

Backstory: Master of found treasures

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STORYTELLER IN MANY MEDIA:

Ashley Bryan, posing with one of his oil paintings, illustrated more than 30 children's books.

BILL MCGINNESS

LITTLE CRANBERRY ISLAND, MAINE - If I hadn't driven five hours up the Maine coast, hopped the Cranberry Cove ferry from Acadia National Park, and landed at a lobster fishermen's dock three miles out to sea, it would have been easy to forget Ashley Bryan lives on a remote outpost.

Here, the award-winning creator of more than 30 children's books greets a seemingly nonstop parade of neighbors, relatives, and young fans with grandfatherly hugs and exclamations.

His sister, Elaine, and niece, Kanika, have made their annual pilgrimage from Connecticut to declutter their beloved relative's bursting collection of found art objects. From the rocky Maine shore, he has gathered more driftwood for his acclaimed handmade puppets and more sea-glass for his stained-glass windows. From legions of fans have come more toys for his global collection of dolls, whirligigs, and miniatures.

The shelves, burgeoning with the detritus of creativity, seem as resistant to categorization as their owner is: a master artist in a range of media from painting to printing to storytelling. Since childhood, his ability to see beauty in the every day has enriched his life. "We were always making things," he says of his days growing up in a New York City tenement with five siblings.

Like the lithe, energetic octogenarian himself, his multifaceted expressions aren't easily contained in a cottage or one-line career definition. But all of it - his entire body of work in children's illustration, encompassing styles from Japanese brush stroke to cut-paper collage - was honored as the US nominee of this year's prestigious, international Hans Christian Anderson Award.

When Bryan describes the lifeforce that is his art, it's clear it is also his catharsis. He explains painting on this wind-swept island: "The outer weather never bothers me. It's my inner weather I'm focused on. I'm lucky I've always had art to deal with that."

Indeed, Bryan has had plenty of “outer weather” to shelter from. He was born to an Antiguan immigrant family during the Depression, when money was scarce and segregation was still a way of life. His father was a greeting-card designer, his mother a homemaker and seamstress. Bryan pays homage to his mother in his book, “Beautiful Blackbird,” winner of the 2005 Coretta Scott King award. It is full of gloriously colored bird collages cut with his mother’s own sewing scissors.

His habit of finding art in the everyday began in kindergarten when he designed and bound his own A,B,C, book. As he grew, he scoured libraries and museums for African art. “A black child always has to reach for what is their culture. It’s not part of the schools... I had the interest to reach for it.”

Searching for beauty in his Bronx neighborhood, Bryan discovered St. John’s Lutheran Evangelical Church. “One day, we three oldest asked our mother if we could go to the beautiful church with the bells. She said yes, and the next Sunday we enrolled in Sunday school.” They became the first African-American members of the church and developed friendships that Bryan says are still among his closest. When the church was partially destroyed by fire 12 years ago, he was asked to design a new window portraying the Ascension. He agreed immediately. “Church was always about getting the work done that needed to be done in the community... We rolled up our sleeves. We worked for the street - whatever was happening there.” He designed a “black Christ rising.”

Denied a scholarship to art school because of his race, Bryan persevered, applying to a second school by submitting his portfolio without an interview, to become Cooper Union’s first African-American graduate.

During the most painful chapter of his young adult life - as a member of a segregated Army battalion during World War II - he carried a drawing pad in his gas mask as an outlet during the “downtimes.” He doesn’t dwell on this experience, saying only that his port battalion was at Omaha Beach in the Normandy invasion.



RESOURCEFUL: Bryan makes puppets, such as this one on display at the Milwaukee Art Museum, out of items found on his island beach.
JOHN KEHE - STAFF

He returned home to complete his art degree at Cooper Union and a philosophy degree at Columbia - ultimately deciding on art as a full-time career.

On Maine's craggy coast, he found what he had relentlessly searched for growing up in the city - "a view with no buildings." His first visit was on an art scholarship from Cooper Union in 1946. He returned every summer, settling permanently here upon his retirement from the Dartmouth College Art Department in 1988. Here, he says, he can reach "the center of stillness" required for authentic creativity more easily than in New York.

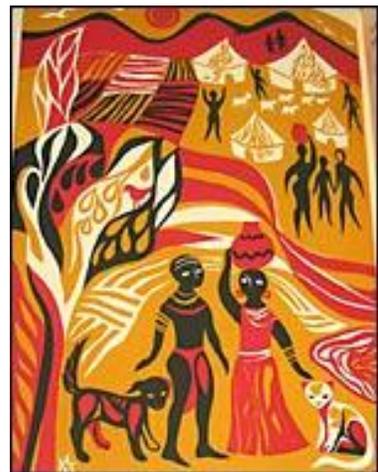
The fact that the lone African-American among Little Cranberry's 90 year-round residents is the island's most beloved figure speaks to Bryan's other driving motivation and talent: his ability to connect with people. Some people who've lived here for 30 years are still referred to as "from away," he laughs, quietly adding, "I was never from away."

Bryan says that "it is a similar community to the one I grew up in - a five-story tenement in the Bronx. Everyone knew everyone. We all helped each other. When the elderly lady upstairs became ill, my family did everything for her. It was a circle of hands - just like on the island."

Here, his "open door policy" brings a parade of visitors into his work world. "I never look at people as an interruption," he says. This is all the more remarkable because his schedule of elementary school visits, conference appearances, and global outreach trips is a jigsaw puzzle only his publisher can piece together.

The ability of art to open doors and forge connections is the basis for Bryan's packed schedule. He can coax meaning from the tiniest syllable, and his melodious recounting - with animated antics - of African tales and African-American poetry is strong demand with audiences of all ages. But it's more than speaking style that prompts children to throng him after his talks, he says. "It's outreach. They are listening for your openness to who they are."

Bryan is anxious to explain his sea-glass window before the sun sinks too low. Late afternoon light is refracted through brilliantly colored scenes from the New Testament. Modeled after the Gothic windows Bryan studied in Europe and admired in his Bronx church, each window is intricately crafted from his sea-glass collection, gathered during 40 years of beach walks. A golden Jesus floats on an ocean of blue bottle remnants smoothed by the seas. But it's the center panel of the crucifixion with its shimmering crown of thorns that inevitably fixes one's gaze.



ARTIST'S SHOWCASE: An Ashley Bryan painting on display at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

JOHN KEHE - STAFF

"I have always loved the play of light through glass," says Bryan. It's evident in the vivid geometric backgrounds of his award-winning collections of spirituals for children - the fifth of which will be released in January. "Let it Shine" features three of his favorite spirituals: "This Little Light of Mine," "When the Saints Go Marching In," and "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," illustrated in cut-paper collages.

Bryan speaks passionately about the tradition of African-American spirituals: "Spirituals are at the center of everything creative in black life. They're at the heart of it all. That under such oppression people could create such art from the mind - the only resource available to them - is staggering.... Just to hear it is to feel one's spirits lifting. You want to share the highest reaches - the gift - of a civilization to children. This is the pinnacle of the artistic achievement of a people."

As evening sets in, Elaine is still attempting to bring order to the cottage's cozy clutter. She sorts containers of mustards, jams, and seasonings left by a year's worth of visitors while her daughter folds a stack of gift bags on the floor.

"Take as many as you want!" the master of found treasures urges his niece. "They'll make fine Christmas wrapping." As always, his perception of beauty in the every day and his determination to share it are irresistible.