



***An Elegy to America in Black and White II:
Artworks by Madai Taylor***

October 28, 2022—February 24, 2023

ASC
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ARTIST'S STATEMENT: Madai Taylor

An artist must be true to himself or herself to find their unique visual language, while working in the dark, ill respective of the light. The light being the notoriety, and the accolades of men. I have endeavored my entire career to develop my own unique artistic visual vocabulary in the dark. Today I use earth as my primary medium to give voice to my artistic visual expressions, in conjunction with ordinary objects taken from my environment. Earth being one of if not the oldest primordial material known to mankind, an organic material that has intrigued me since I was a child living in Lake Village, Arkansas.

This soulish medieval material has given me a visual vocabulary to express myself as an artist, yielding with its remarkable tone, nuances, gradation, and textures. While offering me a wide range of sophisticated techniques to create a body of non-subjective works of art. Works that are powerful, thought provoking and beautiful expressing the perils and the plight of mankind especially that of the so-call African American.

Through the Middle Passage (detail)

Iowa earth on roofing paper, 48" x 48", July 2021

About the Artist

Madai Taylor was born in Lake Village, Arkansas. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in fine arts from Buena Vista University in Storm Lake, Iowa, in 1989. He studied painting and drawing at the Chicago Academy of Art. He lives in Memphis, Tennessee.

Taylor has exhibited across the country in numerous national museums and major cities, including New York City and Chicago. His works are featured in private and public collections across the United States.

In 2021, Taylor received a Tanne Foundation Award, which recognizes outstanding achievement and is an expression of gratitude to artists for their passion and commitment to their work.

For more information about Taylor and his work, visit madaitaylor.com.



MADAI TAYLOR, Photo by Paul Gate

SCHOLAR'S ESSAY: Kelly Houston Jones, PhD

Madai Taylor's masterful employment of rich textures and ominous hues in *An Elegy to America in Black and White* thrust the viewer into an uncomfortable reckoning. Regarding the pieces feels as though one has stumbled onto a personal, raw reality not for outsiders' eyes yet simultaneously creates the experience of being entrusted with the knowledge of truths lying in plain view all along—had we not been trained to avert our eyes. The pieces of this exhibition display pain, declare identity, confront history, and illuminate the present.

The past invoked by Taylor—an Arkansas native—runs deep in Jefferson County and surrounds. The ancestors of enslaved people in Arkansas endured the “middle passage” across the Atlantic. The artist's organic “visual vocabulary” conjures the unspeakable collective horror endured by the trade's victims. Whites later trafficked the descendants of those charter generations via a massive forced migration to the western South's cotton frontier that historians call the “second middle passage.” Although this second wave of relocation did not exactly mirror the trans-

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— Dr. Kelly Houston Jones

Atlantic journey, it disrupted untold numbers of families and communities; most never again laid eyes on the loved ones from whom they had been separated.

While slavery had begun as a method of labor control justified by notions of racial hierarchy, it developed over generations to also function as an enforcer of white supremacy independent of any crop or labor routine. The ropes of Taylor's *Bondage* hang as witnesses to the commodification of African Americans in the past and the continuity of constraints in labor and life beyond.

Although our nation officially abolished chattel slavery with the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the impulses to control Black labor and protect white supremacy remained little challenged. Debt peonage, convict labor, segregation, and disfranchisement were not natural outgrowths of slavery's legacy but regimes created over years with great effort and intention by those protecting America's racial regime.

The highlight of Madai Taylor's *Elegy* must be *1619 Back to Egypt in America*, linking as it does the themes of history, heritage, pain, and identity found across all the pieces that come together to lay bare America's holocaust. The title of the work calls up deep roots of African heritage as well as the power that the tale of the oppression of the Jews has historically held for America's oppressed Black Christians. The work's layers might be seen to suggest a pin-striped suit that had been employed to wallpaper over violence but is now peeling away to reveal the bloody truth beneath. Like its counterparts, there is also beauty to be found in the piece. More than trauma is on display.

