A Conversation with Beverly McIver

Kim Boganey

Kim Boganey I have read many of the articles written about you over the years. They talk more about your life and less about your art. Do you ever wish that these writers would write about something else?

Beverly McIver I don't know what that something else would be. I think people have accused my work of being too personal, and for some people that is a negative. To offer a context for that very personal work, writers must talk about who I am, how I was raised, and what I am today. I hope it comes full circle in that they say something about me being a humanitarian, with an understanding of how I was raised.

KB Your artwork *is* personal; it is your life. Other artists don't necessarily approach it from that perspective.

BM It is more difficult to talk and paint about one's personal life—in an authentic way—because you're constantly evaluating yourself and how you're living and how you're walking through the world.

KB How did you decide to study art, and why did you pick North Carolina Central University?

BM I grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina. I had always been bused to white schools, and then I was returned to the housing projects, which were all Black. It was important for me to choose a historically Black university because I had this uneven belief in white life and Black life, with Black life being negative. I wanted to go someplace where I could see positive perceptions of educated African Americans, who were not much different, except for skin color, from the middle-class white people I knew in high school.

KB What made you decide to pick art as a major?

BM I had several majors before art. In my second year I changed from being a psychology major, which is why it took me five years to graduate. I met this nice guy who was in the health industry. He thought I was so kind that I'd be great in health care. But then I took an art course as an elective, and that is when I met Elizabeth Lentz, who was a white art professor teaching at NCCU. I became an art major because she thought I was good at painting.

KB It's ironic that the inspiration for your becoming an art major was a white woman.

BM Keep in mind that, prior to this, the overall messages that I had been getting were that white was good and Black was bad. The fact that she was a white teacher at a Black institution confirmed in my head that I was going to get a great education because she looked just like everybody that taught me in high school. I ended up having classes with her every year, since the art department was small.

KB There were several other art professors who were Black at NCCU.

BM Chester Williams taught sculpture. He thought I should become a sculptor. I am really a princess, so the idea of having a hammer and being outside to do sculpture and get dirty was not my cup of tea. Elizabeth would invite me over to her house so that we could paint together.

This was an important way of her showing me that she believed in me and my talent. She was doing self-portraits and still lifes (pls. 61–62).

KB Do you see this as her influence on you?

BM Yes. For years after I graduated from NCCU, people would tell me that I needed to find my own voice, that my work looked too much like Elizabeth's. As an example, she taught me about color mixing, so our palettes were remarkably similar. She loved luscious paint; I did, too. It wasn't until I went to graduate school that I started talking about conceptual ideas and being more serious about my intent.

KB Fast forward to your time at Pennsylvania State University, where another artist-professor became a mentor: Richard Mayhew.

BM Penn State representatives visited NCCU looking for the two best art students to attend Penn State's graduate school on full scholarship. The head of the department at NCCU selected me and this other girl, who happened to be white. We flew to Penn State. That is where and when I first met Richard Mayhew. I knew I wanted to study with him when I saw his paintings. This was around 1987. I later found out he had only a couple more years at Penn State before retiring.

KB It must have had an enormous impact on you, seeing an African American professor and painter. What of his work did you see while you were at Penn State?

BM I remember seeing beautiful landscapes that supplied a real understanding of color and warmth, all the things that I was interested in as a painter. I took his course on artistic professional development and how to get gallery representation. I desperately wanted him to be on my thesis committee, but he couldn't because he was leaving. He would occasionally come to my studio and make a couple of comments.

KB This obviously had a significant impact on you, not only as a working artist but also in terms of how you are shaping the next generation of artists.

BM Richard took us all to Washington, DC, and New York to visit museums and galleries. He would take the entire class and say, "Let's go." It gave me a view into the art world and instilled in me my love for travel. Prior to that, I hadn't really traveled anywhere.

KB What about the larger environment at Penn State?

BM I was accepted to Penn State because they thought the work I was doing with still lifes was beautiful. The faculty would take the paintings from my studio and show them to their painting classes and tell them that this is how you should paint. At the beginning of my second year, however, I started painting portraits of Black people: family members and community members. The white faculty kept stressing to me that nobody would buy this artwork. Support for my work went awry. I remember sitting in my studio being so depressed. I was thinking that I would just return to painting still lifes, get my degree, and leave. One day Richard came into my studio and showed me a portrait he had just completed of a Black woman (pl. 64). He asked me if I liked it. I thought it was absolutely beautiful. He told me that I can make portraits, too. He left the pastel with me, and he went away. I decided I must get back to doing portraits.

KB It sounds like things got worse for you at Penn State.

