
**YALE SCHOOL OF ART
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Barbara Earl Thomas in conversation with Christopher Paul Jordan

Monday, November 14, 2022 | 4:30PM

This transcript originated as a conversation between Seattle-based artist Barbara Earl Thomas and School of Art MFA student Christopher Paul Jordan, held in conjunction with a display of Thomas' papercuttings at the Ives Main Library which served as mockups for her stained glass installations at Yale's Grace Hopper College. It has been edited for length and clarity.



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Ives Main Library, Community Program Room

SCHOOL OF ART DEAN KYMBERLY PINDER: We're here today because I had the great opportunity of seeing those amazing papercuts that are on display upstairs, that were the mockups for the stained glass windows that you can see from the outside of Hopper College, at the corner of Elm and College. When I saw those amazing mockups, the models for the stained glass designs, I said to Barbara, "These really need to come to New Haven, and more people need to see them."

CHRISTOPHER PAUL JORDAN: Can we give a round applause for Barbara?

This is extremely fascinating to be talking with you, to be here and to be talking about windows of all things. Partially because I'm obsessed with windows. Anybody who sees my art knows that I'm obsessed with windows, but your work has always invoked the sense of light. I want to read to everyone this artist statement from you, from your show right now at Claire Oliver Gallery, because it just so beautifully encapsulates the spirit of what it's like to experience your work. These are Barbara's

words: “I use my knife like the oar that slices the water’s surface in a swirling motion to reveal through some magic the biofluorescence – I cut to reveal, to make seen. The body is a liquid vessel, a sculptural form that carries its own light emitted in gestures, movements, sighs, and whispers that spill out into the cracks and fissures of this world.”

What more is there to say? Maybe we can start with this conversation about the body and about the way that you use paper – that it needs to have a certain amount of body in order for the papers to work and in order for things to function. I'm just wondering if you could take us into the studio with you right now and what the experience is like of making.

BARBARA EARL THOMAS: What I'm trying to do is, I think we're all trapped in our own personal universes, which are our bodies. I am interested in the conversation with my audience. I am not someone who makes work that is in the room to be alone with itself because it exists without any interaction. In fact, I think of my work as only coming alive when someone comes in contact with it. So when I'm thinking about the body, I'm thinking about those slivers of recognition that you get sometimes when you pass someone on the street and you can know that person almost as well as someone that you've known for years. I want to make the light have that for me, and also I think about the things we communicate to one another without words and the things we see and that we know without explanation.

When I'm doing portraits, my people are my inspiration and I'm looking for something in them that I see that perhaps they don't know is being shown. The reason I picked up the knife in the first place is because I am a painter and I tend to get very... I don't know, if you're a swimmer, you get really strong on a particular side. I get into the weeds and I wanted to

interrupt— this is how I started with paper cutting, I wanted to interrupt that impulse that I have to over-describe.

I have to make one cut serve a hundred cross-hatches and so that was my entry into making paper cuts, but also I realized when I was working with glass that I didn't get to do again. I could use the light to animate the image and I realized that that's what I had been going for my whole life is that animation of the image through movement and light and that's what I think is at the base of all my work.

CPJ: I know a few people in here have been in Barbara's studio before, could you raise your hand and wave to us? Then keep waving if you've ever grabbed one of the knives and cut things. There's a few people. It's an extremely collaborative process, because you're doing massive installations, you're doing immersive spaces, you're taking the paper and you're using it, in this case for mockups for these windows but also to create these spaces that people can enter into, almost like a temple. I'm wondering also about your impulse towards collectivity and collaboration and this approach. I almost think of it as a choreographer or conductor. What is it like to be working in this collaborative process of bringing these really immense experiences together in the work?

BET: When people come to my studio I'm always assessing, what can you do? Because we're not going to talk forever and if you stay too long, you will start working. I feel like what I learned in glass, what I love about glass is it's such a collaborative event— no one does glass alone. You got your gaffers, you've got those 11,000 degree kilns melting things and people running around. So everybody's twirling things and doing all this and drawing on the floor and when I walk in, they ask,

“what do you want, what do you want?” I said, "Ooh, I got to think fast." I thought, well it's like being in a pickup band.

