

America, I need to ask you...

exhibition project

a tribute to the Civil Rights Movement

Contran Lobry

CIVIL RIGHTS TRAIL EXHIBITION PROJECT

Once I was asked about what I would decide if there were one important thing I could do. My answer was with no further hesitation: go to Atlanta to see Martin Luther King's grave.

And in 2019, just before Covid stopped the world, my dream came true. After preparing my journey with a detailed roadbook and after a lot of readings, I flew to New York on the 24th of February.

I already had been to Atlanta and Selma in 2016 with my family. Edmund Pettus Bridge and the AMC Brown Chapel were already a goal in my life.

But at the time, in Atlanta, I went to see The World of Coca-Cola...

Back home, I discovered that I was 2 miles away from the grave of a man I was admiring so much. From that moment I couldn't stop thinking that there was something to fix and that I had to go back.

My journey took me from New York City to Atlanta in a Greyhound and then I drove to Anniston, Birmingham, Montgomery, Selma, Tuskegee, back in Atlanta and Miami to end my amazing journey on the sandy beach of Virginia Key. I wanted in ten days to see as much as possible of the segregation History and witnesses the places where MLK lived, worked, talked, fought, all the churches that helped coordinated the fights for freedom, the courts, streets, roads, houses, buildings, everything possible from daylight to sunlight.

It was like a pilgrimage to me, with the strong idea that this part of the America's History wasn't (and still is not) just an American problem but that we were all concern. And it has to be shown and discussed as long as systemic racism will last in a country that is also producing the best in arts, literature, cinema, technology and representing a dream for so many people all around the world.

And don't get me wrong, I truly love America and It is always where I want to go if asked.

With my paintings back from this amazing journey, I needed to question the dichotomy for America to be the best and the worst, to offer both The American Dream & The American Nightmare when it comes to consider Black People and broadly minorities.

So, These are the paintings I did back home after processing all I had in my mind and that had to come out. I have a lot of photographs too, a travel diary, and a clear memory of what will remain as a powerful souvenir for the rest of my life, like one of the best american road movie in which I was the main character.

My next dream is now to find a place to show my art in an exhibition, here, there, and everywhere, meeting people to talk about it... So if there is any chance that you could help me or put me in contact with someone that would consider my project, please do!

Many thanks.

Gontran Lobry



NEW YORK. *Where were you while they were hanging me?*

The hard black lines will occur on all paintings as a common thread of the story about Segregation. Here, it shows the legs and the harms of a black man hanged high reminding all the pictures you can find with a white crowd enjoying the horror. The American flag represent the symbol of a Nation in which threatening lives because of the color of the skin was possible, in total opposition of the values that America provided... Land of the Free, Home of the Brave.

There is parts of the lyrics of the song "Strange fruit" of Billie Holyday, a powerful song, a powerful woman, a powerful symbol of the Black History in America.

In every painting, there will be a tribute to a Black Famous Person, Writer, Singer... And in every painting, there will be a text, a poem, about the place, the people, the History, from where the painting is talking about.

This first painting is also not showing a lot of things but strong simple symbols because it reflect the beginning of my journey without being confronted to everything is about to come. My mind is full of the books I read, the roadbook I prepared, and facing History, real places of the Segregation will come later.

Waiting in New York around 42 St - Port Authority Bus Terminal for the Greyhound that will take me during the night to Atlanta, and walking down streets, I came at the corner of W 42 St and 8th Ave to discover on a giant screen on the building this photograph.



A strong signal for me with MLK showing me the way to the the Bus Terminal. I'm now definitely sure that I had to be here.



ATLANTA. America, how many more tears do you want?

The hard black lines are the representation of the streets of Atlanta and also a Church cross referring to Ebenezer Church, a strong symbol a the life of MLK's family and Martin Luther King itself.

It's about Auburn Avenue (called Sweat Auburn because it was a prospering community area for the Black population of Atlanta, The Royal Peacock Club (a famous club for music and dancing where a lot of famous Black artists performed). The N°6 refer to the Fire Station where MLK was sometimes playing down the street of his home where he was born at the 501, Auburn Ave NE.

