The Mary L. Fifield Art Gallery presents

Deta Galloway
Ragged Sanctuary
Black Lives Matter, COVID-19 and the Art of Hopeful Transcendence

Bunker Hill Community College
Deta Galloway
Ragged Sanctuary
Black Lives Matter, COVID-19 and the Art of Hopeful Transcendence

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Bunker Hill Community College, Boston, Massachusetts
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Deta Galloway is a multi-media and multi-genre Boston-based artist who produces paintings, poems, and music that reflect her experience growing up in Jamaica, her work as a nurse and a healer, and her abiding faith in forces both seen and unseen.

“Ragged Sanctuary,” her first solo show at the Mary L. Fifield Art Gallery, features work that explores the darkness and trauma of the last two years while keeping an eye on the mythical strength and supernatural powers that surround us. “These are the forces that can help us. And you must become familiar with them and know that they will help us,” she says.

Many of Deta’s paintings are like portals -- whole histories and narratives -- and a form of visual storytelling and spiritual exploration. Given the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic and other events, “Ragged Sanctuary” is positioned as a place for healing -- a place that, however battered and bruised and tattered, is a refuge and a home, as well as a place of power.

The show contained one of Deta’s shrines as well as multimedia presentations of her poetry and music. Her paintings reflect her recent evolution in incorporating iridescence as a medium -- something that helps capture what she calls “the shimmering inside me.” This technique, she says has helped her understand that helps capture what she calls “the shimmering inside me.”

As a trained nurse, Deta draws on wells of deep healing and spiritual exploration. Given the difficulties of the last two years and the trauma of recent years.

“Whenever someone like myself speaks, I feel as if I’m speaking in the name of those who may not have had a chance to say it like I can,” she says. She works in partnership with forces seen and unseen. For her art, “I want to invite everyone and everything that is alive -- trees, rocks, stones, animals of all kinds and subspecies of existence and the entire world, east, west, north and south to acknowledge the importance of our humanity.”

“Deta is a very complex individual and a very powerful artist and thinker,” says Dr. Lloyd Sheldon Johnson, BHCC Professor of Behavioral Science. She has, he says, a way of pulling a lot of different elements together, melding them into something that’s unique and different and then soliciting her audiences to share what they see in her work. “She has countless messages buried not only in her artwork, but also in her writing.”

Now a grandmother of seven, Deta continues to work as a nurse, to compose and perform music, and to paint at her studio in her sprawling Roxbury home.

“Deta is a long-term friend of the Art Gallery,” said Kevin Wery, BHCC Senior Director, Office of College Events and Cultural Planning. “She’s been in many shows. We did an installation of her spirit paintings in our Cultural Events and Cultural Planning. “She’s been in many shows. We did an installation of her spirit paintings in our cultural center to acknowledge the importance of our humanity.”

“All of Deta’s paintings are portals of her experience growing up in Jamaica, her work as a nurse and a healer, and her abiding faith in forces both seen and unseen. 

Her works are in the holdings of the Danforth Art Museum, the Etheridge Knight Archives of Martin University and the Northeastern University Archive, and have been collected by Kofi Kayiga, Taj Mahal, Arthur W. Clewes, Xavier Crenshaw, Edmund Barry Gaither and others. She has exhibited at the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, the National Museum of Senegal, Bunker Hill Community College, and the National Center for Afro-American Artists in Roxbury.

Deta Galloway was born in Kingston in the Jamaica West Indies. She emigrated to America at age eighteen with an American husband, who died suddenly, leaving her to raise their daughter. She is educated in professional nursing, human services and management, and specializes in behavioral nursing. She has lived and traveled in the U.S. South and lived for nearly two decades in Georgia before returning to the Boston area to reside.

Deta’s works have been featured nationally and internationally for nearly four decades, and she has been a warm and welcoming presence in previous BHCC exhibitions and events. Her live performances have been seen on festival stages, including the BBC.

“Whenever someone like myself speaks, I feel as if I’m speaking in the name of those who may not have had a chance to say it like I can,” she says. She works in partnership with forces seen and unseen. For her art, “I want to invite everyone and everything that is alive -- trees, rocks, stones, animals of all kinds and subspecies of existence and the entire world, east, west, north and south to acknowledge the importance of our humanity.”

Deta began writing poetry at thirteen and has been published in several anthologies and journals. As a young mother and nurse, she met Gwendolyn Brooks, one of the most highly regarded, influential, and widely read poets of 20th-century American poetry and the first Black author to win the Pulitzer Prize and read some of her poems. Brooks encouraged Deta to do more readings of her work and to find a way to do less medicine.