You come in and you've got a certain idea and that's your part in the group. You've got to figure out really quickly how to give them an idea that they can execute for you that will be successful in that moment or fail. The thing I love about glass is you can work on something for six hours and then somebody will do something and it falls on the floor and it's broken. When that happens, you just go, okay – nobody even says a word. What is there to say? Someone comes and sweeps it up and puts it somewhere and you start again. I like that sense of impending possibility that this could fail or this could be the best thing you ever did or for the moment.

In the studio it's like that, and when we're talking about making these large installations in my studio, what I like about working with the other people is that, we'll be cutting and I'll look over and I'll see a move that someone makes, I said, "I like yours better than mine." So I go to cut like them and then they'll look at me and then they'll start cutting like me and then we move around so that nobody gets too in love with the place they're working on, because when it's all over, it needs to look like one thing, even though maybe five or six people worked on it. With the images, even for these small cuts I did, I would cut them out and then I'd move them over to Peggy who's here in the audience.

She'd come in and I'd say, let's get those little pieces of paper out so that it looks really clean, so I could see what I've got so I know what to do when I go back in. Being a painter was very solitary, but I found that I like getting the rhythm of someone else's work pattern and not having it be verbal, you just pass it off and they do something and give it back to

you and then you do something and you pass it back and forth. It's really magic and you have to let go because in the end you're going for the magic that you sort of invoke and the faith that you put in, that everything you need, you've brought to bear on that moment. It is true, I'm telling people what to do, I'm not a let-it-happen type of person, but I am able to trust in the process in that way.

I want to say one thing about how I met Christopher Paul as I had seen his work, and I think I wrote you first and I said, I think you need to come see me. And he came one day, just showed up and opened the door and I saw him and I hugged him and he came into the studio and we had this most incredible talk. I think that's another thing I love is when I find really wonderful work, you know how you see things, you go, "God I wish I'd done that." That's the best kind of person to know and the best kind of work to encounter and you want to meet those people. So that's how I met Christopher and he came in, we talked for a few hours I think and then he went away, wherever he goes, and then I didn't see him again for a really long time.

CPJ: For me it was you with the birds. It was me on your website just staring and obsessed with these birds. There's some birds in the work here too, which is exciting and serendipitous, but I remember these prints – I think they might be wood blocks but there's a series of crows and it was about these mass deaths of crows.

BET: Well, actually it was about the shooting stars and equating Black bodies and dying crows and the mass dying off of things, and then our accepting that as normal when we really didn't have to. It was called *The Red-Wing Black Birds and Shooting Stars* and just putting those two

things together. Those are paintings and they're still in the drawer there [in the studio].

CPJ: I'm speaking to you as a Yale student, and you're doing this work here with the university so I have to ask a question about education. I had the honor of reading one of your essays which talked about your journey and interest in university. I really want to rewind back to the moment of the spark for you of the creative process, and where that spark manifests from for you. What your experience has been navigating both institutions of education as a learner, but also as a facilitator of learning through your work at the African American Museum, and through your work in community, connecting generations of artists. Take us back to that initial spark that told you that art was something that you needed and something that you wanted to participate in.

BET: Truth be told, I didn't know that people actually made art for their lives. I mean, I grew up in this house where if you needed a thing, there weren't all these places to go, so if you needed a skirt, you made it. If you needed to beautify your pillowcase, you got an embroidery hoop and you got some thread and you did it. So it was all this problem solving – you need this thing so how do you build it? How do you make it? I'm a maker and so I've always thought of myself as a maker, more than even an artist. I see if there's something we need to solve here, how can we put these five chairs together and make something that we need?

The first time I remember, my mom came home from work and I used to just copy things. I'd copy this, copy that, just draw, and then when she came to the door, one day I gave it to her and she looked so delighted, she seemed so happy. So I said, "Well if that's all it takes for me to make her happy, I'm going to give her something like that every day." So I

would make these things and give it to her. For me, I think the impulse of art started as gift, something you gave – if you were going to go someplace and it was a party, you made something and you gave it to someone because there wasn't this tradition of ordering and buying and all that. So that was where I started. Then when I went to university, I realized that people actually majored in art – I did not know that.