There is also like a reflecting mirror with the door (room 306) of the Lorraine Motel, 450 Mulberry St, Memphis, where MLK was shot (where I was in 2016 with may family) and his tombstone in Atlanta at the 449 Auburn Avenue.

Text in the painting:

« 86 N.E. Auburn Ave, September 6, 1952, Ray is drowning in his own tears singing for a girl gone with someone else while few blocks away at the corner of Auburn Ave & Jackson street Mr Stills is playing on his keyboard praying for mercy.

Blue tears are rolling down faces once again, somewhere one of their brother is hanging high. Ebenezer is flooded with tears on that morning of April 9. Mahalia is singing for Martin, no one will take is hand anymore. »

A tribute to Ray Charles and his great song « Drowning in my own tears » who used to perform at the Royal Peacock, David Stills (the organist of Ebenezer for many years in the 50s/60s), Mahalia Jackson who sang for the Funeral service of MLK on April 9, 1968 his preferred song « Take my hand ».



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ANNISTON. America, why did you lie about the Land of the Free?

The hard black lines are the graphic representation of the structure of the bus and its windows but also the police photographs of the arrests of Freedom Riders during their trip, here Hank Thomas #20894 and John Lewis #20886.

It's about all the Freedom Riders (here in Anniston the « Original » 6 white & 7 black people) and their absolute strength to support white crazy mobs all along their journey in buses. I can't imagine the fear it was to be in front of those crazy people. And Anniston was a sad example of what they were capable of with a lot of people from the Klan living in the area. The times are the hours of the two attacks of the bus.

Text in the painting:

« Gurnee Avenue wasn't enough on Mother's Day so they went to Old Birmingham Highway. From the bus came a burning smell but it has nothing to do with a dark spell. Farewell my Greyhound, Hank was lying on the ground wondering if his time had come, but then came the angel of Anniston. »

The text is about the first attack of the bus in Anniston on Gurnee Avenue at the Greyhound Bus Station before the mob followed the bus on the Highway and put it on fire with the freedom riders inside, Hank Thomas was one of the Freedom Rider who escaped from the burning bus and was beaten outside on the ground. The only help he could find came from a 12 years old girl who arrived from her house with water, her name was Janie Forsyth, and she helped a woman and him. She became « The Angel of Anniston » for Hank Thomas.

There are also words from the poem of Langston Hughes, « I, Too »

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They sent me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed —

I, too, am America.

The hard black lines shows the rubble of the 16th Baptist Church after its bombing with the four girls killed in the blast drawn with the innocence of a small child. The A.G. Gaston Hotel sign reminds of a place where MLK also survived to a bombing of his room and also that the Black People had to travel with their Green Book to find a place where they'd be allowed to stay, eat, put gas. The painting is surrounded with the streets of the Kelly Ingram Park. This is where police and firemen violently attacked civil rights demonstrators (with a lot of children) in May 1963. Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor and Alabama's Governor George Wallace were behind these atrocities. In 1961, Bull Connor also allowed the vicious attack by an angry white mob against Freedom Riders arriving in town in a Trailways vehicle.

Text in the painting:

« They were five when the clock stopped at 10:22, only one did survive. No more laughin' girls, just an empty shoe. Those were the days in Bombingham with the KKK with George helping them to do the dirty job, and that crazy fool, the so called Bull. This Trailways won't forget the mob. »

The song associated to the painting is « Birmingham Sunday » by Richard Fariña

Come round by my side and I'll sing you a song
I'll sing it so softly, it'll do no one wrong
On Birmingham Sunday the blood ran like wine
And the choirs kept singing of freedom

That cold autumn morning no eyes saw the sun
And Addie Mae Collins her number was one
In an old Baptist church there was no need to run
And the choirs kept singing of freedom

