

Signs

OF INSPIRATION



**Prophet
William J. Blackmon**

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Signs
OF INSPIRATION

the art of
Prophet
William J. Blackmon

Jeffrey R. Hayes

assisted by

David K. Smith

essays by

Jeffrey R. Hayes
M. Shawn Copeland
David K. Smith
Chester J. Fontenot, Jr.

Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art
Marquette University
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Signs of Inspiration: The Art of Prophet William J. Blackmon

September 10-October 24, 1999

Organized by the Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University

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Exhibition Venues

Diggs Gallery, Winston-Salem State University, North Carolina
February 4-April 8, 2000

City Museum, Saint Louis
In cooperation with ENVISION Folk Art
May 21-August 14, 2000

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Foreword

Within the movement of contemporary self-taught folk artists, there are some extraordinary persons whose artistic gifts are wedded to their vision of life. Prophet William J. Blackmon is Milwaukee's contribution to this lively art movement. His vision emerges directly from his religious beliefs, and these beliefs are unwaveringly joined with his urban-based social concerns. His art is aimed at action rather than reflection. The message embedded in the visual and verbal forms of the paintings is intended to save lives rather than to merely entertain or to elicit contemplation. At their best, Blackmon's images are compelling in their freshness and simplicity. Their most attractive quality is their ability to communicate directly to viewers. In this sense, they perfectly fit the aesthetic of Leo Tolstoy, who believed that the direct and immediate communication of feeling was the measure of successful art.

This maverick art movement called contemporary folk or outsider art is eminently popular with the public and is increasingly the focus of serious study in the art world. The Haggerty Museum first presented contemporary folk art in an exhibition of the collection of John and Diane Balsley in 1992. In the Balsley exhibition, two of Blackmon's paintings, *God Can Take You Through The Radiation Belt Of Life* and *Stop Feeding The Snakes And Feed The Childrens*, appeared with the work of sixty artists including David Butler, Howard Finster, Bessie Harvey, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, James "Son Ford" Thomas, and Joseph Yoakum. The Balsley exhibition provides a context for the current solo exhibition, which the Haggerty has organized in collaboration with Jeffrey R. Hayes, Professor of Art History at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The exhibition will travel to three additional venues: Diggs Gallery, Winston-Salem State University; City Museum, St. Louis; and the Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso University. We thank the borrowing institutions for their support and interest in this exhibition.

Paul and Jeanne Phelps laid the foundation for this exhibition. They have lent much of their collection of Blackmon's paintings, which includes representative works from all periods of his career. They have also been enthusiastic supporters of the artist and contributed to virtually every phase of the project.

Prophet Blackmon has graciously cooperated with the organizers and catalogue authors. Jeffrey R. Hayes curated the exhibition and wrote an essay for the catalogue. M. Shawn Copeland, Chester J. Fontenot, Jr., and David K. Smith (assistant curator of the exhibition) also contributed essays. John Foster designed the catalogue and photographs were supplied by Francis Ford and Bill Tennessen, assisted by Lewis Schultz. Research information for the catalogue was provided by Lyla M. Washington (the artist's sister), John and Diane Balsley, Todd Bockley, Russell and Barbara Bowman, E. Michael Flanagan, Paula Nordland Giannini, Dean and Rosemary Jensen, Kent Mueller, Dean Olson, Sister Betty Sherrod, and John and Colette Tyson.

Members of the Haggerty Museum staff provided assistance with all aspects of the exhibition. Paula Schulze coordinated catalogue production; James Kieselburg handled tour arrangements and shipping; Steven Anderson, assisted by Tim Dykes, designed and installed the exhibition; Lee Coppernoll organized educational programming; Annemarie Sawkins assisted with the installation and didactic materials; Stephanie Bjork coordinated promotion; and Joyce Ashley and Nicole Hauser provided administrative assistance. Jocelyn Moralde of UWM served as curatorial intern.

Funding for the exhibition, catalogue, and related programming was provided in part by Paul and Jeanne Phelps; the Wisconsin Arts Board; the Marquette University College of Arts and Sciences, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fund; University Ministry; the Institute for Urban Life; and the Educational Opportunity Program, Marquette University.

For all of the many cooperative efforts necessary to produce the exhibition, thanks is due.

Curtis L. Carter
Director

Man—God’s Masterpiece



*Into this old world of dark
And mysteries of sin I came,
A misfit in its program
Yet not anyone to blame.*

*An outcast from the start
Even as an infant I was set apart,
Planted as if a tree
Drenched to the core by a misunderstanding sea.*

*Washed up on the shore
Of an unpenetrating sand,
No hole in which to hide
From the scorn and deceitful torture of man.*

*Lost in the sentimentality
Of a long forgotten dream,
As I lie helpless beneath
The sun’s burning blasting stream.*

*As if eternity had cried at last
You lost soul of the world of mine,
Yet the uncontrollable urge to live
Through my body surge and time.*

*To save my soul from dying
With the help of inhuman,
And supernatural power
I am drawn from the depth of the hour.*

*Now I heard a voice saying
Thou art,
Sing it to me
Man—God’s masterpiece.*



Prophet William J. Blackmon



Dan and Gussie Blackmon, 1940s. *Courtesy of Lyla M. Washington.*

Prophet William J. Blackmon: God's Modern-Day (Artist) Apostle

Jeffrey R. Hayes

It is a wicked and faithless age that insists on a sign . . . —Matthew 16:4

You must learn to read the signs of God . . . —Prophet W. J. Blackmon, Testimonies

I have lived with one of Prophet Blackmon's paintings for almost fifteen years now. Even after all this time, it has refused to fade into the room décor like so much academically smart or market-driven late modern art. Rather, it continues to command my complete attention and stir my deepest feelings whenever I am in its presence.

The painting and the painter are very much alike. Neither is large but both make a powerful, immediate impression. The painting was made on a 3/4 inch thick wooden board—solid, durable, a few rough edges, yet unpretentious and inviting. My painting typically bears its own frame, a wide band of glossy black enamel that clearly defines the work's outer dimensions. This frame, like the bodily presence of Prophet himself, imparts a strong sense of wholeness, privacy, and independence. Within the frame, a few words are inscribed flatly in white—along the top: "Gods Mountain of Peace"; along the bottom: "Prophet W J Blackmon"—a textual hierarchy that presents its maker as a preacher whose art serves a homiletic, visionary function.

Within these distinct but relatively plain boundaries, a complex inner design appears, one



that reflects Prophet's passionate engagement with this world upon a ground marked by a more deeply embedded divine order. At first glance, one is struck by the intense "straight from the can" colors, bold juxtaposition of black lines and white shapes, ecstatic weave of long snake-like forms, and startling combination of interior and exterior spaces. Eventually, however, more subtle and harmonious relationships begin to emerge. The dominant red and blue primary colors form a central, unifying chord that remains dynamic due to Prophet's varied brushwork, vestigial underpainting, and secondary green, yellow, or pink accents. The manifold lines, shapes, and forms disclose an underlying kinship that stems from

an intuitive geometry, or perhaps just a keen sensitivity to the aesthetic properties of angle and interval. The stereoscopic space, a hallmark of Prophet's painting, ultimately coheres (like its Cubist antecedent) through an enlightened recognition of multiple perspectives and realities. What began as random visual allure finds completeness in the mind of a patient beholder.

Prophet Blackmon's painting affects me deeply because it is honest, inspired, and *elemental*.

It reduces painting to its basic components: line, color, plane. It reduces the world to its basic features: sky, land, sea. And, like the small, stylized figures who “stoke the furnace” and “tend the light” in a painting that I have never tired of viewing, it reduces our humanity to a basic choice: doing good or doing evil.

Gods Blessed Time Cycle

Prophet Blackmon believes that every life is a precious gift from God. In his early, largely abstract *Gods Blessed Time Cycle* (cat. 6), he charts the “cornerstones” of an ideal life: birth, education, marriage, and salvation. While he has always tried to honor this model, his own path through life has proven to be rather more complicated.¹

William Joshua Blackmon was born on April 20, 1921. His father, originally from Selma, Alabama, and mother, a native of Macon, Georgia, had moved north a few years earlier as part of the Great Migration of African Americans seeking better jobs and less Tom Crow. According to a brief “Blackmon Family History” written by Prophet’s sister Lyla M. Washington, “On October 13, 1912, Dan and Gussie Blackmon planted a family tree in Albion, Michigan... They were a young teen-age husband and wife braving the unknown to start a new life. The family tree began to grow and to grow with twelve new branches, seven girls and five sons... my what a tree!”² Interestingly, Mrs. Washington’s particular choice of words to give a rare account of the Blackmon family past echoes the very theme that dominates her brother’s earliest paintings (e.g., *Untitled [House*

and Tree], cat. 9; *Birth Tree House. Gods Earth*, cat. 13; *Gods Family Tree*, cat. 14).

While Dan Blackmon worked various jobs in Albion, his family lived on a small farm not far from town. Lyla, only two years older than her brother, remembers days devoted to routine chores—feeding chickens, slopping pigs, cleaning

the five-room house that Dan himself had built—because her mother was an “outside person... [whose] Indian blood gave her the skills and desire to hunt and fish”³ (*Who Is Right You Or The Indians*, cat. 20). Lyla also fondly recalls trips to the nearby Kalamazoo River where she and William would play and pick berries or gig frogs to sell to the local hotel for precious extra cash. For the most part, she regards their rural upbringing, despite

“On October 13, 1912, Dan and Gussie Blackmon planted a family tree in Albion, Michigan... They were a young teen-age husband and wife braving the unknown to start a new life. The family tree began to grow and to grow with twelve new branches, seven girls and five sons... my what a tree!”

“one heater, outside toilets and oil lamps... and no radio or newspapers... [as] busy and happy,” which may at least partly explain Prophet’s numerous later paintings in which the countryside is depicted as the earthly equivalent of heaven (e.g., *Escape From Hell To Heaven*, cat. 11; *Mountain Hotel*, cat. 17; *Gods Mountain Of Joy And Peace*, cat. 36). There were, however, difficult times, too, especially in grade school where the Blackmon children, who were the only African American students on their side of town, discovered that racism was not unique to the South. “It was very hard to go to that school,” Lyla recounts, “We had to listen to all of the little nigger stories read to the class. Like Little Black Sambo and many others. We were put in the back of the room, and all the kids would turn around and stare at us.” Perhaps Lyla’s most ardent memo-

ries are of her mother, Gussie, whom she describes as “a great woman, bright and beautiful... a church-goer who taught us to respect and love one another... [but] she loved William more than anyone, [because] she understood him, and he her.” Although she saw no flagrant signs of William’s later intense spirituality, she does have one especially vivid recollection of a ritual that her mother, a devout Baptist, shared regularly with her children: “Every New Year’s Eve we had very sore knees from kneeling on that hard wood floor for three hours while Mother prayed the old year out and the new year in... we always had to pray!”⁴

In 1937, William Blackmon left Washington Gardner High School midway through the tenth grade. Amid the Depression, he sought work alongside his father, first “tamping stone and laying track” with the New York Central Railroad and later at the Malleable Iron Works, Albion’s largest factory. The latter position was short lived, as Blackmon later likened the heroic workers’ tolerance of noxious gases, molten metal, intense heat, and eerie illumination to saints enduring an inferno (*God Feareing Foundry Workers*, cat. 16). Following the advent of World War II, Blackmon entered the Army and served with the 585th Engineers Company from 1943 to 1945. Most of this time was spent in the Pacific Theater (New Guinea, Southern Philippines, Luzon) where he received several campaign ribbons and six bronze battle stars.⁵ It was also during this period that his religious convictions first began to deepen: “I learned to pray during the Second World War. When the Japanese planes came over, I’d say: ‘Lord, if you get me over this hill, I’ll get over the next one myself.’”⁶

Following the war, Blackmon returned to Michigan where he quickly found work with the traveling Carnival of Amusements based in Kalamazoo. His sister Lyla viewed this as a natural outgrowth of his “latent creativity”—he was the family’s “very special seventh child” and a “dreamer” who had often written short plays for his friends and siblings to perform.⁷ During his time with the carnival, he was known as “Billy” Blackmon, master



Gods Family Tree, 1986 (cat. 14)

impressionist of movie stars, but this work ended abruptly as the troupe moved into the South where a black man imitating white celebrities was ill advised. Blackmon then moved to Chicago where he opened a shoeshine stand at 43rd and Prairie near the Christian Hope Missionary Baptist Church. It was there that he first “joined the sanctified church” after attending a service at which he was miraculously cured of chronic acute gastritis. “If anyone who is here tonight has any condition in your body,” he remembers the preacher exclaiming, “You do not have to take medicine because God himself will heal you if you believe He could”⁸ (*Gods Holy Gohst Church*, cat. 15).

During the 1950s, Blackmon married for the first time, and his religious commitments intensified. He was made a “junior deacon on trial,” began doing mission work throughout Chicago, and realized his own gifts for both healing (“I laid my hands on a person—there was so much fire coming through my body... she was healed”) and prophesy (“I said, ‘I believe there’s gonna be a storm in three days,’ [and] three days later I was caught in the storm... and the lightning came so close I could feel the heat”).⁹ Prophet believes that such evident displays of divine agency intimidated his pastor, who jealously refused to ordain him. Denied the opportunity to



Exterior, Sydney HiH building, Milwaukee, 1984. Bill Tennesen.

occupy the pulpit of his own church, he left Chicago around 1960 to become a “hitchhiking man of God.”¹⁰ Throughout the next decade and a half—a particularly turbulent interval that included the death of his first wife, separation from his second, and estrangement from his five children—Prophet crisscrossed the Upper Midwest preaching in exchange for meals and sometimes a place to sleep. This long period of itinerancy is echoed in the themes of spiritual flight, migration, and pilgrimage found in many of his paintings (e.g., *Escape From Moab*, cat. 24; *The Southeast Is The Border Of Ethiopia*, cat. 25; *30th Verse Of The 8 Chapter Of Acts*, cat. 29; *John The Baptist*, cat. 39; *Good Samaritan*, cat. 47). Around 1970, however, all of Prophet’s uncertainties and wandering was rewarded by one, extraordinary experience. While preaching door-to-door in Dowagiac, Michigan, he was arrested for disturbing the peace after arguing with a white woman about her own claim to being a preacher. Following several days in jail and dismissal of the charges, he experienced a “terrible

wind” as he walked to a friend’s house for dinner. Once there, he approached the table and “a bright light came down through the ceiling onto the plate . . . like lightning, but not . . . and a boy who had been staying upstairs came down shouting that a red flame had come through the ceiling, but as it passed through it turned white!” Prophet and his friend took this to mean that he had been made a modern Apostle in the church, and shortly thereafter his old pastor from Chicago knocked on the door with his “license to preach.”

In 1974 Prophet Blackmon moved to Milwaukee from Madison, Wisconsin, after splitting open a melon and discovering that the seeds formed the letters “M I.” Initially, Blackmon continued to preach on the streets, but he also soon established the first in a series of nondenominational storefront “revival & interprice” centers at various inner-city locations.¹¹ These centers, which rarely drew a congregation that exceeded a dozen members, offered religious services two to

three times a week as well as a site for recycling useful goods and learning basic job skills such as tailoring and shoe repair. To publicize these services, Prophet produced flyers, a magazine, and an assortment of hand-lettered signs for display inside and outside the centers (*Outdoor-Rummage*, cat. 1; *Order-Our-Own Magazine*, cat. 2; *Car Wash Shoe Repair*, cat. 3). In 1982, some of those signs caught the eye of Paula Giannini, public relations director for the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music and wife of Milwaukee Art Museum director Gerald Nordland. She promptly purchased two from their startled maker for one-hundred dollars each, and that sale led to another order a year later from Barbara Bowman, who was looking for a birthday gift for her husband, MAM chief curator Russell Bowman. For the latter, Prophet felt sufficiently emboldened to add a few simple figurative elements to a sign that read “God Bless Our Home,” thereby creating his first genuine painting. Since then, his paintings have evolved into ambitious multi-figural compositions that typically combine strong patterning, robust color play, and complex spatial organization. And yet, despite these advances (he no longer depends on “dumpster” lumber or remaindered paint from nearby National Hardware!), his pictorial language is so distinctly his own that the earliest and latest works maintain an obvious formal kinship.

When Prophet was suddenly evicted from the dilapidated Sydney HiH building in 1985, Milwaukee photographer Bill Tennessen arranged to have his small inventory of paintings stored at the Wright Street Gallery in Riverwest. Kent Mueller, cofounder of this eclectic new gallery, clearly recalls his immediate enthusiasm for the work: “What he left behind were twelve or so works, all wrapped in newspaper that was attached with Elmer’s Glue to the very front of the paintings... As I carefully unwrapped them, gently

pulling the newspaper away from the glue, I experienced my very first epiphany in the art world. Here was the real thing... the undiscovered genius. Here was what most true art dealers live for.”¹² Wright Street gave Prophet his first exhibition in summer 1986, a gamble that proved good when John and Diane Balsley, both artists and educators associated with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, bought a “large block” of paintings on the final day of the show. That success was followed by purchase awards from the Inner City Arts Council in 1986 and 1987. After Wright Street closed, Blackmon followed Mueller to the Metropolitan

Gallery where between 1988 and 1992 his artistic status grew from participation in several important local exhibitions (Milwaukee Art Museum; Milwaukee

Institute of Art & Design; UWM Art Museum, Haggerty Museum of Art) to receipt of his first national recognition (Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis; American Center for Design, Chicago; Artist’s Space, New York). While Prophet is quietly gratified by these and more recent achievements—in 1995 his work was seen at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, and in 2000-2002 it will be included in the traveling exhibition *Contemporary Folk Art: Master Works from the Smithsonian’s American Museum*—he still views painting as a heaven-sent instrument of his ministry, rather than as an end in itself. “I’m amazed! And I know it’s not me,” he admits, “I know it’s inspiration from God—so I end up giving God all the praise and all the glory.”¹³ As he nears his eightieth birthday and continues to preach and peddle his paintings several days a week, weather permitting, on the sidewalk in front of the east side public library, his fondest dream is to someday sell enough of his art to afford the

*“I know it’s inspiration from God—
so I end up giving God all the praise
and all the glory.”*

“real church” that he and his modest following have never had.¹⁴

Stop Feeding The Snakes And Feed The Childrens

Paula Giannini purchased that first sign from Prophet Blackmon because she found it “delightful.” Her choice of words refers primarily to the sheer visual appeal of the sign: “Like similar, non-imagistic folk art,” she explained, “the lettering [was] very carefully laid down, right up to every outer edge, with emphasis instinctively indicated by increased pressure and more paint on the artist’s brush.” She also appreciated the decorative play of white letters on colored ground (or vice versa in some cases), the rhythmic dispersion of letters and words, and above all the consistency of the “artist’s



Revival Center Shoe Repair Shop, Sydney HiH building, 1986. *Bill Tennesen.*

hand.”¹⁵ Indeed, the strong formal qualities of Prophet’s signs and paintings sometimes obscure their *raison d’etre*, their message or function-based content: “Revival-Center-Church-Inter-Price-Shoe-Repair-Shoeshine-Hand-Laundry-Tayloring” (cat. 4).

