

# [STUDIO]

Laylah Ali gave a lecture called “The John Brown Lecture” in Lincoln Hall on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

The following is her interview with the MFA Studio students.

## What book is on your nightstand?

*Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy* by Heather Ann Thompson, recently published.

## What is the goal of the project John Brown Song!? What has the overall response been?

One of the goals was to put the Civil War back into the discussion when we talk about how divided the United States is. That monumental division is not new in our country and has significant bloody precedent. I thought that people would have less tolerance for staying with the John Brown Song project than many actually did. When people actually look at the project and stay with it and click through various parts of it, the response has been one that has surprised me: the longer they stay with it, the more they want to see. I think that the project becomes more unpredictable than it initially appears to be.

## Which version of the song John Brown’s Body do you think is the most relevant for people to hear and consider right now?

One seems to be more fun to sing than the other (the “John Brown’s knapsack is strapped upon his back” version is more catchy, I think). You might learn more from what I call the wordy version by William Weston Patton, the “while weep the sons of bondage whom he ventured all to save” version. But the song really becomes relevant for me in watching people attempt to deal with singing it—so, in that way, either version works. I’ve included the less catchy version here, the other one is easier to find online.

### Version by William Weston Patton

Old John Brown’s body lies moldering in the grave,  
While weep the sons of bondage  
whom he ventured all to save;  
But tho he lost his life while struggling for the slave,  
His soul is marching on.

*Chorus:* Glory, glory, hallelujah,  
Glory, glory, hallelujah,  
Glory, glory, hallelujah,  
His soul goes marching on.

John Brown was a hero,  
undaunted, true and brave,  
And Kansas knows his valor when  
he fought her rights to save;  
Now, tho the grass grows green above his grave,  
His soul is marching on.

*(Chorus)*

He captured Harper’s Ferry, with  
his nineteen men so few,  
And frightened “Old Virginny” till  
she trembled thru and thru;  
They hung him for a traitor, they  
themselves the traitor crew,  
But his soul is marching on.

*(Chorus)*

John Brown was John the Baptist  
of the Christ we are to see,  
Christ who of the bondmen shall the Liberator be,  
And soon thruout the Sunny South  
the slaves shall all be free,  
For his soul is marching on.

*(Chorus)*

The conflict that he heralded he  
looks from heaven to view,  
On the army of the Union with  
its flag red, white and blue.  
And heaven shall ring with anthems  
o’er the deed they mean to do,  
For his soul is marching on.

*(Chorus)*

Ye soldiers of Freedom, then  
strike, while strike ye may,  
The death blow of oppression  
in a better time and way,  
For the dawn of old John Brown  
has brightened into day,  
And his soul is marching on.

*(Chorus)*

## In your lecture you mentioned that your painting practice is completely separate from John Brown Song!, yet there is conceptual overlap. Do you think it is necessary to claim distinction between these two practices? Do you think there will be a time when you allow these directions to mingle?

Well, they feel very different in execution, and that has to do with what kind of painter I am. I have a certain way I make paintings, my method requires almost a stringent level of sealing myself off to complete them. The process is conceptually porous but not technically. I would never rule out making paintings in a different way in the future, but the paintings thrive on their separatist inclinations.

## Can you speak to your decision to use your painting Untitled (Acephalous Series) to advertise The John Brown Lecture? Can you discuss this as a PR strategy?

To be honest, I just didn’t think about it that much. I wish it had been a PR strategy. Maybe you can tell me if it worked as a public relations strategy?

## Has the research about John Brown influenced how you think about your painting practice?

Not so much. The paintings are like their own nation-state, with their own anthem and constitution. I did sing the song in the studio a lot though.

## What appeals to you about making figurative work?

My experience of living in my own brown androgynous body has been one that has taught me that my complexity, my nuances, whatever oddness I consider my own is in constant negotiation with a larger set of forces that have little interest in my interior being. We might call it “individuality” in our western context, but that term doesn’t capture enough, and it divides us from each other in ways that don’t make sense. For instance, is my interior life really more or less interesting than someone else’s? The meeting place of the body (and all it holds) with context is often the site of my interest. It can be a highly politicized and emotional place. It can also be a site of considerable violence. But I am not only interested in the singular body but bodies as collectives, as groups that are both formed intentionally and unintentionally.

## You have worked with performers and choreographers in the past. In John Brown Song! you worked closely with a tech professional. Could you speak a little more about the challenges and rewards of collaborating with artists who work in other media?

Collaboration gave me a new take on my creativity. It moved me from simply thinking I was a painter to thinking I was someone who had creativity that was applicable and useful in different situations.

What you give up in a collaboration are autocratic control and the ability to make everything as you want to precisely see it. That wasn’t the case in the John Brown Song project because I wasn’t

collaborating with the tech professional in that case; he was working to help me realize my vision. That might be another question, more practical: how do you work with hired people to get them to do what you want when they have less interest and tolerance for the project than you have?

## In your talk you had a compelling way of describing how the artist’s role in society is perceived differently around the globe. Can you expand on this?

I should have talked more specifically about Australia, where I have spent more time rather than Europe. I was struck in Australia how artists had more freedom to move between mediums and not be labeled as primarily painters or sculptors, etc. I suppose I am interested in places that are primed to culturally trust the role and necessity of artists in society, the kinds of thinking and vision that they can bring, and their roles not needing to be so tied to sales, collections, investments.

## Has your work or image as an artist been misused or misinterpreted? How can an artist ensure their work and name are represented in the way they intend?

Well, the short answer is yes, and the long answer is too long to go into. One can’t control interpretations, but one can try to resist being exploited. So, for instance, should artists work for free or much less when other people on a project are being paid? I think paying attention to details of all sorts is key. Read the fine print. Ask questions. Get things in writing.

## What suggestions do you have for recent graduates from MFA programs? How did you organize your practice after graduate school to maintain your prolific studio output?

My advice starts BEFORE you get into the MFA program. Try to not accrue too much debt even if that means going to a less desirable grad program. After your MFA, find a job, even if it is not related to art, that might allow you to work for less days per week so you carve out time for your creative life. Don’t worry so much about an art identity job (beware of adjunct positions!) but find a job that isn’t soul killing and pays you what you can live on — and gives you time to be an artist. I taught high school English for five years after my MFA. It was part time at a private school, and I was able to work hard in the studio during that time in my 20’s. I had to make sacrifices though. I didn’t socialize much, and spent some birthdays in the studio, but it was a prolific period.

Editor: Carlin Brown

Lecture Series Director: Lisa Jarrett

Copy Editor: Carlin Brown & Eddie Garland

Art Editor: Melanie Flood

Contributors: Kayley Berezney, Carlin Brown, Jordan Clark, Shawn Creeden, Melanie Flood, Eddie Garland,

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As evinced in her darkly suggestive gouache-on-paper paintings, Laylah Ali’s work often engages with questions of oppression, heroism, and emancipation. With undeniable wit, Ali crafts visceral narratives that evoke culturally and historically referential moments. For her Dia commission, Ali gives focus to the radical abolitionist John Brown by composing a portrait of associations to consider the contemporary impact of this complex and elusive historical figure.

Laylah Ali was born in Buffalo, New York in 1968 and lives and works in Williamstown, Massachusetts. The precision with which Ali creates her small, figurative, gouache paintings on paper is such that it takes her many months to complete a single work. Her most famous and longest-running series of paintings depict brown-skinned and gender-neutral Greenheads and have been included in the Venice Biennale (2003), and the Whitney Biennial (2004) and were the subject of a major touring exhibition in 2012-2013 that originated at the Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA and traveled to the Weisman Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN and the Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. Ali’s works are included in the permanent collections of numerous public institutions, including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, IL; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, among many others.

NEXT EDITION OF [STUDIO]: Fall 2017

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in and beyond the studio.

Laylah Ali

**BLICK**  
art materials



April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017

**Laylah Ali**



*Untitled (Sky), 2014*  
*gouache on custom arches hot press panel*  
*11 x 9 ½ inches*  
*Image courtesy of the Artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery*