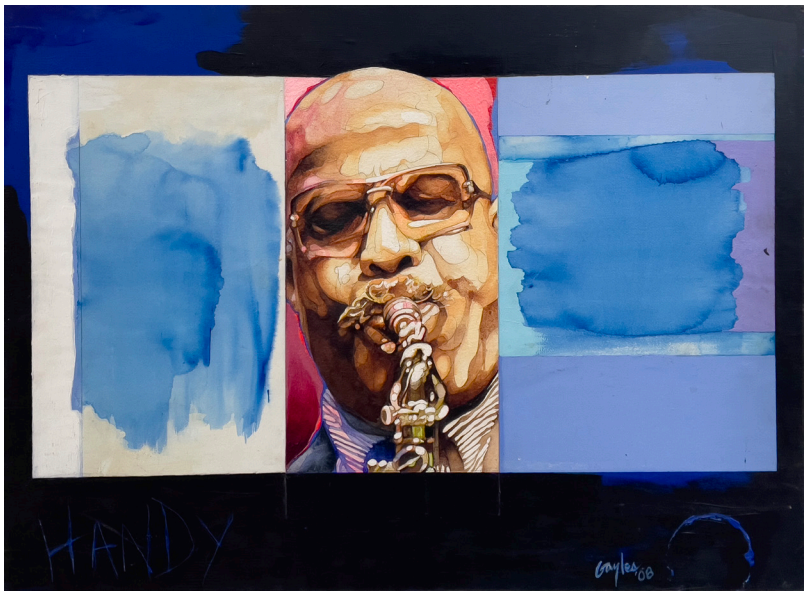
The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Windows to the Soul*, an exhibition by James Gayles, at the Courthouse Gallery from October 4, 2023 — January 28, 2024. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artist, the city courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Chris Lanier, who provided the following essay*.

THE PAPER IS NOT SILENT



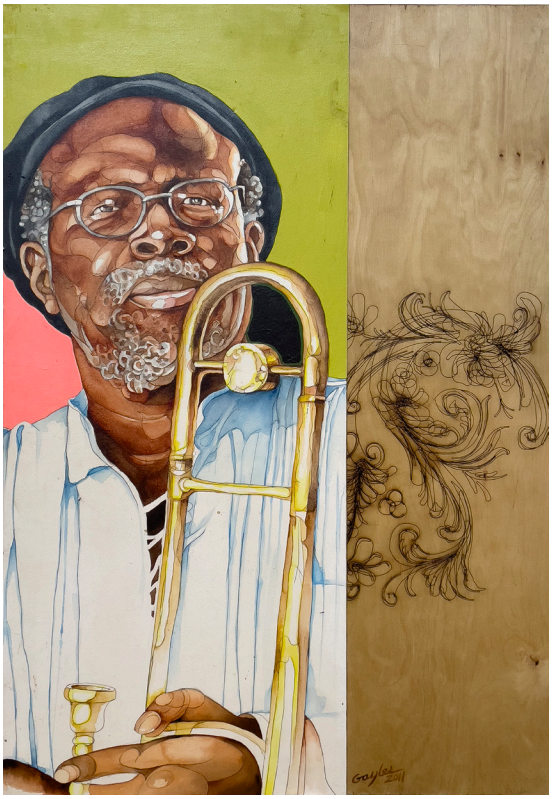
John Handy, watercolor and wood, 24"x36", 2008.

James Gayles usually starts with the eyes. The reason he paints portraits, rather than landscapes or still lifes, is that he's drawn to a sense of humanity – and that's what he's looking for in the eyes. The portraits on display in this show come from a variety of sources – some were commissions, some were attached to editorial assignments, others were sparked by personal interest or inspiration – a photograph that leaped out at him while paging through a magazine. He usually works from photographs: "I don't do sittings. My process is long, I won't torture a person to sit that long."

Gayles hails from the world of illustration and design – he was awarded an Emmy for his design and illustration work for NBC. Part of his job was filling in gaps when footage or photographs weren't available – for instance, when the Shah of Iran was overthrown, he was called upon to make a portrait of the Shah for broadcast. Working on those kinds of deadlines was a challenge, given his preference for taking his time – but it was an excellent venue for him to hone his skills in portraiture. And it also allowed him to indulge a love that continues to drive him in his personal work – a love for faces that communicate.

VISUAL MUSICALITY

Musicians have been a consistent source of inspiration, as can be readily seen in this exhibition. Gayles himself is a drummer, having played in jazz, gospel, and even country bands. For Gayles, part



Wayne Wallace, watercolor and woodburning, 36"x24", 2010

of the appeal of musicians is that they directly present the challenge of capturing something ineffable. The energy and personality they bring to their music – how can you make that felt on a silent piece of paper?