The clouds they were dark and the autumn winds blew
And Denise McNair brought the number to two
The falcon of death was a creature she knew
And the choirs kept singing of freedom

The church it was crowded and no one could see
That Cynthia Wesley's dark number was three
Her prayers and her feelings would shame you and me
And the choirs kept singing of freedom

When young Carol Robertson entered the door
The number her killers had given was four
She asked for a blessing, and asked for no more
And the choirs kept singing of freedom

On Birmingham Sunday a noise shook the ground
And people all over the earth turned around
For no one recalled a more cowardly sound
And the choirs kept singing of freedom

The men in the forest, they once asked of me
How many black berries grow in the blue sea?
And I asked them right back with a tear in my eye
How many dark ships in the forest?

The Sunday has come, the Sunday has gone
I can't do much more than to sing you a song
I'll sing it so softly, it'll do no one wrong
And the choirs keep singing of freedom



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MONTGOMERY #1. America, when will you end racial discrimination?

The hard black lines shows the shelves with all the jars you can see at the Legacy Museum and at The National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Brian Stevenson is an amazing person. The jars are filled with the ground of where a Black person was lynched. It is so emotional and powerful. The painting is a tribute to those who fought, believed, died for their freedom, dignity, proudness of the color of their skin. Rosa Parks, MLK, Fred Shuttlesworth, Brian Stevenson, Maceo Snipes (murdered by a white supremacist in front of his home for a vote, the only African American vote in a Democratic primary in Taylor County, Georgia in 1946), George Floyd (eight minutes forty six seconds to be murdered by Derek Chauvin). I wanted to represent his death in a jar with the matricule of Chauvin and the Minneapolis police badge to show that still in 2020, illegal violence, threats and lynchings continues in America. The Unknown jar represents everyone victims of racism, segregation, a tribute to all the sufferings the had to endure.

Text in the painting:

« With on seat, she forced them to defeat. Oh Rosa, what a step with Martin and Fred here to help. But never forget all those corpses burned, shot, hanged high with ropes. Bullets you can still ear. Even a knee can spark some fear. For sure Brian hopes the jar factory will close, and trade hate for a rose. »

The song associated to the painting is « Georgia Rose » by Esther Phillips

You know, sisters,
There's been far too few songs written
About us, and our beauty.