BM Aside from the faculty comments, there weren't any real signs that this would derail my getting a degree. I had enough credits to graduate, and I had drafted my thesis paper. My thesis exhibition consisted of portraits of people I felt had influenced my life, for the good and for the bad. There were about twenty portraits, several of them with me in the center. You could tell if the person was a good or bad influence by how they were conveyed in the paintings. I had a portrait of Richard Mayhew, and he was up front and upright. But then I had a portrait of another professor, with his torso turned on the side. He was probably the meanest person I had met to date. The good news is he taught me what white males are willing to do if they feel threatened because of entitlement—that kind of entitlement where you are okay if you don't threaten them. The minute they are threatened, they want you to know they are willing to take you down even if it means taking themselves down.

For my oral exams, this professor told me not to worry about preparing intellectual answers to a set of questions that the university should have provided to me, but that I should just go in and talk about my work and influences and pull from my thesis paper. In short, my committee said I failed my orals and my thesis exhibition, so I should come back in a year and submit again. I said I didn't want to do that. I had other commitments already in play. I could not believe this was happening. Why didn't they tell me sooner? There was no indication I would get to this point and fail. I was completely devastated. It still makes me mad. I feel I got burned for being Black, poor,

Fig. 1

Self-Portrait, 1992. Oil on canvas with quilted fabric; 30 × 30 in.

and a woman. It didn't help that all three of my committee members were white males.

KB This is where your third major mentor, artist Faith Ringgold, enters the picture. How did you meet her?

BM She visited Penn State that following fall. She was giving a lecture with the women's studies department, which I went to hear. After the lecture, I walked to the stage and told her what was happening to me. I asked her to come to my studio and help me. Mind you, this is at night; I'm sure she's tired, and here I am, nervous and begging, basically. When she told me how tired she was, I instantly started crying. Faith then told me to get a couple of paintings and bring them to her. I took off running and grabbed a couple of wet paintings, which I got all over my clothes. Whoever was sponsoring the event asked if she needed a cab to get back to the hotel for a 4 a.m. pickup. I volunteered to take care of Faith. She looked at my paintings, then we ended up at an all-night diner, where we talked until about 2 a.m. She thought I would make a great assistant and asked me to come be her assistant at the Atlantic Center for the Arts [in New Smyrna Beach, Florida], where she was in residence. Penn State had broken my spirit. I knew that if I told my committee, these three white males, about this opportunity with Faith, they would surely say no. They wanted me to fail. So I went over their heads to the dean, who not only said yes but also supplied the funds for me to go.

KB Wow.

BM Once they were told, the committee said I would not graduate in May if I left. I would essentially have to start over with another exhibition and oral exam once again. I was okay with this because I wasn't painting, and I was wasting my life. I needed to be around somebody who looked like me, who could nurture me, tell me I was a good painter, and bring that part of me back to life. I left, and I went with Faith.

KB Faith had a noteworthy influence on your second graduate thesis exhibition. Your work (fig. 1) was similar to hers, in that she uses quilts as canvases for portraits of herself, family, and friends.

BM Yes. I had a sewing machine while I was with Faith. The experience was delightful. I went back to Penn State and presented my thesis exhibition again. The committee informed me they would pass me, but they thought I was ill prepared, should never apply for a teaching job, and certainly not ask for a letter of recommendation. By this time, I was teaching at NCCU and was making art. I didn't say anything, and I didn't go back that afternoon for commencement. They mailed my degree.

KB You didn't talk to Penn State for many, many years. And yet they came back into your life later.

BM In 2003 they awarded me the art department's Distinguished Alumni Award for my contribution to the arts and because I was doing so well. When they called me about it, I laughed. I called Faith, who said to accept the award and tell my story. My mother told me to simply accept the award, sit down, and leave the past in the past. I was so nervous. When they called me to the stage, I kept telling myself, "Just say thank you and sit down." I started by thanking Penn State for this award, and then I stopped. I started again and said, "When I was here, I experienced both racism and sexism. It was a really, really challenging time that has scarred me. I accept this award as an apology and hope that it never happens to any other student." The audience was

quiet. There was a professor in the audience who was weeping. She knew what had happened to me and knew there was no one at the school who would help me. In 2010 I was awarded the Alumni Fellow Award for all of Pennsylvania State University. They came back a third time to offer me a position, which I declined.

KB This is a full-circle moment. Your first graduate exhibition consisted of portraiture, which is a happy place for you—creating portraits of friends, family, and people you admire. In 2020, with the stresses of Covid-19, civil unrest, and social upheaval, you are back in that happy place, painting portraits.

BM Absolutely. I enjoy painting people. This guy once said to me, "I see God in you." I'll never forget that. I think the people I choose to paint today are people that I see a part of myself in, or they have qualities that I would like to have or build upon. That is what I try to capture in my paintings—the essence of those human beings. People in this world may try to bring you down, much like what happened to me at Penn State, but you must persist and focus on that which brings you back up.

KB What was the inspiration for painting portraits of your older sister Renee, who was your first dedicated subject matter?

BM I started painting portraits of Renee because I was looking for a physical being that represented my own marginalization in the world. I was at Penn State at the time. I was looking for someone who struggled with difficulties over which they had no control. Renee is intellectually disabled and has epilepsy, which she cannot control.

KB Were you taking photographs of her and painting portraits from the photographs?

BM No, not in the same way that I do today. I took very few photographs of Renee since film was expensive and I could not afford it at the time. The first paintings of Renee are those where I scratched out her smiling face. At the time I didn't realize I felt Renee was basically making me invisible because she was so big and always at the center of attention. As the baby in the family, I disappeared.

KB At the time you must not have been expecting to display these portraits publicly because they were so deeply personal.

BM I try not to think about the public or how people will respond. I keep this at an arm's distance. You will always have naysayers, people who are so judgmental. I now have the vocabulary to talk about it, but at that time all I knew was that I had ruined a couple of expensive paintbrushes by scratching Renee's face out. It was Elizabeth Lentz who told me to keep at it.

KB What did your family think of these portraits of Renee?

BM My family first saw the portraits at an exhibition organized by Elizabeth. I was nervous. My oldest sister, Roni, felt I was putting our family's business out in the street. My mother understood because she knew it was no secret that Renee was a handful. Renee came up to me at the opening and asked why I scratched out her face in the paintings. I remember standing there feeling completely helpless. We were interrupted, however, by someone who said to Renee that her portraits were beautiful and asked if she liked them. She said yes. I realized I didn't have to answer anymore because Renee realized she was the center of attention. She was fine, and she never asked me again.

KB You started painting yourself as a clown about 1995 or 1996, around the time you joined the faculty at Arizona State University in Tempe.

BM Actually, my first painting of me as a clown occurred when I was an undergraduate at NCCU because I was a clown in high school. I remember me and my friend Jewel dressed in clown makeup. The painting represented being white, being liberated from the projects and poverty, and a departure from people like me. I showed the painting to Elizabeth, my teacher. She laughed aloud and told me to look up James Ensor, an artist known for his clown portraits. I remember being shocked that she laughed. I didn't revisit painting self-portraits in clown makeup until after I graduated from Penn State (fig. 2).

KB What brought you back to painting self-portraits as a clown?

BM Around 1993, I attended a performance at Duke University's American Dance Festival. There was this performer dressed in blackface. I remember sitting there thinking, "Oh my God, I can be a Black clown; I don't have to be white." I had to be white in high school because that was the rule for the clown club. The next day I went to a Halloween shop and bought an Afro wig and black grease paint, and I became a Black clown.

KB Around this time, you were having gallery exhibitions of your portraiture, but then you also debuted the self-portraits in black clown makeup. Do you recall your family's reaction?

Fig. 2
Beverly and Jewel, c. 1986. Oil on canvas; 24 × 30 in.

BM I have always kept a journal. And one of the things that was on view with the exhibition was a journal, which helped provide context for the portraits. For example, the journal talked about being a clown and going from whiteface to blackface. In the beginning I didn't think my family had a problem with the portraits. They knew I had tried out for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. My mother was horrified but happy that I had found something that I loved to do. Mom said that being a clown was one of the first things I said I wanted to be.

KB I recall the story about how, as an undergraduate, you stopped doing side work as a clown because of the three-year-old kid who saw your Black skin under the white clown makeup and was horrified that you were Black underneath the makeup.

BM I told myself I would never do that again.

KB I can see how your paintings probably took a lot of people by surprise because they were unlike anything anyone had ever seen, particularly in North Carolina. It is one thing to see portraits; it is another thing to see self-portraits of a clown in black makeup. The journals must have been helpful for viewers unfamiliar with your artwork. Why did you start journaling?

BM I was a loner when I was a kid. I was incredibly shy. I still am; people don't believe that, but it is true. I wanted an outlet for things I couldn't talk to people about, like feeling trapped in the projects. And the only freedom I had was being a clown and hiding behind the clown makeup because then everybody loved me. You can't say that aloud to anybody. So journaling was an outlet for me to really be in touch with my feelings and give voice to all the things going on in my head. I have a bunch of journals from grade school, high school, and my undergraduate years, but I don't write very much anymore. I haven't done much journaling in the last two or three years.

KB Why not?