Dr. Kelly Houston Jones is an assistant professor of history at Arkansas Tech University. She specializes in American slavery, focusing research efforts on the Trans-Mississippi South.

The essay in its entirety can be read at bit.ly/asc-madai-taylor



1619 Back to Egypt in America, Iowa earth on roofing paper, 32" x 53", April 2015

EXHIBITION LIST

***The Spirit of Jim Crow
Live in the Trees ****

Mixed medium with lowa earth
on roofing paper, 48" x 48", July 2021

I Can't Breathe

lowa earth on roofing paper,
35" x 51", March 2015

1619 Back to Egypt in America

lowa earth on roofing paper,
32" x 53", April 2015

When Judgment Cometh to America

lowa earth on roofing paper,
35" x 53", June 2015

***The Earth Was Iron
and the Heaven Brass***

Iron, brass and earth on hardboard,
25" x 24" x 13", 2021

The American Justice System

Mixed medium with lowa earth
on roofing paper, 35" x 50³/₄",
May 2015

The Time of Jacob's Trouble

Mixed medium with lowa earth
on roofing paper, 37¹/₄" x 47¹/₂",
October 2017

Bondage

lowa earth on roofing paper,
36" x 38¹/₂", July 2016

The Rape of Abraham's Daughters

lowa earth on roofing paper,
35" x 53", June 2015

Let the Church Say Amen

lowa earth and rope on roofing paper,
36" x 38", July 2016

The Breaking of White Power

lowa earth on roofing paper,
36" x 39"; April 2017

White Lies and Secrets

lowa gypsum on roofing paper,
48" x 48", March 2015

***Diminished Dreams
of the So-Called Negro***

lowa earth on roofing paper,
48" x 48", June 2015

Black Fire

lowa earth on roofing paper,
43" x 48", November 2015

Slavery Under the 13th Amendment

lowa earth on oil paper,
48" x 55 ¹/₄"; October 2016

An American Icon

Rope and lowa earth on roofing paper,
48" x 48", April 2015

The Snares of the Nigger Jews

Mixed media with lowa earth on roofing
paper, 38" x 36", March 2018

Through the Middle Passage

lowa earth on roofing paper,
48" x 48", July 2021

*Cover image

CURATOR'S REMARKS: Rachel M. Miller, PhD

One of the most well-documented lynchings in the history of Pine Bluff, Arkansas, took place in February 1892 when two Black men were hanged from a telephone pole in front of the Jefferson County courthouse. Their bodies were riddled with bullets afterwards. The savage event was witnessed by 1,000 people and reported on by numerous newspapers from surrounding states. The frequency of lynchings increased after the enactment of Jim Crow laws in Arkansas. From 1857 – 1933, thirty-seven people were lynched in Jefferson County, most of them in the Pine Bluff vicinity. Jim Crow rationalized the segregation of and discrimination against African Americans. In creating legal means to perpetuate the belief that African Americans were an inferior, immoral,



The Spirit of Jim Crow Live in the Trees

Mixed media with Iowa earth
on roofing paper, 48" x 48", July 2021

and dangerous race, the laws also legitimized acts of violence against them. As Jim Crow was a form of social control, so was lynching.

Through his use of organic materials and found objects, Madai Taylor

creates haunting works of art that powerfully address the oppression of African Americans throughout U.S. history. Clotheslines resemble nooses, cut paper bolt washers register as shackles; rose thorns with red tips—bloody snares.

Taylor's art confronts topics that are disturbing, universal, and thought-provoking. As a "native son" of Arkansas, his take on a brutal history is particularly riveting; his focus is not on the far-removed—his artwork addresses issues that are literally close to home. We need merely to step outside of the museum and walk several blocks up Main Street; we will be standing in the present, yet steeped in a tragic history.

— Dr. Rachel M. Miller,
Executive Director and Interim Curator

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The Arts & Science Center has three aspects of collecting and exhibition: art of the Delta, art by Arkansas artists, and art by African American artists.

ASC is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, a distinction held by fewer than 4% of museums in the United States.

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