As this example indicates, Prophet’s signs were inspired—“I tell you... as I was making my signs, I felt God”¹⁶—by the need to promote his

missionary work. That work (Revival Center) calls for ministering to both the spiritual (Church) and socioeconomic (Interprice) needs of the poor, inner-city communities where he has lived. In one of many single-page Revival Center flyers from the early 1980s, which he and other members handed out on downtown streets, Prophet announced:

WE CREATE JOBS. WE ALL WORK TOGETHER AND SHARE ALL MONIES... WE FEED THE HUNGRY AND CLOTHE THE NAKED. WE BUILD NEIGHBORHOODS WORKING WITH FAMILIES WITH HUSBANDS AND WIFES. WE BELIEVE THAT THE WIDOWS AND ORPHANS SHOULD EAT BEFORE THE PREACHER EATS. WE BAPTIZE IN JESUS NAME... OUR DOCTRIN IS LOVE.¹⁷

Another later flyer added:

WE ARE A VOLUNTEER, NEIGHBORHOOD SHARE PROGRAM. EVERY SATURDAY IS SHARE DAY... WE SHARE OUR MEGAR FOOD AND MONEY WITH THE CHILDREN. (1) WE HAVE A SHOE REPAIR DEPARTMENT (2) WE NEED YOUR BUSINESS TO CLEAN UP THE AREA (3) WE HAVE A LARGE RUMMAGE (4) SHOESHINE STAND (5) SEWING DEPARTMENT (6) HAND LAUNDRY.”¹⁸

Moreover, Prophet’s mandate to “work together and make our [own] welfare” was reinforced in the Revival Center’s short lived magazine: “You see, at least half of our program is with the young people, the shop is part of our youth rehabilitation... street ministry [for creating] (1) personal fortitude, (2) initiative... By the time you read this magazine, we will have our mini-cleaning and laundry opened at the same address. We also have diners on weekends, and a continuous rummage. This is what we call survival revival.”¹⁹

Prophet Blackmon’s “survival revival” stems from a long tradition of African American self-help campaigns and programs, many with substantial religious moorings. In *Up From Slavery* (1901), Booker T. Washington identified adherence to mainstream Christian values as the primary strategy for black political and economic improvement, and prefigured Blackmon’s “church-interprice” correlation by specifically

arguing that “what the Negro church needs is a more definite connection with the moral and social life of the Negro people.”²⁰ Marcus Garvey, who was initially inspired by Washington and recognized the importance of Christianity to many black Americans, built the United Negro Improvement Association into a formidable mass movement on the fundamental belief, conspicuous in African American folk tradition, that “God helps those who help themselves.” More recently, self-determinist principles have heavily influenced the basic practices of various black religious leaders, separatist (Elijah Muhammad) as well as integrationist (Martin Luther King).²¹ On a purer political plane, Charles P. Henry theorizes: “The preservation of a distinct subculture with its own set of values represented a challenge to white cultural dominance. It provided the basis for both conservative black nationalism and radical black nationalism. Perhaps this is why black conservatives and nationalists often sound alike in their emphasis on self-esteem and achievement.”²²

Like his signs, many of Prophet Blackmon’s paintings serve to emphasize self-respect and individual responsibility as the only means of realizing healthy African American communities. In one of his larger paintings, *Stop Feeding The Snakes And Feed The Childrens* (cat. 22), Blackmon condemns what critic bell hooks has termed “outlaw culture”²³: a “house of evil” in which “Mama” is seduced by a slickly dressed male figure while her three babies plead for food. A long red snake, fangs exposed, wraps itself around her body. At the side of the house (here, Blackmon effectively employs his characteristic inside/outside dual perspective), “poor Uncle John” sits idly on the steps “eating up the food stamps,” and on the street two teenage daughters beg to “come back home” as they are propositioned by another man in fancy clothes. The painting amounts to a visual jeremiad against parental abuse, sloth, and self-indulgence. For Blackmon, the “house of evil” signifies hell on earth.

On the other hand, in *Spare The Rod And Spoil The Child* (cat. 21), parent and child walk hand-in-hand toward a household where rules are established and strictly enforced, and education is a

priority: “Mama gona get you for skipping school.” Ultimately, Blackmon sees social well-being as primarily contingent upon a strong sense of identity that can only come from conscientious parenting, stable marriages, and genuine respect for both children and elders. His position echoes that of other African American social conservatives who believe that “the black family is the most important institution in our community.... It is the primary source of personal development and character formation. Its foundation of nurturance, discipline, and promotion of learning strengthens a child’s future ability to contribute to the general welfare of the community.” Nevertheless, these critics argue that the black family is impaired by “external forces” such as racism and crime, but “most daunting [are] the threats from *within*” such as drug addiction, domestic violence, unwed mothers, and welfare dependency. They conclude that “only the members of our community can determine the fate of our culture, [and] this fate rests on the strength, solidity, and wealth of moral fiber within black families.”²⁴ In *Gods Holy Plan Of Marriage* (cat. 41), Prophet Blackmon reaffirms this view by using the familiar family tree motif to celebrate continuity among generations (“Vows... Lennage... Promise”), and in *The Phillps Family* (cat. 42), he applauds the family that “prays together,” and gently adds: “Family reunions are the best way to say I love you.”

Prophet’s social and moral conservatism, an outlook that he shares with a majority of African Americans, is reflected elsewhere in his paintings where specific issues such as school prayer, legalization of drugs, premarital sex, sex education, and abortion are addressed.²⁵ Several paintings, particularly from the mid-1990s, focus on sexual permissiveness and promiscuity as serious problems. In *The Best Teacher Is Jesus* (cat. 28), a male asks a female high school student, “Hey baby, what about going home with me,” to which she replies, “I don’t do that anymore.” On the frame of *You Foolish Teachers* (cat. 31), Prophet declares pointedly, “You Should Not Be Teaching Sex.” And in both of these paintings, the prospect of sex among youth is closely associated with drugs, while the

decisions the students make are determined by which “teacher” they obey. Prophet Blackmon’s opposition to abortion is also made clear in *A Broadcasting Studio* (cat. 27) and *What Abortion Dose To The Mother* (cat. 30). The latter establishes a basic connection between abortion and illicit sex (“No Sex No Abortion”), but takes the polemic a step further by portraying the clinic as a profit mill (“Have Your Visa Or Master Card Ready”) and the protesters as avenging angels (“God Will Get You For Killing Babys”). Opposition is based on the conviction that a fetus is a life, and as such, it is God-given and sacred (“Oh God I know you love the babies”). Some African Americans who oppose abortion have gone so far as to equate the fetus with the slave since both are denied the “inalienable right to life” because both are classified as not “fully human.” Although Prophet has never drawn this specific analogy, he would undoubtedly agree that “abortion on demand has brutalized our culture... and cheapened the value of human life.”²⁶

Despite its evident currency, Prophet Blackmon’s depiction of controversial social subjects is consistent, on the most basic level, with his *identity as a prophet*. As biblical scholars recognize, the Old Testament prophets—Blackmon’s fore-runners—were “not so much predictors as they were proclaimers.... When they spoke of the future, it was not so much in terms of general predictions as in terms of what must happen if their people did not turn [back] to God... The prophets were not philosophers.... When they were activists, concerned with life as it is, with people as they are.”²⁷ Thus, the prophet is an agent, a judge, and frequently a martyr who appears during times of upheaval to restore the covenant between God and humanity. In Blackmon’s case, the time of upheaval is “post-modernity,” a period that has been widely characterized as morally relativistic and dismissive of universal truths.²⁸ Such conditions are abominable to Blackmon, who senses a widespread desire for *revival* of more traditional values. His agenda finds support in the recent research of James Darsey: “The impulses that give rise to prophecy, the need

for authority, judgement, and meaning, are tenacious. The appetites of the *ersatz polis* do not disappear in a postmodern, postreligious world.... Even more important than the persistence of political necessities, the desire for cohesion, for unity, for community does not die.”²⁹

In his art and ministry, Prophet Blackmon’s paramount concern is for “social justice” which virtually all of the Old Testament prophets took to mean the protection of society’s weakest and most underprivileged members—the sick and the poor—who are sympathetically portrayed in *This Is Sopose To Be A Hospital* (cat. 34) and *Yes The Restcue Mission* (cat. 33). This central priority forms a bridge between Prophet’s social and scriptural subjects. Justice, modeled on God’s release of the Israelites from bondage and defined as devotion to the wretched of the earth, is also featured in *Good Samariton* (cat. 47), a parable which displaces habitual hostility with radical compassion, and *Do Y Love Neighbon* (“Only The Rightous Shall See God,” cat. 23), which couples two prominent passages from Matthew’s Gospel: The Second Commandment/ “Love thy neighbor as thyself” (22:39), and The Sermon on the Mount/ “Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake” (5:10). Prophet Blackmon’s emphasis on *righteousness*, as the complement of love and companion to justice, further allies him with earlier prophets such as Jeremiah who decreed before the corrupt King of Judah: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Do justice and righteousness; deliver the despoiled from the oppressor; commit no wrong or violence against the resident alien, the orphan, the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place’” (Jeremiah 22:3-4).³⁰

The 53 Chapter Of Isaih

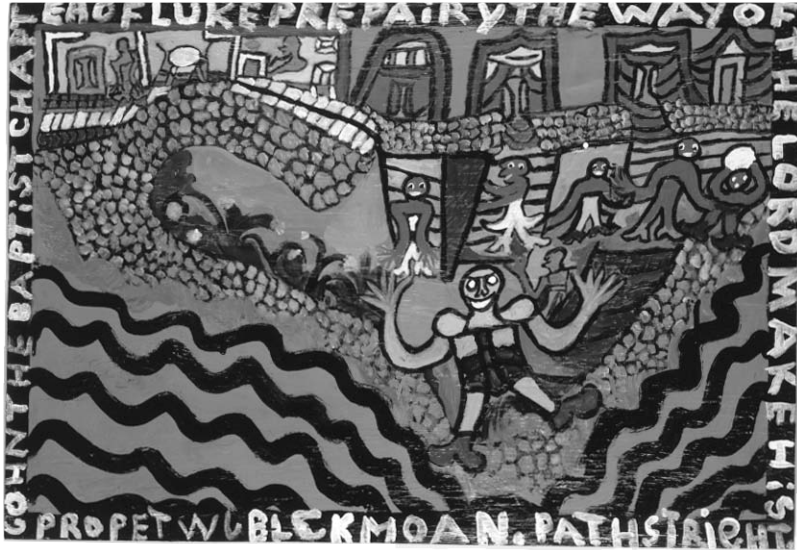
Although many of Prophet Blackmon’s paintings address contemporary social issues, *all of his art* springs from his deep-seated religious convictions, and most of his subjects since the mid-1990s are inscribed with a specific biblical verse or scriptural citation that effectively serves as the title of the work. From the tentative beginnings of *Gods Light House* (cat. 8) to the abundant text and narrative

complexity of *Good Samaritan* (cat. 47), each of Prophet's panels is a personal offering, a visual testament to the eternal love and absolute power of God.

Prophet Blackmon has been a preacher for half a century, and the primacy of his preaching informs his painting. Alain Locke, founder of the historic "New Negro" movement in the 1920s, once suggested that whatever was left of a "black aesthetic"

after the dehumanizing ordeal of the middle passage and slavery survived in a few oral/performative traditions such as the folk sermon: "By way of compensation [for their debasement], some obviously artistic urges flowed even with the peasant Negro toward the only channels of expression left open, those of song, graceful movements and poetic speech."³¹ In *The Sanctified Church*, Locke's contemporary Zora Neale Hurston, among the first to document and study African American folklore, offered a much simpler explanation for the link between Prophet's verbal and visual creativity: "All religious expression among Negroes is regarded as art."³²

Most of Prophet Blackmon's paintings function as pictorial sermons on several levels. Folk preachers, including Blackmon himself, usually begin their sermons with a quotation from the Bible much as he literally "frames" many of his paintings with a scriptural excerpt or citation. This excerpt/citation also serves to evoke a familiar story or lesson that parallels the narrative, didactic style of most grassroots preachers. For example, in *John The Baptist* (cat. 39), the subtitle reads: "Chapter Of Luke Prepair Y The Way Of The Lord Make His Path Stright;" and in *I Was By The Great River Hidekel* (cat. 40), the subtitle adds: "Then I Lifted Up My Eyes And Looked And Danil Chpter



John The Baptist, 1996 (cat. 39)

10." Thus, the audience is clearly introduced to these paintings and predisposed to their respective themes of repentance and prophetic vision.

Beyond these basic strategic features, Prophet's paintings exhibit other qualities associated with African American folk sermons. In his key study of the latter, Bruce Rosenberg observes that although "the sermon's ostensible purpose is to edify... aesthetic satisfaction is an important element [in] the performative style of many spontaneous, oral preachers."³³ He goes on to identify rhythm, tone, intensity, and the "architecture of the sermon" as crucial ingredients that easily convert to visual values and largely define the

pictorial character of *John The Baptist* and *I Was By The Great River Hidekel*. Most significant, though, is the essential emotionality shared by Prophet's paintings and the black folk sermon which Dolan Hubbard describes, quoting Martin Luther King, as "not an essay to be read but a discourse to be heard [before] a listening congregation." In other words, the sermon is never passive instruction, but a *dynamic* exchange between preacher and audience, often involving "call and response," that helps make hard times bearable, empowers those present, and bestows "psychic freedom."³⁴ A comparable expression of



Revival Center lobby, Sydney HiH building, 1986.
Bill Tennessen.

“psychic freedom” is evident in Prophet Blackmon’s figure of John, who with eyes wide and arms flailing, beckons the masses to baptism by the teeming Jordan, or his vision of fasting Daniel who alone beholds a great angel “girded with the fine gold of Ophir, his body flashing like topaz, his face like lightning, and his eyes like torches of fire” (Daniel 10:6). The intensity of Prophet’s biblical scenes recalls the theological argument that the “freedom” displayed in black preaching is the real freedom that African Americans have always desired, but seldom fully enjoyed, in the North American diaspora: “In black preaching, the Word becomes embodied in the rhythm and the emotions of language as the people respond bodily to the Spirit in their midst. The black sermon arises out of the totality of the people’s existence—their pain and joy, trouble and ecstasy.”³⁵

It is also widely recognized that the black folk sermon is “fed directly from God”³⁶ much as Prophet Blackmon insists that his paintings “are not me... [but] inspiration from God.” Such direct inspiration explains the extensive improvisation found in both black sermons and Prophet’s paintings, as exemplified by *In The Frist Chapter Of Genesis* (cat. 38). In this tripartite composition,

Prophet moves in descending stages from Creation (further described in the framing, freely broken subtitle as “Here Thee Ea / rth Was Void Without Form And Dark / ness Was On The Fac / e Of The Deep”); to the Adoration of the Magi (“Wize Men Come To See Jesus”); to Pentecost (“Second Chapter O Acts In The Opproom”). The same pattern, from a formal standpoint, shows Prophet moving improvisationally from the reddish triangular flow in the upper section (= gable), to the deep blue openness and figuration in the middle (= window), to the again reddish symmetrical block that anchors the lower third of the work (= pedestal). Conceptual improvisation is also evident in the associative transition from the birth of the world in Genesis, to its rebirth at the Nativity, to its salvation through Resurrection. This grand cosmography comes close to matching the comprehensive vision of “the old folk sermon that begins with the creation of the world and ends with Judgement Day.”³⁷ Along with this cosmic vision, however, many of Prophet Blackmon’s homiletic paintings uphold the premise that “the chief function of the black preacher has been and remains to make the Bible relevant to current events.”³⁸ By framing his imagery with scripture, he even approximates the long established “text/context” strategy whereby the preacher begins with a quotation from the Bible (text) and then proceeds with a related sermon that is pertinent to everyday affairs (context).³⁹ In Prophet’s case, the biblical subject depicted often has strong contemporary social or political overtones. Since the mid-1990s, for example, as the United States government has seemingly suffered a crisis in “moral leadership,” a distinct group of his paintings—including *24 Chapter Of 2 Chronicles* (cat. 35), *Jehu 10 Verse Ninth Chapter 2 Kings* (cat. 44), and *Valley Of Vision* (cat. 45)—has focused on several of the “good and bad Kings” of the Old Testament, their varied responses to prophetic counsel, and the consequences of their actions for the people of Israel.

Prophet Blackmon maintains that he is not a “race preacher” and describes his religious outlook as “open to all... nondenominational.”

