



ROOTWORK GALLERY

Black Visual & Curatorial Practice in Collaboration
with the Ancestors & Others Unseen

Tracie D. Hall, Rootwork Gallery

“When you enter, leave the gate open.”

—Words of a song in the author’s recurring dream

Before I say anything else, let me say that I lost the first version of this document because I did not properly ask my grandmother for her permission. My grandmother’s name is Bessie Marie Gilliard Sanders Scott. The third and fourth are family names. The last one is her married name. The second she took herself. She was born in September between 1907 and 1909 in Grand Cane, Louisiana. She was the second daughter and the second oldest in a family of twelve siblings. She transitioned in 1995 and is co-curator of Rootwork Gallery.

She shut the computer down because I am not to tell too much. She is saying right now, do not tell it all. In fact, when the computer froze, I was led to a page labeled “permission,” which asked which level of sharing to allow the file which I had labeled “Bessie.” Before rebooting I stopped for a long while to pray, to give thanks for this opportunity to communicate the intention of Rootwork Gallery, and to ask my grandmother if I could continue.

I had started to write about Bessie appearing to me in a series of dreams that led me from Chicago to Louisiana over a matter of days, and where, in a hotel room, I became so sick I was confined to the bed for forty-eight hours, and where, in a dream state, I received (again) my grandmother’s teachings about healing using root medicine. But she says it is not time to write that. She says to stick to talking about the art and how we can learn to see. A gallery is not a factory or an operating room she says, where we just see the parts we are working on: the painting, the object, the installation—we must also see its intention,

what it is seeking to tell us and why it made itself known in the mind of its maker (through, and sometimes in spite, of them). Art is a bridge, a connection across space, plane, time, and experience. It is from but not always of its maker. It is of but not always from its maker.

When I was sixteen or seventeen years old, Bessie took me out into her garden and began revealing to me the medicinal qualities of the plants and rocks we found there. She practiced rootwork, not as an esoteric or spiritual art necessarily, but because in the rural Black south, knowing how to heal was a necessity for a people who could not expect to be saved by or even welcomed in a hospital. I had grown up on her salves and tinctures, her wedging sweet potato and herbs between my fingers and toes then holding them together with twine to draw out fever, her wrapping a paper sack steeped in castor oil around my neck when I had strep throat. But back then, in the distressed jeans days of adolescence, I was not ready for the learning to pass to me. I listened respectfully but let the words fall in the space between us.

In that hotel room though, my grandmother's teachings came in torrents. Her voice so clear that I could not deny her. I took in as much as I could hold onto. When I returned to Chicago where I had been for almost five years at that point, and where I had begun to study Ifa, I spoke with my Baba about the dreams. He saw in them a responsibility to disseminate my grandmother's knowledge of healing. I wrangled with how to do that for a few years. But in 2016, the desire to be in closer connection with my grandmother, coupled with the call for deep healing I saw and heard everywhere in Chicago inspired me to finally open Rootwork Gallery of Arts and Letters, its full name.

Two things to say about Chicago:

1. There is something in Chicago that must be healed from the inside.
The soil here is hungry and the water, too.
2. I was brought to Chicago. Abruptly without any prior intention or real connection. And any attempts at leaving only bring me back to it
3. ~~Chicago is calling some and sending others away~~



"Hot Dome Puff" by Sarah Beth Woods, from "Braid/Work" (July-August, 2016)



"Cleanliness is Next to..." by Tonika L. Johnson, from "Everyday Rituals: Bridging the Black Secular and Divine" (February-March, 2017)