



An Interview with Tony M. Bingham

Mysoon Rizk

Tony M. Bingham, the winner of the 2020 SECAC Artist's Fellowship, is a multi-disciplinary artist who lives in Birmingham, Alabama and has taught full-time since 2006 at Miles College, an HBCU institution in Birmingham. Bingham has been creating art experiences in rural African American communities throughout Alabama and beyond. He received a BA in Communications from Antioch College (at the Baltimore-Washington, DC campus), an MA in Film and Community Media from Goddard College (in Plainfield, Vermont), and an MFA from Georgia State University (in Atlanta). His interest in pinhole

photography as well as use of recycled materials began in high school and continued out of a dedication to relying on, in his own words, "cast off materials to tell the stories of a cast-off people." He describes the objects he has crafted—out of durables like cast metal and cast glass, as well as ephemerals like "grasses, burlap fabric," and "vines"—as ways of marking "the legacy of a people, who took what scraps they were given, and elevated those scraps into things of beauty and function." Conducted during COVID times, this interview came together over email, thanks to Tony's generosity of spirit.

Figure 1. Tony Bingham, *Wallace Plantation*, 2021, pinhole photograph.

Congratulations on receiving the Artist's Fellowship from SECAC during the November/December 2020 conference! Please tell me about the project you have proposed.

Thank you, Mysoon, it is truly an honor to be recognized by my peers in SECAC. I am currently working on what I call the *Praise House—Sun Shadows* project. *Praise House* is my response to being at the Klein-Wallace Plantation House in Harpersville, Alabama (fig. 1). I choose to interpret the site of the plantation through



Figure 2 left. *Scott's Grove Church Family Picture, 1950s-60s*, collection Scott's Grove Baptist Church, Vincent, Alabama.

Figure 3, center left. Tony Bingham, *Pile of Praise House Drawings, 2021*, digital photograph.

Figure 4, bottom left. Tony Bingham, *Bearing Witness: Praise House—Sun Shadows*, Harpersville (Klein), Alabama, October 2022. Site-specific permanent installation in tigerwood, hot rolled steel—CNC plasma cut, and repurposed church windows (for Wall B). Dimensions vary: Wall A, 8 x 8 x 2 ft and Wall B, 8 x 11 x 2 ft. Photo: Courtesy 1504.co Productions.



Figure 5, right. Tony Bingham, *Peter Datcher, 2021*, pinhole photograph.



a lens of acknowledgement of African American craft mastery, spiritual foundation origins, and family. I look at the house and witness the carpentry skills on display, as well as the work of the blacksmith(s) who created the nails that hold everything together. Where there was labor to be used in the gathering and preparation of the materials for the house—from the locally quarried marble used in the steps and fireplaces, to the transformation of the forest resources into beams and boards—I would consider how the plantation is a reminder of the hands of the enslaved in this monument to that time.

While asking members of the African American descendant community who have connections to the house about the spiritual practices of their enslaved



ancestors, I learned about the brush arbor—a rough, open-sided structure used for worship—as well as the Scott’s Grove Baptist Church, which evolved from it and later burned. I discovered that the church was marked on a 1957 United States Geological Survey Map (USGS) and found photographs of the original structure. Members of Scott’s Grove rebuilt and relocated the church to nearby Vincent, Alabama (fig. 2).

I was very moved about what I learned regarding the various histories of the people and places in the community. I was inspired to create a response as a way to remember something of the enslaved legacy at the Wallace plantation. The house was being historically renovated, and planks of lumber were being replaced. I imagined that these old boards were the very surfaces enslaved

people walked on or touched, and I sought to bring those materials back together in a way that could inspire reflection on the history of the enslaved people who once lived there. As I move forward on this project, I plan to repurpose as much of the old lumber as possible from the plantation renovation, for use in constructing *Praise House*.

Praise House is an out-door, site-specific installation consisting of two free-standing, double-sided walls separated by a series of broken marble slabs, arranged to create a floor surface, to capture the image of a sun-cast shadow. One wall will feature two stained-glass windows, recovered from another African American church. The windows will be placed in a plank-covered wall featuring two false doors to reference the burned Scott’s Grove Baptist Church.

The second wall will contain a cut-metal grid/panel featuring an image of a church family. The walls will be situated to allow the sunlight to project a shadow onto both the ground of broken marble and the opposite wall (fig. 3).

I’ve had the great pleasure of watching this project unfold and come together, at least virtually. I was really impressed by the documentation on the website you’ve set up, including the audio from Jesus Deliverance Chapel and the beautiful film-in-progress describing the motivations and intentions behind Praise House—Sun Shadows.’ So many of your projects engage in the memories of communities. Perhaps this is a good time to ask you to explain the roles memory plays in your work?

Figure 5, right. Tony Bingham, *Aunt Daisy's Bibles*, 2021, digital photograph.

Figure 6, below right. Anthony M. Bingham, in collaboration with Marie T. Cochran, *Reunion Place*, Atlanta, Mechanicsville community, Georgia, 1996, site-specific public art installation: concrete, bronze, iron, and plaster, 30 x 18 x 20 feet. Photo: Tony Bingham.

Figure 7, opposite. Tony Bingham, *Old Scott's Grove Baptist Church Site / Daffodil Field*, 2021, digital photograph.



I often wonder if materials hold memory. Do walls and floors “remember” who touched them or walked and danced along their polished planks? I pose this question to myself as I consider an approach to art based in an examination of history, or histories. As an African American artist, my practice is dedicated to discovering the legacies and experiences of black folks in the rural southern region of the United States, stories and experiences not typically considered part of the American story.

I visit sites like cemeteries, plantations, and surrounding forests, searching for opportunities to connect to a history of black engagement with such spaces. I gather whatever materials I can locate to help me interpret the seen and unseen. I look for old hand-written letters, and old photographs of African American people from second-hand shops. Recently, I met up with Peter Datcher, who resides in the African American Creswell community of Harpersville, is a member of the descendant community connected to the Wallace Plantation House, and also serves as a board member



on the Klein Arts and Culture organization (fig. 4).²

Peter and I visited his late Aunt Daisy’s old house. Stepping inside it was like entering a time capsule. There were such items as her two old Bibles, stuffed with notes, photos and the names of her favorite prayerful songs. I was so moved by her words that I am incorporating her writings as a text element for the Praise House walls. I plan to have some songs she enjoyed sung by local church choirs and made available to be listened to by using a QR code.

So, is the audio clip you have on the website related to the songs enjoyed by Aunt Daisy?

Yes. While turning through the pages of Aunt Daisy’s Bibles, I found the titles of her beloved songs written on scraps of paper (fig. 5). I imagine that she was looking forward to church meeting days, so that she could hear those songs. As far as recording those songs, everything magically came together nicely. One day, I was sitting on the porch, visiting Peter Datcher, asking him about local church singers who might know the songs and, not long after,



Robert Franklin—another member of the descendant community in Harpersville—dropped by and I asked him about the songs. It turned out that Robert’s mother is an evangelist minister at the nearby Jesus Deliverance Chapel, a store front church in Vincent, Alabama.

The church members knew the songs and were willing to sing and record them for the project. We were able to record film and audio at the church during the making of our documentary film. For the SECAC exhibition at the University of Kentucky’s Bolivar Art Gallery, in Lexington, we included the audio in the gallery and on the “Virtual Gallery” website, designed by Gallery Director Becky Alley.

When Peter and I visited Aunt Daisy’s house, we also found her quilt blocks and strips, as well as her cotton carding combs. As I held those materials, I imagined her gathering some of the cotton that she had planted, cleaning it with the cotton combs, to remove the seeds, then using it to line her quilts. As I continue work on *Praise House*, I feel the spirit of Aunt Daisy and awe from our discoveries of the hidden visual arts legacy of the plantation’s descendant community.

It is really moving to see the images in the “Virtual Gallery” reproduced on the UK website, of the artifacts belonging to Aunt Daisy O’Neal and the objects you

made in honor of her, like the Four Vessels for Aunt Daisy. Would you like to explain anything about those vessels?