“So even though I continued working to educate my daughter and make sure that she had some opportunities that in some ways I missed because of the early death of my very supportive husband and the transition of my career from wanting to become a psychiatrist to nursing, I held on very strongly to the art, no matter what,” Deta says.

Her poems explore journeys, immigration, pandemics, and the strength of the natural world. She has been published in Stone Soup and other journals. A trip to Paris to attend the Bi-annual Conference of the Plastic Arts of the African Diaspora yielded an invitation to appear at the Sorbonne’s 100-year anniversary celebration of American poet Langston Hughes.

She has performed with poets such as Etheridge Knight, Josephine Miles, Galway Kinnell, M. S. Merwin, Hayden Carruth, Yusef K, Brother Blue, Tom O’Leary, Elizabeth McMKim and others. She has read her work for numerous radio stations including Radio Jamaica, (a subsidiary of the BBC).

While Brooks was Poet Laureate, she invited Deta to participate in an event at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. However, before she had a chance to read, Deta felt she had to return home to her nursing job and to take care of her daughter. Afterwards, Brooks called her and strongly encouraged Deta to keep writing and to find a way to do more poetry.

As a trained nurse, Deta draws on wells of deep healing from trauma for her paintings, poems and music.
A Conversation with Deta Galloway

On March 22, Deta Galloway, Kevin Wery and freelance writer Stephanie Schorow met by Zoom for a conversation about art, healing and the power of the spirit. Here are excerpts from their conversation, which have been edited for length and clarity.

Q: How did you begin as an artist?
A: A friend once asked me, where did you begin this? What happened? And of course, I first said I didn’t know. And then I started just going over the stories of childhood. And as I reflected, I realized that a number of things had occurred, and most of which was contextual in a cultural setting. Everybody did something. My mother sang, my biological father played incredible harmonica. And they told stories — they would save the scary ones for nights… And my mother often talked about this power, this supernatural power, this spiritual force and these dimensions of existence and so forth.

When I was about six, my cousin played beautiful banjo and sang. And he visited my mother a lot. And I would listen to the stories. And I would watch him play. It seemed effortless. And I said to myself, “I would like to do that someday.” And so one day I said, “I want a Banjo.” And he said, “Well, I’m going to England. Let me give you mine.” So I had this banjo, and I began to fiddle with it.

I always loved to draw. And when I was finishing up my fifth year in America, and I started to really draw and then (came to)… this idea of painting. But I was writing. I was still writing some poems, and I just kept a diary.

Q: Do you see your poetry and your paintings and your music as all one?
A: Yes, it’s coming out of one. People would say, “Well what are you going to call yourself?” I said, “I don’t want to call myself anything. I’m just that type of artist.” And then years later (a friend) and I were talking and I said, “Well how about if we put all of these things together, what would you call it?” He said, “These are different types of media. You have to identify yourself.” I said, “No, I’m a multimedia artist.”

Q: You also seem to combine healing with your artwork. How did that come about?
A: My mother was known as a midwife, a nontraditional midwife in Jamaica. I mean, she delivered, I would probably say, 1,000 babies, if not more. So my mother was in great demand. And so people came to see her also for prayers and for healing… And one thing that impressed on me was the results that people had from coming to her or from them having the communal discussion with her and then her using very simple rituals. I saw the power of water. I saw what light and water and the sound in the voice of my mother or other people praying or chanting (could do) in some other cases, go through a trance shift into another physical body. And as a child, that’s powerful. … I spoke to her about the power She said yes, you got the power too.

Q: Does this ever inform any of your paintings — that kind of ritual healing?
A: I do what I call the primordial paintings. — this idea of creating, using the symbols, for instance, making the land protective symbols. Sometimes they appear in the paintings, but they also are known to me and are often now used by myself as symbolic and votive places and spaces. It’s a physical and an emotional thing, but there’s in many cases a representational image, a mask or a piece of maybe a stone that you can touch and you can make it sacred. That enters into the work in terms of writing or painting. Also it’s combined often with what my mother used to call “the link” — praying over things. Sometimes when I feel this emotional surge of something and not always explainable, which I believe is a spiritual entrance of a spirit of medium or transferring a symbolic transference of my own self becoming inhabited by a higher call. I sometimes often would just put that brush down and I would just start to chant, moving into other places at home.

Q: Could you describe your artistic process?
A: When I paint, for me, it’s an extension of all the other things I’m doing. Like cooking. Sometimes the domesticity of painting informs the food and the domesticity of food, informs the painting. … Sometimes there’s a gradual flow going back to finish up an idea. And sometimes, though, when the emotions or the feeling of the call comes to create an image, it is a rush. It’s a rush to get whatever I can cast from the emotion of the image on paper or follow through the link of a story or something that impacted me from dreams. And I try to get down some of it or all of it or as much as I can later. The dreams may relink it into something else.

