icon paintings, she has developed a powerful visual hagiography, embracing the leaders and martyrs of the fight for equality with a devotion usually reserved for the beatified.

Chatterton-Purdy, a Cape Cod resident and former art editor at Ebony magazine, utilizes gold leaf, paint, wooden architectural elements and found objects, along with an articulate style of portraiture and snippets of heartrending text, to represent the dead and the living, including the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.; his widow, Coretta Scott King; former NAACP leader Julian Bond; defiant bus rider Rosa Parks; entertainer and activist Harry Belafonte; and President Barack Obama.

One particularly striking work is a vivid gold triptych

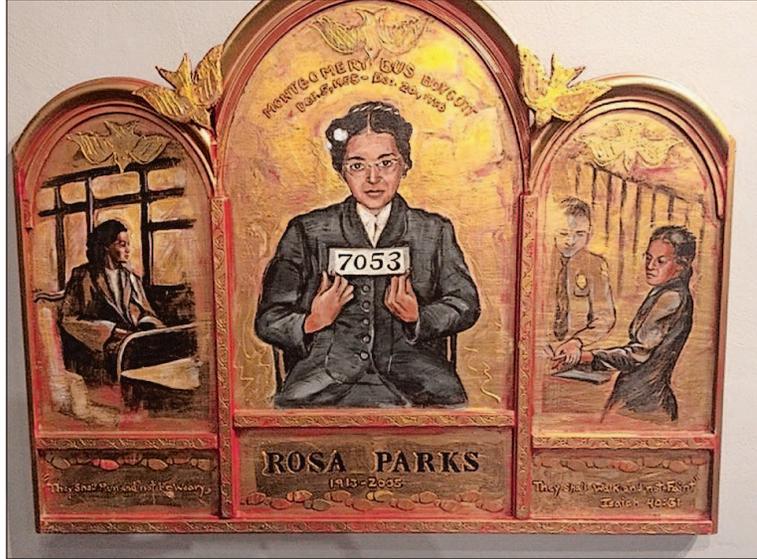


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featuring Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln and William Lloyd Garrison. Above the 16th president's head the words "Emancipation Proclamation" is emblazoned. Over Douglass' head it says "The North Star" and over Garrison's, it reads "The Liberator," respectively the abolitionist newspapers they published. The painting itself comes across a secular version of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, and it resonates with something akin to saintliness.

As in any pantheon, there are the sky fathers, the earth mothers, and the lesser-known deities that Chatterton-Purdy also gives their due. Many will not know Fannie Lou Hamer, a one-time sharecropper who eventually became a delegate from Mississippi at the 1972 Democratic Convention and famously said "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired," which became a mantra of the Movement.

Represented is Viola Gregg Liuzzo, who, in the early '60s, became one of the few white members of the Detroit chapter of the NAACP. She eventually moved to Selma, Alabama, and drove black marchers. For her efforts, she



Pamela Chatterton-Purdy, a Cape Cod resident and former art editor at Ebony magazine, has created icons depicting important figures in the Civil Rights Movement, including Rosa Parks. COURTESY PHOTO

was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. "Goodman, Chaney, Schwerner" is another triptych-style painting that depicts three civil rights workers (Chaney was black, Goodman and Schwerner were Jewish) who were also killed by the Klan. There also is a tribute to Emmett Louis Till, slaughtered at 14 for having the audacity to whistle at a white woman. His killers put a bullet in head, gouged out an eye, and a 75-pound cotton gin tied to his neck with barbed wire.

Events are captured by Chatterton-Purdy as well. They include the infamous bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on Sept. 15, 1963. Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley and Carole

Robertson (all 14) and Denise McNair (age 12) were killed while wearing their Sunday best and preparing to attend a Youth Worship group. If there is any thought that "things are different now," let me remind you that Dylann Roof shot African-American worshippers at an A.M.E. church in Charleston, South Carolina ... 52 years later.

Chatterton-Purdy's work is exceptional and important. AND relevant. This is not just "history" ... it is a condition of our present state. In an era when we need to be reminded that black lives matter, in which the pundits on Fox News are shocked by a Super Bowl performance by Beyonce, in which a town clerk refuses to grant marriage licenses to

gay couples (despite a Supreme Court ruling), in which a candidate for the highest office suggests building a wall to keep out Mexican refugees, and in which the very legitimacy of the current presidency is questioned ... the battle for Civil Rights is far from over.

"Icons of the Civil Rights Movement", co-sponsored by the New Bedford Historical Society, is on display at the New Bedford Art Museum/Artworks! (608 Pleasant St.) until March 2, and at the Alison Wells Gallery (108 William St.) until March 27.

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