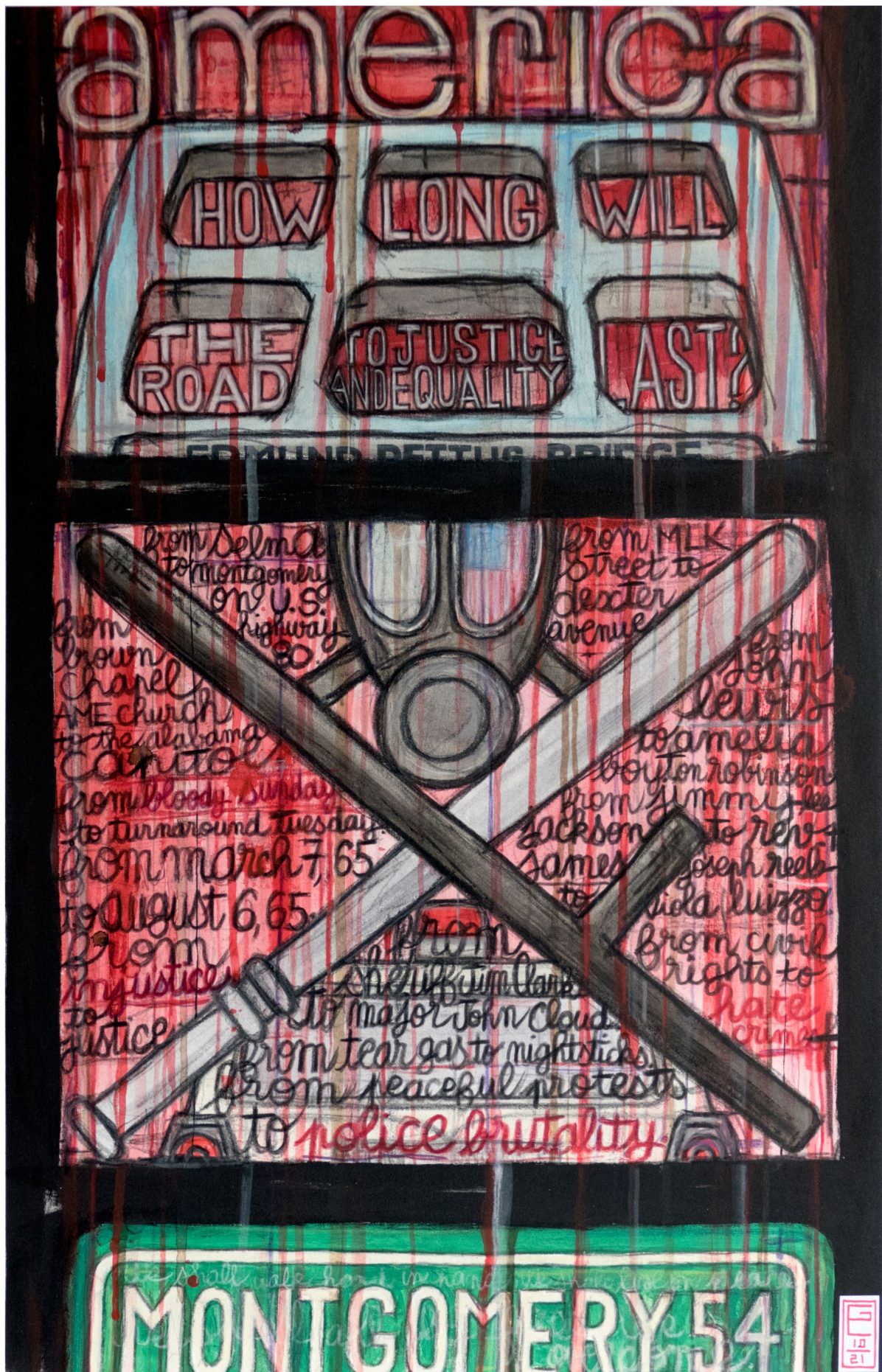
And women of lesser understanding
Might have become bitter
Through the years of neglect.
But our faith in our men and ourselves,
Is being rewarded.

Now, I'm not saying that the struggle is over,
Far, far from it,
But there is a new day
And it promises to be a day of truth.
Truth about beauty
And the world will see
How truly sensitive and beautiful,
And wonderful,
We really are.

Georgia Rose
Georgia
Georgia
Georgia Rose
We're the most precious rose, Dixie grows.
Now some folks don't think it's right,

'Cause our skin is black as night.
But we know our hearts
Is showing up alright.
To the good Lord up above,
We all look the same.
So let's not hang our heads down in shame
Hmm

Georgia Rose,
Georgia
Georgia
Georgia Rose
We can't be blue
'Cause our skin is black
We can't walk around now
With our heads down In shame
No, no, no!
'Cause our skin is pretty and black as night.
We can't be blue.
Ah, ah
No, no
We can't be blue,
'Cause our skin is black.
Georgia Rose
Georgia Rose



SELMA. America, how long will the road to justice and equality last?

The hard black lines represent a negative film frame showing the chronology of the events starting with the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the police violent attack, and the road to Montgomery. It's a bloody painting for a bloody Sunday, for all those who were injured or died before (Jimmy Lee Jackson) and after that day (Viola Luizzo, James Joseph Reeb) fighting for peace and justice.

