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Local artist Dawn Williams Boyd has new exhibit at Atlanta Contemporary

Rosalind Bentley, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
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Credit: Amber Bernard

2020 was a trying year for most.

Yet, for Atlanta artist Dawn Williams Boyd, 2020 has been the kind of professional year she has dreamed of. For decades she worked by days as an airline reservations agent. In the evenings and on the weekends, she sharpened her vision and skill as a maker of story quilts. Then this year in her retirement from the airline, at age 68, her story quilts or “cloth paintings,” caught people’s attention. A selection of her cloth paintings done during the last 20 years were featured in a well-received, virtual solo show at Fort Gansevoort Gallery in New York City. The New York Times “T” Magazine featured one of her pieces, and she was the subject of a major profile in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

“A solo exhibit online at a New York gallery, that’s an artist’s dream come true,” Boyd said recently. “I tried to control myself, but in fact, I was jumping up and down.”

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The show features pieces that tackle the long fight for racial and class justice in this country, as well as pivotal moments in the civil rights movement. But the pandemic forced the show to be presented online only. That changes with Boyd's latest show at the Atlanta Contemporary, "Death Is Swallowed Up by Victory." When the Contemporary re-opens after the holiday break on Jan. 5, the show will run through Jan. 31.

It is a small show, curated by Dianna Settles, who chose three of Boyd's pieces to feature. While the title is Biblical, the show speaks to a revival of spirit and the will to fight. One imagines the Middle Passage of enslaved Africans to the Americas. Another is a resurrection theme. The third pulls from a line in Boyd's favorite Christmas carol, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

"The title is part of a scripture from one of the titles of Dawn's pieces in the show," Settles said. "[It's] 1 Corinthians 15:51-54. 'For I am telling you a secret. We will not die, but we will all be changed in a very short time, no longer than it takes for the eye to close and open...Then when it happens as the Holy writing said it would happen, death will be swallowed up into victory.'"

Settles said the quote had special poignancy given the recent police killings of George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks and Breonna Taylor.

"I love the idea of moving beyond the time that Black bodies are being murdered by police and all of the different structures that work to uphold white supremacy," Settles said. "And that there being this sort of salvation at the end of all this upheaval."

Veronica Kessenich, executive director of the Contemporary said that when she was unwrapping the pieces to prepare them for installation, she was "completely riveted by the scale and the sewing and the intimacy.

"Not only in looking at the content of the form but then the content of what is represented, it was really a timely exhibition," Kessenich said. "They feel maybe like stained glass or something that is heightened to something that is in need of being acknowledged and worshipped and recognized and ultimately reckoned with."