



## An Immortal Lineage: Delita Martin Does Matriarchs

Inspired by generations of black matriarchs in her family as far back as the days of slavery, Delita Martin's series "I Come From Women Who Could Fly" has taken off.

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*Luna lived with her mother and her light-skinned sisters, whom she thought were the most beautiful girls in the world. Luna thought her own dark skin was ugly. But when Luna danced in the moonlight, her skin glowed a radiant blue. Moon found Luna so enchanting that she asked the earth girl to come live with her, to play among the stars*

*and consider solar systems her domain. Now Luna is the most beautiful girl in the galaxy.*

Delita Martin created Luna as God created Adam - in her own image, from earth pigment and ancient breath. To understand this is to know Delita. To know Delita is to know her mother, Jannie, and her paternal matriarchs - Julia, Mary and Amelia. To know Jannie is to know Texanna, Rebekka and Hanna.

Delita was born in 1972 in Conroe, Texas, eight years after the youngest of her eight half-siblings. Jannie was a domestic worker and nurse who decorated junk-store furniture with broken jewelry and had a decade-long affair with an artist/plumber, the man who gave her Delita. Julia was a beautician who hot-combed ladies' hair in her kitchen, treated Delita as her own and, despite everything, remained married to that artist/plumber until his death in 1994.

Texanna had a fourth-grade education, but she raised first Jannie, then Delita, and pieced together quilts about mountains she would never visit and tales about Luna on the moon. Texanna's father was Creek Indian, and her mother was Rebekka, daughter of Hanna, a slave passed down to Delita in bits of a ripped photo—the fragments of freedom's dream.

Mary was Delita's paternal great-grandmother, born to a slave named Amelia and the man who considered himself her master. Amelia hailed from an unknown village on a far-off continent. Even in Texas, she avoided shoes and carried burdens the old way, perched atop her head, elegant as a crown.

To know these women is to know immortality. Delita is an artist, and these women are her muses.

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"The women, they did everything. You worked when you had to. You created when you needed to. You raised children ... It was never a question of could I, it was just, I will," Delita says.

Her current work, a continuation of a series called "I Come From Women Who Could Fly," is a depiction of characters that were in these stories that her mother and aunts told to her, that her grandmother told her mother and aunts." The first incarnation of the series nearly sold out during a solo show at the Arts and Science Center for Southeast Arkansas in Pine Bluff, and pieces are in the permanent collections of the Arkansas Arts Center and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, as well as the current "State of the Art" exhibit at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville.

The women's portraits aren't straightforward depictions. "You may see my grandmother's eyes, my mother's lips, the lady down the street who had a particular gesture," Delita says. In her studio, a cramped carriage house behind her blue and white Craftsman in Little Rock's Quapaw Quarter, Delita spreads photographs on her printing press.

Texanna is there, in a '70s pantsuit. She stands in a garden, hoe planted against the ground, hip cocked, squinting at the camera and casually flicking a cigarette. There is a stiff studio shot, an aunt in a boxy hat and midcentury suit with a carnation pinned to the lapel. Another aunt laughs from a parlor armchair, head tossed, knee drawn to chest, a nylon halfway down.

The women are commanding, coy, spirited, hardworking and stern. The women they've inspired are commanding, too — nuanced, layered, built from stacked paper, embroidery thread, ink and cloth.

They emerge from hand-printed patterns as organic and coded as fossils, in shades of river, forest, clay and sky. They wear loops in their ears and wraps on their heads. They have high, woolly hair, knowing expressions and inquisitive eyes. They carry bowls and birds, are surrounded by spoons and jars. Sometimes they're seven feet tall. "Their

stance, their presence, their eye contact with the viewer ... these are presences that you cannot dismiss or marginalize. There's this confrontation happening," Delita says.

This current work, composites of specific women, is a deviation from her past work, which deconstructs stereotypes. But always, Delita's work is about black women.