Q: Did you receive any formal training in painting?
A: Initially, I received no training. When I would talk about my work, they would always say to me, well, what school did you go to? And initially I was like, well, this is just what I do. I just like to do those things. I began to defend a particular understanding about me as an artist and about the possibility of the things that I do becoming alive on the page, but also giving me a sense of authority to explain a personal yet a collective sense of information about art in terms of what happens. As I got it in my mid-20s, I began to insist that the word was made whole, that the word is alive. I began to insist that a circle, the linking of lines, was leading into somewhere spiritual. It was exposure, experience, memory, recasting, and at the same time reclaiming, exhorting, and ultimately defending the magical. For me, training always seems secondary.

Q: What has your work evolved over time?
A: I think part of the area that I would want to talk about painting evolving for me has to do with its ability to bring people together spiritually. Sometimes I tell someone, “I make the pretty painting.” I think that using indiscence is an attraction; it did come from a dream, and it is a material that I use that is very helpful to me in capturing my shimmering. There’s a shimmering inside me that in spite of the traumatic years and in spite of being born and living through many wars, that I had this joy, this light inside me, that sometimes I feel like a painting or song is not going to be enough. I want something to show the light. And I found that using indiscence has helped me. So one part of me evolving as an artist is realizing that there are materials, there are spaces, and there are people and places that can help me to explain my story. It is a human story, and some say it’s complex, but it isn’t. It’s simple.

We worship by not only creating images on a page, which is very useful and important, but we’re worshiping within a space where we are actually called. We’re called to remind each other of our sacredness. We’re called to remind each other of our usefulness. We are called to remind each other of the collective power that we share when we trust and when we grow together, when we are patient enough to listen to the stories of others or to walk a little bit in their shoes, not necessarily a mile, but the ability to take on the empathetic understanding of one other person’s condition or listen to another artist’s journey. We are now mirroring and sharing in this symbiotic and individual and yet connected event that will move us into greater power spaces.

Q: I’m struck with how you can have a foot in the spirit world — although that’s not a good way to say it — and a foot in the nursing and science and modern medicine world.
A: I became an explainer and a defender and as time has gone and I have been able to receive the evidence of these ideas, this idea of the invisible versus the visibility, the idea of the known versus the unknown, the idea of the conscious becoming unconscious, the unconscious mixing with the known conscious, the recasting and the power that sends it back. I have been able to and to even demonstrate that dealing with the issues of divination, ritualization performance, and an extensive memory of how these two things come together. So I’m deeply interested in the ancient world. I’m interested in the artistic evidence of early people making symbols and signs and sounds and sometimes placing them on stone or jamming them into other aspects or creating an area in the world and naming it as sacred...

Q: But you are also interested in science.

A: Science has been able to assist us in understanding that when you traverse these various areas of being, we can use scientific methods. As (Stephen) Hawking said, we’re looking for the God answer. And so it became easier and easier for me to accept and to insist by telling others and showing that these two forces are intertwined, that one is an outcome of the other, and that not only do they coexist in that space, but in fact, as we move further and further into this unity of understanding, how we transform and the evidence of our spiritual and our physical being working together to make us better. Psychology, philosophy, science, and the practice of religion, the practice of animism and synchronicity in history and also the evidence of our lives that are still very much the two forces that are pushing at us.

Q: If you were to interview yourself, what would you ask yourself?

A: So if I were interviewing myself, I would say, Dear, how do you love? What is the meaning of this love? And what will it do for peace in the world? What will it do from your understanding and compassion and the patience of others? What would it do to quiet down this very noisy, aggressive, confusing quarrel that we’re having among ourselves as humans and point to them about the simplicity and the power of love, the easiness and the accessibility of it, and also reassure each and every person that if you seek, you should fight. This is the question that I would have. How we love, how we bring peace and cleanliness and how we bless the universe.
Dete
2021
Acrylic, metallic, cloth, iridescence on canvas
5x4ft

Covid Nation People #1
2019-2020
Acrylic, iridescence, semiprecious stones on canvas
30x40in
The Red Shango (from the Fire)
2022
Iridescence, acrylic on canvas
5x4ft

Xooni (Covid SARS 19 Protective Animal)
2020-2021
Iridescence, acrylic on canvas
5x4ft
Towards a New Season
(Landscape, Seascape)
2021
Acrylic wash, metallic, iridescence, cloth on canvas
5x4ft

