

HOLLY TROSTLE BRIGHAM

SACRED SISTERS

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Selected Poetry By: Marilyn Nelson

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Holly Trostle Brigham: Sacred Sisters.

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Watercolor

29 1/2" x 29 1/2"

SORDONI
ART GALLERY
WILKES UNIVERSITY

Sordoni Art Gallery at Wilkes University
84 West South Street
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766

www.wilkes.edu/sordoniartgallery

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HEATHER SINCAVAGE, *DIRECTOR*

It has been said that when women join together in sisterhood, a community is created with the strongest of bonds. The series of work, *Sacred Sisters*, by Holly Trostle Brigham honors the accomplishments of women who were part of the convent during the 15th to 19th centuries. Historically, the convent was a place where independent thinkers were free from the limitations of the male-centric world and could develop skills in art, poetry, and music. As a result, stunning contributions were made to the arts.

Sisterhood can also be used to describe this exhibition. Paired with Brigham's paintings are the poems of Marilyn Nelson. The Guggenheim fellow and former Poet Laureate of Connecticut created first person accounts for each of the women, providing a voice to Brigham's images. The images and poems were then pulled together into the star-wheel artist book, designed and made by MaryAnn Miller. The book is an edition of 12, one of which is included in the Smithsonian Institution's collection of artist books.

I want to thank Holly for sharing her work with our Wilkes community. It is wonderful to witness how she brings together and supports women within her work and her studio practice. She is a wonderful example of interdisciplinary collaboration, something inherent to the university setting.

Thank you to the Sordoni Art Gallery Advisory Commission who always supports and guides the gallery's programming with enthusiasm. Thank you to Assistant Director Nikki Lewis for her continued ingenuity in making our exhibitions accessible to diverse audiences. An additional thank you to our student staff of gallery attendants and volunteer gallery docents, who assist our classes and community groups in viewing our exhibitions.

BIOGRAPHIES

Sacred Sisters is a collaboration between visual artist Holly Trostle Brigham and award-winning poet Marilyn Nelson. Brigham's paintings depict eight nuns who represent many centuries, religions and cultures. Each nun was an artist or writer. While Brigham imagines the nuns in the midst of their creative work, Nelson gives voice to each nun with a poem phrased as a prayer.



HOLLY TROSTLE BRIGHAM

Holly Trostle Brigham of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a figurative painter who creates mythical allegories of contemporary and historical subjects. Her paintings have won awards at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Lancaster Art Association, and for watercolor at the Harrisburg Art Association. Brigham's work has been exhibited in New York, Washington, D.C., Massachusetts

and Pennsylvania. She taught painting and drawing at the Baum School of Art and has taught at the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester State College, Lebanon Valley College, Lafayette College and Pasadena City College.

MARILYN NELSON

Marilyn Nelson is a poet, children's author, and translator. Nelson is a professor emerita at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. She has won two Pushcart Prizes, two Yaddo residencies and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and Guggenheim Foundation. In 2012 she received the Frost Medal from the Poetry Society of America. Nelson was Connecticut's poet laureate from 2001 to 2006, and was elected a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

HOLLY TROSTLE BRIGHAM: VISUAL STORYTELLER

Holly Trostle Brigham's beguiling series of watercolors of women artists from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, Baroque, and Modern eras (*Seven Sisters*, 2000-11) calls to mind the eighteenth-century ideal of the speaking likeness. Boldly illuminated and deftly modeled, Brigham's subjects are frozen in time, as if captured in a moment of suspended action. Yet, paradoxically, they appear to move, or at least to suggest the possibility of movement. Brigham consistently models her figures at expressive angles and in strong poses. As viewers, we effectively join the motion as our eyes investigate these variegated surfaces. The illusion of the subjects' potential energy results in part from the artist alternating between washes and linear work. The vibrant luminosity of the watercolors approaches the effects of egg tempera mural painting—the artist's attention to artificial light is always present in these works. Brigham also frequently uses opalescent coloration to invest her subjects with intimations of activity, voice, and vision.

The women artists in *Seven Sisters* function as prototypes for Brigham's creative work in the newer *Sacred Sisters* (2012-15) series. It is important to note that her artistic process includes not only preliminary studies and thumbnail sketches, but also meticulous research into biography, costume, and—especially for the *Sacred Sisters*—religious history. The eyes and hands of Brigham's subjects—the instruments with which an artist fashions her work—captivate the viewer. In so many works, the sisters' hands are in the process of making, evoking the artist's own hands as she made the compositions. However, this parallel is perhaps not surprising, as she becomes her own sitter to play the part of the subject in a good many of these paintings. The painted sisters wield brushes (like Brigham herself), fly an airplane, grasp a skull, and pray—all the while gazing fixedly upon the observer. Intent on reclaiming their place in history, and with a firm command of rich, time-honored (if still, sometimes, obscured) iconographies, Brigham tells the personal story of each subject and connects them to larger narratives about art, creativity, and women's work.

