

Born in 1944 in Louisville, KY, O'Leary Bacon attended school in Louisville, graduated from Kentucky State College, and later earned a master's degree in social work from Loyola University. She worked for the state of Kentucky for 24 years, beginning in 1967, and became supervisor of a multi-county social service office. In the 1980s she taught herself to paint, and quit her career in 1991 to be an artist full time. O'Leary Bacon lives in Covington, where she paints daily and frequently gives presentations to visiting groups of school children and adults.

"I quit my job in 1991. I was feeling the need to get out there with this mirror and begin healing the souls of African Americans. That was my whole focus: healing the souls of African Americans. So in April I wrote a prayer to God, and this is the blueprint. I wrote that it is time for me to begin the healing process. So the next day I felt pretty comfortable about it. I looked at my assets. I had a nest egg that I thought I might as well use. So I said I will do this and see what I'm made of."

"My purpose in doing art is not only to lift up the self-esteem of black people but to depict us as human beings, because in this country we have been robbed of it and are still robbed of it. And therefore when I paint, I paint my soul. And when I paint *my* soul I paint yours and everybody else's on the feeling level. That's where I draw on the social work part because social work aims at the feeling, the underlying thing that's causing the problem... and I have some stuff that's just really, really graphic that tells you exactly how I feel as a person to some of the things that happened to the great underdog."

"I'm about harmonizing. I know there's discord and dissension, and to do it intelligently you have to be very truthful, very honest about yourself and just lay the cards on the line – and there is a way that I do it that is apparently very effective – so they can be exposed to an art that isn't *arty*."

O'Leary Bacon, 1998

Joan Dance was born in 1940, in Paducah, Kentucky, where she continues to live. Joan, who has four grown children, wrote poetry for many years before becoming an artist. In 1994 she felt compelled to do a drawing of her church. She then drew more churches and began incorporating people into these compositions. She began painting and her work soon expanded to non-church subjects. Her work features new interpretations of scenes from everyday life, with special emphasis on children, children's games, and dramatic portrayals of common, interpersonal relationships.

"When we were kids, you had a way of passing down things from generation to generation orally, and we were passing down things in these games, although we didn't really realize it. We used to play a game called "Mother, may I?" and that was probably teaching kids manners, and then there was another one, that was probably the way of teaching kids the way business is carried on in different churches and so forth. There was one called "Mother Goose" or something like that – "The Fox and Mother Goose," whatever – that was kind of like teaching children that the parents need to take care of their offspring."

"I think life is special – every little thing that you do. Every day that you wake up it's a brand new day, and you ought to be happy about it. I think people waste too much time fussing and fighting and disagreeing, not wanting other people to have their own opinions. I do, I think life is really beautiful, I see it that way. If we just wake up every day and see things the way they're supposed to be seen, without a lot of hate, I think things would be a lot better."

"I like to work with children... I teach children two hours each Saturday. I want to teach these nephews of mine because it's so hard on children, specially young black boys in these projects. I really would like to help them."

"It can work but you gotta have enough people working, and people with the energy and the strength and the love so you can teach the children how to look beyond themselves. Because, you know, things are bad a lot of times, but you can't just give up... teach 'em how not to give up. There must be some ways that each of us knows to show a child how to get over a bad period. The darkest hours are before the dawn – give 'em a whole lot of those types of things and sooner or later they'll be grown and maybe then they'll be over whatever it was, they'll have made it, if they go to school."

Joan Dance, 1996

Born 1917, in Clio, Alabama, Marvin Finn learned to carve as a child from watching his sharecropper father. As a young man, he moved to join one of his 9 brothers in Hazard, Kentucky, then migrated on to the Louisville area around 1944. He has lived in Louisville since the early 1950s, presently in the Smoketown area. Raising a family, Finn began making toys for his children, and painted wood sculpture. Finn is probably best known for his brightly painted plywood roosters. He remains active as an artist.

“In Alabama, we didn’t have to have no lock and key to get in your house or leave your house. They didn’t have nothing but wooden latches back in those days... neighbors looked after one another. Today, it’s just like being in the penitentiary, that’s all it is, people got iron bars on their houses – same thing at the penitentiary. They got their iron doors to keep the thieves out of their houses anymore.”

