

FORT GANSEVOORT

haberarts.com

There Goes the Neighborhood

John Haber – November 14, 2022



Dawn Williams Boyd: Leaving Alabama (Fort Gansevoort, 2022)

Dawn Williams Boyd covers it all. Voting rights, gender rights, Black Lives Matter, the homeless— all are subjects for her painting but only, as the exhibition has it, “The Tip of the Iceberg.”

The usual suspects parade by for *The Death of Democracy*, and I do not mean those uppity people of color taking more than their share. The suspects that keep themselves off the radar have their *Smoke-Filled Room*. Covid-19 still elicits a scream. *Leaving Alabama* is the occasion for celebration and a long wave goodbye from the back of a car. But then Boyd and her country have a lot to leave behind, at Fort Gansevoort through December 17.

They can only be salient issues for a black woman and, I hope, for you. She makes them all the more so in deep black and bright colors on well-stained fabric. Tapestry as painting is trending, for sure, with an homage to folk traditions, but there is nothing naïve to this version of folk art. Boyd has learned her craft and been around. White may play the starkest role of all—in a picket fence, a predatory fish, a dog out for a walk or the hunt, or the pale face of Vladimir Putin with Kim Tok-hun of North Korea on his shoulder. But then George W. Bush has the nails of a vampire behind them, and Donald J. Trump peeks from behind a curtain to steal the show.

FORT GANSEVOORT

It is all that you expected, and that may have you worried. Is she just checking off the boxes? Is she falling instead for the soft, bright pleasures of assorted fabrics, cotton embroidery, Faith Ringgold spaces, and Robert Colescott colors? Maybe she thinks that she can have it all, as two ways of being in her comfort zone—but maybe she can. True, she has no shortage of certainty, not when pollution has reached the point of gas masks, in *This Uninhabitable Earth*. Not, too, when a boy lies surrounded by police badges in a pool of blood, as *In Fear of My Life*.

And Boyd values the certainty, but also the tension between the twin comforts. That dead boy lies on the ground, but in the picture plane in as well. She heightens the disorientation, too, in *There Goes the Neighborhood*. She splits the scene of gentrification in two, with a slight gap between halves that may or may not match up. At the very least, the moving signs are from different companies. Putin and his cohorts carry a casket, presumably of democracy, but whatever are the cotton balls gathering on top?

Her subjects speak of heroes and villains, but the work may not. She has a schoolyard confrontation, with faces pressed close, but black and white share that ride out of Alabama, and paler dark skins or pink flesh tones add nuance. That sign for leaving the state is a highway sign, not a protest sign, and who is to say who has crossed out “Y’all Come Back Now”—the passengers or the state? Boyd can elicit gentler tones, too, in layers of fabric. She can also use them as intermediate spaces past the foreground, leaving the actors neither coming nor going. *Massacre on Wall Street* has become a literal massacre, with men out for the hunt, but do not be surprised if its exuberance packs a smile.

There goes the neighborhood, then, but a neighborhood all the same, biracial and alive. For one last word, Jammie Holmes sticks closely to his, at Marianne Boesky through October 8. His living rooms and backyard card game look familiar enough, but the black people within do not seem altogether at home. More than Boyd with her disjunctions, Holmes prefers compressed spaces, although with similar colors and similar results. Unlike her, too, he claims the mantle of the self-taught. Yet her greater experience pays off.