



BARBARA BULLOCK

UBIQUITOUS PRESENCE



Ubiquitous Presence

selected works by
Barbara Bullock

September 15 — October 30, 2022

List Gallery, Swarthmore College



**Barbara Bullock dedicates *Ubiquitous Presence* to
Jack Bullock Jr., A. M. Weaver, and James Nixon Jr.**



Power and Inquiry in the Art of Barbara Bullock

by Andrea Packard
List Gallery Director

Ubiquitous Presence, Selected Works by Barbara Bullock and this accompanying catalog celebrate the accomplishments of an artist who consistently challenges Western European artistic conventions, centers Black cultures, and fosters new ways of seeing. Hailed as "The Adored Maverick" by A.M. Weaver, Barbara Bullock researches diverse art traditions, particularly the arts of Africa and the African diaspora, and improvises freely with form, color, and rhythm.¹ The "ubiquitous presence" that informs Bullock's oeuvre emanates from both the importance of Black lives and beliefs that can connect all humanity. Her dynamic works in diverse media have continued to evolve over more than sixty years. As Syd Carpenter notes,

"Bullock has been a stalwart and icon of the Philadelphia art community for many decades. Over the years, she has expanded her art in unlimited directions, always originating from a distinctly personal voice and experience. Her work vigorously contributes not only to a local narrative, but also to national and international conversations about identity, spirituality and the expression of Black femininity in all its exquisite complexity."²

During the past 25 years, Bullock has received many such tributes as well as notable awards, residencies, and public commissions. Bullock's wide-ranging oeuvre includes oil

paintings, sculptures, book arts, prints, altars, mixed media works, and more. Over the course of her career, she has alternated between abstract and figurative modes and created a hybrid visual language that synthesizes diverse approaches to making art. Although the African American Museum in Philadelphia mounted an important survey of Bullock's works in 1988, her accomplishments since then merit a museum retrospective. In the meantime, the modest scale of the List Gallery offers viewers the opportunity to intimately experience nine of Bullock's wall-mounted, cut-paper assemblages created between 2011 and 2019 together with 14 portraits that have never been exhibited before. The portraits are part of a larger series created in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing prevalence of racism.

Formative Years and Communities

To fully appreciate Bullock's achievements and the relevance of her recent work, it is important to consider some of the challenges and influences that shaped her artistic journey.

Bullock's parents moved from North Carolina to Philadelphia in the 1930s as part of the Great Migration from the rural South to the industrial North. She was born in Philadelphia in 1938, and her parents separated when she was young. Her mother died when she was 12 years old, and she moved with her siblings, Jack and Delores, into the home of her father and her stepmother, Gertrude. Amid that loss and the challenges of de-facto segregation in the 1950s and 1960s, she found comfort in her loving "second mother," other relatives, and an extended community in North Philadelphia. She also developed resilience through pursuing dance, music, reading, and art.

Bullock was especially influenced by her paternal grandparents, who she visited on family trips to North Carolina. Her grandmother, Mattie Bullock, was of Scotts-Irish ancestry and a gifted story teller (see family photo, opposite page). Her grandfather, the Reverend Oscar Bullock, was born into slavery. As Bullock reflects, "My grandfather was a freed man—think of that!" The realities of Jim Crow segregation were most visible to Bullock on road trips during the artist's youth, when her family could not stop at whites-only restaurants. Although Bullock felt relatively secure in her predominantly Black neighborhood of Germantown, Philadelphia was notorious for systemic injustices, such as redlining, de-facto segregation, racial profiling, and violent police tactics—to name just a few factors that led to race riots in 1964. Bullock was already sixteen in 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that the racial segregation of public schools is unconstitutional. Two years later, when Bullock graduated from Germantown High School and considered entering art schools dominated by white men, she drew upon her clarity of purpose and her grandparents' ancestral knowledge, wisdom, and spirituality.