Text in the painting:

« From Selma to Montgomery on U.S. Highway 80, from MLK Street to Dexter Avenue, from Brown Chapel AME Church to the Alabama Capitol, from bloody Sunday to turnaround Tuesday, from March 7, 65 to August 6, 65, from injustice to justice, From John Lewis to Amelia Boyton Robinson, from Jimmy Lee Jackson to Rev. James Joseph Reeb to Viola Luizzo, from Civil Rights to hate crimes, from sheriff Jim Clark to Major John Cloud, from teargas to nightsticks, from peaceful protest to police brutality. »

There are parts of the lyrics of the song "We shall overcome", inspired by "I'll Overcome Some Day", a hymn by Charles Albert Tindley that was first published in 1901

We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,
I do believe
We shall overcome, some day.

We'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,

We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,

We shall all be free,
We shall all be free,
We shall all be free, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,

We are not afraid,
We are not afraid,
We are not afraid, TODAY

Oh, deep in my heart,

We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,

I do believe
We shall overcome, some day.



MONTGOMERY #2. *America, shouldn't your dream be applied to all?*

The hard black lines represent the metallic structure of a stained glass in a church. It is here a tribute to the admirable judge Franck Minis Johnson, an extraordinary man of real justice. He did so much during his life with honesty and righteousness, helping the cause of the Civil Rights and more. He is like a statue of a Saint, in his courtroom (called America's Courtroom) with the blue background with stars and the clock behind him giving a halo effect. He's standing like the French King St Louis, famous for his will for Justice. He's over the Alabama Capitol to show his strength against politics and George Wallace (they went to the same law school). He's surrounded by the bus of Rosa Parks, and the white and colored fountains found in the Kress building during renovation. The time on the clock is 6:05 pm remembering when MLK was shot. There is also the drawing of the lights in the Dexter Pardon Baptist Church, and between the Capitol columns, there is a part of the speech of MLK "How long? Not long" delivered on the steps of the Capitol after the completion of the Selma to Montgomery March on March 25, 1965.

Text in the painting:

« From the same law school one became a racist fool screamin' as a J.C. (Jim Crow) preacher, now, tomorrow and forever, segregating anything that could be. The other one first chose Normandy. He was like King St Louis under his oak tree but paid a high price to remain free. Justice was made under the law in spite of the threats so he doesn't have any regrets. »

Lines of the speech "How long? Not long" by Martin Luther King

"My dear and abiding friends, Ralph Abernathy, and to all of the distinguished Americans seated here on the rostrum, my friends and co-workers of the state of Alabama, and to all of the freedom-loving people who have assembled here this afternoon from all over our nation and from all over the world: Last Sunday, more than eight thousand of us started on a mighty walk from Selma, Alabama. We have walked through desolate valleys and across the trying hills. We have walked on meandering highways and rested our bodies on rocky byways. Some of our faces are burned from the outpourings of the sweltering sun. Some have literally slept in the mud. We have been drenched by the rains. Our bodies are tired and our feet are somewhat sore. But today as I stand before you and think back over that great march, I can say, as Sister Pollard said—a seventy-year-old Negro woman who lived in this community during the bus boycott—and one day, she was asked while walking if she didn't want to ride. And when she answered, "No," the person said, "Well, aren't you tired?" And with her ungrammatical profundity, she said, "My feet are tired, but my soul is rested. And in a real sense this afternoon, we can say that our feet are tired, but our souls are rested.

They told us we wouldn't get here. And there were those who said that we would get here only over their dead bodies, but all the world today knows that we are here and we are standing before the forces of power in the state of Alabama saying, "We ain't goin' let nobody turn us around."

Now it is not an accident that one of the great marches of American history should terminate in Montgomery, Alabama. Just ten years ago, in this very city, a new philosophy was born of the Negro struggle. Montgomery was the first city in the South in which the entire Negro community united and squarely faced its age-old oppressors. Out of this struggle, more than bus [de]segregation was won; a new idea, more powerful than guns or clubs was born. Negroes took it and carried it across the South in epic battles that electrified the nation and the world. [...]

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" Somebody's asking, "How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?" Somebody's asking, "When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men?" Somebody's asking, "When will the radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night, plucked from weary souls with chains of fear and the manacles of death? How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?"

I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again."

