

BROWN, INGA KIMBERLY, M.F.A Communicating with the Spirit. (2016)  
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My thesis work consists of oil paintings, hybridized through the use of mixed media, each one individually representing a *Sacred Conversation* involving family members and individuals that have passed from life to death, as well as the celebration of life in the present. I see my painting as spiritual work in which I interpret and map out the past, present and future of my life. My work is autobiographical. This is reflected through the attention to the pictorial embodiment of my own ancestor worship and the state of my own family history within the United States, my visions and communications with the past, deceased spirits, as well as the visualization of the future make-up my life. The relationship I have with the photograph is a dialogue that takes place within the gaze. My pictorial or mirror gazing concentrates on the spirit attached to the image inside the photograph, vision or in this case, *spirit window*. This act of gazing allows the spirit to speak and articulate what is necessary for the vision to evolve in what I am creating. The communication starts before I actually stretch the canvas. The spiritual intuition comes as a complete vision and then in the process of creation evolves through the spirits and my own formal decisions and intuition. The dialogue takes place within the studio; the medium is oil paint. The communication comes through the action of painting and listening to the faint voices of the spirits that guide me.

In the various branches of *Vodun*, one branch is Santeria, an African diaspora religion brought to the New World by African slaves, the ritual of ancestor worship occurs in the form of adoration, and in listening and watching for signs and miracles brought about by the ancestors who push us from behind while the *Orishas* pull from the front, in order to guide us in our lives. My religious views stem from indigenous American and African spiritual beliefs. During slavery these beliefs and spiritual practices were concealed by a European cover or mask, to ensure their survival and continuation. My work appears on an array of different sized canvases and is both two dimensional to three dimensional. When I add three-dimensional elements, I use mixed media materials that may reference the composition. For instance, I may transform staples in the Santeria practice, such as tobacco, egg shells, seed beads or feathers by incorporating them into the painting, or may affix gold leaf in the tradition of Renaissance paintings, and these symbolic objects create a dialogue with spiritual dogma. I am a Hybrid of cultures and races and my work embodies that Hybridization.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE SPIRIT

by

Inga Kimberly Brown

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

To my beloved *Ché Rodrigo Brown*, 2011- 2016. May you rest in peace my dear Ché, my soul child, my mother Trudi-Mae Brown-Williams, My *Ellegua*, my warriors, my grandmothers and grandfathers and my entire family tree, who make up my *Eggun*.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Inga Kimberly Brown has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## COMMUNICATING WITH THE SPIRIT

My recent works are oil paintings on sewn canvas panels as well as traditional canvases. Hybridization takes place through the addition of three-dimensional household objects or objects I created that are either sewn on or attached with adhesives, threads, and paint. I also use organic materials such as mustard seeds, eggshells and holy water. I combine seed beads, faux grass, and 24-karat gold leaf, as well as oil on wooden extensions of the canvas. The work shows elements of ritual and tradition. For inspiration, I use family photographs as well as scenes from my imagination. The focus is an abstract imagined dialogue with my mixed tri-racial heritage, taking place in the *antebellum and post bellum* South. In some of the paintings, I subtract color to add a monochromatic suggestion of the past, or create mythical visions of a bastardized culture, and juxtapose it with saturated color symbolizing the immediate present. The compositions explore conflict and isolation, while sharing narratives of the African-American, European-American, and Indigenous American heritage that I embody. The hybridization of the materials in the work is autobiographic. The hybridizing of my work starts off by extending the paintings. Wood is essential to me as an addition. Often in my life size paintings I used the additional wood to extend the figure to include head to toe in the painting or an idea of location. The paintings grew to have an awkwardness that emulates my personality and my feelings when I am around others.

