

Image page 1, top: "The Road Less Traveled"
2024, mixed media on cradleboard and hardboard,
20" x 53"

Image page 1, bottom: "Two Roads"
2023, mixed media on cradleboard and matboard,
9.5" x 26"

Image page 2, top: "Soul Mapping"
2024, mixed media on canvas, 40"x30"

Image page 2, bottom: detail from "Same All the Way
Down"
2024, mixed media on board, 16" diameter round
plus three 4" diameter rounds (not pictured)

Image page 3, top: "Scattered Fragments,
Reassembled"
2024, mixed media on canvas, 40"x30"

Image page 3, bottom: "The New Angel of History"
2023-2024, mixed media on canvas, 40"x30"



Cracking Open My Own Certainties

Suzanne Scott Constantine

"People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them."
-James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 1955

Each of us lugs around our entire personal history. In our bodies. In our souls. In our minds. Some of that history is obvious; some is invisible even to us. But we all live inside the legacies of our personal and communal pasts, whether or not we acknowledge it.

My story has straddled two centuries. I struggle to make sense of my personal past from the shards of family stories and personal experiences, all slowly emerging from my inadequate memories. I also struggle to expand my understanding of our collective past, as old narratives fall away and suppressed or forgotten or misvalued fragments emerge to expand our incomplete knowledge.

I do not pretend to a unifying vision of even my own life history, let alone our collective past. Instead, I view my job as an artist and writer to stand as witness at the intersection where personal and collective narratives meet. My task is to amass the fragments I receive, evaluate them in an earnest and receptive spirit, and then use my skills to reshape and communicate them into artforms offering hope and optimism.

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If that sounds grandiose, it is because my personal history of the South was trapped in a child's perspective of the 1940s and 1950s. And as Baldwin suggested, I was trapped inside that story, too. That is, until I moved back to my home state. At first, I was wary of becoming Southern again after liberating myself more than six decades earlier. Soon I discovered that my *certainty* about the South and my flight from all things Southern had bound me, not freed me. My *certainty* imprisoned a portion of my soul without my knowledge or consent.

But I am learner. And I am *still* learning. Learning again that when I am most certain of something, that's my cue to look again. To step away from autopilot thinking and shift into a beginner's mind.

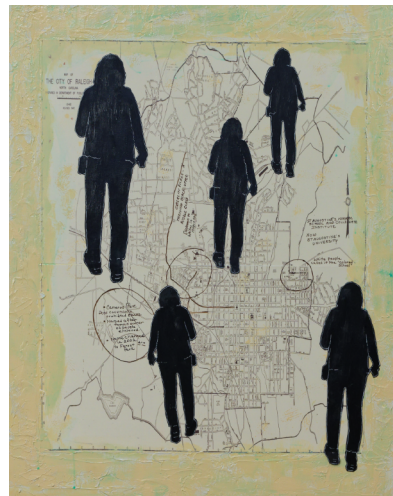
Over the years, artmaking and writing have been my greatest teachers. One example: like many artists, I reuse my canvases. The writing and textures and visual texts of the older works still exist, even when covered with new paint, and I believe they still speak. In the new work, I feel the energy of what lies beneath the surface. What is invisible to the naked eye energizes what is visible in the painting. In art history, the interplay of old and new is called *palimpsest*, with the paper or canvas itself still holding the precious traces of its history in an eternal present.



Not just my art, but my whole life, is personified and contained in this concept of palimpsest, and especially in making the works for this exhibition. As I work, new insights about my new/old homeplace swallow up my fossilized dogmas about the South—entrenched ideas that were created through my child ways of seeing, and later through my *imperial eyes* reading my own image into everything I saw. My old

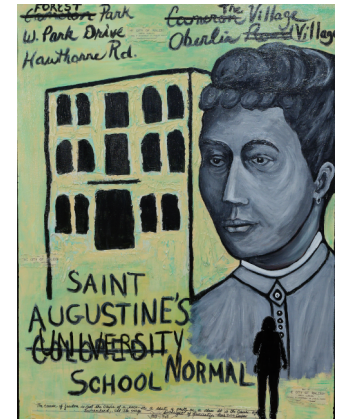
certainties begin to crack open, shape-shifting to accommodate complexity and nuance. Suddenly I begin to inhabit the audacious ambiguity of NOW. Because I am still learning.

As a child, I used to lie outside staring at the heavens, working myself into a panic thinking about the complexities of time and space, alarmed at my insignificance and the impossibility of comprehending it all. As an adult, I see my place in the immensity of life a little differently. Rather than a linear progression, I view our personal narratives – as well as our communal ones – as a spiral, repeating over and over, going deeper each time we circle back to confront the “same old situation.” The one we thought we had escaped. Or the

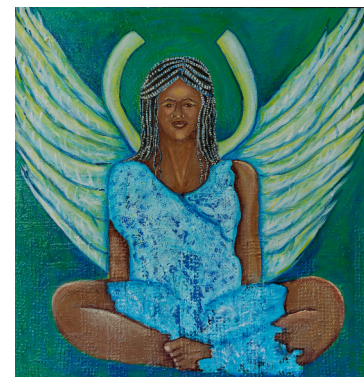


one that we know still needs healing. The paradox of the spiral is that, as the spiral's power pulls us down into the maelstrom, we remain the same people at every level; yet if we can traverse the spiral as if it were a labyrinth, a tool for meditation, we also are changed by new insights. Forever the same; forever changed. In my renewed relationship to the South, I aspire to be that person in the silhouette standing in as witness who cooperates with the spiral, without judgment, hoping to be the calm and wide-awake observer to what is unfolding around me, open to what the vortex may reveal.

In one such wide-awake moment in 2018, I discovered Anna Julia Cooper. Born in Raleigh in 1858 to an enslaved mother, Anna Julia Cooper was educated at St. Augustine and Oberlin College, became principal at a high school for Black students in Washington DC, wrote extensively, completed a doctorate at the Sorbonne at the age of 67, and eventually moved back to Raleigh where she died in 1964. Incredulous that it had taken me so long to learn about this extraordinary African American woman, I set out to understand why. Historians and feminist researchers have made her exemplary life and career more widely known; she even has a US stamp honoring her work and recently was the subject of a play entitled “Tempestuous Elements.”



Still, few white people know anything about her, and my own family lived in her orbit without ever knowing she existed. During her long life in Raleigh and in Washington, DC, my family moved through the same landscapes but on opposite tracks, sometimes parallel, but never intersecting. The answer to my question “why” was simple: the strictures of Southern “gentility,” taught to me all too well during my North Carolina upbringing, kept the journeys of my family completely separate from Anna Julia Cooper's, because racial separation was a cornerstone of that code.



As one goal for my work in this exhibition, I wanted to honor Anna Julia Cooper's extraordinary life. In “Scattered Fragments, Reassembled,” I represent the push-pull of my past and present through the places both she and I would have been and known in Raleigh that have moved in a better direction with the times. In “The New Angel of History,” I disavow the legacy of false hierarchies and poisonous gentility and declare that the aspirational spirit of today's South resides in the true gentlewoman of Raleigh, Anna Julia Cooper.