Given that her technical finesse ultimately communicates these information-rich narratives, I wonder if it would not be missing the point to call Holly Trostle Brigham a storyteller, perhaps a visual raconteur, one for whom materials and process comprise her speech and critical vocabulary. And I wonder if this is why I am so beguiled by her verbal descriptions of the paintings, and the series of which they comprise a part. Telephoning Brigham to discuss her art is like calling a friend who, in turn, tells you about what her other friends have been up to. But in this case the "friends" are the subjects of her paintings: typically saints, nuns, and unlikely, but very accomplished, adventurers. On one recent phone call, we spoke of her religious sisters—and her nun-friends have been busy. Rengetsu (2014), for example, a nineteenth-century Buddhist nun, was also a ceramicist and poet who wrote verse (think David Drake/Dave the Potter) on her vessels. And then there's Henriette de Lille (2013), the Creole—and free African American—founder of the Catholic order of the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans in the period leading up to the Civil War. In her painting of Mother de Lille, Brigham poses as the nun, holding a black Jesus doll. This evokes for Brigham—and surely for the earlier nuns—the sacred tradition of bathing and clothing a doll as if it were a baby.

Another friend is a member of a Brazilian order, the Sisterhood of Our Lady of the Good Death, Hilaria Batista de Almeida, *Provider* (2015). Originally untitled, the painting came about at the suggestion of renowned contemporary poet Marilyn Nelson, who suggested that this nun be named Hilaria and composed an eponymous poem. The work narrates the story of an order (in Bahia, Brazil) that was single handedly responsible for freeing several thousand slaves before emancipation in 1888, and which has since that time addressed ever-present issues of poverty and financial inequity.

With Hilaria looking at and yet through us, cropped into our realm, and with the diamond tiling pattern of the floor bringing us into the perspective plane, the picture brings us so immediately into the story's realm that we



are there with Brigham's friend. The nun, posed here as the order's Provider, participates in the Festival of Boa Morte (the good death), a ritual in which nuns worship and mourn the Madonna, as if attending a viewing. In this work, however, the artist does not represent herself as the foregrounded subject, Hilaria; instead Brigham appears as the deceased Virgin in the background.

This watercolor of a Brazilian sister is only one of several recent works in the *Sacred Sisters* series to feature a collaboration with Nelson, who writes poems about the figures appearing in the watercolors that are blown up and exhibited in juxtaposition with the artworks. It is little wonder that Brigham would work with Nelson—a Frost Medal winner, Guggenheim fellowship recipient, and former Connecticut state poet laureate, among other achievements—to narrate the nuns' stories. Nelson's prayer-like verse continues and facilitates the story aspect of the nun-friends. As we study a painting such as *Andrea Maria de la Encarnacion* (2015), for example, we are reminded that Brigham's work both portrays and reflects, but not in the mirror/verisimilitude sense—although several passages capture with watercolor a shimmering lifelike quality that might usually be attributed to oil painting.

Rather, these painted commentaries of the nuns' lives reach the viewer like oral histories that call out with visual power and narrative clarity, offering much upon which to reflect. If Brigham creates modern-day speaking likenesses, Nelson captures the words they are about to express. The ancient Roman poet Horace coined the phrase, "ut pictura poesis," which translates to "as in painting, so in poetry." Later, Renaissance humanists explored the expressive possibilities of this concept in a number of canonical treatises and paintings. Thus, the Brigham-Nelson collaboration continues the powerful tradition of joining word and image—powerful because, for these *Sacred Sisters* to speak to us, we must understand that their stories cannot be limited to any one medium or genre.

- Leo Mazow



Hilaria Batista de Almeida, Provider, 2015

Watercolor

29 1/2" x 29 1/2"

Hilaria Batista de Almeida, Provider

Sisterhood of the Good Death, Bahia, Brazil

August 14, ca. 1850



tomorrow, after we've led the procession following Our Lady of the Good Death back to our chapel, two hundred Sisters, in our white eyelet headwraps and dresses and the company of the Ancestors,

will dance a Glory samba, with our neighbors like us redeemed, and those we work to free. We'll dance as if we don't know aches and pains, to celebrate the best death of all time.

