

July 28, 2020

## **The Underground Railroad, Vermont and the Fugitive Slave**

Dragon Dance Theatre, Sam Kerson and Katah 2020

Since the Vermont Law School is closed, and since the announcement from the Trustees of VLS, appeared in the Valley Voice saying they intended to paint over the mural and that for now they would cover it. And since Dean Mc Henry told us all the buildings are closed and locked because of Covid. We have created this letter as a visit to the mural with the artist, in which the reader will see the images of the mural and hear a few ideas about each image from the artist himself.

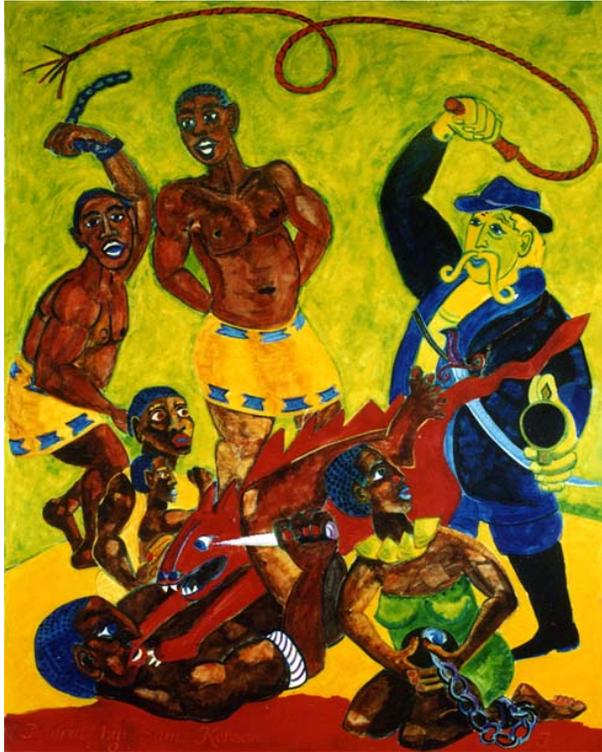
Before 1850, between 8.5 and 10 million people were captured in Africa and transported to the United States or the Caribbean basin as slaves. That is, white men who needed labor to profit from their investments in the Americas sent others to buy or capture or kidnap Africans from their homes in Africa and transport them to the USA. Once arrived these African men and women, who survived the ordeal, were sold in markets, for money, as slaves who were bound to their new owners for life and for generations. These markets were wide spread and we suppose they were in New York and Rhode Island and Boston as well as various obvious places in the south. Once the slaves were owned by individual white men they were put to work. Jefferson Davis, for example, in 1860 owned one hundred and sixteen slaves. The slaves were often brutalized and used as if they were animals. Some would say animals were treated better than slaves.

*As Nicole Hannah Jones, the Pulitzer Prize winner tweeted on Sunday "If chattel slavery – heritable, generational, permanent, race-based slavery, where it was legal to rape, torture, and sell human beings for profit – were a 'necessary evil' as Tom Cotton says, it's hard to imagine what cannot be justified if it is a means to an end".*

The first part of our mural, *The Underground Railroad, Vermont and the Fugitive Slave*, attempts to cover these crimes in three large images.

