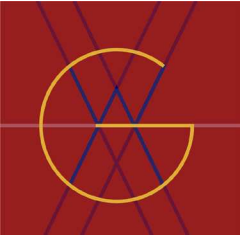




Living History: The Liveliness of Lavett Ballard's Wood Stories

Essay by ELizabeth Ezekiel



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Pride vs. Prejudice

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Contents

Forward by Jonathan Shirland	6
Living History: The Liveliness of Lavett Ballard's Wood Stories Essay by Elizabeth Ezekiel	
Preface	8
Ballard's History with Wooden Media	9
Sourcing and Treatment of Wood	12
Layered Histories, Living Histories	15
References	20
Notes	21
Exhibition List	22
Illustrations	28

Forward

This exhibition and the accompanying catalogue originated in the passionate advocacy of students in my ARTH308 Women in the Visual Arts class. I ask them to complete a short research assignment that combines a social justice approach to art historical analysis with an investigation into the workings of the contemporary art market whilst learning how to write an effective acquisition proposal through templates utilized by auction houses and museums. The groups use a variety of professional digital tools that monitor trends in the art market to investigate artworks by female artists that have sold at auction in recent

years, and then select a piece that represents the best purchase to add to our university collection from financial, political, educational and artistic standpoints. They must draft a formal acquisition proposal letter and I encourage them to weigh up issues such as the symbolic value the work might have to the BSU community and our local region, its usefulness as a teaching aid, its potential as an economic investment, where and how it might be installed on campus, and its power as an expression of a historically situated artistic consciousness that will resonate with different members of our community. The proposals are reviewed by Jay Block, Associate Director of Collections and Exhibitions, and myself



When They See Us

and we have been struck by the variety and persuasiveness of many of the submissions. In Fall 2021, propositions for the acquisition of artworks by Irma Stern, Yayoi Kusama, Hildegard of Bingen, Harriet Hosmer, and Lalla Essaydi were submitted, but the proposal by Maya Boivin, Elizabeth Ezekiel, Melanie Marhefka, Benjamin Matos and Erin Williams selecting Lavett Ballard's mixed media piece *When They See Us* (2020) prompted Jay to approach the artist with an invitation to hold a solo exhibition in the Anderson Gallery.

The proposal considered various aspects of Ballard's work including the significance of the wood support that Elizabeth Ezekiel examines in detail in her catalogue essay, the lavish floral symbolism from the perspective of cycles of social justice and the "stealthy" hiding of figures who possess an "oppositional gaze" and "hold their ground in plain sight" in defiance of racist and sexist stereotypes, and the appeal to students in different studio concentrations given the methods and materials employed. Comparisons were drawn to the work of Mickalene Thomas and Betye Sarr in its investigation of generations of black female experience and memory, and the students eloquently highlighted in *When They See Us* the, "re-circulation and amplification" of experiences many in our communities grapple with every day. The proposal argued that all BSU students benefit from seeing artworks that enhance, "the connectivity between the campus community and the broader global community", a sentiment I wholeheartedly endorse. I am grateful to Jay Block for amplifying their voices and to Lavett Ballard for making their advocacy a reality.

Jonathan Shirland
Associate Professor of Art & Art History

Living History: The Liveliness of Lavett Ballard's Wood Stories

"It is not just a piece of art, it's a piece of history. It has a story to it, and it's a work that I really want people when they hand it down or pass it on to the next generation they can say: well, when I was little, I could've sworn that one panel was straight, and now it's starting to curve just ever so slightly. And I think that's so awesome because it's curving because it's still a living thing. It's still, even though it's cut off from its root, it's still growing."

- Lavett Ballard

Preface

Prior to 2017, Lavett Ballard experimented with collaging on different forms, sizes, and cuts of wood. In that year, however, she began to collage on reclaimed wooden fence panels, and it is then that her style as a collage artist began to garner national recognitionⁱ. I interviewed Ms. Ballard in June of 2022 in preparation for this exhibition, and she explained to me how she views her smaller wooden collages (called wood slices) and paper works as her sketchbooks, whereas the fence panel collages are her final compositions.