*Earth Shaker, Oil on canvas, spray paint, metal leaf, and crushed eggshells mixed with holy water, mustard seeds, dyed feathers, 72 x 42 inches, (Image 1).* In *Earth Shaker*, the image of my paternal great grandmother and her daughter my great Aunt Helen are reunited in death and are visiting me in my kitchen. The mustard seeds and mustard paste on cloth come from my paternal great-grandmother Carmen Marie Dena Hatcher-Waddell (1899-1985) also known as grandma Commie and were passed down from her tri-racial free issue mother, my great-great-grandmother Dena Hatcher (1866-1940) and Dena's biracial mother, Sarah (1820-Unknown, *Image A & B*) and Sarah's husband and Dena's father a Lumbee Indian, Charlie Hatcher (1824-1880) from Robeson County, North Carolina. My great, great grandmother Dena had six children with the plantation owner and Confederate Captain Will Henry Brown (1868-1940, *Image C&D.*) of the historic *Brown's Battalion* although he was married to his white wife Curtsey. One of the children conceived was my great grandmother Commie. Captain Will Henry inherited the Oakland Plantation (*Image E*) from his grandfather a Revolutionary war hero named General Thomas Brown (1747-1814, *Image F&G.*) who came to North Carolina from Scotland. All of my mixed-race relatives in North Carolina were free issue, not slaves, but worked on the Oakland plantation in Bladen County, North Carolina to survive. It is fact in the family General Thomas Brown was my great, great, great grandmother Sarah's father. The Oakland Plantation was just one of many plantations General Thomas Brown owned. Using the medicinal recipes passed down to me from my grandmothers is a way of invoking the spirit and sanctifying and adorning the spirit of the figures in the painting.

I generally think of creating so much that paint is the only medium that can keep up with the velocity of my mind. My oil paints are a wet medium that allows fluidity and flow of my vision's communication from mind to brush to picture plane. Oil painting is a communication tool for me and it gives me as much freedom and means for expression as language or writing might for another person.

My own spirituality comes through in that I believe my paintings to be in dialogue with the spirit. Often my art functions like a premonition “sounding” board sparked by visions or dreams, as in *The Visit, 54 x 48 inches, Oil on canvas, wood, seed beads, and 24 karate gold leaf (Image 2)*. The Visit is a painting of a dialogue with my late maternal grandmother Mattie Beatrice Hicks- Minott, born Nattie Beatrice Hicks-Steel (1930-2008), a black and indigenous Cherokee mix from Warthen, Washington County, Georgia. Grandma Mattie's mother Marie Hall (1905-1935 *Image H&I*) was African descent and indigenous Cherokee. Her father Charlie Steel (1900- Unknown) was a man of Africa descent. My great, great, great parents Ned and Nora Payton both born in to slavery in 1860 Sandersville, Washington County, Georgia their daughter Eva Payton (1833-1973 *Image J&K*) married Wylie Hicks (1830- Unknown) who was an indigenous Cherokee. These were grandma Mattie's people. The family is documented in the early 1900's (*Image I.*) but then after Grandma Marie Steele dies at age twenty-five, the family disappears, leaving only women present in any documentation. All six great uncles and aunts from the Georgia side of the family, except one, are deceased. This has left most of my Georgia roots trapped in old, scarce photos, and it hushed stories of who they were, and the record of the Joshua Plantation they came from in Washington County, Georgia.

In *The Visit* I sit across from my beloved late grandmother Mattie. She is visiting me from the afterlife. I am seated in an old wood rocking chair and, because she is dead, she needs no chair at all; she just floats on air seated, as if she is sitting on a chair that is invisible. Grandma Mattie is seated on air higher than me, because in the afterlife everything is lighter than the physical plane of the living. The spirit is not void of empathy and love, but they are void of stress and depression. Grandma Mattie's housecoat has been turned into a beautiful floral dress. Photographs can be seen throughout the painting. Behind me, through the rocking chair are back boards, one can see just a hint of my altar with all my deceased family pictures on it. The family pictures that the viewer can see are a continuation of adoration of family through photos, and the very thing uniting me and my late grandmother.

