



**Gina Phillips**

*I Was Trying Hard to Think About Sweet Things*

Ogden Museum of Southern Art







Gina Phillips lives and works in the Holy Cross Neighborhood in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans and is represented by Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.

**Gina Phillips** - *I Was Trying Hard to Think About Sweet Things*  
On View October 5th, 2013 - January 27th, 2014

Curated by Bradley Sumrall

**Ogden Museum of Southern Art**  
925 Camp Street  
New Orleans, Louisiana 70130  
504.539.9600  
[www.ogdenmuseum.org](http://www.ogdenmuseum.org)

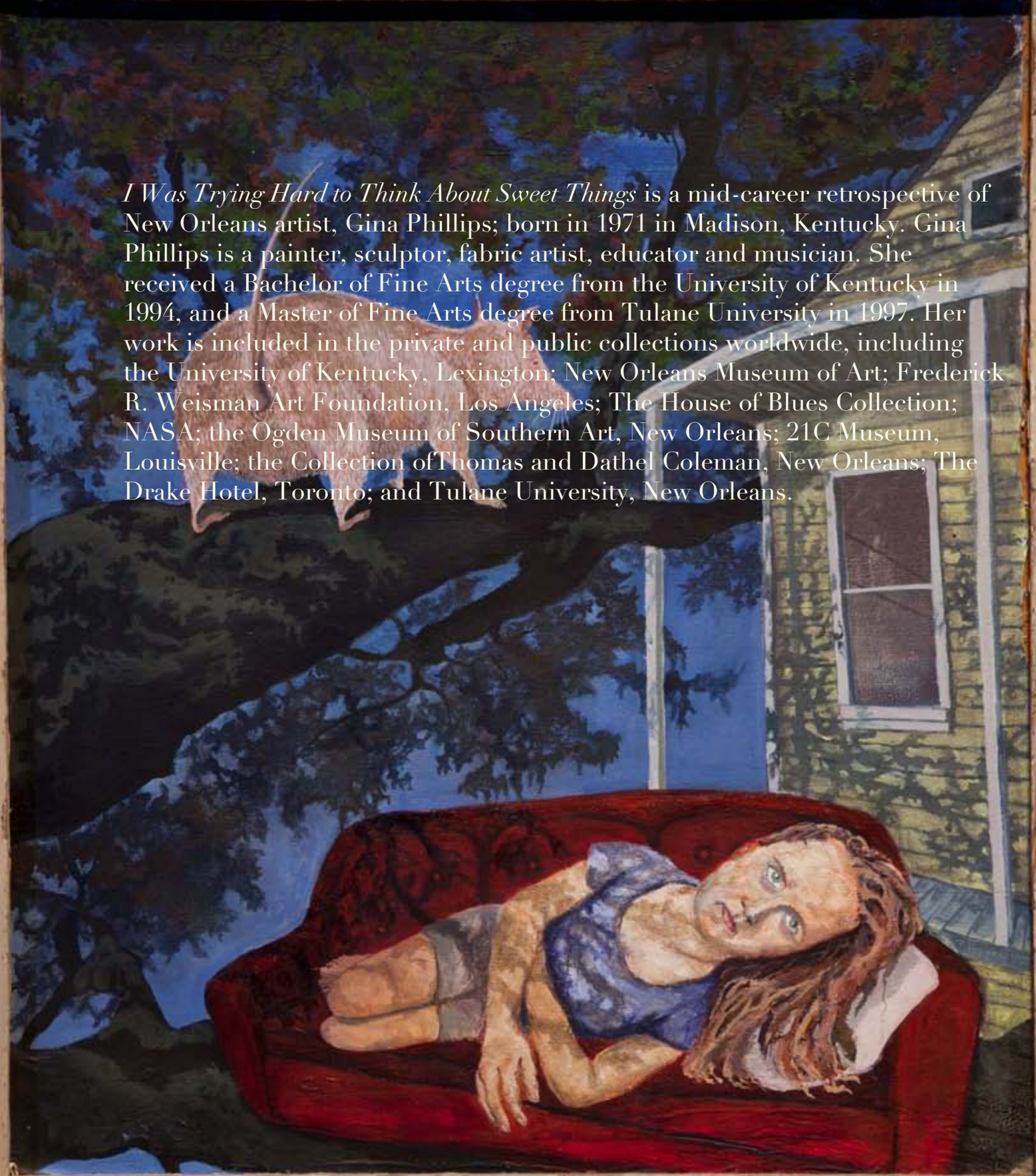
Host Committee  
Dathel and Tommy Coleman  
Jonathan Ferrara Gallery  
Roger Ogden and Ken Barnes  
Positive Vibrations Foundation  
Van Schley  
Beth Wheeler

catalogue composed by  
**Jonathan Ferrara Gallery**  
400a Julia Street  
New Orleans, Louisiana 70130  
504.522.5471  
[www.jonathanferraragallery.com](http://www.jonathanferraragallery.com)





*I Was Trying Hard to Think About Sweet Things* is a mid-career retrospective of New Orleans artist, Gina Phillips; born in 1971 in Madison, Kentucky. Gina Phillips is a painter, sculptor, fabric artist, educator and musician. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Kentucky in 1994, and a Master of Fine Arts degree from Tulane University in 1997. Her work is included in the private and public collections worldwide, including the University of Kentucky, Lexington; New Orleans Museum of Art; Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, Los Angeles; The House of Blues Collection; NASA; the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans; 21C Museum, Louisville; the Collection of Thomas and Dathel Coleman, New Orleans; The Drake Hotel, Toronto; and Tulane University, New Orleans.