In 1956, when she was 18 years old, Bullock began attending Saturday-morning courses at Fleisher Art Memorial in Philadelphia. She took drawing and painting classes there for three years and supported herself through babysitting, cooking, cleaning, and other part-time jobs. In 1963, she enrolled in night classes at Hussian School of Art, a commercially-oriented art program that primarily served army veterans. Bullock remembers being one of the only students who was not receiving financial support through the G. I. Bill. She also remembers being asked to draw from a white plaster miniature replica of Michelangelo's *David*—the very model of the Western European canon. When Bullock portrayed the figure with brown skin, she was sternly admonished, and even threatened with expulsion: "You need to stop painting Black people—I was told that so many times."³

Nevertheless, Bullock continued to draw Black and Brown bodies and sought out models among her Black friends. Eventually, she found guidance by joining a circle of talented Black artists. After a chance meeting with Richard Watson and Cranston Walker, who were students at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and John Simpson, a sculptor, she joined a diverse group of artists that included Charles Pridgen, Joe Bailey, Moe Brooker, James Brantley, Walter Edmonds, Charles Searles, and Ellen Powell Tiberino. Artists in this circle regularly met at Simpson's studio on Market and 13th streets or Pridgen's nearby studio. Bullock admired their dedication, developed enduring friendships, and learned a great deal from their rigorous debates about art, race, and identity. As she states, "They influenced me as an artist. People might talk about artworks by Jacob Lawrence or ask, 'Do you consider yourself an Artist or an African American Artist?,' and the discussions would go on from 10:00 p.m. until 3:00 or 4:00 a.m."⁴

Ellen Tiberino was an especially important friend and role model. Just a year older than Bullock, Tiberino was gifted and prolific at drawing and painting. She often portrayed painful historic events, such as lynchings, and her work ethic was remarkable—she continued to paint and give lessons, even when she was in bed, dying of cancer. Bullock recently likened Tiberino to Frida Kahlo—another prodigious talent who unflinchingly portrayed human suffering, made no distinctions between art and life, and who died in her prime. While Bullock was still in her twenties, Tiberino was one of the few active Black women artists she knew. Observing that many male artists were supported by their wives and that most female artists who married became marginalized, Bullock decided to remain single. As she puts it,

"I married my art."⁵

Exploring the Arts of Africa and the African Diaspora

Bullock's creative process was also catalyzed by her work as a teacher and her friendships with dancers and jazz musicians. In the early 1970s, Bullock served as the artistic director of the Model Cities Program at Ile Ife Black Humanitarian Center. Ile Ife was founded in 1969 by Arthur Hall, whose Afro-American Dance Ensemble integrated African and Modern dance forms. In the 1970s, Ile Ife served as a Black cultural hub that attracted talented artists, dancers, and musicians from all over the world. Bullock took dance lessons from Hall, and some of his dancers became her life models. At Ile Ife, Bullock worked alongside other notable artists, including Charles Searles, John Simpson, and Charles Pridgen, and she hired Martha Jackson Jarvis to teach ceramics.

She also became close friends with the internationally acclaimed jazz artist, Sun Ra, who had moved to the Germantown section of Philadelphia in 1968. As Barbara recalls,

"I remember this time, being in someone's house: Someone was playing the piano, and we were all there—just friends. We felt really strong, even though the galleries and music venues weren't open to us. We just knew were artists. All of us loved jazz and the blues. That's Black art—it's a part of your life."⁶



Bullock's expanding circle of creative artists helped her develop expertise in numerous African artistic traditions and cultures. They shared and discussed new resources, such as Ulli Beier's survey, *Contemporary Art in Africa* (1968). Such knowledge also broadened her spiritual beliefs. Originally raised as a Catholic, Bullock developed a more polytheistic understanding, an awareness of intangible energies and spirits, and a desire to commune with and honor ancestors. She became especially fascinated by the work of contemporary African artists, such as Twins Seven Seven (1944-2011), who was born in Nigeria and was the only surviving child among seven sets of twins. Accordingly, many believed he possessed unique insight; his multi-faceted art transmitted his own experience of the spirit world and Yoruba folklore.

Barbara Bullock's grandmother, Mattie Bullock, sits in the center of a couch, surrounded by her family. Bullock's father, James (Jack), is seated on the far right side and her "second mother," Gertrude, stands in the back row, second from the left. C. 1960s. Photo courtesy of Barbara Bullock.

In 1980, Bullock began a series of extended journeys that allowed her to gain first-hand knowledge of traditional art forms and cultures in diverse countries. Over the next 23 years, she visited important cultural centers in Spain, Haiti, Jamaica, Brazil, Mexico, Senegal, Morocco, Egypt, Ghana, the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Niger. In each country, she marveled at the incredible beauty of the landscape and the black night sky; took inspiration from textiles, masks, and other craft forms; witnessed ceremonies and masquerades; met artists and artisans; and took pictures (with the permission of her subjects). She identified themes, motifs, principles, and materials that were especially resonant for her; incorporating them into her own creative practice, she developed an eclectic and deeply personal aesthetic.

