

MICHELANGELO LOVELACE

MEET ME AT THE CROSSROADS

BY ELENA HARVEY COLLINS

Michelangelo Lovelace Sr. chronicles the Cleveland streets around him, creating expressive records of city life. Largely self-taught, he has been painting every day for the past 30 years and was mentored by the late Reverend Albert Wagner (1924-2006).¹ Wagner encouraged Lovelace to endure his personal struggles through art, to continue to paint no matter what, and to develop a voice and style that was true to his experiences.

There is an animated joy in Lovelace's canvases. Works like *Backyard Celebration* (2007) portray inner city neighborhoods that bustle with life, back yard parties and people going about their daily errands among tree-lined streets, hair shops, and grocery stores. *P-Funk Party* (1999) depicts a Parliament Funkadelic concert that the artist painted from memory. Revelers throw their bodies around in wild abandon, you can feel the heat coming off the room. The extravagant style of the musicians and the show (spaceship on the stage) opened Lovelace's eyes to the multitude of expressions through which creativity can flow, that it doesn't need to be man-nered, or follow anybody else's rules. This sense of freedom, self-love, and acceptance is articulated in Lovelace's erotic paintings like *Turn off the Lights* (2006), which unapologetically celebrate sexual pleasure, experience, and body.

In Lovelace's paintings, the realities of police violence, poverty, addiction, and criminal lifestyles are approached fearlessly and with the kind of clear-eyed relentlessness arrived at through daily practice and pursuit. These themes of social justice form the main narrative framework for his paintings. Often autobiographical, Lovelace references his personal trials as a way to connect to universal themes of struggle and redemption. Life affirming Bible verses

are placed on billboards, sending mes-sages of love, community, acceptance, and responsibility. There is a strong moral force in these works, backed up with love, a lesson to be given, the painting a vehicle for allegory. In *Standing at the Fork in the Road at Temptation and Salvation* (1997) Lovelace represents different life choices as real destinations, inhabited by symbolic individuals. The painting grows brighter and lighter as the viewer travels along the pathway towards goodness and spiri-tual peace; in the opposite direction, darkness awaits. Lovelace returns to images of street intersections and cor-ners often, evoking the cultural sig-nificance of the crossroads as a meeting place where a reckoning must be made. James Baldwin wrote about the tension a person feels when being drawn towards a negative force despite best intentions, imagining those competing energies (Guilt and Desire) as characters that fight for the attention of Love:²

At the dark streetcorner
where Guilt and Desire
are attempting to stare
each other down
[...]
Love came slouching along
an exploded silence
standing a little apart
but visible anyway
in the yellow, silent, steaming light,
while Guilt and Desire wrangled³

In his depictions of the world around him, Lovelace operates as a witness, an insider who is also an outsider. *Katrina Aftermath* (2006) portrays the chaos of the 2005 hurricane in New Orleans, in which looting (in order to find food, clean water, and supplies) by white survivors was often excused or defended, while Black survivors doing the same thing were treated like criminals, even shot. Lovelace mediates these events,

stepping back to reflect on them, an approach evident in the shifts in perspective and depth in his paintings.

Encountering a group of his works, the viewer travels above, under, through, and finally into Lovelace's Cleveland. *At the intersection of Cedar-n-E. 79th Street* (1997) presents a three-quarter birds eye view of a street crossing, complete with car-dealership bunting that marches off into the distance. *These Urban City Streets*(2013) shows a neighborhood where stores, trees, streets and signage are compressed and stacked on top of one another like a Chinese scroll painting, traditional narrative paintings which often show landscapes arranged vertically, folding vast distances within them and conveying a sense of rhythm and order. A further distancing is evident in *Work in Progress* (2010), a painting inside a painting in which Lovelace depicts his own hand, tracing the curving outline of figure at the outset of a new work, both distancing and touching.

This idea of record keeping (or of correcting the historical record) evokes the work of Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), who painted the rich life of Depression-era Harlem, drawing visual information from his surroundings--brightly colored clothing of neighborhood residents, the patterned fabrics used inside their homes for decoration, the bustle of the streets--into his works. Lawrence's *Migration Series* (1940-41) helped ingrain into art history the impact of the Great Migration, while other series focus on the life of Harriet Tubman and the story of Toussaint L'Overture, who led the 18th century Haitian Revolution resulting in the liberation of that country from France. Also a chronicler of the times, Lovelace has responded to such events as the police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1991, the election of the United States' first Black president, and recent "Black Lives Matter" rallies.