BM I think I feel sad and heartbroken in a way I don't want to remember or bring to the forefront. That is what journaling does. My paintings do the same thing, but if you're a viewer of the paintings, you can just look at the colors and say, "Oh, that's a beautiful painting," and you can forget all the other heavy stuff that's around it. With journaling, you can't do that. I think there are some real ugly truths in there that I'm not interested in addressing—at least these days.

KB It is quite a shock to hear you say you stopped.

BM I have journals that are a third full. I think it has to do with a sadness that I have for the world and for humanity, which is a bit too overwhelming for me to write about. I think this happens to a lot of artists. You push your way through. As you get older, you get to a point where you give yourself enough encouragement to keep going.

A reporter recently said to me that perhaps I have been so busy being an artist that I forgot to be me. Or to live. I didn't know what to say to that. But that speaks to teetering on the edge, and I'm not interested in going there because I think I'll fall. That's in part why I don't write anymore. It is just too painful an experience to face.

KB I believe it was with the painting *Dancing for My Man* (2003; pl. 18) that you finally took off

the clown makeup and began portraying yourself unadorned. What caused you to do that?

BM I remember it was important for me to not wear makeup. I knew it was time, and the paintings that came afterward allowed me to be open with myself—and with others.

KB It wasn't until 2017, when you spent a year at the American Academy in Rome, that you put the makeup back on. What happened?

BM I think it is the same thing that brought it on when I came to Arizona. I was in a place that made me feel very, very Black. While living in Rome, I was stripped of my comfort zone, since I didn't speak the language, felt quite isolated, and was living in this big mansion with other fellows who were very, very smart. I didn't feel like I didn't belong there, because I knew I could paint as well as they could speak or write. But it did make me feel like, as a Black person, you must be twice as good. I felt like, in addition to being a great painter, that I also needed to read the *New York Times* every morning so I could be a part of their world.

KB So you put the makeup back on because you were exhausted?

BM That was part of it. It was triggered by a Halloween party. Everybody asked me what I was going to dress up as. Many of the fellows were art historians, so some of their costumes were based in mythology. They were thinking of these very sexual women who were also powerful vixens. I thought I could be a clown. I hadn't put on makeup in years.

KB Did it feel good putting your makeup back on?

BM It felt great. I was cute because my hair was in exceptionally long dreadlocks. But people were staring at me at the party, thinking that I was in blackface. They did not think it was cute or funny. One of the fellows' husbands asked me why I could dress up in blackface and he could not. What gave me permission to do that? I said that, because I'm Black, this is authentic to my life. It is a part of who I am and the beginning of how I came into loving the performing arts in high school as a clown.

KB How did you feel about doing a portrait of Larry Wheeler, a white male, in blackface (2018, pl. 54)?

BM Larry had commissioned me to do his portrait, since he was retiring as the longtime director of the North Carolina Museum of Art. He wanted to be portrayed in blackface. Initially I told Larry that wasn't the best way to address his authentic self. Everyone was going to hate him for doing this, putting him out there on the ledge. I didn't know if I wanted to be out there on the ledge with him. Larry felt that since he was retiring, he didn't care anymore what people thought. He told me about this isolation of growing up in the South, being gay, and feeling like he was Aretha Franklin in this white male body. I realized I understood what he was talking about, so I wanted to honor that.

When I paint portraits of people, I'm interested in two things: I'm interested in finding myself within them, and I'm interested in painting their authentic selves. Larry met both those criteria, so I painted the portrait. I think the only way he could signify being a Black person was by putting on blackface. I didn't choose this lightly. I can't think of how else I could have painted him to have the same point come across.

KB When I look at Larry's portrait, I feel his portrayal is coming from a place of privilege, knowing how charged that imagery is for African Americans, particularly in the twenty-first century. The rest of us would be very respectful of other people's history and not appropriate, because we would not want to offend. It is still a very charged way to portray Larry's authentic self.

BM I believe that I have sometimes upset people when I have shown my authentic self. I must have courage when portraying my authentic self, whether people can appreciate it or not. When people see my *Depression* paintings (2010; pl. 38), it is so uncomfortable for them because they've been there themselves. But nobody really wants to acknowledge those painful aspects of life because it may imply something is wrong with you. Don't forget the early paintings of Renee, where I scratched her face out. I've been doing provocative things my entire artistic career. People project their own experiences onto the paintings. That is what art should do.

KB I have always been fascinated by your lovely backgrounds. That's another thing that is distinctly yours in terms of that depth of color, the lushness, and how you apply paint.