Gina Phillips was born in 1971 in Madison County, Kentucky. Her childhood was spent living with her extended family in a rural landscape marked by an absence of modern conveniences. The family used a coal-burning stove and heated water to take baths in buckets. Her grandfather was a mechanic, and their property was basically a private junkyard filled with objects that could be repurposed in a practical or artistic way. If, as the English proverb claims, necessity is the mother of invention, then perhaps Phillips' upbringing can be credited for her unique use of materials and her boundless imagination.

The men in her family were craftsmen or mechanics. Her grandmother was a folk artist who cut images of money from magazines, and placed them in jars that lined her kitchen shelves. Her mother made hooked rugs, dolls, and even tried her hand at painting. Her entire family was musical. "My role models were my family," says Phillips. "Everyone around me was always making art, playing music or working on something. It was a great training ground."

At 18, Phillips moved to Lexington, Virginia to attend the University of Kentucky. She decided to major in Architecture, feeling that she should not allow herself to follow her passion in art, but to go into a field that is traditionally more lucrative. She wasn't initially accepted into the architecture program, so she took some art classes to fill the time. Immediately, she realized that she had been denying her true passion. She graduated in 1994 with a Bachelor of Art in Painting. It was at the University of Kentucky that she defined the trajectory of her work in both medium and subject. Drawing from the characters of her Kentucky home, including her family, she developed a tragicomic narrative style. Much of this early work combined painting with mixed media construction repurposed from her grandfather's junk yard and her grandmother's fabric collection.

In 1995, Phillips moved to New Orleans to attend Tulane University, where she received her Master of Fine Arts degree in 1997. At Tulane, she continued in her signature narrative style, but the medium become more delicate, more focused on fabric. Initially, she combined printed fabrics with painting, allowing the prints to interact with her figurative scenes. Eventually, she moved to pure fabric works for the first time.

In New Orleans, Phillips found home. The city reminded her of Kentucky with its funky landscape, open and quirky characters, and the "shackiness" of the vernacular architecture. She also became fascinated with the city's exotic difference, the richness of its history, and the inclusive, interactive nature of its traditions. She bought her first house in the Holy Cross neighborhood in the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans in 2004. Spending the next year renovating the house into both home and studio, she called it finished in mid-August of 2005. One week later, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. The Federal Levee System failed in New Orleans, and her home was flooded with four feet of water. Like so many of the city's residents, Phillips spent ten months exiled from her adopted home. When she returned in the summer of 2006, it was to a FEMA trailer in her back yard. For the next year-and-a-half, she worked on rebuilding. Much of her fabric collection was salvaged and washed. The galvanizing effect of Hurricane Katrina created strong bonds with her neighbors. "The longer I stay here, the harder it is to imagine living anywhere else," she says. "There is a strong sense of community here. My neighbors have become my best friends." She is also fascinated with the Mississippi River. Almost every day, she walks out of her door and onto the levee. "The river defines the city," she says, "and here in Holy Cross you can see that relationship. There is an immediacy to seeing the connection between the river and the city."

In December of 2005, Phillips received a grant from the Craft Emergency Relief Fund, allowing her to purchase an industrial long-arm quilting machine. It was a dream come true. No longer confined by the scale and limitations of a common sewing machine, she was free to work at any scale, and move the thread freely.





With this "dream machine," Phillips began to use thread in a way that painters use paint. "To me, making art is one half a desire to tell a story, and one half a love of the materials," she says.

This exhibition is the culmination of a long relationship between the artist and the museum. Since the founding of the institution, Phillips has worked with the education department to teach art classes, both in the museum and in the public schools of the region. She is not only an important rising artist whose work is held in the permanent collection, but she is a dedicated supporter of our mission. *I Was Trying Hard to Think About Sweet Things* is a survey of the work of artist, Gina Phillips, including works ranging from the raw narrative works made of paint, wood, metal and fabric in her early years as an artist in Kentucky, to the sophisticated narrative fabric work created on her "free-motion thread-drawing machine" in the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans.