Brickwork and graffiti form strong through lines in Lovelace's paintings. As he remembers, "Living in Garden Valley Housing projects, the King Kennedy projects, all of the projects were brick, we called it Brick City. I fell

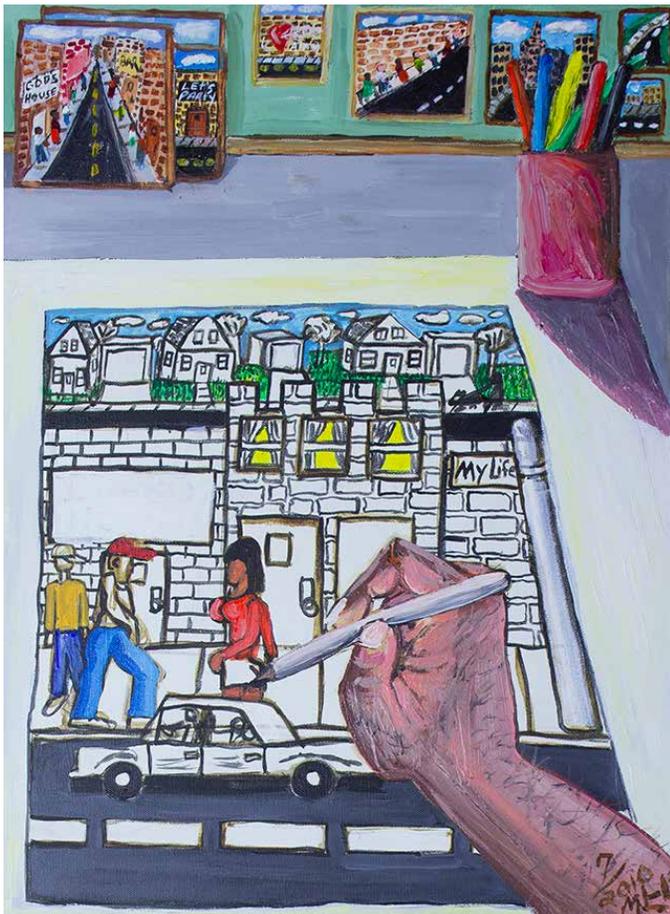
in love with the brick."⁴ The bricks form a visual shorthand for the architecture of the inner city. But the bricks that Lovelace paints are never just brown or red; they are rainbow bricks, holding green, red, black, brown, yellow, white, purple. The paint is thickly applied so that it stands out from the surface, often looking as if it was mixed on the canvas. The colors change, depending on the mood of the scene and the inhabitants who move through his paintings. In *Another Street Corner Memorial* (2006), the bricks are painfully vivid and fleshy, interrupted by the blood red curtains in the windows that overlook the road side marked by death. *Blue Wall of Silence* (2000), confronts the reality of police brutality. The intense blue runs off the policemen's uniforms and drenches the wall behind them; the unnaturally blue bricks, sidewalk and street fill the entire visual field, only interrupted by the pink skin and blonde hair of the officers, and the red of the blood spilled on the sidewalk. The officers faces are portrayed by a series of quick hard slashes. The colors vibrate; this painting hurts to look at. In both of these works, there is a sense that the bricks are bodies, and that the walls of the city are sentient. Like Lovelace, they can't, won't, turn away.



1. Wagner was a visionary and prolific painter and sculptor, who began his work as an artist at the age of 50, developing an eccentric signature style, working with diverse materials such as driftwood and found objects.
2. Here I refer to a couple of stories among many; the myth of blues legend Robert Johnson, who allegedly sold his soul to the devil at a deserted crossroads at midnight in order to receive greater musical prowess, going on to record "Cross Road Blues" (1936), but also more recent cultural references such as the hit single "Tha Crossroads" (1995) by Cleveland rap group Bone Thugs-n-Harmony.
3. James Baldwin, *Jimmy's Blues: Selected Poems* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 57.
4. From an interview with Lovelace, April 2015. The Garden Valley Public Housing Project was in the Kinsman area of the city, now demolished and replaced by townhomes. The King Kennedy Housing Project, also in the Kinsman-E 55th Street area, is still standing.



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2.