Thanks, Mysoon, for your response to the *Praise House* exhibition, and that you were so moved by just the pictures, as I’m sure that you would have enjoyed seeing it in person. **That’s for sure, Tony, I was really disappointed not to be driving down to Kentucky in person, as I’m always trying to persuade people of the benefits of looking at art in person rather than on a screen, but I was happy to see so many installation views of the exhibition online, and I really appreciated the audio as well as video components.**

Four Vessels is a series of shaped cast-iron pieces that resulted from the resin-bonded sand-mold process. I took bound organic materials such as vines, stems, small branches, and leaves from cotton plants that I gathered from the yard and cotton fields near Aunt Daisy's house, then prepared them for the molten iron-casting process. The vessels are presented as elongated shapes, and I refer to them as Communion Vessels: forms to contain such artifacts as buttons, rolled quilt strips, and string belonging to Aunt Daisy. I also included some abstract bottle shapes, constructed in wax, which were melted out prior to casting. I imagine those Communion Vessels as objects which might be used during spiritual services, such as a baptism, religious service, or during celebrations at the *Praise House*.

Thank you, Tony, for that excellent description of the Praise House project. I look forward to seeing it in person one day. I'd like to ask you to elaborate on the roles art has played in shaping and/or preserving memory in earlier phases of your work?

More than two decades ago, I was involved with a site-specific public art installation in the Mechanicsville Community of Atlanta, Georgia called the *Reunion Place* project (fig. 6).³ The work was commissioned by the Cultural Olympiad of the Atlanta Olympic Games in 1996. After spending time in Mechanicsville, I learned that art makes a significant difference in communities, story-telling, and memory. When fellow artist Marie Cochran and I began planning the

project, we wanted it to serve as a permanent site: to host the annual Mechanicsville Community Reunion and to be a place where children could play, dream, and have a space to reimagine their community. So, we crafted an outdoor stage/pavilion with a podium element. The installation uses railroad track, sculptural objects, and embedded designs.

During the development and construction phase of the project, we sought community input and participation. One of the features of the project was use of the text, "REMEMBER," stamped along the edge surface of the stage/pavilion. In addition, the children created patterned forms, which we used to adorn the front surface of the stage. We had elders of the community add their footprints in wet cement for the podium element of *Reunion Place*, so that the community could continue to "stand in the footprints" of those who were the leaders in the community. We also wanted to recognize the presence of numerous churches with the community. We made a connection to the legacy of the railroad industry, in Mechanicsville history, and the importance of family there. By including railroad tracks adorned with symbols of the family unit, we hoped the site would cause people who gathered for reunions to think about the community's history and to reflect on their own experiences of living there.

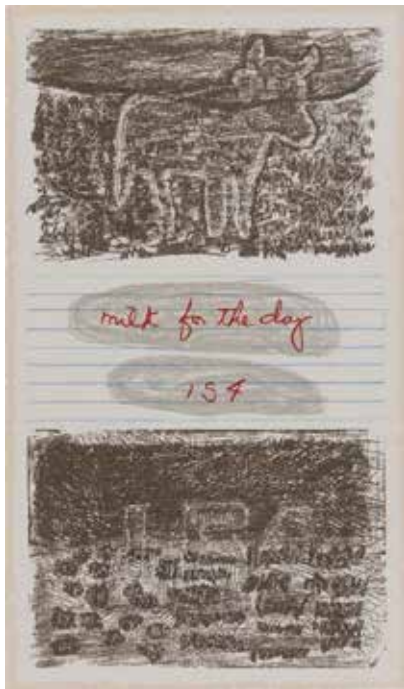
Since 1996, the Mechanicsville community has undergone many changes. Many of the long-time residents have moved away, and children who participated with *Reunion Place* are now adults with families of their own. On a few

occasions, some of these children have even enrolled at Miles College and were students in my classes. I'd like to think that, because of my relationships with the community, bonds were formed and people took ownership of the space, which may help explain why the installation remains intact and well-cared for after all these years. During visits to Atlanta, I visit the space and feel gratified to see it has become part of the community fabric. People continue using it as a gathering place and a space for remembering.

I've heard you speak about "African American rural ways of memorializing"—would you elaborate on what you mean by that and how it relates to your current project?

