

# Empowering Figures

*Ayana Ross, winner of the second Bennett Prize, explores the themes of race and identity in her paintings.*

BY ROCHELLE BELSITO

Looking at Ayana Ross' paintings it is clear she is a storyteller. Each work has a strong point of view felt through the subjects, composition and her individual style. The works are personal for the Georgia-based artist who uses her experiences and background to compose important and timely narratives. "I like to read a lot and think a lot about context—why things are the way they are and how did we get to this point," says Ross. "A lot of times I go back to my origins, my experiences and my roots and I pull from there."

The figure is the primary vessel in her paintings, and it came naturally for Ross who began her career as a fashion designer before transitioning to education and then fine art. "I've always drawn people, since childhood, and in particular I've drawn women," Ross explains. "I gravitate to the human figure because when I wanted to say something that was the first thing that I knew I could use to say it...That was the language for when I wanted to convey a message."

As Ross has developed her artistic voice and style over the past few years, her art career has blossomed and reached new heights. One of her major achievements has been participating in the esteemed *Bennett Prize*, a biennial art competition for women figurative realist painters conceived by collectors Steven Alan Bennett and Dr. Elaine Melotti Schmidt to elevate women artists' careers. In late November 2020 Ross was selected as one of the 10 finalists in the second edition of *The Bennett Prize*, and then on May 27 she was named the winner during the *Rising Visions 2* exhibition for the finalists at Muskegon Museum of Art in Michigan. Ross will now have the chance to create a major museum exhibition that will unveil in two years at the third *Bennett Prize* exhibition.

"The whole journey was above and beyond anything I originally expected," says Ross of the competition.



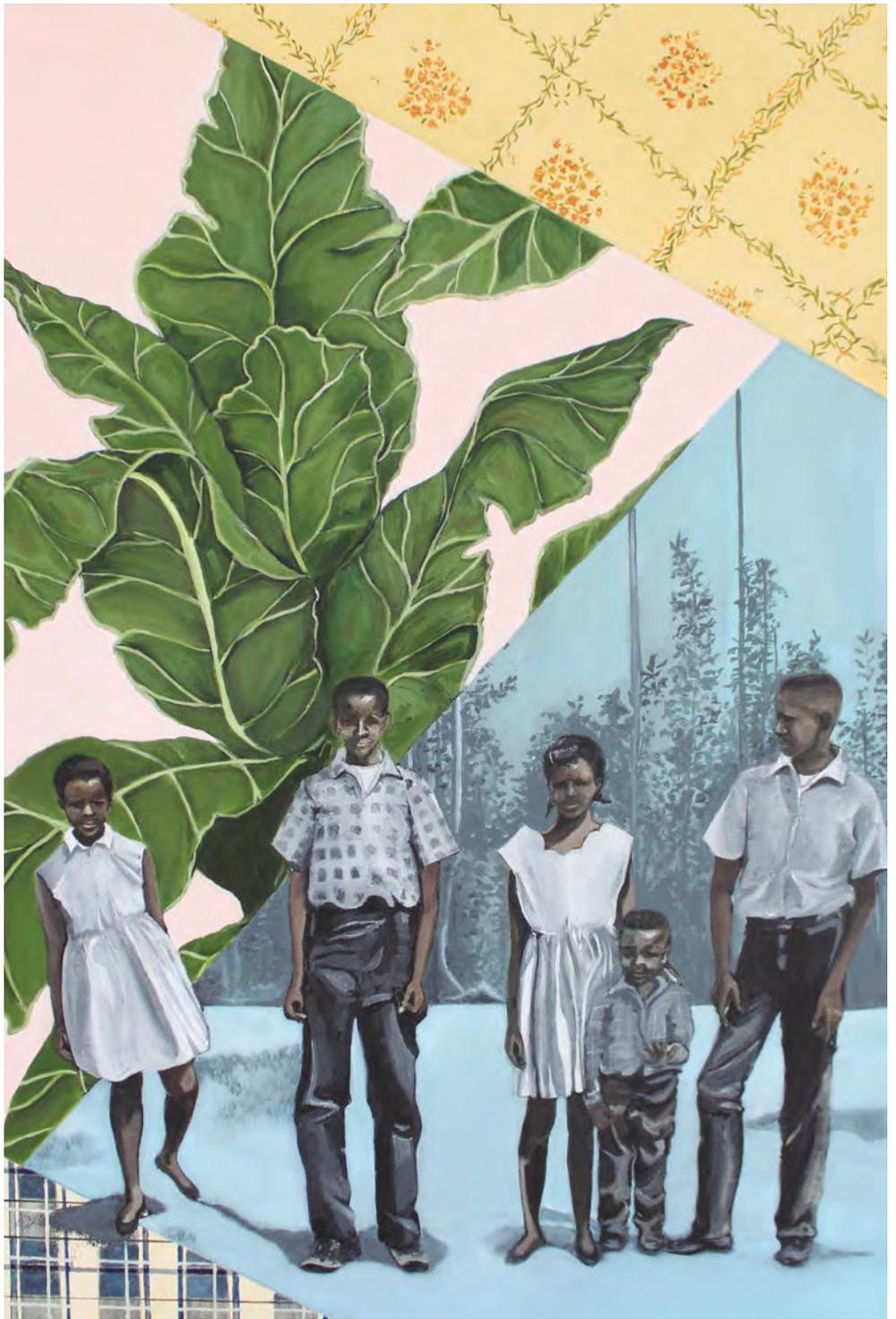
"Just from becoming a finalist and the recognition it gave, and the way my community rallied around me and amongst ourselves as finalists, it was something else and quite a journey. Then to build up on that excitement and prepare for the trip to Michigan...it has been a wonderful experience and a major event in my life that I'll probably always have. I'm grateful to have been a part of that and meet the artists, the Bennetts and everyone at the museum."

