

Daniel Minter

DANIEL MINTER'S KEYS:
DECIPHERING AND HONORING
ORDINARY BLACKNESS

441 DEERING AVENUE
PORTLAND, ME 04103
DMINTER@MECA.EDU
DANIELMINTER.NET
(207) 321-9748

Overview

Weaving seamlessly through southeast Georgia farm towns, Afro-Brazilian *terreiros*¹ and the mythic reaches of African philosophy and ceremony, Daniel Minter collects the implements, the figures, the cultural tools of Black experience in diaspora and gives them iconic status. Many of the figures in Minter's art are those of ordinary Black life, especially of the mid-20th century rural south: hot combs and axes; straw brooms and jack-knives; snakes, jars and crows; round women, big men and long-limbed trees. Through his skilled gaze and carefully honed instinct, Minter elicits deeper meanings from the mundane.

Like one of his mentors, John Biggers (African American painter and muralist, 1924- 2001), Daniel Minter uses his broad knowledge and experience of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora to complicate and enrich the substance of his work. In Minter's hands, as in Biggers', the underlying relatedness among the various communities of blackness in the New World appears more clearly. Minter enables us to recognize the influence of Xangô and Ogum² in Ellaville, Georgia farmers; or the diaphanous burden of ritual responsibility in the posture of both an *iawô*³ and a backcountry loner. Incorporating representations of African, West Indian and Afro-Latin American cultural and religious life in his U.S.-based work, Minter expands the visual and conceptual vocabulary of African American art.

¹ *Terreiros* are ritual communities (temples) of the indigenous Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblé.

² Xangô (Shango, Changó) and Ogum (Ogun, Ogú) are Yoruba deities (orixás; orishas; orichás) venerated in various parts of the Afro-Atlantic world, particularly Nigeria, Benin, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti and Trinidad.

³ *Iawôs* are initiates who ritually receive orixá (sacred energy; deity) into their bodies in Yoruba-based religions of Africa and the New World. Literally meaning "wife" in Yoruba, the term refers to the devotee's consecration and proscribed-time status as servant, confederate and student of the deity.

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Minter works in varied media – canvas, wood, metal, paper, rubber. Twine, rocks, sand, paint. This cross-fertilization strongly informs his creations and his sensibility. His carvings become assemblages. His paintings are often sculptural. His faces obsidian, slate, rosewood. A stone almost metal. A clay almost pine. A bleeding mud. Where all the earths meet.

Keys

In some of Minter's newest works, he has created canvases and metal plates stamped with small individual images. He calls these Keys. Burned into metal, scraped into wood, stamped on canvas or paper, these are representations of Minter's family memories and childhood experience. They are also easily recognizable images of a collective Black southern ethos. And they are remnants of journeys in Brazil and the Caribbean. What Minter has culled and carved from the storehouse of ancestral memory. They are, in a sense, totems of unremarkable Black historical and spiritual experience. And yet, in ritualizing their ordinariness into art, Minter unearths their significance. He creates a map, a legend of symbols where the images stand for so much more than first meets our eyes. They are themselves as well as what is behind them. What is beneath the ground they stand on. What grows up in the branches.

Minter's deceptively simple stamps and keys become, in the sacramentalization of their ordinariness, links to the extraordinary: to the long and peculiar story of Black life on these shores, to the culture of survival and transformation, and to the creative genius of spirit... His series of narrow portraits, featuring a single individual and an emblematic item are like studies of personal and clan lineage marks: "Mr. Leaks" and the rooster; "Slitty" and the beetle; "Turtle Girl" and the wooden divining board. In "Counting-by-3" a woman holds okra in a bowl and at her feet a black hen guards three eggs. Minter's is an artwork reuniting Black people with their totems – the mythic resources and cultural sinew embedded in our historical experience.

The Abstractions and the Orixás

Paintings like "Blue Knife," "In a Dream with Fish," "Jar 1," "Jar 2" and "Saida" are significant for their abstraction. Unlike Minter's other works that feature strong representations of grounding, the figures here are centered in a kind of open space, a groundlessness often enhanced with clouds and shifting intensities of light, as if in intimation of storm. "Saida," for example, is a meditative, three-paneled painting named for the ceremonial entrance of new initiates in Brazilian Candomblé. Each of the novices, freshly consecrated to a guardian spirit, an orixá, is situated in the doorway of a house, a solid structure that is both physical and psychic home.

