Beauford Delaney & James Baldwin: THROUGH THE UNUSUAL DOOR

SELECTED TIMELINE

1901 Born Knoxville, Tennessee, on December 30 to Delia Johnson Delaney and the Reverend John Samuel Delaney, 815 East Vine Avenue.

1919 Father dies on April 30. Rioting breaks out in August after an African American man, Maurice Franklin Mays, is accused of murdering a white woman in what would later become known as Knoxville’s “Red Summer.” Memories of the violence haunt Delaney for years afterward.

1923 Moves to Boston, taking art classes at the Massachusetts Normal Art School, Copley Society, South Boston School of Art, and Lowell Institute.

1924 Born Harlem, New York, on August 2 to Emma Berdis Jones. Biological father is unknown.

1927 Mother marries the Reverend David Baldwin. Together, they had eight biological children (four girls and four boys) in addition to James, the eldest.

1929 Moves to New York, spending the first night sleeping on a park bench in Union Square. Settles in Harlem, where the following year he is joined by younger brother Joseph (1904-1991).

1930 Works for a crusade project of the African American Arts and Letters. Hired as a doorman at the Whitney and given a studio and basement apartment. First one-person show, at New York Public Library’s Harlem branch (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture). Classes at the Art Students League with Thomas Hart Benton and John Sloan. Finds work with the mural division of the Federal Art Project, Works Progress Administration.

1931 With brother Joseph moves to 18 Downing Street in Greenwich Village.

1933 With brother Joseph returns to Knoxville to visit family. Beauford produces pastel portraits of Joseph and mother Delia.

1935 Works with Charles Alston on the Harlem Hospital mural project, joins the Harlem Art Guild, and spends time at Alston’s “306” space.

1936 After living at several addresses on Downing Street in the 1930s, settles nearby at 181 Greene Street, where he would remain until 1952. First work in print, at age 12, a short story about the Spanish Revolution, appears in a church newspaper.


1940 Meets Delaney for the first time at the artist’s 181 Greene Street studio.

1941 Spends Christmas with his family in Knoxville. Appears in Delaney’s art for the first time in Dark Rapture (James Baldwin).

1942 Graduates from DeWitt Clinton High School.

1943 Stepfather David Baldwin dies.

1944 Appears in Delaney’s pastel Portrait of James Baldwin.

1945 Lauded by friend Henry Miller in his chapbook “The Amazing and Invariable Beauford Delaney.”


1950 Visits Knoxville in March. Receives a two-month fellowship to Yaddo, the famous artist’s retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York.

1952 Moves to 713 Broadway. Begins writing The Amen Corner.


1955 In December, moves to 68 Rue Paul Vaillant Couturier in Clamart, a Paris suburb, a move arranged by Richard Olney, a friend of Baldwin’s who also occupied the residence. Publishes collection of essays, Notes of a Native Son, first play, The Amen Corner, is performed at Howard University.

1956 Travels with Baldwin and artist friend Lawrence Calcagno to Ibiza, Spain. Publishes second novel, Giovann’s Room.

1957 Meets Martin Luther King Jr., and travels across the American South as a correspondent for Harper’s Magazine. “Sonny’s Blues” appears in Parisian Review. Spends time with Delaney at his studio in the Paris suburb of Clamart, noting significant growth in the artist’s work.

1958 Mother, Delia, dies in Knoxville.

1960 Clamart paintings are shown for the first time, at Galerie Paul Facchetti, Paris.

1961 While traveling by boat across the Mediterranean to Greece, jumps overboard in a suicide attempt and is rescued by a fisherman. Friends pay for his return to Paris and hospitalization. Second essay collection, Nobody Knows My Name, published by Dial. Makes first trip to Istanbul, where he finishes writing his third novel, Another Country.


1965 Paints his monumental portrait Marian Anderson, and dedicates it to Baldwin. Going to Meet the Man, Baldwin’s first short-story collection, is published by Dial and dedicated to Beauford Delaney. Debates William F. Buckley Jr. before 1,200 students at Cambridge University and receives a two-minute standing ovation. Makes first trip to Israel.

1966 Completes his fourth novel, Tell Me How Long the Train Has Been Gone, while in Istanbul, and is visited by Delaney.

1968 Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone is published by Dial. Moves to Los Angeles to work on the script for Autobiography of Malcolm X. His distress at Martin Luther King’s assassination causes him to abandon the Malcolm X project and return to Europe.

1969 Spends Christmas with family in Knoxville. During the visit, independent curator Elsa Hong Fine meets with Beauford and Joseph to propose a joint exhibition at the University of Tennessee’s Frank H. McClung Museum, where Delaney Delaney once worked as a custodian. After returning to Paris in January of 1970, writes his brother to explain that he is not able to participate in the exhibition, which subsequently becomes a solo exhibition of Joseph’s work.

1970 Buys a home at Saint-Paul-de-Vence, in the South of France.

1971 Travels to London to appear with poet/writer Nikki Giovanni on the television program Soul. At his new home, he is visited frequently by an increasingly unstable Delaney, who sees Baldwin’s home as a refuge.

1972 Publishes No Name in the Street, his fourth book of non-fiction, and dedicates it to Baldwin.


1975 Publishes children’s book Little Man, Little Man, which is dedicated to Delaney, and The Devil Finds Work, a critique of the film industry.

1978 First retrospective exhibition, at the Studio Museum, Harlem, organized by Richard Long. Begins one of several teaching stints at Bowing Green College and is awarded the Martin Luther King Memorial Medal by the City College of New York. Essay from Delaney’s 1964 Galerie Lambert exhibition brochure is included in the publication accompanying the painter’s retrospective at the Studio Museum, Harlem.

1979 Dies on March 26 at age 77 at Sainte-Anne. Teaches at the University of California at Berkeley. Returns to Paris on the occasion of Beauford Delaney’s death. Makes his first trip to Russia.

1980 Visits University of Florida for a meeting of the African Literature Association, where he participates in a dialogue on the “African aesthetic.” Travels through the American South as part of the television documentary I Heard it Through the Grapevine.


1986 Awarded La Légion D’Honneur by President François Mitterrand. Travels to Russia with group of writers to meet Mikhail Gorbachev and discuss world peace.

1987 Dies on December 1 at age 63 of stomach cancer at home in Saint-Paul-de-Vence.