"When I look at her art, the expressions of the women ... I get a sense of their history and their future. ... It's very emotional," says Reneisha Henry, 44, Delita's cousin.

Three years ago, Delita approached Kyle Boswell, owner of Little Rock's Boswell Mourot Gallery. He picked up her work because he "saw she had a story to tell and that it was going to continue to evolve."

Thom Hall, registrar at the Arkansas Arts Center, says Delita's strength is in texture and color: "The printed paper, the stitching, the conte crayon that's so black and rich, in places it's smooth, then it's almost fuzzy. ... This is about small-town, garden, earth, African-American skin tone."

In an earlier series, "Beyond Layers," Delita confronts Sapphire, the domineering, emasculating black woman; Mammy, the rotund, sexless figure who lives to nourish white women's children; and the hypersexual Jezebel. She draws "women who are shapely but modestly dressed," depicts Sapphire as "an African woman who does not need a man to stand on her own, but she's not castrating him either," and explores Mammy through America's obsession with "black hair."

"[In Africa] you could identify a group of people based on a particular head adornment. You can look at combs and identify regions," she says. When Africans were loaded onto slave ships, their heads were shaved, theoretically to prevent lice, "but also to strip them of their identity." In antebellum New Orleans, biracial women were forced to cover their hair "to mask their beauty," while Mammy wore a kerchief to hide unsightly kinks.

Delita wants to present these head coverings "as a crown; it's no longer this way that this woman wraps her hair that she's ashamed of, that she has this bad grade of hair that she's hiding."

Delita makes posters featuring black women and slogans such as "The bigger the Afro, the closer to God"; "Missing: Natural Hair. Last seen on the end of a hot comb"; and "The revolution will not be texturized."

"There are African-American people who feel like my work is too ethnic, that maybe I'm showing some things that they're embarrassed or uncomfortable to see," Delita says.

She has been criticized by white viewers, as well. "I was asked by a fellow artist, a white male, why I only draw black women. ... He said, 'I'm tired of seeing black people only draw black people.' And my response to him was ... 'I'm comfortable with what my work says. I don't need it to make you feel comfortable.'"

When she was 12, Delita's father drove her 40 miles to Houston, to have her work critiqued by John Biggers, his former art professor and founder of the art department at Texas Southern University. Dr. Biggers told her, "Young lady, in your work, do not ever miss an opportunity to uplift your people."

## A LINE YOU DIDN'T CROSS

In Conroe of the '70s and '80s, population 12,000, Delita spent long hours at her mother's house, reading or pinning quilts with Texanna. At her father's house, days were full of cousins, fireworks and videotaping the boys break dancing.

Woody Arnsworth ran a plumbing business, but he spent his weekends painting. From the age of five, Delita would plop on the floor beside her father, filling pages with

drawings. Her family life was so rich that she didn't mind being left out of her (primarily white) school friends' slumber parties. "You understood that it was OK to be friends at school, but there was a line you didn't cross," Delita says.

What bothered her more was that her public school art education presented only images of white people. A junior high art teacher scolded her for "using color incorrectly," when she drew women in head wraps with bright, clashing patterns. After that, she avoided using color until graduate school. And she didn't see a professional exhibit or visit an art museum until she was an undergraduate drawing student at TSU.

### ACIDS, GUM ARABIC AND 'ALL OF THIS STUFF'

One Saturday in her junior year, Delita noticed several professors in the print room. Acids, gum arabic and other materials covered a large table. The men worked together in an almost choreographed manner, like they were part of a singular dance. "It just looked incredibly complicated, and the way they were printing, one person rolling, one wiping, Dr. Biggers signing [his prints]," Delita says.

The men were helping Biggers reopen a lithograph he had created before Delita was born. She sat on a stool and watched, thinking, "I have to do this."

When Delita graduated in 1995, she took an administrative job in a local school district. But when strangers asked what she did, she told them, "I'm an artist."

