ABOUT THE KNOXVILLE MUSEUM OF ART

PRESENTING SPONSORS

EXHIBITION SPONSORS

BEAUFORD DELANEY & JAMES BALDWIN
THROUGH THE UNUSUAL DOOR

February 7-May 10, 2020

KNOXVILLE MUSEUM OF ART
NEW YORK

A group of paintings in the exhibition from the 1940s and early 1950s depicts locations of significance to Delaney and Baldwin during the formative stages of their lifelong friendship. Crossing the threshold into Delaney’s world in 1940, Baldwin found inspiration on many levels. He heard African American music his strict stepfather did not allow him to listen to at home. He saw the painter’s vibrant colors “on the easel, on the palette, against the wall.” Above all, Delaney stood before him as “the first walking, living proof, for me, that a black man could be an artist.” Greene Street is one of several New York scenes by Delaney depicting the avenues on which he first expanded James Baldwin’s creative vision during one of their frequent strolls. Buildings, terraces, roadways, and occasional pedestrians are distilled into isolated motifs swept up in currents of bright pigment and pinned down within compressed pictorial spaces. This painting and other Greenwich Village scenes attest to Delaney’s ability to infuse the most mundane urban haunts with an otherworldly radiance.

PORTRAITS

Portraiture as an expression of identity was a vital part of Beauford Delaney’s studio practice throughout his career, and the exhibition includes key examples of Delaney’s portraits of himself and of his friend James Baldwin. A quality shared by all of Delaney’s portraits is that they communicate as much about the artist’s emotional state and his feelings about the subject as they do about the external appearance of the sitter. In Dark Rapture (James Baldwin), Delaney’s earliest known portrait of his teenage protégé, the artist maps out in wildly inventive chromatic terms a provocative nude within an idyllic landscape. He presents Baldwin’s figure as only partially discernible through a mottled veil of dark pigments, as if signaling that at this early point in their friendship the artist still considered him something of an enigma. Irregular bands of bright color enliven the composition, and recall the iridescent hues of an oily puddle to which Delaney called Baldwin’s attention the previous year, an experience which the young writer later recalled as having a profound effect on his creative vision: “I remember standing on a street corner with the black painter Beauford Delaney down in the Village, waiting for the light to change, and he pointed down and said, ‘Look.’ I looked and all I saw was water. And he said, ‘Look again,’ which I did, and I saw oil on the water and the city reflected in the puddle. It was a great revelation to me. I can’t explain it. He taught me how to see, and how to trust what I saw.” In later portraits, Delaney’s use of color and abstract brushwork becomes intensified as seen in paintings in which sitters are surrounded or engulfed by the artist’s signature veils of vibrant mottled color (Portrait of Ella Fitzgerald, 1968). While some of Delaney’s friends were perplexed by what they perceived as two opposite strains—abstractions and portraits—the artist pointed out the reality that all were part of one body comprised of “studies in light revealed.”
**TRANSMONALISM**

Delaney and Baldwin considered themselves citizens of the world, and while traveling abroad together they discovered new creative horizons and a clearer view of the challenging cultural landscape in America. For instance, references to Africa in Delaney’s art echo Baldwin’s ideas regarding transnationalism and the glaring need to reconnect with and redefine the so-called “Dark Continent,” as labeled by its European colonizers. As the writer mused, “there is something a little mad about sitting in London or Versailles looking at the map of Africa and drawing lines as if there were no people living there.” Such references are visible in several Delaney paintings, including *Self-Portrait in a Paris Bath House*, in which the artist depicts himself, in what may be his final self-portrait, as a youthful Maasai warrior. While Sub-Saharan African art and its conceptual approach to proportion did not transform Delaney’s art to the extent it did for his heroes Picasso and Matisse, he did embrace its emphasis on reflecting inner truths and content beyond the physical world.

**CLAMART**

“(Beauford) for a while lived in a suburb of Paris, Clamart. It was at this time that I began to see Beauford’s painting in a new way, and it was also at this time that Beauford’s paintings underwent a most striking metamorphosis into freedom.”