Nevertheless, a number of his paintings—as well as his occasional use of the alternative signature “Blackman” (cats. 32, 33)—suggest a keen awareness of his own racial identity and an approach to the Bible that intersects at times with more sweeping Afrocentric interpretations. The name/site Ethiopia, a key biblical referent in black religious tradition and often taken as a symbol for all of Africa,⁴⁰ is specifically acknowledged in *The Southeast Is The Border Of Ethiopia* (cat. 25) and *30th Verse Of The 8 Chapter Of Acts* (cat. 29). The latter, as its lengthy subtitle indicates (“An Philip Ran Thither To Him And They Went Down Both Into The Water”), portrays the Apostle’s dramatic pursuit and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, and is another work conspicuously signed “Blackman.” “Study the 2nd Chapter of Genesis the 10th verse and it reads thus,” instructed Prophet in the second issue of his Revival Center magazine, “And a river went out of Eden... and it [parted] into four... and the name of the second river is Gihon, the same is it that compasseth the whole land of E-thi-opi-a... So we find that the Garden of Eden was in Africa.”⁴¹ In fact, it is precisely *because the black man came first*—and by inference, was the first to sin—that Prophet believes the race has been “walked on, held down, ridiculed, slandered.” Citing God’s instructions to Moses and Aaron regarding leprosy (Leviticus 13), he further explains that the “younger brother came from the elder (who was black) through the disease.” Thus, the white man was created from the black man and pronounced clean by the priest, but now, after eons of punishment, Prophet foresees radical change: “Well, have not, we served, the white man. The first will be last, last shall be first. This is now coming to pass.”⁴²

Prophet’s black perspective on the Bible is based on a revered trio of ancestors: Adam (*God*

Created The Heaven And Thee Earth, cat. 43); Moses (*Moses At The Burning Bush*, cat. 19); and Solomon (*Solomon In All Of His Gloy*, cat. 48). Blackmon sees a “direct kinship” between these three major Old Testament figures, who were all “dark skin[ned]” and “indowed with majesty and glory.” He honors Adam first for having “the garden and God’s direct presents” and Solomon last for his “knowledge, riches and heavenly wisdom,” but it is Moses for whom he reserves the greatest honor because he “was given authority second only to God.”⁴³ Moses, of course, is also prominent in black religious discourse as a biblical type—a liberator—

whose role in leading the Israelites out of bondage prefigures the freedom and dignity sought more recently by people of the African diaspora. This typology is echoed in Prophet’s particular choice of Mosaic subject: the moment when Moses stands on sacred

*“In black preaching, the Word
becomes embodied in the rhythm
and the emotions of language as the
people respond bodily to
the Spirit in their midst.”*

Mt. Horeb, snake/staff in hand, and receives from the fiery bush God’s command “to go before Pharaoh that you may bring my people out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:10). Similarly, if Prophet associates Christianity, and the living Christ, with delivery of the abused from earthly bondage, then his impassioned adoption of the Resurrection theme in the distinctively cross-shaped *He Is Not Here* (cat. 46) also “double voices” black liberation. In this dramatic rendering, forms literally rise up from the empty sepulcher into the heavens where two great white-winged angels hover just beneath the redemptive hand of God. African American theologian James H. Cone interprets this transcendent subject primarily in terms of social justice for the living: “The cross-resurrection events mean that we now know that Jesus’ ministry with the poor and the wretched was God himself effecting his will to liberate the oppressed. The Jesus story is the poor person’s

story, because God in Christ becomes poor and weak in order that the oppressed might become liberated from poverty and powerlessness. God becomes the victim in their place.... This is what Christ's resurrection means."⁴⁴

Among the most ambitious and striking of Prophet Blackmon's scriptural subjects is *The 53 Chapter Of Isaiah* (cat. 26). Its large scale and circular, spoked format recall Ezekiel's vision of the wheels below the throne of God and suggest that this painting served Prophet as a spiritual oath or manifesto. The circle also implies a compass, globe, or constellation that, in this case, subordinates virtually all world religions and belief systems to the standard of Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" whose sacrifice is described in the central hub of the composition: "It Pleas'd God To Afflict / He Was Wounded For Our Transgressions." Like Moses and Jesus, the servant is an outcast and a redeemer who "stands in our place, interceding for us... and suffering the punishment that should be ours."⁴⁵ Again, James Cone adds more pointedly: "On the cross, God's identity with the suffering of the world was complete. This event was the actualization of Second Isaiah's prophecy [53:4]... *But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we were healed.*"⁴⁶ Ultimately, Prophet Blackmon himself finds simple, practical meaning in the trials of the servant: "The 53rd Chapter of Isaiah makes such a perfect picture of Jesus suffering for us. Whenever you feel like you have gone as far as you can go and you can go no further, read the 53rd Chapter of Isaiah."⁴⁷

Two of Prophet Blackmon's most recent paintings are remarkable on several levels and shed some final, valuable light on his creative vision. *In The Beginning* (cat. 49) and *You Are Looking On The Inside Of A Tree* (cat. 50) demonstrate that Blackmon remains an exploratory, developing painter despite popular assumptions that self-taught artists are often "one-note players." Both of these works evidence his recurring interest in abstraction (compare cats. 5, 6, 10), as well as his willingness to

experiment with new materials such as casein and crayon. It is notable that *In The Beginning* formally resembles a large open book whose molten colors spill from the breach, while *You Are Looking On The Inside Of A Tree* rehearses an old Surrealist strategy by taking its design largely from the inherent grain of the wood panel's surface. What is most impressive about this pair of paintings, however, is the affirmation of Blackmon's profoundly holistic philosophical outlook. Moreover, this outlook has been deemed basic to black folk tradition itself. Lerone Bennett, in his discussion of the relationship between Sunday (spirituals) and Saturday (blues), maintains: "The tradition... cannot be understood without holding these two contradictory and yet complementary strains—sacred/secular—together in one's mind. This is the essential genius of the Negro tradition which did not and does not recognize the Platonic-Puritan dichotomies of good-bad, white-black, God-devil, body-mind... The Negro tradition, read right, recognizes no such dichotomy."⁴⁸ Likewise, Prophet Blackmon's preaching life (*In The Beginning*) and his painting life (*You Are Looking On The Inside Of A Tree*), both practiced in a small Revival-Church-Interprise-Center on the city's near north side, are truly one life dedicated to the indivisibility of sacred and secular experience.

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Notes

1. Transience and poverty have resulted in meager documentation of Prophet Blackmon's life. Unless otherwise noted, biographical information is taken from conversations with Blackmon himself; from conversations between art historian and fellow essayist David Smith and Blackmon (the author wishes to thank Smith for sharing his notes); or from several brief articles or reviews published in the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel* between 1982 and 1996 (the author thanks Rosemary Jensen of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* library for gathering this material).
2. *Program*, Blackmon Family Reunion, 1997. I am grateful to Mrs. Washington of Detroit, Mich., for providing this document.
3. Lyla M. Washington, letter to the author, 3 March 1999.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Enlisted Record and Report of Separation/Honorable Discharge*, William J. Blackmon, 23 December 1945. The author thanks Lyla M. Washington for providing a copy of this document.

6. James Auer, "The Prophet's Art: Preacher-Painter Is True Article," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 31 March 1996, 4E.
7. Lyla M. Washington, letter to the author, 3 March 1999. As an adult, Blackmon has also written two full-length plays: *Light Breaks Through* (religious drama) and *Old Dark House* (mystery).
8. Prophet William J. Blackmon, ed., *Testimonies* (Milwaukee, Wis., c. 1986-87), 3.
9. David Isay and Harvey Wang, *Holding On: Dreamers, Visionaries, Eccentrics and Other American Heroes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 61-62.
10. *Ibid.*, 62.
11. Those addresses have included, in chronological order: 808 W. Walnut, 1424 N. 8th, 3250 N. Green Bay, 2512 W. Hopkins, 300 W. Juneau (Sydney HiH), and 1312 W. Garfield, a former machine shop purchased on land contract in 1986 for \$10,000.
12. Kent Mueller, letter to the author, 2 February 1999.
13. Isay and Wang, *Holding On*, 63.
14. In 1987, Blackmon hoped to acquire an old Gothic Revival church building scheduled for demolition on the grounds of the Milwaukee School of Engineering. MSOE was willing to give it away, but the high cost of moving this heavy brick structure across town to his near north side property thwarted the plan. See Thomas Schmidt, "For Prophet, Signs Point to a Miracle," *Milwaukee Journal*, 31 January 1988, 1-2G.
15. Paula Giannini, "The Wonderful World of Curbside Art" (unpublished typescript, 1983), 2-3.
16. *Ibid.*, 3.
17. Revival Center flyer, c. 1984, courtesy of Bill Tennesen.
18. Revival Center flyer, c. 1988, courtesy of Kent Mueller.
19. Blackmon, *Testimonies*, 33.
20. Charles P. Henry, *Culture and African American Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 63.
21. V. P. Franklin, *Black Self-Determination: A Cultural History of African-American Resistance* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1992), 210-218. More broadly, Franklin contends that "the belief in black 'religious self-determination' developed among the masses of Afro-Americans directly out of the material conditions they faced in the slave South," 8; see also Chapter Two, "The Gospel According to Enslaved Afro-Americans," 29-67.
22. Henry, *Culture*, 14.
23. bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also Raymond B. Flannery, *Violence in America: Coping with Drugs, Distressed Families, Inadequate Schooling, and Acts of Hate* (New York: Continuum, 1997).
24. Diann Ellen Cameron, "The Black Family and Parental Licensure," in Stan Faryna, Brad Stetson, and Joseph G. Conti, eds., *Black and Right: The Bold New Voice of Black Conservatives in America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), 98-102. For additional discussion of the black family, see Brian W. Jones, "Two Visions of Black Leadership," 41; and Mazhar Ali Awan, "Educational Development in the Black Community," 54-56.
25. Robert C. Smith and Richard Seltzer, *Race, Class and Culture: A Study in Afro-American Mass Opinion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 41-42. The authors summarize: "Blacks are more liberal than whites on economic issues, foreign policy, and voting behavior, but on social issues there is considerable variation. Blacks are more conservative or traditional on the role of women in modern society, abortion, homosexuality, and school prayer."
26. Peter Kirsanow, "A Black Conservative Looks At Abortion," in Faryna, Stetson, Conti, *Black and Right*, 115-119.
27. Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, eds., *Mercer Commentary on the Bible: The Prophets* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1996), ix.
28. See, for example, Barry Smart, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwells, 1990), 116.
29. James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 113.
30. Mills and Wilson, *Mercer Commentary*, xvii-xviii; on the Old Testament concepts of "justice" and "righteousness," see also John F. A. Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 42-45.
31. Alain Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present* (Washington, D.C.: Association in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 3.
32. Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley, Calif.: Turtle Island, 1983), 83.
33. Bruce A. Rosenberg, *Can These Bones Live? The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 128-130.
34. Dolan Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 8, 120-122.
35. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 19.
36. Rosenberg, *Can These Bones Live?*, 39.
37. Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 24.
38. Henry, *Culture*, 65.
39. Rosenberg, *Can These Bones Live?*, 19.
40. Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 65.
41. Blackmon, *Testimonies*, 68.
42. *Ibid.*, 69.
43. *Ibid.*, 70-71.
44. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 80-81.
45. Sawyer, *Prophecy*, 94.
46. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 174-175.
47. Blackmon, *Testimonies*, 28.
48. Lerone Bennett, Jr., *The Negro Mood and Other Essays* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1964), 50. See also Henry, *Culture*, 82: "Traditional Afro-American sermons... often mix sacred and secular references with an emphasis on the latter."



Prophet Blackmon, Inner City Arts Festival, 1987. Bill Tennesen.

The Seeing Heart of the Prophet: Protest and Praise

M. Shawn Copeland

For the wound of... my people is my heart wounded...—Jeremiah 8:21

One link between prophecy and the artistic lies in the privilege each accords, not only to image and symbol, but to silence and attention.¹ The prophet is gifted with a vision of the divine, with the sound of the divine voice. Frequently, the prophet is made ready to receive revelatory visitation only after prayer, fasting, self-denial, and the cultivation of inner stillness and attention. This stillness is never mere passivity, but a crucial aspect of the prophet's summons, of his communion with the divine, of his interpretation and mediation of the word. For the prophet must discern and interpret the symbols and images that come to him in visionary moments. Moreover, the voice of God is not always in "the earthquake or the fire," but sometimes in "the still small voice."² Should the prophet be as recalcitrant as those to whom he is sent, he can expect to be pushed and prodded by the Spirit, to be mocked, to be laughed at, to be rejected by those to whom he brings a message. As biblical experience suggests, the prophet has little choice. In ecstatic longing for



God, he surrenders: "There is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."³

The fifty signs and paintings of Prophet William Blackmon brought together for this exhibition bear the marks of this relation between the prophetic and the artistic. Blackmon, a vernacular artist, understands himself to be a prophet—one "commanded by God [not only] to make art,"⁴ but to prophesy and to preach. Blackmon's artistic process is thoroughly spiritual and thoroughly religious. He spends hours in meditation and reflection before choosing a subject and painting in order to make his heart and gift available to the promptings of the Spirit: "I know it's inspiration from God," he says, "so I end up giving God all the praise and all the glory."⁵

Like his fellow artist Sister Gertrude Morgan, Prophet Blackmon has made his own home (a rough square brick commercial building on Milwaukee's near north side) the site of his ministry, and like her conducts a ministry to the poor, neglected, and homeless.⁶ Like the apostle Paul, Blackmon refers to himself as "God's Modern

Apostle” and, like Paul, distinguishes his livelihood—shoe repair, hand laundry, tailoring—from his preaching ministry. If Blackmon may have struggled to understand his call, he dates the gift of prophecy to the occasion of a fierce electrical storm. When denied ordination and a pulpit, he took to the road as “a hitchhiking man of God” for forty years or more. “I didn’t have money,” Blackmon stated in an interview, “but I just felt the drive of God to go and preach the gospel. So I learned to have faith.”¹⁷

Prophecy, like theology, is as much a matter of culture as it is of faith. Even as Blackmon embarked on a great personal spiritual journey, he moved out from and has been formed by several hundred years of *black* culture. The *black* in black culture is a modern and hybrid term. Black culture emerged slowly under press of slavery through the transgression and blending of various ancient and vital West African cultures (e.g., Kongo, Igbo, Yoruba, Mande) and the creative adaptations of Judeo-Christian biblical traditions. Historically, those West African cultures had been oral ones in which the rhetorical mediation of the word was paramount. Here rhythm, styling, sound, metaphor, and artful repetition were intended to evoke epic memory, to form intense communal bonds, to effect a sense of human wholeness, and to generate individual receptivity to the power of the word to possess, to heal, to create.⁸ But, these characteristics have not been lost in “the transition in black America from a primarily oral culture in the slave period to its current situation as a formally literate, but still orally oriented culture.”⁹ Rather these features surface in the literature, fine arts, discursive analysis, and vernacular arts of contemporary black culture.

Prophet Blackmon’s paintings provide a suggestive example of African aesthetic retention. He covers the boards on which he frequently paints with curvilinear strokes that move at once upward and downward, giving the resulting picture more than one center of focus. He complicates and varies that focus further with the addition of involved, asymmetrical geometric forms. *24 Chapter Of 2 Chronicles* and *Escape From Moab* (cats. 35 and 24) are illustrative. In *2 Chronicles*, the v-shaped

faces and oval eyes recall a nineteenth-century BaKongo carving, *Figure on Dog*.¹⁰ In *Escape*, the route from Moab twists and turns, meandering clockwise, then counterclockwise past houses and people and animals, intersecting with other possible paths. Oval and rectangular ornamentation on the houses flow into the bright curving rays of the sun and skyline which, in turn, flow outward to form the path on which the viewer glimpses Naomi and Ruth.

Blackmon’s work has a strong storytelling quality. These paintings are the most numerous in the Haggerty exhibition. They intimate continuity with the primacy of the oral and convey a holistic spiritual vision. Blackmon takes seriously a prophet’s need for stillness and attention in order to sharpen critique and correction. In the story paintings, Blackmon takes thematic and narrative material from biblical events, stories, and characters as well as from spiritual and moral dislocations in contemporary culture. These dislocations—drugs, abortion, promiscuity, and violence—are evaluated in light of biblical teachings on the choice between life and death, between heaven and hell, between God’s domain and that of the Devil. This choice is concretized in the recurring house image which appears in nearly one-fifth of these paintings. In *Gods Light House* (cat. 8), illumination gushes upwards and outwards to provide direction so that those who seek the path to God shall find it. Those who choose this path of life can find comfort and affirmation in God’s holy *Mountain Hotel* (cat. 17). Critical contrast to these paintings is found in the *Valley Of Vision* (cat. 45). Here, Blackmon depicts the chaos predicted in Isaiah 22 and 24-27 due to warfare being conducted against the Northern Kingdom. Even as Isaiah announces this destruction as a judgement by God on the people’s sin and evil, he assures them in the later books of God’s presence in their midst and calls them to repentance, to a “hope in the waiting-time,” an active yearning for the ultimate triumph of God over chaos and destruction.¹¹ This brooding painting is arresting: large white-hoofed horses dominate the center; on the sides bowmen stand at the ready; in the lower right-hand corner appears a huddled mass of



Opening of Prophet Blackmon's first exhibition, Wright Street Gallery, 1986. Bill Tennesen.

human forms. The glowering faces of the attacking warriors are daubed in white, a stark contrast to the gloom and misery of the conquered.

To view this punishment is to be warned: this is the fate of contemporary humanity if we continue on the path of destruction. This warning is repeated in such pieces as *Stop Feeding The Snakes And Feed The Childrens* (cat. 22). Here Blackmon portrays a mother, her body encircled by a vivid red snake, who is enchanted with a man while her children cry for food. The figure of the mother dominates the picture, underscoring Prophet Blackmon's affirmation of the importance of heterosexual marriage and family life. This theme is echoed in *Gods Blessed Time Cycle* (cat. 6), *The Family Tree Showing Gods Holy Plan Of Marriage* (cat. 41), and *The Phillips Family* (cat. 42). These paintings provide an antidote to *A Broodcasting Studio* (cat. 27), *What Abortion Dose To The Mother* (cat. 30), *You Foolish Teachers* (cat. 31), *The Teacher Is Teching On The Word AIDS* (cat. 32), and *This Is Sopose To Be A Hospital* (cat. 34).

This last group of paintings illustrates the old African American proverb: *God don't like ugly*. Of course, this proverb is equally related to the moral and ethical code of African Traditional Religions. In these religions and in the religious thinking of the

enslaved Africans, salvation and punishment are to be enjoined in the here and now. As many West Africans say: *God evens things out*. God rewards with good those who follow the path of the good or the *beautiful*, and metes out evil to those who follow the path of the evil or *ugly*. The proverb *God don't like ugly* reinscribes, cultivates, and prizes moral conduct rooted in aesthetics: a man or a woman is said to be good or evil depending upon what he or she does; doing good evokes the beautiful, doing evil evokes the ugly.¹²

Blackmon paints a new cultural aesthetic, a new set of meanings and values that might inform a way of life.¹³ For culture is never merely something extrinsic, material, and static; culture is dynamic, spiritual, and in-process. Blackmon is promoting concrete meanings and values to mold personal and interpersonal, religious and moral, economic and political choice. In other words, he is contesting the crass violence, rampant secularism, and acquisitive individualism that has come to dominate the *imagination* of our time.

Intelligent, creative imagination is central to culture-making—that is, in realizing the values we esteem and cherish and uprooting the values we find repugnant and seek to abandon, imagination has such a crucial role.¹⁴ At the same time, because

(dis)values of secularism and materialism have become so decisive in shaping contemporary U. S. (and global) culture, there is widespread breakdown in the moral and spiritual, religious and cultural formation of too many youth of all races, ethnic-cultural backgrounds, and nationalities. Any attempt to counter this deformation must begin by grasping just how these (dis)values have been extended by modernity, advanced by cultural attitudes towards direct or personal and indirect or structural violence, and legitimated by language and art, religion and theology.¹⁵

Theologian J. Deotis Roberts writes, “In our urban centers, life is a useless passion.”¹⁶ With little or no remorse, life is snuffed out, treated as a disposable commodity. Such vicious attitudes are related to and sustained by dysfunctional family life, and a social setting satiated with poverty, unfulfilled yearnings, and hostility to genuine moral growth and development.¹⁷ Moreover, our market-driven society promotes the confusion of comfort, convenience, (hyper)masculinity, (hyper)femininity, and sex with the good life—that is, with authentic happiness, self-realization, and personal fulfillment in community. Not only has this confusion spawned a crisis in values, it has brought about, for many women and men, a collective experience of psychic breakdown or deterioration and nihilism. For many, the lived and material result is a kind of “outlaw culture” pumped up by the survival of the fittest, vicious individualism, violence, conspicuous consumption, alienation, and self-hatred.¹⁸

Hollywood in black and in white desensitizes, manipulates, and manages our response to violence—to seduction and rape, to death and betrayal, to torture and killing. Print and visual media, films, MTV, video games transmit gross and brutal images that suffuse our subconscious. Unnoticed and unreflected upon, these images pervade our thoughts, speech, bodily reactions to others, decisions, and ordinary practices of everyday interaction.¹⁹

Thus, violence becomes common, ordinary, expected; in a culture of violence, nonviolence is an aberration rather than the norm. For, even as violence sustains our aggression, violence undermines our efforts to respond and critique that aggression, to engage in and be engaged by nonviolent personal and social transformation. Violence has deformed our imagination. Violence leaves us discouraged, dispirited, and numb; wounded culturally and socially, psychically and physically, morally and religiously.