**Bradley Sumrall**  
Chief Curator  
Ogden Museum of Southern Art





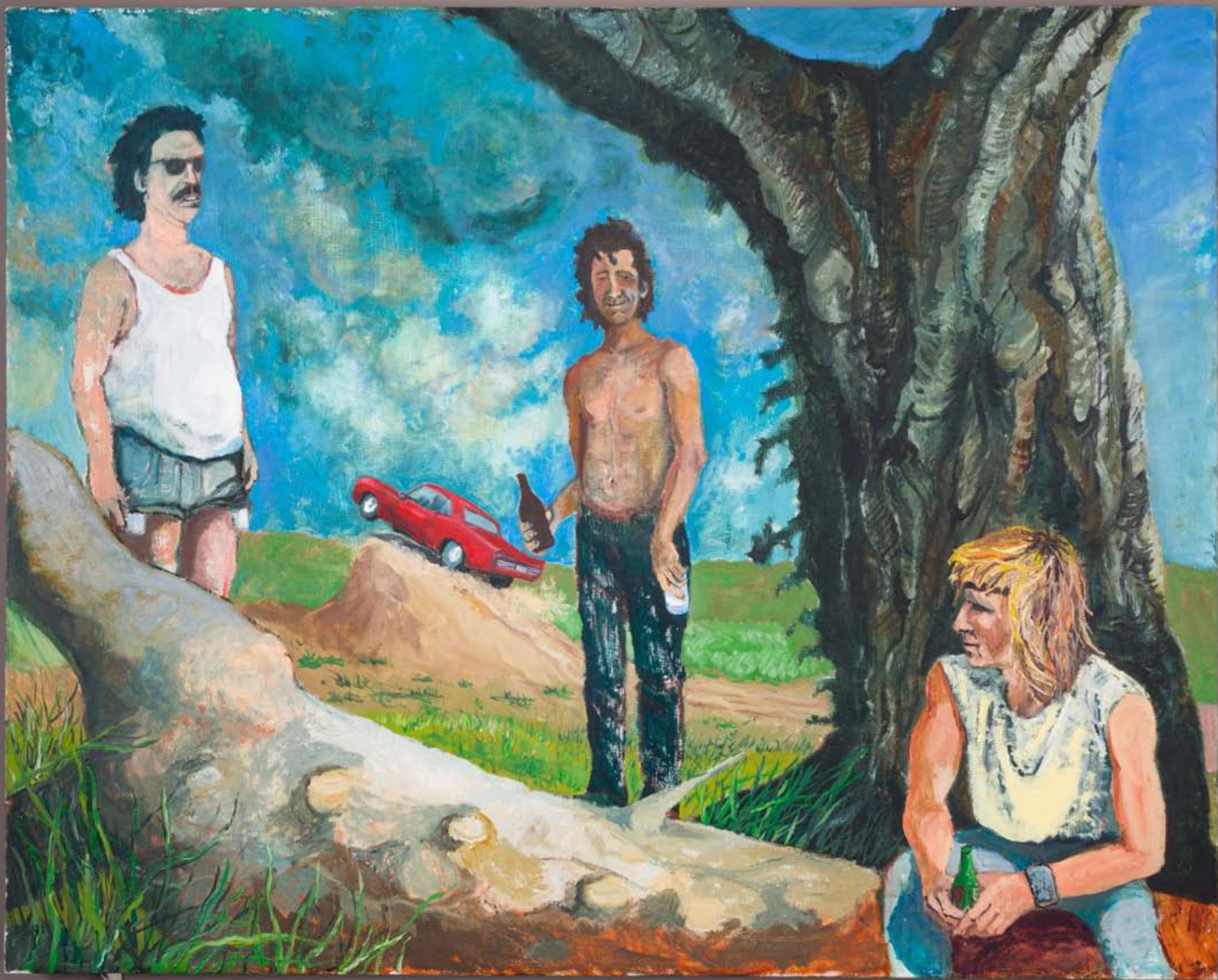
















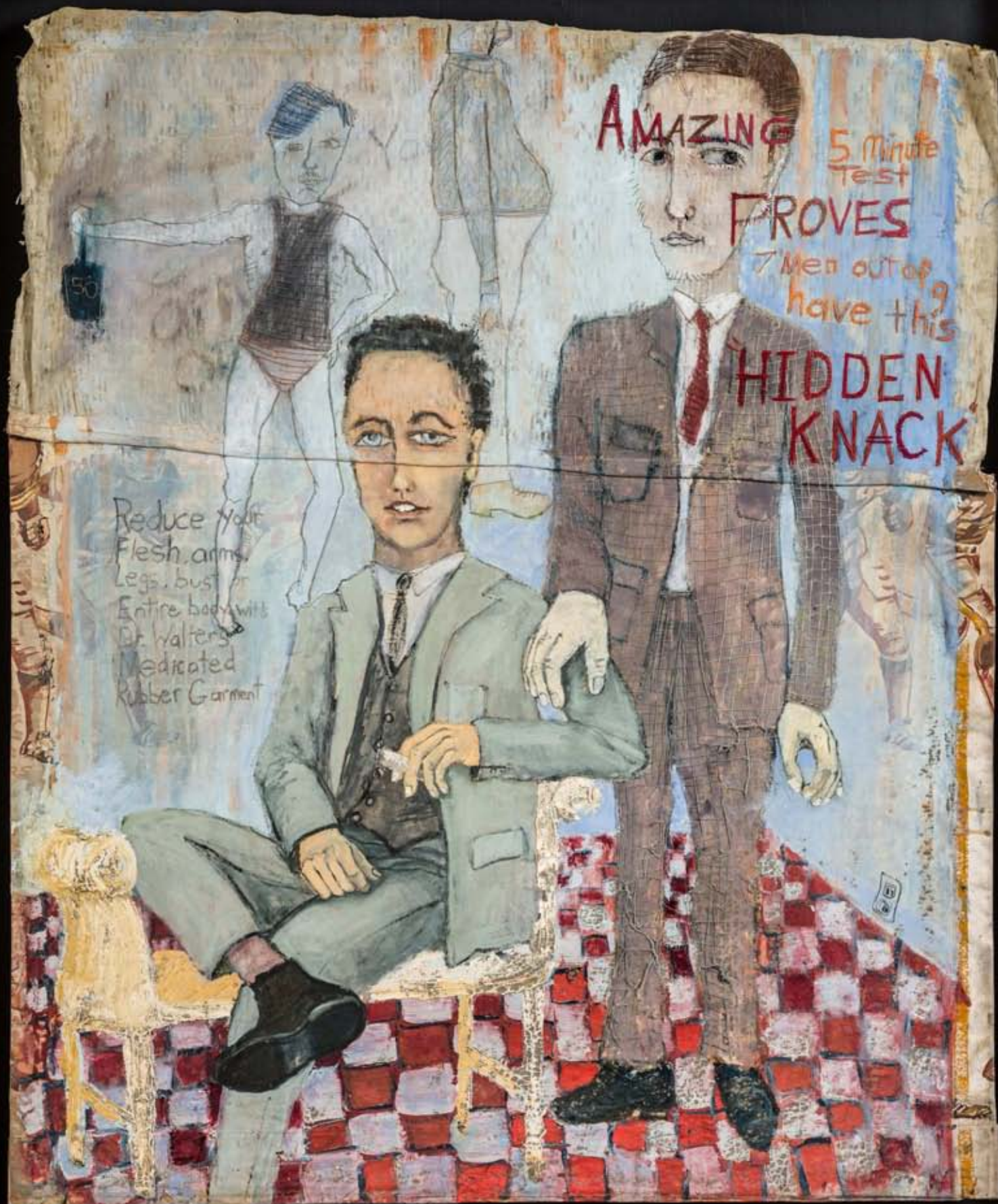




















Fats Domino





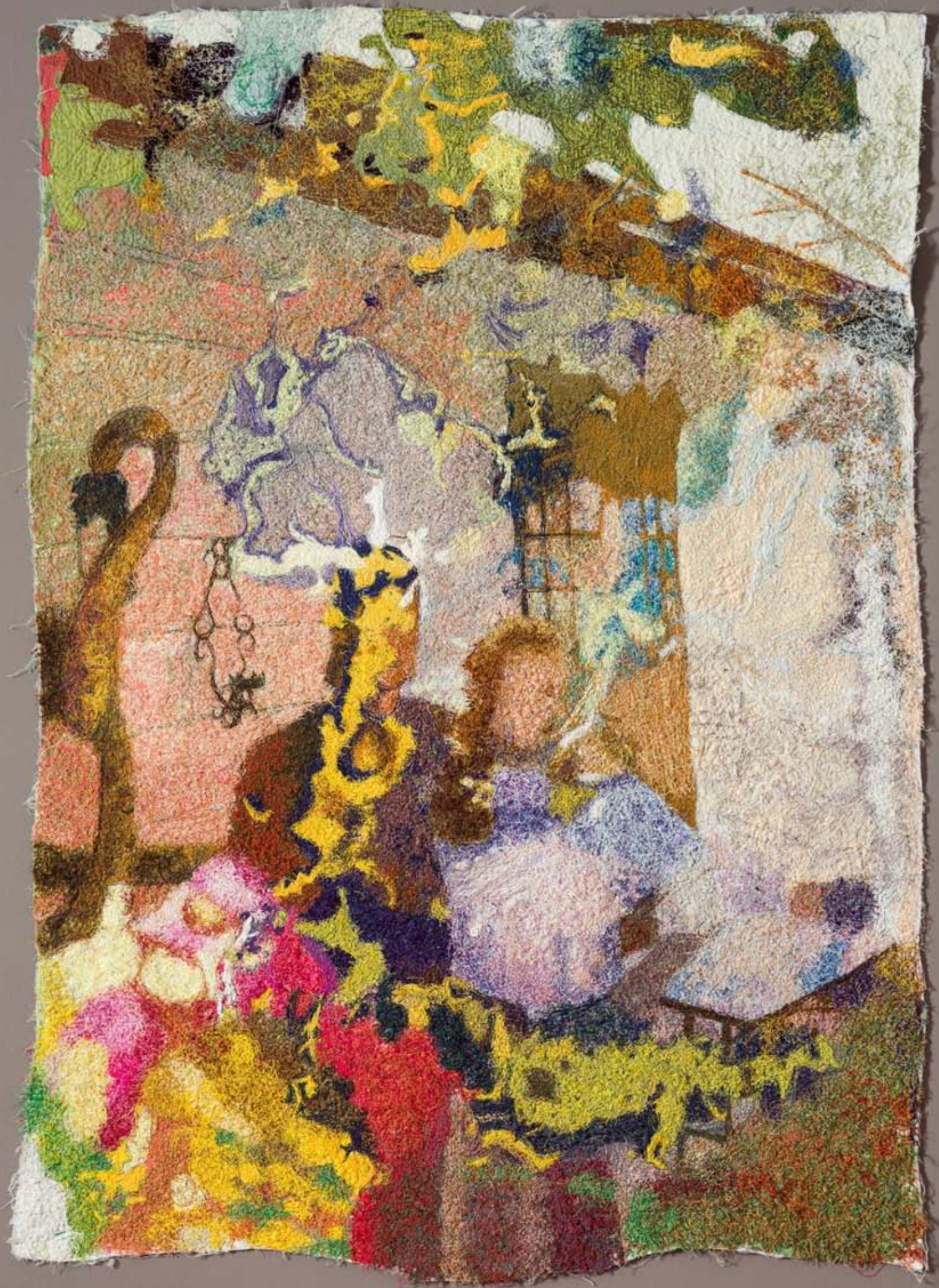


















# The Call of the New World Empire



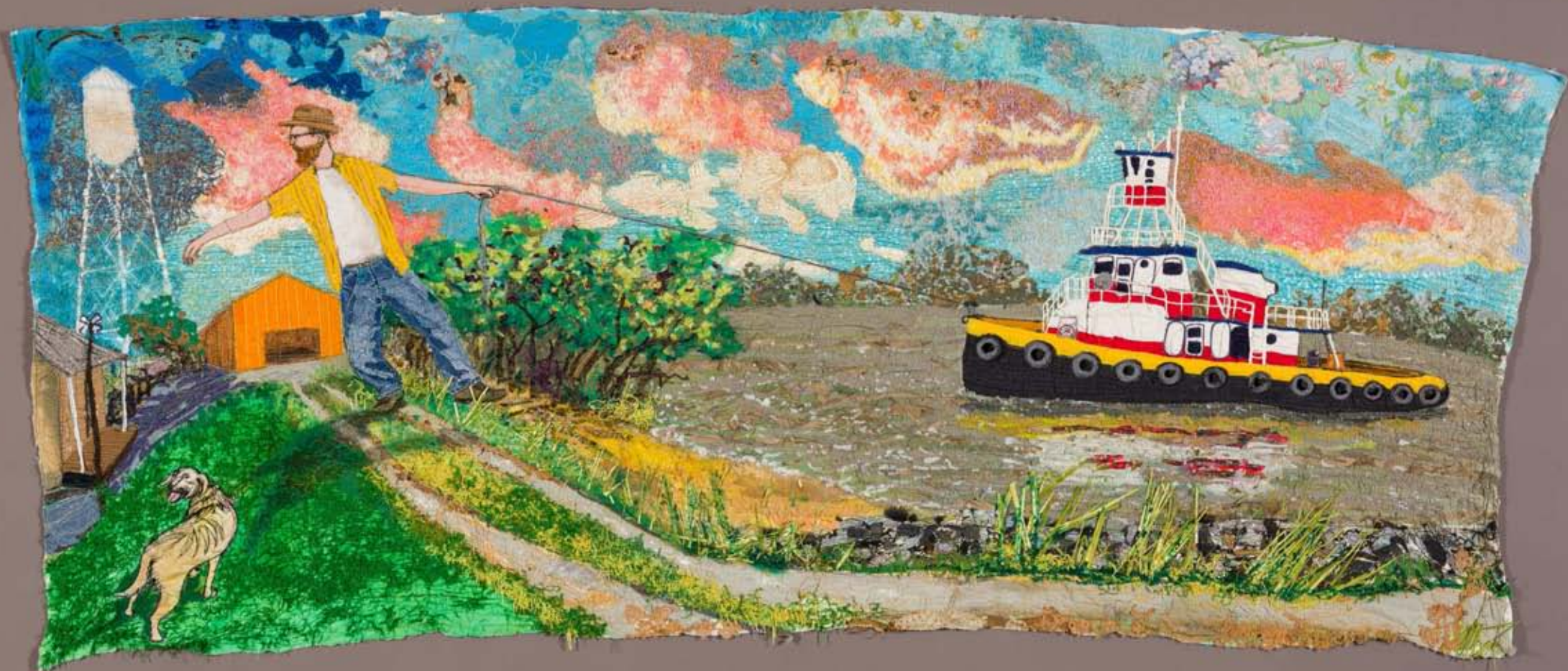


















The scope of Gina Phillips' work is wide-ranging and impressive---human and animal portraits, narrative scenes, landscapes, surrealist flights, mythology, history, objects and installations. The inventiveness in her work continually churns and unearths fresh themes and series.

Even though Phillips grew up in a poor rural Kentucky household, the lack of material abundance did not hinder her creative path. Her family's strong traditions of making art, objects and play structure environments were a rich garden for growing an artist.