— JAMES BALDWIN

By 1953, Delaney had left New York for Paris and reconnected with Baldwin. In late 1955, the painter moved to a new studio in Clamart that served as a retreat for both men. Delaney’s six-year Clamart period was marked by dramatic events—the loss of his mother Delia back in Knoxville, bouts of severe depression, tremendous productivity, significant exhibitions, and international travels that brought emotional highs and lows, including a suicide attempt at sea. It was also a period in which Delaney enjoyed the increasing presence of James Baldwin in his daily life resulting from the writer’s need for solace after an emotionally straining sojourn through the American South in 1957. The quiet suburban surroundings of his new studio sparked Delaney’s growing interest in depicting light and movement in bold abstractions in which references to the physical world appear dissolved, as in the untitled abstraction illustrated to the left and *Blue-Light Abstraction* (overleaf). Baldwin wrote eloquently about this key moment in Delaney’s development in an essay for a 1964 show at Galerie Lambert, noting that “this light held the power to illuminate, even to redeem and reconcile and heal.”
THE CALL OF CIVIL RIGHTS

Delaney paintings related to the civil rights movement are tied to Baldwin and his central role in keeping the artist abreast of key events in the struggle back in America. While Delaney seldom left Paris, Baldwin traveled frequently to the U.S. and his frontal role in the civil rights discourse made him an ideal conduit for news of the latest developments. Paintings from the late 1960s reflect the artist’s attempt to reckon with civil rights topics and celebrate the movement’s key figures in portraits that are striking in their straightforward, descriptive character. Baldwin’s influence is perhaps most evident in a series of sketches and paintings of Rosa Parks that Delaney created between 1963 and 1970. In most sketches the artist portrays her as a seated figure with arms folded, often accompanied by slogans of resistance. However, in several sketches and painted works he removes Parks from the Montgomery bus seat she made famous, placing her in park-like surroundings as in Two Women Sitting on a Park Bench (Rosa Parks).

SAINT-PAUL-DE-VENCE

In 1970, Baldwin settled in Saint-Paul-de-Vence in the south of France in an old Provençal villa beneath the ramparts of the famous village. His house was always open to his friends, including Delaney, who frequently visited him. Increasingly plagued by bouts of depression and confusion, Delaney came to view Baldwin’s house as his personal and creative sanctuary, often setting up his easel in the garden. Included as a coda to the Baldwin-Delaney story are late works from Baldwin’s personal collection related to Delaney’s time with the writer at Saint-Paul-de-Vence. In the 1972 canvas Village (Saint-Paul-de-Vence), Delaney condenses the town’s unending stone staircases into a cross section of successive stepped paths, rendered in expressive brushwork and volcanic hues.

THE LURE OF MUSIC

Paintings relating to jazz and blues highlight the important role of music in Delaney and Baldwin’s ongoing friendship and understanding of their cultural identity. Baldwin had grown up in a household run by a domineering stepfather who had always condemned such music as “dirty.” Delaney taught Baldwin that jazz was an important art form and just as “sacred” as gospel music: “...in (Delaney’s) studio and because of his presence, I really began to hear Ella Fitzgerald, Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith...these people were not meant to be looked on by me as celebrities, but as part of Beauford’s life and as part of my inheritance.” The two visited jazz clubs in Harlem and Paris, became acquainted with many performers, and even sang together on stage. Works such as Portrait of Ella Fitzgerald represent Baldwin’s assertion that Delaney set out to capture the essence of his subject without reliance on convention or memory, and sought “to see the light contained in everything, in every surface, in every face.”
Beauford Delaney (Knoxville 1901-1979 Paris)

Oil on canvas, 25 3/4 x 21 1/2 inches
Knoxville Museum of Art 2018 acquisition
Photograph by Bruce Cole
Beauford Delaney and James Baldwin: Through the Unusual Door presents more than 50 paintings, works on paper, and unpublished archival material drawn from the Knoxville Museum of Art’s extensive Delaney holdings, public and private collections around the country, and rarely displayed papers held by the Delaney estate. The exhibition examines the 38-year relationship between painter Beauford Delaney (Knoxville 1901-1979 Paris) and writer James Baldwin (New York 1924-1987 Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France) and the ways their ongoing intellectual exchange shaped one another’s creative output and worldview. Through the Unusual Door seeks to identify and disentangle the skein of influences that grew over and around a rich, complex lifetime relationship with a selection of Delaney’s works that reflects the powerful presence of Baldwin in Delaney’s life. While no other figure in Beauford Delaney’s extensive social orbit approaches James Baldwin in the extent and duration of influence, none of the major exhibitions of Delaney’s work has explored in any depth the creative exchange between the two. The exhibition incorporates previously unpublished archival materials and artworks that promise to extend the understanding of Delaney’s aesthetic agenda and range and reveal the extent of his ties to Baldwin.