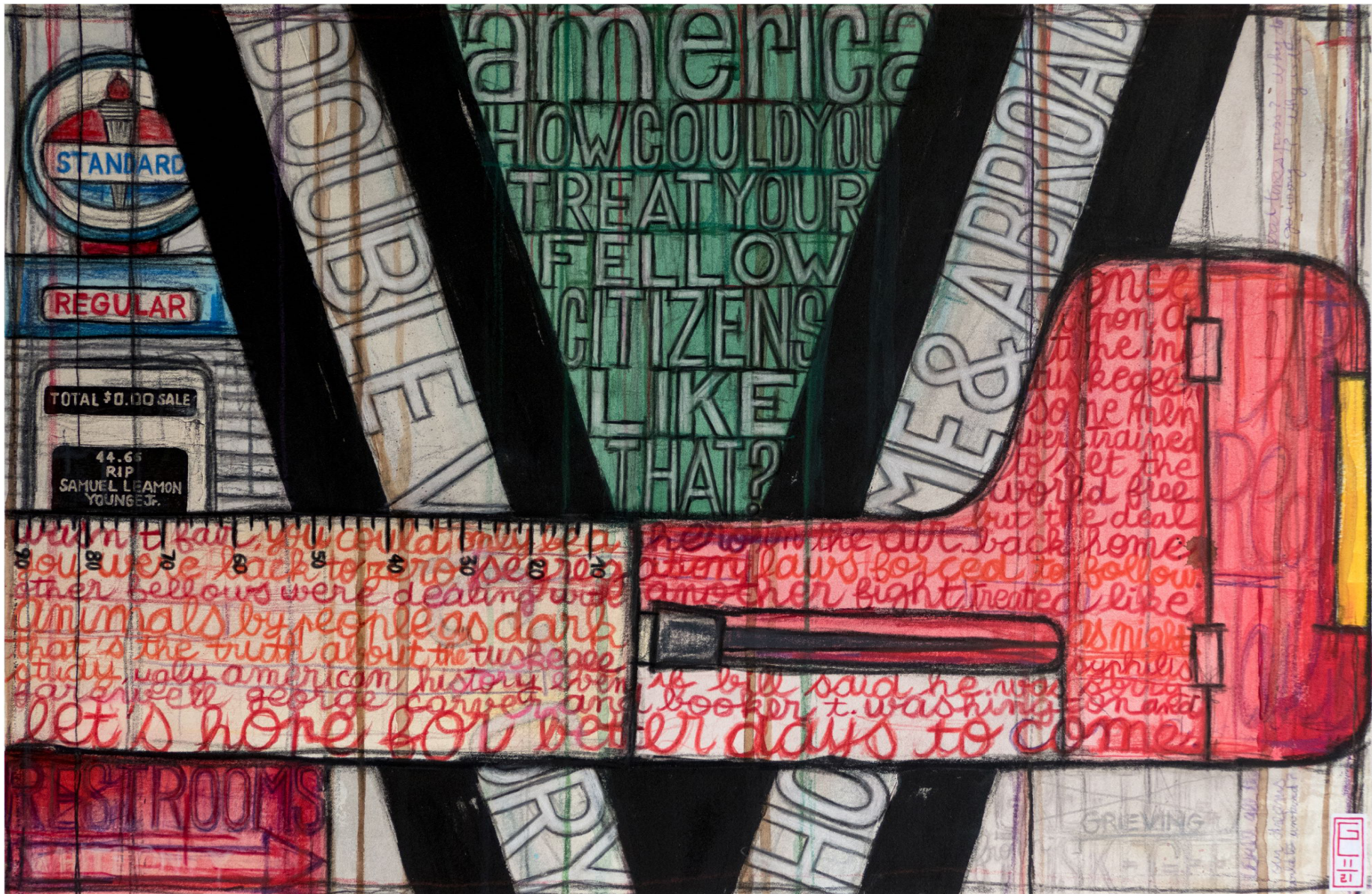
How long? Not long, because "no lie can live forever."

How long? Not long, because "you shall reap what you sow."