The chief means of healing violence in the African American (Christian) worldview remains the rhetorical—the conjured word, the black sermon. On this account, it is the key to understanding and projecting its resistant worldview. The sermon

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conjures a rhetorical space in which the preacher and people “articulate the self, challenge the dominant culture’s ordering of reality, and contest its authoritative discourse.” In that space, the preacher recovers the community’s voice and binds the present to the past, while striving against social dislocation, value disorientation, and psychic breakdown to imagine and “project a benevolent cosmology and teleology” in which black people apprehend and know themselves as subjects of their own history and destiny, as a people of God’s own making.²⁰ For those who respond to its beauty, truth, and power, the sermon signifies and effects a healing shift in their religious, cultural, social, and psychological imagination.

But the Prophet’s paintings also come from a “conjugal” imagination within the horizon of African American Christianity.²¹ In pieces like *Do Y Love Neighbon* (cat. 23), *Yes The Restcue Mission* (cat. 33), and *Good Samariton* (cat. 47), Blackmon allows us to experience the possibilities of transgressing borders in unity, of transcending finite limitations of time and space to act in love and hope.

We can learn something of Blackmon's understanding of his own vocation from the three paintings *Moses At The Burning Bush* (cat. 19), *John The Baptist* (cat. 39), and *Valley Of Vision* (cat. 45). Moses stands unshod before a vivid red bush outlined in heavy black. Without doubt, the artist intends to invoke the God of Exodus, but the colors are the colors of Esu or Esu/Elegbara, the trickster deity of the Ifa (Yoruba) pantheon. Esu is a messenger, a mediator—so was Moses, so is Blackmon. John the Baptist is poised before the water (the River Jordan), hands upraised, eyes bulging, mouth stretched. Here is the prophet burning with vision and truth, who prepares the way of the Lord. He denounces the hypocrisy and sin of the city, as does Blackmon. The Valley of Vision comes from the mouth of Isaiah, but I think Ezekiel is Blackmon's other alter ego. It is Ezekiel who prophesies against the foolish prophets (foolish teachers); it is Ezekiel whose visions are full of strange mysticism and disaster.

Despite such gravity, Blackmon's prophetic mission announces a future for humanity—a future full of hope. And these paintings, even when bleak and brooding, seek out hope—God's hope or eschatological hope. It is "hope [that] enables the future reality of the reign of God to affect the past and the present... Eschatological hope makes freedom possible in the face of radical evil."²²

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Notes

1. Ilona N. Rashkow makes the same point about the "link between psychoanalytic literary theory and biblical scholarship" in "Oedipus Wrecks: Moses and God's Rod," 72, in Timothy Beal and David M. Gunn, eds., *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies: Identity and the Book* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
2. I Kings 19:12, RSV.
3. Jeremiah 20:9, RSV.
4. Jane Livingston, "What It Is," in Jane Livingston and John Beardsley, *Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1982), 11.

5. David Isay and Harvey Wang, *Holding On: Dreamers, Visionaries, Eccentrics and Other American Heroes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 63.
6. *Ibid.*, 46.
7. *Ibid.*, 62.
8. See Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 181-194.
9. Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 148.
10. Illustrated in Livingston and Beardsley, *Black Folk Art in America*, 30.
11. Ann Johnston, "The Concept of Waiting in the Isaianic Corpus: A Rhetorical Critical Study of Selected Texts," (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1986), 238.
12. See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1989), 3, 37, 58-73, 74-89.
13. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), xi.
14. Imagination can be defined as the "sum total of all the forces and faculties in [the human person] that are brought to bear upon our concrete world to form proper images of it," William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), 243. Or, imagination may be apprehended as "a faculty or power of reproducing images stored in the memory under the suggestion of associated (reproductive imagination) images or of recombining former experiences in the creation of new images directed at a specific goal or aiding in the solution of problems (creative imagination)," *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 711.
15. Felipe E. MacGregor, S.J., and Marcial Rubio Correa, eds., *The Culture of Violence* (New York: United Nations University Press, 1994).
16. J. Deotis Roberts, "Victory over Violence: A Theological Perspective" (paper presented at the conference *Church, Theology, and Violence*, New York, N.Y., 20-22 October 1994), typescript, 4.
17. *Ibid.*, 5.
18. The term "outlaw culture" was coined by Mark Naison, "Outlaw Culture and Black Neighborhoods," *Reconstruction* 1, no. 4 (1992): 128-131; also see bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
19. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 148.
20. Dolan Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 5.
21. Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 154.
22. Sally Ann McReynolds, "Memory and Faith: Tested by Eschatological Hope," *The Way* 55, no. 1 (January 1995): 34.



Prophet Blackmon with Kent Mueller (left) and Dean Olson, Inner City Arts Council Purchase Award, 1986. *Bill Tennesen.*

Painting Pictures from God: Process and Meaning in the Art of Prophet Blackmon

David K. Smith

Prophet Blackmon's home is located in an area of Milwaukee that he admits is not the kind of neighborhood that necessarily welcomes visitors. In fact, Blackmon would prefer to meet his friends or other guests at a different location, for their own safety. The building he calls home is a small single-story former machine shop, flattopped and windowless, off Garfield and North Avenues. It is hidden behind a gas station and vacant lot on one side and huddles at the end of a narrow yard and vine-covered chainlink fence on the other. This modest red brick structure serves as Blackmon's primary residence, place of business, church, and painting studio.

The interior of the one-room building appears even smaller than it actually is as most of the space beyond the doorway is overwhelmed by clutter and shrouded in darkness. Hanging rows and mounds of used clothing Blackmon once sold in an ongoing rummage sale compete with stacks of lumber, old tires, salvaged paneling, and other nonde-



script items which in some places seem almost to reach from floor to ceiling. Overhead, a row of perhaps a dozen soot-covered fluorescent light fixtures hugs the high ceiling, though it seems that no more than three or four of the light tubes are ever working at one time.

Blackmon's studio space lies against the back wall directly opposite the entry door, past the half dozen or so mismatched chairs that seat his congregation during Sunday worship services, past his small bedroom space with its makeshift walls of 2x4s and hanging clothing, past the small jerry-rigged wood stove that heats the place in winter and the machinery he once used to repair shoes, and past his kitchen area (one or two small

tables piled high with pails, utensils, boxes, and a single electric cooking wok). His "studio" is no larger than the shipping palette upon which sits a paint-splattered easel and wooden chair. It is here, in the shadows, that Blackmon creates the biblically based paintings he says are "a gift from God."¹

*When you do your thing,
Don't let other people peek at your hand.
It ain't always what you do,
It's who you let see you do it.*

—Etta James, “It Ain’t Always What You Do”

Blackmon’s creative process, wherein he transforms discarded boards and wood panels, often soiled and splintered, into emotionally charged visual sermons, is a secretive and somewhat ritualistic procedure. He has been extremely reluctant to discuss his working methods; indeed, it is a rare occurrence when one is allowed to even view a work in progress. While he has on very few occasions posed for photographs as though painting at his easel, more often than not he is loath to allow anyone access to his studio space. I have been able to document the details of his creative process by virtue of our friend-

ship and many conversations, as well as from my observations of various works in progress within his studio space. His verbal disclosures concerning how he paints came slowly and in piecemeal fashion and were often framed with a concern that he was revealing too much. The usual explanation Blackmon offers for his circumspection is simply that he fears that others may take and use his painting techniques without his consent for their own financial gain. “Now if I was making thousands of dollars from my art like some of those artists do, then I might see it differently,” he says, “but when you’re poor and that’s about all you’ve got, then you’re not too quick to lose what you’ve got.” Occasionally he has also voiced concern that his methods might, if publicized, fall into the hands of his “enemies,” forces of evil who would then be further empowered to do him harm. While it took



Prophet Blackmon, Wright Street Gallery, 1986. Bill Tennesen.

considerable persuasion to cajole Prophet into discussing his painting methods, he did in fact come to see the merits of documenting certain aspects of his creative process. Because his painting process does not in fact appear extraordinary, his guardedness seems unwarranted; yet his caution and sense of autonomy are understandable given the circumstances of his life, which has been marked by constant struggle and almost total self-reliance. It is also not surprising that an elderly black man who has survived the double scourge of racism and poverty, a fickle and sometimes disingenuous art market, and the constant incursions of real or imagined evil forces would be reluctant to reveal the methods of his livelihood to a younger white man such as myself.

Blackmon seldom responds to any question simply or directly. Instead, he couches his answers with biblical references and social commentary, creating a circuitous stream of dialogue which often seems unrelated to the initial question. Nevertheless, his rambling answers are also revealing. If one understands that all things in Prophet Blackmon's world are perceived through the lens of scripture and their relation to holiness, it is easier to understand why he performs certain procedural tasks in the preparation and execution of each painting. It also illuminates how and why he views his art as he does.

Upon completion of a painting, regardless of whether or not the piece compares favorably with his best work,² Blackmon will often declare the painting to be "a great one." He has on rare occasions admitted that a painting he may have hurried to complete when in dire financial straits "could use a little more," after which he will usually reclaim the work and add the necessary enhancements. Yet he strongly believes that, while some paintings may be more effective than others, there are none that are substandard or ineffectual. As is the case with many artists of faith, Blackmon credits divine intervention for the creation of his art. Just as he professes that God uses him as an instrument to reveal and cure physical ailments, he also firmly declares that "this

art comes from God," by way of His servant Prophet Blackmon. That belief is compounded by the fact that Blackmon also sees himself as "God's modern-day Apostle" and the Old Testament Prophet Jeremiah reborn. It would therefore be logically impossible for him to paint a *bad picture*. Since God is the ultimate artist, every painting must be "great."

There is a story of Blackmon accepting a commission from a local collector to paint a chest of drawers. As he began to compose and paint the narratives that envelop the cabinet, the collector repeatedly requested that he change certain aspects of the compositions. The collector's intervention justifiably angered Blackmon, although he did finish the commission. Besides the ethical uncertainties of unduly directing an artist's creative output, it is of little wonder that Blackmon would take umbrage at an outsider's intrusion into what he surely views as a process founded on holiness. After all, who is man to dictate how God's instrument should be used?

Let all things be done properly and in order.
—I Corinthians 14:40

Most of Blackmon's paintings begin conceptually with acquisition of a board or wood panel. That is, *only after* he has obtained a board on which to paint does he develop the composition. As far as I have been able to document, all of Blackmon's narrative paintings have been executed on wood, whether it be solid wood boards, plywood and particle board panels, hollow-core door panels, or sections of tabletops and wall paneling. His first paintings were done on boards he salvaged from the trash behind the Sidney HiH building where he lived in the early to mid-1980s. Salvaged wood continues to be the primary surface Blackmon uses for painting, although he has also made use of precut boards and panels given to him by friends and patrons since the late 1980s. There is a noticeable predominance of heavy, precut plywood panels from around mid-1996 to late 1998 when friends supplied

him with several small loads of 1/2- to 1/4-inch stock for use specifically as painting surfaces.

The salvaged boards and panels Blackmon uses are often in imperfect condition. "I'd get old boards and pieces of wood in the back, back in the alley where the trash goes," he says of his first reclamation efforts, "and most of them would be in pretty bad shape, so I'd have to condition them." Many panels are not only dirty from being mixed in the trash but, because they are usually castoffs from construction or remodeling projects, often possess numerous knicks, gouges, and splintered edges. Blackmon begins his reclamation project of turning discarded wood panels into art objects by "conditioning" the wood. "Conditioning" is a term he uses for simply cleaning the wood, repairing any glaring defects, and covering the surface with a ground color or underpainting. After wiping away any dirt or grime from the panel's surface, he checks the wood for any repairable defects. The gaps and gouges he chooses to repair generally lie near the edges of the panel, and these he covers with small scraps of leather, cut to size and nailed or tacked into place. He will then usually go over the entire surface of the panel, front and back, with a coat of paint, typically pale red, creating a clean, blemish-free surface and further binding any leather patches to the board. Often his repairs are small and practically unnoticeable, as in *Spare The Rod And Spoil The Child* (cat. 21), which has a small leather patch in the upper-right-hand corner. *The Family Tree Showing Gods Holy Plan Of Marriage* (cat. 41) offers another example of Blackmon's limited leather repairs. This painting is executed on particle board, a manufactured product made from wood chips mixed with a glue binder. Particle board is generally more susceptible to corner and edge damage than solid wood or plywood, and in this piece he has installed precautionary leather patches on all four corners.

The repairs executed on *God Feareing Foundry Workers* (cat. 16) reflect the concern Blackmon has for producing quality work. In this relatively large painting, he has installed carefully

cut, sizable leather patches over vacant areas of the panel on the back, out of sight of the viewer. Perhaps the most extravagant leather repair he has undertaken is that found on two paintings executed sequentially in 1995: *Gods Mountain Of Joy And Peace* (cat. 36) and *Sheperded Mountain Retreat* (cat. 37). These spiritually uplifting paintings are composed on sections of a hollow-core door panel. The door from which the panels came had been sawn in half, revealing the hollow interior. Blackmon covered the open edges of the panels with wide strips of leather, and then, perhaps to maintain a degree of visual continuity or just to experiment, he continued to circumscribe the entire perimeter of the panels with leather. He then used the leather frame as the black, text-enhanced border which encircles practically all of his compositions. Interestingly, he resumed this experimentation a few years later when he added leather to a painting solely as a visual enhancement: *Valley Of Vision* (cat. 45) displays a text-enhanced border of carefully cut leather strips applied to the front of the panel. These leather strips are not added to cover defects, but result from an aesthetic decision.

It is worth noting that Blackmon's method of repairing distressed wood panels, as well as the particular materials he uses, dovetail nicely with his profession of shoe repair. Besides the association with concepts of thrift and self-reliance, and the presumption that as a shoe repairman he would have leather, shears, and shoe tacks on hand, the connection also reinforces his long-standing entrepreneurial philosophy of combining diverse activities within a homogenous, interconnected entity (i.e., Revival-Center-Church-Inter-Price-Shoe-Repair³).

Blackmon considers painting the entire surface of the panel, both front and back, as the culmination of the "conditioning" process. He says that this coating of paint "seals" the wood and ultimately prevents or retards deterioration of the surface painting. While he is adamant that this step is necessary to maintain the future integrity of the painting, it remains unclear how he believes this preventative process actually



Prophet Blackmon's signs near North and Teutonia Avenues, Milwaukee, 1988. *Bill Tennesen.*

works. He simply states, "If you don't do that the colors will fade after a while." It is doubtful that he has experienced any fading paint color in his own work,⁴ and it seems unlikely that any significant color loss would take place with or without this process. However, an undercoat of paint does serve as a primer coat that inhibits paint loss and surface deterioration, as well as the effects of any corrosive oils or chemicals (found in treated lumber) that might be present in the wood. While Blackmon's effort to "seal" the wood for reasons of preservation may be sound, an equally favorable by-product of the seal is the clean surface on which to render a composition.

Blackmon has been fairly consistent in his choice of colors for the underpainting of his panels. In most of his first works from the early 1980s, he used a brick-red color (*God Bless Our Home*, cat. 7; *Gods Light House*, cat. 8). He soon turned to light red as a favored color and has used it

more than any other during his career. In *Valley Of Vision* (cat. 45), the color peeks through the bow carried by the lower archer in the upper-left corner, while in *He Is Not Here (Resurrection)* (cat. 46), Blackmon has left much of the underpainting visible in the top half of the composition and has introduced additional shades of red to depict a heavenly aura. He has also occasionally used other colors for the underpainting—purple, pink, and blue, for example—but their use is limited and may be the result of a temporary shortage of red. Once the underpainting has been applied, the "conditioning" of the wood panel is complete. He then paints the black border which frames the composition. The associations this color shares with the artist's name and ethnicity are obvious, and his belief that several key figures in the Bible are of African descent (including Adam and Solomon) lends additional symbolic significance to Blackmon's choice.

Once he has settled on a narrative, Blackmon begins to sketch with pencil directly onto the panel, deciding on such things as figure placement, architectural elements, and overall composition. After he is satisfied with the general composition, he will begin to paint, using primarily latex and enamel paints. Although he may have spent considerable time outlining the composition in pencil, he allows himself the freedom to veer from the sketch as he paints, changing figure positions or architectural elements as he sees fit. *Valley Of Vision* (cat. 45) and *Good Samaritan* (cat. 47) exhibit alterations from the original pencil sketch where areas of underpainting and pencil lines are visible around certain figures.

When painting, Blackmon uses an assortment of mostly small brushes which soon become caked and hardened with dried paint. Sitting comfortably in his chair and holding a brush in his right hand, he paints large panels at his easel and small panels either at the easel or flat upon a table. He begins by duplicating his pencil lines with black paint. Then, mixing colors in a pan or on plastic pail lids, he fills in the outlined figures and shapes with color. While he appears adept

at mixing colors, Blackmon will also use paint directly from the can. Suspecting that he might have symbolic preferences for specific colors, such as red for the presence of the Holy Ghost (e.g., the flames in *Moses At The Burning Bush*, cat. 19), white for purity and holiness (e.g., the angels in *He Is Not Here*, cat. 46), and yellow for degradation and disease (e.g., the adulterous woman in *Stop Feeding The Snakes And Feed The Childrens*, cat. 22), I once asked, "Do you use certain colors to mean anything special or to symbolize broader concepts?" Blackmon surprised me with his simple and direct response, "Well, blue is for the sky and water, green for grass and plants, red for blood."

Prophet Blackmon admits that his compositions do not come to him as *visions* in the sense of mystical or supernatural revelations. Rather, they usually come from prolonged study of scripture and reflection on what he has read. "I read the Bible," he says, "and most of the time something will just come to me." The process of Bible study, reflection, and ultimately deciding on a theme to depict may be the most time-consuming aspect of the entire creative process for Blackmon. He is deeply concerned that each and every one of his paintings be substantive in both message and presentation. He has said that he is capable of producing up to two paintings per week for extended periods of time, but I have never known him to be that productive. When the weather is warm and his health and disposition are good, he may produce four to six paintings in a month, but not consistently. He is a methodical and thoughtful artist who labors over every painting. During his approximately fifteen-year career, he has probably produced fewer than five hundred paintings, for an average of thirty-three per year or around three per month. There have also been periods of several months when he has not produced more than one or two paintings. The most productive period in his career was the five or six years in the mid- to late 1980s when he experienced his initial success as an artist and enjoyed very supportive gallery representation. He has also experienced several spurts of creativity

lasting a few months at a time during 1996, 1997, and late 1998. At the time of this writing, he is apparently in the midst of another creative upswing as he has completed at least seven paintings in the last four to five weeks.

A specific example of a composition Blackmon developed from the Bible is *30th Verse Of The 8 Chapter Of Acts* (cat. 29). The painting is a description of the story in Acts 8: 26-39 where Christ's disciple Philip baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch "of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians." Along the picture's frame Blackmon has joined the beginning of verse 30: "And Philip ran thither to him," with the middle of verse 38: "and they went down both into the water;" to effectively outline the story's beginning and conclusion within a single descriptive sentence. This progression from literary and verbal concept to pictorial realization is in keeping with Blackmon's identity as a preacher and as a sign painter.