I explore communities and public spaces throughout Alabama, like sites of enslaved, extractive, or industrialized labor—e.g., in Fairfield, Helena, Panola, Tannehill, Titusville, Africatown community of Mobile, West Tuscaloosa and Marion. My installations of sculpture, photographs, and audio samples reference unmarked burial sites and vernacular headstones. While these sites may have official histories, I seek to understand the histories of black culture and black spaces at those sites.

In the case of *Praise House*, I am working closely with descendants of both the black and white members of the Klein Arts and Culture organization.⁴ I'm learning about the community's history and exploring the church sites, burial grounds, baptismal creeks,



farms, and other important places, such as the Creswell Community in Harpersville. I am speaking to descendants of the enslaved people bound to plantations like Wallace: folks like Deacon Henry Smith, Theo Perkins, and Albert “Peter” Datcher. They remember the families that attended the nearby Bakers Grove, Arkwright, and Scott’s Grove churches. In our conversations, they recall their classmates at the Vincent Elementary School (a segregated school attended by African American children), days of farming and picking cotton; the hand-me-down clothes that became source material for quilts; and taking shoes in, to get the soles fixed, when they were worn out. As I listen to their memories, their words become images, like watching old family movies.

I was standing in the Creswell community with Peter Datcher, who has lived there most of his life. As he remembers classmates, and looks back, he wishes that they had done more to preserve the building as a community center.

Peter serves as the memory keeper in Creswell, having transformed his old residence, from his days as a cotton farmer, into a place for remembrance. The rooms and walls of the “History House” are filled with an odd assortment of farming tools, antique and archival photographs of people, depicting a visual lineage of the descendant community in Harpersville. As I stood next to him, Peter directed my view to the now quiet acres and acres of land near a creek. As I gazed at the overgrown field of grass, I imagined listening to traces of laughter, the sound of a baseball hitting a bat, the smells of fish frying and barbeque roasting. In the silent and wandering creeks, I heard not the summer cicadas but the splash of children jumping and mothers calling for the little ones.

Last February, Deacon Henry Smith of the new Scott’s Grove Baptist Church, led me to the site of the old church and the nearby Yellowleaf Creek where the faithful were once baptized. We paused to take in two thousand yellow daffodils, perennial reminders of the burnt-down spiritual heart that once pulsed there, signaling all the past voices of song and prayer by true believers (fig. 7).

I envision a new narrative about the antebellum site of Klein-Wallace, built in 1841. I honor the memory of the enslaved community, through working with the descendant communities in Harpersville and Creswell—realizing a place for remembering, while enabling new understandings about African American contributions to American culture.



Figure 8, top left. Tony Bingham, in collaboration with Mxolisi Nyezwa, *Lidgetton Portal Series* (1 of 4), 2009, screen print, 18 x 24 inches, edition of 25.

Figure 9, top right. Alabama Contemporary Art Center, exhibition flyer for *The Ancestral Light Series and Communion Vessels for Africatown*, 2022.

How do you select the materials you choose to use? Do you wait for a certain feeling? It seems you work intuitively?

A recent series, *Communion Vessels for Cahaba*, was inspired during a walk through a deep forest with Dr. Jack Bergstresser, an industrial archaeologist from Birmingham. We were at the site of the Cahaba Coke Ovens, near Helena, Alabama. There we discovered not only the ruins of an early nineteenth century industrial complex, but a vast field of the graves of the African American men caught up in the cycle of convict labor. I gathered organic materials growing around the grave stones and made a series

of sculptures, or vessels, so visitors could commune with the burial site and the forgotten men lying there.