During this period of intense travel and research, Bullock read extensively and was especially inspired by Ben Okri's book, *The Famished Road* (1996). The book prompted Bullock to create a narrative series, *Child in the Land of the Spirits*. Over more than two years, she created collages that represent the dilemma faced by Okri's protagonist—a boy who is caught between the spirit realm and extreme hardship in the everyday world.

Confronting a Homeland in Perpetual Crisis

Even after her last trip to Africa in 2003, Bullock remained fascinated by narratives about spiritual journeys and the interrelationships between familiar and otherworldly realms. Such concerns informed her work on several ambitious series, including *Spirit House*, *Journey*, *Healer*, *Katrina*, and *Chasing After Spirits*. However, she also felt an increasing need to directly address contemporary events in the United States.

One such event was Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the Gulf Coast in August 2005. Like many Americans, Bullock was deeply disturbed by the horrific loss of life, televised scenes showing more than 15,000 people suffering in the Louisiana Superdome, and news of patients trapped and dying in nursing homes without adequate care. Bullock remembers thinking, "Is this another country?" And she notes, "That's when, mentally, I came back from Africa. Ever since that point, I've asked, What is happening around you?"⁷



Subsequently, Bullock continued to reflect on the implications of Katrina and other events that threaten society. Bullock has said that while making *House Transitioning to Ancestor* (opposite), she was still wondering about those who lost their homes and lives, not only because of Katrina, but because of systemic failures that dispropor-

tionately impact poor and minority communities. In part, such works provide a way of imagining the transition from life to the realm of spirits and ancestors. The titles of *Transformation 1* and *Transformation 2*, as well as their animated and open forms, underscore Bullock's interest in dynamic and ineffable states of being.



Considering Color

Visitors to Bullock's exquisite Germantown studio can immediately see that her life and art are completely intertwined. Paintings, collages, and sculptures from various stages of her career intermingle with art supplies, painted and hand-carved furniture, art books and catalogs, and jazz CDs. Vibrant color is everywhere: brightly colored bowls and baskets, bags of African fabric, and numerous masks and sculptures from all over the world. Her studio walls are a deep saffron color—the primary key in which she composes. The color activates the interior spaces within her undulating assemblages and deepens her crimson reds, ultramarine blues, and viridian greens. Most importantly, it makes her diverse hues of black appear more nuanced and vital. In fact, the color is essential to her practice. As Bullock states,

"I use black because in popular culture it has been used in such a negative way. I always want to show strength, and I want to show power. And so, I use a lot of black in my work. It's a constant."⁸

Accordingly, when Bullock and I decided that *Ubiquitous Presence* would primarily feature her recent unframed works on paper, I suggested we paint the main gallery the same color as her studio walls. Whereas white walls are often associated with Western Modernism and commercial spaces, her rich golden color disrupts habits of seeing and sparks intuition.

Opposite: Barbara Bullock in her studio, 2021
Photo: Grace Roselli, *Pandora's BoxX Project*



In contrast to the golden glow animating the front room of the List Gallery, the rear room (shown at right), appears more somber in tone. One wall was painted black to offset *Trayvon Martin, Most Precious Blood* (shown opposite), Bullock's expressive testimonial honoring Martin, an innocent Black youth who was murdered by a white vigilante, and his grieving mother. As Bullock and others have noted, her title alludes to the name of the Roman Catholic church she attended when she was young and, by extension, the sacrificial Blood of Christ. At the same time, her broken organic shapes and expressive use of black and blood-red colors metonymically suggest larger historic patterns. As Woodmere Museum of Art Director William Valerio writes,

"For Bullock, the murdered body of Trayvon Martin represents all the bodies that have come before, including the generations of slaves on whose backs this country was built, the men and women who were lynched and torched in the era of Jim Crow, and those individuals like Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, the nine members of Charleston's Emmanuel A.M.E. Church, Sandra Bland, and others whose deaths came as the result of institutionalized brutality or overt racism."⁹



