



THE SILENCE IS DEAFENING

The visual culture of the African Diaspora is woven into the intricately executed works of Ron Bechet. Tangled vines, roots, the bases of large trees, and the decomposition of the forest floor are the subject of these layered scenes of tangled imagery. Here, we are gifted with the physical proximity of life and death – How they share the same organic space, how they sleep together as equals. The flora of South Louisiana’s natural landscape is cleaved open to expose its roots.

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Charcoal on paper

12’h x 22’w

Ron Bechet

b. 1959

American

LET’S LOOK

What is the setting of this scene? How can you tell?

Where are the individual plants and trees?

Find one vine and follow it as far as you can.

Bechet’s work illustrates a story of a Louisiana best understood as a dynamic meeting of land, water, and roots. Defined more by its constantly changing coastline rather than by any arbitrary borders, Louisiana is a marshy merger of sea and shore with a tangled rooted border dispersed throughout. In this work we must grapple with nature’s complicated relationship with the human spirit. Whimsical



yet haunting, Bechet’s work communicates volumes about the resilience and buoyancy of a life lived below sea level. These works tell a story about Louisiana’s complex relationship with elements that are at once life giving and unpredictable. Rising seas and the disappearance of protective wetlands threaten Louisiana’s broad, heavily populated delta, making it the most endangered coastland on the planet.

In Bechet's œuvre each tree disperses into many tangled roots that touch other roots, that dig below the surface, that intertwine with branches and leaves that make their way to water, that strangle houses and invade fences, that seem to be familiar and haunting yet beautiful. Here is botany that has every potential of becoming monstrous. All of these meanderings are used to symbolize the deep historical roots of a family home and exhibits the precariousness of nature, both human and environmental, with all of its nurturing and destructive potential. Ultimately upon closer inspection bodies emerge from the interwoven plant life, rendered with a physicality and fervor that brings what is buried to the surface. It is a diaspora body, skin folded back to reveal its elegant and resilient backbone.

Context

Landscape Painting

Landscape paintings as we know them today have their roots in devotional painting of the Renaissance period. Artists of the time, particularly in the schools of Northern Europe, often painted contemporary buildings and local wilderness as a backdrop to religious tableaux. This demonstrated both the artist's command of perspective and their agility with a variety of subject matter. When religious imagery fell out of favor at the onset of the Reformation in the early 16th century, artists adapted by making the landscape a focal point of their paintings. Artists such as Jacob van Ruisdel created canvases devoid of all narrative structure, focusing exclusively on natural elements.

Landscape painting was firmly established as a genre by the 17th century. However, it was not considered a legitimate pursuit by the painting academies of the time, such as the *Académie de Peinture et de Sculpture* (later the *Académie des Beaux Arts*) in Paris, and the Royal Academy of Art in London. Dozens of academies in Europe and the United States provided artistic education and exhibition spaces for students, and ostensibly determined what was considered "art" in Europe until the 1860s and 1870s. These academies were often sponsored and run by the government, and the *Académie de Peinture et de Sculpture*, in particular, espoused the Enlightenment-born idea that aesthetic matters could be subjected to reason. This led to the Académie assuming almost complete control of all matters relating to the creation of art in France, and thus Europe. The Académie asserted this control with regularly-held Salons which only exhibited work that adhered to a very specific set of rules. Until the 19th century, landscape painting did not meet this criteria and was believed to have no merit. As a result, the Académie only offered its first course in Landscape Painting in 1816.

By this time, however, a revolution was underway. By 1821, the Académie had created the *Prix de Rome en Paysage Historique* landscape painting competition, which awarded a prize of several years' fully-funded study in Rome to the winner. At the same time, English painter Constable was braving the elements to capture the fleeting qualities of the English countryside, most notably with his oil entitled *The Hay Wain*. And Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, who would make his name as a leader of the Barbizon School, was already creating his expansive, tree-filled canvases. The authority of the academies was also challenged by the rise of Romanticism, which promoted the idea of the artist as an individual creative genius who possessed talent which could not be taught. But it was the Impressionist movement that finally prevailed over the authority of the academies. Promoting practices such as painting outside, or "en plein air," which the academies especially frowned upon, Impressionists such as Monet and Renoir

were able to topple academic power by swaying public tastes away from traditional forms, and toward artwork created with free, emotional expression. No longer were Academic paintings, which endorsed Neoclassical ideals through mythological and allegorical subjects, considered a higher art than works that captured the world, from city to mountains, with immediacy and intimacy.

About the Artist

Born and raised in New Orleans, Bechet began his college career with an athletic scholarship at Mississippi State University, but returned to study art at the University of New Orleans where he earned his B.A. He went on to earn an MFA degree in Painting from Yale University School of Art. His work is inspired by his experiences and observations of the consequences of forces of nature, time, and ritual on the human experience. He describes his expressive and improvisational mark making as grounded in the experiences and cultural practices of New Orleans African-American culture. But his work also owes much to nineteenth century European and American considerations of nature and its impact on the human spirit. Casper David Friedrich is here and Robert Scott Duncanson too. In this work, the revelation of the effects of terrain, light, and water symbolize humanity's attempt to grasp the awe-inspiring fecund landscape of Louisiana, focusing on the slow deterioration and death of the landscape and how it is intricately interwoven with the inevitability of reconciliation and transformation.

Let's Look Again

There is a single palm tree in this work. What do you think it represents?

The roots and vines, in certain areas, resemble human limbs. In groups of three, make up a story about the person or people entwined in this landscape.

Writing Activities

This installation literally invites the viewer to step inside the landscape. Imagine you have arrived inside this work. How would your other senses be engaged?

Bechet captures his landscapes with an exceptional level of detail. What do you think can be found in the hidden crevices of the tree roots and vines?

Bechet's influences are varied. As rooted as he is in African-American culture in New Orleans, he is also influenced by 19th-century European and American painting. Find one landscape painting that illustrates the European aesthetic and write a paragraph comparing and contrasting it with Bechet's work.

Hand's On Activity

Bechet finds inspiration in the natural world around him. Take the artistic tools of your choice outside, "en plein air," and document one of your favorite natural landscapes in as much detail as you can.

References:

Rau, William, *Nineteenth-Century European Painting: From Barbizon to Belle Époque*, 2012

<https://www.britannica.com/art/academy-of-art#ref41276>