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Sourcing Synchronicity: Overton Loyd & the Funk Aesthetic

Mike Sonksen · Wednesday, July 20th, 2016

“Back in the day, Funk really was a bad word. I know because my mom popped me dead in the mouth for using that detested noun in a sentence,” says Overton Loyd.

Detroit-born artist Overton Loyd is one of the few besides James Brown, Rick James, Prince or George Clinton and a select few others authorized to talk about the word “Funk.” Loyd’s cover art for seminal funk band Parliament aka P-Funk is the visual equivalent of P-Funk‘s music. Loyd’s signature style is now known the world over as the “Funk Aesthetic. “ His work retranslates funk music’s swagger and flavor into paintings, prints, cartoons, comics, loose sketches, and digital illustrations. For over 40 years Loyd’s art has worked symbiotically with P-Funk’s music to bring a powerful “multimedia” experience before they even had the word. Like many pioneers, Loyd has been too busy living the experience to realize how groundbreaking his work is.

Rhythm of Vision

After so many years of prolific art production, Loyd is finally being recognizing with his first solo museum exhibit. “Rhythm of Vision: The Artistry of Overton Loyd,” at the California African American Museum in Exposition Park, Los Angeles, features more than fifty works in a variety of mediums including oil, acrylic and watercolor paintings, charcoal and pen and ink drawings, lithographs, prints and album covers. The work ranges from colorful, complex figurative scenes to simpler, black and white abstract compositions. This comprehensive exhibition is the first time the full breadth of Loyd’s four plus decades of artwork has ever been displayed. A title from one of the exhibit’s pieces, “Sourcing Synchronicity,” captures a recurrent theme in both his artwork and life.

His first encounter with synchronicity was in Detroit in 1971, his senior year in high school when he created an oil painting of Isaac Hayes. “A woman who worked with Hayes,” he recalls, “saw me doodling in a sketch book at a cafe, and invited me to Isaac’s birthday party, where I presented him with the painting.” Situations like this have happened many times since. Before breaking down the progression of his career and the ever-present synchronicity which has defined his journey, it is important to highlight his youth in Detroit.

Detroit: the Motor City

Loyd is always quick to point out that his consciousness started in Detroit in the 1960s. Loyd was

born in the Motor City in 1954 when the city was still booming. Detroit like Washington D.C., as Parliament declared is a “Chocolate City.” Born into this, Loyd was into music and art from a very early age. He also kept a close eye on current events and the cultural climate. Detroit’s climate of chaos and unstable socioeconomics made music of protest. Motown was still in Detroit until 1970. As Vietnam set in, factories started closing down. Jobs were harder to come by.

Motor City made way for Devils Night. Detroit of the Civil Rights era was hot like Watts. The 1967 Detroit Riots were the biggest riots in American history until 1992 in Los Angeles. Broadside Press founded by Detroit poet Dudley Randall published Black Arts poets like Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Don L. Lee and Sonia Sanchez. The Chicago-Detroit Nexus was one of the centers of the Black Arts movement. During this same time, the band MC5 formed the White Panther Party in Detroit while punk rock pioneers Iggy and the Stooges were coming to rise. Loyd soaked up all of this in his Detroit youth.

Growing up as a kid in the early 1960s he learned how to draw White people quickly because there was no shortage of examples to copy like Norman Rockwell. He recalls that there were very few images of Black folks, aside from the painters of the Harlem Renaissance. One of his biggest career goals as a young artist was to draw Black figures so future young Black artists will have someone to imitate because Loyd never did. That’s why he had to do it himself.

Detroit to New York

Loyd’s always been in synchronicity. Throughout his career he has always had a golden touch of meeting the right person at just the right moment. The arc of his life has a “Forrest Gump,” like trajectory. He explains further, “I was the in-house artist for the Shelby Hotel in Detroit. I was painting a mural for a club that they had called JJ’s Lounge, where I met a ton of performers, including Sun Ra and Martin Mull.” Shortly after meeting Mull, the comedian convinced Overton and his girlfriend to move to New York to try his hand at commercial art.

“I traveled to New York in 1976 where Mull introduced me to his wife at the time, Kristen Johnson – who was also working in the illustration field,” Loyd recalls. She introduced him to prominent illustrator Robert Grossman. Grossman is the artist that created the poster for the movie, *Airplane*. “Grossman saw me doing caricatures in front of the Guggenheim Museum one day,” Loyd shares, “and said he was looking for an assistant. Assisting for Grossman ignited my career as an airbrush illustrator for various magazine publications.” This was just before he started working with George Clinton.

The Funkiest Multimedia Show on Earth

His career really picked up in New York in 1977. “A pal of mine from the Shelby Hotel, Joey Zalabak – was working on the road with George Clinton,” Loyd says. “He invited me to a listening party premiering the record, *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein.* It was there that I re-met George just in time to scribble up the underground comic insert for his next album *Funkentelechy vs. The Placebo Syndrome.* Before long, I was on the road helping to create the funkiest multimedia shows on earth! We had all kinds of special effects, from animation to giant props.” Clinton let Loyd spread his wings creatively. There were no limits and Clinton had the budget to make Loyd’s ideas concrete. “One stand out memory,” says Loyd, “was *the Glory Hallastoopid* tour. That album concept was about throwing a party in the black hole. Part of the album art featured an exploding

egg, representing the ‘big bang theory.’“

The pace of Loyd’s career really picked up after this. His cover for the 1977 Parliament album *Motor Booty Affair* was an instant classic. “I’ve considered it my job to act as ‘behind the scene reporter‘, documenting the Gloryhallastoopid environment of the P-Funk realm,” he says.

The Funk Aesthetic

The pioneering style Loyd developed working with P-Funk is now known the world over as the “Funk Aesthetic,” or “Bop Art.” Loyd laughs about this now. He exclaims, “We never named the style that we were doing – we were too busy doing it!” They created their own mythology. He’s designed costumes for the band, illustrated P-Funk comic books and his animated video for P-Funk’s “Atomic Dog,” in 1982 was awarded the “Best Use of Computer Graphics” award from Billboard Magazine.

Loyd and Clinton are brothers for life. Loyd has a lot of gratitude for the role Clinton has played in his life. Clinton is working on a new Parliament record as we speak and he is also celebrating his 75th birthday near the end of July. Loyd has been working with him for four decades. “George has empowered us all,” Loyd confesses, “to take the art of our minds and transform it into the art of this world!” There’s never been anything but creative chemistry between Loyd and Clinton. The only time apart they have had over the years was when Clinton flirted with retirement for a while in the 1980s. This is when Loyd landed in L.A., after several years of touring with P Funk.

A Little Bit of Everything

“For the last couple of decades I’ve been doing a little bit of everything,” he says. He’s done illustrations for Ray Bradbury’s book, *Dinosaur Tales*, he was the featured caricaturist on *Win Lose or Draw,* a guest art director for *The Class of 3000,* where he remixed Andre 3000 character designs and Loyd has even done commercial work like painting skateboard decks. In 2014, Simon & Schuster published George Clinton’s memoir *Brothas Be, Yo Like George Ain’t That Funkin’ Kinda Hard on You?* Loyd designed the book’s jacket cover and his illustrations and album covers are in there. Clinton talks about Loyd on a number of pages throughout the work, even referring to many of Loyd’s signature pieces he created for Clinton over the years as “Overtoons.”

As Clinton explains in his memoir, Loyd made P-Funk look like the superheroes they are. Loyd looking back says, “Never in my wildest dreams could I imagine that we were actually at the genesis of initiating contemporary urban branding. I’m only now waking up to that wild idea.”

Loyd’s current exhibit is divided into five sections and one section in particular is dedicated to all of his collaborations with George Clinton. In addition to his album covers, there are a number of prints, pen and ink sketches and watercolor paintings. A disco ball hangs over the room and a soundtrack of funk music plays on rotation in the room. Songs like “Chocolate City,” and “Let Me Ride,” complement the surrounding work. The wide range of imagery created by Loyd shows how versatile and talented his artistry is.

Arik Marshall, former member of the Red Hot Chili Peppers says, “He’s a truly gifted artist whose versatility with different styles and mediums is extraordinary…the man can paint like Monet money…make you marvel at his Marvel meets Richard Pryor comic book cartooning…sell you some surreal estate in the Daliwood Hills…silly, serious, classic, abstract, funky, high-

brow…whatever's clever…the brother's got it all!" Marshall's insight above applies to Loyd's oeuvre. In pieces like Loyd's 2002 watercolor, "Dr. Funkenstein and his Therapist Logic," Loyd's technical skills and surreal ability fuse together seamlessly.

Art Flows Through the Future

Loyd is extremely quick with his renderings. This is why he has flourished in dynamic environments like television or live concerts. L.A. artist and publisher John Carr says, "Peek over his shoulder at one of his live sketching sessions at a nightclub, capturing the vital essences of his subjects, and you'll immediately feel that you're in the presence of an artistic giant. He draws with the same ease that most people have talking and using hand gestures. He's got the ability to crystallize a story into a single frame, and a knack for "détournement" – flipping everyday concepts into opportunities for mind-expansion, empathy or even just a good laugh."