She was still working for the school district in 1999, when she met Cedric Martin. A year later, Delita moved with Cedric to Philadelphia while he completed a Master of Business Administration in finance. He graduated and proposed. Cedric's jobs forced relocation from Houston to New Orleans to Indiana. When their son, Caleb, was 3, Delita told Cedric she wanted to go to graduate school and study printmaking, even though she had never made a print before. Cedric thought the form would suit his wife, whom he describes as a "grounded free spirit."

"Printmaking is very technical. There's a lot of science that goes into it. I think that's part of why she was so attracted to it," he says.

## INTO THE STUDIO

In 2006 Delita began to make the two-hour round trip from Indianapolis to Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind. She spent the first year sitting in on undergrad classes during the day, to learn processes, and taught and attended graduate classes during the night. She was gone from 7 a.m. till 11 p.m. most days.

Delita still had a year of school left when Cedric accepted a position in Little Rock as head of human resources at L'Oreal, so she made a deal with her professors — she would drive nine hours to Purdue once a month and spend a week printing. "Just me, some chocolate, beef jerky and Red Bull!" She slept on a plastic lounge chair in her graduate studio and showered at the university's gym.

In late 2012, Cedric urged Delita to quit adjunct teaching at UALR and become a full-time studio artist. "My husband said, 'You need to go into the studio,' and I was like, 'Yeah, but that paycheck every two weeks is really nice,' and he was like, 'You may never have this opportunity again.'"

She began her current routine of dropping Caleb at school and retreating to the studio until time to pick him up. She made about 50 pieces last year, and estimates that they took about 40 hours each. Cedric recognizes Delita's responsibility to put away her work, have dinner with the family and help Caleb with homework. "But it doesn't negate that, still, in the back of her mind, what she wants to do after we get done with dinner ... is spend the rest of our evening sitting at the table and talking through her artwork," he says.

## ABOUT STRONG WOMEN

Curator Chad Alligood from Crystal Bridges contacted Delita in early 2013. She knew nothing about the nationwide search for "State of the Art" artists, despite the exhibit's aim to be on par with New York's "Whitney Biennial" exhibition and the fact that it would eventually be reviewed in The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times, among other publications. Alligood visited her studio and filmed her working. A few months later, Delita received several texts congratulating her on her Huffington Post interview. Confused, she Googled herself and discovered that Alligood had posted his video. It was the first she'd read about "State of the Art."

"Babe, you don't think that I'm going to be part of the show?" she asked her husband.

"I don't think they'd put it on Huffington Post if you weren't," he said.

According to Don Bacigalupi, Crystal Bridges president and the exhibit co-curator, Delita was selected because of her technical abilities, her use of mixed media and her "passion for communicating about her subjects ... the women she admires and heroicizes." Now Delita has a half dozen forthcoming shows and is steadily sending out new proposals.

"The art world has very little to do with talent. It has everything to do with that one important person, who's usually backed by a lot of money, looking at your work and saying, 'She's it,'" Delita says. "Crystal Bridges kind of said, 'It's OK to have a black woman on your walls.'"

Delita's newest collectors are primarily white Arkansans. Her longtime collectors are black urbanites from Atlanta and Chicago. She's grateful for her success but unwilling to compromise her work, even if its commercial viability wanes. At the "State of the Art" opening, she overheard Caleb telling a stranger that his mommy "sews into prints" and "makes work about strong women." Delita has been trying to teach Caleb to be articulate, to respect women and himself. In that moment, she realized, "This little guy was really watching me."

Delita's work is about women, but it's also about men. It's about Woody Arnsworth hanging his art in his home and taking his daughter's ambition seriously. It's about a 15-year-old note from Cedric that she still carries in her wallet: "Go effortlessly in the direction of your artist's dream." It's about reading Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* with Caleb, for whom, through her work, she wants to "continue to fight and break down barriers." And it's about the barrier of textbook history, about making space for black women there. "