

ART @ BAINBRIDGE

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

Hugh Hayden / Creation Myths

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Hugh Hayden (b. 1983) works with materials that have fascinating, politically charged histories. Born and raised in Dallas, Texas, Hayden often draws from his own background and experiences to derive the forms and meanings of his works. For *Creation Myths*, the artist's first solo presentation in a museum context, Hayden responds to the history of Bainbridge House, and to Princeton more broadly. He has created four distinct—but interconnected—spaces: a kitchen, dining room, study, and classroom. Each space is defined by an installation; together, they craft a narrative—part fiction, part history—that evokes such themes as cuisine, leisure, and education, and explores the intersections of these themes with the complex legacy of slavery.

The following conversation between Hayden and exhibition curator Alex Bacon traces the artist's background and development as it informs the work on view.

What is your concept for the exhibition at Art@Bainbridge?

I want to explore notions of creation, hence the title of the show: *Creation Myths*. Each of the four rooms represents the idea of creating something new out of historical antecedents—working from the notion that these antecedents were already remixed to create the world that we live in. The body of work you first encounter, in the kitchen, is from a series called “American Food,” in which I combine cast-iron skillets with African masks as well as with historical artifacts from other cultures that have a dialogue with Africa.

These works, which are the newest shown here, grew from the idea of Southern food—with its African American, even slave, origins—being the only true American food. Cast-iron skillets are an early cooking technology; it's presumable that some form of cast-iron cookware was used in the early days of Bainbridge House. I've been interested in food as art for awhile. In fact, as an

undergraduate at Cornell I started what I called “invasive food events,” which I still do, and which were maybe my first brush with making art, though I didn’t think of them that way at the time.

How did you come to focus on skillets as a subject?

These objects, both the skillets and the artifacts, can be understood as part of the creation of the America we know today. There is a historical significance to the presentation of this work in this place, an eighteenth-century house in Princeton, New Jersey. With my background in architecture, I wanted to create a very specific experience of going through the exhibition, playing on the status of this as a domestic space. You enter the exhibition through a kitchen, a very welcoming space, with its social role: the creation of food, and thus sustenance, which fuses with culture.

What is the process for creating the skillets?

I start with an existing skillet. Some of them are new, and some of them are over two hundred years old. There is intentionally a mix of new and old ones. Many of the people who were cooking this food in the pre-Civil War years weren’t Southern whites but enslaved Africans and their descendants. This is thus a materialized remnant of the historical cooks who helped develop this cuisine. But this isn’t just African American culture, it’s American culture. They were creating something that has become seen as quintessentially American cuisine, so it’s not the story of just one group of people.

How have you connected these works to the Princeton University Art Museum collections?

Realizing this project in Princeton, it was important to me to take advantage of the Art Museum’s excellent collections to make a new group of skillets specifically for this exhibition. It further made sense to engage not only the collection

of African artifacts but also objects in the collection related to Africa but made by artists from other cultures at various times in history. For example, in one of these skillets is a juxtaposition of an African mask with a bust of a breastfeeding Isis, which creates an Afrofuturist narrative by combining aspects of black history with the future-oriented vision of these works. Just like you use many different ingredients in the kitchen to cook, as an artist I utilize disparate artifacts to create new meanings.

I'm using a new technology to 3-D scan them, which is a noninvasive way to replicate the surfaces of these precious museum objects, and then using 3-D sand printing technology to make the mold that is cast into the final object. This is something that couldn't have been done even ten years ago. It allows me to reinterpret the scanned surfaces by manipulating them in the computer, so that I can go beyond a one-to-one relationship with the original. The breastfeeding Isis is in a way an ancient African prototype for the Western Madonna and Child. I want to juxtapose it with a mask that would traditionally be worn by a male tribe member in rituals that express the beauty of motherhood.

There are three elements in each of these works: the skillet, the African mask, and the non-African object that deals with Africa.

Yes, they are objects that didn't necessarily interact in history. They are geographically dispersed, though of course historically Africa did interact with these places through the slave trade. I'm synthesizing them in these skillets—which is related to the history of black people in America, taken from one place and melded together over time to form something new. Being African American, I am myself undeniably of African origin, but an abstraction of it.

Tell us about the second room of the exhibition, the dining room.

