

ON THE COVER

Island Sovereign by Theodore Walker Robinson

Portions of the following are based on an exchange of written interview questions and answers with the artist on September 9, 12, and 13, 2022.

Our December cover selection demonstrates how a title can affect the perception of an artwork and then affect it again when the artist provides context. At first glance, *Island Sovereign* looks like a large stained canvas in the American color field and abstract expressionist traditions. And in some ways, it is. The painting is all washed out blues and grays above an insertion of darker gray and black. The cool and neutral colors return in the lower corner. But then consider the title. Why “island,” and why “sovereign?” Perhaps those thin blues and grays are hints of a sky-colored sea. The black in the lower left, boiling up like a cloud of ink, might mark some landing place in memory or imagination. Can pictures have moods? If so, some of us might feel that the image has a sombre quality, others might find it tranquil. Back to the title, “sovereign” means power and authority over people and places. How does that fit—if fitting was intended? This is the kind of questioning and guesswork that many artists delight in provoking.

Island Sovereign is one of a series of mixed media paintings called *Ocean Voices*. Originally, they were presented in combination with sights, sounds, and words that evoked the landscapes and seascapes of Black histories and migration stories. Robinson describes the series as “meditations on canvas” and “a reflective inquiry into the subject of Afro-Caribbean and Black ancestral relationships to water.” Why water? Because the oceans are water. And oceans were highways of grief for Africans, consuming and transporting millions into slavery in the Americas. But later, the same water offered escape routes and avenues of hope and potential, helping to send survivors and their descendants to new homes throughout the world. *Island Sovereign* is Robinson’s reflection on one of those histories, the Caribbean independence movement that arose as islands sought freedom from colonial rule and influence.

Now consider the person who created the image. Robinson is Black and transgender, a first-generation Canadian with Caribbean immigrant parents, born with 10% vision and 50% hearing. These are the roots and realities of someone who has learned to turn mountains into stepping stones. Creativity in many forms, including drawing and painting, but also music and performing arts, was encouraged in childhood and adolescence. Graduate degrees in religion and modernity and

biblical studies followed. Along the way, politics and the many facets of social exclusion and activism worked their way into Robinson’s life and artistic vision.

The artists that have inspired this vision are from underrepresented communities. They are Black, Indigenous, people of color, those with disabilities and queer. Artists like Syrus Marcus Ware, Ravyn Wngz, “Courage” Bacchus, and Oluseye Ogunlesi. Their influence, however, has been less in terms of media preferences and technique and more in terms of subject matter. All express strong social and ecological messages in their art and a commitment to political engagement and change. Ware’s work, for example, ranges from drawn portraits of activists to videos, performance pieces, and installations. He transformed a subway newsstand into a microprison to memorialize the incarceration of Black revolutionaries. Ravyn Wngz is a storyteller and member of Black Lives Matter. Bacchus, a deaf former Olympic sprinter, is an actor and performance artist who focuses on conveying the experience of Blackness and disability. Ogunlesi collects “diasporic debris,” which is material discarded in travels back and forth across the Atlantic. Almost anything may be included, from synthetic hair and bamboo earrings to old farm implements and tire parts. These “found” objects are reimagined and cast into installations and sculptures to explore Black migration identities. It is this amalgam of art, social comment, adversity, and politics, especially the struggle for justice in an unjust world, that galvanizes Robinson’s own creativity.

Disabilities create impediments to certain avenues of artistic expression. But they can facilitate others and spur new possibilities. Robinson uses a cane to apply acrylic paint, inks, and washes to canvas. A roller ball is attached to the cane’s end to hold and spread pigment across the canvas, which is laid out on the floor. The attachment also provides a sense of touch and contact with the painting surface. It is a technique that lends itself to sweeping flows of form and color. Ironically, the cane is a device that symbolizes disability, used to support and negotiate a way through the visual world. In Robinson’s hands, it has become an instrument of art-making and provides an unconventional artist with an unconventional way of painting. This month *American Psychologist* is pleased to provide a place for the result.

 R. Walter Heinrichs
Art Editor