BM I think it came from looking at the paintings of Mark Rothko, Nathan Olivera, and Richard Diebenkorn. Their works would have these rich fields of color. In my head, I always put a figure in the middle of these color fields. I understand what Rothko wanted to achieve by making very atmospheric paintings with infinite space that you visually walk through and disappear. I decided I wanted to have that kind of background in addition to having a visual resting place, because sometimes what I place in the foreground can be too heavy for most people. I thought if I make a beautiful background, then people who are afraid of topics like racism won't see it. They'll see a lush painting with some figure standing in it, and they won't be alarmed.

Those who are willing to go there will see there is a contradiction between the foreground figure and the background, which is how my life is. It reflects so much of how I have walked through this world. When I moved to Arizona [in 1996], I was depressed for months, in part because I felt I was one of the few Black people out there. All that is familiar to your environment and your surroundings is snatched away from you. Initially, I couldn't find soul food, a Black radio station, a Black church, or a beauty salon. The things that I took for granted in North Carolina appeared to be gone. So I was simply trying to rise out of it and not fall apart.

KB I met you for the first time at your 1998 solo exhibition *All of Me* at Scottsdale Center for the Arts.[1] As the museum's registrar, I was there to check on the artwork. For whatever reason, I honestly had no idea about you up until the moment I walked into the exhibition space and saw you—another Black woman in Scottsdale who was in the arts. It was remarkable at that time.

You always had a command of paint, but you also had the ability to share your personal history. I truthfully believe that's where your career really started to take off because your subject matter was so different, interesting, and provocative.

BM I recall the exhibition had some tough paintings.

KB The center was taking a huge risk to show these amazing paintings of you with this audience having zero understanding of who you were.

BM I remember speaking at the opening. The theater was packed, with more Black people than I had ever seen in my whole stay in the state of Arizona. A Black guy asked me about a painting in the exhibition titled *Stand*. He asked why I wrote that word in the painting and what it meant. I suspected he was thinking about this song by BeBe and CeCe Winans called "You Just Stand." The painting is symbolic of my mother, who was a big churchgoer and who would say, "When you are going through a rough time, just stand still, and it is going to be alright." In that painting I am dressed in my mother's church gloves, which she gave to me when I wanted to be a clown.

KB *All of Me* was your introduction to people outside North Carolina, their chance to know who you are and your power as a painter. After that you began several series—*Loving in Black and White* (1998–99; pls. 9–10) and *Mammy, How I Love You* (1999; pl. 12)—where you used costumes to place yourself at the center of narratives speaking to personal experiences about love and your mother's life as a domestic worker.

BM While at Arizona State University, I had access to the theater department. I couldn't wear their costumes because I was too big, but I got permission to go backstage and take pictures as well as to use the props. I reenacted scenarios of things my mother would have done as a domestic worker, like ironing and washing dishes. There were also all these dolls backstage as well, and, of course, they were all white. I incorporated the dolls into my portraits. I decided to make the narrative bigger, so that it was not simply personal but that it is also universal, in that others felt the same way or grew up like I did. Many African American children in the South grew up with mothers who were caretakers for white families and their children, so this was an opportunity to act out these narratives.

Also keep in mind that I was in my thirties when I arrived in Arizona. I was looking for a partner, but it never occurred to me that I would likely need to date someone white. I thought, There has to be some brothers out here, but I don't see where they are. I can clearly remember thinking that I must learn how to look at white men, which speaks volumes about how we're trained about what beauty is, what sexy is, and what is alluring. I remember staring at white men. Most of my colleagues were white males, and I'm looking at them and thinking, Is he cute? Can I see myself sleeping with him? I did that for a long time.

KB The connotations with *Loving in Black and White* and the sexualization of the mammy figure are loaded. I know at one level you are telling the story about what it is to find love in Arizona or wanting to shed light on your mother's history. Now, however, the figures have become powerful symbols of identity and empowerment. Later, instead of sharing your mother's history through narratives, you began painting portraits of her. Did you ever talk with her about wanting to become a painter?

BM I don't know if I went to her and said I wanted to be a painter. I know my mother was glad my sister Roni and I were the first generation to go

to college. My mother was enormously proud of me, but she would have preferred that I take a traditional route. She had me question everything, though.

KB I haven't seen many portraits of your mother from your time in college.

BM Most of the portraits of Mom came a year or two before she died [in 2004]. My mother was a domestic worker, which I wasn't interested in when I was in college. I wasn't interested in being traditional—it was too mundane.

KB The *Mammy, How I Love You* series explores your mom's work as a domestic. You also collaborated with photographer Ernie Button (2002; pls. 66–69) to document several domestics living in the South. You were able to talk about this big aspect of her life, which you initially avoided. Did you see yourself as symbolically being your mother?