How long? Not long [...]."

Words from an interview of Franck M. Johnson

"I wasn't hired to be a moral judge, I wasn't hired to be a preacher or an evangelist, I was hired to pally the law."



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TUSKEGEE. America, how could you treat your fellow citizen like that?

The hard black lines are for the double « V », symbol for the Tuskegee Airmen for the Victory « Home and Abroad », against the nazis and against segregation. The green triangle is a parallel with the colored triangles used by the nazis to identify and diminish different populations, in order to eliminate them. The gas pump and the restrooms sign are the reminder of the death of Samuel Leamon Younge Jr., a SNCC member (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), who died shot in the face by Martin Segrest for wanted to go to the white only restrooms of a Standard gas station.

The part of the plane with the red tails to identify the Tuskegee Airmen is mixed with a syringe telling the awful story of the Syphilis study that occurred in Tuskegee using Black people. George Carver and Booker T. Washington reminds of the Tuskegee University and its role for the emancipation of the Black People.

Text in the painting:

« Once upon a time in Tuskegee, some men were trained to set the world free but the deal wasn't fair, you could only be a hero in the air. Back home you were back to zero, segregations laws forced to follow. Other fellow were dealing with an another fight treated like animals by people as dark as night. That's the truth about the Tuskegee syphilis study, ugly americana history even if Bill said he was sorry. Farewell George Carver and Booker T. Washington and let's hope for better days to come. »

Lines of the song "Love will conquer all" by Lionel Richie (born in Tuskegee)

Here we are
Out here, me and you
Reaching out to each other
Is all that we can do

Here we stand
Trying not to fall
There's no need to worry
Love will conquer all

Do you really wanna know
Just how long will last?
Will all of the bad times pass?
How can we make things right?

Ooh and why
Why is the world so unkind?
We surely can find peace of mind
If we only see the light

Can't we see that
Here we are
Out here, me and you
Reaching out to each other
Is all that we can do

Whoa, here we stand
Trying not to fall
Oh, there's no need to worry
Love will conquer all

Can somebody tell me why
Why do our dreams go wrong?
Why can't we all belong?
Ooh, where do we start?
Oh, and tell me when