As with many residents not born in New Orleans, it's hard to imagine her not being a New Orleanian. She and New Orleans were destined to be together. Centuries of layered history, customs, rituals and indigenous and blended cultures compelled her to remain and create here. The uniqueness of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast Delta permeates her work, but transcends insular description into universal value. Phillips' stitched paintings remind us of other artists who depict human beings--- Otto Dix, Alice Neel, Robert Crumb, Nicole Eisenman, Phillip Evergood, Chaim Soutine, Diane Arbus. As they have, Phillips has an unflinching appreciation for the human individual (especially the human face), which brings emotional identity and weight to her pieces.

Works from early in her art's evolution are exuberantly brushed scenes on canvas, printed fabric, wood, found paper and objects. Experimentally adventurous use of materials and media, at some point, focus into intricate tapestry-like fabric assemblages with even richer depth, texture, color and sculptural aesthetic. The mutability of fabric surface, unique use of thread as line drawing, her furious machine stitching as cross-hatch shading, can all fool the eye at first glance. Upon closer inspection, the miscellany of the fabrics, craft furs and threading reveal mosaic, maplike abstract expression. Over time, looseness and tightness of the fabric constructions fluctuate. Some of the iconic pieces with more formal finishes contrast with earthier, edgier pieces. Even seemingly raw constructions are intricately, intuitively crafted. The vibration between primitive and complex compels us to contemplate them many times over, gleaning further visual pleasure and story. If they were music, they would be like an Iris Dement vocal backed by an unplugged garage metal band - haunted, otherworldly, gritty.