BM For these paintings, I didn't initially use my mother's image. My mother has fair skin and pretty hair. She was an attractive woman. But I really wanted to capitalize on the stereotype of a mammy figure: an overweight Black woman who was a good cook and nursemaid to white children. I dressed up in my grandma's old dresses, put on a wig and blackface, which was part of my identity as a clown. All those themes are right in line with how I felt with Renee—being in the margin, being invisible.

KB The portraits of your mother are wonderful, positive affirmations. One of my favorite portraits, *Momma* (2003–04; pl. 22), is of her sitting in a chair just as regal as she can be. I remember when you left Arizona to be near your family in North Carolina while your mother was in the hospital dying of pancreatic cancer. There are some powerful images of your family. I think this is also the first time you haven't completely "finished" the portraits, where some of the figures are roughly drawn but not filled in.

BM I wasn't conscious of what I was doing. I was simply being an artist and choosing to keep these parts of the paintings unfinished. I found myself preferring to be an artist instead of grieving, since I could not do both at the same time. After my mom's death, Renee came to live with me in Arizona, where it was more important for me to take care of Renee than to grieve.

KB Around this time, you were also involved with the filmmakers who created the HBO documentary film *Raising Renee*, where they focused on you and the promise to your mother to take care of Renee.[2]

BM In 2002 I was at [Harvard's Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Studies] completing a fellowship. This is where I met filmmaker Jeanne Jordan, who was also a Radcliffe fellow. Jeanne was interested in making a film about me as an artist, and she began by filming me in my studio. Shortly after that my mother was diagnosed with cancer. That is when the film switched to being about me as an artist and fulfilling this promise to my mother.

KB What was it like having them following you around everywhere?

BM They didn't show me any footage for five years. I didn't know how I was being portrayed. Much of the footage was of me was in pajamas, which is how I'm most comfortable. That's the beauty of what they were doing; it was not about this perfect artist in the studio. The producers at HBO loved the film because I appeared so down to earth.

KB The ending of the film—Renee getting herself established in her own apartment, maintaining independence, and realizing she has done well—is wonderful.

BM Renee was the poster child for the Arc of the United States [an organization serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities]. They deemed her that because so many of their clients don't ever get to live on their own or be as independent as Renee is. She loves it.

KB I think your mom is looking down and saying, "You fulfilled the promise."

BM Renee is now sixty. She's falling more, as her seizures have increased. I know that eventually she is going to have to come back and live with me.

KB You have several portraits of your cousin Sharon. They include starkly realistic imagery that shows the ugly side of what can happen to people. In Sharon's case, you portray the experience of living with diabetes and being a double leg amputee.

BM I'd like to think of Sharon's paintings as portraying fragility or doom—what it means to be human, how humanity manifests itself in people's lives in vastly diverse ways, but they become heroic, they rise. Sharon was really the embodiment of rising from all the things she had to endure, including diabetes.

KB Sharon was not your only cousin to suffer from diabetes.

BM She had four brothers, and several of them died because of diabetes. One is in a wheelchair with a leg amputated because of it. It is heartbreaking. But I came to the realization that Sharon's only power on this earth, especially the last ten or fifteen years of her life, was being able to make the decision to put whatever she wanted to in her mouth. That was her act of power. It led to several amputations and ultimately her death.

KB One portrait, *Sharon Pushing Up Daisies #1* (2018; pl. 53), has her literally pushing up these daisies in the painting, but figuratively it is a wonderful way to pay tribute to her. You had previously used flowers as ornamentation in your portraits, but this seems different.

BM I think of the old saying: When you die you push up daisies. I really did want to use them to celebrate Sharon's life and her tenacity. She had a hard life. She took everything, including diabetes, in stride. And I can't say that I would.

KB Another figure featured prominently in your paintings is your father, Cardrew. I understand that you didn't meet him until you were seventeen. Apparently, your mother pointed out a figure standing in the kitchen doorway and said, "By the way, I need to introduce you to your father."

BM I was mad at her. I was shocked, too. How in the hell can you keep a secret like that, then just blurt it out when the man is standing at the door staring at me? My mom had apparently planned it; they apparently had stayed in touch. He was giving money to her every Christmas so that she could buy me extra gifts. One day he told Mom he was coming over and that he would introduce himself as my dad. It magnified this sense of isolation that I had felt all my life that I was different, which was now intensified because I realized I only have half-sisters. It brought back memories of times I felt like I was treated differently.

KB Did you reach out to him and ask about getting to know him better?

BM I did initially because, when I went to college, I did not have money. I thought he would help me. He said he would, but he didn't really mean it.

KB When did you reconnect with him and begin painting portraits of him?