For me, I think the impulse of art started as gift, something you gave...

I decided, even if I don't become whatever that is that's in the art history class, I'm still going to take those classes because that's something I'm really interested in and it was more continuing to cultivate how I would be able to make these gifts. I think that coming here to Yale and being able to work on this project really is part of that gift-giving for me. It's part of that idea that I have this opportunity to bring whatever learning I have incorporated in myself to the audience, to channel whatever desires it is that you have, to manifest in the mending of the issues that we have. This is a very small thing, making these windows – it's a small thing in terms of a dot on the ocean of the universe, but it was what I get to do to bring my talent to that and it was amazing.

I didn't think about how heavy it might be, because if I had known how much work it was going to be, I might not have done it. But luckily I was able to do it and I was able to talk to so many students during the pandemic, to hear what they wanted. In a way, the pandemic was a little bit of a gift to this process because it meant that everything slowed down. Maybe it's every university, but when you come here, the students

are everywhere – they're going here, they're going there, but all of a sudden they were captured like birds, caged, and then all of a sudden they were on these Zooms. I could ask: if I left these three spaces, what do you want to see there?

One of the things the students said over and over was: I want there to be some representation of the kitchen staff and the maintenance people who are more than just kitchen staff and maintenance people – they're part of our daily life here at the university. We want to see that. We want to see something that gives a nod to the fact that there was so much agitation, which is *Broken is Mended*, so we want to see that. We want see something about the population change, so I was able to do that in the image that had to do with women being officially admitted to university in 1969. It was a collaboration – they told me things that actually, after it was over, it seemed perfectly obvious that I should have done that, but it was not something that I had thought of initially.

Those things that manifested as one of the windows that was broken. I was able to respond to that and take that back into the studio and try to channel what it was that they were feeling, and hoping that I could get out of my own way and let that desire come through.

CPJ: I want to talk about that piece for a moment and take us into the space of Hopper. Is it six windows?

BET: Yeah, six windows and two niches that have portraits of Grace Murray Hopper and of Roosevelt Thompson.

CPJ: The *Broken is Mended* piece is extremely fascinating to me because it spoke to something personal for me as an artist working in community. I think often about a vantage point that African American artists have is

this sense of entering a picture after something is broken. That something, oftentimes, had to be broken for us to enter a certain space, that something sometimes has to be broken in order for new types of experiences to be discussed or addressed and connected there. Also a bit of grief, that sometimes you want to be present and engaged in things, and not putting together something that's broken. You want to be engaged and connected in a proactive way.

For this piece, both because of the symbology of the glass, and because there's something that you sort of refuse to erase in the process of representing the history of those windows. It's not simply a plastering over the history with something more palatable, something more acceptable, something that ignores the history of extraction and social and political and economic violence that sort of undergirds this institution. There's something that's actually named there in those windows that the students contend with, that we as a community contend with and that's an incredible gift that you've offered this space. If you could just talk about breaking things and how that lives with you as a creative process, and maybe even about your working community beyond the studio and how that fits together for you.

BET: I always think that there are lots of people who maybe are, I guess they call it fortunate. They come into the world, they've got intense amounts of resources, they can choose to do whatever they want, they can have whatever materials they want because they've got all these resources. Then they can just go into a space and they never ever have to see anybody, lock your kids out like Picasso did, let them knock on the door. I want to address that part about the broken: I would prefer not to have to do that, I would prefer not to have to be called because I'm Black

and I bring this visual symbol to the space, so that it's clear that the place that needs me to be there is thinking beyond its own borders.

I could choose not to do that, but what I'm choosing to do is react to it. I say, well I'm coming as a whole person, I'm not coming as this Black fixer, I'm not the fixer, I'm Barbara and I'm coming here and I'm bringing you everything I have to bear, and if you only want to look at that little small part, that's your problem. So we have the piece where the [name of] John Calhoun is in one of the images and then Grace Murray Hopper's in the front, and I wanted it to be there because how do we know why we're mad if we don't have it there? If we can't see it, if someone can't look up and know what's all this about if it's all erased?