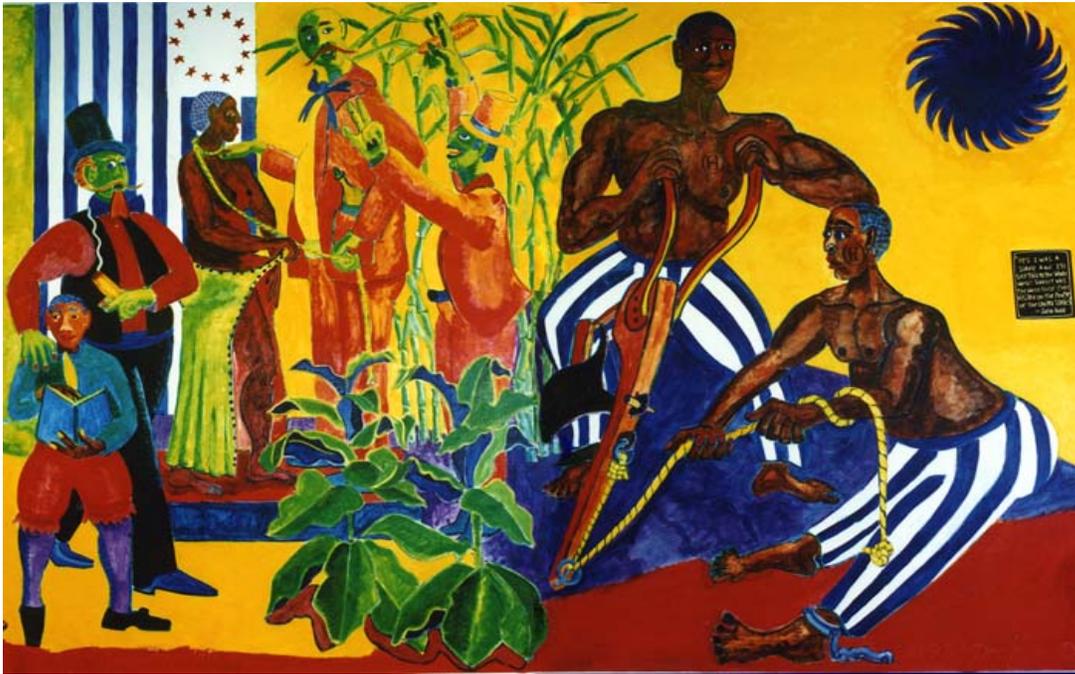
First, the capture of human beings in their own land and their shipment to another continent.

This was a brutal and bloody process as people understandably and valiantly resisted. Terror was used to intimidate these Africans and killing the captive was standard procedure. Less than half of the captives were likely to reach the destination their captors intended for them. You can see that this is a criminal activity in every sense of the word, crimes against humanity, and crimes against nature.



Also, at least from the boarding of the ships on the African coast, it would be crimes of white men against black people. Our image intends to depict the Africans fighting back. Perhaps you have noted the green shade of the skin of the white man. With this colouration we intended to suggest that these men were motivated by the profit motive they were coloured by their lust for the green back. It is also true that the colouring of these figures refers to Diego Rivera's portrait of Cortez as a degenerate pervert. This well-known portrait of Cortez can be seen in the National Palace in Mexico city.

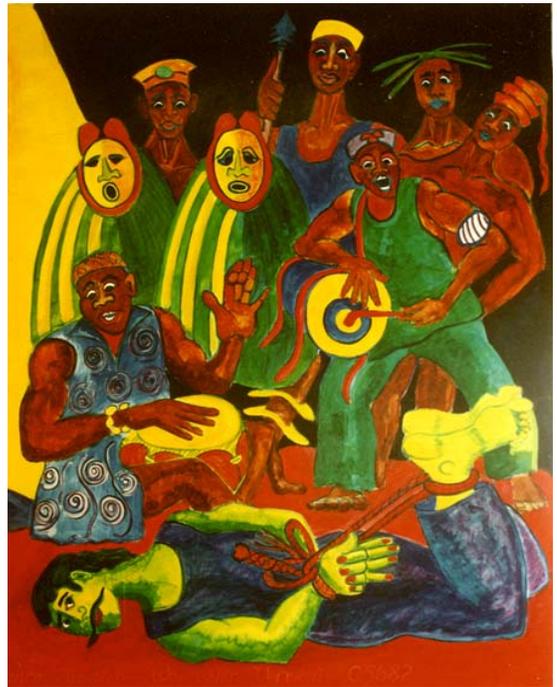
Next we attempt to show the selling of human beings in slave markets where they are, brutalized, humiliated, treated as livestock and exchanged for small amounts of money. Their lives to be determined by their new "owners". In our image we display the colonial flag to capture the role of the United States in permitting and sanctioning these markets. We depict the perversity of the seller and the buyers. The humiliation of the African woman stripped and prodded in a twisted attempt to determine her "value" is the central image. Further this representation of the slave markets mentions the generational quality of the exchange, because black and white children were effected by watching such a criminal activity. Children were exploited and used in the process, in one way or another they were implicated.



