

MARIE COCHRAN



NOTES OF AN AFFRILACHIAN DAUGHTER IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

This exhibition is dedicated to my **Uncle Hayward
Cochran, Jr.**

October 14, 1954 - February 24, 2020

*He was an enterprising spirit and visionary who always
wanted to expand his horizons.*

*Hayward Jr. will always be loved for his kindness, quiet
strength, and compassion.*

February 25 - March 25, 2021

Mason-Scharfenstein Museum of Art
Piedmont College

Title image from artist's collection: Waterrock Knob, NC.

The mountain's summit is within the Blue Ridge Parkway National Park Service unit.

Introduction

In a letter to journalist Eugene Patterson in 1960, Lillian Smith wrote, “I cannot... tear myself away from this great moment in history and pretend it has nothing to do with me and my art. . . . I must cry out a warning to my beloved people.” Debates on the role of art in our society have raged for generations. Should art merely exist for its own sake, or should art be political? Art can be both sublime and serve as a call for action. Art can be beautiful and serve as a cry for change.

Marie Cochran’s work does just that. She is the founding curator of the Affrilachian Artist project, and she works, as she told the Carolina Public Press in 2012, “to use [the project] as a platform . . . to say that not only do we exist but also speak to some of the interests we have related to living in the region, whether it’s issues related to [white supremacy] or environmental racism.”

Cochran challenges the prevailing narrative of her native Appalachia as a region where only rural, white southerners exist. Her work and writing note the intersections of the region, the “crossroads,” as she states in her essay “I Pledge Allegiance to Affrilachia,” “where African, European, and indigenous people collided and co-existed.”

During the summer of 2020, Cochran was selected to be one of three lead artists in the design and creation of the Black Lives Matter Street Mural in Asheville, NC, which brought together a team of over 20 artists. The site-specific mural encircled the Confederate “monument” to Zebulon Baird Vance, the Governor of North Carolina during the Civil War.

Cochran’s work serves as a cry to the past, a cry to the present, and a call to action.

—Matthew Teutsch, PhD

Director of the Lillian E. Smith Center

Marie T. Cochran

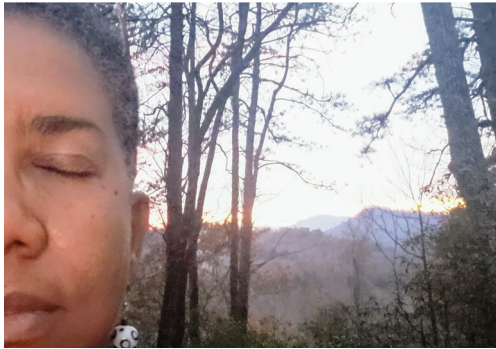
Notes of an Affrilachian daughter during the COVID-19 era (playing on the title of James Baldwin's seminal 1955 book *Notes of a Native Son*) is a visual memoir on the 10th anniversary of the Affrilachian Artist Project. The installation offers a window into the unique lived experience of being Black in Appalachia.

Marie T. Cochran was born and raised in Toccoa, Georgia, a rural town in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. As a great granddaughter of the enslaved, granddaughter of sharecroppers, and the daughter of textile workers, she was a student of oral history at the dinner table. Listening to stories of struggle and survival instilled in her a desire to honor their journey in the vernacular of her own work.

Cochran takes pride in the fact that she is a first-generation college student who became a college professor. She received a BFA (1985) in drawing and painting from the University of Georgia during the rise of the alternative music scene in Athens. She received an MFA (1992), in mixed media studio from the School of the Art Institute, Chicago.

While completing her graduate studies, Cochran was enrolled in the Department of Art History's Theory and Criticism certificate program and worked as a News Editor for the weekly student publication, *F Newsmagazine*. Her creative coming-of-age was shaped by several noteworthy events, notably the Gulf War of 1991, the Supreme Court confirmation controversy surrounding Justice Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill, the Los Angeles riots in the aftermath of the Rodney King police brutality incident, and a tumultuous American Flag incident at SAIC involving a provocative artwork created by fellow student "Dred Scott" Tyler.

In recognition of her academic achievements and student activism, Cochran received the Student Leadership Award at commencement ceremonies. She became an artist, curator, educator, and cultural advocate whose career hallmark is connecting academic and grassroots communities.



Residency at Lillian E. Smith Center, Clayton

Left: *Artist's Self-Portrait*

Right: *Esther Cottage Door*

Affrilachian Origin Story

In 1991, writer Frank X Walker learned he was invisible. That year, a showcase of authors in his home state of Kentucky, dubbed “The Best of Southern Writing,” changed the course of his life. The original title of the event, “The Best of Appalachian Writing,” had been altered to accommodate African American writer Nikky Finney, the sole voice of color in the lineup.

Walker knew additional African American writers who should have been represented. He also felt the name change from “Appalachian” to “Southern” required an explanation. Walker’s disappointment led him to Webster’s Dictionary and a definition that identified “white residents from the mountains.”