No death is easy, but some deaths are good. The free die good deaths. The people we free will be put down with honor and music. The best death was the one Our Lady had, passing directly from breath to glory. Glory is ours, too, just one death from now. What dies lives on no longer slave, but free: The same essence, wearing another face, like an orixa changed into a saint.

Tomorrow is Our Lady's Assumption Day. Today we sit in our rooms to prepare, searching the dark silence to find glory. My still hands, thick from cutting sugarcane... and there it is, that flood of thanksgiving. These nimble fingers that can tell from touch the best tobacco leaf and when to stop rolling a cigar smooth on the table, this year helped free thirty Yoruba slaves!

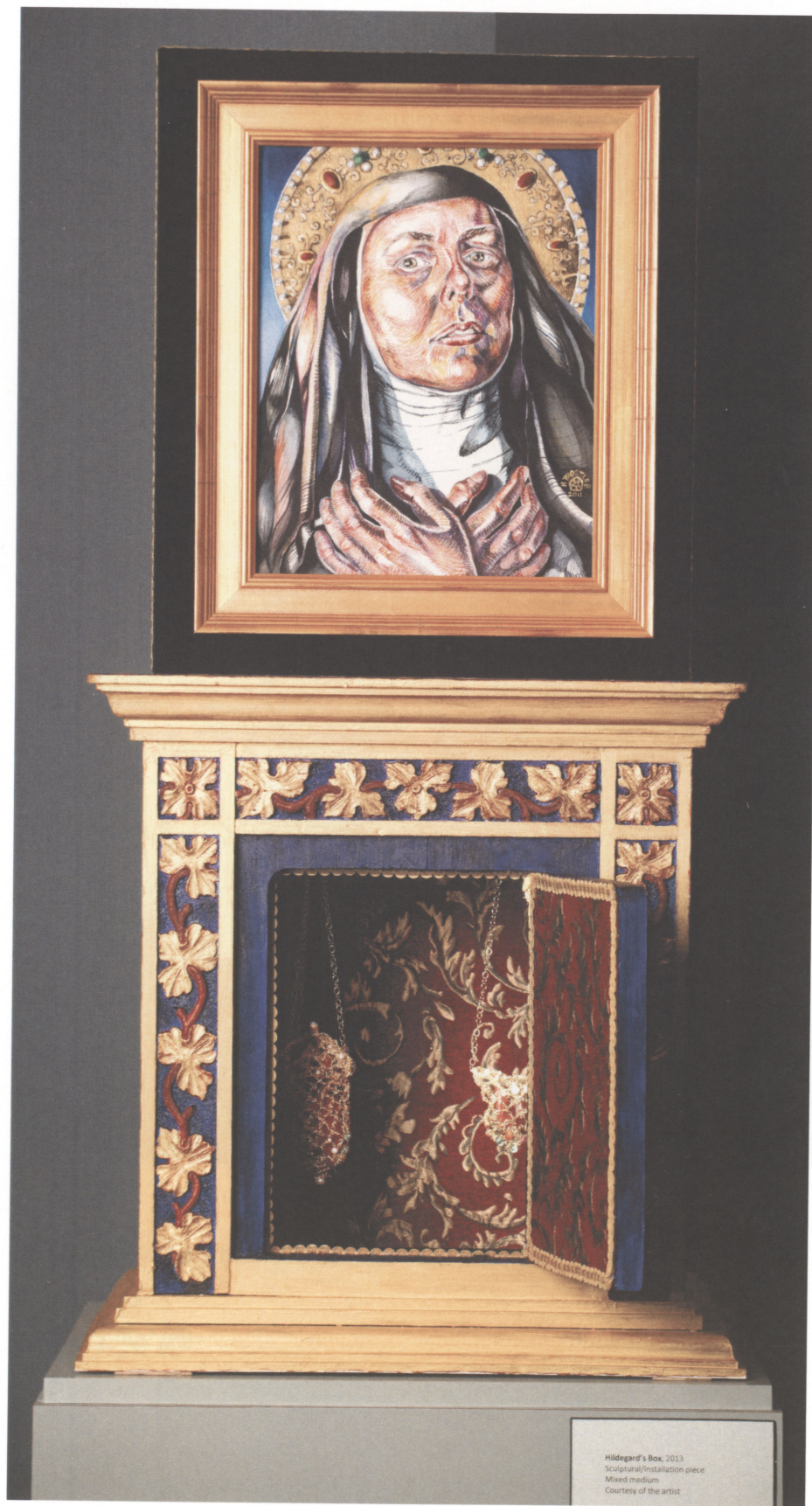
Marilyn Nelson, 2015
Hilaria Batista de Almeida, Provider
Sisterhood of the Good Death,
Bahia, Brazil
 August 14, ca. 1850