BM After my mother died, I decided that perhaps I should get to know him. I suspected that I had some issues around men and realized I was doing myself harm. I needed to sit and talk to him. That is how it started. He had to have surgery to remove a tumor from his head. The first painting I made of him is in the hospital.

KB The portraits of Cardrew, as in *Daddy's Birthday* (2015; pl. 46), are your affirmation of a male presence in your life. But it is also male portraiture, something that you do less often than female portraiture, which you seem to have a comfort level with.

BM I was giving a lecture somewhere, and a young Black man raised his hand and said, "When you show us your work, all I see are women. Why don't you paint men?" At that time I said, "Well, I guess I don't because there haven't been powerful men in my life journey. They have all been women." I had completed a few male portraits prior to the paintings of my father, but I believe my deep exploration of Black male portraiture started at this point.

KB Two bodies of work—the *Dear God* series and the paintings about depression—offer compelling commentary on aspects of life that affect everyone. Is the *Dear God* series (2007–10; pls. 28–36) about the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States?

BM It started there. I was in Santa Fe, and the television announced he was going to be a candidate for the presidential nomination. My only context for this historical event was Shirley Chisholm's run for president when I was just a child. I never thought I would see this in my lifetime. I remember being so overwhelmed with joy and happiness that a brother was going to be president. So I made this series of paintings expressing how I felt. I had an image of myself that I repeated for each canvas, to hold that same sort of emotion. Then I started writing down things that were occurring daily that made me think, Is this a joke? Is this real?

KB I believe the *Depression* series (2010; pl. 38) was completed during your residency at Yaddo, the artists' retreat.

BM There was a pool of other artists in residence who came to my studio and were blown away by my work. That is where I met writer and painter Robert Storr. The *Depression* series is about my life at that time in Arizona. I was able to address that kind of sadness in what I felt like was a safe and protective place to talk about depression.

By the way, I remember you telling me, and I quote: "If you feel that bad about being in Arizona, you need to leave and never show these to anybody else. Don't show them. They are too vulnerable."

KB Okay, I did say that. But please allow me to put that statement in context. I thought these

were beautiful works about a very raw, emotional state. I erred because everyone feels that way. I come from a very dignified family where you don't show that kind of feeling in public. And maybe that was my fear.

BM The *Depression* paintings are just as relevant right now during Covid-19. I think people who suffer from depression, their head becomes so big and so heavy that they can't get it off the table. I think it is exceedingly difficult and incredibly vulnerable to share that with anybody. The saving grace is that when people see the work, they understand they are not the only one who feels that way.

KB Richard Mayhew, Faith Ringgold, and Elizabeth Lentz nurtured you and supplied an understanding of what it takes to be a good artist and professional. Did you see yourself as a nurturer for your students once you became a professor?

BM Not right away. It did not crystallize until I returned to North Carolina to teach painting at NCCU in 2007, nearly twelve years after I first taught there. John Bloedorn at Craven Allen Gallery in Durham agreed to show my work along with my students' work. I told my class they needed to choose between working hard for this special opportunity or following the class syllabus. They decided to make artwork for the exhibition. That same year I took them to New York for a week, much as Richard Mayhew did with me. Some had never flown or been to New York before. The world was opening for them. We had a wonderful time. That was the beginning for me taking a more conscious approach to nurturing those I was teaching. Four of those students went on to graduate school to get their master's degrees, which had never happened in the history of NCCU's art department [with the exception of Beverly herself]. Lamar Whidbee was one of the students.

KB It is great to see Lamar actively working as an artist now. I believe, however, that your work in professional development predated your experience at NCCU. You were also actively doing this at Arizona State University, too. This is where students like Michael Dixon, Damian Stamer, and Claudio Dicochea were taught. You were an art professor, but you were also teaching students the business of being an artist.

BM It was important to me not to dictate what my students should do unless I was doing it myself. I was a practicing artist in addition to being a professor; I was exhibiting artworks, and I was busy applying for and receiving grants. I received some of my first big grants, like the Guggenheim and Anonymous Was a Woman, when I was at ASU. I wanted to teach my students how to be professional artists. How do you present your work? How do you give a lecture and not put everybody to sleep? How do you apply for grants? These were the things I knew were going to be extremely important for the survival of an artist; I knew they would need something to sustain themselves. It is great to be able to paint, but you must have money, too. It makes me want to cry. I didn't have children of my own. I feel like these students are my children. I feel responsible for sending them on their way as artists, giving them the tools needed to survive.

KB I remember when you were told you were a fellow at the American Academy in Rome in 2017. You called me from the airport in New York, crying. What was it like to get this prestigious opportunity?

BM I was shocked that I got the grant because it is incredibly competitive. A part of me was hoping I didn't get the grant.