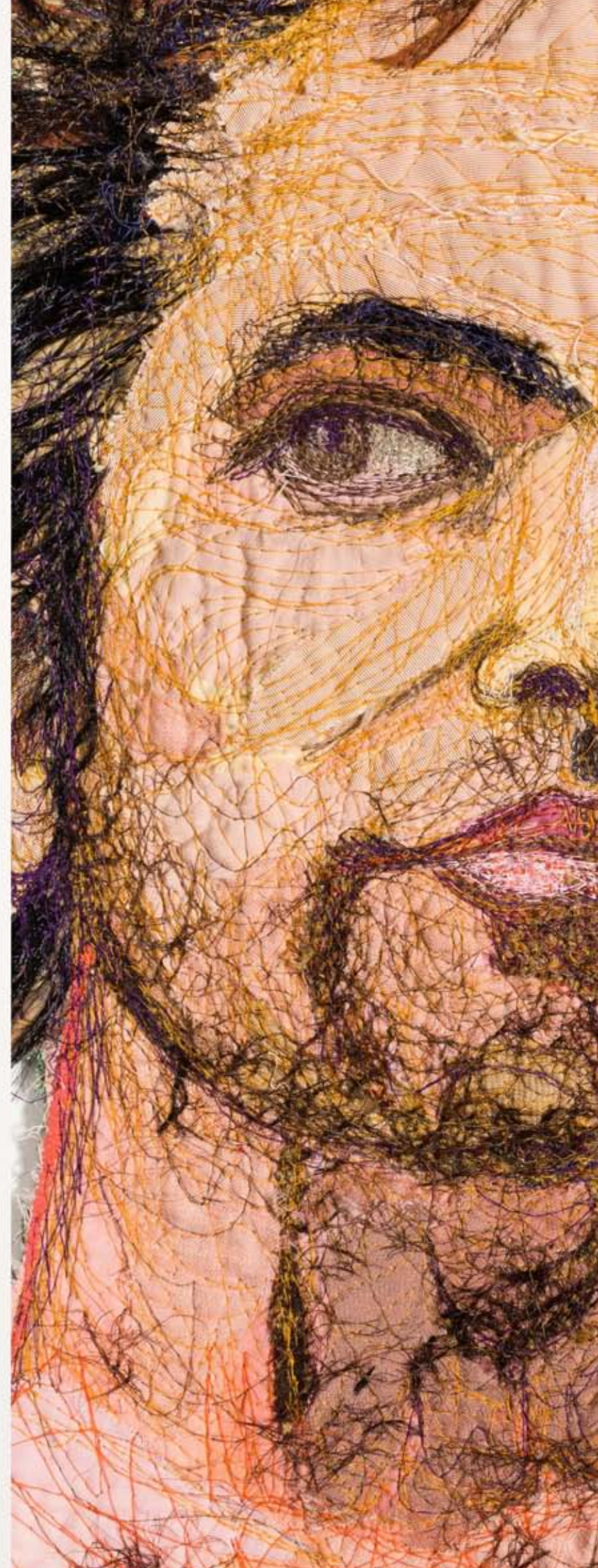
Phillips has developed conceptual series for exhibition and her own intellectual exploration as her vision expands. Heroes and Villains, The Call of the Alluvial Empire and Life Lasagna poeticized history, Delta geographical civilization, and deliberations on mortality and remembrance. Her series mythologizing the brilliant music artist Fats Domino is as celebratory as Domino's music. But it has undercurrents of the tragic-comic dichotomy of life in the Crescent City, especially after the 2005 Levee Failure and Flood. The juxtaposition of suffering and ecstasy, beauty and plain-ness, sweetness and bitterness - connect to us in a visceral and empathic jolt.

It is appropriate and rewarding to see the stages of Gina Phillips' expanding cosmology of people and avenues of story-telling in this mid-career survey exhibit. It is gratifying to witness this uniquely personal vision, phenomenally crafted, yet visually roughhewn enough to show vulnerability. It reaches into us to stop us in our rushed moments, to really look at these "everyday" protagonists.

Kentucky, Laurel St., Irish Channel, Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans, Louisiana, The American South, all of America, the rest of the World. This singular body of work belongs to all of these places.

**Douglas Bourgeois**  
September 21, 2013















































It seemed like my cousins and I spent our whole summer out in the yard, building clubhouses and digging a huge hole we christened "Fort Dirt Hole". We tackled the bulk of the work using grubbing hoes and then switched to kitchen spoons for the finer work which involved carving caves and tunnels into the sides of the hole to house our Star Wars figures. (We referred to them as Star Wars People). We spent more time on the digging and carving than the actual play-action time with the figurines. The hole would turn into a small lake when it would rain and then we'd go on patrol around the perimeter...I think this is how the militarized "fort" moniker took effect.

I grew up with a young mother and her even younger brothers and my grandparents in rural Central Kentucky. My grandmother functioned as our epicenter. She was a wholly creative person. She sang, played guitar, wrote poetry, made art and grew gardens. Rather than scold us for tearing up the yard, I think she saw the artfulness of our endeavors. She turned a blind eye to the perpetual loss of spoons from the kitchen.

Inevitably, someone would say "you're so dirty, you're gonna grow corn out of your ears!" I thought about how amazing that would be...to be able to grow a vegetable on my own body! One summer day, while hanging out by Fort Dirt Hole by myself, I indulged in an experiment that I knew, deep down, was silly. I caked a bunch of mud on my leg and stuck some corn kernels in to it and sat there and waited to see what would happen. Of course, nothing happened, but for some reason, it's a memory that's always stuck with me. I think because it was an early exercise in transcending boundaries...letting my imagination take me somewhere absurd. Now I see that as early training in the process of becoming an artist.

In Fort Dirt Hole, I've created a narrative that captures some of the elements of these early memories. Instead of depicting myself as a nine year old, I used a recently-found photo of myself from high school as a reference. I'm sitting by Fort Dirt Hole and the corn stalk has actually taken root and grown from my leg. I'm looking at it somewhat warily and holding it with an outstretched arm that seems to convey, on one hand, some misgivings for having been so firmly rooted by it and, on the other hand, a defiant planting-of-the-flag kind of stance. This stance speaks to the condition of being rooted, and the benefits and disadvantages inherent in rootedness.

On the far right side of the composition is my grandmother. She's singing and playing guitar and her scale is enormous. She seems to be walking out of the frame of the picture. Between the left side and the right side, there's a big shift in scale. The cornstalks on the left side of the piece are towering; they're even bigger than the live oak tree that's behind my figure.

Time feels like it's wrapping into itself in this piece. The landscape itself is a hybrid of my Kentucky home and New Orleans, my adopted home for 18 years. The house itself is more New Orleans-like and there are certainly no live oak trees in Kentucky. The water tower is a reference to a water tower here in my Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood and the hill that divides the left and right side seems to be as much a reference to the earthen levee in front of my house as it is to the rolling hills of Central Kentucky. I look a lot like my grandmother and it feels like my grandmother's portrait is a portrait of my future self. My 42 year old self, a product of growing up in rural Central Kentucky and now dedicated to my adopted, Southeast Louisiana home...is implied in the space between.

**Gina Phillips**

*Fort Dirt Hole* statement

October 2013















exhibition checklist

front cover | *Fort Dirt Hole*, 2013. fabric, thread, ink and paint.  
156" x 324"

back cover | opening reception photograph, courtesy of  
Matthew Weldon Showman, Jonathan Ferrara Gallery

page 1 | Gina Phillips in her studio, courtesy of  
John McCusker, The New Orleans Advocate

foreword

page 3 | *Self Portrait with Rat*, 2002, oil on canvas and mixed  
media, Collection of Thomas and Dathel Coleman

page 4-9 | installation images, courtesy of Mike Smith

curatorial statement

page 10-11 | *Memento*, 1996. fabric, thread, ink and paint,  
194" x 95", Collection of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art

page 12 | *Newlyweds*, 1991, oil on canvas board, Private  
Collection

page 13 | *Hearse*, 1992, oil on canvas, Private Collection

page 14 | *Ghosts*, 1992, oil on canvas, Private Collection

page 15 | *River Buddies*, 2000, oil on canvas, Private Collection

page 16 | *View from Outhouse Door*, 1993, oil on found objects,  
Collection of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art

page 17 | *Warm Morning Stove*, 1994, mixed media, 51" x 50"

page 18 | *Patrol*, 1995, oil and thread on printed fabric,  
46.5" x 34", Private Collection

page 19 | *Hidden Knack*, 1995, oil on fabric and Katrina mud,  
51" x 43.25"

page 20 | *Facing Leaner Times Ahead, Fats Eats A Nourishing  
Bowl of Yakamein*, 2009, oil on canvas, 30.5" x 35",  
Collection of Thomas and Dathel Coleman

page 21 | *Walking Past the Battle of New Orleans*, 2009, oil on  
paper (framed), 36" x 52", Private Collection

page 22 | *Young Fats Goes Fishing With the Natives*, 2009, oil and  
colored pencil on paper (framed), 32.75" x 46.5",  
Private Collection

page 23 | *Fats Got Out*, 2009, fabric, thread and acrylic paint,  
5' x 4', Private Collection

page 24 | *The Arrow of Time is a Lie*, 2010, fabric, thread, acrylic  
paint and ink, 92" x 51.25"

page 25 | *Hoover and the Gourd*, 2008, fabric, thread and acrylic  
paint, 45.25" x 32.5"

page 26 | Selections from *Heroes and Villains*, 2010-2011, fabric,  
thread, ink and paint, dimensions vary

page 27 | *The Call of the Alluvial Empire*, 2010, fabric, thread  
and acrylic paint, 53" x 39.5"

page 28 | *Score*, 2010, fabric, thread, ink, paint and synthetic  
hair, 46" x 32"

page 29 | *Rope a Dope*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink and paint,  
70" x 42"

page 30 | *Louis Tugs a Tug*, 2010, fabric, thread, acrylic paint  
and glitter, 41.5" x 103.5"

page 31 | *Salvage Operation*, 2010, fabric, thread, feathers, ink,  
acrylic paint and spray paint, 104" x 83", Private Collection

D. Bourgeois essay

page 32-33 | *Andy Cook* (and detail), 2011, fabric, thread, paint  
and synthetic hair, 57.5" x 32"

page 34 | *Mable On Her Way to Mass*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink  
and paint, 54" x 30"

page 35 | *Jason Reitz*, 2012, fabric, thread, ink and paint,  
72" x 30", Collection of Thomas and Dathel Coleman

page 36 | *Jenga Mwendo*, 2012, fabric, thread, ink and paint,  
75" x 40", Collection of Thomas and Dathel Coleman

page 37 | *Azana and Julian*, 2012, fabric, thread, ink, paint and  
metal, 78" x 53", Collection of Thomas and Dathel Coleman

page 38 | *Golda Green*, 2012, fabric, thread, ink and paint,  
69" x 36"

page 39 | *John Taylor and his Chicks with Shelby*, 2012, fabric,  
thread, ink and paint, dimensions variable,  
Collection of Thomas and Dathel Coleman

page 40 | *Dream Girl Cloud*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink and paint,  
68" x 75"

page 41 | *Floating World Cloud*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink and  
paint, 68" x 75"

page 42 | *Sentimental Tooth: Cornstalk*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink,  
paint and oil pastel, 42" x 46"

page 43 | *Sweaty Feet (Leakers)*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink and  
paint, 61" x 50"

Phillips *Fort Dirt Hole* statement

page 44-47 | *Fort Dirt Hole* (details), fabric, thread, ink and  
paint, 156" x 324"

Phillips curriculum vitae

page 50-51 | *Hair versus Face*, 2009, fabric and thread, 27" x 39"



exhibition checklist | not pictured | in chronological order

*Mother's Day*, 1993, oil on canvas, 61.5" x 37.25"  
*Pink Eye*, 1994, oil on canvas, glass and wood, 27.5" x 24.75"  
*Sunday*, 1995, oil on printed fabric, Private Collection  
*Ward, South Carolina*, 1996, oil and pencil on paper  
*Clay's Ferry Road*, 1996, oil on paper, 31" x 49"  
*Glazer's Steel and Aluminum*, 1996, oil on paper, 47.5" x 27.5"  
*Pit Stop*, 1998, oil and colored pencil on paper, 44.5" x 44.75"  
*Rummage*, 1998, oil on paper, 44.75" x 27.25"  
*Scar*, 1998, mixed media, 18" x 24", Private Collection  
*Wake*, 2004, oil on canvas, Collection of Thomas and Dathel Coleman  
*Stud*, 2004, oil on canvas, Collection of Thomas and Dathel Coleman  
*Western Wear*, 2004, oil on canvas, Collection of Thomas and Dathel Coleman  
*Rico*, 2006, fabric, thread, synthetic hair and paint, 22.5" x 12", Collection of the artist  
*'88 Conflates '74*, 2008, fabric, thread and acrylic paint, 37.5" x 24.75"  
*Conversion Van*, 2008, fabric, thread and acrylic paint, 40" x 38"  
*Mabel On Her Way to Mass*, 2008, oil on paper (framed), 44.75" x 31.5"  
*Memory Painting of Pawpaw*, 2008, oil on paper (framed), 32" x 34"  
*Big Stick Diplomacy*, 2010, fabric, thread, ink, paint and synthetic hair, 19" x 29"  
*Cat Island Encounter...Macaroni Meets Jean-Baptiste*, 2010, fabric, thread, ink, glass beads and feathers, 22" x 22"  
*Chief Jumper and his Horse*, 2010, fabric, thread, ink, and paint, 21" x 32"  
*Clutches*, 2010, fabric, thread, ink, and paint, 47" x 39"  
*Escape from Jackson Barracks...The Resurrection of Chief Jumper*, 2010, fabric, thread, acrylic paint and ink, 43" x 79"  
*Flying Trapeze #1 and #2*, 2010, fabric, thread, ink, and paint, 44" x 44" each  
*Mardi Gras Indian Myth #1*, 2010, fabric, thread, ink, acrylic paint and oil pastel, 35.5" x 49"  
*Rogue Wave with Fist Wave*, 2010, fabric, thread, acrylic paint and ink, 30.5" x 54.5"  
*Rosie*, 2010, fabric, thread and ink, 53" x 36", Private Collection  
*20th Century American Baby*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink and paint, 14.5" x 12.5"  
*Disarming*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink, and paint, 21" x 26"  
*Fast Girl, 7th Ward Creole Girl* (with avatars), 2011, fabric, thread, ink and paint, 51" x 7"

*Let's Split*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink, and paint, 21" x 20"  
*Ross Karsen*, 2011, fabric, thread and paint, 53" x 22"  
*Dancing Pete*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink and paint, 55" x 29"  
*The Golden Halter (Denise)*, 2011, fabric, thread and paint, 53" x 22", Private Collection  
*Italian Travis*, 2011, fabric, thread, synthetic hair and paint, 55" x 22"  
*Old American Baby*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink and paint, 12.75" x 12"  
*Reach*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink, and paint  
*Rex Cloud*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink, and paint, 50" x 96"  
*Sentimental Tooth: Cornfield*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink, paint and oil pastel, 28" x 42"  
*Sentimental Teeth: '73 AMX*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink, paint  
*Worried Baby*, 2011, fabric, thread, ink and paint, 12.5" x 12"  
*A Sentimental Tree Reminisces*, 2012, fabric, thread, ink and paint, dimensions variable  
*Future Feathers*, 2012, fabric, thread, ink, and paint







curriculum vitae

Education

- 1997 MFA, Painting | Tulane University, New Orleans, LA  
1994 BFA, Painting | University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2013 *I Was Trying Hard to Think About Sweet Things*, Mid-Career Retrospective, Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, LA  
2012 Volta 8, Basel, Switzerland  
2011 *Heroes and Villains*, Jonathan Ferrara Gallery, New Orleans, LA  
*Life Lasagna*, Prospect 2 Biennial, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, LA  
2010 *The Call of the Alluvial Empire*, Delgado Community College, New Orleans, LA  
2006 *Southern Tales*, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, LA  
2004 *Plucked from Thin Air: Songs and Stories about Suspended Characters*, Marguerite Oestreicher Fine Arts, New Orleans, LA  
2003 Riverfront Galleries, New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts, New Orleans, LA  
2001 Marguerite Oestreicher Fine Arts, New Orleans, LA  
1999 *New Works*, Delgado Community College, New Orleans, LA  
*Pride of Trigg County*, Marguerite Oestreicher Fine Arts, New Orleans, LA  
1997 *In Stitches*, Carroll Gallery, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA  
1994 *Twister*, Barnhart Gallery, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY  
1993 Virtual Gallery, Lexington, Kentucky

Selected Bibliography

- Colpitt, Frances. "Report from New Orleans, Southern Sensibilities." *Art in America*, no. 11 (November 2001): 59-6.  
Dawson, Faith. "A Sew-Sew Form of Art." *New Orleans Magazine* (March 2002): 24.  
Fagaly, William A. 2001 *New Orleans Triennial*. New Orleans: New Orleans Museum of Art, 2001.  
Haubrich, Kirah. "Gina Phillips: An Artist En Route." *New Orleans Art Review* (July/August 1999): 10-11.  
Kemp, John R. "Gina Phillips". *ARTnews* (May, 2011).  
McCree, Cree. "Astro Art-Gina Phillips Has the 'Right Stuff' for NASA." *Southern Woman* (March 2003).

Collections

- University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY  
NASA\*  
New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA  
Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, LA  
Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, Los Angeles, CA  
Tulane University, New Orleans, LA  
Basin Street Station, New Orleans, LA  
House of Blues (various locations)  
21C, Louisville, KY  
Drake Hotel, Toronto, ON  
Collection of Marilyn Oshman

\*The piece commissioned by NASA, titled Spacesuit, was destroyed in Katrina.