This spontaneity Carr notes can be seen in prints like Loyd's 2007 piece, "Under a Groove." Loyd shares the idea that George Clinton advocated in his music and this idea is that music and art are forces for unity. One of Clinton's most popular songs declares, "One nation under a groove." Loyd takes great joy in using art as a bridge.

"Art flows through the future," Loyd shares. The future is something Loyd has always had his eye on. "I'm hyped about the future," he says, "because cyberspace allows us to connect directly with our fans, and distinguish ourselves however we want by virally marketing our Thang by any memes necessary. I got a funny feeling that we're once again, standing on the verge of flipping the ol' paradigm. Expect more multi-media style exhibitions that might include animation, music and a gang of Pure Funk!"

Funk to Hip-Hop

John Carr published several of Loyd's images in the book, *Yo What Happened to Peace?!* "I'd put him in the same category as a jazz virtuoso or your favorite hip-hop MC," Carr says, "Crazy improvisation and freestyle while delivering a tightly crafted message. His drawings and paintings ARE jazz, ARE funk, ARE hip-hop." Among Loyd's dozens of pieces with musicians in action, a piece that especially captures this idea Carr speaks on is a print of Loyd's from 2007, "Crew Cuttin' It." This piece shows a team of DJ's cutting wax over four turntables.

Speaking of hip-hop, Loyd's work can rightfully be called a precursor to the urban art movement of West Coast graffiti and hip-hop. Young west coast artists of the 1980s were heavily influenced by Loyd's work for P-Funk; especially because L.A.'s graffiti community was 10 years behind New York. Before the internet, West Coast kids looked to special effects in movies and album covers as inspiration according to Mear One. Loyd shares the love, "I'm really inspired by the generation of artist that P-Funk inspired. Upstart Artstars from Mear to Murakami are impacting my creative sensibilities."

In spite of his longevity, Loyd remains contemporary. In addition to his show at the California African American Museum, one of his paintings is currently up at Pershing Square in Downtown Los Angeles. In his exhibit a series of both watercolors and acrylic paintings offer candid scenes from the several years Loyd had a loft in Downtown Los Angeles. Loyd has always been in the moment and his work takes inspiration from this. His 2007 acrylic canvas, "Look Out Man," shows

three men standing on the street, one with money in his hand. A watercolor, “Stopped,” from 1997 shows a homeless man sleeping under a bus stop overhead cover. Loyd’s sensitivity and expression feels the plight of every man.

Loyd says, “I stand for the possibility that art can generate a breakthrough in communication that might allow us to shift our consciousness, embrace our humanity and access the eternal. I see a future in which I explore some of the over-the-top approaches to branding and exhibiting that Dali initiated, Warhol mastered and Murakami redefined. Only now, am I beginning to comprehend the true power of picture making. Transform the Norm.”

Loyd lives the transformation. He also says, “I don’t feel that human beings have yet evolved to the point that we can truly listen to ourselves. That’s why I titled my contribution to the tapestry, *Quantum Listening*. Standing for the possibility of a future in which we truly learn to “listen” outside of our own internal filters. When humanity finally hears *itself.”* One of his more abstract pieces, “Breakthrough the Groove- Lost in Sound,” from 2006 looks like a self-portrait of him immersed in sound and transcending the present. A related oil on canvas piece, “Rhythm of Vison,” from the same period is where the show got its name. This piece shows two men on microphones voicing in unison. It is also a metaphor that demonstrates how Loyd is always in tune with the music and his surroundings.

A Visual Diary

For all these reasons and more, this is why his show in the museum is so important. The magic of the “Rhythm of Vision: The Artistry of Overton Loyd,” exhibit is that it shows how versatile Loyd is. The work ranges from his various well known paintings, to his candid daily life sketches like the series on his mother as she passed in the hospital in 2010. In a watercolor piece titled, “Breathe,” he painted a tender up-close portrait of his mother in the hospital in bed with respiratory tubes. A related watercolor, “Infinite Chasm,” shows his mom sleeping in the same hospital bed but from a more distant angle. His concern for her condition can be felt in its depiction.

Before concluding this piece, a word must be said about the California African American Museum at Exposition Park. This museum has several ongoing exhibits and it is truly a jewel in the cultural fabric of Los Angeles. It is truly appropriate that Loyd’s first solo museum exhibit is there.

Vida Brown, the Visual Arts Curator at the California African American Museum calls Loyd’s work, “his visual diary.” He records his daily life visually whether it be his family encounters or engagements with musical celebrities like his vibrant sketch portraits from live performances of legends like George Clinton and Amp Fiddler. All of these encounters are treated equally with his signature virtuosity. Overton Loyd is a phenomenal artist that knows what it means to be in tune with the world. He has been “Sourcing Synchronicity,” since the day he was born.

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