

# MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS ST. PETE



Mary L. Proctor, (American, b. 1960), *Dancing on the Street Pave [d] in Gold*, 1996, Mixed media with found objects on wooden door, Gift of Donna and Thomas Brumfield, Jr.

## Wild Creations Digital Access – Workshop 2:

**Mary L. Proctor with Erin Wilson, MFA Curatorial and Registration Assistant**

The artwork of “Missionary” Mary L. Proctor is unmistakable in its spirited tone, vibrant colors, and diverse use of materials. Proctor was born in 1960 and raised in Loyd, Florida, a small town outside of Tallahassee. Her mother was only 11 or 12 when she gave birth and so Mary was brought up by her grandparents. In a 2001 interview, Proctor recalls the loyalty her grandfather, a white man, had to her grandmother, a black woman, despite the racial prejudices that plagued their relationship. Like her mother, Proctor also gave birth at a young age and had to drop out of high school in the 9th grade. Despite these challenges she went on to establish multiple businesses—including the Noah’s Ark Flea Market, which sparked her interest in collecting. It was not until tragedy struck that Proctor turned to painting. She now sees herself as a missionary and her artwork is her message. Despite a lack of formal training, Proctor’s painting exhibits a

strength and exuberance drawn from personal experience, with themes of faith, childhood memories, and familial bonds at the core.

Proctor did not seek to become a painter, instead she states that the idea came to her in a vision precipitated by a deep depression. In 1994, she suffered the loss of her grandmother, uncle, and aunt in a violent house fire. The death of her grandmother—a central figure in Proctor’s life—as well as those of her aunt and uncle, to whom she was close to, left her devastated and unable to function. She recalls praying for guidance and strength with little relief. A year after their deaths, Proctor began to fast with the hope of gaining some clarity. After a month of fasting and prayer, she received a vision which directed her to “Get a door and paint.” And so she did.

Since this experience, Mary Proctor has become certain of her calling as an artist, and has since dedicated her life to painting. Her first composition was created utilizing a door pulled from the inventory of her flea market. Doors of various sizes, as well as full-sized cars and buses, bathtubs, porcelain toilets, Coke cans, and sheets of tin all serve as surfaces for her paintings. Proctor’s works are often embellished with objects she has collected, including plastic beads, chains, watches, broken pieces of glass or pottery, and buttons. The inclusion of these three-dimensional elements gives her work unique tactility and dimensionality.

*Dancing on the Street Pave[d] in Gold* was gifted to the Museum of Fine Arts in 2007. Painted in 1996, it is one of her earliest doors. It portrays a spiritual journey in which she is once more reunited with her grandmother in heaven. The composition, titled after a passage in the Book of Revelation, displays a certain lightness and exuberance through Proctor’s use of brightly-colored paint and ephemera. Words painted on the surface such as “peace,” “love,” “grace,” and “happiness” reinforce a sense of joy and spirituality.

In 2016, Proctor spoke of a less literal interpretation of this work. As she sees it, her grandmother paved the way for her to have a better life and she acknowledges those who have paved the way for others, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Presidents Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Barack Obama.

Mary Proctor continues to live and work in Tallahassee. Her compositions can be found in such museum collections as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art, and the New Orleans Museum of Art.

## **QUIZ**

1. As you pan through Mary Proctor's door, what items, phrases, or elements stand out to you? Are there any particular emotions that it evokes for you? How can you imagine your reaction changing based upon shifts in mood or circumstances?

2. We learned that Mary Proctor employs multiple surfaces for her paintings: doors, cars, sheets of metal, and other items readily available in her home, flea market and personal holdings. If you were to paint on anything in your home or yard, which items would you choose, and why? What items would you choose to embellish it with? Feel free to create your own painted object and submit to the museum; we'd love to see your work!

3. In the accompanying essay, *Souls Grown Deep*, Mary Proctor speaks about her faith and the mission she is fulfilling through her paintings. Can you think of other artists who have built a life of work around their spiritual beliefs?

*[Submit your quiz answers to be eligible for prizes.](#)*

### **EXTRA CREDIT**

[Souls Grown Deep](#), Mary Proctor

[Mary Proctor discusses \*Dancing on the Street Pave\[d\] in Gold\*](#)

[Don't Ignore Signs: The Life and Art of Missionary Mary Proctor](#) by Katherine Webb-Hehn, *The Bitter Southerner*

[YouTube video of Mary Proctor in her studio](#)

For our next Wild Creations installment, please check the [MFA From Home](#) page on [mfastpete.org](http://mfastpete.org).