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Suspended: The Art of Paul Stopforth

Jonathan Shirland

“I have slowly suspended the narrative context of my search for meaning in favor of pictorial structures that emphasize the use of color...The importance of varied and complex figure/ground relationships suspended in fields of variegated color, constitute a search for beauty and mystery” (Paul Stopforth)

Suspended above the entrance to the Moakley auditorium are two artworks by internationally renowned artist Paul Stopforth donated to Bridgewater State University by Lawrence and Katherine Doherty in 2013. They are exemplary of Stopforth’s practice since he moved to the United States in 1988 in that they are technically daring pieces that sparkle with luminosity. If you crane your neck and look slowly, your eyes will become dazzled by the densely dotted surfaces, which allude to Xhosa, Zulu and Ndebele beadwork. These shimmering patterns infuse and harmonize the “fields of variegated color” and the “complex figure/ground relationships” that the artist identifies in the quotation at the start of this essay. But it is his repeated use of the term “suspended” in this section of his artist statement that inspires ways into a fuller appreciation of these paintings, and Stopforth’s practice more broadly. As well as meaning to hang above or from something, the term also denotes an indeterminate but imposed cessation, or a painful enforced debarring. In this sense, “suspended’ is achingly appropriate for an artist who has endured thirty years of exile from his home country. Stopforth left South Africa heartbreakingly close to the end of Apartheid, the terrible racist regime his activist art repeatedly condemned, most famously in his Death and Detention series. Works like Elegy for Steve Biko from 1981 (which depicts the charismatic leader of the Black Consciousness Movement on a mortuary tray after his death on 12 September 1977 from brain damage suffered during police detention) made Stopforth one of the most well-known “Resistance Artists.” They also made him a target. The difficult decision to settle in Boston with his wife Carol was taken only after many of his activist colleagues had been arrested and his close friend David Webster was assassinated on a Saturday morning having gone to buy groceries at a local supermarket. To be suspended is to be in an unresolved, indeterminate state; to be exiled often results in acutely experiencing a similar condition for perpetuity.

However, if we return to the first definition of being suspended – “hung above something” – the potential benefits of the exilic condition (what Edward Said called its “pleasures” in his essay, “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals”) come into focus. In this sense, being suspended offers the possibility of unique perspective, a special vantage point above the conventional, that connotes a kind of freedom from orthodox judgement and which can foster “appreciative sympathy” to use Said’s evocative phrase. For me, Stopforth’s practice is full of such sentiments—his outlook has become profoundly humane and optimistic despite the deprivations of displacement. As he remarked in 2010, life in America has made him more generous and open-minded. It also allows him to explore color and gestural mark-making for their own sake; under the constrictions of apartheid, such enjoyment felt like a betrayal of the struggle and its martyrs. Similarly, an interest in the traditional arts of Southern Africa is something Stopforth has only developed in exile, alongside his intense study of Buddhism and Hinduism, a critical armature of his search for healing after moving to Boston. His spiritual and intellectual explorations of a wide variety of world cultures have encoded a truly global perspective into his work. Perhaps exiles necessarily become adept at cultivating a syncretic bricolage in the pursuit of a sustainable suspended identity. Regardless, his works can guide Bridgewater’s mission to pursue a generous, enlightened policy of international engagement.
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Look at Alchemist, made in 1992 (fig.1). Centered on the stippled surface is a baboon skull interwoven with the outline of a pair of hands. The skull is a reference to the ancient Egyptian God Hapi, whose baboon head adorns the stopper on the canopic jar responsible for the preservation of the lungs. Hapi is the divine guardian of air, and of alchemical transfer from one state to another. This symbolism can be related to Stopforth’s testimony that moving to Boston provided space for him to breathe because, “America is big enough to provide people with the opportunities to live out their lives regardless of how they feel connected to, or are affiliated to, the countries that they were born in.” The hands interlaced with the skull are playing an invisible flute, perhaps the oldest and most widespread instrument in the world, able to transform breath into music. Its portability and ethereal sound make the flute an ideal medium for the musician as exile. The flute is associated in many cultures with the voice of the Gods; ancient Egyptians believed that Isis spoke through its notes. In
classical mythology, the flute is most strongly associated with Pan’s pining for the nymph Syrinx, whom the Gods turned into reeds to save her from his lustful pursuit. Despondent Pan binds some reeds together and blows through them in order to hear Syrinx’s voice again. But the most important allusion is to the Hindu God Krishna, whose flute playing can erase separateness and generate unconditional love. In classical Indian dance, there are a series of mudras that delineate flute-playing positions, and many poets have connected the holes in the instrument to the sorrows of the human heart. It is through suffering that the heart is made hollow; yet it is only through such hollowness that it can be transformed into a flute, an instrument for the God of love to play upon. Throughout Alchemist’s stippled ground are red outlines of lotus blossoms, another symbol of transformation, one of Buddhism’s central allusions to the progress of the soul. Despite the giant hands, minutely worked surface and complex symbolic allusions, Alchemist feels light and airy, suspended above the weight of human intransigence.