Her style combines the metallic tones, vibrant color palette, and a celebration of womanhood associated with the Afrofuturism, alongside imagery that speaks to the experiences of African

Americans living in the southern United States ⁱⁱ. The title of this exhibition, *The Ground We Stand On*, reminds viewers that African peoples were brought to the United States to be laborers working with the earth. The works curated for this exhibition implore viewers to question not only the land ownership rights of the ground they are on, but also the histories of who was working that land.

The Ground We Stand On invites us to consider the histories of African American peoples not only through the exhibition title, but through the primary medium of works curated for this exhibition: reclaimed wood. This substrate transforms these collages into compositions vividly marked by the forces of time. Eventually, the slats of the fence panels in her wood stories will bend and curve as the weight of time forces them to change. Rather than working against these decaying processes, however, Ballard celebrates the liveliness of this material. The imperfect nature of the wood panels, both at the start and end of the collage-making process, embeds them with a sense of life, reflecting both the flaws of human history and the natural world more broadly. Interpreting her wood stories through this lens allows for an openness to compositions changing over time, and grounds the viewer in their own sense of being alive while maintaining a connection with the past.

Ballard's History with Wooden Media

Ballard began working with wood at a larger-scale in 2017 while pursuing an MFA at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. When asked what initially drew her to start working with wood, Ballard recounted that “the thing I like the most about this medium is the thought process. It makes me really get in my head.” Her collage entitled *The Making of Us* (2017) marks the transitional point in Ballard's

career when she began collaging on large pieces of wood. Reflecting on this work, Ballard shared that “this was one of the earliest pieces. I did smaller mock-ups in wood, but this was the first large-scale mock-up on wood I did before I got the fences.”

The Making of Us was not made with a reclaimed fence panel like the majority of works in this exhibition, but rather the substrate is plywood. Ballard was drawn to working with plywood because it was the flattest and most even wooden surface she could find. Despite these benefits, Ballard soon realized that working with plywood was far more challenging than she originally anticipated. In our interview she explained that “the problem with plywood is that it is very heavy. Believe it or not, my



The Making of Us

fences aren't that heavy because they are outdoor fences... most of [the fences] are pretty old and are starting to get ashen and they're weather-beaten."

A recurrent theme across Ballard's oeuvre is the influence and endurance of African hair traditions. Earlier in her career she explored this theme through three-dimensional installation artworks, however in *The Making of Us* Ballard conveys the strength of African hair traditions on a flat surface in part due to her craftsmanship in carving the plywood ⁱⁱⁱ. This strength is reflected by the deep, vertical cuts that rupture the surface of the composition. The horizontal striations shooting off from these cuts are further indicators of the force used by Ballard to carve into the panel, ultimately causing it to split. These irregular striations also remind the viewer of the substrate's organic makeup. Plywood is a manufactured substance comprised of multiple wooden layers glued together; her use of this pseudo-natural material results in intended imperfections. In other words, Ballard is collaging on a substance which has already grown and decayed and lived.

The ruptured surface of the plywood panel also adds tension to the composition, elevating viewers' awareness of the importance of hair braiding to African American peoples. Kobena Mercer summarizes the complexities and polarization of Black hairstyling in American culture:

When hairstyling is critically evaluated as an aesthetic practice inscribed in everyday life, all Black hairstyles are political in that they each articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both social and symbolic meaning and significance. ¹

¹ Owusu, Kwesi, and Kobena Mercer. "Black Hair/Style Politics." Essay. In *Black British Culture and Society: A Text-Reader*, 111–21. London: Routledge, 2003, 115.

The politicized history of Black hairstyling in America is echoed by Ballard's deep cuts into the plywood which reverberate throughout the panel. These cracks fracture the wooden plane and allude to the divisive nature of American politics and the, at times, dislocated dream for a unified nation.

While the hardness and density of the wooden substrate in *The Making of Us* underscores the tension surrounding hair braiding practices for African American communities, this work is simultaneously a celebration of the cultural and aesthetic traditions which build a community. In other words, through this work Ballard is asking the viewer to consider: what makes our community, our history, our beauty, *ours*? What defines us? One way to answer this question is by observing the exchange on the right of the composition where a woman braids a child's hair. The child is staring straight at the photographer, though the older woman looks off into the distance, comfortable, as though this is a familiar routine. Here an intimate moment is captured where an older generation cares for the younger, passing on traditions of beauty likely within the privacy of their own home. Ballard's inclusion of this tender moment informs us that while this work may be in part about the tensions that fracture us, it is also about the moments that bring us together.