Gayles listens to a wide variety of music, but his ear (and eye) for jazz is front and center. Portraits range from contemporary musicians, like Bay Area guitarist Terrence Brewer, to legendary figures like Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong. Gayles credits his love of jazz to his mother. "When I was little, she had the most expansive jazz collection I've ever seen of anybody – even DJs. She had everybody – Ella Fitzgerald, John Coltrane, Miles Davis. When I was a teenager of course I liked Motown, too– but when I came home from high school, I would put her albums on, sit back in my dad's easy chair, and just go into another world."

Spinning records eventually evolved into forays from his home in New Jersey to New York, to visit jazz clubs. He remembers catching Nina Simone at the Village Gate (he would later make several paintings of her, not included in this particular show). "She was very impactful, and she was very expressive, energetic. She was really a personality. I went to see her perform, and it was a club – so people were sitting down drinking. You know, clinking their glasses. She stopped her performance right in the middle – she says, 'I'm not gonna play another damn note until you all shut up.' Everybody shut up and she continued her show."

DEFENSE AND OFFENSE

Simone – along with many other Black figures he's chosen to paint – was self-consciously an avatar of Black excellence and beauty. Growing up as a child in the 1950s, Gayles came into his own in an era when Black excellence often had to be won against the hostility of the dominant white culture. "I went to an Italian Catholic grammar school, and I was the only Black kid in class. My sister, she was the only Black person in her class. That experience brought some pain. I had feelings of inferiority growing up. I got bullied a lot. I got in fights almost every day with the Italian boys. Because back in New Jersey the Italians and the Blacks were enemies. There used to be wars in schools all the time. That's what I grew up in."

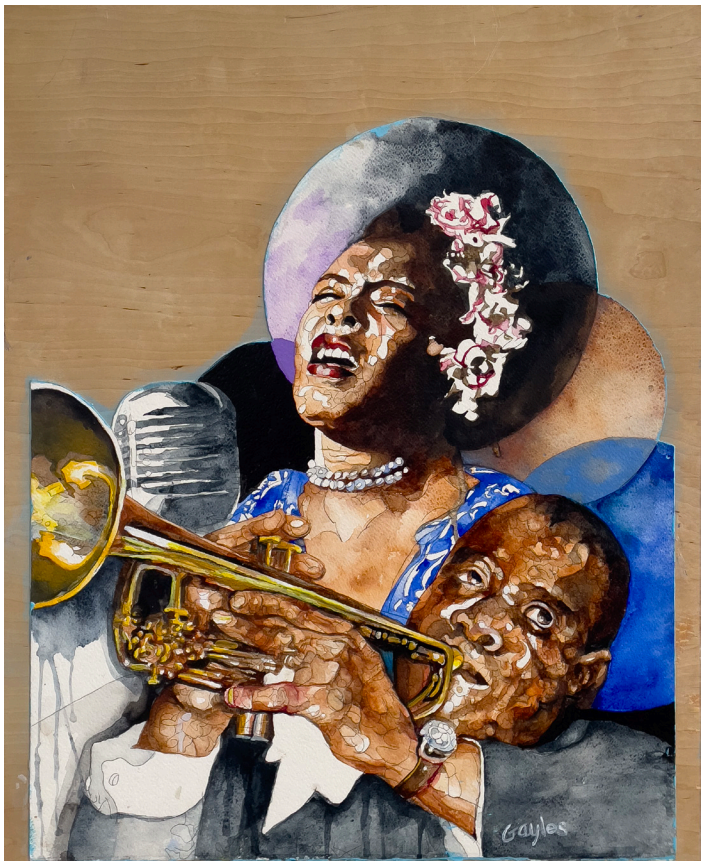
Art provided an escape route. "I preserved myself by excelling. Just to prove that I was as good as

everybody else, I had to be better than everybody else. That's when I first started to excel in my art. I got the top grades in my class, too. That was my defense and my offence."

His teachers steered him further into art. "The Nuns helped me out a lot because they recognized early that I had talent. They encouraged me to go a program for artists at an Arts High School – they encouraged me to take Saturday classes at Arts High. That's where I learned a lot about different mediums – oil, watercolor, acrylic at an early age." He painted in oil a lot as a teenager, but ultimately found he was allergic to oil paint, which triggered his asthma. He migrated to watercolor as his primary medium of choice.

Over the course of his career, through his portraiture, he has assembled a pantheon of sorts – a collection of singers, musicians, writers and thinkers who invented pathways for themselves, making innovations in sound, language and perception – immeasurably enriching American culture along the way. It's become a cliché to frame artists like Holiday and Armstrong as "Jazz Royalty," but crucially, they didn't inherit their crowns – they forged them themselves.

