

REVEREND ALBERT WAGNER

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ROSE BOUTHILLIER

I first encountered Albert Wagner's work in a catalog for the exhibition *Black Folk Art in Cleveland* (1983), and was struck by its powerful message and singular aesthetic. Love, spirit, darkness, honesty, humor, all coming through an overwhelming sense of physicality. His works are thick, rough, flush, wobbly, bursting.

I sought out one of his daughters, Bonita Wagner Johnson, who was a constant companion to her father throughout his life, and who has continued his work as a minister. Her home is filled with her father's artwork, and she warmly welcomes those who are interested in seeing it. The *Sunburst* paintings that Megan Lykins Reich and I saw during an initial visit there were magnetic, beaming, and clear; they were some of the first works selected for *Realization is Better than Anticipation*, and undoubtedly shaped its focus.

I was able to visit The Wagner Museum in the summer of 2012, before it was cleared out and most of the works within were sold at auction. This was the three-story house in East Cleveland where Wagner lived and worked until his death in 2006. His presence was still palpable; every corner was filled with art; expectant chairs were lined up in the basement congregation. Everything, everywhere, looked like it could be fodder for Wagner's prolific output. Among the most striking works were two hanging in the kitchen, small figures made from sticks and peanut shells glued to Styrofoam trays. They seemed to say: "we are made from nothing, and take the shape of something. There is energy moving through us."

It was there that I first saw the wood-and-pot sculptures also featured in *Realization*. Sharing a table, two of them seemed to pose, nonchalantly, strangely anthropomorphic and totally odd. The combination of two simple objects made each seem strange, inter-reliant, knowing. It was hard to imagine them in their previous lives, unconsidered, washed up on the beach, fallen under a tree, at the back of a kitchen pantry or the cookware section of a thrift store.

During a subsequent visit with Bonita, we inquired about two shattered plates in a display case by her front door, surrounded by an array of plants that cloaked them in a warm light. The plates' miraculous story is intense, and seemed to unite the sculptures and the *Sunburst* paintings. Wagner was most known for his figurative, narrative, and overtly religious works—our aim was to try to draw attention to a different aspect of his practice, one that is singular, spontaneous, and very much about *becoming*. It was not our intention to ignore the religious aspect of his work and message, but rather to highlight his ability to funnel that message into symbols and objects. The plates seemed to illustrate this so clearly: simple items, activated by a simple gesture, that hold so much power and spirit.

What follows are some of Bonita's thoughts on her father's work and the specific pieces in the exhibition, which we recorded during a visit in May 2013.

### ON THE SUNBURST PAINTINGS:

My father started back in painting when he was 50 years old, he was just doing sunbursts of all different colors, some of them were blue, light blue, dark blue, oranges, and some reds. I don't think that he had the confidence that he needed to do figures yet.

When I look at the sunbursts, I see all of the strokes, his hand, you know, making all of those strokes. First with the pencil, or charcoal, then he went back over it with the paint. He put a lot into his work, no matter how small or how big. I see his heart is in it. The spiritual thing that I see in them is that he really, really admired God's creations. Genesis talks about how God made those great lights. He wanted to rule by day, he wanted to rule by night. That's just what he's doing. I have seen the sun and the moon out at the same time, hundreds of times, and even when it's daylight, the sun cannot outshine the moon. As powerful as the sun is, when it's dark outside, it can't do anything. You know, it has to let the moon rule. That's what I would say about the sun, that it is God's creation.

What made him get away from the sunbursts was people, mankind. He wanted to tell a story in his art, to help people. Sometimes to make them happy, sometimes to give them a thought. So he didn't continue with the *Sunbursts*, though people sometimes requested them.