Because you need to be able to go back. It's like all the fairytales with the bread in the forest, because they needed to figure out how to get back. I want to not look away and try to do this backward corrective – there are lots of films I don't go see because there's this corrective in the film. So when you come out you feel like history's all good because in the film we won. I'm sorry, that's not what it is. You can feel good about that but that's fiction. And it's okay to have that, but I want to know the difference between the two.

I guess what I'm saying is, I think we're strong enough to take it now. I think we're at a point where we can all handle it – you don't have to coddle anybody about it, it's our history. We need to sort it out and I think that one of the things that's happening right now is that people that aren't Black or some other color are living in a dystopia that we've been in a really long time. People were really just depressed and were like, "Oh my God." I said, "Really, how long have you been depressed?"

When I see people like Christopher here working and hear him talking, I feel so encouraged.

I feel so encouraged about that, when I see the faces of the students and they don't seem as fraught. What I tell my friends who are my age, I say, "Keep that crap in your own backpack, don't pass it forward." Let people come with the knowledge that we've given them, but they don't have perhaps some of the scars that we may have. Perhaps that will be the start or the place where things unfold. So that's what I'm saying when I say *Broken is Mended*—I don't mean that we've erased it, I mean you can go back, as I say, how long you going to put your finger in the stigmata? It's real, we've been wounded and we will be perhaps wounded again but we have managed to survive in ways that surprised me.

I was at a conference once and someone was asking me some goofy question and there was this plant, you know those air plants, those green ones that are really green on top? She was talking to me, I grabbed that plant and I said, you know what, we're just like this plant, we are really green on the top and there are no roots here and it's a miracle and nobody knows why. I have a lot of faith in you guys, I really do. I don't think people are as stupid as they act. I think it's just like with Black people— you treat us like we're crazy, we act like we're crazy because you are making us crazy. So I'm going to treat you like you know something, and that you are going to come to me with some sort of an open heart. That's what I tried to do in the windows.

That was an offering, so it's back to the artist gift. This is my offering— you don't have to like it and I'll tell you, I'm an acquired taste. "You're so intense, I don't know if I could be around you." I said, "You don't have to be around me, but I don't have to die, you can just go in another

room.” So I think that's what I'm trying to say, our solutions don't have to be the extinction of the other, there has to be a way that we survive in our difference together.

I went over to see Hank Willis Thomas's work at NXTHVN and he's asking about “what is truth?” And [his piece] says “the truth is i am you” and I feel like that's not different from what I'm doing here. So it's exciting to be able to see that connection we're making even though we're all in different states and cities.

CPJ: Let's make some noise for Barbara.

About this event

Hosted in conjunction with a display of mock-up designs that led to her stained glass installations in Yale's Grace Hopper College, Barbara Earl Thomas discusses her recent commission in New Haven which confronts and contextualizes the history of the residential college's name, which originally honored 19th-century statesman and slavery advocate, John C. Calhoun.

The twelve new windows, designed by Barbara Earl Thomas and Faith Ringgold, honor Grace Hopper's legacy as a mathematician, computer scientist, teacher, and rear admiral in the U.S. Navy, and reflect cherished aspects of student life and staff contributions to the college community. In addition to the six new stained glass medallions,

Thomas designed glass and metal portraits of Grace Hopper and Roosevelt Thompson (for whom the dining hall is named) which were recently installed in two stone niches of the Hopper Dining Hall. These stunning backlit niches, which extend beyond the original scope of the commission, involve an innovative approach to the medium of stained glass, and complete the artist's commission.

Christopher Paul Jordan is a 2nd-year MFA student in Painting/Printmaking at the Yale School of Art, whose own practice involves creating paintings, sculptures, and installations as time-capsules for displaced folks to hold, bury, connect, and reintegrate their stories.

The display of Barbara Earl Thomas' mock-ups of the windows in the Ives Main Library entrance are on view November 14 through December 31, 2022.

This event was hosted as a collaboration between the Yale School of Art, New Haven Free Public Library, Yale University Art Gallery, and Yale University's Office of the President.



Barbara Earl Thomas. *Broken is Mended*, 2022. Installed at Yale University's Hopper College. Courtesy of Yale University, photo by Ronnie Rysz.