This Is Sopose To Be A Hospital Where They Take A Oath To Save Life Do The[y] Keep The Vow (cat. 34) appears to be a secular subject but is no less effective as an example of the preacher's words transformed into painted picture. Hospitals and the medical profession have long been a bugaboo of Blackmon's. He has consistently railed against the rejection of God as the ultimate source of all healing, while doctors and the general public misguidedly tout the benefits of modern medicine as though it were a religion unto itself. "You see them on TV, all their great inventions and things," he says, "and with all they do, you know you will never hear one word... God! That's right! God... He is the one who should be getting the credit, because He's the one who made those things possible." Blackmon may well have voiced the text of this piece during a sermon or impassioned conversation.

There are a few examples of works which counter Blackmon's usual reliance on language to communicate his point. *Untitled (Abstraction)* (cat. 5), *Gods Grain Of Life* (cat. 10), *In The Beginng* (cat. 49), and *You Are Looking On The Inside Of A Tree* (cat. 50) illustrate Blackmon's ability to make a connection between a seemingly unlikely source of

inspiration and biblical principles. Intrigued by the patterns the tree growth rings imparted on the panels, he further separated and highlighted each line and shape with color. It was then a small matter for this man who appreciates the *natural* beauty of God's creation to impart consociating text into the composition. "Just look at what God makes! He is the greatest artist," says Blackmon. "Ain't nothing man can do to beat God's art!" It is worth noting that the two paintings from 1998 (cats. 49, 50) were also executed without the usual underpainting. These panels were already "conditioned" by God.

Once the picture is completed, Blackmon will take a medium artist's brush and paint the text in the black frame which essentially gives each piece its title. Following that he will often add text to the inner composition. This additional text may represent speech from figures within the composition, as in *You Foolish Teachers* (cat. 31), where drug-addled students outside a school pronounce "Hey man I am trip[p]ing" and ask "Hey did you bring stuff[?]" Text may also function as additional descriptive or explanatory notes, as in *Gods Mountain Of Joy And Peace* (cat. 36), where the text identifies a "Coyote Lapping Water" and an "Underground Cave." Interior text may also be a continuation of the frame text. In *Gods Mountain Of Joy And Peace*, the frame text travels around the edge of the painting and stops abruptly with the words "Have You Ever." The sentence concludes with "Seene Trees Dance," the words jumping into the picture and climbing (dancing?) up the trunk and branches of the tree on the right. Blackmon's employment of text in this painting is magical and highlights the symbiotic nature of image and text in his art.

Prophet Blackmon once told me, "Whenever I need a painting [meaning subject] and it won't come, I go back and there it is... Family Tree." His reliance on tree imagery is consistent and deliberate enough to be a metaphor for the man himself. He might well compare his own daily struggles against poverty and the influence of the devil (where he says "I am being fought on all sides Brother, I'm being fought

hard!") to a lone tall tree, lashed by wind and rain, but standing strong, and firmly rooted in the power of holiness.

The Bible is rife with tree imagery and symbolism, with trees representing various Christian themes, including the Church itself (*Gods Holy Gohst Church*, cat. 15, prominently shows a tree just outside the church, enveloped in a purple aura), Christ Jesus, and knowledge of good and evil.⁵ Trees also symbolize a "reaching" for heaven, their branches like hands and arms lifted to the sky. They also form a bridge or pathway between the earth and the heavens, connecting the two spheres figuratively and visually. Blackmon places trees in close proximity to important biblical figures (*Moses At The Burning Bush*, cat. 19), and in places of spiritual peace and rejuvenation (*Gods Mountain Of Joy And Peace*, cat. 36; and *Sheperted Mountain Retreate*, cat. 37). He even uses the tree as a subject in itself (*You Are Looking On The Inside Of A Tree*, cat. 50). Speaking about this latter painting, Blackmon said, "Every winter the tree dies, it dies. Then, come spring it comes back to life, it gets resurrected from death. Just like Jesus... that's right... he was crucified and he died there. Three days later he came back to life. That tree is there to remind us, ain't nothing impossible for God!"

Blackmon also closely identifies trees with family and home. Supposedly his first narrative painting was of the home⁶—*God Bless Our Home*—and subsequent paintings repeated the theme, showing houses and trees in conjunction with one another, with the tree situated next to but outside the building (*God Bless Our Home*, cat. 7; *Untitled [House and Tree]*, cat. 9). Soon he began to move the tree directly into and on top of the house (*Birth Tree House. Gods Earth*, cat. 13; *Gods Family Tree*, cat. 14), melding the two so that the tree came to symbolize family and God's command for a stable home life (*The Family Tree Showing Gods Holy Plan Of Marriage*, cat. 41).

He also employs the tree in paintings that condemn illicit or immoral behavior. In *Stop Feeding The Snakes And Feed The Childrens* (cat. 22), Blackmon laments a mother's abandonment of



Prophet Blackmon at his easel, 1999. Francis Ford.

her children in selfish preference for the carnal interests of a male suitor. Here the tree takes on a decidedly less affirmative aura. Rather than placing the large tree inside, or on top of the exposed house where the sexual pursuit takes place, in a rare attempt to represent distant objects, he situates the tree conspicuously in back of the house, behind the overhanging roof top whose blade-shaped edge slices into the branches. Another use of a tree as a symbol of family discord and despair is seen in a 1988 painting not in the exhibition: *God Have Mercy On The Weeping Willow Tree*. About this piece Jeffrey Hayes writes, "a house divided signifies divorce. Above it a tree, Blackmon's favorite symbol for family lineage, stoops with bare limbs marked *Children Where/Adultery/Dad-Mom Where Are You/Broken Home/Promises*."

Along with the tree, Blackmon also uses the mountain as an important symbol. In the third chapter of Exodus, Moses climbs a mountain

where he encounters the Lord in the form of a burning bush. Later, in the nineteenth chapter of Exodus, Moses again climbs the mountain to speak with God. For Blackmon, mountains symbolize God's goodness and loving care. *Gods Mountain Of Joy And Peace* (cat. 36) and *Sheperded Mountain Retreat* (cat. 37) are lush green places overflowing with colorful flowers and cool water, and are inhabited by wildlife (coyotes lapping water!), and dancing trees. Nowhere on these mountains will you find "foolish teachers," abortion clinics, hospitals, or witches. Blackmon's mountains are high above the sins of the world, closer to heaven; they are places of refuge for those seeking salvation. Perhaps for him, a man living in one of the least desirable areas of a large inner city, mountain imagery offers an imaginative escape from the realities of poverty, crime, and disillusionment. Blackmon's mountains are as close to a heavenly paradise as anything he has painted.

In *Gods Mountain Of Joy And Peace* and *Sheperded Mountain Retreat*, Blackmon places the viewer physically atop the summit. In other works, the mountains are seen from afar. *Moses At The Burning Bush* (cat. 19), *I Was By The Great River Hidekel* (cat. 40), and *The Phillips Family* (cat. 42) show mountains in the distance, sharply peaked like overturned ice cream cones. In *Moses At The Burning Bush*, Blackmon has colored the two distant mountains with the same red and yellow that identifies the burning bush in the foreground, equating them with the earthly manifestation of God as revealed to Moses. In *I Was By The Great River Hidekel*, he plasters a tree to the side of a white-ringed mountain and encloses both in a heavy black outline. Most interesting are the three mountains in *The Phillips Family*, where they are identified by interior text as "Holy Gost Mountains." The mountains represent the Trinity in this composition, while at their base members of the Phelps family carry wood to a cabin below. This painting was created for Paul Phelps, a religious man in whom Blackmon saw deep spiritual conviction and family commitment. The frame text reads in its entirety, "The Phillips Family That Prays Together Stays Together, Family Reunions

Are The Best Way To Say I Love You.” In this one remarkable piece Blackmon has successfully integrated the themes of family unity, spiritual devotion, “God’s mountain of joy and peace,” and the physical presence of God in the lives of His children.

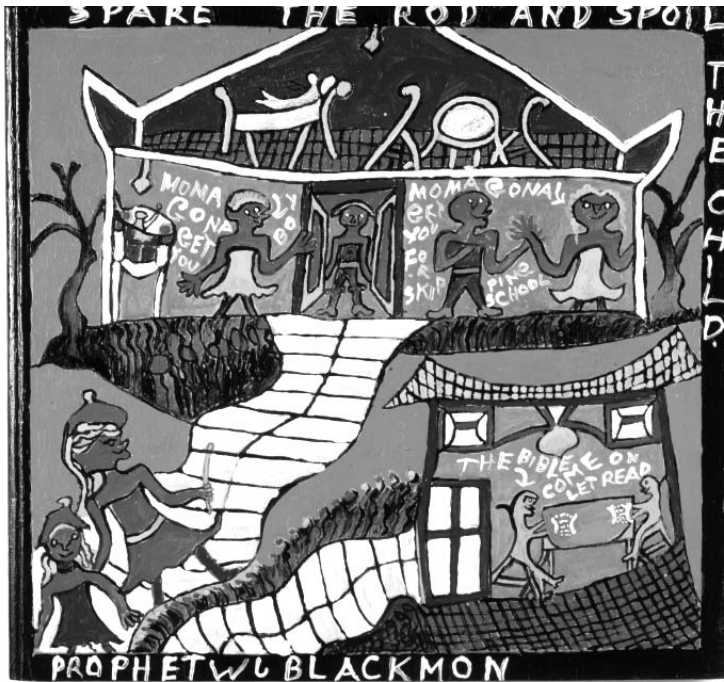
Angels, depicted as birdlike creatures, are shown in five of the paintings in the exhibition: *Gods Holy Gohst Church* (cat. 15), *In The Frist Chapter Of Genesis* (cat. 38), *I Was By The Great River Hidekel* (cat. 40), *God Created The Heaven And Thee Earth* (cat. 43), *He Is Not Here (Resurrection)* (cat. 46). Angels are understood to be messengers of God as well as guardians of believers and the innocent. While Christian dogma offers an elaborate hierarchy of various types of angels,⁸ each with specific roles and identifying attributes, Blackmon’s angels seem to function primarily as messengers, guardians, or the heavenly choir.

Gods Holy Gohst Church shows two chicken-like creatures, white with yellow beaks and areas of red, hovering above the church building as a preacher speaks before an assembled congregation. While these creatures might, at first glance, be considered birds, their large size and position around the cross and steeple identify them as angels. The white and red angel in *In The Frist Chapter Of Genesis* dominates the center scene of this vertical triptych and appears to be guiding the wise men who “come to see Jesus.” The five angels in *God Created The Heaven And Thee Earth* seem to function as the heavenly choir during God’s original creation. Their long wings curve around the yellow stars of the newly created heavens. This extremely large arch-topped panel (92 inches in height) presented Blackmon with a formal challenge, and he responded effectively by placing a rich array of decorative forms in the upper half of the panel. The most human-looking of Blackmon’s angels act as sentinels at Christ’s tomb in *He Is Not Here*. Matthew 28:3 describes the angel atop the stone in front of the tomb: “His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow.” The angels shown in this painting are indeed strikingly white. This cruciform piece also presented Blackmon with the opportunity to

display his talent as a composer and decorative artist. Although the biblical account cites only one angel at Christ’s tomb, Blackmon introduces a second creature, a twin of the first, to maintain the symmetry of this very ordered composition.

Blackmon’s symbolic use of angels is rather straightforward and predictable. However, his method of depicting them—their formal qualities—is most interesting and unique. Many of Blackmon’s angels are indeed otherworldly creatures, none more so than the magnificent being confronting Daniel in *I Was By The Great River Hidekel*. In this story from the tenth chapter of Daniel, the prophet, who had been fasting for three weeks, and several companions were at the river Hidekel when there appeared “a certain man clothed in linen, whose loins were girded with fine gold of Uphaz.” Daniel’s fellows could not see the angel, yet they began to tremble and flee, leaving Daniel alone with the creature. He describes the angel as having a body “like the beryl,” a yellow or gold colored stone, and “his face as the appearance of lightning, and his eyes as lamps of fire, and his arms and his feet like in colour to polished brass, and the voice of his words like the voice of a multitude (10:16).” Blackmon bathes the angel, whose rubbery arms appear to bend in three places, in orange, yellow, and gold, with a surrounding aura of scumbled color vibrating from the creature. Daniel covers his eyes, and the river Hidekel itself seems to tremble at the presence of this amazing being. It is a startling image and is, for me, one of the most powerful depictions in all art of a heavenly being.

Arguably, sidewalks and walkways appear in Blackmon’s art more than any other motif. People in his paintings always seem to be in motion, walking to school or parading outside abortion clinics and rescue missions. Even when the action takes place inside the home, bare sidewalks anchor the buildings. The prominence sidewalks have in so many of his paintings highlights more than anything else Blackmon’s long service as a street preacher and “hitchhiking man of God.” For a large portion of his life, he has not owned a



Spare The Rod And Spoil The Child, 1989 (cat. 21)

car and has traveled by bus, proffered car ride, and, most significantly, by foot. 2 Corinthians 5:7 states, “For we walk by faith, not by sight.” It is a verse especially apropos when discussing Prophet Blackmon. For many years he walked throughout the Upper Midwest preaching the Gospel door-to-door and, while advancing age now curtails much of this activity, he continues to walk to destinations throughout Milwaukee.

Sidewalks are shown as undulating swaths (*Spare The Rod And Spoil The Child*, cat. 21) or horizontal bands across the bottom of the picture (*You Foolish Teachers*, cat. 31). One can imagine Blackmon passing the time, as he walked along innumerable white segmented cement paths, with the childhood game of counting the separate squares and avoiding the cracks. He has depicted sidewalks in his paintings from the outset, and they present a good example of his willingness to experiment and improve as an artist. Sidewalks have offered him the opportunity to refine his grasp of spatial perspective. In *Gods Holy Gohst Church* (cat. 15), he renders the sidewalk in the foreground as a horizontal band of like-sized

white blocks, presented in a manner reminiscent of the flat, water-fall perspective of many early American portraitists.⁹ He attempts to show the sidewalk receding into the distance on either side of the painting by gently lifting it at each end, although he retains its flat, pressed-to-the-glass appearance.

In *A Broodcasting Studio* (cat. 27), Blackmon repeats the sidewalk format he used for *Gods Holy Gohst Church*, gently lifting the ends of the sidewalk at each side of the panel as they apparently bend into the distance. This time, however, he does not maintain a consistent sidewalk width; rather, he narrows the

ends of the walk as they bend upward and shrinks each “cement” square as it recedes in space. It is not an entirely successful perspectival rendition, but it does add a pleasing decorative quality to the painting and further emphasizes Blackmon’s willingness to extend himself artistically.

In the later *You Foolish Teachers* (cat. 31), we stand directly in front of a school while at our feet a series of steps, in correct diminishing perspective, lead up to the school’s entrance. The sidewalk extends horizontally on either side of the steps. Blackmon has taken the sidewalk and used the viewer as a kind of reverse horizon point where, instead of all lines converging at a point in the distance, the lines on either side of the center steps lead back to the viewer, creating an odd back-and-forth vanishing point game between the steps and the sidewalk.

Some of the most memorable stories in the Bible involve images of walking: Jesus walks across the water in the book of Matthew; the Israelites destroy the mighty city of Jericho in the book of Joshua by simply walking around it several times

blowing trumpets; and David writes his most famous hymn to the Lord in Psalm 23: "Even though I walk in the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff—they comfort me." And walking figures prominently in at least one historic African American spiritual:

If I walk in the pathway of duty,
If I work till the close of the day,
I shall see the great King in his beauty,
When I've gone the last mile of the way.

When I've gone the last mile of the way,
I shall rest at the close of the day,
And I know there are joys that await me,
When I've gone the last mile of the way.¹⁰

As a subject for art historical study and analysis, Prophet Blackmon's work and his life are multi-layered and unique. I find Blackmon's talent as an artist to be superlative, but I also believe that he is much more than this. In today's world, he provides us with an invaluable example of moral character, humility, spiritual conviction, self-reliance, and self-responsibility. As a personality and well-known community figure, he is colorful, outspoken, and sociable. As a painter, he is a Milwaukee treasure and one of the foremost folk artists in the region, if not the country.

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Notes

1. Except where indicated, all unattributed quotes came directly from conversations between the author and Prophet Blackmon. Most of these conversations, in the form of videotapes, audiotapes, and written notes, are in the possession of the author, Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

2. The critical assessment of what constitutes Blackmon's "best work" is, in this essay, strictly the opinion of the author. I feel that certain paintings Blackmon creates may be less successful than others for a variety of reasons. For instance, although he is a very meticulous artist who labors over each piece, financial circumstances and other intrusions may distract him from focusing on his painting to the fullest degree. Also, an occasional depletion of materials, such as certain paint colors or small brushes, may force him to use less desirable materials at hand. It is also a common practice for Blackmon to wrap his paintings in plastic trash bags before allowing them to leave his residence. On a

few occasions I have picked up paintings from him which were only just completed, with paint still wet. His insistence that the paintings be bagged, lest the "wrong people" (i.e., his enemies, witches, and the forces of evil) see them, has resulted in a few smears and smudges.

3. The concept of Blackmon's Revival-Center-Church-Inter-Price-Shoe-Repair is briefly discussed in Jeffrey Hayes's essay *City/Country: The Art Worlds of Prophet William Blackmon and Charles Kinney* for an exhibition of the same name which was held at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1997.

4. The possibility that Blackmon has detected color fading in his work seems doubtful to me. He has never kept any of his own paintings for any substantial length of time and rarely sees his work once it has left his possession, so it seems unlikely that he would encounter an earlier piece and notice any significant fading. I believe his assertion that color will fade without an undercoat is simply a personal belief, not based on any empirical evidence.

5. Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society LTD, 1972), 136 and George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 27-40. Ferguson indicates that various trees also represent character qualities such as "patience" (fir), "firmness of character, and moral superiority" (plane tree), and "strength of faith and virtue, and the endurance of the Christian against adversity" (oak), attributes particularly suited to Prophet Blackmon himself.

6. The commission for Blackmon's first narrative painting has been historically credited to Barbara Bowman, wife of then Milwaukee Art Museum chief curator Russell Bowman. She originally asked for one of the preacher's hand-lettered signs, but Blackmon decided to go beyond pure signage and created a small painting of a house with the words "God Bless Our Home." The details of Blackmon's transition from sign painter to figurative artist may be found in my notes of conversations with Blackmon, Russell Bowman, and Kent Mueller, gallery director and Blackmon's original dealer.

7. Jeffrey R. Hayes, *City/Country*, unpaginated.

8. Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols*, 57-58.

9. A good example of this kind of perspective is seen in *Joseph Moore and Family* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1839) by Erastus Salisbury Field. In this painting, the figures are situated upon an ornately decorated floor that tips almost parallel to the picture plane.

10. Quoted in James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 131-132. I want to thank Jeffrey Hayes for bringing this poem to my attention.



Revival Center, 1312 W. Garfield, north view, 1999. Jeffrey Hayes.

Paintings that Speak and Heal: The Prophetic Art of Prophet Blackmon and the African American Prophetic Tradition

Chester J. Fontenot, Jr.

