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The Freedom Seeker

Spring - 2013

2013 Conference Opens at Faith Ringgold/ Aminah Robinson Exhibition

By Andor Skotnes, PhD, Professor of History, The Sage Colleges

The opening day of the 2013 Annual Conference of the URHP, Friday, April 12, will be held at the site of a major exhibition at the Opalka Gallery of the Sage College of Albany: *“Stories & Journeys: The Works of Faith Ringgold & Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson.”* This year’s Educators’ Workshop, scheduled from 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and the Opening Address and Reception, 7 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. will be held directly adjacent to this exhibition and will draw on these remarkable works of art.

The exhibition by two major African American artists is simply stunning. As an exhibition curator puts it, “Integrating the materials and visual language from their African-American heritage with those from the Western tradition, each of these extraordinary artists tells stories which inspire, educate, commemorate and preserve memories both individual and collective”; together they “inspire us to look toward building a better future.” And the works of Ringgold and Robinson in this exhibition very effectively complement each other.

Faith Ringgold and her works are probably more familiar to those of us involved with the URHP. Growing up in Depression-era Harlem, Ringgold was steeped in the traditions of African America, and the culture and politics of her neighborhood during the 30s and 40s. Although she remembered always having crayons and paints

despite the ferment of the time). She also became a self-conscious political activist during these years, playing a leading role in opening major NY art museums to black artists. In a meeting of artists at the Studio Museum of Harlem, she proclaimed, “Let’s demonstrate!” to the surprise of some present. Nevertheless, they did, and the museums were progressively integrated racially. However, when the museums continued their reluctance to show



Faith Ringgold, Visual Artist
Photo by Grace Matthews, 1993

women artists, Ringgold became a leader in the successful cause to integrate them in terms of gender as well. Fittingly, major New York museums that she and others picketed have exhibited her works in more recent years, and have included them in their

permanent collections. During these years of activism, Faith Ringgold came to define herself as a black feminist.

Over the decades, Ringgold’s art has taken many forms: paintings, sculptures, textiles, mosaics, and books. However, in 1983 she created the art form for which she is best known: the painted story quilt. Drawing on African American traditions of quilting, painting, and story telling - and reacting with frustration to the fact that, at the time, she could not get her stories published - she

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around as a child, she “didn’t realize I would be an artist” until she got to City College in NY in the late ‘40s. She then pursued this vocation with increasing vigor into the 60s, during which she came to define her work as “political art,” (something, she recalled, that was quite unusual,

(Continued on page 4)



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The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc., a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting knowledge of the 19th century Underground Railroad Movement and its legacy in the Capital Region, in New York State, and in the United States. This newsletter is published three times a year. Editorial inquiries can be sent to URHPCR, P.O. Box 10851, Albany, NY 12201.

Email at info@UndergroundRailroadHistory.org.

The Portrayal of Slavery and the Underground Railroad in the Visual Art of Faith Ringgold, with Reference to the Work of Jacob Lawrence

Michele Faith Wallace, professor of English at City College and the CUNY Graduate Center in New York, will present the opening address to the 2013 URHP conference, 7 p.m., Friday, April 12, at the Opalka Gallery

of the Sage College of Albany. Wallace is a renowned black feminist author and activist, a cultural critic, and the daughter of artist Faith Ringgold. She will speak on "The Portrayal of Slavery and the Underground Railroad in the Visual Art of Faith Ringgold, with Reference to the Path-Breaking Work of Jacob Lawrence."

Wallace is the author of six books and many

articles on African American and women's politics and culture, including the path-breaking 1979 volume, *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*; in fact, it was this book, plus her columns in the *Village Voice*, that first brought her to the attention of many as an important voice for black feminism. Wallace has written that her mother inspired her to develop this voice:

Becoming a black feminist in the 70s had not only to do with the times but it also had everything to do with being the daughter of the ambitious, fiercely militant and driven black artist, Faith Ringgold. . . . I frequently accompanied and assisted my mother in her various radical forays into the anti-war, anti-imperialist art movement of the times. . . . Faith and I were very shortly radicalized within the frenetic and inclusive goings on of the downtown art scene.

Indeed, mother and daughter were involved together for some years in launching a number of initiatives that combined their common commitment to black freedom, feminism, and the arts, including Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL), the Sojourner Truth Festival of the Arts, and the Women's Interarts Center National Black Feminist Organization.

In recent years, Wallace has focused more on research, writing, and teaching, engaging in a wide-ranging inquiry into feminist theory, gender studies, and African American culture. In the context of this inquiry, she has engaged in an ongoing process of considering Faith Ringgold's art in the tradition of black painting, visual arts, and history, which will be expressed in the subject matter for her Friday evening address.



*Black Macho and
the Myth of
the Superwoman*

Michele Wallace



Louis Massiah to Present at Conference

Documentary filmmaker Louis Massiah, winner of a MacArthur "genius grant" Fellowship, is the founder and director of Scribe Video Center in Philadelphia, a media arts center that provides training and equipment access to community groups and the independent film and video community. On Saturday evening, as part of the 12th annual UGR Public History Conference, he will present excerpts from his recent work, including *Underground Railroad Routes in the Frankford Neighborhood* (Precious Places Community History Project), *Neighborhood Bike Works* (Community Visions Program), *Contested Spaces* (by Boone Ngyues), and *Seeds of Awakening* (Muslim Voices of Philadelphia).



This program begins at 7:30pm at the Sanctuary for Independent Media. On Sunday, Mr. Massiah will conduct a four hour workshop entitled **Be the Media! The Wealth Around You: A Community History Workshop**. Information is available at www.MediaSanctuary.org.

Over the Past Months

Youthbuild Project Draws Albany Students into Underground Railroad History



Mikiyah Taylor Vanness, Julio Espejo, Mark Seibert, Angel Tosado, and Jonathan Turnbull take a break from their work at the Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence.

News and Notes

Mission Statement of URHPCR:

Underground Railroad History Project researches and preserves the local and national history of the anti-slavery and Underground Railroad movements, their international connections and their legacies to later struggles; it engages in public education and dialogue about these movements and their relevance to modern society.

Mark your calendars and plan to attend -

- ◆ **URHPCR Board Meetings** - 3rd Thursday of every month, 5:45-7:30pm at the Upton Center, Russell Sage College, Troy. Visitors welcome, call 518-432-4432 to notify the Board of your planned attendance
- ◆ **Harriet Tubman UGRRR Conference** - May 31 - Jun 1 - Event Website: <http://www.tubmanugrr.net/>
- ◆ **Conference Planning Mtg** - 1st Monday of each month, 6:00-7:30pm, Rm 105, Gurley Hall, Russell Sage College, Troy
- ◆ **Building & Properties Mtg** - Thursdays, monthly, 5:30-6:30pm, call 518-432-4432 for date & location information
- ◆ **Gardening & Landscaping Mtg** - 2nd & 4th Wednesdays, 5:30-7:00pm, call 518-432-4432 for location information
- ◆ **Finance Committee Mtg** - 2nd Tuesday of each month, 6:00-7:30pm in Rm. E, Gurley Hall, Russell Sage College, Troy

Welcome and thank you to new and renewing members: Jessica Bowles, Nell Stokes-Holmes, Lynne Dolan, Willie Terry, Mary Ellen Lee, Peter G. Sokaris, Susan Kastan, Robert Kimball Wallace, Victor Artale, Yvonne Abunaw, Paul and Kathe Sander-Rhem, Ron Deutsch, Roger and Maria Markovics, William Suggs, Barbara DiTomaso, Peter B. Tunny, Joan Travor, Barbara Traver, Charleen Bivona, Robert Radliff, Roberta Villanova Nunn, Fred and Maren Stein, Robert A. Emery, Kenneth M. Mathews, Colwyn Allen, Andrea Howell and Family, Maurice and Elizabeth Thornton, Major Eddie Gurewitz, Isabel Mills, Cynthia Baptiste, Don and Vivian Papson, Linda Spaulding, Lucy Wong, Brea Barthel, Vienna Carroll, Fergus Bordewich, Eugene Pierce Preston, Jacqueline C. Robinson, and Cynthia W. Seacord. Your support is greatly appreciated!

Websites to Visit:

<http://niagaraboundtours.com/>
<http://www.motherlandconnexions.com/>
<http://buxtonmuseum.com/>

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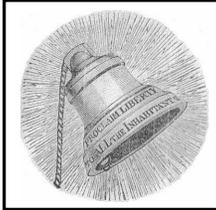
Milestones on the Road to Freedom: the Emancipation Proclamation, Harriet Tubman, and the March on Washington - a Legacy and a Future - - - April 12, 13, 14

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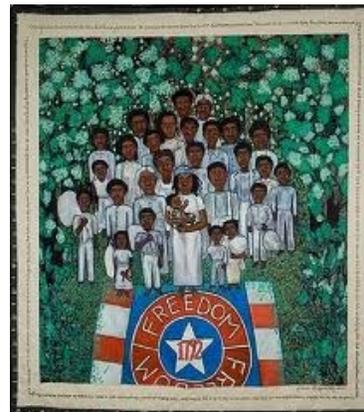
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Ringgold and Robinson *(cont'd from p.1)*

began to produce narratives of painted images and text on quilted fabric. Her many story quilts, a number of which are on display in the current exhibition, address black history and politics from abolitionism to the present, black culture, black women, everyday life, and a variety of world themes. Ringgold's quilts - and indeed her paintings and other pieces - are visually and textually powerful, often humorous, sometimes surrealist, and occasionally shocking.

Now in her early 80s, Faith Ringgold has exhibited in important galleries and museums on five continents; has installed 4 major publicly commissioned murals and mosaics; has written and illustrated 16 children's books (several inspired by her story quilts); and has received some 75 awards, including 22 honorary doctorates (one from Russell Sage College in 1997).

Both Faith Ringgold and her co-exhibitor Aminah Robinson are a part of the long tradition that traces itself back through the Underground Railroad; it is appropriate that their works will be an important part of our 2013 conference.



***Coming to Jones
Road Part 2: We
Here Aunt Emmy
Got Us Now***

2010
Acrylic on canvas

***Jazz Stories: Mama
Can Sing, Papa Can
Blow #4, Nobody will
ever love you like I do***

2004
*Acrylic on canvas with
pieced fabric borders*