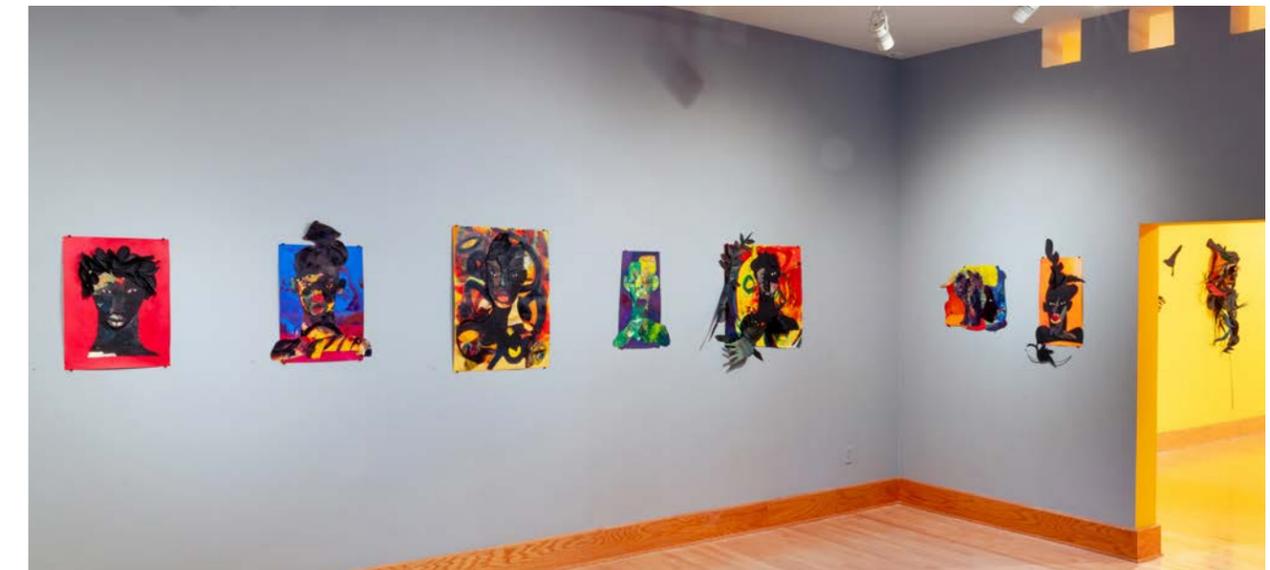
Above: Installation view



Creating During Covid

At the List Gallery, the three walls surrounding *Trayvon Martin*, *Most Precious Blood* were painted grey to accent a selection of portraits Bullock created during the Covid-19 pandemic. In part, these works respond to varied personal losses, including the sudden death of her older brother, Jack Ronald Bullock Jr., who died of Covid-19; the recent deaths of numerous friends, including A.M. Weaver; and a cat she had cherished for 18 years. In addition, Bullock was deeply affected by the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 by a white police officer—an event that sparked protests in Philadelphia and other cities throughout the U.S. Quarantining in her studio during a time of personal grief and social upheaval, Bullock found herself unable to work on her larger and more lyrical assemblages, but found a way forward through creating portraits.

After improvising on a smaller scale, Bullock created one of her first portraits, *Once in a Blue Moon 1* (page 29). The work pays homage to the creative genius of Romare Bearden, a leading artist of the Harlem Renaissance and a model for many who work in collage. Rather than working from direct observation or seeking verisimilitude in her portraits, Bullock abstracted features drawn from varied sources, including sketches, personal memories, photographs, historical research, and contemporary events. Bullock notes that she began one portrait working intuitively, but gradually found herself thinking about George Floyd. Although Floyd's likeness and the events surrounding his death informed her creative process, the final work became archetypal in character. Other works, such as *Otherworldly 1* (page 34), or *Nigerian Forest Stories* (page 33), evoke a powerful, otherworldly presence.



Teaching as an Engaged Art Practice

For more than four decades, Bullock developed her artworks in tandem with her teaching. She has taught in varied settings, including inner-city and suburban schools; professional artist residencies; museums; prisons; non-profits, such as Prints in Progress; and the Arts Horizons Teacher Institute at Rutgers University, where she spent 10 summers training art teachers.