Next our mural moves to the work the Africans, once enslaved, were put too. We focus on the idea that slaves were cheaper than animals and that two slaves could be used to plow a field in the place of an oxen. Was such a thing possible? Perhaps, if the foreman was violent enough and the slaves believed their lives depended on their doing the impossible work they were assigned. Violence toward Black people by white people was common and is spoken of in all the journals and descriptions of the experience of slavery. There is no denying it, this country was built with the blood and muscle of African slaves. All of these elements are totally illegal and forbidden and crimes against humanity.

We hoped to lead the viewers of our mural to see all of these implications in the three images at the beginning of the series. The images are large and brilliant and unremitting in their intention to expose the violence of the whites and the courage and resistance of the blacks.

The fourth panel is a bit more psychological. Here we contend that the white nation was terrified of the black, and lived with nightmares of insurrection. For this reason the African culture was suppressed; drums and costumes were forbidden. You can imagine the old languages were suppressed too, we hear it today, 'speak English if you want to live in this country.' So we chose to depict a restoration of African culture in America. These costumes represent the village gods Pondo Raku and Goll, from a Baule Village on the Ivory Coast.



This whole panel owes a debt of gratitude to the French musicologist Francis Bebey and his book full of photos, *African Music, a People's Art*. We wanted to show that the Africans were empowered by their village gods and their ancient cultures and their mighty drums.

All of which is evident even today. Insurrection of the Black population is still a terror which whites carry in their primitive brains. George Floyd is an example and we all understand this. The strange over arming of the city police is an aspect of this same recurring nightmare. All of us who have lived in this country understand black white violence; its murderousness if we are black its complexity if we are white.

This image of Insurrection raises the question. Who is asking for this mural to be erased?

When the series of images leads to the insurrection and domination of the white man with his own bull-whip? Who is it that asks for this image to be erased? Who is it that does not want the image of Insurrection on the walls of the law school? And who is it that chooses to throw paint on the mural as if they were vandals destroying the cultural heritage of the people they are oppressing. One party wants the *Underground Railroad, Vermont and the Fugitive Slave* destroyed, and the other wants to cover it with paint? The black man who believes insurrection is necessary wants the image of Insurrection at the Law School destroyed. While the trustees of the Vermont Law School publish in the local papers their intention to cover the *Underground Railroad, Vermont and the Fugitive Slave* with White paint.

What a marvelous knot. What school of higher education would not want such a provocative piece of art on their walls?

The Law school must be ready to discuss the issues in these images because they are legal issues as well as moral issues and slavery still exists in the world today. People are enslaved today, many people. The role of the law school in a world like this is to talk about the issues, explain the realities, study what is going on and help the students prepare for a tumultuous world where race and violence still exist.

It is because the law school, concept, contains all of these issues and the natural tendency and desire to discuss our world and to affect our world that the mural was painted at VSL in the first place.

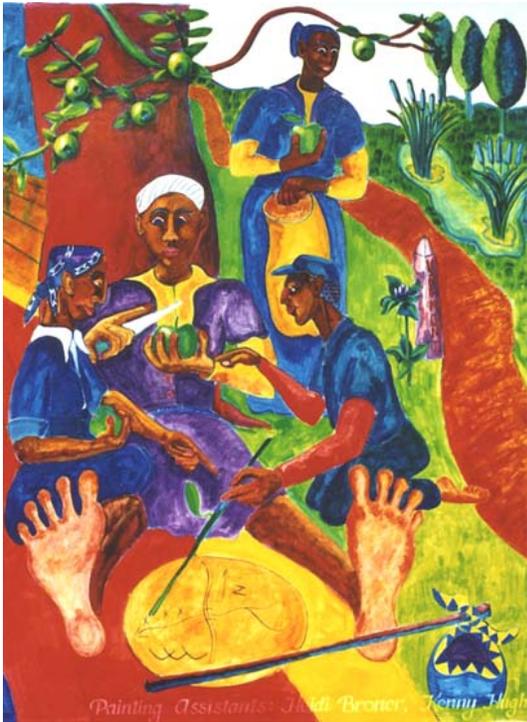
But since the mural, *The Underground Railroad, Vermont and the Fugitive Slave* has been there at the law school for more than 25 years, it has also become a cultural heritage object. Our mural is an expression of Vermont, Vermont culture and Vermont's heritage. To understand this aspect better we must go on to the second part of the mural, about abolition, which I remind you is also eight feet high and 24 feet long.