When Jeffrey Hayes, the organizer of the national tour for Prophet Blackmon's paintings, first invited me to write this essay on Prophet's paintings, I felt a little like a fish out of water, mostly because I am a literary and cultural critic, and have not previously written about visual art. Also, after I received and saw the slides of Prophet's paintings, I didn't know quite what to make of them or the person who produced them. But when I accepted Jeffrey's invitation to travel to Milwaukee to meet Prophet, I was not aware of the impact that both he and his art would have on me. Once I arrived in Milwaukee via Amtrak, Jeffrey informed me that he had some difficulty pinning Prophet down to an exact time and location for our meeting. He informed me that Prophet had promised to meet us in front of the East Library at 2 p.m. I later found out that Jeffrey had pulled off the unimaginable, since Prophet embodies all of the familiar tropes of prophecy by consciously refusing to submit to any institutional expectations or



demands, including an adherence to setting appointments. Nonetheless, when Jeffrey and I arrived twenty minutes early in front of the library, we found that he had not yet arrived. Since I had yet to check into my hotel room, I suggested to Jeffrey that we go by the hotel so that I could check in and freshen up a bit. Jeffrey agreed and said that if Prophet still had not arrived when we returned to the front of the library, we could get something to eat at the Beans and Barley restaurant across the street.

When we returned to the library, Prophet had still not arrived, and noticing that it was not yet 2 p.m., Jeffrey and I walked across the street, were seated in the restaurant, ordered lunch, and engaged in conversation about the project. Shortly after 2 p.m., I noticed an older brown car pull in front of the library, and two young African American women and an older black man get out of it. They didn't seem to move deliberately, but rather walked around aimlessly while engaged in conversation with each other. After noticing them and deciding that

they were probably part of the local human activity in this part of town, I returned to my conversation with Jeffrey. After approximately fifteen minutes had passed, we left the restaurant and had begun to cross the street when Jeffrey looked up and exclaimed: “There’s Prophet—he’s kept our appointment.” Now I was taken back by the sight of Prophet, since this was the same older black man I had seen get out of the old brown car accompanied by the two young black women, the same man whom I had relegated to inconsequential status a few minutes earlier. Now I was facing this man, and was being introduced to him not as a depersonalized vagrant or part of the locale, but rather as Prophet Blackmon, the subject of aesthetic and cultural interest that had drawn me to Milwaukee.

I was first struck by Prophet’s demeanor and physical stature. Jeffrey had told me that he is one of the nicest human beings I would ever meet, but I was not prepared for the warm, brotherly hug that he bestowed on both of us. And I also knew that Prophet is nearly eighty years old, but his upright physique, quick pace of walking, strong voice, powerful hug, and piercing gaze failed to betray his advanced years. Indeed, when I first saw him arrive I thought he was twenty years his junior. But the most unsettling attribute of this man who refers to himself as “God’s Modern Apostle” is his commanding presence and sense of peace. Even though Jeffrey and I were clearly members of an elite class of cultural intellectuals—college professors—I had the distinct impression that it was Prophet, and not either of us, who was in control of our meeting.

Since our meeting took place on a typical March day in Milwaukee when the temperature dipped below the point of freezing, and the wind that met our exposed flesh testified to its embrace of the cold lake waters, we moved our discussion inside of the library where we found a table and chairs in an area where we could talk without disturbing the library’s patrons. As we began our dialogue, I realized that Prophet is immersed in the African American religious

discourse of holiness that resists attempts to locate it through human logic and specificity. His language is punctuated with the tropes of prophecy—foretelling the future, revealing personal information about his subjects, and locating physical infirmities in others and healing them with his spoken word. He responded to every question that either Jeffrey or I asked him with a cyclic narrative that enabled him to circumvent our logical queries and, at the same time, to create the narrative space to tell his own story. It became clear to me that in spite of the fact that Prophet indicated that he pastors a church comprised of only eight members and has spent nearly half of his adult life hitchhiking, I was in the presence of a man who radiated with the charisma and assuredness of the African American prophetic tradition.

After talking for a while, I asked Prophet how he would describe his religious faith and the relation of his faith to his paintings. Although he responded by denying any denominational affiliation—his religious background is in the Holiness church—he did indicate that holiness is the center of his ministerial and prophetic vision; in other words, his art is a visual representation of prophecy. I should add here that I use the term “Holiness church” to refer to the precursor to the Pentecostal movement that maintains strict adherence to traditional church doctrine as the necessary prerequisite for salvation, and the centrality of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit (speaking in tongues, and tarrying for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit) as evidence of the “second blessing.” This “second blessing” allows the believer, or “saint,” to have access both to full church membership, favor with God, and the ability to win the position of apostle, prophet, prophetess, spiritual worker, or healer within the church’s hierarchy. Even though Prophet refused to embrace the Holiness church as his denominational affiliation, his self-designated status as “God’s Modern Apostle” and “Prophet” suggests that he has, at the very least, appropriated the language of this religious movement in his public representation and ministry.

In spite of my inability to obtain a specific, workable definition of what Prophet considers holiness, the following day I confronted, his representation of this spiritual commodity in his paintings. Just as his language is punctuated with the discourse of the Holiness church, his paintings force the perceiving subject to grapple with his vision through a coded linguistic system that does not conform to the rules of spelling and conventional representation of linguistic phraseology. This dynamic relationship between the visual images and narrative text constructs an art form that both speaks and, if we believe Prophet, has the potential to heal those who see them.

I believe that Prophet's unique artistic style is the result of his realization that he has the gifts of healing and prophecy, the former of which he became aware in 1946, and the latter in 1952. While he knew that he had special gifts for quite some time previous to the aforementioned dates, he had not fully realized their significance or accepted his "call" to use these gifts for God's purposes until he miraculously healed a man who was dying, and later prophesied a terrible storm that had not been forecast by meteorologists. Writing in a pamphlet of testimonies produced to support his ministry ("Revival Center"), Prophet recalls the first time he was used by God:

The earliest I can remember being used by God is when I was around eleven years old. We had neighbors who lived up the street from us, Tom and Anny Riddley. Mrs. Anny's Mother was living with them, she was old and sick. I had heard the older people talking about the Death Rattle, when one was ready to die. I was in the front room where her mother was, when a strange sound began coming from her throat, a gurgling, as if she were choking. For some reason, I said, rather loudly, "Mrs. Anny, your mother has the Death Rattle." After making that unusual statement, I left the Riddley house and came home to my house, and when I came around to our backyard, Mrs. Anny came out of her backyard, screaming "Mama, Mama!" Her mother had died.



Prophet Blackmon, Inner City Arts Festival, 1989. Bill Tennesen.

While this testimony may seem incredulous to some, it is quite common within the African American prophetic tradition, especially in the southern parts of the United States. The mysticism of the folk religion of black southerners has become legendary. What is unique here, however, is that Prophet indicates that his gift of prophecy was revealed to him through foretelling the death of Mrs. Anny's mother. This is unusual because prophecy is usually associated with adults who are able to forecast events that could not otherwise be known. Here, Prophet indicates that he was neither an adult nor unaware that this woman was near death because of the presence of the trope of death—the "Death Rattle." Nonetheless, Prophet indicates that this was a sign, to him, that God was using him for a specific, divine purpose.

Prophet's construct of prophecy extends beyond the biblical trope that privileges the written text as the divinely inspired word of God; he considers his paintings to function much like sermons, another way of preaching or prophesying. His paintings, created on the surfaces of an amazing array of mostly wooden utilitarian objects with whatever colors of paint are available, are

often based on biblical stories and passages of scripture; he also interweaves his written prophetic narrative—in which he disrupts the static formal principles of symmetry, spelling, and other mechanics of writing—into the visual images in his paintings. It is as if his prophecy forces his audience to simultaneously confront both the arresting visual images in his paintings and reconstruct his written prophecies by imposing the conventions of written expression on a narrative that expressly refuses to be constrained within the demands of traditional written form.

While talking with Prophet, it became clear that the center of holiness is, for him, “traditional” Western values grounded in Christianity that have been challenged and largely disregarded by our post-modern culture. By post-modern, I mean the contemporary post-World War II era that has called into question, among other things, the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of Western civilization. This period has been marked by the secularization of cultural values; it has witnessed the decline in the nuclear family and close-knit community, two things that Prophet values and feels are necessary for God’s prophetic voice to be heard in this contemporary age. Most of Prophet’s paintings depict scenes of family life that have gone awry as the result of the ills of urban life—drugs, gangs, sexual promiscuity, etc. His “speaking and healing” paintings, then, offer a corrective to these problems that result from a decentered Christian consciousness. This emphasis on traditional Christian values places Prophet’s art within the African American religious tradition, since following the end of slavery and the failure of Reconstruction, African American independent churches and denominations shifted

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their focus from challenging the anti-Christian nature of slavery and sociopolitical legislation that denied blacks full access to American society. In the final quarter of the nineteenth century, these churches joined the African American cultural movement, known popularly as the “put your best foot forward” generation, that emphasized adherence to the mainstream cultural values that would offer blacks upward mobility. In fact,

Booker T. Washington was the strongest proponent of this outlook; his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, has been characterized by many scholars as a manual, both for presenting a public image of oneself and a polemical treatise that argues for the maintenance of traditional Christian ethics and morality within African American society. Much like Washington, Prophet privileges

conservative religious discourse as the means to racial uplifting and a corrective to social ills that plague urban areas.

This religious outlook is centered in one of Prophet’s paintings, *The 53 Chapter Of Isaih* (cat. 26). Of the fifty works included in the exhibition, I find this “speaking” artifact most striking. This painting, reminiscent of Ezekiel’s vision of the wheel in the middle of the wheel to represent the salvific relationship of Jesus to God the Father and the Holy Spirit, fixes holiness at the center of the wheel. Religious institutions, denominations, faiths, and ethnic groups that worship deities other than Jesus the Christ revolve on the periphery in a spiral of judgment based on their adherence to this objective, eternal standard that exists independent of the viewing subjects that perceive it. The ethical, religious center of the painting is the sacrificial suffering of



The 53 Chapter Of Isaih, 1992 (cat. 26)

Jesus the Christ. Here, the written narratives are characteristically interwoven with visual imagery to create a discursive system that forces the viewing subjects to deconstruct these misrepresentations of faith. It is as if, through this painting, Prophet constructs a visual sermon that “speaks” both to the racial/ethnic and religious groups portrayed in its second layer, and Jesus on behalf of the sins of humanity; it establishes a standard against which all other religious faiths are judged. Similar to Ezekiel’s vision of the wheel in the middle of the wheel, the outer wheels in this painting are dependent

on the inner one; as it turns, all other religious systems do so likewise, but only as signifiers of the inner wheel. In order to achieve holiness, one must divest oneself of derivative religious systems that signify on the inner wheel and adhere to the authentic text of Christianity. As one moves through the “unholy” systems en route to the inner wheel, one is “healed” both spiritually and culturally. In this way, this painting both “speaks” in the manner of a sermon, and “heals” in the Holiness tradition by drawing the viewing subject inside its discursive system toward wholeness, which is



Prophet Blackmon with Sister Peavey (center) and Sister Sherrod (left rear), 1999. *David Smith.*

here defined as the proper relationship with Jesus the Christ.

This dialectical relationship between the visual representation of prophecy and the written narrative of social criticism vis-à-vis salvific discourse is consistent with the tradition of African American prophetic texts. Although Prophet Blackmon stands almost alone in his representation of this tradition through visual art, I find that his paintings function much like the cultural texts written by African Americans during the nineteenth century that argued against the commodification of people of African descent as property, that is to say, social and political subjects that had no citizenship rights. This suggests that the logos, or ethical, spiritual center of Prophet's art is drawn from the African American tradition through visual art. His paintings are cultural texts that are intended to serve the same social purpose as the written and spoken texts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century black cultural leaders, such as Prince Hall, David

Walker, Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Maria Stewart, Jarena Lee, Julia Foote, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Dubois. Much like Prophet's paintings, these texts "spoke" to, or "talked back and black" (Gates, 1988) at the oppressive conditions under which blacks existed—slavery, segregation, and the silencing of black women within African American independent churches—and offered a corrective to these societal ills by privileging the biblical text over cultural traditions that misrepresented Christianity. God's call to the prophet to prophesy, then, is the command to serve as divine agency in human history, to maintain adherence to the salvific discourse centered in the biblical tradition. The African American prophetic tradition represents itself as the authentic prophetic voice in the midst of spiritual perversions that have led to the decline of human agency that is God-centered.

Just as Prophet's paintings signify against the traditional Christian values that undergird American

culture to deconstruct the evils that plague post-modern culture, the writings of the aforementioned authors doublevoice their narratives by juxtaposing their critiques of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American culture against the standards imbedded in the biblical tradition. For example, in establishing the African Masons, Prince Hall (Hall, 1797; Walkes, 1979) argues that the white Masons who refused to authenticate him and his Masonic family because of race prejudice were not consistent with the tenets of Masonry. In fact, he asserted that Africans were the original Masons and traced the history of Masonry to King Solomon, a black king who presided over the construction of the temple at Jerusalem. Prophet revises and repeats this cultural trope by holding that Solomon is the center of the biblical narrative, and black people serve a “chosen” function in their relationship to salvation and God. The graphic imagery and strong language that Prince Hall uses in his text create the same effect that Prophet achieves in his paintings—arresting visual imagery set against salvific discourse that forces the reader to deconstruct the position of the white Masons. Similarly, David Walker directs his *Appeal* (1829) to black people who are the subjects of slavery and deconstructs the evils of the slave system and what he calls “false professors” of Christianity by structuring his argument using the form of the U. S. Constitution, complete with a preamble and articles. His specific purpose is to awaken within the black community and others who read his text the call to righteousness, or in Prophet’s discourse, “holiness,” by which Walker means to fight against slavery. It is significant to mention here that Walker’s *Appeal* had such “healing” or corrective influence that it was banned in the South; less than a year after its publication, Nat Turner began his rebellion and attributed his revolutionary activities to David Walker.

In 1845, Frederick Douglass published his autobiography, an event that promoted him to the forefront of the abolitionist movement. Douglass, a licensed minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, invoked the powerful language of sanctification and righteousness to condemn

the brutal nature of American slavery. His graphic portrayal of the inhumane treatment of slaves, combined with a balanced portrait of the effect that the slave institution had on those who managed and maintained it, created a dialectical narrative structure much like Prophet’s. Moreover, Douglass doublevoices his text by signifying against the Transcendentalists (Barbour, 1973; Miller, 1957; Wellek, 1965) who were attempting to construct their identities through the genre of autobiography by establishing that, while these white intellectuals had the privilege of locating their history through specific information, slaves had no such options since their status as property denied them access to specific signifiers from which they could assert their individual identities. Further, the Transcendentalists argued that the evils of American society were the result of industrialization and the growth of cities. They proposed the return of humanity to the rural areas where they could re-establish their intimate relationship to the natural environment as the remedy for the cultural aberrations that America was experiencing. In much the same way, many of Prophet’s paintings depict the evils that he is speaking against as the result of the failure of urban residents to assert their social identities through appropriating significant cultural markers. Instead, they turn to materialism, drugs, sexual perversion, etc., to fill the spiritual emptiness they suffer from lack of focus, history, and spirituality. Prophet’s corrective to this ailment is to generate a visual discursive system that reconstructs human history—from genesis to the present—and itemizes the particular aspects of urban culture that have led humanity astray.

Just as Prophet is convinced that God called him to minister, both through traditional preaching and pastoring and visual art, Maria Stewart (1832), Jarena Lee (1849), Amanda Berry Smith (1893), and Julia Foote (1886), four nineteenth-century African American female prophets/preachers, asserted their divine calling as evidence of their authentication as preachers against the male-oriented African American independent churches that excluded them from speaking in public as

ministers (Gates, 1988). Beginning in the early nineteenth century, African American male religious leaders appropriated the patriarchal discourse that resides within the linguistic constructs of Christian churches. While this dialogical borrowing, so to speak, served to empower them against a religious-based system that attempted to negate their voices as men, it likewise rendered African American women silent within the male-structured hierarchies of historical African American independent churches and denominations. This discourse delimited the voices of women in ministry, public church representation, and race leadership. This silencing of African American women begins in the 1830s with Maria Stewart, the first American woman to give a public lecture before an audience of men and women. Although their ministerial roles were restricted within the organized churches, these women, much like Prophet Blackmon, refused to accept the domesticated public roles created for them as public speaking subjects. Instead, they constructed feminist discourse that privileged divine agency over institutional doctrines, and offered a prophetic voice that attempted to correct the misrepresentation of the sacred biblical text to support the gendered roles cast by male religious leaders. These women's attempts to find their "preacherly" voices was embraced, in 1893, by the World's Women's Congress of Representative Women that met in Chicago, with the public acceptance of their spiritual autobiographies that had been previously published, albeit at their own expense. These spiritual autobiographies functioned much like Prophet's paintings in that they offered these women the option to become speaking subjects within the African American male prophetic tradition. The picturesque language these female prophet/preachers use to represent God's divine calling is set against the stilted, oppositional discourse of church doctrine.

I am aware that Prophet would not agree with my placing him within the context of these nineteenth-century female preachers, since he believes that while God calls women to other branches of ministry, He does not call them to the ministry as

preachers. In his paintings that depict scenes of people worshipping in churches, and in one of his broadsides that characteristically uses the narrative technique evident in his paintings—namely conscious lack of adherence to the formal principles of writing—Prophet states his opposition, based on divine revelation, not church doctrine, to women preachers:

WE BELIVE IN ALL OF THE GIFTS WORKING.
WE DON'T EXCEPT THE SISTERS AS PREACHERS
FOR GOD HAVE NOT CALLED THE WOMAN
TO PREACH. HOWEVER SHE WAS CALL TO
PREACH IN THE THIRD CHAPTER OF GENSES.
THE DIVIL CALLED HER TO PREACH. WE DO
EXCEPT OUR SISTERS AS MISSIONARYS AND
AZ PROPHETESS WITHE ALL OF THE GIFTS
EXCPEP PREACHING.

Prophet's language here establishes a relationship to two traditions within African American prophecy: the first is the male-oriented perspective that reserves public speaking roles for men while relegating women to the private space of domesticity (i.e., holding prayer meetings in their homes); the second is the feminist assertion against church doctrine that silences women and other "undesirables." The oppositional nature of church doctrine not only otherizes those who are not within the male-oriented religious tradition, but it also forces them to speak publicly through other cultural forms, such as writing, and, in Prophet's case, visual art.

The African American prophetic tradition is later continued by Alexander Crummell (Crummell I, 1830-1898), a Presbyterian minister who lived for twelve years in Liberia, returned to America and attempted to establish economic relationships between African Americans and African nations. Writing in prose that signifies against the American Colonization Society, Crummell argues that African Americans should be interested in Africa's economic future because of their Christian commitment, shared African heritage, and the vast riches of the continent. Crummell's texts, much like the binary structures in Prophet's paintings, create tension between the

attempts of the American government to rid itself of the presence of people of African descent, and his altruistic motives to awaken African Americans to the real possibility for black nationalism through economic investment and development in Africa. Crummell's emphasis on traditional Christian values and ethics is similar to the "healing" propositions offered by Prophet in his paintings that resist the vices of our postmodern society.

