

## Dark Buoyancy

# An Interview with Sojourner Truth Parsons



Sojourner Truth Parsons, *Slow runner with the fireflies*, 2017, canvas, archival adhesive, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 102 inches. All images courtesy of Downs & Ross, New York.

**BORDER CROSSINGS:** The first thing people probably notice is your name. How did you come to be named after a 19th-century African-American abolitionist and civil rights advocate?

**SOJOURNER TRUTH PARSONS:** My dad's ancestors came to Canada through the underground railroad and settled in Lucasville, Nova Scotia, with other freed and escaping slaves. My grandfather was African Canadian and they were a rare Black family growing

up in Prince Edward Island. His father had had a horrific and difficult experience being Black, and he encouraged his children to be as white as they could. So their African roots weren't celebrated and that caused a lot of pain in their family. My father is also part Mi'kmaq First Nation from the Prince Edward Island area. I guess my parents wanted me to have a Black name because they knew it wouldn't be exactly obvious. My mother is white from Newfoundland, but Black culture was huge in my upbringing. Every musician whom my dad played at home was Black, and they taught me Black history and the history of different oppressed peoples. It was a multicultural environment. When my mother was pregnant with me, she saw Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" exhibition and was inspired by the shift in feminism that came from the work in the 1980s.

**Where did she see the exhibition?**

They were living in Vancouver and she flew out to Calgary and saw it at the Glenbow. The story goes that we were walking around the table and at Sojourner Truth's setting I started kicking really strongly. I was about to be born and, as my mother tells it, I was naming myself. It all fell into place that way, and my whole life I've been happy to have that name and proud of all the things that I am. I move through the world as a white person and that's how people read me, but my name is Sojourner Truth. You can imagine that combination in Los Angeles right now is not easy. It's an opportunity to have a conversation with people, but I've been finding it difficult. I don't want to take up space. I can only speak to being of mixed race.

**How did your parents meet?**

They met in their 20s in Ottawa. My mom was desperate to leave Newfoundland and my dad was desperate to leave Prince Edward Island. I was talking to my mom the other day and I asked her what she felt about the world right now, and she actually seemed quite hopeful. She was explaining to me that she and my father were excited about globalization and the perceived brightness and cultural inclusiveness that were promised when they met; everyone thought that was going to be a good thing. They were a mixed couple in Ottawa and they were both rebellious. They liked the looks they would get

when they walked around holding hands in public. Even though interracial dating had been going on for some time, it wasn't the norm. They told me that once, people threw fruit at them. My grandmother was born and raised in rural Newfoundland and on meeting my father, she squished my aunt's hand so hard that it bruised, saying under her breath, "He's Black." My parents quickly moved to Vancouver, where my mom did illustration and graphic design. At that point my dad was a radio DJ. He has a really creative family. My dad has a beautiful voice, one of his brothers is a professional musician who plays saxophone, one is a folksinger, and the other one was a ballet dancer turned modern dancer turned visual artist. He's an amazing painter in his own right. I've actually painted a picture of him from a dream called *Slow runner with the fireflies*, a title of one of my other uncle's folk songs. When I was young my dad had an entire oral history of this young deer called Charlie Buckskin and through those narrations he taught me about strength.

**So art played a significant role in your growing up?**

For sure. I actually wanted to be a dancer and a singer. That was my focus, so I would go into my room and draw out those scenarios. Picture making was always the way I would manifest my dreams, so I would draw myself being a dancer or a singer. It was always what I took to naturally, but I never thought that's what I would do. It was second nature to paint and draw, but that wasn't the goal. My first love was tap dancing. I tried for many years to be a professional tap dancer, but I wasn't good enough to make it.

**Now you say that if you weren't making art, you'd be dead. You didn't have to be a tap dancer, but you seem to be an obsessive painter.**

It's just what I do with my time. It's the way I process how I'm feeling. I'm not the best painter; I don't have many skills. I failed all my painting classes in school. It's never been about learning how to articulate myself in this way, but it has always been about the way that I feel about my life. My degree at NSCAD was in Intermedia Studies. I was interested in learning about how to get into lucid states to access different feelings, different ways of expressing and understanding myself. I was never interested in the history of painting. The only reason I came to use paint is that it's the most immediate way to express what you're feeling. It's wet and it's accessible and you can work through those feelings very quickly.

**You mentioned earlier about being in Los Angeles at this particular time. Has the city changed your art?**

It's definitely changed me; LA is a strange place. I don't socialize so I end up self-isolating. I've been thinking a lot about my dad and what he went through growing up and about that part of my family. It's interesting that their vision of the future was this beautiful, multicultural celebration with everybody loving each other. But living here, there's just so much poverty and so much pain, and so much wealth and denial of what's happening. Those two conditions are right up next to each other.