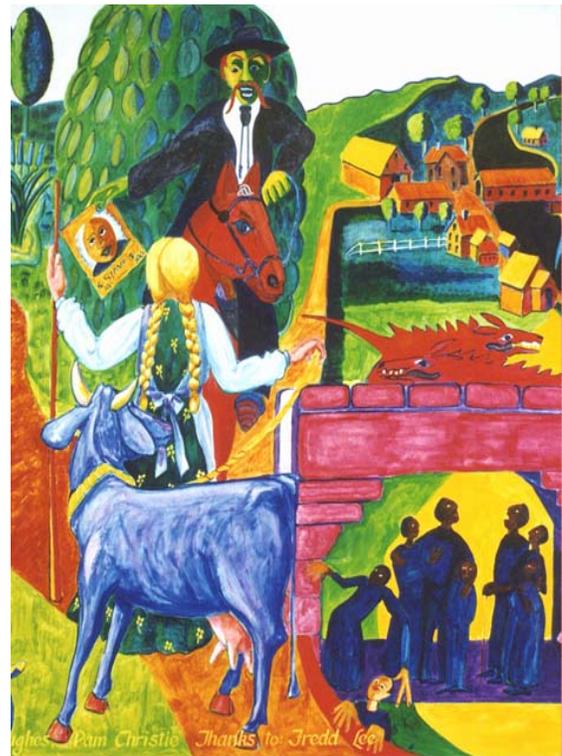
In the first panel we see, John Brown receiving a message from God, telling him to arm his five sons and attack the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. People fought over slavery in Kansas and here in Vermont too. John Brown lived just across the lake in the Adirondacks, he was a neighbor to the Vermonters of his time. In the same panel we see an image of Frederick Douglass the fiery spokesman of abolition who took every opportunity to speak for the liberation of Black people enslaved in these United States, also a New Yorker as you must know. And below, Harriet Beecher Stowe whom Lincoln famously called, "the little woman who started the Civil War".

I ask you, who would want to cover the images of these important and outspoken Americans with white paint and why?

