



ART STUDENT'S PAINTBRUSH DRAWS 'GIANTS'

[By ANDE RICHARDS]

[Photos By MAJESTY JORDAN AND CREATIVECOMMONS]

BLUITT, BRANDO, BALDWIN – NO, IT'S NOT A LAW FIRM. IT IS HOW A PORTRAIT OF A FAMOUS AUTHOR PAINTED BY AN L.A. CITY COLLEGE STUDENT, LED TO A CHANCE MEETING WITH A MOVIE STAR, WHICH LED TO A MEETUP WITH THE FAMOUS AUTHOR IN THE PAINTING.

Rufus did all the driving. Timothy ran his mouth the entire trip. He chatted nervously about what to expect at the art fair. Otis Reading, Aretha Franklin and Marvin Gaye were hot artists back in the '70s, but as Rufus Daigle and Timothy Bluitt cruised on U.S. Route 101, they listened to Bob Marley. It was Rufus' van after all, and he loved Marley.

They drove through cities that owe their names to Spanish origins — San Mateo, Palo Alto and

Santa Clara. They arrived at a school gymnasium in San Jose. A number and a space assigned to each artist indicated where they would set up their booth. Rufus paid the entry fees—a \$65 investment. It would be Timothy's first art show.

It was a Sunday, and the fair teemed with people dressed in suits and ties like they had just come from church. Others wore more casual attire. People walked around and looked at the art; the crowd was spending money.

They asked the artists how much for this and

how much for that. Timothy kept changing his prices and Rufus reprimanded him — “you have to keep the prices consistent!”

Rufus showed his oil paintings, mainly portraits and landscapes. Timothy told Rufus his portraits were much stronger. Ironically, Timothy and Rufus had both painted portraits of the famed author James Baldwin, often called one of the greatest writers of the 20th century.

The talented essayist, novelist and playwright is remembered as much for his activism in the civil



rights movement, as for his prose. Titles include “Notes on a Native Son,” “Fire Next Time,” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain.”

“I’m a little nervous,” Timothy says as he recalls his face to face encounter with a legend. “He is just going to say nice job and he is going to walk by.” Timothy’s insecurity mounted.

“The competition here is so thick, there are so many other people here way better than I am,” Timothy says. “I just put something together. I’m just fumbling in the dark.” But before Timothy could collect himself, Marlon Brando asks about his painting.

“He stops and he looks at it, looks at me and looks at it again and asks, ‘You’re the artist?’” Timothy says as if it happened yesterday. “Yes sir,” he replied. “How much?” Brando asks. “And I said \$600.”

Brando asks Timothy if he would take a check. Timothy says that he will take whatever Brando has in his pocket.

“So, he says to the young lady he is with, ‘Give him \$600.’ So, she reaches into her bag, pulls out her wallet and hands me six crisp \$100 bills,” Timothy says. “I thought to myself that this is a dream, and I’m going to wake up.”

Timothy didn’t have time to wake up because right after that, Ralph Carter — the actor who played Michael, JJ’s little brother on the 1970s popular TV sitcom, “Good Times,” — wrote him a check for \$800 for a huge painting. It depicted three African American kids.

“One was standing at the blackboard working on an advanced mathematics problem, the other was

looking through a microscope and the third was reading a book,” Timothy says. “He bought it. He kept saying this is our future. This is where we have to direct our people.”

Vietnam War Inspires Activist Mission

The Vietnam War raged in Southeast Asia while Americans watched the conflict on their television sets every night. An estimated 2 million Vietnamese people died as the body bags of fallen soldiers piled up in the U.S. It was a confusing war for the soldiers in combat and an unpopular war for the folks back home.

“I was in the Marines from 1966 to 1970 and stationed in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968,” Timothy says. “I did a 13-month tour of duty there. I was 19 years old.”

Timothy met his long-time friend Rufus in Vietnam. He also experienced troubling situations — but not from the enemy.

Timothy went to a village where there were no men. Just boys, old men and women. That meant one thing: The young men were out fighting the Americans. There was another Marine in Timothy’s troop that used this opportunity to assert himself. He made his annoyance that no one in the village spoke English clear. He began to shout derogatory words at the villagers as he wielded his weapon.

“This young woman looked like she was about 19 or 20,” he says. “He took his hand and stuck it down the back of her black pajama trousers and grabbed her buttocks and said she’s got a fat ass on her ... When she started crying, he took the hand from there and started fondling her breasts and said

she’s got nice boobs on her also.”