Sourcing and Treatment of Wood

The first panels Ballard acquired were salvaged from her neighbor's yard following a severe winter storm. Because their fence was so damaged, her neighbors replaced the fence rather than try to repair it, leaving them with a surplus of scrap wood. Ballard thought to herself: "I'm [already] working with wood, [with] plywood, if I can figure out how to collage on those fence panels where it will look intentional if it's distressed, I think that will work." Ballard acquired six fence panels from her

neighbor's yard and began her career in large-scale reclaimed wood collaging ^{iv}. Soon, birchwood emerged as her favorite type of wood to collage. Its flatness eases the sanding process as well as Ballard's ability to lay other media atop the wood. Moreover, the softness of the wood allows Ballard to carve into the wood with less force, subsequently giving her more control over the size and shape of the cut, as well as any striations that radiate outwards.

Over the last five years collaging with reclaimed fence panels, she has developed a multi-step system to treat the wood. Such a system allows for proper assessment of the condition of the wood, and prepares the surface for additive elements like photographs, paint, or metallic foil. Additionally, the conditions of the wood vary from the time she acquires the panels, to when she starts collaging, through when she finishes the work due to natural decaying processes. The changing condition of the wooden substrate adds a vitality to both the final work as well as the art-making process.

Wood Treatment Pre-Collaging:

1. Spray and soak the fence panel with a homemade cleaning concoction of orange oil, tea tree oil, hydrogen peroxide, and water.
2. Use a hard brush to brush down the wood, scraping off debris, plant matter, or splintering wood.
3. Allow wood to fully dry.
4. Repeat steps 1-3 twice more.
5. Store wood panel in a vault (part of Ballard's studio) for one week to allow wood to fully dry. This helps prevent future fungal growth.
6. Sand wood to even the surface texture.

7. Cut wood to desired size.
8. Spray wood with cleaning solution; brush with hard brush.
9. Final sanding of wood.

Wood Treatment Post-Collaging:

1. Dark woods: apply three coats of a water-based polyacrylic sealant.
2. Blonde woods: apply one coat of shellac and one coat of polyacrylic.



Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection

Ballard also often burns sections of the birchwood panels using a torch, such as in *Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection* (2018). Here, we observe burn marks prominently in the upper-middle region of the composition. Contrasting with both the blondness of the wood stain and the vibrancy of the paint, the burnings add more compositional complexity ^v. *Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection* is unique among Ballard's fence panel collages for this work is oriented in landscape rather than portrait. The great width of this panel, over one-and-a-half meters, encourages the viewer's eye to move left to right across the compositional plane. The viewer starts this journey with ragged, uneven slats of wood on the left, ending with a smooth, rounded curve of the wood that offers a pleasing juxtaposition. The rough texture on the left side of the panel compliments the burning, together conveying intensity. In our interview, Ballard also expressed that "the burning also signifies the burning of cities and the burning of towns in Black communities." The dark visual effects of the burning stresses the history of racial tension in the city of Philadelphia; the setting for this collage and a place where Ballard affectionately refers to as her "sister city." Specifically, the imagery of men and women lined up together alludes to racial protests in Philadelphia, as well as government implemented redlining. ^{vi}

Layerd Histories, Living Histories

Lavett Ballard employs visual storytelling through collaging to share the histories of African American peoples by working with a medium that has its own history. The multi-layered histories embedded in her collages result in works that within themselves are living histories. Works that do not end when the artist is done working with them, but rather continue to change in form and condition as time passes. The ongoing processes of Ballard's works changing in condition and interpretation reminds viewers of the literal passing of time, but also of their own mortality and connection to the natural world.

By utilizing a substrate that was once alive and is now taking on a new life through art, Ballard is highlighting the ever-changing conditions of what it means to be alive on this earth. Just as her physical substrate will never be wholly unchanging, the conversations aroused by her collages can never be static. As time passes, viewers' reflections on historical events represented in these collages will inevitably change as new events unfold and demand reevaluation of history. Compositions such as Ballard's perhaps then can never be fully apprehended as they will inevitably change in the years and decades to come. Art that has not only been made for the sake of being art but embodies the vitality and liveliness of being both an object created in history and an artwork that demands the development of history. Art that becomes, with time, living history.

