

Herbert Singleton
Commentary on some of the imagery
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Barrister's Gallery

Devil Door (2001)

The door is a 9ft cypress door salvaged by Herbert from a New Orleans home on the West Bank which caught fire. As far as I can recall, Herbert has carved only six doors this size—he has done probably as many smaller doors. One of them was on the cover of the first edition of Betty Carol Sellen's *Encyclopedia of American Folk Artists*. All the doors are concerned with Biblical subjects. It is likely that the height of the doors suggests the fall of man and the demon forces arrayed against him. This door has many of the images associated with this theme: fallen angels, mankind plunging into the fires of Hell, the heads of men burning in those flames, skulls, the playing card spade (death), the figure of Death himself with his scythe, male and female demons. There is almost always the prospect of redemption in Singleton's view and Christ is figured in the lower right. The door's structure, with its cross support panels, has imbedded in it the form of the cross and that is why at the very bottom are the bones of Adam. Singleton is aware of the old tradition that says that Adam was buried on the summit of Golgotha where Christ was crucified. Christ's death thus redeems all men all the way back to Adam, the first sinner.

The Crucifixion(2002)

Singleton is unflinchingly a believer that Christ was black—but, then again, so was Judas who is depicted committing suicide by hanging at the left of the panel. To the right is Pilate and his wife, Claudia Procula, whispering to her husband that she had a dream had he must not condemn Jesus. This piece, and others, except when specified, are executed on cedar panels from discarded chiffarobes—the NO term for a cedar clothing cabinet.

He Fell From Grace (1997)

The fellow represented here is Singleton's former landlord. Around 1989, Singleton had an argument with him resulting in Singleton hitting the landlord with the barrel of a shotgun. I retained an attorney for him. Since the charges for an ex-felon in possession of a gun were anywhere from 10 to 20 years, he was lucky to get a year's imprisonment. Some years later, Singleton was able to take malicious glee in the financial collapse of his enemy because of a divorce. Singleton, memorably, described his tormentor as owning "only a chair, a TV with a rabbit ear antenna, and a shit pot."

Voodoo Stump (c.1985) and Voodoo Sculptured Limb (c.1990)

These pieces harken back to Singleton's work before I met him and began to represent him. He used to make these pieces for the porches of friends to ward off evil spirits and spells. They are probably both oak.

Portrait Head (2003)

This is a representation of JA (God). There are all sorts of confusing semi-Baptist churches in the Black community in NO—some of them include Rastafarian elements—this would include the Black Jesus above.

Big Hat Willie and Deacon Monk (2005)

Big Hat was a pimp and Deacon Monk a notoriously loose moraled minister—both were active when Herbert was “coming up” on the West Bank in the 50’s. The episode recounted here circulates around the time one of Big Hat’s whores owed Monk money. Monk stuck her in the trunk of his car and took her to the French Quarter so that she could ply her trade and make up her debt to him. To make up the difference, Monk hauled her back to a dive on the West Bank. Big Hat caught up with him and beat him up. It is of interest that the stick Big Hat is using to dispatch Monk is one of Singleton’s “killer sticks”—the canes he used to carve out of hickory ax handles—he stopped carving them when, in fact, some one was killed with one.

St. Peter (2005)

A representation of St Peter in a state of confusion when Jesus tells him not to battle the Roman soldiers who have come to arrest him. The rooster symbolizes Peter’s thrice denial of his knowledge of Christ.

Lazarus (2005)

A depiction of a shrouded Lazarus as a proto-Christ and a proto-Christian—resurrected and redeemed by Christ. This is carved out of a slab of Cypress—highly unusual material—(you have three like this)—which allows him to carve deeper than usual.

Things Never Change (2004)

Singleton spend more than a decade in plantation-like Angola Prison in Louisiana and speaks here with cynical authority when he depicts a slave picking cotton and an Angola inmate doing the same more than 200 years later—both slave and inmate overseen by the same type of mounted and armed guard.

Crack Dealers (2005)

A common enough scene in Singleton’s neighborhood—a copy chasing after young corner crack dealers—their product is spilling all over. The text refers to the Negro spiritual that sinners have no place to hide, but the virtuous can hide around the throne of God.

“Rob What?” (2005)

This is an example of Singleton’s cynical humor and awareness of what is going on in his community. A young gangster punk tries to rob an older man—who he insultingly calls “Pop”—and his wife. The old man turns out to be an “OG,” an “Old Gangster” who has a gun and startles the punk by drawing down on him.

Legion

Singleton has updated and re-gendered the story from Mark (5:6-9) about the man that Jesus encounters who is beset by all kinds of evils:

And cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not. For He said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit. And He asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many

Singleton depicts the multitude of modern evils which beset his community—crack, needles, and guns.

Puci

Puci was Big Hat Willie's woman. Here she is depicted throwing him out the house, telling him to take his monkey, his heroin habit with him.