“I mean just like a kid, I been playing with toys ever since I was big enough to know what toys was. I’ve had many a Christmas, man, I didn’t get even a stick of candy, and I can see that right today. But toys, the older I got the more interested I got in the thing, I used to pick up a stick and do everything to make a toy, if I wanted to.”

“I used to work on the big machines (at the docks in Louisville). That’s what got me fascinated. After I got laid off from this job back in 1963, I just went to the lumberyard, I’d get me a armful of these sticks and things, and come on back and start work. I mean, everyday, man, I got something different in my head I wanted to do and it always comes out in the work.”

“I mean, heh, talk about the hard times, well, this ain’t no hard time, I don’t know nobody would work for seven dollars and a half a month these days, would they? I mean, 50 cent a day. Young generation don’t know what a hard time is. When the end of the month come, I’d go to the store and buy me a new outfit, and still had some money left. I’d get three good meals a day and a place to sleep! Man, it ain’t all bad!”

“This place, having all these old race riots and everything, it was pretty nasty around here, but mostly the old timers have moved out of here, all of them, either moved out or died. It’s a pretty nice neighborhood as far as I’m concerned. I mean it’s just trouble anywhere you go these days. Well, it’s just everywhere, but you can just look out the window and see guys passing this dope and stuff, I mean you can’t get rid of it.”

Marvin Finn, 1997

Helen LaFrance was born in 1919 in Boaz, a rural village in extreme western Kentucky, where she continues to reside. Helen loved to draw as a child when she also taught herself how to make dolls out of scrap materials at hand. She made numerous carved wooden figures with movable limbs, and has painted for many years. She took up painting fulltime after her sisters and parents had all died and her grandchildren were grown. She says that memories provide her richest source of subject matter.

“My grandmother lived right beside a schoolhouse, and these kids’d pass by our house every morning going to school. We paid taxes like they did, but we didn’t get to go to school, because it was a white school! They taught us at home. They’d buy the books in Mayfield every year. I got to go to school when I was in the fifth grade, right up the road there in the church house. My Momma’s brother, he told them that they needed a school out there. They had to sign this and that and get petitions and stuff. But anyway, they all went to the courthouse together, and they got the school started and the bus running.”

“There was a guy over here and he made a school bus. It was funny! The benches went all up and down the side, just like you laid a board along it. He built it, and it had a flat top and it came together at the front and wide in the rear. It had a back door and it had a side door. He had two kids, and they would ride in the back, and he couldn’t hardly see back there. When he was getting ready to turn he said “Anything behind me?” They were his rear-view mirror. They said “Naw.” But he had it painted yellow, not a school bus yellow, more of a jonquil-yellow.”

“I didn’t know it was the Depression, you know, we just thought that was just the way people lived. You had one pair of shoes, one good dress, that’s just the way it was. We didn’t complain about that, ’cause we never heard them say a word about money – whether they had it or didn’t have it, they didn’t say. Or ‘Can’t afford it,’ I never heard that. Or ‘We ain’t got no money,’ I never heard them say that.”

“I remember things like when we were kids and I used to go up on the hill, and there were trees up there on the hill and I remember how the shadows looked and how the cows would stand under the trees in the shade, things like that. Like how my Grandma used to hang all her clothes out on the line on pretty days and the wind would blow ‘em up. All that just comes back to me, it’s just in the back of my head all the time.”

“Momma used to buy us – well she called them “painting pencils” – colored crayons. And I thought that was the best smelling thing I ever did smell. Open a box of coloring crayons – smell so good. And she would give us these old, thick Big Chief tablets, you know, real rough paper, had lines across them, and a Indian Chief on the back. And I thought I was in Seventh Heaven. And I would fill mine up and they’d say, ‘You better quit drawing in that tablet you won’t have nothin’ to write on.’ I had rabbits and horses and everything all over the trees, and she’d hold my hand and show me how to draw something.”

“I like the smell of the paint, and I like the smell of the paper and the canvas. It’s just something I like to do.”

Helen LaFrance, 1998

Born 1906 in Salem, Kentucky. Died 1990, Brown, Kentucky. As a farmer all his working life, Willie Massey learned how to make things, to meet practical needs and also to satisfy his creative drive. Later in life, Massey began making sculpture and towards the end produced numerous paintings. His choice of materials was both practical and ingenious.