The liveliness of Ballard's wooden collages refers both to the material quality of the substrate having once been alive, and taking on new life through art, as well as the conversations these collages provoke about the viewer's own sense of being alive. Ballard combines photographic traces of her own family members alongside recognizable icons from African and African American histories, as well as the faces of ordinary citizens, to speak to the connectivity and strength that comes from being a part of a group. These themes of unity and community are reinforced by the collaging techniques Ballard utilizes. The long, thoughtful process Ballard employs to research, select, and place images compounds the idea of bringing groups together that may otherwise be separated. By placing images taken throughout history beside one another, the viewer is guided by Ballard's artful hand in connecting historical events, movements, and cultural phenomena together. The physical act of viewing people or events throughout history next to each other on one compositional plane emphasizes how stories may be reimagined when studied as one whole, not only as separate parts. In other words, Ballard's collages are not attempting to reshape how historical events unfolded. Rather, through her collaging



The Making of Us

process and the visual connections made between images, these works create new stories altogether; stories capable of guiding the viewer in exploring human connectivity.

Just as the collaging techniques Ballard employs encourage a broader, collective approach to studying these works, their positioning both as artworks and living histories are most illuminated when considering these compositions as unions of the collage materials with the wooden substrate. An emphasis on both these compositional elements not only reinforces the power of unity but helps us as viewers understand why wood selection and treatment are so critical to Ballard's art making process. By carving or burning sections of the fence panels, Ballard is complimenting the additive collage elements without overpowering

the substrate. In the end, the emphasis Ballard places on both the fence panel substrate and the additive collage elements provoke conversations about the interconnectivity of humans and natural resources in both life and art. ^{vii}

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Notes

ⁱ She was commissioned to create the collage, *We Shall Not be Moved* (2020) for the Time Magazine special Woman of the Year feature edition in March 2020, marking the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage.

ⁱⁱ According to Oxford Bibliographies, "Afrofuturism comprises cultural production and scholarly thought—literature, visual art, photography, film, multimedia art, performance art, music, and theory—that imagine greater justice and a freer expression of Black subjectivity in the future or in alternative places, times, or realities." Afrofuturist works displace linear temporality, often looking to the future through means of science or speculative fiction to create realities in which Black experiences are normative. Afrofuturism dates back to the late nineteenth century but continues to increase in popularity. (English) Key figures of the Afrofuturist movement are writers Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany, as well as jazz musician Sun Ra. (Tate)

ⁱⁱⁱ Early in Ballard's career she was interested in studying the relationships African Americans had with hair and hair braiding practices, both as markers of individual identity and symbols of historic cultural practices. Using synthetic hair, wire, and yarn among other media, Ballard created three-dimensional installations which reimagined the structure of hair fibers to help "the viewer appreciate the beauty, strength and resilience of hair as both an identifier of beauty and [of] heritage." Examples of these installations are seen on her website, lavettbart.com. ("Art of Lavett B. - Curated Kinks.")

African hair traditions have been a significant topic of recent exhibitions and art historical scholarship. One landmark exhibition, *Textures: The History and Art of Black Hair*, at the Kent State University Museum (Sept. 2021 – August 2022) explores topics such as the preferential treatment for straight hair, social hierarchies of skin color, and the politics of bodily presentation. Featured artists include James Van Der Zee, Sonya Clark, Lorna Simpson, Mary Sibande, and Zanele Muholi. For more information, visit <https://texturesksumu-seum.wordpress.com>. ("Textures")

^{iv} An average fence panel is 182.8 cm (72 in) high and 172.7-177.8 cm (68-70 in) wide.

^v In addition to burning the wooden panels, Ballard carves scarification marks on the faces within her collages and paints patterns of dots on their complexions. Given Ballard's interest in Afrofuturism, these dotted patterns dancing across her compositions may be interpreted as a celestial connection to the cosmos, in part due to their resemblance of stars. When asked about these dots in our interview, Ballard explained that "the dots on the face are to tie us into our lost African traditions and culture of painting faces for certain events or key marks of life, like weddings or funerals.... Some of my collectors have figured it out that when I'm doing the dots on the faces if I have multiple figures what I will do is try to show some type of family connection by having one [face] with certain dots and another [face] with [the same] certain dots. [So], family members will have the same dots within the same piece."