Next to Alchemist in the Moakley auditorium is Diviner (fig. 2).

Made on an unusual cut-out birch wood support, the crouching figure seems at once grounded and weightlessly suspended in the palms of the four wing-like hands around him. His stretched out right hand reiterates the axis of larger hands and is poised in the position of a diviner whether casting sacred nuts or bones, reading animal tracks on the ground, recording results of mystical numerology, or consulting an ancient text. It is also the hand gesture of the painter. Both professions can diagnose afflictions, decode seemingly random patterns, serve as repositories of memory and wisdom, and bring insight into the human condition.

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Hands are also prominent in *Malagasy Mourner*, also installed nearby in Moakley (fig.3).

The pink outline stretches across the panel and illuminates the rocky ground behind. This is one of Stopforth’s more enigmatic works, but the title provides a key to decoding its symbolism. The central motif of a figure astride a cow and holding its ear is derived from a finial on top of one of the dramatic wooden stelae made by the Mahafaly peoples of Southern Madagascar. These monumental sculptural posts, known as *aloalo*, are embedded in dense fields of arranged stones which serve as family tombs, into which bodily remains are interred. The term is derived from the word “alo” meaning “messenger,” indicating the importance of these sites for communication with ancestral spirits. Often skulls and horns of the distinctively humped zebo cattle that have been sacrificed during funeral ceremonies are incorporated into these structures, ensuring that they stand out dramatically from the surrounding scrubland alluded to in the background of Stopforth’s composition. The title of the work also gestures towards the funerary traditions of the Malagasy people of central Madagascar known as “Famadihana” or the “turning of the bones.” During these celebrations held every two to seven years, the remains

*“America is big enough to provide people with the opportunities to live out their lives regardless of how they feel connected to, or are affiliated to, the countries that they were born in.”*
of the deceased are exhumed, lovingly wrapped in new silk shrouds, anointed with perfume, and danced with in a form of family reunion, before an elaborate re-cleansing and re-burial. Reaffirming the link between the living and the dead, the practice is based on the belief that passage to the spirit world remains incomplete until the body decomposes completely, so Famadihana helps the process along. Grief is part of Malagasy mourning but so too is communal celebration and the two-day festivities blend a joyful affirmation of life with respectful honoring of the dead. During his time teaching at Harvard University, Stopforth used bones in innovative exercises that required students to complete one another’s drawings in a ritual of creative interdependency, so allusion to this Malagasy rite seems fitting. More pertinently, a ceremony aiding spiritual passage on one hand and leavening grief through transcendental familial reunion on the other has special resonance for the artist-exile.

The fourth Stopforth work donated by Lawrence and Katherine Doherty is located in the Welcome Center, a particularly appropriate location given the cumulative implications of its symbolism (fig. 4).