KB What—why?

BM It speaks to the duality in my life. At my core I am a very private person who really enjoys routine and consistency. I am shy. Then there is this person that is more adventurous, wants to explore, and wants to have different experiences but thinks there is always a lesson. I applied for the Rome Prize because I wanted to have something on my résumé that said that I was still active—that I was not resting on my laurels. I also had never been to Italy. I had no real expectations, except that it was going to be different and new.

KB Change is hard, especially when you think about how it affects your painting. The goal is to see how this experience can further develop and enrich you with regard to your eyes and how you see things.

BM In my mind, I hadn't even gotten that far. I was thinking that I was going to Rome to represent Black people, reluctantly learn the language, and not have any comfort zones. It is the only way you grow, and thank God, I understand that much of it. There were several other African American fellows, and that made all the difference in the world. My time with them was magical because we all had the same problems. As a result, I was able to focus on painting, which included reintroducing self-portraits in black clown makeup, as I have already mentioned, but also seeing how the differences in lighting, atmosphere, environment, and even collaboration could affect my work. *Brown Girl Memory* (2018; pl. 51) is a perfect case in point, where I collaborated with Italian artist and set designer Gaetona Casseli to create something I had not done before—namely work together on a canvas. What resulted is a fun, beautiful portrayal that combines two distinctly different aesthetics into one unified image.

KB Another collaboration you are known for is your work with dancer and performance artist Eiko Otake. How did this come about?

BM In 2019 Jodee Nimerichter, the director of Duke's American Dance Festival, asked if I would be interested in collaborating with Eiko. Jodee felt we were similar as artists and as caretakers for our families. Eiko was, at the time, living in New York but completing a residency in Colorado before heading back to Japan to care for her mother. I tried to meet with her in Colorado but was unable to fly there due to weather. We then came up with another plan; instead of her flying home to New York from Colorado, she would come to North Carolina and spend a couple of days with me.

I remember it was about 10:30 p.m. This petite Asian woman came knocking at my door. She came in, we sat, and we talked. She was hungry, so I made her some rice as we continued to talk until fairly late. We spent two or three days together, just talking about the project and its possibilities. Initially, the focus was to be about caretaking. I knew she was going to Japan four times a year to check on her mother. I wanted to visit Japan and take pictures of Eiko caring for her mother. From this, we could put together a show and talk about caregiving and its challenges. It was decided I would visit Japan the following April. Eiko called in January, however, to share that her mother was dying. If I wanted to meet her, I needed to fly to Japan immediately.

KB So the focus of the collaboration changed from caretaking to being about death—the death of a mom.

BM I book my ticket and fly to Japan, which is such a head trip. Because of the jet lag, I arrive not even knowing what day it is. I'm numb, and it feels like I might be the only Black person in the airport and all of Japan.

KB Culture shock.

BM People are staring at me, doing double takes to see a Black person. One of Eiko's students picks me up from the airport and takes me to Eiko, who is staying two hours outside Tokyo. When I finally connect with Eiko, she says her mother died just before I had arrived. We eventually get to Eiko's house, where her mother is lying in a little box close to the floor. I have to get down on my hands and knees to be at eye level with her. Eiko sits down beside me, and we pray. Orange and white rice were on a table next to her mother as a way for her to symbolically have food as she went on her journey.

KB How did the family perceive your presence there? They knew you were an artist, correct?

BM They embraced me and treated me like family. Eiko asked me to take part in their service and allowed me to take pictures. I took photographs of the ceremony and tried to document it as well as I could, much like we did at my mother's funeral. They also had me actively taking part in the ceremony, which was unlike anything I had experienced before.

KB You returned home carrying this amazing experience in your head. How did your collaboration transition from focusing on caretaking to a story about grief?

BM It became about grief because all my images from Japan were about death. I made paintings about Eiko and her mother—in particular, these images of her lying in a bed looking very frail and deceased (2019; pls. 55–57). The collaborative performance with Eiko debuted at the American Dance Festival in 2019. The paintings were already on stage before the performance. Eiko's son visited, and I remember him dropping down and weeping in front of the paintings. You realize that grief does not discriminate. I don't care if you are Black, rich, poor, Japanese, Korean, whatever. We all grieve the same. That look, that mad human look of loss is universal.

KB Eiko decided to bring you into the performance as well.

BM As a shy person, I hated it initially. The last thing I want to do is get up on a stage. She wanted us to be on stage together naked. That was not an option for me, so instead we wore simple black-and-white outfits. Eiko choreographed movements around mourning and last rites.

KB Tell me about your current work, which you have been creating in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. What was it like for you when things shut down in March 2020?