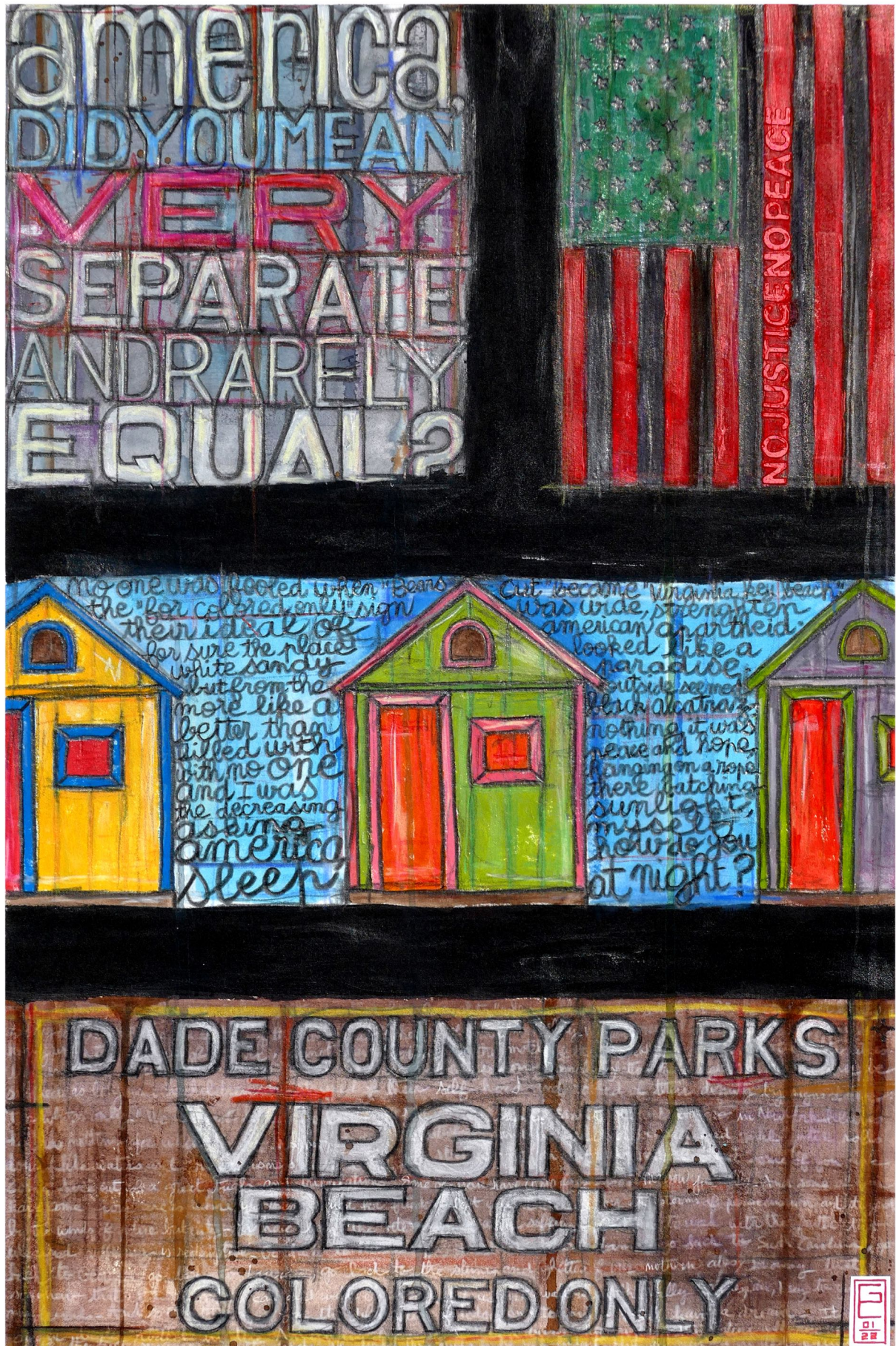
When will we ever learn?
There's nowhere else we can turn
The truth is in our hearts
Here we are together

Sometimes the road gets hard to travel
Sometimes the pain's too much to bear
Sometimes when life seems to unravel
That's the time, oh, to say
We're gonna make it anyway
Can't we see that

Here we are
Out here, me and you
Reaching out to each other
Is all (is all), that we can do

Here we stand
Trying not to fall
There's no need (there's no need to worry)
Oh-oh, love will conquer all

Ooh, ooh, ooh (ooh-ooh-ooh)
Whoa, whoa, whoa (give love a chance)
(Baby) ooh, ooh, ooh
Whoa, whoa, whoa
Ooh, ooh, ooh
Whoa, whoa, whoa



MIAMI. America, did you mean very separate and rarely equal?

The hard black lines frame the painting in different parts to focus on each one and what it is telling us: a question to America to meditate about its History, a tribute to David Hammons and his African-American Flag and "No Justice No Peace" words reminding us that there is still a lot to do, the colorful rental cabins on Virginia Key Island where Black people could stay, and the historic road sign reminding that it was a colored only place. On the background of the sign is written parts of the speech of MLK « I have a dream". The painting is a mix of past and present symbols confronted to think about a better future and act for change.

Text in the painting:

« No one was fooled when "Bears Cut" became "Virginia Key Beach". The "For colored only" sign was wide, strengthen their ideal of American Apartheid. For sure the place looked like a white sandy paradise but from the outside seemed more like a black Alcatraz. Better than nothing, it was filled with peace and hope, with no one hanging on a rope. And I was there watching the decreasing sunlight asking myself America how dows you sleep at night? »

Lines of the speech "I have a dream" by Martin Luther King delivered 28 August 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C.

"I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition. [...]

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today! [...]"



"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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