During my 2009 residency at the Caversham Centre for Artists and Writers in Balgowan, Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa, I was paired with Mxolisi Nyezwa, a poet from Port Elizabeth, to collaborate on ideas leading to a final product (fig. 8). Caversham was the ultimate printmaking studio, operated under the direction of Malcolm Christian. During the course of the three weeks in residence, a main goal was for each artist to create an image to be prepared for printing. We also conducted art workshops at the Jabula School, a community partner with the Caversham Centre. It seemed like a tall order to have to go from a concept, to realizing that idea in print in a few weeks' time. I'd spent days both in the darkroom and outdoors, running around trying to capture the beauty of the landscape with my pinhole camera, then Malcolm came to me to explain "that, within the beauty, lives a tragedy." He went on to describe how Gabi Nkosi, a skilled Zulu woman printmaker who had worked at Caversham, had been killed in her home as the result of domestic violence the year before I arrived. He suggested that I go to her house and to her community in nearby Lidgetton, to see if there were items to be incorporated into the ideas that I was working with, to express the sadness that could also live within such beauty.

So, I created a series of prints that combined my interest in the landscape, with items from her house and images in her community, as a way to remember

Gabi. Those prints became the *Lidgetton Portal Series*, and incorporated pinhole photo-based landscape images with images of some of the items serving as reminders of Gabi's world. The final prints referenced the blue lines found in her son's school notebook. The borders of the image were printed to resemble pages with burned edges—connected to a series of drawings I had done on burned pages found in a church in Birmingham that had burnt down. Malcolm connected my feeling of loss about that church with the sadness at Caversham about the loss of their colleague Gabi. The medium of printmaking created a path for those found objects, artifacts, and photographs, helping connect our stories of loss. Conversations with Malcolm helped me find my "point of departure" for this work. I documented the printmaking process, as well as much of my approach to making art, with a slide show that can be seen on Vimeo.⁵

Thank you for sharing that beautiful story about your creative process. I'd also like to ask you about your role as an educator. First, what classes do you teach at Miles?

I have taught Art Appreciation (Humanities) since 2007 and Studio Art since 2006. As a one-person Studio Arts presence, I rely on the support of Miles and the arts community to assist my efforts. For several years, we have partnered with my wife, Dr. Emily Hanna, who works as Senior Curator of the Arts of African and the Americas in the Birmingham

Museum of Art (BMA), where we hold a "Night at the Museum" event, planned by a student as part of a paid museum internship, an experience increasing African American student familiarity with museum occupations. As a result of this partnership, one student intern was recently hired by the BMA. Birmingham attracts many African American artists, coming to learn about civil rights history while completing related projects, and sometimes visiting the Miles campus, giving students an opportunity to meet in person or hear a talk by a contemporary artist—including such figures as Kerry James Marshall, Carrie Mae Weems, Emma Amos, Hank Willis Thomas, Dawoud Bey, and Thornton Dial.

I imagine your teaching has informed the work you make and vice-versa. If so, how would you describe that influence in each direction?

One of my observations about the students who attend my Studio Arts classes is that I have got to introduce them to art processes that make sense to them, to what they bring to the class, to what art means to them. They know about photography, collage, and sound. Over time, I have figured out how to use what they already know, then take them in new directions, with new combinations that build on their knowledge. My role in the classroom is to function as a storehouse of art-making ideas and problem-solving, to be ready when they are ready to make their next steps, and to lead them to that place.



Figure 10. Installation view at opening day, 2022 Alabama Triennial, 2022. Photo: Isaiah A.S. Bingham.

In both teaching and in my own practice, I choose processes that invite viewer engagement. I have embraced the potential of creative processes working with limited financial resources. With pinhole photography, we use cameras made out of readily available materials and work with out-of-date photography papers, or improvised darkroom spaces. In stop-motion animation, we find new uses for obsolete camera equipment, out-of-date newspapers and magazines, old photographs and photocopies, as well as sculpture made out of materials at hand. We also use GIMP, a free open-source software program for working with photographs. Students create spoken-word audio tracks and edit their work using iMovie. In addition, we have worked with

local art foundries to cast iron. I have embraced studio practices that allow for creativity without being hampered by financial limitations.

Thinking back on the last year and a half, how has life been during this year of quarantine and COVID—not to mention the shifts in US government, all of the Black Lives Matter efforts to demand a reckoning around race, and all of the continued incidents of systemic racism?