Perhaps Prophet's relationship to the African American prophetic tradition is best exemplified in his appropriation of the tropes established by Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Dubois. Washington, the late-nineteenth-century educator turned political power-broker, emphasized the traditional tropes of hard work, honesty, morality, Christian ethics, and self-help as the panacea for the fractured nature of the African American psyche that resulted from slavery and the failures of Reconstruction. His autobiography, *Up From Slavery* (1901), doublevoices the texts of the slave narrative (Washington, 1901, p. 15-24), popularized by Frederick Douglass, with American autobiography, i.e., Benjamin Franklin (Washington, 1901, p. 40-43). The dialectical positioning of these texts creates within his narrative an effect similar to that achieved by Prophet in his paintings: both cultural texts are used as a narrative springboard, so to speak, against which Washington presents his program for racial uplifting. Prophet achieves this by juxtaposing the vices of urban life against the sacred biblical text. His visual representations of the decay of urban life are set against the pastoral images that signify God's will for humanity. His written narrative is interwoven into these graphic scenes. The tension created by constructing this binary representation of traditional Christian values against the perversions of postmodern American culture suggests that, much like Washington, Prophet creates a complex paradigm that builds his dialogic system on the contemporary cultural milieu.

In the same way that Prophet establishes an intertextual relationship with Booker T. Washington's cultural tradition of righteousness and self-help, he also appropriates the discourse

imbedded in W. E. B. Dubois seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In this classic work, Dubois presents what he calls "the problem of the twentieth century," which is the color line, through articulating from within the "veil," the world of blackness that is constructed as a cultural marker that establishes difference between whites and blacks (Dubois, 1903, p. 43-45). Dubois finds that in order to represent the "souls" of black people—that is, the spiritual, cultural essence that lies behind their masks of stereotypes that are grounded in the minstrel era of the 1830s—he must first locate their physical bodies in the black South. In other words, Dubois must first find the true essence of black people, what they are really like, and represent them from the point of view of their own cultural experiences, rather than from that of the dominant American cultural hegemony. As Dubois weaves his haunting poetic narrative, he interweaves what he calls "sorrow songs," the lyrical utterances of ethnic groups that have been oppressed, through epigraphs that establish the tenor and tone for his narrative voice. This dynamic relationship between two different cultural forms—music and written narrative—constructs within this text a discursive system that both "speaks" to the delimiting nature of race prejudice in America and offers an analysis of the problem that is intended to "heal" the cultural fabric that has been damaged by racism.

Prophet Blackmon achieves much of the same effect as Dubois in his graphic portrayal of a kind of urban hell, complete with different levels of human suffering created by both African Americans who have deviated from the tenets of Christianity, and the dominant American society that has deliberately led blacks to cultural and spiritual damnation. In a number of his paintings, Prophet clearly depicts scenes of this depraved state, similar to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and speaks to these conditions through prophetic discourse that simultaneously critiques the nature of these problems, and offers a remedy for them. In this sense, Prophet's paintings, much like Dubois' text, appropriate the tropes of African American prophecy by juxtaposing two

different artistic forms within the same narrative structure. This positioning of, in Dubois' text, music against polemical discourse, and in Prophet's paintings, visual art against sermonic language, constructs a cultural text that "speaks" against the problems presented and "heals" those experiencing these difficulties through a spiritual resolution.

In the same manner that Prophet establishes an intertextual relationship with cultural texts within the African American prophetic tradition, he constructs his version of holiness by revising and repeating the tropes of what Zora Neale Hurston called "the sanctified church." The holiness that Prophet envisions is anchored by what he calls *Gods Family Tree* (cat. 14), a visual representation of the act of divine favor that is at once egalitarian, yet differentiated. However, the differences exhibited by racial/ethnic groups do not signify human value, but rather different branches connected to the same tree of life that is embedded in the soil, the substance from which God formed humanity. Yet, during my conversation with him, Prophet signified blackness by asserting, as I indicated earlier in this essay, that Solomon, a black man, is the center of the Bible, and all other things emanate from him, including Adam, Eve, and Jesus. Here, his eschatological vision recasts biblical history from the point of view of what some call Afrocentricity, an ideology that privileges Africa as the significant signifier for people of African descent. Although Prophet does not maintain that an African consciousness is a necessary prerequisite for the cultural healing of blacks, he did assert, during our conversation, that a correct representation of Christianity acknowledges the centrality of African history in biblical discourse. He refers to people of African descent as the original race in whom the biblical narratives are centered, and as subjects of divine agency armed with a unique history and relationship to salvation. While he says that he is not a "race preacher," but rather his ministry is centered in holiness, Prophet also represents himself as a black man, both in his discourse and signatures on his paintings—"Blackmon," "Blackman," "Blackmon" with an "a"

inside of the "o," and "Blackman" with an "o" inside of the "a." The signatures on his paintings signify that he constructs his identity in a manner that deconstructs the tropes of blackness that depersonalize African Americans. Rather, he asserts his blackness through linguistic play, a sort of pun, on the "o" and "a" that he uses to represent himself as both prophet and black-speaking subject.

While I think that Prophet emphasizes family and communal life because he has a strong sense of his own family history and ties, and a complex relationship with his own community, it may well be that he sees in these two structures the divine agency that is presently lacking in the vicinity in which he lives. Prophet's church building, which also serves as his living quarters and "studio," is located in an area of Milwaukee that embodies the familiar characteristics of urban decay, or in hip-hop discourse, "the hood." His ministry is set against the destructive forces that decenter traditional Christian values and substitute for them postmodern secularism that, Prophet feels, corrupts the purpose that God intends for families and communities. He visualizes God's family as a stable home life which angels, represented by airborne figures usually with five wings, watch over. His paintings tend to associate this stability with the presence of either a huge tree that grows out of the center of the home and spreads its protective branches over the entire house, or several smaller trees outside the home that create an edenic scene reminiscent of the pastoral nature of the Garden of Eden in which humanity is in harmony with the natural world. Here, Prophet revises and repeats the trope of African American prophecy established by Frederick Douglass that represents the cities as freedom/salvation and the rural environments as oppressive/damnation (Douglass, 1845, p. 30). He deconstructs this by visualizing the vices associated with urban life—sexual promiscuity, broken families, drugs, neglecting children, oppression of lower class workers, etc.—and offers a corrective visualized by pastoral scenes in which human beings commune with nature and each other. Prophet appropriates

biblical tropes that represent the presence of God with the naturalistic environment. God's will for humanity is here pictured as human beings in concert with the presence of God, and in submission to divine agency that exists in nature.

It might also be that the presence of trees in Prophet's paintings points to the lack of rootedness and specific history of African Americans. Clearly, while Prophet signifies intertextually with the biblical narrative, especially Psalm 1 where the godly man is represented as a "tree planted by the rivers of water" whose "roots run deep," he also engages the African American prophetic tradition that has used this trope to represent the attempt of blacks to establish a relationship with their African heritage. The inability of blacks to locate with geographic specificity the exact locale, nation, and tribe on the continent of Africa from which their ancestors originated has left them without the signifiers necessary to construct identity in the way other American ethnic groups have. Instead, they have had to construct identity through the Hegelian notion of positivity by negation, that is to say, by embracing the cultural markers of blackness that were created for them by the dominant hegemony, and recasting them to express their Africanness that asserts difference as a positive characteristic. The presence of trees in many of Prophet's paintings may indeed indicate his attempt to replace the historical search for the roots of the African American consciousness with a firmly embedded notion of the presence of God that eternally watches over the least of His children.

Prophet, likewise, centers his construct of holiness in communal life where human agency maintains adherence to the standards established

by God for them. His paintings in this area range from speaking texts against abortion to stern warnings to teachers and others not to "teach sex" to children. This community is centered in *Gods Mountain Of Joy And Peace* (cat. 36) and *Sheperded Mountain Retreat* (cat. 37), pastoral views that depict human beings in harmony with nature, which is, again, represented by a tree. Of course, his use of mountains in these and other paintings suggest that he has appropriated the

biblical trope of mountains as the dwelling places of God and the source of serenity for humanity. Here, Prophet establishes a relationship to the tradition of prophecy evident in biblical narratives that represent not only the stability of God's presence as mountains, but also the comforting, secure relationship of mountains as the source of the sacred to the communities that

reside next to them. Therefore, another such subject, *God's Mountain Hotel* (cat. 17), is a visual representation of the sacred prophetic tradition that locates divine agency in the magnificent, overwhelming nature of majestic mountains that rise high above the earth and humanity. It is as if this speaking text that we perceive in this and other paintings by Prophet offers a cultural text—the presence of God associated with naturalistic imagery—that has been submerged within the American consciousness in favor of the materialistic underpinnings of post-modern society.

Prophet's conscious attempt to authenticate himself as "God's Modern Apostle" situates him within the tradition of African American prophecy, both through the verbal narrative he rendered

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and communities.*

during our meeting, and his art that both speaks to the viewing subjects and has the potential to heal the ills that plague our urban communities. In spite of social and institutional indicators that suggest, much like my first impression upon seeing Prophet through the window of the restaurant, that he is a depersonalized African American elder who easily blends into the locale of the black folk community, I find that his prophetic language gleaned from the Holiness church and the complex nature of his art that sermonizes in the manner characteristic of African American prophets, both sacred and secular, differentiate his message from the mundane, discursive folk utterances that have become commonplace in lower class urban environments (i.e., political rhetoric, traditional sermonic language, etc.). His awareness of the biblical tradition, combined with a keen sense of social commentary, allows him to speak publicly and establish authenticity within the community of faith. His paintings function much like the verbal texts written by African American prophets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and connect him to a rich artistic tradition that considers art within the contexts of the community from which it is produced and to which it speaks. Perhaps Prophet's vision of his art healing without touching, just as he and his followers do in his ministry, is more than the rantings and ravings of an elderly man who has been unsuccessful in finding his niche within the established hierarchy of institutional African American churches. For just as his paintings speak through the prophetic tradition within black religious vernacular, they also have the potential to heal by privileging salvific discourse that continues the tradition of African American prophecy established nearly two hundred years ago.

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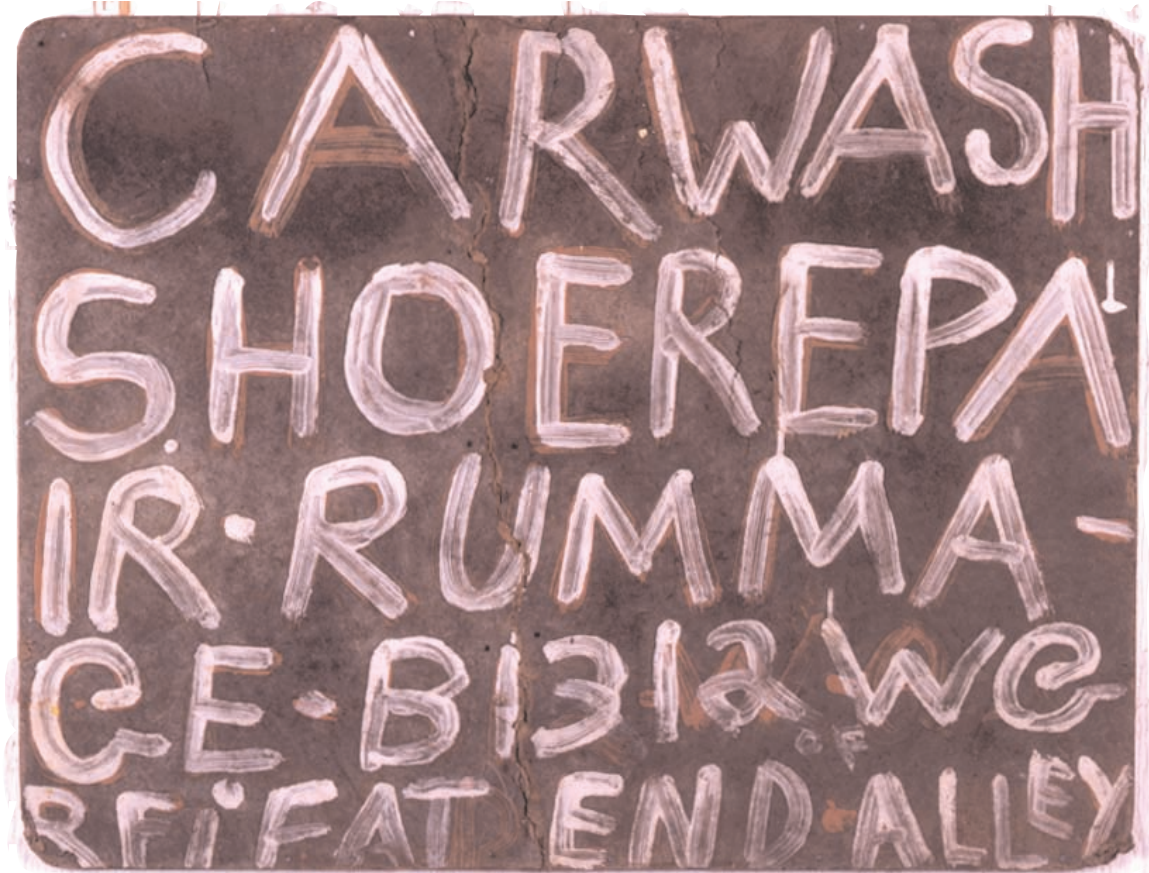
Paintings in the Exhibition



Outdoor-Rummage [sign], mid-1980s (cat. 1)



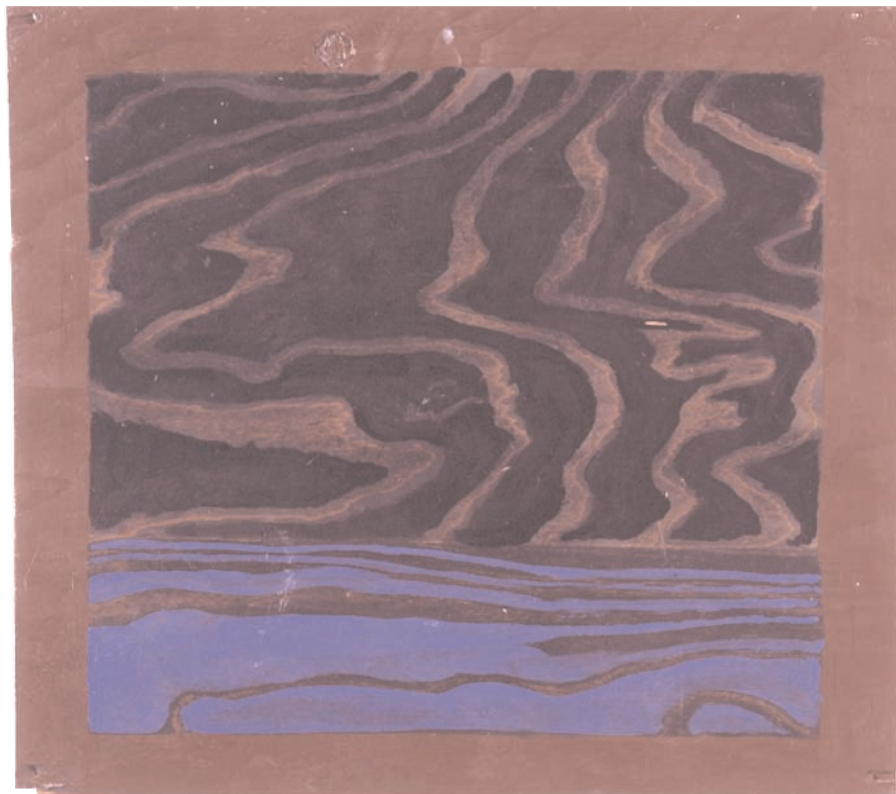
Order-Our-Own Magazine [sign], mid-1980s (cat. 2)



Car Wash Shoe Repair [sign], mid-1980s (cat. 3)

REVIVAL-CENTER
INTER-CHURCH
INTER-PRICE-SHOE-REPAIR-
IRISH-BOESHINE
HAND-LAUNDRY
TAYLOR
INC.
PROPHET W BLACKMON

Revival Center [sign],
late 1980s (cat. 4)



Untitled (Abstraction), 1984 (cat. 5)



Gods Blessed Time Cycle, 1984 (cat. 6)



God Bless Our Home, 1985 (cat. 7)



Gods Light House, 1985 (cat. 8)



Untitled (House and Tree), 1985 (cat. 9)



Gods Grain Of Life, 1985
(cat. 10)



Escape From Hell To Heaven, 1985 (cat. 11)



Gods Blessed Spirit, 1986 (cat. 12)



Birth Tree House. Gods Earth, 1986 (cat. 13)



Gods Family Tree, 1986 (cat. 14)



Gods Holy Gohst Church, 1986 (cat. 15)



God Feareing Foundry Workers, 1987 (cat. 16)



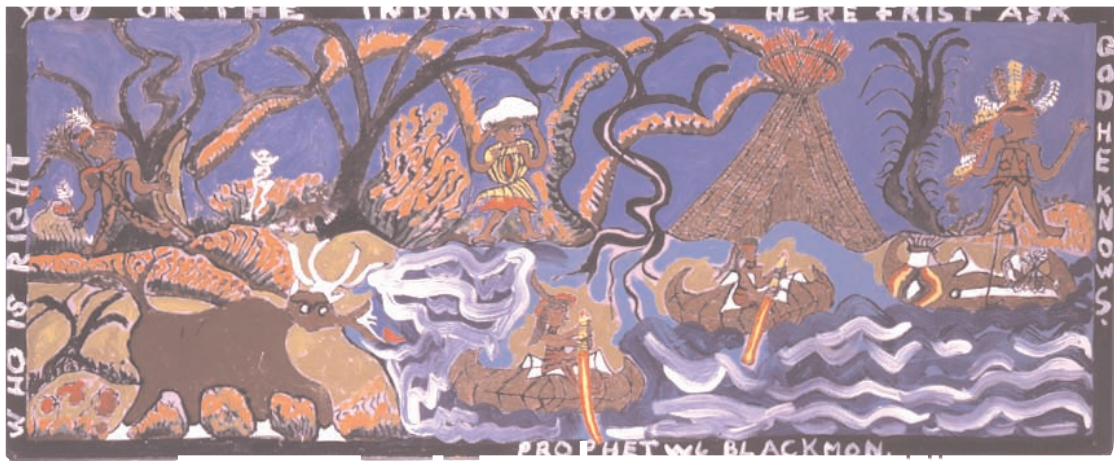
Mountain Hotel, 1988 (cat. 17)



Noah Arck, 1988 (cat. 18)



