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ARTnews

For Generations, African American Women Have Used Quilting as a Powerful Tool of Survival, Resistance, and Artistic Expression

Dawn Williams Boyd

Colony Little – November 23, 2022



Dawn Williams Boyd, *Massacre on Black Wall Street*, 2022.

Photo: Ron Witherspoon/©Dawn Williams Boyd/Courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

Textile painter Dawn Williams Boyd combines elements of quilting with narration to create large-scale tapestries that are filled with messages and wry commentary on America's social institutions. In "The Tip of the Iceberg," her first solo show at Fort Gansevoort in New York, Boyd presents works on racism, the imperilment of *Roe v. Wade*, the environment, voting rights, and police brutality in 12 works that candidly address these issues.

The largest piece in the show is an ambitious 10-foot cloth mural that depicts the destruction of Greenwood, an affluent Black neighborhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In *Massacre on Black Wall Street* (2022), Boyd conjures the tragic events during the summer of 1921 when a white mob burned and looted homes, killed Black residents, and forced many to flee. (Many residents left for other states and never returned.) Boyd renders the smoke from that day in layers of black organza, while lushly colored green fabric hints at the bucolic setting that was set aflame by looters and by low-flying planes that dropped firebombs on the community.

In its brashness the piece shares the same haunting visual register as a painting by Ringgold, *American People Series #20: Die* (1967), now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. That

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piece depicts wanton violence experienced under the fearful, watchful eyes of young children. Similarly, Boyd's work pays tribute to the lives of those who were unaccounted for after the massacre: a pile of skeletons evokes a mass grave, while a large tree covered in West African Adinkra symbols represents spiritual and cultural ties to home. The tree acts as a memorial to the dead and a shield of protection for a family taking cover from the violence that surrounds them.

"This is chaos in defiance of law," Boyd said of the Greenwood massacre. "In defiance of who we as Americans say we are. This is the truth of who we actually are—this is not a mythology that we teach in school." Boyd's work calls out the inane cyclicity of the issues we continue to face that prevent us from addressing newer and equally insidious threats to humanity—and our survival.