

# EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT

By Anne Gregory  
All images courtesy of Beverly McIver

*Beverly McIver, widely acknowledged as an outstanding American painter, is even more remarkable for her singular path as an African American woman artist. Her expressionist portraits take a hard look at race, gender, socioeconomic disparity, and mental disabilities within the context of her own life. Most of her paintings are self-portraits, others portray family or friends – all are painted with a ferocious emotional honesty delivered with frenetic brushwork loaded with color.*

Born in 1962, McIver grew up in the south during the civil rights era. The youngest of three girls, she was raised by a single mother, who was a domestic worker. McIver was bussed to a predominately white high school. She was painfully aware of her social status – poor, black, from the projects. Then she joined the clown club and performed in white face and white gloves. Ironically, this guise gave her a new identity. Clowning was her ticket

out of the constraints of her life's circumstances.

This seminal experience became the subject of her first self-portraits. These early works show her in white face paint, a blond wig, and blue eye shadow. They would be humorous if they weren't so heartbreaking. Painting them was McIver's "way of expressing strength in the face of overwhelming vulnerability."<sup>1</sup> The

series evolved and the white faces were replaced with black. McIver confronts racial stereotypes by becoming them in the paintings *Barbershop* and *Singing Off Key*. "In these paintings, we see an

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*1 Curry-Evans, Kim (2011). To Move Forward Love, Reflections: Portraits of Beverly McIver, North Carolina Museum of Art catalog*



## *McIver's life has filled her canvases as she sorted through conflicting identities and emotional states*

African American woman tackle the images of race and slavery in order to claim the pain of her past while rejecting them as controlling her.”<sup>2</sup>

At a painting demonstration in her Durham, NC gallery, Craven Allen, someone asked McIver why she uses oil. “Because it’s superior”, she chuckled. She mixes her colors from a primary palette – two reds, two yellows, two blues and white. First she paints an outline of the image with cadmium red light, her favorite color. Then her brush dances inside the lines, touching down all over the palette, and mixing colors directly on the canvas. The result is earthy tones frosted here and there with splashes of contrasting color.

McIver’s oldest sister Renee is an integral part of her life and work. Renee, who is mentally disabled, is a gentle soul with the mentality of a

third grader (she makes potholders galore and is an avid facebook user). Their mother took care of Renee until her death in 2004. At that time, McIver became her sister’s keeper. Her paintings about this difficult period deal with the grief she felt over losing her mother as well as being overwhelmed by the challenges of caring for her sister. The resulting *Depression Series* is a group of large scale self-portraits weighed down by a sense of defeat and utter despair.

In *Truly Grateful*, with head bowed and eyes closed, McIver acknowledges the journey that brought her to a good place -- the present. Her life has filled her canvases as she sorted through conflicting identities and emotional states. The white face/black face days are history, so, too, the depression (fingers crossed). The content of her work has been one cathartic tide of candid introspection after another. Now her focus is outward, and if she applies the same intense scrutiny to others, she is sure to paint emotionally lush portraits that reveal an inner sanctum. ♦

A documentary called “Raising Renee”, made over a period of six years, chronicles the family’s transition from McIver’s artistic success, through the death of their mother, to the challenge of taking care of Renee. The film was nominated for a 2013 Emmy Award.

An exhibit of McIver’s recent work, *New York Stories*, runs October 12 - December 28 at Craven Allen Gallery in Durham, NC.

### Credits:

Page 82: Beverly McIver © Beverly McIver  
 Page 83: *Feeling Sharon’s Pain 1, 2, 3, 4*, 2013  
 Oil on Canvas  
 30 x 140 inches  
 76.2 x 355.66 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist and Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York  
 © Beverly McIver  
 Page 85: *Bill T. Jones*, 2013  
 Oil on Canvas  
 48 x 48 inches  
 121.92 x 121.92 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist and Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York  
 © Beverly McIver  
 Page 84: *Embrace*, oil on canvas  
 Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York  
 © Beverly McIver  
 Page Series #3, 2010  
 Oil on canvas  
 30 x 40 inches  
 76.2 x 101.6 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist and Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York  
 © Beverly McIver  
 Page 87: *Depression Series #1*, 2010  
 Oil on canvas  
 30 x 40 inches

2 Henrich, Sarah S. (2001). *Race and Slavery in the Visual Arts, Word & World Vol. 31*