Santa Caterina's Trinity, 2013
Watercolor
29 1/2" x 29 1/2"



Sorella Plautilla Nelli's Lamentation, 2012
Watercolor
29 1/2" x 29 1/2"



Hildegard's Box, 2013
Sculptural/Installation piece
Mixed medium
Courtesy of the artist

Hildegard's Box, 2013
sculptural/installation
21 1/2 " x 21 1/2 " x 44"



Henriette deLille, 2013
Watercolor
29 1/2 " x 29 1/2 "



Andrea Maria de la Encarnación, 2015
Watercolor
29 1/2" x 29 1/2"

Andrea and Claudia de Mena
 María de la Encarnación, Claudia Juana de la Asunción,
 Cistercian Convent, Malaga, Spain, ca. 1680



We inherited the family gift--
 Alonso to Pedro, Pedro to us
 alone, of the five children who survived.
 But our brother Alonso was the heir
 to the last name, the patrons, and the tools.
 Though we were born with seeing fingertips,
 our options were marriage or the convent.
 So we entered the continuous Lent
 of silence and fasting, where we can sculpt.

We go to our shared studio at Lauds
 and pick up tools and work where we left off:
 chisel and mallet, or paint brush and pallet,
 through Terce to Sext and the bread and soup.
 Then back to the Mother's ecstasy of grief,
 the exact pattern a patter of blood
 drips onto Christ's shoulders from the thorn crown.
 My tongue between my teeth, I carve a veil.
 Breath held, I watch my brush create the real.

Marilyn Nelson, 2015
 Andrea and Claudia de Mena
 María de la Encarnación,
 Claudia Juana de la
 Asunción,
 Cistercian Convent, Malaga,
 Spain, ca. 1680

This is our way of worship: creating
 truth-speaking beauty. Helping people see
 what can't be seen, leading them toward belief.
 I place myself in the Creator's hand,
 become a fish-tail gouge, or a glass tear.
 The artist asks to be an instrument,
 to create, through carvings on a choir stall,
 or through a solemn saint in a dim niche,
 for seeing people, the Oh, my God! of awe.



Henriette deLille

Sisters of the Holy Family, New Orleans, 1855



he sacrament of marriage is defiled
by a society that looks askance
where color is concerned.

Moi, je refuse to be a concubine
raising daughters into concubinage.

You can't white-wash sin with necessity,
nor know dignity in the narrow world
between the despised and those who despise.
I don't know much, but God tells me that's wrong!

My best friends Juliette and Josephine,
like me, are free quadroons: doomed to be kept
as almost-wives by men who can afford
to have side-families. God intervened.
Thanks to the Bishop and Pere Rousselon,
thanks to the Holy See, our vocations
are recognized, and our lives given meaning
far beyond birthing octaroon children.
We are nuns, married to Christ. We'll feed His sheep.

This faith that guides me: is it black or white?
Is my love beige? What color is my soul?
and does it matter in His opinion?
He said we serve Him when we serve the poor:
did He mean the white poor, not the colored?
We serve Him in the slave children we teach,
in the black aged and infirm we house,
in the sick we nurse through epidemics.
I lift my hands high when I sing Thy name!



Otagaki Rengetsu, 2014
 Watercolor
 29 1/2" x 29 1/2"



Procura desmentir
 los elogios que
 a un retrato de
 la Poetsa
 inscribio la
 verdad que
 llama pasion

Este, que ves, engaño colorido
 que del arte ostentando los
 primores,
 con falsos silogismos de
 colores
 es cauteloso engaño del
 sentido;
 éste, en quien la lisonja
 ha pretendido
 excusar de los años
 los horrores,
 y venciendo del
 tiempo los
 rigores
 triunfar de
 la vejez y
 del olvido

MRM Sr
 Juana de la
 Cruz

es un vano artificio del cuidado
 es una flor al viento delicada
 es un resguardo inútil para
 el hado:
 es una necia diligencia
 errada,
 es un afán caduco y, bien
 mirado,
 es cádaver, es polvo,
 es sombra,
 es nada.

Sor Juana de la Cruz, 2015
 Watercolor
 29 1/2" x 29 1/2"

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