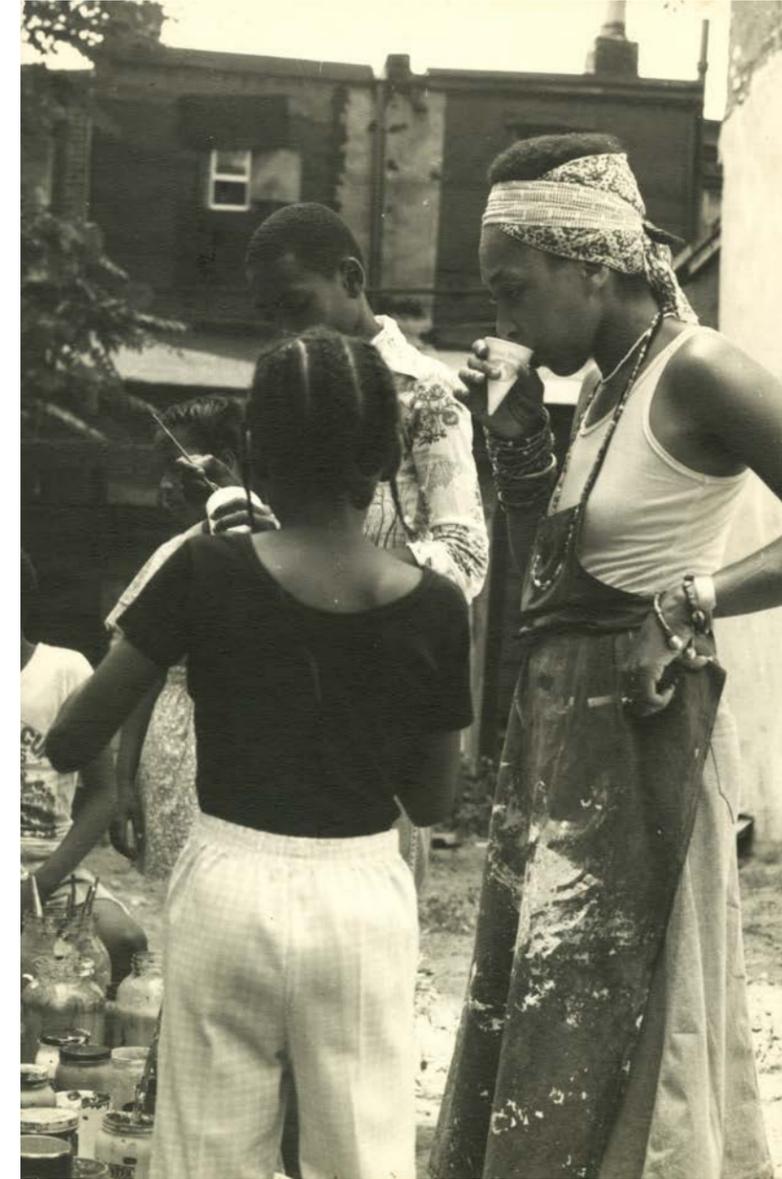
When teaching, Bullock freely described the concepts, themes, and techniques that inspired her and shared examples of her own diverse projects, including pop-up books, ancestor fans, *Magic Theaters*, and *Spirit Houses*, to name a few. As Bullock notes,

"When I was working at the Arts Horizons Summer Program at Rutgers University, I was talking to one of my students about what I was doing at home. And they said, 'Oh, you're making altars? We want to make altars—we need to!' And so, I said, 'Well, OK, we will. I won't even limit the materials that you use, but I want you to take notes and think about *why* you want to create an altar.'"¹⁰

Ubiquitous Presence features one of the altars Bullock created while she was teaching at Rutgers (page 18–19). She painted and transformed a wooden chair, added wing-like sculptural forms, and adorned the seat with painted boxes and a mirror-like fan depicting a Madonna. An intricately painted box at the base of the chair contains hidden objects that are of special importance to the artist. Asked why she creates a wide variety of altars, Bullock replies, "The altars are about something—a *need*. It's something that is just so natural to do. I had an altar for my mother that I did when I was in my 30's, and that was ongoing. And then, I created *Guardian Spirit* when I was beginning to travel. I felt like, 'I'm doing a lot of things that I might be afraid to do, I'm going to need a guardian spirit.' And so, I created *Guardian Spirit*."¹¹



Bullock does not consider such altars to be "finished" art works or commodities to be sold and traded. At the List Gallery, Bullock reanimated and expanded the essential form of *Altar*. She added cut paper birds, a snake, legs, and other forms selected from her archive of collaged shapes, integrating *Altar* with the adjacent walls and artworks.





Empowering Inquiry

Malleability and improvisational openness are vital themes and guiding principles for Bullock. She emphasizes such qualities and the importance of musicality in her work with some of her titles, such as *Straight Water Blues* (2014–2022, page 30) and *Bitches Brew* (2014, opposite). In addition, Bullock is known for reinventing or altering components of her works as if they are musical phrases that can and must expand, contract, and recombine in relationship to new contexts. For her List Gallery installation, Bullock removed a cut paper component from *Straight Water Blues*, simplifying the ultramarine river-like shape; she then integrated the extracted component into a recent portrait, also titled *Straight Water Blues* (2021–2022, page 31). Working in her studio around the same time, she created a new composite work—and suggested a more figurative quality—by placing *Bitches Brew* (2014) above an older piece, *Swallowing Bitter Pills, Chewing Dry Bones* (2012). At the List Gallery, this synergistic composite appears kinetic, suggesting a vibrant spirit presence.

Collectively, such experiments reflect the artist's remarkable creative agility and discernment. While Bullock represents aspects of the human condition that are painful to behold, her relentless inquiry and fearless creativity model an empowering way forward.





End notes

1. A.M. Weaver's essay, "The Adored Maverick: Barbara Bullock," appeared in *Barbara Bullock, Chasing After Spirits*, which was edited by Klare Scarborough and published in 2016 by La Salle University Museum, Philadelphia PA.

2. Email exchange with Syd Carpenter, Sept. 21, 2022

3. Phone interview with the artist, Sept. 21, 2022

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Interview with the artist at the List Gallery, September 2, 2022

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. William Valerio, "Trayvon Martin, Most Precious Blood" in *Barbara Bullock: Chasing After Spirits*, p. 71.

10. Interview with the artist at the List Gallery, September 2, 2022

11. Ibid.



Barbara Bullock in her studio, 2021
Photo: Grace Roselli, *Pandora's BoxX Project*

Biography

Barbara Bullock was born in Philadelphia, PA in 1938. She studied art at Fleisher Art Memorial (1956-1958) and Hus-sian School of Art (1963-1966) in Philadelphia before developing her distinct aesthetic in dialogue with a variety of Black artists, musicians, and dancers associated with the Black Arts and Black Power movements in the 1960s and 1970s. In the early 1970s, Bullock served as the artistic director of the Model Cities Program at Ile Ife Black Humanitarian Center (now known as The Village of Arts and Humanities), a cultural hub that attracted talented artists, dancers, and musicians from all over the world. From 1980 through 2003, Bullock traveled extensively in Africa, the Caribbean, Mexico, and South America in order to research diverse artistic traditions of Africa and the African diaspora.

Bullock's artworks have been exhibited and collected by galleries and museums throughout the United States, including The Woodmere Art Museum, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, La Salle University Art Museum, and The African American Museum in Philadelphia; The Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University and the Noyes Museum in New Jersey; and the Minneapolis Institute of Art in Minnesota. In 2016, Klare Scarborough, who then directed the La Salle University Art Museum, edited and published *Barbara Bullock: Chasing After Spirits*, a 176-page exhibition catalog honoring the artist's life and work. Bullock's most notable accolades include a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, a Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation Visual Arts Residency Grant, the Bessie Berman Grant awarded by the Leeway Foundation, and two distinguished teaching artist awards from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. She has won and executed numerous public commissions, including for the Philadelphia International Airport, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, SEPTA, and the Village of the Arts and Humanities, Philadelphia. As an educator, advisor, and artist,



Bullock has led numerous classes at museums, schools, prisons, and non-profit organizations, such as Prints in Progress in Philadelphia and Arts Horizons in New Jersey. She continues to live and create art in her home/studio in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia.