“Nothing but just took it up in my head... Just whatever I take a notion to make. I start on it and they just wind up what they will be... One reason I do it is ‘cause I can’t do nothing else. I guess if I could work I’d do it at night. That’s when I do most of it anyway, at night. Most every night.”

“I’ll keep working as long as my hands don’t get like my legs, where I can’t use them. I hope they don’t.”

Willie Massey, 1989

Born 1943 in Indianapolis, Zephra May-Miller has lived in the Smoketown community of Louisville since she was a few weeks old. Married young, Zephra worked several years as a mortician for her grandfather, a prominent local funeral director. She lived briefly in Spain when her former husband was in the army. In the late 1970s she attended Jefferson Community College for a period of time. She discovered plastic bags as a raw material by chance, and credits her technique to watching her great-aunt, "Big Momma," as a child.

"Everything that I create come from deep in me, it's a very personal thing, every piece that I create. I never wanted to be a copycat. I always felt that each person is unique, and that if we'll allow that spirit, that we can come out with what's bothering *us*, and not be so much influenced. I read in the scripture about the point where if you focus in on Jesus, even if there are 5 or 10,000 on either side of you, if you still focus in on him, you don't have to worry about it. And I take that literally, even into my own work. I get focused!"

"I was crocheting a piece to enter in the Kentucky State Fair, in Fine Arts and Crafts, and I ran out of yarn and so I said, 'I've got to get out there in an hour.' Next thing I know I saw a garbage can. Jumped up and grabbed a garbage bag, clipped it up, tied it up, and won the blue ribbon."

"Even as a kid my mother used to say I'm strange, different. I didn't understand it then. But now whenever I hear people say many things, I don't pay any attention, because every morning I'm in my prayers. I'm seeking out what does say the Lord, and what is his purpose. This is serious stuff!"

"Please, let it be known that this is the Bag Lady of Louisville/Smoketown. Smoketown is an African-American community, and we're celebrating 131 years as Louisville's oldest African-American community, and this was our 6th annual Smoketown Festival, and we had over 2,000 to attend from all over the state, even out of the country – as far away as Europe – to be a part of the festivities here in the city."

"God allowed me to design the Smoketown Community Monument for our community; because of Mohammed Ali, and because of Jimmy Ellis, and because of Rodale Stitch. I gave the design; Jesus gave me the design."

Zephra May-Miller, 1997

Born in 1963 in the Chickasaw/Rubbervtown area of Louisville, Mark Anthony Mulligan learned to draw and paint as a young adult, while living on the streets. Fascinated since childhood by the ever-present commercial signs of his home community, these visual landmarks gave rise to his own unique urban landscapes, where actual corporate logos, and imaginary street and business signs are intermixed. His aerial depiction of urban life in the late 20th century is in stark contrast to the characteristically orderly cityscapes of the 19th century.

“My mother got after me about making signs and logos. See what I had to go through being a sign and logo artist? But after I became a free man: Bingo! There’s a moral to all of this that I went through: If you like what you’re doing you gotta suffer for it.”

“Sometimes it’s the shape, what it looks like, far away, or near me, and sometimes it could be the name or the colors, or the logo itself. That’s the only way I can put it. For example, to me Ashland stands for: **A**sk, **H**eal, **L**ove **A**nd **N**ever **D**oubt. And to me Gulf stands for: **G**od’s **U**nique **L**ove **F**orever. And then Mobil, to me that stands for: **M**Ore **B**ible **L**overs. And, let’s see, Bonded: **B**OrN **D**EaD... It’s not here no more.”

“It’s just when I see signs and logos. It’s weird, a man being thrilled and happy over logos. It’s weird, but everybody’s got their own thing.”

Mark Anthony Mulligan, 1993

Born in 1950, in rural Christian County, Kentucky, Willie Rascoe lives in nearby Cerulean. He was in the 8th grade when local schools were integrated. After high school he attended Hopkinsville Community College but was drafted into the army, where he became a translator. After the army he finished an associate's degree in general studies and went to work for his father as a builder. Rascoe has presented numerous programs for school children. His art is made entirely from found materials.

"The only fun we had as kids was going out to see if we could find old junk piles, to see what we could make out of this... we would take this part, join it to another part, you know... I think all that had something to do with this work here that I'm doing right now."

