AULA Library Research Award 2019 Reflective Essay

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This paper was written for an Art History class I took during winter quarter 2018. The objective was to use a local artist I had previously written about and compare that artist's work with the work of a significant artist from any of the artistic periods studied in class. I chose local sculptor Tina Allen, with the aim of comparing and contrasting her Celeste King III bust with a bust created by a visual artist of the Harlem Renannace.

My first approach was to connect with my friend Mr. Google. Google provided me with very little information, beyond the usual obituary of Tina Allen and one You Tube offering of a segment produced by Entertainment Tonight on how Allen came to public attention by product placement of her sculptors on various African American TV shows during the 90’s. There was very little else provided by my friend Google.

I thought perhaps I would look into the work of sculptor Richard Barto to see if his work resonated with the conceptual work of Tina Allen. The little information I was able to gather through my friend Google, as I pursued the slight few images offered, led me to discover that Augusta Savage’s works were more akin to Tina Allen’s work.

Realizing that I was able to find so little information on the work of Augusta Savage led me to the Antioch University Los Angeles library. I was bowled over by the eagerness of all of the Library staff to aid me in researching these women, as they thought more could be learned on these intriguing subjects. The great difficulty in finding material on these two African American artists became such a challenge, that even the library staff invested in my efforts as a major challenge. None of the library staff and librarians could believe that these two important
American artists had so little information generated about their existence or work, never mind the great contributions they made to education and civil rights in this country.

AU key staff became perplexed by the search and gave 150% assistance in trying to unearth any bit of information on Augusta Savage especially. In peer review searches and other academic journal depositories, very slight evidence of Savage's existence was found. In one source I learned that a retrospective of Savage's work was put together in her Florida hometown, and was going to be touring the country with a soon to be published companion book/catalogue on the exhibit as well as her life and work.

One of our key academic librarians discovered that the book had indeed been published just a couple of months ago. Utilizing AULA's access to World CAT, a global library cataloging database, he was able to locate and borrow a copy. This book, rightfully titled Augusta Savage, provided clear pictures of the images and additional information on Savage we had not had access to through any other resource.

This experience awakened an understanding that our library is more than a brick/mortar and a few shelves of books, but through technology and our resource subscriptions, our reach in research can be boundless. I am grateful to the Antioch University library staff for opening my mind to this reality. I realize that our library holds a treasure trove of wealth to attaining information. I will forevermore be fearless in my further pursuits to research.
Savage - Allen: A Comparison of Lives and Sculpture

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Savage – Allen: A Comparison of Lives and Sculptures

A daring effort to compare and contrast the work of sculptors Tina Allen and Augusta Savage has left me completely dumbfounded. Though worlds apart in time, age, socioeconomics and artistic acceptance, their lives were so very similar it is frightening. As two African-American women, they not only battled sexism, racism and elitism of the greater global community, but the art world as well. According to Lois Jones Pierre-Noel, “the strength and position of the Black woman artist has existed as an important contribution from early history of Black American artists. Women artists emerged from a most discouraging beginning in this country to attain remarkable achievements. For to be Black and Woman was to express one’s creativity in frustrating obscurity” (1976, p.12).

The life of Augusta Savage began in the Jim Crow south of Florida where she, the seventh of fourteen children, faced daily discrimination as a Negro child. Augusta escaped her reality by molding figures from the red clay found around her impoverished neighborhood. For making figures from the red clay her minister father would beat her, saying it was ungodly. Augusta often said her father tried to beat the art out of her. After she won top prize ($25) at a local fair with her figurines, her father left her alone. She was encouraged by the fair organizer to use real modeling clay, which he gifted her, and recommended she seek to pursue art
education. Augusta became so good at modeling clay figures that her school principal paid her $1 a day to teach the other students (Hayes, et.al 2018).

Tina Allen, was born at the height of the civil rights movement. She lived in Harlem, NY with her artistic family (mainly musicians). Her chosen medium was drawing and painting. Her parents divorced when she was seven and moved her to the island of Grenada. One day she met famed sculptor William Zorach on the beach. Tina took him to meet her family and showed him her work. Zorach encouraged Allen and when her family moved back to New York he became her mentor, allowing Allen to develop in his Brooklyn studio.

Like Savage, Allen as a teenager in high school, was asked to make an ashtray in her art class. She had been reading Aristotle and decided to make a bust of him instead of an ashtray. Allen’s teacher wanted to know where she got the bust. After the teacher realized Allen sculpted the bust, she was encouraged to pursue art as a profession, leading her to an art degree from the University of South Alabama (post Jim Crow). Allen eventually moved back to New York and attended the Pratt Institute and the New York School of Visual Arts.

In 1986 Allen entered a competition where she won an $85,000 commission in Boston to sculpt a memorial statue of noted civil rights and labor leader A. Phillip Randolph. This commission catapulted Allen’s career. She became the “go to artist” for sculpting important African American public figures. Like Savage, Allen was a gifted conceptual artist who did sculptors of famous leaders like Nelson Mandela, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Sojourner Truth, Alex Haley and George Washington Carver to name a few.

Both artists landed in New York after formal education. For Savage, she continued her development in 1921 at Cooper Union receiving a scholarship. When the school realized her artistic gift, they extended her scholarship. Savage finished the four year program in three short
years. She was nominated for a scholarship at the prestigious Fontainebleau to study abroad in Paris. When the award committee learned Savage was black, the scholarship was rescinded. As fate would have it, Savage completed one of her most famous works “Gamin,” a bust of a young boy (modeled after her nephew) and a commissioned bust of W.E.B. DuBois for New York’s 135th Street Public Library. These two works won her the renowned Rosenwald scholarship for a two year study in Paris. This opportunity was extended and allowed Savage to travel and study extensively throughout Europe. She, like Allen, even studied in Italy.