Walker wasn’t white, but he was from Kentucky.

This definition of Appalachian would not suffice, and Walker was moved to a moment of clarity. He would create his own word that describes people of African descent from the Appalachian region: Affrilachian. It was the stereotype of an all-white and impoverished Appalachia that this new word could battle against. The word Affrilachian would stand as a reminder of the cultural complexity and the cultural wealth of the region.

In his 2007 book, *The United States of Appalachia: How Southern Mountaineers Brought Independence, Culture and Enlightenment to America*, historian and journalist Jeff Biggers lays claim to a vital involvement of Appalachian citizens in the abolitionist and Civil Rights movement. He also highlights the presence and contributions of people of African descent in the Appalachian region documented as far back as the 18th century. The region has produced some of the most important Americans thinkers and creators of African descent including: Carter G. Woodson (founder of the first official celebration of Black History), Booker T. Washington, Bessie Smith, Nina Simone, Bill Withers, Nikki Giovanni, and Henry Louis Gates—to name a few.

Affrilachia is not a location on the map; instead, it embraces a multicultural influence, a spectrum of people who consider Appalachia home and/or identify strongly with the trials and triumphs of being of this region.



Photo made by artist of homemade banjo and quilt

Excerpt from *I Pledge Allegiance to Affrilachia*

In 2011, I created the Affrilachian Artist Project, inspired by the Affrilachian poets who had been working together since college and the modern resurgence of old-time music by string bands like the Grammy Award-winning Carolina Chocolate Drops. Following in the footsteps of these creative trailblazers, I presented a regional digital showcase featuring the work of living artists for a two-day interdisciplinary Affrilachia symposium at the University of Kentucky in 2011. My motivation was simply to create a directory of Black visual artists in the region.

But the dream grew. I co-curated the inaugural museum exhibition of the Affrilachian Artist Project at the August Wilson Cultural Center in Pittsburgh, the region's unofficial urban capital. My goal was to create a sustainable collaborative network among the region's artists and community organizers. Today, the Affrilachian Artist Project Facebook page includes 2,000 individuals and organizations that celebrate and explore the intersection of cultures in Appalachia.

Affrilachia cannot be located on a map. Yet it is manifest, in writers' words, the sounds of musicians, visual art, and the creative network we continue to build. I seek out the makers and the truth tellers. I vow to honor the messy, bittersweet contrast of my home region's historic challenges and the courageous accomplishments of artists, activists, and residents who want a better future.

In an 1848 letter to Frederick Douglass, journalist and abolitionist Martin Delany said it best.

It is only in the mountains that I can fully appreciate my existence as a [person] in America, and in my own native land. It is then and there my soul is lifted up, my bosom cause to swell with emotion, and I am lost in wonder at the dignity of my own nature.

This is why I pledge allegiance to Affrilachia.

Excerpt from: Marie T. Cochran, “I Pledge Allegiance to Affrilachia,” *Rewire News Group*, February 28, 2019, <https://rewirenewsgroup.com/article/2019/02/28/i-pledge-allegiance-to-affrilachia/>.



Marie T. Cochran, *Affrilachia mask*, 2020

Our Three Viruses: COVID-19, BLM, Misinformation

Filmmaker Ken Burns has spent his career documenting American history, and he always considered three major crises in the nation's past: the Civil War, the Depression and World War II. Then came the unprecedented “perfect storm” of 2020 — and Burns thinks we may be living through America's fourth great crisis and perhaps the worst one yet. Burns poses the question: “We're beset by three viruses, are we not?” he explains. There's “a year-old COVID-19 virus, but also a 402-year-old virus of white supremacy, of racial injustice. ... And we've got an age-old human virus of misinformation, of paranoia, of conspiracies”. [1]

In 1985, Edward Cabbell, co-editor with Dr. William Turner of the groundbreaking book *Blacks in Appalachia*, called African Americans an “invisible minority” within a minority among the Appalachian population.

Before the Civil War, Blacks made up as much as 15 percent of the population in the rural southern Appalachians. Currently, there is an average of three percent throughout the entire geographic region. The trend of out-migration has been fueled by socio-economic insecurity. Most recently, the drop in population has accelerated in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

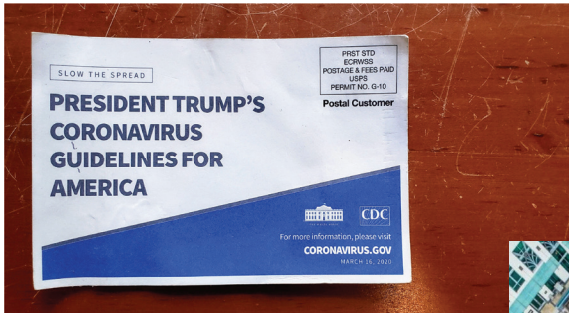
In spite of these massive challenges, these scattered, often isolated and racially segregated communities provide a rich albeit unwritten narrative of resilience and achievement. They are integral to the region’s identity and their stories enhance the understanding of the Appalachian past and present. To put Cabell’s quote in context, I prefer to say, “Small numbers, huge impact.”