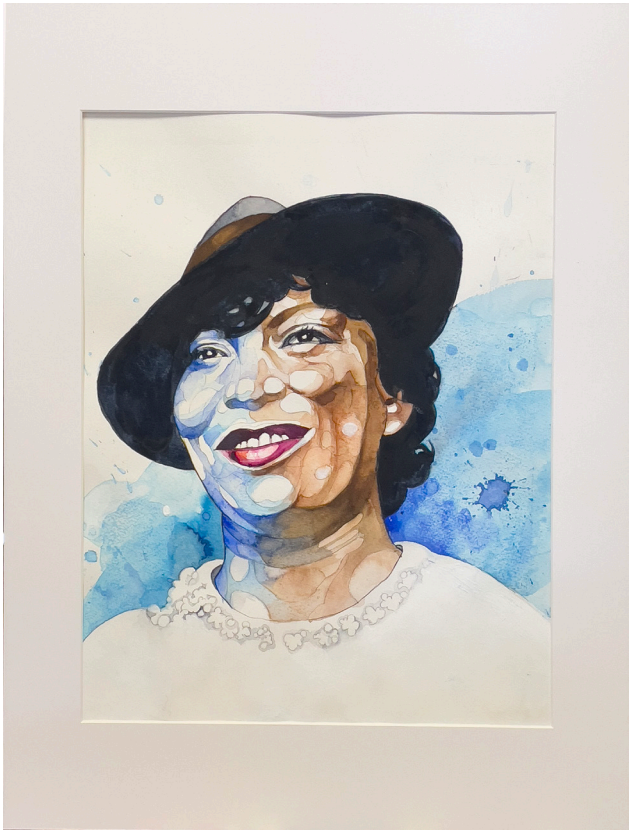
Black jazz musicians created their own aesthetics, their own set of values, and given the cultural respect they now enjoy it's possible to forget how much misunderstanding, opposition, and violence they faced from the mainstream. No clearer image exists of this than Billie Holiday at the end of her life, targeted by racist Federal Bureau of Narcotics commissioner Harry Anslinger after she refused his request to stop singing the anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit" – and essentially left to die in a hospital, denied proper medical care for her damaged heart, lungs, and liver, suffering from heroin withdrawal – handcuffed to her bed, with two police officers stationed at her door.



Lady Day and Satchmo, watercolor, 32"x24", 2018

Speaking of the jazz pioneers he admires, and the way they created their own worth, Gayles reflected – "It's almost the same thing with me, personally. I had to excel in my own way, because I wasn't given any props by society." He sees artists as crucial trailblazers, not just in definitions of beauty, but in broader cultural progress. "Artists seem to be the ones that always

further society – they're precursors of development in the human race."



Zora, watercolor, 20"x16", 2022.

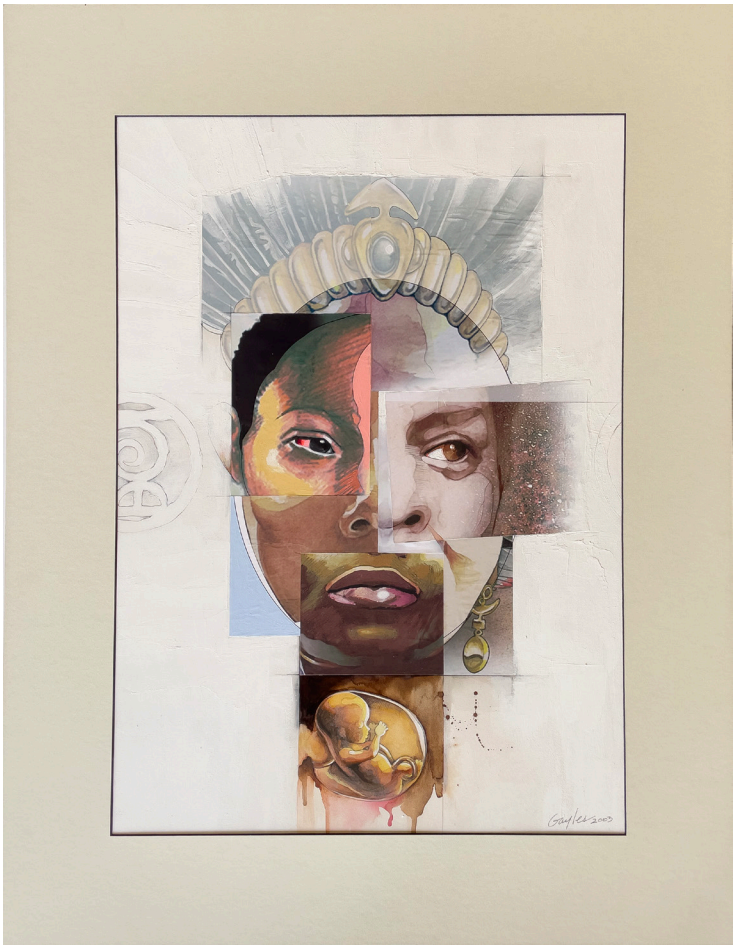
GEOMETRY

An idiosyncratic feel for geometry comes through in his watercolors. The faces seem to be puzzled together from ovals and arcs – highlights float like organic archipelagos in surrounding, fluid shadows. In his portrait of the great Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston, her cheeks connect to her jawline in soft echoes or ripples that descend and bend toward a sequence of arcs that define the circumference of her neck. In Gayles' portrait of Sonny Rollins, his white beard and hair coil up and fragment out like whorls of coral. Gayles credits this sense of shape and geometry to his training as a graphic designer. When he collages an African mask into his paintings, the geometry seems to call out to the superb sense of geometry and figurative abstraction found in African sculpture – the kind of bold figurative stylization that would inspire Picasso to embark on his voyage into Cubism.

COLLAGE

The collages in the show represent something of a departure for Gayles. They nod toward the work of Romare Bearden, the pioneering Black artist who fused collage with a sense of sociology and a commitment to civil rights (Gayles met Bearden, and got to visit his studio, when they were both living in New York). Bearden's collages were deeply rooted in (and reinventions of) photographic culture, built from magazine clippings – assembling densely-peopled rooms and neighborhoods from an ephemeral, mass-produced photographic archive of Black life. Perspectives and figures were often impacted against each other, and even against themselves: a recurring strategy was to make a face out of pieces of multiple faces, like looking at someone in a mirror that has been shattered and uneasily repaired, the planes at uneven angles.

Gayles' collages don't partake in Bearden's visual density – like Gayles' more traditional portraits, he affords big expanses of empty space – but he does borrow that technique of facial fragmentation. The constituent faces from Gayles' collage "Motherland," showing a composite female visage, are as follows:



Motherland, mixed media, 40"x30", 2012.

The lips are taken from a photograph of a Zulu woman.

The crowned forehead comes from a painting of Queen Califia, the pagan warrior queen from Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo's 16th Century novel The Adventures of Esplandián. In the book, she ruled over a citizenry of Black women who "lived in the manner of Amazons" on the fictional Island of California – she loosed griffins upon her enemies as beasts of war. She has been invoked as a sort of spirit-precursor to the state of California, depicted in a variety of murals and paintings – perhaps most famously by Diego Rivera in his "Allegory of California," painted for the Pacific Stock Exchange.

The left eye is taken from Ida B. Wells, one of the founders of the NAACP, born into slavery, who went on to become a teacher and journalist. Her investigative reporting on lynching effectively made her an exile from Memphis, where her newspaper's office was destroyed by a white mob. The reference photo Gayles used dates from about that time – he captures the stoic and somber glint in her pupil.

The right eye belongs to Augusta Savage, the Harlem Renaissance sculptor who realized the Black figure with a dignity and reverence that it had rarely been afforded in American sculpture. Her Methodist father disapproved of her early artistic interests to the point of physical abuse – she once said he "almost whipped all the art out of me." Her monumental sculpture The Harp – depicting a chorus of singing children in the form of a harp, telescoping out along the platform of the harp's soundboard – was displayed in painted plaster for the 1939 New York's World Fair. Savage was never able to raise the funds needed to cast it in bronze, and it was destroyed at the end of the Fair; like Zora Neal Hurston, she ended her days in artistic obscurity.

Bringing these elements together I see an attempt to synthesize the mythic and the historic, along the vast arc of diaspora. This face of faces evokes a sense of communal identity that, surprisingly, doesn't negate the individual. The face becomes a social self, without being rendered general or generic – a social self that still retains its sharp particularities, its private and piercing experiences.

RETROSPECTIVE GLANCE

Looking back over his work through the years, Gayles has recently developed a strong feeling that his talent was God-given, and that in some sense he's been a conduit for something beyond his personal self. It's not that he has any amnesia about doing the work. He remembers the process: the mixing of colors, the brush strokes, the tilting of the paper when he wanted the pooled paint to run down the picture in liquid streaks. But in some ways he feels like he's become a spectator to his own work, and he gets to receive it as a gift – prepared by his own hands, but ultimately bequeathed by God.

After he told me this, I couldn't help but read some of those feelings into the self-portrait he created for the show – and of course I looked for it in the eyes. At first I 'd found something sly in his sideways glance (Gayles has a warm sense of humor) – but looking more slowly, I found the glance more quiet, more thoughtful. I was able to imagine his eyes weren't looking at me, but perhaps (and I realize this is projecting too much, but art has a way of granting this kind of license) he was looking at his own paintings. It's up to you to find what you will in his eyes, but for myself, I found a sense of humility, and a hushed contentment.

Chris Lanier

Reno, Nevada

September, 2023

Self-Portrait, watercolor, 20"x16", 2023.

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