Savage returned to NY from Europe in the late 20’s and landed in the middle of the “Harlem Renaissance,” a group consciousness to celebrate the African past and rich heritage of African Americans. Savage alongside writers Zora Neal Hurston, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen; musicians Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong; intellectuals like Allan Locke and Sterling Brown created one of the most powerful artistic movements in American History. Savage emerged as the most important sculptor in the Harlem Renaissance. She created an art school and studio for children and adults. Savage was also the first black woman to open a gallery in New York.

In 1937 Augusta Savage was chosen among a few other American artists to create art for the 1939 World’s Fair. Inspired by the National Negro Anthem “Lift Every Voice and Sing”, written and composed by her Florida friends James and Rosamond Johnson. Savage created the “Harp”, a 16 foot sculpture of black slave bodies forming the shape of a harp. The Fair sponsored smaller versions to be cast in iron and sold to the public, but there was never funds to bronze cast the original plastered version. Sadly after the Fair, officials had “Harp” destroyed.

During the success of Savage’s participation in the World’s Fair she was commissioned to do a bust of her friend James Weldon Johnson for the NYC 135th street Public Library. It is
this commissioned bust that I chose to compare with Tina Allen’s bust of Los Angeles leader Celeste King III in my community. Both of these women were conceptual artists. Though from different eras, Savage and Allen were also “artist activists”. Allen, like Savage, was known for her renowned sculptures of famous and historical public figures.

When I examine the images of the bust of Savage’s James Weldon Johnson, I am driven to the realism and swiping motion of this human figure, even though it is a bust. The care to detail appears to be so intentional with every wrinkle or fold of skin. The figure feels as though it will speak. The deep set eyes, and natural gaze, give way to an obvious personal approach you feel Savage has taken with this bust. Even the texture of the clothing feels real with its tactile layers. One is left with the feeling that Johnson the man was clearly a great thinker, even without knowing him as educator, writer or prominent activist.

Nestled in my community in Los Angeles at the intersection of Crenshaw Boulevard and Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue standing regally as if it is keeping watch is the Tina Allen memorial bust of business and civil rights leader Celeste King III. It is amazing to me that Allen’s bust of King is so similar to Savage’s bust of Johnson. The strong expression on King’s face is in motion with a sense of pride that Allen has applied to the spirit of the piece. The position of the bust on its anchored pedestal gives the illusion of this famed Tuskegee Airman looking down Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard towards the parade route that he created to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. on the very street Celeste King III had renamed in Dr. King’s honor.

It is haunting to me that both artists used a similar technique forging markings into the clothing of their busts providing a texture of reality to which one touches with one’s eyes. Even the methods used to create hair and mustache segments on the busts are extremely akin to each
other. The coloration of the two bronze busts practically sets them in the same “tribe.” Both busts have a powerful impact on the observer, even if subliminally. Allen once said, “The emotional nature of a person is part of their beauty, not just the bones, and the skeleton….I’m trying to lift up the idea that human strength and courage are beautiful.” (Tina Allen 1955-, n.d) Clearly this notion of Tina Allen is a recognized feature in her impactful work.

In the early 90’s I met and befriended Tina Allen. Until I did research for this paper, I did not know she sculpted the King memorial bust. The Tina Allen I got to know socially and professionally was a strong activist for human rights and global change. She had already done several of her most famous works when we met. I remember her excitement when she announced her current work on the 16 foot commissioned statue of writer Alex Haley for the state of Tennessee. Her passion for her work was apparent with each word that rolled off her lips.

Allen being a child of the civil rights era knew the power of media, television and film especially. She understood how these mediums could promote her work. Living in Los Angeles, the home of Hollywood, Allen began to negotiate with film and television studios to display her work on their sets. She was able to get her smaller figurines in numerous television shows and movies. Her abstract figures prompted many award shows to commission her to create special awards for their organizations. I am happy to say, I used my friendship with Tina, to get her to design the “Stellar Gospel Music Awards” statue during my tenure with the television production. Many prominent personalities began to collect her works including, Hillary Clinton, Bill Cosby and Robert DeNiro to name a few.

Both Allen and Savage had a firm commitment to children and art. After all both of these women had struggled as children to find a path to their artistic calling. Clearly with Allen
working with the United Negro College Fund, was a further demonstration of her invested vision for youth. Tina once described her work as “writing history in bronze.” She shared, “my creations are totems that tell children this kind of person is worthy of attention. If a human being is no longer tender and loving they can’t raise their children so that they want to live, the game is over. The minute you no longer are able to raise a generation willing to carry the future on their backs, the game is over!” (Tina Allen 1955- , n.d.)

Savage, like Allen, has given back to the world through her art education to children. She mentored and taught some of America’s greatest artists including Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight, among others. Savage once shared the following, “I have created nothing really beautiful, really lasting, but if I can inspire one of these youngsters to develop the talent I know they possess, then my monument will be in their work.” (as quoted in SAAM, n.d)

I am so grateful to this experience, prompting me to do a deeper dive into the lives and works of these two important American artists. It is amazing how little has been written about both. Sadly it is even more sobering how so much of Savage’s work was lost, because of the inability to cast in sustainable materials. I am further saddened that Tina Allen died suddenly from a massive heart attack in 2008 at the age of 58. I can only image the body of work she would have generated given longer on this planet. I hope that art historians and other eager learners as myself will keep the flame burning to illuminate the greatness of these two incredible artists.
Bust of James Weldon Johnson, 1939
Celes King III, date unknown
References


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