

Shubuta and Other Stories

Paintings by Noah Saterstrom

With works by Sam Dunson

Julia Martin Gallery

One branch of my family were prominent slave-owners in Natchez, Mississippi; some of them were also great keepers of family stories. The imagery in this group of paintings - *Shubuta and Other Stories* - is derived mostly from ancestral memoirs and family lore.

I have little trust of history and memory; as a painter, my interests are issues of oils and canvas. The highly polished stories told by ancestor-worshipping Southern aristocrats are inherently suspect. I am, however, drawn to the complexities that those stories reveal, when laid over other voices, other realities, other histories - the polyphony of multiple interrelated narratives.

Painter Sam Dunson, gallerist Julia Martin and I entered into conversation about these braided tales and conceived of a kind of "call-and-response" dialogue between Dunson's work and my own. The resulting paintings will be shown side-by-side.

We are also exploring, through collaborative works on paper, what happens when the barriers containing our own approaches to family, history, narrative, cultural mythology, authorship and archetypes become fluid and permeable.

I do not consider my family history more unique or special than anyone else's; it is merely a well-documented bloodline and as such provides a lot of subject matter. Maybe, like many artists, I have a certain fascination with unresolvable questions – and history provides an endless supply of those.

I am never sure how to feel about sharing DNA with people who owned slaves. Remorse at this shared blood seems futile and reductive, even elusive. I do feel remorse that slavery ever existed anywhere in human history and that my family chose, with deliberation and forethought, to repeatedly participate in and foster the growth of one of the most abhorrent chapters of our country's history. I am afraid of the bigotry that still exists in the hearts of so many and I acknowledge that the tendency to dehumanize 'the other' is a problem for everyone; our work as citizens of the world is at least in part to dissolve the specter of otherness while retaining the depth and divergence of experiences.

I'm not so naïve to think that I can make a dent in our shared depraved human inclinations by making paintings. Paintings don't do that kind of the good in the world. But speaking plainly about an uncomfortable subject is at least an alternative to the catastrophic politeness and silence that pad difficult history. The Julia Martin Gallery provides a forum for challenging work that does not fit neatly into a commercial art market. Artists of any media who are given the privilege of a public wall, stage, microphone, or page are afforded a platform for conversation and open public discussion, and I am honored to be a participant.

This show is not a history lesson, and though it may not seem as such, I'm more interested in making paintings than I am in making statements, although I'm not sure if these things can exclusively exist. If it is about anything, this exhibition is about the questions that arise as stories, both factual and apocryphal, are passed from mother and father to son and daughter, and where to go from there.

Painting Notes

The central painting in this exhibition, "In Times of War" is based on the following story:

In August 1863, my mother's mother's mother's father's mother fled Natchez, Mississippi during the Union occupation, with her three-year-old son and her servant Emeline. In the little town of Shubuta, they were to meet her husband who had been sheltering under protection of the Confederacy from accusations of espionage. She was eight months pregnant and the bumpy wagon ride through the country caused her to give birth, and the baby died. According to one telling, her breasts became so engorged, with no baby to relieve them, that the slaves on one of the plantations brought her their puppies.

Examples of two other stories painted:

From my great great grandfather's memoirs:

"North Mississippi towns all have court houses in the middle of the square. In 1879 – the year of Yellow Fever – they only gave us a short holiday for Christmas. We could not go home. The Negroes were thick on the streets. We threw Roman candles at the Negroes and chased all of them off."

"My father liked to joke. In Mobile, walking along the river bank, we saw a Negro boy and my father pretended to knock him over into the water and caught him just as he was falling."

Slavery is universally understood as evil and is easy to compartmentalize as historical. But post-slavery narratives like these, which foreshadow the lingering and still present American racial caste structure and our ingrained, collective bigotry, are especially troubling. They are stories remembered as funny and playful, but can also be (rightly) seen as casual terrorism. The legacy and perpetuation of this kind of recreational racism are easier to see today than the 'historical institution' of slavery.