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Each emanates the aural colors of their spirit guides – yellow/orange for Oxum⁴, blue for Iemanjá⁵, and white for Oxalá the orixá of peace⁶. The ambience of the surrounding sky, filled with clouds and echoing the colors in the doorway, suggests a weightlessness, a quasi-conscious state and an intangibility of spirit. And yet that atmosphere is cut through the middle by a dark horizon of jaggedness. A stark power both specified and balanced by that emanating from the iawôs' bodies.

“Odoya,” “Healing Weight” and “Morning Flight” borrow and renew ritual images of Africa and the Afro-Americas. The spiderweb circles and lines of “Odoya” are a visual trope Minter uses to indicate an extended, vibrational connectedness. In that painting a novice kneels on the ground, barefoot, in a simple white dress, and places her hands, fist over fist, in a traditional Candomblé gesture of salutation, to honor the mother of the sea, Iemanjá. In “Morning Flight,” a quiet man kneels in Georgia earth the color of blood, his torso, arms and legs veiled in a faint, vaguely heiroglyphic overlay of birds. One of the most remarkable elements in Minter’s art is his use of lightweight (sometimes transparent), open-work design or translucent suggestions of fabric to imply a kind of relationship to spirit; a grace as well as an obligation. “Healing Weight” is an especially striking example. A starched, white, gossamer cloth delicately shrouds the body of a dark-skinned woman. Her head is shaved, her back bent under the weight of the deity’s favor. She holds to the trunk of a tree as if it were her staff and takes labored steps; walking, perhaps unknowingly, over the tree’s roots, stark as veins in the earth. The painting projects a heavy and effortful entrancement; one that is tempered (if not eased) by the exquisite beauty of the orixá’s overwhelming nearness.

Blessing Boats

Minter’s series of encaustic relief prints take their name in part from poet Lucille Clifton’s book, *Blessing the Boats*, (Boa Editions, 2000). Like Clifton’s concise poems, Minter’s small, stamped images capture both a language and a meaning of personal and collective African American experience. Minter’s choice to arrange the multiplicity of small, rubber-stamp images in close layers on canvas or seared in metal hanging from nails in wood, heightens the sense of these symbols as “keys”. Collectively they are a means of access, explanation, deciphering. Within their rectangular borders the keys are like panels, triptychs, slices. Each is a personal story, an imagistic single chapter of a larger whole.

“BlessingBoats” is also, potentially, an allusion to slave ships, their human cargo (and human stories) in rows, crowded together in the ships’ holds. One by one. Counting the names. Naming the numberless. Remembering. Reminding. While the boats of the Middle Passage were vessels of deep and searing grief they were also conveyances of the ancestral resources for our survival.

⁴ Goddess of “sweet waters” (rivers, lakes, streams), fertility, creativity and beauty.

⁵ Goddess of “salt waters” (oceans and salt-water estuaries), she is the mother of many of the other orixás and is associated with maternal love, wisdom and remarkable strength.

⁶ Oxalá is the father of the other orixás and is associated with paternal protection, wisdom, gentleness and care.

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Even in transporting the earliest generations of enslaved women and men, in horrid conditions, in unrecountable pain, those ships also brought the seeds of American and African American culture.

This series, like Minter's work as a whole, urges a reexamination, a reconceptualization of our relationship to ordinary blackness, to our enslaved ancestors – the ones who were carried across the ocean chained to each other, as well as their grandchildren who gifted us a cultural legacy inside trauma. Art historian, C. Daniel Dawson, writes that the intellectual and artistic heritage of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Americas, is a “treasure in the terror.”⁷ All across the Atlantic world, cultural expressions of astounding, even haunting beauty have been created out of the remnants of ancestral memory, historical suffering, and the material circumstances of lives sometimes lived under great constriction. Not only for African Americans, but for all of us, Daniel Minter is collecting the remnants, the totems, the simple images spilling with meaning, and giving them back to us as treasures, as lessons, as keys to our healing and our joy.

Rachel E. Harding, PhD | Denver, Colorado | January 2005

⁷C. Daniel Dawson, “*Treasure in the Terror: The African Cultural Legacy in the Americas*,” 2002, published on the web at www.undergroundrailroadexperience.com/html/stories_places_dc.php