I'm imagining it as the more grand entertaining area of the house, anchored by a dining table set called *America*. The table is based on memories of my dining table growing up as a child in Dallas. I was born in the 1980s and grew up in the 1990s. Visually, it's mimicking a popular design from that time, in oak with an orange finish. Many people I knew had this table growing up. For me it's a symbol of the American family. As a round table it's also this idea that everyone has equal access to it. But I wanted to investigate further the idea of family in America. Who is this dream open to? A heterosexual, cisgendered nuclear family composed of a husband and wife with their children. This idea is now in flux, it's no longer assumed. And so this dining set is impossible to sit and eat at. It's covered in big thorns. It's a vision of America that's seductive, but not inhabitable. It's something you can look at, but you can't touch. It really is the American dream: the desire to participate in something unattainable.

The wood is very specific for this work, right?

Yes. The table is made from mesquite trees that I harvested around the US-Mexico border, in Laredo, Texas. Most people know mesquite as the wood they use in barbecue to give the food that certain smokiness and flavor. I was more interested in its marginal position. It's a small bush that becomes a tree and is indigenous to both the US and Mexico. It is tolerant and can survive with limited resources where other plants can't. People in Texas have come to think of it as a weed, as undesirable.

I became really interested in the material history and cultural significance of this tree as unwelcome. This history relates not only to contemporary debates about immigration and national identity but also to historical ones—the civil rights movement, say. Times when there is a discussion about who is American, and who has a right to be here. The material is as loaded as the form of the table itself.

How did you start working with wood?

Back when I started the Master of Fine Arts program at Columbia, my work was related to wood, but it wasn't carved yet. That work reflected my interest in what I call "organs of identification." The pieces were focused on surfaces: tree bark, hair, or clothing, say—organic materials that identify a person. Grad school is when I started actually carving into wood. I wondered about these wood exteriors, what would they look like on the inside? All my work is about the relationship of an individual or a group to a larger society, the idea of assimilation or camouflaging oneself and blending into a greater social landscape.

Tell us about the next room of the exhibition.

This is a private study, the kind of room where you would have a grandfather clock and which, here, reveals aspects of a dark past: that of slavery in Princeton. There were slaves in Princeton, and Princeton University benefitted from slave labor—the livelihoods of some of its presidents, for example. The centerpiece of the room is a claw machine, which you normally encounter at a grocery store or Walmart, where it's a fun arcade game. You put money in and get a chance to try and grab a toy.

The big difference here is that the machine has been outfitted with a mirror that creates an infinity effect of this endless space of cotton balls. Typically, the game is filled with toys; here, it's filled with cotton. I've removed the hunky-dory exterior, so you're just seeing the raw cotton, exposing this thing that's normally hidden. The sense of endlessness created by the infinity mirror references the industrial-like project of picking cotton, that quintessential act of slave labor.

The outside of the game is dressed up, like a grandfather clock or a Chippendale bed. Something really nice and hand-carved. This surface and finish comments on how a dark past, like slavery, can be abstracted into something beautiful that you gloss over.

Why don't we move into the final room of the exhibition?

The classroom. As an artist, I'm creating a type of fiction, my own versions of history, if you will. I'm not a historian. The title of the piece—*Brier Patch*—comes from the story of Brother Rabbit by Uncle Remus. These tales, which are thought to be an evolution of tales from African folklore and parables, were passed on through an oral tradition by slaves. They were part of a positive abolitionist narrative at the time. The stories have an African origin, like the skillet in the first gallery.

Brother Rabbit was a cunning rabbit who would play tricks on everyone. One day, a fox was trying to catch him, but he hid in the brier patch, which is known as an inhospitable place because it's thorny and uncomfortable. For Brother Rabbit, though, it was somewhere he knew well and was able to navigate. He was able to hide from the fox and take comfort in this place, using it as a refuge. I was interested in this idea of the classroom, of education, as providing a safe space to build a foundation and grow.

The material is again significant: the trees used to make the work are discarded Christmas trees from Park Avenue, which is a place of wealth that means you've made it in America. So, the idea of academia as a safe space of comfort and security is embedded into the piece, which is also providing this kind of safety and security, despite seeming menacing.

Hugh Hayden: Creation Myths was organized by Alex Bacon, curatorial associate, with Mitra Abbaspour, Haskell Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

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