There is in your work a sense of dark buoyancy, that at any moment the intimate and interior and beautiful world could turn

and manifest a more disturbing dimension. So at the same time that the work is so appealing, it creates a sense of apprehension. That's how I feel about the world I'm in. That's definitely what's happening. There's so much darkness just below the surface. It's hard to not be checking behind your shoulder.

**You have a pair of paintings called *The same rope that pulls you up will hang you his and hers edition*. How are those works a manifestation of your interior emotional and psychic life?**

My experience of moving to Los Angeles was that the forces helping me were also trying to kill me. By "kill" I mean to change the way I was working and get me to enter some sort of capitalist system. I found that disturbing because, for me, art has always been about protest and honesty, and I've always believed that failure is important and integral to growth. I would never go to my studio and think, "I'm painting a dog and I'm going to get this dog painting down really well and keep doing it." That's what those paintings were about: the villain trying to pare you down to a couple of brush strokes so that a lot of money could be made. And I wasn't going to do that.

**Do you paint every day? Is your studio practice a regular one?**

I work a lot, usually 12-hour days, but I don't believe in "working." Sometimes working on things can make them less successful. So I go to the studio but if I'm not feeling any magic, I'll leave. I can tell at this point in my body if something's available or not. I have a garden at my studio, I have candles and essential oils, I have lots of ice cubes and water and my dogs are there with me. I have also used essences in my work; in the past it was lavender and right now it's geranium and patchouli and bergamot. I try to make my studio a peaceful place. But I don't have any agency; I don't have any authority over what's happening. I feel like I'm trying to open myself up to a higher power moving through my body so that I can express a certain feeling with accuracy. But if you give me a canvas and say, "Paint something," I'm not able to do that; it wouldn't be successful. It's always a mystery to me when something's successful. I don't want to make paintings; I want to stay open to crystal-clear truths coming through me and out of me. I want these potent truths to exist.

**You talk more like a dancer than a painter.**

Dance is my passion. Dance is the thing I have loved since I was little. I like music and movement way more than I do visual art. I don't think about brushes or paint colours or materials. I'm not technical and I'm not thinking about paint handling; I'm thinking about energy and feeling. When I paint I want to feel the painting in my body and I want to feel it in my heart the way that you would if you listened to your favourite song, or when you see a strong, beautiful dancer do 12 pirouettes. I want the kind of intense beauty and lingering openness you feel when you see something that gets inside your body. That's the space I'm interested in.

When you do an abstract collage, it always seems to urge towards the figurative. So in *You Will Get Old!*, there is an abstract, geometric shape and at the bottom a hand emerges. Suddenly, you're aware that all the shapes in that painting want to form

themselves into a figure or a body. It's as if abstraction is a decoy for an emergent figurative process.

Yes. That painting was me making a painting of a person. *You Will Get Old!* was difficult. Sometimes paintings are, and I'll spend months on them. I prefer it when it happens quickly. I don't like to fuss with things. But that painting changed a lot and it bothered me because it felt fussy. Eventually, I thought it looked like a warrior. It connected to how I was feeling about Los Angeles. It's been painful and it hasn't been a dreamy time. I've had lots of relationships that ended. When I was making that work I was thinking, "We're all going to be old people, and then we're not going to even be here anymore."

**What's the source for that gorgeous slim-waisted woman with long, straight hair who wears a stylish black hat in *Heartbeats Accelerating*? That's not about growing old; it's about youth and beauty.**

Those paintings are about the fact that I'm looking at a beautiful young woman who is quite literally turning away. Sometimes I try to imagine what something would feel like to paint. If I'm painting water or hair that's straight and silky and clean, I'll imagine that feeling in the brush stroke and try to move slowly down with it.

**How do you apply the collage fragments onto the support?**

I'll cut the pieces as I go, use a really nice archival glue and paint them once they're on the surface. The glue is silky and feels as if it adheres differently.

**Do you ever do studies for the paintings or are they always generated out of their making?**

No studies. I find that to make a painting, it's best to get it out; and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. There are so many different variables, especially when I'm down. I don't feel like I have full access to things; they just come and go. It also has to do with the moon and what's happening in my body. I'm coming to understand that it's definitely more of a bodily thing.

**You say you don't look at a lot of other painters, but when I look at your paintings I see echoes of artists as different as John Wesley, Philip Guston, Florine Stettheimer, Carroll Dunham and Matisse. I prefer Matisse when his work is a bit more complex. Like, I don't love the *Blue Nude*. It's perfect but it doesn't do that much for me. But I do love that Matisse commands your attention in real time. The truth is I don't look at other artists mostly because I'm just doing me. Lately, I've been thinking about**

1. *View from Diane I*, 2017, canvas, archival adhesive, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 72 inches.