^{vi} According to the Cornell Law School online Legal Information Institute, "Redlining can be defined as a discriminatory practice that consists of the systematic denial of services such as mortgages, insurance loans, and other financial services to residents of certain areas, based on their race or ethnicity."

^{vii} To see more examples of works by Lavett Ballard, visit her website, lavettbart.com. Currently, Ballard is co-represented by both the Long Sharp Art Gallery (Indianapolis, IN) and the Galerie Myrtis (Baltimore, MD).

Exhibition List

Black Pearl, 2020

8 x 10 "

Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

The Descendants, 2019

12 x 11 "

Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

Don't make me Over, 2021

11 x 14 "

Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

Hear my Call, 2020

11 x 14 "

Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

Ignorance is Bliss, 2018

12 x 12 "

Collage/Mixed Media on Hand carved
Birchwood Panel

The Inheritance, 2021

Installation Mixed Media

Jiggy, 2020

17 x 12 "

Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

More Than Me, 2017

72 x 30 "

Mixed Media/Collage on reclaimed wood



Black Pearl

My Name is Atatianna, 2020
16 x 20"
Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

My Name is Sandra, 2020
16 x 12 "
Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

Passing, 2019
8 x 10 "
Collage/Mixed Media
on Hand carved Birchwood Panel

Pay it Forward, 2021
Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

Pride vs. Prejudice, 2018
59 x 32"
Mixed Media/Collage
on reclaimed wood

Still I Rise I, 2017
6 x 4 ' Mixed Media/Collage
on reclaimed wood

Sublime, 2021
24 x 30 " Collage/Mixed Media
on Hand carved Birchwood Panel

Sunshine, 2020
11 x 15"
Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice



Still I Rise I (detail)

Timeless, 2019

11 x 13"

Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

Unruly, 2021

6 x 12"

Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

We Shall not be Moved, 2020

36 x 40"

Mixed Media/Collage on reclaimed wood

'Whatcha Lookin at?', 2020

16 x 12"

Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

Your Blues ain't like Mine, 2019

48 x 24 "

Mixed Media/Collage on reclaimed wood



Your Blues ain't like Mine



'Whatcha Lookin At?'

Illustrations

<i>My Name is Sandra</i> , 2020 16 x 12 “ Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice	Title
<i>Pride vs. Prejudice</i> , 2018 59 x 32” Mixed Media/Collage on reclaimed wood	Copyright
<i>When They See Us</i> , 2020 48 x 36” Mixed Media/Collage on Birchwood panel	Forward
<i>The Making of Us</i> , 2017 40 x 50” Mixed Media/ Collage on Plywood	Preface
<i>Brotherly Love & Sisterly Affection</i> , 2018 32 x 66 “ Mixed Media/Collage on reclaimed wood	pp. 14
<i>We Shall not be Moved</i> , 2020 36 x 40” Mixed Media/Collage on reclaimed wood	pp. 17
<i>Black Pearl</i> , 2020 8 x 10 “ Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice	pp. 22

Still I Rise I, 2017

6 x 4 ' Mixed Media/Collage
on reclaimed wood

pp. 23

Sunshine, 2020

11 x 15"

Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

pp. 24

'Whatcha Lookin at?', 2020

16 x 12"

Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

pp. 25

Jiggy, 2020

17 x 12 "

Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

pp. 29

Timeless, 2019

11 x 13"

Collage/Mixed Media on Wood Slice

pp. 30





Acknowledgements

This exhibition would not be possible without the amazing art of Lavett Ballard. Throughout her work, she maintains a defining connection to her subjects and personal history while imbuing each work with a fluidity of color and light as a vehicle in the expression of these social critiques.

Jonathan Shirland has provided the forward to this catalogue and has graciously included my input into his *Women in the Visual Arts* class. Without this collaboration and the remarkable proposal generated by his students, this exhibition would not have occurred.

A special thanks to Elizabeth Ezekiel on her insightful essay that delves into the materials and their meanings found within the art of Levett Ballard. This exploration of how wood is a living document that continually expresses itself through time, illuminates an essential element in understanding the complexity found within this artists work.

j.block



About the Author

Elizabeth Ezekiel is an undergraduate art history major at Bridgewater State University graduating in the fall of 2022. Her undergraduate research, highlighting the discursive relationship between female modernist painters and primitivist ideologies, has been presented at both local and national research conferences. Her intention following graduation from BSU is to attend graduate school and pursue a career in museum studies.