At that moment, Timothy says he realized his fellow officer was determined to dehumanize the people in the village. He wanted to let them know he could do anything. He was in charge.

“These people are crying, petrified,” Timothy says. “Old people down on their knees begging, and these two ignorant assholes were just laughing. And I’m saying don’t do this, we are better than this, this isn’t who we are. And I’m feeling guilty because I’m wearing the same uniform they are wearing. At that moment, I realized I was an activist.”

Paintbrush Brings Portrait to Life

Timothy did his time in the Marines and then headed to Berkeley to earn a degree. He studied philosophy. He says his parents didn’t care what he majored in. They were just happy he was going to college.

In 1979, Baldwin spoke at a UC Berkeley event. Timothy was listening to the man his parents had praised for intelligence and wit. The man whose portrait he painted because they all looked up to him. In his talk that evening, Baldwin spoke about the nuances of racism.

“What a writer is obliged at some point to realize is that he’s involved in a language he has to change,” Baldwin said during the event. “For example, for a black writer, especially in this country, to be born into the English language is to realize that the assumptions of the language the assumptions of which the language operates are his enemy.”

After hearing those words, Timothy approached Baldwin and asked if he could interview him.

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“He asked me, ‘Are you a journalist? Are you working for some magazine or newspaper?’” Timothy says. “And I said, no sir. I said I’m just an individual and I would love to meet with you.”

Timothy told Baldwin about how he sold a portrait of him to his friend Marlon Brando. Upon hearing that, Baldwin agreed to meet with Timothy the next day.

“We met at the Le Mediterranee café down the street from campus,” Timothy says. “He walked in and I said, ‘Whatever you want, I’ll take care of it.’ And he said, ‘Aren’t you the big shot?’ And I told him, ‘I’m taking up your time.’”

They talked for about an hour and 40 minutes. Timothy says he watched Baldwin smoke cigarette after cigarette and drink red wine. Baldwin picked up the tab at the restaurant.

“He told me that he didn’t leave the United States to escape racism,” Timothy says.

“He said he was looking forward to finding something better. He said he had more freedom in France to write and to live like a human being. But racism is everywhere, and if they find a place where there is no racism and no hostility against black people in particular, they will export it to that environment. It’s everywhere. There is no escaping it.”

On hearing those words, Timothy recalled a billboard ad he saw in Vietnam. It featured a very dark black man with big white teeth. The brand was called Darkie Toothpaste.

“So, I asked this captain, ‘What’s that?’ Timothy says. “And he said to me, ‘Oh the French left that here.’ And I said, ‘If the French left it here it would



be in French. Why is it in English?’ My friend Carlos said to me later on, they get the Vietnamese to act hostile toward you, and then it creates friction between blacks and the Vietnamese.”

Artist Starts a New Chapter

Timothy reads a book a month and recently read, “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America” by James Allen. He wants to do something on the subject of lynching, but first, he wants to complete a series of 20 pieces that feature African American historical figures.

Writer and civil rights activist, W.E.B. Du Bois said all art is propaganda, and it should be used to gain the rights of black folk to love and enjoy. Timothy has taken that edict to heart.

“I want to paint people who didn’t give up,” he says. “Muhammad Ali stood his ground.”

Timothy may paint James Baldwin again and Langston Hughes, Frantz Fanon, Malcom X, Winnie Mandela, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone.

Timothy married, but he divorced and did not have any children. He suffers from PTSD because of his experiences in Vietnam. He never took formal art classes, but as a substitute, he read books and observed what other people were doing while they created art.

Five years ago, Timothy retired and decided to take art classes at Los Angeles City College. A drawing class and an oil painting class.

“We are always learning,” he says. “I think a person is cheating themselves if they don’t try to learn something new every day. Once we stop learning it’s because we’re dead.”



1. Timothy Bluitt begins work on a portrait of jazz great Billie Holiday as part of his series on historical black figures. Bluitt says the achievements of vocalists like Holiday and Nina Simone inspire him with their talent despite turbulent personal lives.

2. Timothy paints a portrait of his friend Safika. Bluitt paints the famous and people from his inner circle.

3. James Baldwin takes a cigarette break. Baldwin is considered one of the great writers of the 20th Century as well as a fervent civil rights activist known for his elegant critiques of racism.

4. Charlton Heston, James Baldwin, Marlon Brando, Harry Belafonte and Sydney Poitier stand with activists at a civil rights “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” Washington D.C. on Aug. 28, 1963. The march is remembered as the occasion for Dr. Martin Luther King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech.