

Noted illustrator of themes in African American life got his start on a blackboard in his Waco front yard

Description

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You might have seen his paintings and woodcuts in a bus shelter on Market Street, the headquarters of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, or galleries and art fairs in the Bay Area and Los Angeles. Others are on display at several San Francisco housing projects, and some have sold for as much as $5,000.

The artist is Ira Watkins, an 81-year-old Texas transplant who has been homeless, did time in county jail, supported himself by hustling pool and overcame a drug habit.



Ira Watkinsâ?? artwork focuses on African American life. (Photos by Bill Snyder)

Painting, he said, is how he turned his life around.

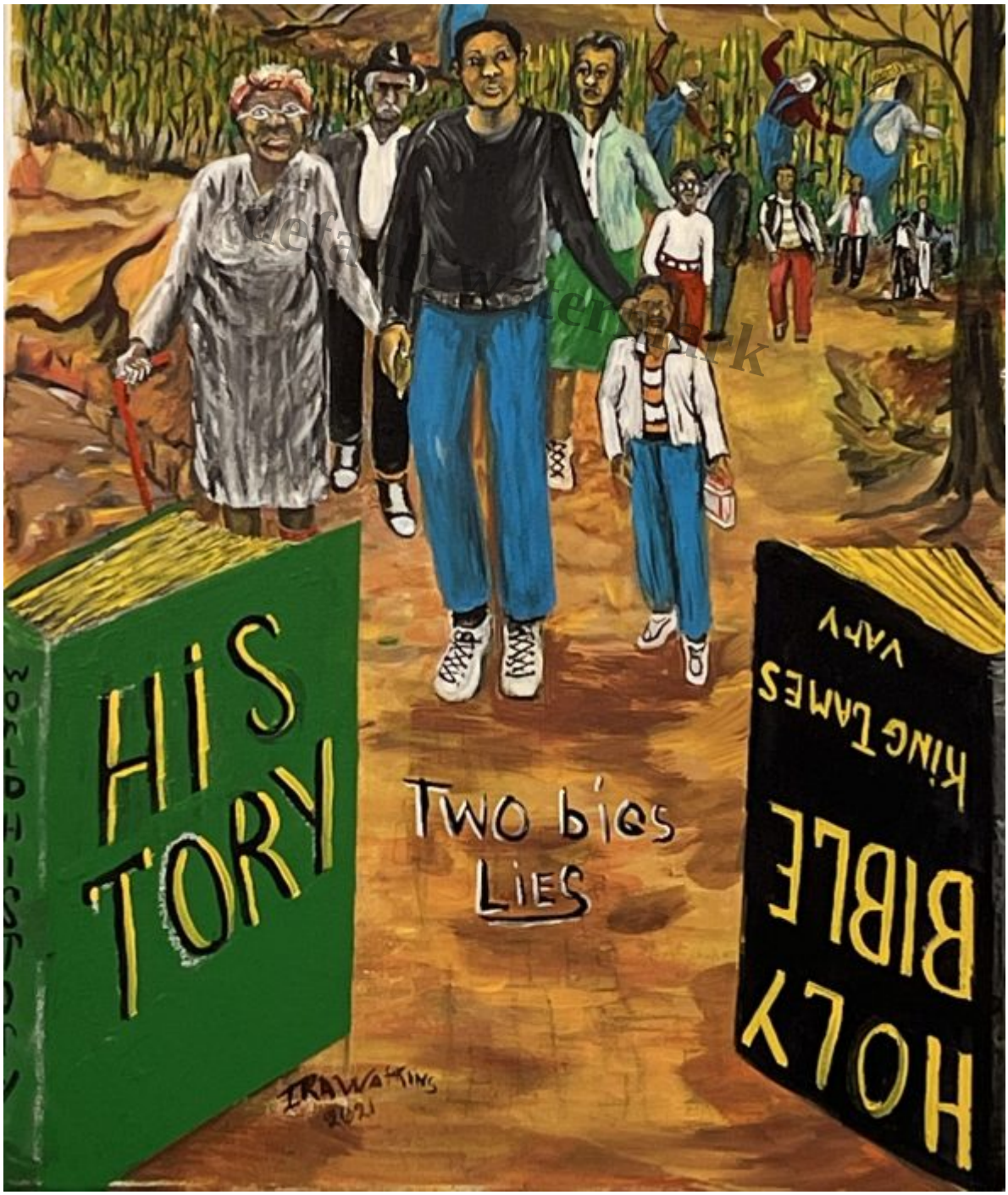
â??I got to the point where I asked myself â??what am I going to do? No one is going to hire me.â?? The only thing I knew was painting.â?•

His art studio used to be the van he lived in. Now he spends hours nearly every day working in a small studio at the former Hunterâ??s Point Naval Shipyard. His style is distinctive and often angry, though he said, â??Iâ??m not an angry person.â?• He favors themes of African American life, the evils of

slavery and what he sees as the distortions of history and religion by the dominant White culture.