### ON THE DRIFTWOOD SCULPTURES:

My father made a lot of these types of sculptures. One of the sculptures he called *Moses*. He wanted to show Moses with the rod, that was actually a piece of branch. Moses had absolutely nothing to use when he found out he was chosen to lead the people, he didn't even have a voice, because he was a man of stammering lips, the Bible said. He stuttered so bad that he couldn't even talk. And he's like, "You're telling me I'm going to lead those people that have been down there in Egypt for 400 years? Do you realize that that's thousands and thousands of people?" He said, "What am I going to use?" And God said, "You see that rod? Pick it up. You're going to use that." And so he obeyed, he picked it up. He knew it was God speaking, because he had seen the burning bush. But he still asked, stuttering, "How am I going to speak?" and God replied, "Your brother Aaron is going to speak for you." And that rod went everywhere you know, it did some of everything, it turned into a snake, it opened up the sea, it made water come from rocks, that one simple rod. So that shows us that it doesn't matter how you can speak, or how you look, God uses really dumb, simple things to confound the world with.

And that was a story that Albert wanted to show, that this is the rod, in the physical. He loved sculpture. He told me "I'm really not a painter, I'm a sculptor." And he loved finding objects. Moses was his hero. But his favorite artist was Picasso, because he just did what he wanted to do. A person can't take your gift and say, "No, it's supposed to be this way." Albert used to say, "You know, I'm not the greatest painter in the world, but this is me." He also said, "They have to rename the art, you know, it's not outsider's art, it's not this art or that art, it's just art."

### THE STORY OF THE BROKEN PLATES:

My father had gotten up in age, and his knees were bothering him. He had a little refrigerator and a microwave put up into his room, so he wouldn't have to move around as much. And he had a plate, a saucer, a cup, a spoon and a fork, and he would just wash them out in the bathroom and set them back by his bed, on the floor, right next to the hammer and the screwdriver, and all of the things that he would use to put his art together in his room.

So one evening he was just tired, and he went to lie back in the bed and relax. And a still, quiet voice came. It said, "Albert." So he just lay there and waited for it. And it called again, "Albert." And he was familiar with that voice, you know. It said, "I want you to pick up that hammer, and I want you to tap the middle of that plate." And Albert laid there, because he still wasn't all the way sure that it was God telling him to do this. But God was ready for him to know that through all the times, and all of the things and the miracles that He'd shown him, God was saying, "I want you to know, I am with you. Don't have no doubt. I am with you."

So the voice spoke again. "Albert," God said, "I made the plate, I made the hammer, and I made you. I want you to pick up that hammer, and tap the middle of that plate." So he picked up the hammer, and tapped the middle of the plate, and it came out into six slices, with no little shatters or nothing, just six even pieces. And Albert gasped, "Oh my God," and he laid back down, shaking and in fear. "Oh my God, my God." He was about 75, 76 years old when this happened, getting up in age, and the Lord wanted him to know, before he left here, that the Lord was with him, and that he was going with him when he left.

So, he lay back down, and the voice returned, saying "Albert..." And he thought "Oh my God, my God." And the voice said "Albert, I want you to pick up that same hammer, and I want you to tap the middle of that saucer. Remember what I told you, Albert. I made you, I made that hammer, and I made that saucer. I want you to pick that hammer up and tap the middle of it." So he tapped it, and *it* came out into six slices. *Even*. With no shatters, like it had been cut by a machine. After that, if anybody came to see him, whether it was to buy art, or just visit, if he had a message for them, he told it to them. He had no fear, because God had told him, "I am with you." So many things happened for this man, but those plates, they were the last, biggest thing in his life that he saw, that he was able to talk about.

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Reverend Albert Wagner, *Untitled*, date unknown, drift wood, acrylic paint, cooking pot, 25 x 31 x 13 inches. Collection of Daniel Wolf/Donald Rosenfeld. Image courtesy of Gray's Auctioneers, Llc. Photo: Jessica Ramage.

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Reverend Albert Wagner, *The Broken Plates*, date unknown, plate and saucer, 17 1/2 x 26 1/2 inches. Collection of Bonita Wagner Johnson. Photo: Jennifer J. Smailes.