Along with the other finalists, Ross had three paintings on view at the museum for the *Rising Voices 2* exhibition, which will travel for the next two years to Customs House: Museum & Cultural Center, Arnot Art Museum, the Bo Bartlett Center and more. Included among the pieces on view were *SWBAT: Learn, Girls in White Dresses* and *My Turn*, which are among her series of paintings featuring children.

"I think one important thing to see in some of my work is the fact that I am a mother, and although I do not exclusively paint children, you often will see children in my work," says Ross. "It's funny, I realized

1 Ayana Ross stands at center with Dr. Elaine Melotti Schmidt and Steven Alan Bennett, the founder of *The Bennett Prize*. Photo by Jennifer Green Photography.

2 *The Homestead*, oil on canvas, 36 x 24"





3  
*(Deacon and Deaconess)*  
*Mother Earth and Father*  
*Time*, oil on canvas,  
48 x 36"

4  
*Girls in White Dresses*,  
oil on canvas, 48 x 36"

3

it's not because I love painting kids, but when I paint a child, I am really painting the adult in their life. We can all relate to being the child or having the child, and what that means to care for another life. That's something that I've noticed in my work. It's really about the hands that help to get them where they are and to see it from that perspective."

The experiences of women and the Black commu-

nity also have a prominent place in her work. At the core of it all, it's an exploration and conversation with the viewer. Ross says she doesn't pretend to have answers, but rather explores a topic from many angles. "I approach the subject as this is how it is, this is why it is or this is how it should be," Ross says.

One of her newest paintings is *The Homestead*, which contemplates land ownership. "How it has or







5  
 SWBAT: *Learn*,  
 oil and acrylic on canvas,  
 60 x 48"

6  
*My Turn*, oil on canvas,  
 48 x 36"

has not been passed down within my own family and how widespread that is within the Black community. The work follows my inquiries and thoughts and what I'm curious about," she shares. "I'm very interested in women and the experiences that women have and how they are valued in society and the areas where there is room for improvement."

Ross adds that each painting—with the figures in the foreground against fragmented sections of beautiful, bold graphics—allows her "to insert a bit of my thought process from those angles into the pieces." To create the dynamic compositions, she combines several elements. "Mostly the figures are from either a model or a photograph. I have, more often in my older work, pulled from older photographs that are from my family or others. They also could be photographs that are found photos. I also have quite a few [works] where I have the models pose," she explains.

Then, after finding the figure and the idea, she begins to adjust and work through the placements. "I wish

I could say it's natural, but I usually use an equation. The formula is that I have [the figures] representing an idea and usually at least one object that gives some sort of association," Ross explains. "Then I will often play around with the background design. I even make a list of what types of designs I want to have incorporated and play around with the fragmentation of what works and get it where I want it to be. I do that digitally so I'm not constantly working over the painting."

With winning *The Bennet Prize*, Ross now will begin preparing for her solo exhibition slated for May 2023. "I cannot say enough how grateful I am for this opportunity. It gives me one of the greatest gifts any artist can ask for, which is time," Ross says. "I am going to take time to explore a few things that maybe I didn't have time to explore a bit deeper. Map out a plan and get to work. Both for the art, for the upcoming show, and also additional artwork that I do in my commissions. I don't take this opportunity lightly. I've been given such a gift and I certainly want to rise to the occasion." ●