2. *View from Diane II*, 2017, canvas, archival adhesive, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 72 inches.

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1. Installation view, "Holding your dog at night," 2017, Oakville Galleries, Oakville, ON.

2. *For every black woman in prison*, 2017, canvas, archival adhesive, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches.



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collage and the paintings being like quilts; how once you start to collage, it gives this feeling of warmth or comfort. That impulse to piece together different things is a really powerful metaphor. You can cut and paste and change it. I often feel like I'm doing something wrong in life, which I think comes from childhood. I feel like with collage, you can work through those changes and realize that change can be integrated into the experience.

**So collage is a corrective? It has that psychological dimension?**  
No, it's a freedom to keep changing so that I don't have to fuss with something on the first layer. I can keep layering. If you marry somebody and it's not working, you don't have to go to counselling, figure out the marriage and have sex with him again. You can just get a divorce and meet somebody who better fits the next chapter of your life.

**I'm trying to figure out what is the relationship between the content and the title of the painting *I hate sex*. What would make that content generate that title?**

It all happened by accident. I had been at therapy and we were talking about sex. So I was in the studio, painting my dogs, and because of the emotional weight it can bring to your personal experience, I decided in that moment I hated sex. Then I made the painting and realized that it looked like General Idea's poodle piece, and that the title was funny. But I wasn't thinking about General Idea when I titled it.

**General Idea's title would have been *I Adore Sex*, because their poodles get involved in every possible sexual combination. Their dogs are pretty polymorphously perverse.**

Totally. But on that day I didn't share that feeling. The feeling was just passing.

**Your imagery can be captivating: the ubiquitous dog, the glamorous long fingers with the painted nails, an extinguished candle. Where does the set design come from and why do those objects turn up in your paintings?**

When I moved to LA I was hanging out with really privileged people and I had never been invited to elite spaces, so I was taken aback with what was happening in them. Those were the things that stuck out.

***Rose* is an example of a painting where that sense of darkness comes through. It's elegantly painted, but there's something about the density of the black that is discomfiting, maybe even terrifying. Your palette mixes delicate pinks and blues, which you counterbalance with black. Do you think of colour as a kind of tension?**

I don't think about it from that place. It's entirely an intuitive process. That black would be a weight in my body.

**The title *You can rest in my heart forever* is quite poignant. And the painting has a cane-backed chair in it.**

That title was a mistake. I had sent my gallerist a suggestion for a group show and she thought I was talking about my upcoming





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show in September in New York. That chair is new. As a reaction to the heavy political nightmare of America, I've mostly been hanging out in my garden and that's where the chair is. I decided that I needed to spend more time with plants, to see them grow in small bursts every day. I would be looking at this empty chair and I wanted to be the mother of plants. I'm coming to understand that what stays in my heart are the people I've loved and the experiences I've had. This notion that we get over things is a false and strange idea. I don't think we have to get over things; you can let them rest in your heart forever. You don't have to heal from past love; you have to learn how to live with its being a feeling in your heart. I feel that way with every flower; I can remember every flower and everything that grew in the garden since I planted it in March. I had never grown anything before. I planted this white eggplant and this really strange, alien-like, purple flower appeared and it's still growing inside its spiky cocoon. I never understood that everything flowers before it creates a fruit. I hadn't known how intense that is.

Your paintings seem interior and intimate. They're private, but you allow the viewer in, so that the one doing the looking and the one being looked at become equivalent. You open your world up.

Yes. Every painting synthesizes an important moment, and that's what hanging out in this scene in Los Angeles felt like. It didn't feel like there was a lot of depth; it felt like there was a lot of surface symbolism. So I turned away from that and began spending time with my dogs. I have a terrier mix and a poodle mix, and I found them both on the street. They became my family in Los Angeles; they're my constants. Then I started moving into the garden. I was hanging out with lots of dogs; I decided that I would hang out with plants.

When you do a painting like *Holding your dog at night 2015–2025*, you rework some of your trademark elements: the fingernails, the cigarette, the flower and something at the centre of the painting.

That's a paintbrush with the paint dripping off the top. It's a hand with a paintbrush and a cigarette and a rose. And everything is falling.

You paint a lot of butterflies. Do you ever worry that you could get characterized as the butterfly painter?

No, because anyone who would say that would be a moron. It's pretty obvious that I'm not just painting butterflies. I think there's an evident undertow.

The undertow is part of that dark buoyancy. There is always an undertow in your work.

That's how I experience moving through the world. There definitely is a darkness. I think that I get undertowed by my own feelings, my own experiences. The work is just an extension of that sadness. ■