*Initiate* is a bas-relief made of sculpta-mold (a paper and wood adhesive compound) from 1994. Out of a densely dotted shimmering surface inspired by both African beadwork and Aboriginal Dreamtime paintings, a grid of hands and birds moves out into the viewer’s space, greeting the initiate as if at a threshold. The birds are oxpeckers, famous for their symbiotic relationship with rhinos, and are thus emblematic of reciprocally beneficial affiliation. Balanced on the larger animal’s back and serving as a natural alert system, oxpeckers also signify how to ‘ride through’ life by using one’s ‘voice’ for communal good. The hands reaching out towards the viewer suggest affirmative mudra gestures to channel the flow of bodily energy in pursuit of insight and healing. The circular markings are reminiscent of the concentric circles composing Aboriginal dreamtime paintings, but also evoke body paint and other cicatrization patterns traditionally used throughout Africa to mark rites of passage. They are embodied signs of new membership but also new responsibility accompanying a change in life status.

The Anderson Gallery held an exhibition of Stopforth’s paintings from August 27 to October 15, 2018, organized around the juxtaposition of one of the artist’s depictions of the breakwater in Provincetown with Trinity, perhaps the greatest work from his Robben Island series (fig. 5).

In 2003, Stopforth became the first artist-in-residence on the rocky outcrop off the coast of Cape Town, most famous as South Africa’s maximum...
security prison from 1961 until 1991, where Nelson Mandela spent 18 of the 27 years he was incarcerated. Three simple stools fashioned by the inmates in the prison workshop span the composition. They seem to float free yet remain suspended in each other’s orbit, like three martyred bodies hanging on adjacent crosses (the shapes of the “T” and “Y” behind evoking splayed body parts). Most importantly, the stools convey human companionship even in the incarceration of Robben Island, bringing together Nelson Mandela, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe and Govan Mbeki in a configuration reminiscent of an ‘amaphakhati,’ a meeting of elders able to resolve conflict through consensus borne of patient, dignified debate. They become a ‘Trinity,’ a mysterious union of personhood through relationship and community.

*Trinity* utilizes an extraordinarily varied, liquid ground behind the black lettering and stool motifs that stains the wooden support but also seems to break through the representational elements and erupts on the surface towards the edges of the composition. This is milk paint, a medium Stopforth stumbled across when staining wooden bookcases. Made from milk and lime, and sold in powder form, it can be clotted or smooth, opaquely textured or softly transparent, depending on the mixing with water. Milk paint is evocative of a range of traditional African artistic practices that use casein (the protein in milk) as a binding agent, and Stopforth often then works with charcoal through it. This is one of the techniques the artist has experimented with over recent years in pursuit of the “fields of variegated color” described in his artist statement. His intense engagement with the materiality of paint also bears reference to chemical and medical uses of the term “suspended”: the state of a substance when its particles are larger than colloidal size and are mixed with but remain undissolved in a fluid medium. It is an important reminder that for all of the complex symbolic content, Stopforth’s practice is forged through deeply considered technical daring. It is when these two forms of visual sophistication are brought together that his art succeeds in its “search for mystery and beauty.”

If we permit a slight etymological slippage borne of linguistic proximity, a final insight facilitated through pursuing the notion of “suspension” in Stopforth’s art is the excited, slightly agitated alertness brought about through the experience of “suspense.” His works can hold us in this indeterminate state of uncertain expectancy because of their mysterious yet alluring properties, hovering between abstraction and representation. They are dense with symbolic allusions that offer sudden bursts of insight but ultimately remain beyond formal resolution (in both senses). At the same time, they excite with a luminosity that can shake up our spirits as well as our eyes.

The Stopforth exhibition provided the catalyst for the publication of the first in a new series of studies examining the visual arts collections at Bridgewater State University. My essay for this catalogue, ‘Bethesda, Breakwater, Bridgewater,’ offers a more in-depth analysis of Stopforth’s career and situates the artworks now in the Bridgewater permanent collection in greater art historical context. More importantly, the show precipitated Paul Stopforth’s generous decision to donate *Trinity* to the university, complementing the works given by Lawrence and Katherine Doherty. In my opinion, this quintet of pieces constitutes an important and profoundly interconnected collection that greatly enriches the environment we live and work in at BSU.

*Figure 5: Trinity by Paul Stopforth (Photo Credit: Jay Block).*

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