In the painting entitled *The Path Finder, Oil on Sewn gelled Canvas, Oil on Wood Extension, Seed Beads, Thread, Adhesive, 24 Karat Gold Leaf. 81 x 71 inches (Image 3)* the focus was so strong on the spiritual aspect of the painting, I could hear the faint voices in my own delightful conversation with the spirit. While I worked in my studio, the voices of spirits appeared. They were relatives from the Georgia side of the family who have passed on. When I painted relatives on a couch in the middle of the fields, I heard faint, low, deep voices of joy, and multiple voices in unison responding, *Ohhhhh!* And a voice says from another dark corner of the painting, *"Look at meee, over here."* In particular, this was a voice that prompted me to draw out indigenous female representations of my family in the dark doorways of the old, rundown plantation house in a southern field.

Within The Path Finder we see the small middle figure stepping on the image of a picture of my great grandmother Marie. This was created by using photographs, but mainly the composition came to me from rehearsing specific words from a conversation with my only living grandmother Dorothy- Faye, lovingly called Grandma Dot, in Bolton, a small town on the eastern coast of North Carolina along the Cape Fear. My grandmother told me about the time she kept stepping on her younger brother Linzy's photograph after he was struck down in his twenties dead by an unknown car. My grandmother believed he was communicating to her from his afterlife. In my grandmother Dot's theory this could have been Linzy or it could have been a demon pretending to be Linzy. The gun on the lap of the female character figuratively salutes a black male who salutes her back. Why is the gun even present? Because it represents what is necessary within this life. The "necessary" is the survival and protection of being female in a life that has historically been a war zone for black and mixed race women. This is my view of the world as a black woman.

The themes of life after death and the dead who push me from behind while the Orishas pull me from the front to understand the messages that help me and guide me to my destiny. The idea that the voices I hear and the *shadow people* I see, visitors that I do and do not know, telling me the ways they came to be dead became a portal that I would have to fight in order to stay present. Painting allows me the rhythm and time to engage with the portal of the afterlife and remain in present life without fear or exposure.

*Myth, Oil on canvas, oil on extended wood, 70 x 58 inches. (Image 4.)* The painting combines saturated color and de saturated color. The depiction of myself wearing my Cherokee Tear dress made in Lakota style with the Four *Cherokee direction* colors of red, white, black and blue, I am wearing the Hopi Style deer wrap moccasin boots and my warrior dogs are by my side. I shaped a piece of wood and I attached it to the canvas to create space for my white dog Ché's tail. The addition adds a subtle three-dimensional effect to the painting. The addition serves the painting by completing a narrative in more than just one way. I believe the paintings reach out to the viewer because they have something to say. The hybridizing by adding an object to the painting speaks back to the narrative. I would not say that the narrative is fully understandable, since I believe the spirit dialogue present during the painting process gave it an access to another world, where a cohesive and chronological narrative may not exist. The Myth comes out the darkness and the energy is both aware and unaware of the imaginative demons or gentile spirits at bay. Does it guard or hinder? Myth spells out a feeling of helplessness and an overwhelming energy that has followed me and subdued me, from something deep in my karmic and familiar past. It is a past full of truths, good and bad, narrated through an indigenous myth, the dragon of my own making. Myth is not a painting of fears and nightmares though. It is a painting of the unknown and confronting the truth. I wrap myself in a tri-racial narrative in the painting, because the spirit has infrared eyes and can see me anywhere, and he has nothing but time to wait until I respond.

*Do You See What I See? Black Star. Oil on Canvas. Oil on gelled sewn canvas, sewn in faux grass. 48.5 x 99 inches. (Image 5.)* The painting is on a sewn gelled canvas with a seam down the middle and one across the mid-section of the top and faux plastic grass material sewn on the bottom of the canvas, and then stretched over a half circle of curved stretcher bars. The painting speaks to the past, and I used the olive green paint to represent the past. Strong, indigenous American, tri-racial women with their children stand in what is a representation of the racial quilt I stem from, a mother and daughter, aunt and nieces and nephew. The only boy is held in the arms of his aunt. I paint the three “me’s” on a half dead horse. I hold a shotgun in my hands, ready to save the day and avenge our historically-raped dignity that has been reduced to symbols of the sexually sweet to taste, *Brown Sugar*. I dismiss this reduction.

