THE BIG KEY TO PARADISE: Remembering Bessie Harvey, 1929-1994

The American art world lost a uniquely great contemporary sculptor with the death of Bessie Harvey on August 12 at her home in Alcoa, Tennessee. Although only sixty-four, she had been in ill health often in recent years, so her passing was not entirely unexpected.

Harvey arrived at her station in the art world through an unlikely and unconventional route. A visionary in the most fundamental sense of the term, she was a seer, a prophet, a dreamer, who often spoke of the visions she saw and the spirit voices she heard, and who claimed these visions and voices guided her in making her extraordinary organic figural sculptures.

Born on October 11, 1929, in the small town of Dallas, Georgia, Harvey was one of thirteen children in a family that endured abject poverty and suffered particularly after the death of her father when she was only four or five. She married her first husband when she was fifteen, but it was a union she later described as deeply troubled, and she left him when she was twenty. She then moved to Alcoa, where a cousin was then living, and supported herself from the late 1940s through the late ‘70s in a variety of service-related and industrial jobs--waitress, cook, blue-jeans factory seamstress, domestic worker, hospital housekeeper. By the time she was in her mid-thirties she had given birth to eleven children, and there were thirty grandchildren and several great grandchildren by the time of her death.

With no formal art training and relatively little schooling of any kind, Harvey didn’t begin creating art until around 1970, when she was in her early forties. When I last saw

her during a visit to her home in the summer before her death, she told me she started making art spontaneously at a time when she was deeply troubled by problems she experienced as a single parent. She recalled having been disturbed by evidence that her teenage sons were involved in drug use and incidents of petty theft, and she attributed the emergence of her artistic impulse at that crucial time to divine intervention.

"I was afraid," she said. "But the Lord began to show me faces in the wall to soothe me, and I began to talk to the trees and to the grass. And I discovered that they're alive just like we are, and you can talk to them....And the Lord showed me how to bring these faces out of these pieces of wood, so I could have somebody to talk to, so I wouldn't be afraid."

Harvey worked with a wide range of materials, but she was known primarily for her "root sculptures," inspired in part by suggestions of figures and faces she perceived in the natural contours and protruberances in the roots and other gnarled wood fragments that are the central components in these works. When she began making such pieces, some of her neighbors didn't know what to make of them, andthey accused her of being a "voodoo person," as she told me.

"They felt something from my work, and it scared them," she explained.

Upset by this negative response from her community, she burned a number of her earliest works, but she soon began creating new ones. She received a more favorable reaction to her art a few years later, when she entered one of her sculptures in an employees' art exhibit at the hospital where she was then employed. Through one of the staff doctors, her work was introduced to a few art dealers in New York, and thus

began the process by which Bessie Harvey came to be one of the most widely known contemporary exponents of black American vernacular art.

Although examples of her work were shown in New York as early as 1983--the same year I first saw her work at Alexander Gallery in Atlanta--Harvey's art began to gain widespread attention only after *Artforum* published an enthusiastic review of a solo exhibit she had in late 1987 at Cavin-Morris Gallery (Carlo McCormick, "Bessie Harvey/ Cavin-Morris," *Artforum*, January 1988, no pagination). Within the last seven years of her life she was represented in a number of important museum exhibitions, including "Black Art, Ancestral Legacy" (Dallas Museum of Art) and "Passionate Visions of the American South" (New Orleans Museum of Art).

After admirers of her art noted its visual and conceptual similarities to certain types of traditional African sculpture, Harvey developed a keen interest in African cultures, which she studied on her own and which overtly influenced some of her later works. She also claimed that, in her words, "God told me I was an African 500 years ago, and that's where I got these things from."

A year and a half before her death, Harvey came to North Carolina, where I live, to participate in an art symposium that I helped organize at Winston-Salem State University. The talk she delivered at that forum was not so much a lecture as an inspirational sermon--a testimonial to her own deep religious faith and a sharing of hard-earned practical and spiritual wisdom. A few days after her death I watched and listened to that sermon again on a videotape documenting the symposium. Several points she stressed in closing rang in my ears for hours afterward, and these words seem like

appropriate ones with which to close this little appreciation, since they encapsulate Harvey's profoundly mystical sense of life:

"God is here. Here's here in us. We're not going anywhere. This is Heaven and this is Hell."

And finally, Bessie Harvey's voice rang with the conviction of her rich life experience as she urged her listeners, *"Take the Big Key and open up the Paradise of Heaven!"*

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