

BOND MILLEN GALLERY

EXHIBITION ESSAY

Down By the Water / *James River Suite*

One can say that Tidewater Virginia was the true birthplace of the United States. The towns of Williamsburg, Jamestown and Richmond, linked by their adjacency to the James River, provided a crucible for the forming of a new democracy. Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison, Patrick Henry and their contemporaries roused the colonial populace, drafted the Declaration of Independence, envisioned a new form of government and incited the American Revolution.

River cities are typically infused with history and commerce as the oldest communities of human culture and civilization. Rivers connect the sea to the hinterlands and other communities, providing trade routes and arable lands for farming and settlement. Virginia's James River tells a unique chapter of what has been called the American Experiment: a new and independent nation formed on a vast, isolated and underdeveloped continent with enormous potential for growth and opportunity. The James is a testament to many factors, both positive and negative, that have defined the making of America and its power and dominance on the world stage.

The River has not always been a story of progress and positive development. The James was the first entry point for enslaved Africans in 1619, which introduction started approximately 250 years of displacement, bondage, suffering, and continued racism for thousands upon thousands of black families throughout the South and across the nation. Dawoud Bey's recent photography exhibit at the VMFA eloquently evoked the unspeakable horror of the institution of slavery, a practice that stands in direct opposition to the Christian principles the nation was founded upon. The practice of slavery set off the Civil War which took an estimated 620,000 lives and created many of the deep cultural divisions that are still playing out today in the United States. Richmond, as Capital of the Confederacy, was the nerve center and as a result was burned and nearly destroyed. The evidence is still visible in the James in the form of destroyed bridges.

In contrast, today the River provides a strong sense of place and a focus for Richmond's rich urban environment, one that all citizens can share and enjoy. In addition to its fascinating history, the River is a unique natural feature that teaches lessons about

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geology and geography. No other major city in the US has Class III-IV rapids flowing through its downtown. At the Fall Line, one can witness the effects of an ancient continental shift that rippled up the East coast to New England providing over five miles of rapids and a natural wonderland for hiking, fishing, and kayaking, accessible to all citizens. The home of many universities and Fortune 500 corporations, The City has renewed potential as a center for positive and climate-sensitive urban growth. It also provides a locus for a dialogue about cultural, racial, and historical forces that have formed our nation.

This show of paintings investigates many of these aspects by showing the power of the River's natural beauty and the poignant historical ruins and artifacts that still resonate within its banks, coupled with multiple engineering and transportation landmarks in the form of beautiful bridges and railroad infrastructures. They speak to us across time and remind us of our varied backgrounds and how America developed. The works show a river that belongs to everyone, a place to gather and be with one another...a place for healing divisions and experiencing the beauty of the City and the natural world.

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