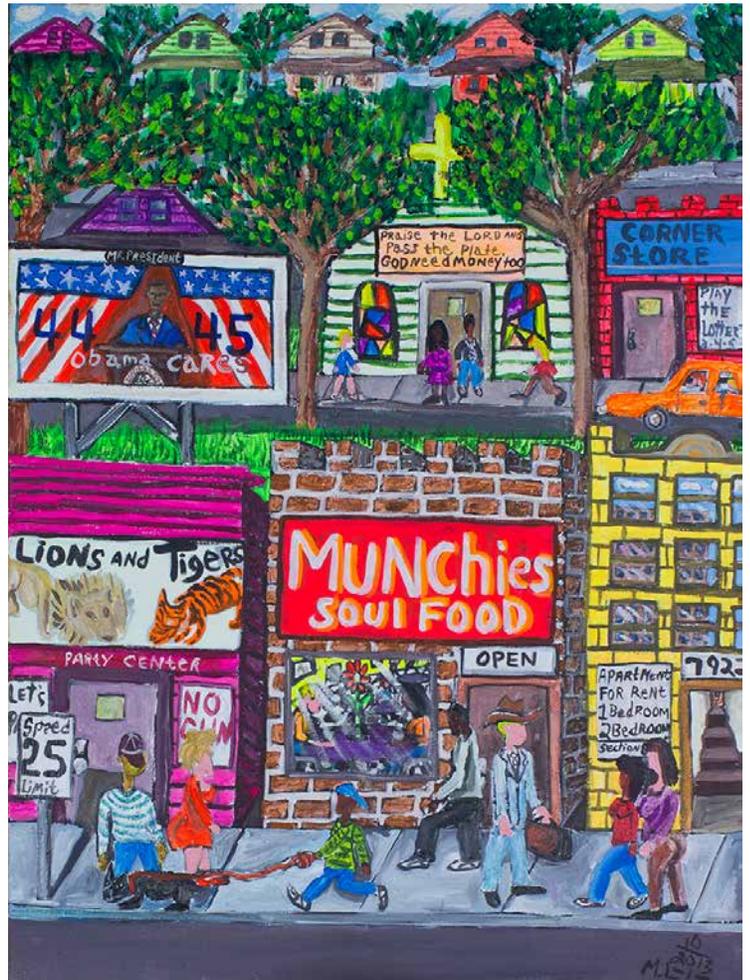
1. Michelangelo Lovelace
*Standing at the Fork in the Road at
 Temptation and Salvation, 1997*
 Acrylic on canvas
 52 3/4 x 92 inches
 Courtesy of the artist

2. Michelangelo Lovelace
Work in Progress, 2010
 Acrylic on canvas
 26 3/4 x 21 inches
 Courtesy of the artist



3.

4.



3. Michelangelo Lovelace
Blue Wall of Silence, 2000
 Acrylic on canvas
 24 1/2 x 42 1/2 inches
 Collection of Alissa McKendrick

4. Michelangelo Lovelace
These Urban City Streets, 2013
 Acrylic on canvas
 37 x 28 3/4 inches
 Courtesy of the artist

MICHELANGELO LOVELACE

LOOKING BACK FROM THE FUTURE AT
MICHELANGELO LOVELACE SR.

BY EBONY L. HAYNES

I never wanted to be a part of planet Earth, but I am compelled to be here, so anything I do for this planet is because the Master-Creator of the Universe is making me do it. I am of another dimension. I am on this planet because people need me.

-Sun Ra, quoted in an
A&M Records press release (1998)

Afrofuturism is an ideology linked to music and art and a Black experience. Sun Ra often acts as its musical trope. Born in 1914 in Birmingham, AL, Sun Ra claimed to not be of this earth. His outer space sounds challenged the Black aural aesthetic in many ways, including being one of the first musicians to use electronic instruments. Like Sun Ra's music, the overarching phrase "Afrofuturism" responds to a search for the world of tomorrow, today. Afonaut artists like William Villalongo and Cristina de Middel, and writers like Octavia E. Butler and Samuel R. Delany keep an undeniably thick racial history as a subject but present new ideas about race and representation, breaking with normalized racism to create a space for change. Coined in 1994 by writer Mark Dery, the phrase Afrofuturism questioned the largely streamlined depictions of both utopian and apocalyptic futures, which were predominantly Anglo/European based. Afrofuturism is not about science fiction, though that may be the genre chosen to relay ideas of the future; more accurately, it is about imagining a Black reality not limited to racial identity. In this world, the human race exists in colors other than Black and White to include the Purple, Green, and Orange. Pop and politics are key in the Afrofuturists' aesthetic, and to their goal of empowering Otherness. Afrofuturists paint portraits of how they want to be seen, or perhaps how

they see themselves. But this is not always how others seem them. What, then, is the Black future?

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Michelangelo Lovelace Sr. has been painting for most of his life. His treasure trove of canvases includes hundreds of paintings, which are snapshots from moments in his life. Some are celebratory, depicting community pride, block parties, and dancing. Some are more personal and include portraits of people in his life or of the artist himself, painting. Others are social commentary: the historical election of the first Black president of the United States of America; the swift block-to-block changes that occur within the landscape of the urban American cityscape; dark temptations of our inescapable vices; the light of redemption; police crime scene tape marking the site of another dead young Black man.

Lovelace's scenes are not paintings of the future. Instead, the tableaux capture moments of the present. He paints what he sees--often visions of all races sharing similar experiences. In one of these paintings, *Katrina Aftermath* (2006), he paints the chaos of the flooded streets of New Orleans, post-hurricane. Here, colorful acrylics paint the faces of the displaced--people of all colors, all in desperate need of help. The masses are faceless, as are most of the faces in Lovelace's large and vast crowds. Black and White, young and old, the ailing and the able bodied, all vulnerable. As people on the ground try to stay dry atop of cars, or stand in the rising water, a few dead bodies float by. Some fill the rooftops and hold up signs, hoping to catch anyone's attention.

Lovelace takes this opportunity to use commentary and media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and inserts them onto the signs. A White man holds a sign that reads "Help Us!," and another holds one that reads "We All Are American." A small group stands in front of a sign that reads "Need Help Don't Call FEMA." A Black man waves the American flag while another holds a sign paraphrasing the musician Kanye West's off-script remarks: "Bush don't care about Black people." West's outbursts during a live NBC telethon for hurricane relief, less than a month after the storm, was in response to aid, or lack thereof, being delivered to the affected residents of New Orleans. Criticism came from both inside and outside the city walls. The predominant accusation being that help would've been swiftly and effectively delivered had the affected not been predominantly Black.

In the same painting, where locals rummage through stores in desperation and panic, store signs reflect the racist double standard of the media's interpretation and reporting on riots and looters: "White Folks Just Looking For Food," and "Black Folks Just Looters." This, in particular, feels very close to recent press coverage of the aftermath of various accounts of murder at the hands of the police. This past April in Baltimore, the story of a young man named Freddie Gray, and his suspicious death, seemingly at the hands of local police officers, sparked a wide range of emotional reactions from the local, predominantly Black, neighborhood. The sensationalized news coverage of both the video recording of Mr. Gray's scuffle with officers and mysterious uncaptured moments which left him in excruciating pain and paralyzed, mixed with the rioting, looting, and property damage caused by incensed locals, had media outlets calling the people of Baltimore "Thugs." Cable news consistently presented nearsighted views of the riots. Drawing attention to young Black men dressed all in black, reporters become visibly irritated at the sight of Baltimore residents destroying police property. Much less attention was paid to the rioters who were not Black, and even less still to the peaceful protests.

The reality painted for those not on the ground differed from what the angry and exhausted communities were experiencing: a seemingly endless fight for justice.

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Lovelace's *Katrina Aftermath*, as most of his paintings, comes from observing and absorbing the moments around him. In the style of Afrofuturism, race remains an overarching theme, but he plays with it by means of dissecting ideas of community and empathy. He is not, by conventional definition, an Afrofuturist. The work is neither intergalactic nor fantastical. And his paintings have been criticized for depicting racial stereotypes. I agree that they depict stereotypes, stereotypes that have sadly stood the test of time, reappearing both pre- and post- his *Katrina Aftermath*. But the stereotypes are not of people in his paintings; instead, they often reflect those looking in from the outside. An Afrofuturist attempts to create an alternate reality, where identity is not bound by race or racial stereotypes, but may present itself in many forms. From an electro-infused jazz song to a photograph of a Black astronaut in the Zambian desert. But what if the viewer, not the artist was an Afronaut?

Looking at the works now, through an Afrofuturist lens of an alternate racial reality, the work has both utopian and apocalyptic elements. Like an artist, an Afrofuturist viewer can retain race as a subject but move beyond it and customize it. Seeing Lovelace's paintings from this point of view, the work challenges stereotypical depictions of race by illustrating the artist's reality, one that is often not acknowledged or appreciated for the ongoing strides made toward equality. Afrofuturism uses fantasy to discuss bigger issues. Michaelangelo Lovelace does just that, but this demands more work from the viewer. In this Black future, a brick wall is not part of a ghetto, the death of a young Black man is tragic, all humans deserve to be treated as equals, and life can be a party.



Michelangelo Lovelace Sr.
Katrina Aftermath, 2006
Acrylic on canvas
50 1/2X 53 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Michelangelo Lovelace Sr.
P-Funk Party, 1999
Acrylic on canvas
58 1/2 x 67 1/4 inches
Courtesy of the artist