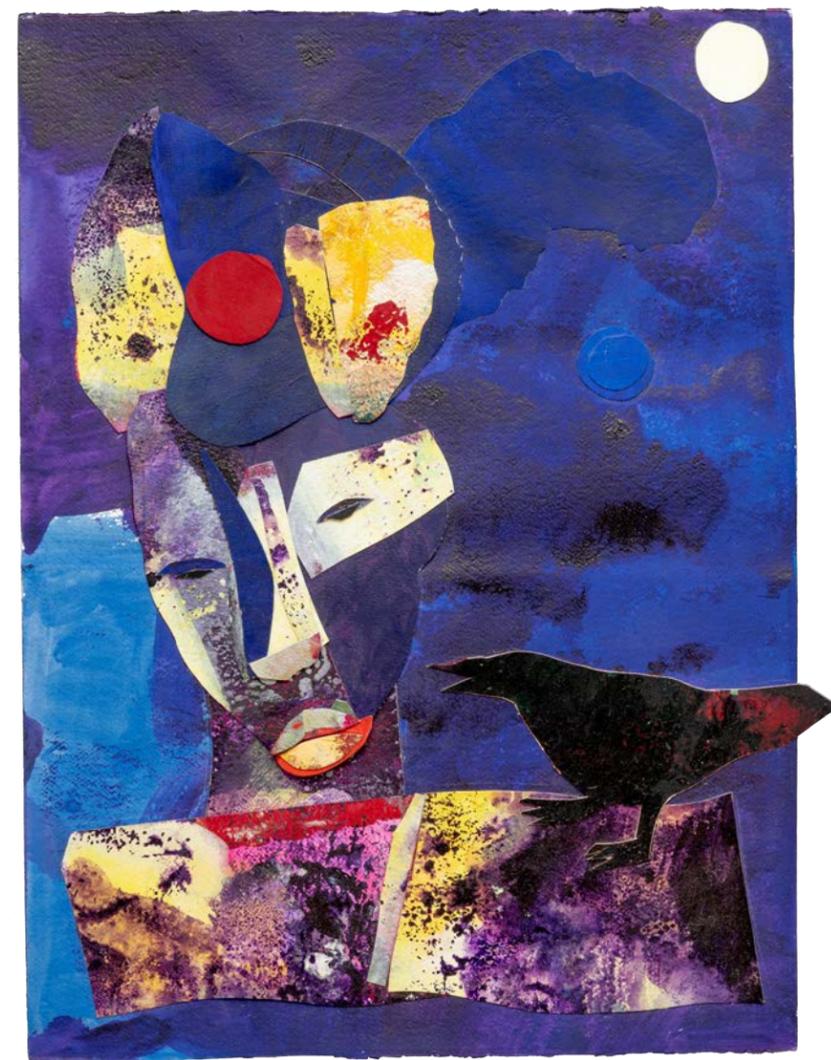
26 *Male 2*, 2021–2022, 22 ½ x 14 ½ x 1 inches



Chasing After Spirits 2, 2011, 74 x 34 x 12 inches 27



28 *Walking in Shallow Water*, 2013, 52 x 36 x 7 inches



Once in a Blue Moon 1, 2021–2022, 30 x 23 1/4 x 1/2 inches 29





Nigerian Forest Stories, 2021–2022, 23 x 16 x 1 inches
Opposite: *Chasing After Spirits 1*, 2011, 80 x 93 x 13 inches



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I am deeply grateful to Barbara Bullock for the honor of curating *Ubiquitous Presence*. We met more than 30 years ago when we both taught at Prints in Progress, and she continues to be a role model for me. I am also grateful to Exhibitions Manager and Assistant Curator Tess Wei, who supported myriad aspects of the exhibition and designed this beautiful catalog.

Diverse scholars and curators supported our efforts. Klare Scarborough shared some of the images and expertise she gained as director of La Salle University Art Museum and through editing *Barbara Bullock: Chasing After Spirits*. Published in 2016, the book provides valuable perspectives and scholarship, including an eloquent essay about Bullock's masterwork, *Trayvon Martin, Most Precious Blood*, by William Valerio, director of Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia. We are especially indebted to Bill Valerio and the entire staff at Woodmere Art Museum for loaning this pivotal work. I am also grateful to Lewis Tanner Moore for his generous gifts of expertise, time, art advocacy, and humor.

Tess Wei and I would also like to thank several individuals who provided valuable assistance: Ife Nii-Owoo, Joe Painter, Grace Roselli, Sean Stoops, Stacy Bomento, and Caren Brenman.

—Andrea Packard, List Gallery director



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Cover image: *Chasing After Spirits 1* (detail), 2011

Page 2: Installation view

Opposite: Installation view



