

Just Above the Water: Florida Folk Art.* Kristin G. Congdon and Tina Bucuvalas. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006. 288pp.

Reviewed by Natalie M. Underberg

In *Just Above the Water: Florida Folk Art*, Kristin G. Congdon and Tina Bucuvalas survey the rich diversity of folk art in Florida. More than an encyclopedic compendium of fieldwork data on folk art, the book extends the definition of what is counted as folklore and who can be considered a folk artist. Long a debate among the gatekeepers of academic folkloristics (one thinks of Richard Dorson's writing about "fakelore"), the issue of how to frame traditional art and artists is given a fresh perspective in Congdon and Bucuvalas' volume.[1] The introduction locates Florida folk arts within the geographic, demographic, and artistic trends that characterize the state. Florida's cultural identity as an ethnically diverse location is clear in the brief overview of the co-mingling of arts as distinct as the making of Jewish prayer shawls and bonsai trees.

Having established Florida as the meeting place (but not melting pot) for multiple environments, occupations, and ethnic traditions and as a site equally suited to high-tech industry as to cultural tourism, the authors go on, in the next chapter, to grapple with the complex issues of tradition and innovation that establish the context for appreciating the arts and artists that follow. The authors present, and then problematize, the various approaches that scholars have taken to defining folk art, whether by focusing on the artwork, the community, or the artist. They do not advance as primary (but they do acknowledge) the definition of folk art as somehow synonymous with the naïve or primitive, but nor do they limit their definition (and the entries in the book) to artists who practice folk arts that strictly adhere to the folkloristic maxim of multiple existence and variation. Some of the artists that they discuss may not have learned the tradition through informal means from someone else; not all of the artists adhere to a type of art-making that every folklorist would unequivocally identify as a genre of folklore (Cocoa painter Kurt Zimmerman, for example, paints images of dead road kill and UFOs). Instead, Congdon and Bucuvalas argue that: "What binds all the artists together is that they represent both innovation and tradition. The fact they have all lived and worked in Florida and are strongly representative of one or more of Florida's cultural communities also conceptually unites them" (p. 30).

Profiles of the artists themselves form the next section of the book. Arranged alphabetically, they demonstrate the wide variety of art forms and relations of artists to communities characteristic of Florida. A select list of these artists will serve to illustrate this diversity, as well as the varied ways in which contemporary artists learn about and find meaning in traditional arts. Miami-based Eileen Brautman makes *ketubot*, Jewish wedding contracts, and the essay about her discusses not only the tradition itself but the way in which Brautman strives to educate herself through reading books on the subject about the history of the tradition. The essay on Haitian painter Edouard Duvall Carrie situates his artwork, and the artist, at the ever-shifting nexus of traditional art rooted in a specific cultural context and the so-called "fine art" world. Ginger LaVoie, a Hawaiian quilt artist, is largely culturally if not biologically Polynesian, at least in

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terms of the way she engages with the tradition she practices. Nicholas Toth, a Greek sponge-diving helmet maker from the historic Greek community of Tarpon Springs, has seen the helmets he makes for occupational-use simultaneously form part of curated exhibitions of traditional arts in Florida museums. Ruby C. Williams, an African-American painter and produce stand owner from Bealsville, creates colorful paintings on found pieces of wood and displays them to the public at her annual Walk-in Gallery opening, itself an intriguing re-appropriation of elite, art-world culture.

An important contribution of the book, beyond the fine introductory survey it provides of the breathtaking diversity of Florida folk art, is the way the brief essays educate readers about the complex ways that artists learn, traditions adapt, and folk artistic production actually works. Some folklorists may consider particular artists and artistic practices covered in the book outside the realm of “true” folklore, but Congdon and Bucuvalas’ book makes clear that art based in a community context always has a place in our consideration of how human expression engages with culture and history.

Note

1. See Richard Dorson (1974) “Folklore vs. Fakelore – Again and Again.” *Folklore Forum*. 7(1):57-63.

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