The three “me’s” represent the three races I defend in validation of tri-racial people who in the end are black by definition of the “One Drop Law” of Virginia's *Racial Integrity Act of 1924*. In 1792 white lawmakers felt the need to distinguish the rapidly increasing mix race population from whites. A law stated that people with one fourth African ancestry were “mulatto” (half mule, half African field laborer, and half European.) By 1866 a new law declared any person with more than one fourth or more of African American blood was to be deemed “colored”. Any person who was not “colored” and had one fourth Indian blood was deemed Indian.

By 1910 the law changed to reduce the amount a person would have to be deemed colored. The “One Drop Law” made extreme racial classification legal in Virginia and the rest of the country followed suit. But on March 20, 1924, Virginia passed an *Act to*

*Preserve Racial Integrity*. This law was born out of fear that a new world race was mixing into the white population, a new world race in between slave and master. What exemplified ownership of human cattle by showing evidence of power over will. The rapes. The "*Act to Preserve Racial Integrity*," was passed in Virginia March 20, 1924. Through this law, all mixed-race people were subject to segregation laws, including those that prohibited interracial marriage. Racial designations of "white" or "colored" were required for every Virginia resident through the State Bureau of Vital Statistics. Doctors, midwives, and other health county officials were ordered to fill out birth registration forms that classify children they delivered as either "colored" or "white." If Walter Ashby Plecker, the head of the Virginia Bureau of Vital Statistics, believed children were misclassified as white or Indian, he would threaten the health officials with arrest and jail time. Only two races were recognized under The Racial Integrity Act of 1924. A racial description was recognized under The Racial Integrity Act of 1924. A racial description was required for every person at their birth and the act also outlawed marriage between white and non-white people, declaring it a felony. Under Plecker, Virginia "adhered strictly to the one-drop rule", this claimed that any person with any amount of African ancestry was black.

Interestingly enough, *The Birth of a Nation* a film about the fear of mixed race people rising up and entering all white domains was released in 1915. Written by *Thomas Dixon Jr, D.W Griffith, and Frank E. Woods*, this film paints the tension in the United States for black people and mixed race people. The film, although racist, is revered as one of the greatest films ever released. Mixed race persons living in that time would not

come forward saying they were mixed because it was seen as wanting to be white, and that was seen as arrogant by the white communities. Many of half-white mixed race children were born to unmarried women. The white fathers were not often present. Wanting to be white was also shameful for mixed race people, who having truthfully witnessed the racism of the United States, should not want to be white when under the white system they were deemed not only lawless but nonexistent. In this respect I look to validate my elder family members in paint because they themselves did not have a voice. I am validating them.

There has been a bastardization of a people and the way they came into being was oppressive, and that was their existence in life. The family was forced by society to be proud of who they were, but they were in fact, isolated. Isolation in the south along the eastern coast of North Carolina or in the mountains of Georgia became a way to maintain the generations of racial mixing that took place and continues to this day. I grew up knowing that part of history was my history. I try to capture elements of all three races in my paintings.

The gaze of the figures I have chosen to portray in oil paint reach out to the viewer. It's difficult to pass by the painting without looking back into their eyes. The vibrant colors and the carefully created three-dimensional additions, such as extended wood, extend the space of the painting and may speak back to the viewer about culture and ritual or from which culture it comes from. The paintings pops out of the canvas toward the viewer and the viewer is also invited into my world through the painting. The figures are not telling the viewer a complete story. The paintings are ambiguous enough to allow the viewer to make up their own story to complete their own understanding of what they are seeing and to get lost in the details.

I believe that this is the success of the work. It is not an illustrated story; it still leaves the space for an individual's response to the paintings. The viewer gets to make up when, where, and why. I paint beyond race and obvious social structures and go deep into my imagination to create my visions, as well as letting my intuition guide me in paint. I trust that the spirits will guide me in my future paintings as they do in my life through the spirit window I am always creating and communicating with.

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