

ON THE COVER

Provenance by Lyle Rushing

Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on February 16, 2024.

In these times of concern over artificial intelligence, fabrication, and authenticity, it is apt to place an artwork entitled *Provenance* on the cover. The word refers to the origin, source, or history of ownership of something valuable. It could be a painting, piece of antique furniture, or sculpture but also a work of literature. The term is not used in relation to ideas or people, although they too have origins and histories. So what did Lyle Rushing have in mind by giving these blue and red swirls and eddies a name like *Provenance*?

It was the idea of a source point or beginning, the origin of something new that inspired our cover artist this month. He felt that embarking on the unfamiliar unfolds a process that “allows beauty to come through” and the painting embodies this sensibility. Note the small heart encircled in pink, floating up on the left side. Rushing suggested the image was “speaking love into existence” in visual terms. To achieve these effects, he used acrylic and metallic paints as well as resins that could be poured onto flat canvas. He then directed and mixed the different streams by tilting the surface first one way and then another until the desired design was achieved.

Abstractions like *Provenance* are perhaps surprising to find in an artist without formal training, born in a rural community in North Carolina during the early 1960s. His father worked five acres of land surrounded by relatives who did the same. Isolated from the outside world but affected by its events, Rushing found himself the only Black student in primary school. The previously segregated South was slowly giving way but for him, it meant abusive and hurtful experiences. Years later, with remarkable generosity, he organized a reunion for members of his second-grade class. He jokingly asked them to find him in the bank of white faces that filled the class photo and posted a description of what those days had been like for him. His old classmates replied with humorous remarks and avowals of innocence but no expressions of regret or requests for forgiveness. This and other similar experiences were to echo later in his art.

Rushing drew with pencil and paper in his early years, but art and becoming an artist were foreign concepts in his community. He recalls entering a drawing competition advertised in a magazine and receiving a telephone call that attempted to recruit him to an art school in Ohio. His mother gave a firm “no,” and he was not disappointed or angry. The possibility of such an opportunity had never entered his imagination. He went on to university but majored in math, not fine art, and then joined the Navy to find that he disliked following orders. Rushing worked for a stockbroker doing payroll for 34 years after moving to Los Angeles, discovering the climate and the city to his liking. He retired recently to focus on painting. Seeing himself as a professional artist and navigating the world of galleries has been a challenge but one he is surmounting with increasing success.

Provenance contains only a hint at representation but it would be a mistake to think that abstraction is typical of his art. Rushing has used the human form extensively, especially male figures, in many of his paintings. He likes depicting men in vulnerable states, men by themselves, perhaps in a room, hidden from others. At the same time, he has again started doing abstract pieces and is content to follow wherever the creative path leads. Lack of formal art schooling meant less exposure to the great painters of the past. The first artist that really made him “think” was Charles White, whose images of the Black experience in America were arresting. Rushing says he is “not that influenced” by other artists and tends to produce work based on what he has experienced in his life. He paints what he is, a Black man in America.

At the beginning, it was noted that the term “provenance” applies to objects and property, but not to people. Given this month’s issue theme, however, history reminds us that humans have been defined as property in the past, their origins but not names listed, a kind of perverse provenance. It will require empathy and courage greater than what was shown by Rushing’s classmates to “speak love into existence” and dismantle this legacy.

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Art Editor