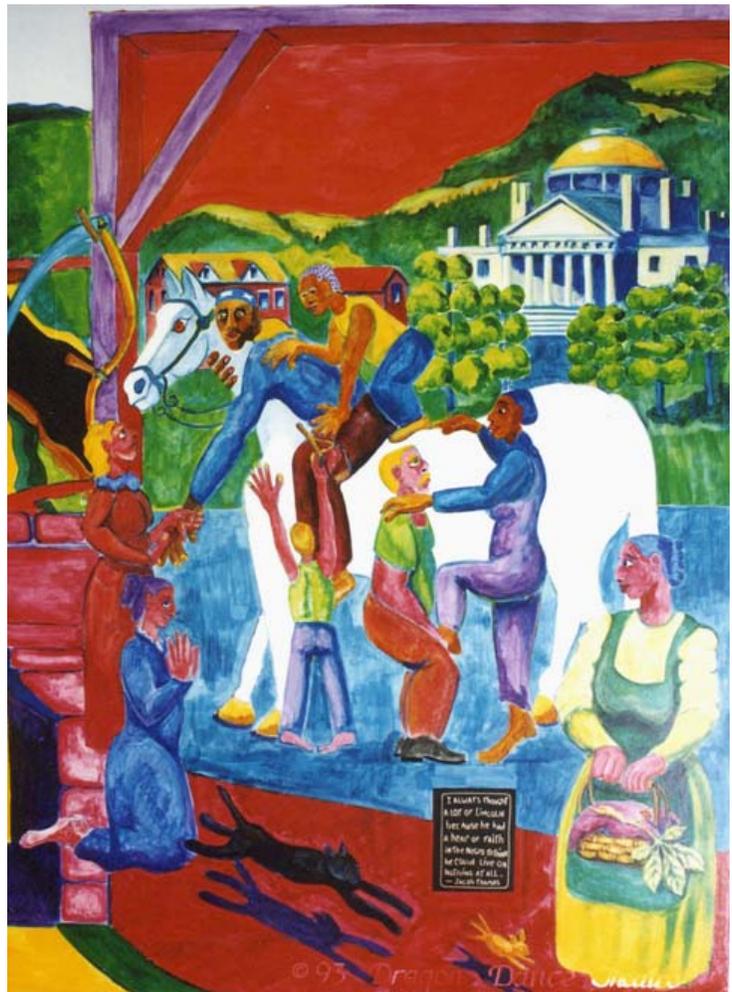


The second large image, six by eight feet, is of Harriet Tubman leading a small group of escape slaves north, as she did time and again. This image is dedicated to just that: Harriet Tubman, guiding escaped slaves to become freemen and women and children, in the State of Vermont, where she undoubtedly knew they would be protected by the Law. Vermont's constitution was the first in the US to forbid slavery and on, "November 1850, the Vermont legislature passed the Habeas Corpus Law, requiring Vermont judicial and law enforcement officials to assist captured fugitive slaves." This quote is from Wikipedia, but surely known to all the VLS community. This mural is about Historical Vermont Laws, that is why it is at the Vermont Law School. Incidentally Vermont apples and blue gentian are also celebrated in this image.

The third large image on this side, is about state's rights. Here is a bounty hunter showing a wanted poster, for a "Fugitive Slave". While the Vermont woman uses her milk-cow to hide the freemen under the bridge. We see those red dogs again from the first panel when the men who intended to use humans for profit used huge dogs to battle with the people they intended to enslave. In the back ground we see the village of South Royalton taken from a photo of about 1860. Quite a fine painting in itself. Full of legal questions; Whose rights? State's rights? Human rights?



Finally on this side, at this end of the series of eight large painted images, we see The Vermont state house before it burned down in January 1857. In this image, again six by eight feet, we see the refugees mounted on a white horse preparing to ride off to Canada. The Vermonters are providing the travellers with gifts, advice, food and herbs. The herb in this image is Ginseng. The Vermont boy is giving his friend a sling shot, and the whole image is bracketed by two kinds of law; the Vermont State Legislature above and the cat and mouse rule of the wild below. This painting is perhaps the most beautiful of the series, Heidi Bronner painted all of the backgrounds; the State House and the fields on the hills above, while Sam Kerson painted the horse and the figures in the foreground. This image was created by two of Vermont's most important contemporary painters.



We understand that if a person from Guernica in Spain saw Picasso's great mural, that person might be distressed, perhaps brought to tears and could feel the oppression of the violence that they and their family suffered at the hands of the Nazi bombers. But is that a reason to paint out the historical monument the artist made to their suffering? Or, to whose advantage might it be to throw paint over the warning that the artist gave the rest of us a generation after Guernica? If they were still alive, it is easy to imagine the people being humiliated and murdered by the French troops in Madrid might be hurt by the images that Goya made of their suffering. But is that any reason to prevent the rest of us more than a century later from seeing Goya's statements about that historical moment. We need to know what the Invaders were capable of and how crazy the invaded became and how much everyone suffered. *Tres de Mayo*, Francisco Goya. Carefully preserved in the Prado.

Save the *Underground Railroad, Vermont and the Fugitive Slave*, it is our culture, all of our culture, and no one has the right to destroy it.

Subjective views of the art rendered in the form of a mural will change with every viewer. But the mural as an object will stay in its present form for many years.

The people who are objecting to the mural suggest that a black painter might come to VLS and paint a black person's version of this history. Nothing like that has ever happened at VLS or in Vermont and dollars to donuts it never will. The smart thing to do would be to recognize the value of the bird we have in hand and protect it.