Memory & History

In a profile of Southern Arts Federation/NEA Regional Arts Fellows, writer Nadine Wasserman states:

Memory acts as an agent of history by authenticating lived experience. And history, as the affirmation of both personal and community identity, is of great importance to people and communities who have been overlooked and de-valued. Cochran’s installations take on the task of presenting testimonies of African American lives in a way that conveys the immediacy of lived experiences and reinforces inclusive history.

¹ Ken Burns, “Playbook: America’s fourth great crisis,” *POLITICO*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/playbook/2021/01/12/americas-fourth-great-crisis-491367>.



Left: Former President Donald Trump declared the coronavirus pandemic a national emergency on March 13, 2020.

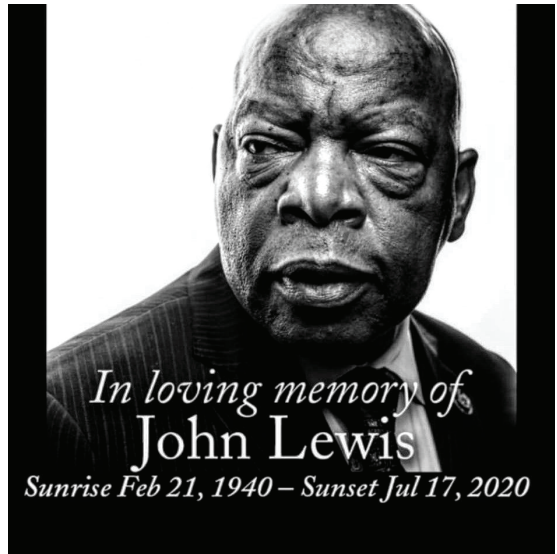
Right: *AVL BLM Street Mural*
Black Lives Matter Street Mural, downtown Asheville. (Photo by Reggie Tidwell/Curve Theory, courtesy of Asheville Area Arts Council.)





Left: Georgia Voters Stickers

Right: *The Passing of Civil Rights Icon and U.S. Congressman John Lewis of Georgia.*



Director's Statement

Cochran's art and work as a cultural pollinator intersect, showcasing her contribution to national dialogues about art, identity, race, and culture. Cochran is the featured speaker at this year's Lillian E. Smith Symposium. Her exhibition coincides with the bi-annual event, held for the first time in Demorest, and co-supported by Piedmont College's Mason-Scharfenstein Museum of Art (MSMA) and Lillian E. Smith Center (LES Center). Working together, the MSMA and LES Center hope to inspire thoughtful discourse and celebrate creative achievement within our unique region.

The MSMA facilitates artistic and cultural enrichment by exhibiting art, serving the college, and engaging the Northeast Georgia community. Located in downtown Demorest, the museum houses a permanent collection with a focus on American and European art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It hosts five temporary exhibitions each year as well as senior Capstone shows.

The LES Center serves as an educational center and an artist retreat. The Center is named for the social justice activist and highly-acclaimed author of *Strange Fruit* and *Killers of the Dream* and is located on the property where she lived and worked in Clayton, Georgia. With over 150 acres in the Northeast Georgia Mountains, the Center is surrounded by beauty and is an ideal location for recreational, social, and instructional activities.

Acknowledgements

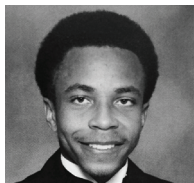
Thank you to Dr. Matthew Teutsch for his introduction and support of this exhibition; to A.J. Goodloe and Sarah Bittner, two emerging graphic designers who worked hard to make this catalogue; to Professor Tyler Mann for his elegant design work and guidance; to the MSMA student workers who helped install this show; and finally, sincerest appreciation to Marie T. Cochran, who gave her time, energy, and expertise to our museum's spring 2021 exhibition. Her passion for making a better world is reflected in her art and writing! We are thrilled to share her work with you.

—Rebecca Brantley

Assistant Professor of Art & Director of the Mason-Scharfenstein Museum of Art

*"To believe in something not yet proved and to underwrite it with our lives: it is the only way we can leave the future open." —Lillian Smith, *The Journey**

Designer Profiles



Anthony "A.J." Goodloe is a senior majoring in art with a focus in graphic design. A Georgia native, he was born in Atlanta and raised in Lawrenceville. Goodloe has done design work ranging from physical media for businesses to neighborhood signs. In 2020, he worked as a designer for Cavender Creek Winery in Dahlonega. Goodloe is a Dean's List recipient, a Dean's Scholar and currently holds the school record in the triple jump for Piedmont's Track and Field team.



A sophomore from Bethlehem, Georgia, Sarah Bittner is double majoring in mass communications and art, with a focus in graphic design. She is active on campus, doing design work for events and organizations. Bittner plans to go into branding businesses after college or design film posters. When she isn't in the studio, she competes at horse shows.

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