"I start out with a piece of wood and then I react to it. Sometimes my mind goes into the wood and I bring out the subject. I like to stay as close to nature as I can, and since all this material around here is just out there (and to me some of the greatest art comes from things that's already in front of your face) and you'll be the one that's chosen to get out the very true meaning of pieces that you work on, that's your gift."

"I take this driftwood that's been drifting down the river. I'll grab and I'll save it, and I'll turn it into something. And you can do the same thing with kids. You take kids, baddest kinds there ever was; you *thought* was bad. You can take that kind and you can turn that kid's life around, it's just a matter of doing it, finding that one key thing in a kid's mind and unlock it."

Willie Rascoe, 1998

Born 1958 in Lakeland, Florida, Lavon Van Williams finished high school in Denver. He moved to Lexington in 1976, to play basketball at the University of Kentucky, and was a starter on the 1978 NCAA champion team. After college he played pro-ball in Italy and Japan, then worked for 3 years on the Chicago Commodities Exchange. Williams learned to carve from his older brother, Dave Wright (a.k.a. Dave Henry). Their great-uncle, Neely Williams, had taught Dave the intricacies of the carving tradition he brought with him to Florida from coastal North Carolina. Lavon's brother explained the formal intricacies of the carving tradition to him but it wasn't until later that he understood the importance of the formula, pattern and balance within a carving. Williams returned to Lexington where he has worked full time as an artist since the mid-1980s. He carves in African-American tradition, the "old" way.

"If there's a circle one place, there's going to be a circle appearing someplace else. If there's a straight line here, there's gotta be a straight line someplace else. If there's a curve over here, there's gotta be another curve. There's gotta be a triangle that fits to another triangle. It has to be juxtaposed. It's rhythmic. If there's three circles here, there's gotta be three circles someplace else. It's like a set pattern, order, but not many people know it. It's gotta be there, it's gonna be there, it will be there some way; unless you're trying to express something that you want the viewer to look at, so therefore you might put one of those shapes there or some kind of emphasis in that side and that's it, but when you work the piece you have to work it all over, and usually you want to work front and back, so that the front is as fantastic as the back."

"You want to try to be as expressive as possible, as explosive as possible. Like the concept of beauty is not so much that you're looking for beauty, you're looking for a fantastic movement or a fantastic shape that comes in the piece, and that's the whole power to the piece. You're looking really for power to come out of the pieces. You want it to explode out when the viewer sees it or you want it to be calm but yet you still want a powerful presence in the piece, so that it dominates or takes off."

"What a lot of people have to get rid of mainly is the notion and the concept of beauty, of light, because with this style of art you're not trying to look for the most beautiful form – if you're trying to make a woman, you're not trying to do the most beautiful woman in the world, you're probably trying to express the soul or the inner part or the personality of a person, more so than trying to capture the exact image, like a photograph would do."

Lavon Van Williams, 1997

Born 1942, in Blue Diamond, Kentucky, a now-defunct coal camp, Charles Williams was raised by his grandparents until he joined his mother in Chicago during high school. He returned to Hazard, Kentucky after high school, then joined the Job Corps in Western Kentucky, where his passion for comic strips was fueled by work as a cartoonist on the Center newspaper. He moved to Lexington in 1970, where he worked at a variety of jobs. Along the way he took some art classes but was encouraged to retain his own aesthetic. Williams typically made use of recycled and found materials in his sculpture.

Charles Williams died at the University of Kentucky Medical Center on June 30th, 1998, nine days after this exhibition opened to the public at the Kentucky Folk Art Center.

“When I took a drawing class I was going along with it, participating in it, but it wasn’t telling me nothin’. I mean I’m not criticizing, but what I’m saying is: it was just like me re-learning my ABCs and I already know it.”

“I wouldn’t know exactly how to define my sculpture. I guess I would be sort of a reconnaissance artist. Going through some of those phases, or in other words, OK, you do so much work on canvas, but you sort of want to bring your art off the wall. You want to go a little bit deeper, or whatever. You don’t want it on the wall, you don’t want it on canvas, you want it out there with you where you can touch it, feel it, and make the audience get up, look at it closely, and you can walk around it... sculpture art, more form-effective, three dimensional, silent, touching object, or whatever the piece might be called, it’s no longer on the wall, it’s there in three dimensions, like you.”

Charles Williams, 1997