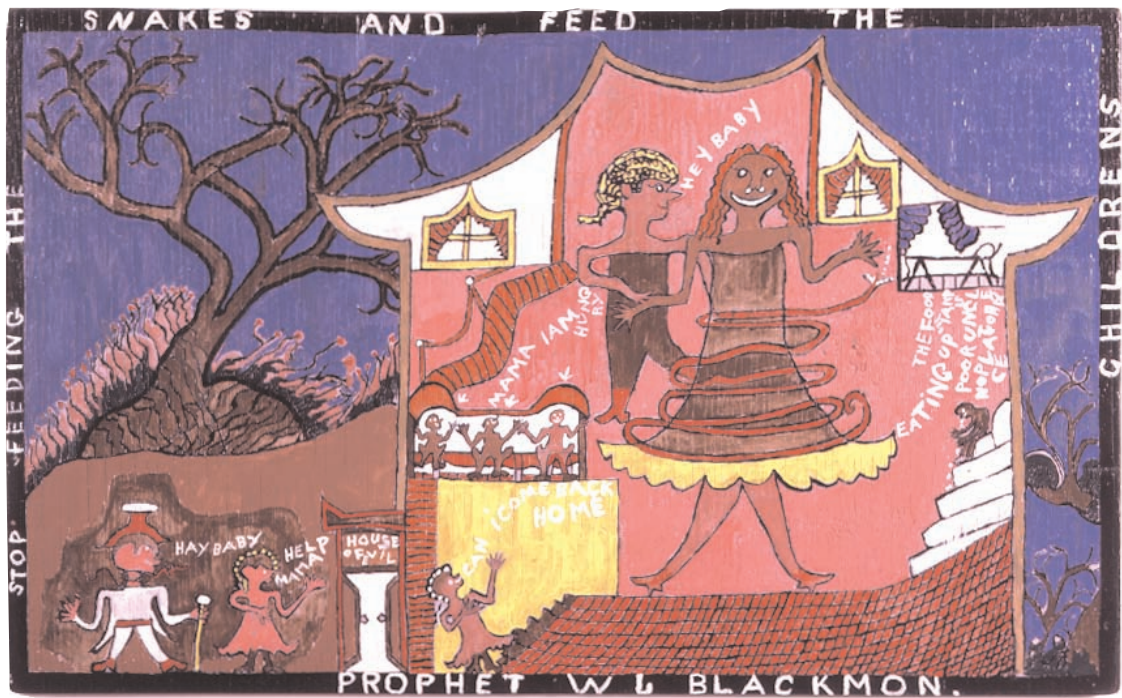
Moses At The Burning Bush, 1988 (cat. 19)



Who Is Right You Or The Indian, 1989 (cat. 20)



Spare The Rod And Spoil The Child, 1989 (cat. 21)



Stop Feeding The Snakes And Feed The Childrens, 1990 (cat. 22)



Do Y Love Neighbor, 1990 (cat. 23)



Escape From Moab, 1991 (cat. 24)



The Southeast Is The Border Of Ethiopia, 1991 (cat. 25)



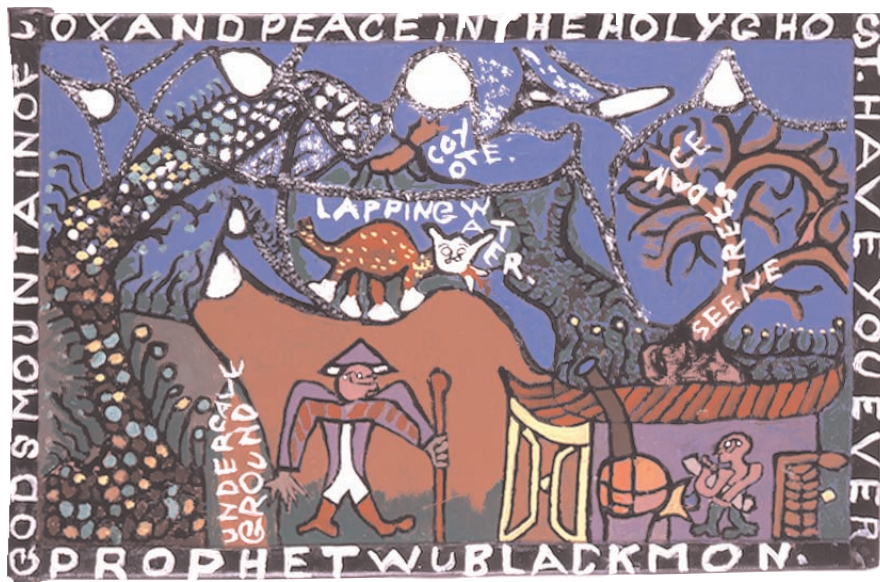
30th Verse Of The 8 Chapter Of Acts, 1993 (cat. 29)



What Abortion Dose To The Mother, 1994 (cat. 30)



24 Chapter Of 2 Chronicles, 1995 (cat. 35)



Gods Mountain Of Joy And Peace, 1995 (cat. 36)



Sheperted Mountain Retreat, 1995 (cat. 37)



*In The Frist Chapter
Of Genesis, 1996
(cat. 38)*



John The Baptist, 1996 (cat. 39)



I Was By The Great River Hidekel, 1996 (cat. 40)



The Family Tree Showing Gods Holy Plan Of Marriage, 1996 (cat. 41)



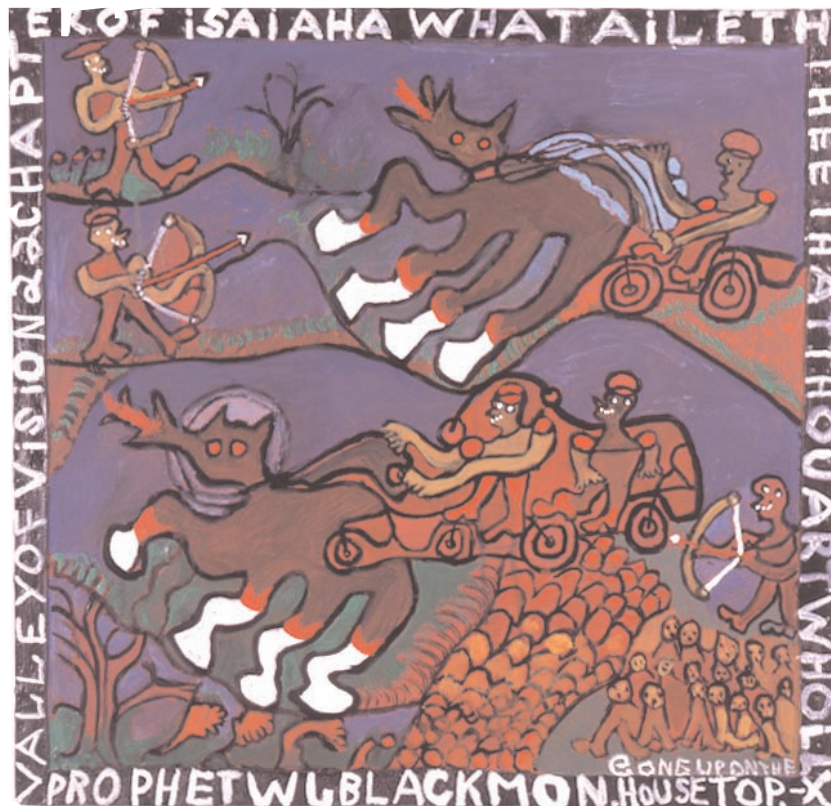
The Phillips Family, 1996 (cat. 42)



God Created The Heaven And The Earth, 1996 (cat. 43)



Jehu 10 Verse Ninth Chapter 2 Kings, 1997 (cat. 44)



Valley Of Vision, 1998 (cat. 45)



He Is Not Here
(Resurrection), 1998
(cat. 46)



Good Samariton, 1998 (cat. 47)



Solmom In All His Gloy, 1998 (cat. 48)



In The Beginning, 1998 (cat. 49)



You Are Looking On The Inside Of A Tree, 1998 (cat. 50)

Checklist of the Exhibition

All works in the exhibition are from the collection of Paul and Jeanne Phelps.

(Height precedes width in dimensions)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. <i>Outdoor-Rummage</i> [sign]
mid-1980s
latex paint on cloth
13 1/2 x 33 in. irregular
Provenance: acquired from the artist | 6. <i>Gods Blessed Time Cycle</i>
1984
latex paint, ink on wood
14 x 31 in.
Provenance: Kent Mueller
Exhibited: <i>Prophet William Blackmon</i> ,
Wright Street Gallery, Milwaukee, 1986 |
| 2. <i>Order-Our-Own Magazine</i> [sign]
mid-1980s
latex paint on paper, mounted on metal
screen frame, tape, wire
28 1/2 x 18 in.
Provenance: Ruth and Robert Vogeles;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: <i>Personal Voice</i> , Krannert Art
Museum and Milwaukee Art Museum,
1997 | 7. <i>God Bless Our Home</i>
1985
latex paint on wood
16 1/4 x 28 in.
Provenance: Edward Shurla; Wright
Street Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: <i>Prophet William Blackmon</i> ,
Wright Street Gallery, 1986 |
| 3. <i>Car Wash Shoe Repair</i> [sign]
mid-1980s
latex and enamel paint on fiberboard,
mounted on wood
21 x 27 1/4 in.
Provenance: Kim and David Smith | 8. <i>Gods Light House</i>
1985
latex and enamel paint on plywood
18 x 20 in. irregular
Provenance: John Havu and Ken
Johnson; Wright Street Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: <i>Prophet William Blackmon</i> ,
Wright Street Gallery, 1986 |
| 4. <i>Revival Center</i> [sign]
late 1980s
latex and enamel paint on plywood
77 x 23 in.
Provenance: Diane and John Balsley
Exhibited: <i>City/Country</i> , University of
Wisconsin-Milwaukee Art Museum, 1997 | 9. <i>Untitled (House and Tree)</i>
1985
latex and enamel paint on wood panel
14 x 27 in.
Provenance: Dean Olson |
| 5. <i>Untitled (Abstraction)</i>
1984
latex and enamel paint on plywood
18 x 20 in.
Provenance: Kent Mueller | 10. <i>Gods Grain Of Life</i>
1985
latex and enamel paint on wood
22 3/4 x 11 1/4 in.
Provenance: Dean Olson |



Prophet Blackmon, Metropolitan Gallery, 1990. Bill Tennesen.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>11. <i>Escape From Hell To Heaven</i>
1985
latex and enamel paint on wood
18 x 12 in.
Provenance: Diane and John Balsley;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee;
Kent Mueller
Exhibited: <i>Regional Folk Art—</i>
<i>Dawson/Blackmon</i>, University of
Wisconsin-Milwaukee Art Museum,
1989; <i>City/Country</i>, University of
Wisconsin-Milwaukee Art Museum, 1997</p> | <p>13. <i>Birth Tree House. Gods Earth</i>
1986
latex and enamel paint on wood
17 3/4 x 11 3/4 in.
Provenance: John Havu and Ken
Johnson; Wright Street Gallery,
Milwaukee</p> |
| <p>12. <i>Gods Blessed Spirit</i>
1986
latex and enamel paint on wood
14 1/2 x 19 1/2 in.
Provenance: John Havu and Ken
Johnson; Wright Street Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: <i>Prophet William Blackmon</i>,
Wright Street Gallery, 1986</p> | <p>14. <i>Gods Family Tree</i>
1986
latex and enamel paint on wood
23 3/4 x 24 in. irregular
Provenance: Dean Olson</p> |
| | <p>15. <i>Gods Holy Gohst Church</i>
1986
latex and enamel paint on wood
29 1/4 x 28 1/2 in.
Provenance: Ruth and Robert Vogeles;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee;
Kent Mueller</p> |

16. *God Feareing Foundry Workers*
1987
latex and enamel paint on wood,
leather, nails
20 x 46 1/2 in. irregular
Provenance: Diane and John Balsley;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee;
Kent Mueller Exhibited: *Regional Folk Art*
Dawson/Blackmon, University of
Wisconsin-Milwaukee Art Museum,
1989
17. *Mountain Hotel*
1988
latex and enamel paint on wood paneling
24 1/4 x 18 in. irregular
Provenance: Dean Jensen Gallery,
Milwaukee; Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee
18. *Noah Arck*
1988
latex and enamel paint on wood
paneling, electrical tape, leather, tacks
19 x 36 1/2 in. irregular
Provenance: Diane and John Balsley;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: *Prophet William J. Blackmon*,
Metropolitan Gallery, 1988; *Regional*
Folk Art—Dawson/Blackmon, University
of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Art Museum, 1989
19. *Moses At The Burning Bush*
1988
latex and enamel paint on wood
23 x 35 3/4 in.
Provenance: Todd Bockley
Exhibited: *William J. Blackmon*, Bockley
Gallery, Minneapolis, 1988
20. *Who Is Right You Or The Indian*
1989
latex and enamel paint on wood
20 x 48 1/2 in.
Provenance: John and Colette Tyson;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: *Prophet William J. Blackmon*,
Metropolitan Gallery, 1990; *Off Center:*
Outsider Art in the Midwest,
Minnesota Museum of American Art,
1996
21. *Spare The Rod And Spoil The Child*
1989
latex and enamel paint on wood panel,
leather, nails
19 1/2 x 20 3/4 in.
Provenance: Valerie's Gallery, Milwaukee;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee
22. *Stop Feeding The Snakes And Feed The*
Childrens
1990
latex and enamel paint on plywood
30 x 48 in.
Provenance: Diane and John Balsley;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: *Contemporary American Folk*
Art, Haggerty Museum of Art, 1992;
The Black Family, Haggerty Museum
of Art, 1993
23. *Do Y Love Neighbor*
1990
latex and enamel paint on wood
22 x 23 in.
Provenance: Diane and John Balsley;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee
24. *Escape From Moab*
1991
latex and enamel paint on wood
28 1/2 x 36 3/4 in.
Provenance: John and Colette Tyson;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: *Prophet William J. Blackmon*,
Metropolitan Gallery, 1991
25. *The Southeast Is The Border Of Ethiopia*
1991
latex and enamel paint on chip board
24 1/2 x 24 in. irregular
Provenance: John and Colette Tyson;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee
26. *The 53 Chapter Of Isaih*
1992
latex and enamel paint on wood
41 in. diameter
Provenance: Kent Mueller

27. *A Broodcasting Studio*
1992
latex and enamel paint on plywood
24 x 24 1/2 in.
Provenance: Ruth and Robert Voege;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee
28. *The Best Teacher Is Jesus*
1993
latex and enamel paint on plywood
23 x 22 in.
Provenance: Ruth and Robert Voege;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee
29. *30th Verse Of The 8 Chapter Of Acts*
1993
latex and enamel paint on chip board
21 x 31 1/2 in.
Provenance: Ruth and Robert Voege;
Metropolitan Gallery, Milwaukee
30. *What Abortion Dose To The Mother*
1994
latex and enamel paint on wood
13 1/2 x 28 in.
Provenance: Diane and John Balsley
Exhibited: *City/Country*, University of
Wisconsin-Milwaukee Art Museum,
1997
31. *You Foolish Teachers*
1994
latex and enamel paint on wood
14 x 27 in.
Provenance: Instinct Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: *Whirligigs, Jesus, Quilts and
Junkyard Dogs*, Instinct Gallery, 1995;
City/Country, University of Wisconsin-
Milwaukee Art Museum, 1997
32. *The Teacher Is Teching On The Word AIDS*
1994
latex and enamel paint on wood
15 x 24 1/4 in.
Provenance: Dean Jensen Gallery,
Milwaukee; Kent Mueller
33. *Yes The Restcue Mission*
1995
latex and enamel paint on wood paneling
16 3/4 x 23 3/4 in.
Provenance: Instinct Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: *Whirligigs, Jesus, Quilts and
Junkyard Dogs*, Instinct Gallery, 1995;
City/Country, University of Wisconsin-
Milwaukee Art Museum, 1997
34. *This Is Sopose To Be A Hospital*
1995
latex and enamel paint on wood paneling,
leather, nails
14 x 23 3/4 in.
Provenance: Instinct Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: *Whirligigs, Jesus, Quilts and
Junkyard Dogs*, Instinct Gallery, 1995;
Text Tour: Text In Outsider Art, Webb
Gallery, Waxahachie, Texas, 1997
35. *24 Chapter Of 2 Chronicles*
1995
latex and enamel paint on wood,
leather, nails
27 1/4 x 17 1/2 in.
Provenance: Instinct Gallery, Milwaukee;
John and Colette Tyson
Exhibited: *Whirligigs, Jesus, Quilts and
Junkyard Dogs*, Instinct Gallery, 1995
36. *Gods Mountain Of Joy And Peace*
1995
latex and enamel paint on hollow wood
panel, leather, nails
20 x 30 1/2 in.
Provenance: Instinct Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: *Whirligigs, Jesus, Quilts and
Junkyard Dogs*, Instinct Gallery, 1995
37. *Sheperted Mountain Retreat*
1995
latex and enamel paint on hollow wood
panel, leather, nails
20 x 31 3/4 in. irregular
Provenance: Instinct Gallery, Milwaukee
Exhibited: *Whirligigs, Jesus, Quilts and
Junkyard Dogs*, Instinct Gallery, 1995

38. *In The Frist Chapter Of Geniesis*
1996
latex and enamel paint on wood, vinyl
backing
40 3/4 x 17 1/2 in.
Provenance: Modern Primitive Gallery,
Atlanta
39. *John The Baptist*
1996
latex and enamel paint on plywood
19 1/2 x 28 1/4 in.
Provenance: acquired from the artist
40. *I Was By The Great River Hidekel*
1996
latex and enamel paint on wood
16 x 31 in.
Provenance: acquired from the artist
41. *The Family Tree Showing Gods Holy Plan
Of Marriage*
1996
latex and enamel paint on particle
board, leather, nails
21 3/4 x 28 1/2 in. irregular
Provenance: acquired from the artist
42. *The Phillps Family*
1996
latex and enamel paint on plywood
28 1/4 x 24 in.
Provenance: acquired from the artist
Exhibited: *City/Country*, University of
Wisconsin-Milwaukee Art Museum, 1997
43. *God Created The Heaven And Thee Earth*
1996
latex and enamel paint on wood
92 x 24 in. irregular
Provenance: acquired from the artist
Exhibited: *City/Country*, University of
Wisconsin-Milwaukee Art Museum, 1997
44. *Jehu 10 Verse Ninth Chapter 2 Kings*
1997
latex and enamel paint on wood
18 1/2 x 22 1/2 in.
Provenance: acquired from the artist
45. *Valley Of Vision*
1998
latex and enamel paint on hollow wood
panel, leather, nails
26 x 26 1/2 in.
Provenance: acquired from the artist
46. *He Is Not Here (Resurrection)*
1998
latex and enamel paint on plywood
48 x 24 in. cruciform
Provenance: Kim and David Smith
47. *Good Samariton*
1998
latex and enamel paint on wood
20 3/4 x 20 3/4 in.
Provenance: acquired from the artist
48. *Solmom In All Of His Gloy*
1998
latex and enamel paint on wood
19 1/2 x 23 3/4 in.
Provenance: acquired from the artist
49. *In The Beginng*
1998
latex and enamel paint, casein, crayon
on hollow wood panel
20 x 29 3/4 in.
Provenance: acquired from the artist
50. *You Are Looking On The Inside Of A Tree*
1998
20 x 35 3/4 in.
latex and enamel paint, casein, crayon
on hollow wood panel
Provenance: acquired from the artist

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