Black Lives Matter #3. Homage to Michael Brown
2014
Acrylic, iridescence, paper on canvas
4x3ft
Black Lives Matter #4, The Feast
2019
Acrylic, iridescent metallic on paper
26x32in (24x18)

Black Lives Matter #6, City Walk
2018-2021
Acrylic, iridescence, paper on canvas
2x3ft
Black Lives Matter #9, The Lamb Tamir
2018-2021
Acrylic wash, metallic on paper
39x25in (21.5x18.5)

Covid Protection Symbol
2019-2022
Acrylic on canvas
4x3ft
Black Lives Matter #7, Tamir, Homage
2018
Acrylic, semiprecious stones, iridescence
4x2ft

Covid Nation People #2
2021-2022
Acrylic, iridescence, paper on canvas
30x40in
Black Lives Matter #8, Unison
2018
Acrylic, iridescence, paper on canvas
4x2ft

Black Lives Matter #0, Buxom People
2017
Acrylic wash, paper, iridescence on paper
22.5x35in
Covid Nation Children
2020
Acrylic wash on canvas
2x2ft

Black Lives Matter #10,
Maternal Elegance
2021
Acrylic wash, iridescence on poster by
1x2ft
COVID FLAG OF NATIONS
2022
Installation: canvas, wood, acrylic, paper and community graffiti
97x44x29in

DIVINATION SHRINE
2022
Wood, acrylic, iridescence, feathers and found objects
57x48x40in
“Ahhhh—wooooo
Woooo—ooooo”
(Repeat)

I. In the Beginning . . .

From the seas, from the imaginings
And the emergence of life
We begin into the cosmic world
And from that light,
The breath transforms and encircles,
Reveals a multiplicity of our births.

Breathe.

Breath is the sound,
Breath is the beating heart
And the calling of the cosmology
Of the natural world,
From the pantheons of supernatural linings
Of the natural sea of Being
Comes
The living, living, living, living breath.

II. Zoonotic Winds

Zoonotic wind, zoonotic wind of paradise
A sin of the bride and the bridegroom
Zoonotic sound of the “Ah-oooooooo”
The sound of the spheres of the earth
Her crevices and canyons,
His time in the melting fire
That leaps into transience,
To the decrying of the light

III. COVID Conquering

Once upon a time . . .

Then a coming of the spirometers
The parasitical, the bacterial
Into the magical body
Of our preternatural Being
Here goes flesh and bone,

Where we take flight,
Expelled into breath.

Breathe.

Zoonotic wind, zoonotic seasons
From the dark wings of pterodactyls,
To terraform seasons
Tides of fire, blood in the wind
The breath rises, and flows
From sound into time
A fragile, humble-jumble of earth
A ringing circle of reptilian song,
To moving exhalation,
A bearing of the morsels
Of human breath that flies
Into mammalian cockles,
Into rich mammalian chambers
Of righteous song.

Breathe.

Hear now, the arboreal forest,
From deep igloo permafrost
Of breath, breathe, breath
Melting into the origins of seas,
The granite fiction of Evolution
Again, the pterodactyl wings of zoonotic power
Power that lifts, power that girds us
Power that moves us, and sets us
Free to

Breathe.

III. COVID Conquering

Once upon a time . . .

Then a coming of the spirometers
The parasitical, the bacterial
Into the magical body
Of our preternatural Being
Here goes flesh and bone,
The songs of life renewing
Flung into the fields
Near the virgin wood
Oblivion runs in the pathway
Of a living, livid sea.

Here comes rising
To fossil footsteps,
Our humanistic sapience:
We are fully, fully, fully alive!
Stood up on two legs
With Epsilon and Delta
Here comes Omicron,
Here comes the retrospectives
The retro-viral COVID,
Old SARS and cold scars
Here comes the criticality of the dance
Between a life and its last breath,
Cyclical turning and callings in the blood
The dark winds of death,
Rising and falling
Living and palling
On the verandas of our understanding,
On the landing of our lungs
Squeezing from the breath
Its last song.

Here comes the singing,
Here comes the sighing
Of our breaths
“Ah—ooooooo
Oooooo-ooooo” (echoes)

Then a flat-line of sound,
Then the whisper of some wings,
Then a crying in the hall.

IV. A Mourning Canto

Lament for the pale moon
Rising waxen and alone
A pale wound endeavors its sleep

Gathering strength
In the wisdom of seeds,
In the fever of the dream
All through a causeless night
Through an awakening, sun-beveled dawn

Life, live, life
The red earth now emergent
Full of headwind and flowers
A bloom of many a noon
A beckoning of souls, moribund
8.2 billion Beings in the Rapture
Marching through time,
Footsteps in unmarked history
Of our interrupted landscapes,
Escaping no catapult of breath.