Shackles of the mind

Consider a painting he calls â??Two Big Lies.â?• It depicts a group of Black men and women walking away from a field of slaves picking cotton and chopping corn. In front of them crowd are two large books. One is titled â??Holy Bible King James;â?• the other â??History.â?• In between them, the words â??Two bigs lies.â?•



One of Watkinsâ?? signature paintings.

Asked about the workâ??s meaning, Watkins explains: â??So much of what they teach in history is a lie,â?• he explained. â?•Take Columbus. That damn fool was lost, he didnâ??t discover anything,â?• he said.

A more disturbing work depicts a lynched Black man hanging from a tree while a priest kneels at the feet of another Black man, ready to remove shackles from his ankles â?? only to replace them â??with shackles on his mind,â?• Watkins explained. Looking on are three icons of Black history: Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington and Fredrick Douglas.

Other paintings depict Black musicians, dock workers and people at play.

Perhaps his best-known work is a mural of Martin Luther King on display in his hometown of Waco, Texas. The town appreciated his work so much that it held Ira Watkins Day in 2004.

Watkins was born there in 1941, one of 12 children. His father was a plumber, his mother a healthcare worker. With that many mouths to feed, money was tight. â??At Christmas time weâ??d get clothes for presents,â?• he recalled. â??That was it.â?•

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Watching and learning

His introduction to drawing was informal. He had a small easel with a blackboard in his front yard. When Watkins was about six, a neighbor got in the habit of drawing on the blackboard now and then. â??Iâ??d watch him and when heâ??d leave Iâ??d do what I thought he was doing.â?• Later, Watkins started copying comics from the newspaper. Dick Tracy, Batman and Plastic Man were his favorite models.

Other than some kind words from an uncle, he didnâ??t get much encouragement. When he got a bit older, he found a new interest that eventually became a lifeline: pool.

â??Iâ??d tell my folks I was going to my grandmaâ??s to cut firewood for her. I would cut some, and then Iâ??d go to Mr. Cottonâ??s pool hall across the street.â?• At first, heâ??d sweep up and rack balls for a dime a game. Then he started to play and â??I got pretty good,â?• he said.

When he was in seventh grade he wrecked his motherâ??s car. â??I knew Iâ??d get my butt kicked, so I ran away.â?• And that was the end of his schooling.

He fled to nearby Oklahoma, but the cold weather didnâ??t suit him, so it was on to Los Angeles and the home of an older brother. Before long, he and an uncle headed to the Bay Area in pursuit of work, settling in Oakland. But they didnâ??t get along, so Watkins moved across the Bay to San Francisco.



Watkinsâ?? artwork in his studio at Hunters Point Shipyard.

Short of money, heâ??d hustle the shipyard workers on paydays at a pool hall near the Bethlehem Steel shipyard in Dogpatch. He developed a drug habit and was essentially homeless for several years. Heâ??d rent cheap rooms, crash with friends or squat in empty apartments, including one in the infamous Pink Palace, a public housing project in the Western Addition. Heâ??d even sneak into a scrap yard and sleep in a length of discarded steel pipe, blocking the open ends with blankets.

Tenderloin in the â??60s

When he could, heâ??d stay in the Tenderloin, a very different neighborhood in the 1960s than it is today. â??It would be all lit up with neon signs, like North Beach. Weâ??d go to Stuckeyâ??s on Market Street to watch people and get steak and potatoes for $3,â?• he recalled. For a while, he stayed with a friend who had a room above The Condor, the strip club made famous by Carol Doda.

Watkins was arrested for selling marijuana to an undercover cop and did a short stretch in San Franciscoâ??s county jail for possession of a firearm.

Out of jail, he came across Hospitality House, a nonprofit social service group based in the Tenderloin, and began to paint. â??It was a turning point for me,â?• he said. â??All I had to do was create.â?• Hospitality House supplied the materials, the workspace and helped market his artwork.

Watkins worked there as an art instructor for five years before landing a position with the National Institute of Art and Disability across the Bay in Richmond. He taught and did administrative work there, but the job burned him out and kept him from painting.

Watkinâ??s is tall and thin, with an erect posture and a white beard**.** Heâ??s no techie, but in his own way heâ??s as entrepreneurial as a Silicon Valley bro. After leaving the job in Richmond, he made a small living running errands for Hospitality House.

Talent and hustle

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Often those errands took him to a gallery or other exhibit spaces, and he was always careful to leave his resume and work samples. â??Iâ??d walk around with my portfolio; you never when you might meet someone who can help,â?• he said. He mails slides of his work to galleries, because â??itâ??s a contact thing.â?•

His talent and hustle have paid off. He regularly sells his paintings â?? his website is www.shipyardartists.com/artist/ira-watkins/ â?? and has a stable home in the Dr. George W. Davis Senior Residence in the Bayview.

His work has attracted notice beyond the Bay Area. He was featured prominently in a New York Times article about Tenderloin artists in 2015, and his paintings have been exhibited in Los Angeles, Chicago and Dallas.

Never married, Watkins has a daughter, a stepdaughter, and two grandchildren. Life, he said, is good: â??I donâ??t need anything new in life. This is what I doâ?•

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