Like many other campuses, our campus at Miles College had to suspend all face-to-face teaching, making the shift to virtual. While virtual teaching works pretty well with Humanities classes, making the shift in Studio Arts was challenging. Fortunately, we

had access to the GIMP software, which enabled our exploration of manipulating pinhole photographic negatives. The students worked with digital files, then submitted their projects online. As an HBCU, we are keenly aware of BLM concerns, and continue to cultivate partnerships with predominantly white colleges in Birmingham. Our city has a great many historic African American sites, but they need some young blood to help them continue preserving their legacies. We can play a role in bringing our students together with those resources.

Thank you so much, Tony, for everything you've shared about your work, your practices, your life

as an educator. Before we finish up, I want to give you a chance to speak about any other projects on the horizon once you have completed Praise House.

Two projects I am working on currently include *The Ancestral Light Series* project and the *Flow Tuscaloosa* project. The first project—*Ancestral Light Series*—is scheduled for Spring of 2022, when I partner with the Alabama Contemporary Art Gallery in Mobile, to create a new body of work about the Africatown community there (fig. 9). In preparation for that exhibition, I am engaging with the community of Africatown, to document the residents, and to create a series of cast-metal sculptures—based on conversations within the community and after a gathering of organic and found objects in the area. I spent a week with a family in Africatown in 2012.

While there, I began making connections and capturing pinhole photographic images of the people and sites. The house I stayed in served as a makeshift darkroom and film-changing space for my cameras. I also visited the fishing places, graveyards, archaeological sites, creeks, and churches. Since the recent discovery [in 2018] of the Clotilda slave ship in the waters around Mobile Bay, there is a new excitement in Mobile about the community. In January 2021, I hosted a curatorial team from the Alabama Contemporary Gallery in my studio. After being offered to show in their gallery, I have partnered with them to participate in the grant-writing steps to secure funding for the project. I returned

last summer to Africatown, and plan to go back in Winter of 2022, to view the community through the pinhole lens. I will be using cameras constructed from the discarded plantation lumber of the Klein-Wallace house, adding a new layer of interpretation to my imagery. I plan to select a group of four to six pinhole-based images to be printed as a large-format (10 x 12 feet) photomural for installation in the gallery. I will use the pinhole images in the creation of a stop-motion animation film, which will feature families from the community.⁶ I will also be preparing a series of cast-metal sculptures for presentation during the exhibition.

The second project—*Flow Tuscaloosa*—is scheduled for 2022–23 and represents a partnership with the Collaborative Arts Research Initiative, based at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. I am in the beginning stages of that project, and my contribution is entitled *Down by the Riverside: The Black Tuscaloosa Baptismal Legacy*. I will be examining the legacy of black baptismal sites at Black Warrior River as well as along the Hurricane Creek and the Little Sandy Creek waterways around Tuscaloosa.⁷

Since we conducted this interview, four of Tony’s images from *Praise House*, including two large pinhole murals, were selected for the 2022 *Alabama Triennial*, an inaugural exhibition organized by the Abrams-Engel Institute for the Visual Arts (AEIVA) at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (fig. 10).⁸

Endnotes

1. More information about Tony M. Bingham’s *Praise House—Sun Shadows* project can be found at this address: <http://www.bolivarartgallery.com/tony-m-bingham--secac-fellowship-award.html>.
2. For more information about Peter Datcher, see the Alabama Department of Archives and History: <https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/photo/id/18734/>.
3. For more information about this site-specific public art installation, see https://www.oaatlanta.com/public_art/reunion-place/.
4. For more information about the Klein Arts and Culture project, see: <https://kleinartsandculture.org>.
5. You can see Tony’s thirty-one minute documentation, entitled *Point of Departure* (2013), at this link: <https://vimeo.com/64862256>.
6. To see Tony’s eight-minute stop-motion animation, entitled *Crabman of Africatown* (2022), scan this QR code.
7. For more information about this exhibition, which takes place at the Paul R. Jones Museum, University of Alabama, see <https://art.ua.edu/news/artist-tony-bingham-to-talk-at-paul-r-jones-museum/>.
8. For more information about the 2022 *Alabama Triennial*, see <https://www.uab.edu/news/arts/item/12871-inaugural-alabama-triennial-exhibition-at-uab-s-aeiva-to-exclusively-feature-alabama-artists>.