Here we are,
Bold and betrothed
Immigrants of influence
Revelation in a pity of light,
A persistence of duty
A grieving in the song
Life persisting these grievances
Of oligarchs and cannibals,
An influenza of travails
Manifestation in the infestation
Transparency gone, going, gone
A harrowing of Winter Songs
A sighing of the light
Seasons flourish and then resign
Spring fluorescence, children crying
A breath born among the parting
Of wind from rain,
Of life from limb,
Of limb from sorrow
And then only distances,
Stones that remain
Demanding life, living, life
For what Death has torn down
Tickertape for the terrorists,
Sweeping for the soul,
Windswept for a dirty dawn.

V. Remembering Our Dead

The song of the beautiful,
The songs of emerging mirth
Fossils of shimmering noise
Poised in the light of the day
Soft bone that condemns its flesh
Vanishing in a whirl of light,
Turgid healing from wrongs
Those trepid but rising still
Born in a forlorn metropolis
Cosmopolitan and ordained
A city amused and abashed
Teaming bands of uproar,
Streaming throngs of the masses
That sing a magnificent ode
Demanding justice for the shackles
Comfort from the knee,
To feel the threat of the fire
And the never-ending desire
To be free, free, free . . .

"Om-Ha, Ha, Ha—Om"

Breath overcomes a distillery of memory,
Remembering the luxuries of the body
Carried out of the womb,
Obscured in the passage,
Made visible in the void
A lure for the lurid
A cure for the cause,
The cause of the cure
Nocturnes for the heroes,
A surplice for the afterbirth
A sluice for the dying,
Sugar for the stone.

VI. Epitaph for the Poet

The Poet is the speaker
And the interpreter of dreams
The Poet insists on the uncanny
An extension of wild voices,
Listening while proclaiming
The tombstones of children
Buried in the schoolyard.

From a childhood of memories,
Remember no more!
That existential brevity of loss,
That bruising of the unforgiven,
As the Poet confesses
An evensong of mourning,
Singing all through the winter,
Through the interments of spring
Reaping the harvests in summer
And at the first feast of snow;
A weeping off the chin.

Could the dead arise?
A conveyance of souls the Poet shucks
Evidence of being beyond all seasons,
Seen but unseen,
A persistence of self-discovery
Moving, marching into the void
Where words beget sounds,
Where sounds and words give
A little paradise of rhyme
Just a murmur on the lips,
Just a moment of the sublime.
SPEAKING THROUGH ART
PRESENTATION: Art and Resilience

ELL 110 – Resilience (Multi-Level ELL)

In this activity, you will practice your speaking and critical thinking skills by giving a 3-5 minute oral presentation in front of your classmates. Find a piece of art that embodies resilience for you. The medium is open, which means that you can choose painting, music, dance, photography, an album, a photo of a cooking dish etc…. You will need to SHOW your chosen art in some form to your classmates.

Guiding Questions:
1. How does your chosen piece of artwork represent resilience to you? Use both evidence (supported observation) from the artwork itself AND your own personal experience. On the day of your presentation, explain why your chosen artwork represents resilience to you.
2. Use Supported Observation as defined by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. According to the Critical Thinking Skills Rubric, by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Supported Observation means that you make a “comment about the image/object that is grounded in evidence.”
   QUESTION: According to the evidence based on your supported observation, why does the artwork represent resilience?
3. After you explain your supporting evidence, make a personal connection to the artwork, explaining why YOU see it representing resilience.
   QUESTION: In terms of your own personal experience, why does the artwork represent resilience to you?

Jennifer Valdez
Professor and Chairperson
English Language Learning Department
Bunker Hill Community College
Deta Galloway’s epic mixed-media painting *Leaving Juárez* was featured in the 2020 exhibition *Things Left Unsaid: Women Artists Share Work about the Body, Memory and Pain* (February 18–June 19), and was gifted to BHCC by the artist and is now part of the College’s Teaching and Learning Collection.

In 2019, the artist was also featured in an engaging art and performance installation of transportation, transformation and healing at the Pao Arts Center, Boston—sponsored by the Mary L. Fifield Art Gallery. *Shango: My Heart is a Red Journey of Thunder and Light* (February 22–24), examined the migration of the river religions of Africa and diaspora of syncretic Yoruba beliefs through the many cultures and homelands of the Americas.

*Leaving Juárez*, Mixed Media Painting on Canvas, 2019

*Shango Unveiled*, Acrylic on Canvas with Iridescence, 2019

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