Kim Boganey and
Beverly McIver

BEVERLY MCIVER

Stories of an African American Painter Raised in the South

Artists Studies

Collection Editor
JOY SPERLING

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LPP

This book is dedicated to our mothers, Ethel McIver and Dolores Curry, whose love for family and strong work ethic, even in difficult times, has defined who we are.

We also dedicate this book to Renee McIver, also known as Renny, whose life and love for creativity are the inspiration for the artist residency, Renny's Place.

Back cover image - Beverly McIver, Renee is 65, 2025, oil on canvas. Collection of the artist.

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Abstract

What can the lived experience of acclaimed painter Beverly McIver teach us about life as an African American woman artist raised in the American South, and what insights can we glean about the wider art world? Expanding on their original conversation stemming from the artist's retrospective exhibition, *Full Circle*, painter Beverly McIver and curator Kim Boganey delve into Beverly's life journey from her origins in Greensboro, North Carolina, to her struggles in education, her growth as an artist and caretaker, and her development as a professor. Exploring captivating, shared stories, the friends touch on themes of identity, race, caretaking, depression, and death, and how these have impacted Beverly's artistic practice.

Key words

Beverly McIver, Painting, Portraiture, Art business strategies, Lived experiences, Identity, Race, Caretaking, Empathy, Depression, Death

Contents

Note on language

This work employs a common African American vernacular when referring to particular ethnic groups as "Black" and "white."

Content warning

This book contains explicit references to, and descriptions of, situations that may cause distress. This includes:

- Uncensored use of explicit language
- References to and descriptions of ableism, discrimination, and microaggressions
- Both overt acts of aggression and microaggressions borne of racism
- Terminal illness and death

Please be aware that references to potentially distressing topics occur **throughout** the book.

Learning objectives

- Exploring Southern lived experiences and their impact within African American communities.
- Understanding how our personal experiences influence how we navigate the professional world.
- Getting to know ourselves and hearing our inner voice are key elements that guide us through our lives.

Introduction

In 2022, the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art premiered a retrospective exhibition of Beverly McIver's work titled *Beverly McIver: Full Circle*, which was curated and organized by Kim Boganey and subsequently traveled to the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (Winston Salem, NC) and the Gibbes Museum (Charleston, SC). The exhibit spanned 25 years, featuring McIver's paintings on diverse themes like identity, stereotypes, illness, caretaking, death and portraiture. A 132-page hardcover catalog, published by the University of California Press, accompanied the exhibition, with essays by notable scholars Richard Powell, Ph.D., and Michele Wallace, the daughter of artist Faith Ringgold.

Also included in the catalog was a conversation between the artist and the curator, excerpted from ten different sessions conducted in the summer of 2021, where they met via Zoom to discuss the artist's upbringing, college years, efforts at elevating her career, family, collaboration, and how she pays it forward to the next generations of artists. The conversation was rich with anecdotes, biographical history, and practical information about the business of art. Unique to the conversation was that the two were also best friends, having known each other for nearly thirty years. At times funny, with some disagreements, but full of insight from both of them regarding their personal and professional lives, the essay, as printed in the exhibit catalog, was well received but unable to capture the full extent of

their conversations. *Beverly McIver: Stories of an African American Painter Raised in the South* is a compilation of those conversations printed in full, with additional content provided since the original essay was published in the exhibit catalog in 2022.

A little background for Beverly McIver and Kim Boganey: they were raised in two very different worlds. Beverly McIver grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina's projects, living with a single mother who worked as a domestic, raising McIver, her two sisters, and a cousin. Kim Boganey is the daughter of Air Force parents, who both had jobs that required them to frequently move her and her sister across the country and overseas, until they finally settled down in Mesa, Arizona. Both, however, had a love for the arts, and pursued degrees and careers that would allow them to serendipitously meet and become best friends. More importantly, as African American women, they supported each other through personal and professional triumphs and challenges over the course of nearly thirty years.

Undoubtedly this book is about Beverly McIver, whose career as an artist, educator and mentor is of tremendous interest to a wide audience. Her paintings tell her life's story, and are immediately personal to those who see their own lives in her works. Her journey has been difficult, however, and can serve as a lesson on history, racism, poverty, caregiving, gender bias, mental health and death, to name a few. All of these elements, however, shape and inform the decisions McIver has made as an artist. She believes you can't have one without the other.

But learning about Beverly through the lens of her best friend shapes the perspective and offers a counterpoint when needed.

This book may seem like an informal chat between two friends, talking about their experiences. But the astute reader will pick up on the lessons learned and understand that success in the visual art field comes with a steep learning curve and biases, particularly if you grew up poor in the South. Success is what you make of it, and how you adapt your personal experiences to your professional endeavors.

A note regarding reproduced images: Included in the book are some of the artworks so that you can visually see what is referenced as a part of the conversation between McIver and Boganey. Additional images, including family photographs, are available online at the Lived Places Publishing website.

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Origins: Family

K: Beverly, you were born in 1962 in Greensboro, North Carolina. What is your earliest memory?

B: My earliest memory is of me staying with my mother in the projects on the weekends.

K: Did you, as a child, understand what the term "projects" meant?

B: There was this look: brick buildings, two stories tall, clotheslines, no real green space, no trees, no flowers. I could make that distinction because on the weekends, we would get to stay home with my mother, because she worked at Cone Mills, which was a factory where my mother would run a machine that put the seersucker bumps in fabric. Mom made sure the machine didn't jam.

K: I thought your mom, Ethel McIver, always worked as a domestic?

B: She worked most of her life as a domestic but she initially got a job at Cone Mills, working hours from 2:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. We couldn't live with her because we needed to maintain a schedule that allowed us to go to school. My two older sisters, Renee and Veronica, who we called Roni, and I stayed with my grandmother, grandfather, and my cousin Sharon, who was about our age. My grandfather was the first

man I ever loved. He was so handsome, and he could sing and whistle without running out of breath. He worked for this company called Odell Hardware, where he was a truck driver. He would drop me off at school and then go to work.

K: You were living with your grandmother and grandfather, as well as with Sharon and your two older sisters. Yet at some point, you somehow shifted to living with your mom. Was Sharon still with you when you ended up going to live with your mom?

B: My mom quit working at Cone Mills, and began working as a domestic. The hours made it possible for us to finally live with her. Sharon's mother died of a brain aneurysm very young, and so that left their dad to take care of five boys and Sharon. Their dad felt that he couldn't really take care of Sharon, because of her being a girl, so she was sent to live with her grandmother. Then she came to live with us for a while.

K: Your mother was actually taking care of four girls (Christmas, 1965).

B: Yes. Sharon was considered the oldest. It's funny, because even now, when I get an award or prize, I instantly want to share the news with someone. Sharon is generally the first person that comes to my mind, even though she died several years ago. She was always supportive of me.

K: Did you perceive any difference in your neighborhood because you were being raised by a single mother?

B: Well, everybody in the projects was poor. My boyfriend lived across the street; not across the street, but actually across the clotheslines in the projects. He had a single mom. Everybody

Figure 1.1 Beverly, Roni, Sharon and Renee McIver, Christmas, 1965.

in that immediate area were single parents. I don't think that there were a lot of men around. At the very end of our street, I remember there were two Black girls who had both of their parents. The husband was a taxicab driver. This was the only man present in the household that I remember.

K: So that was the norm in your neighborhood.

B: Of course, it was very different at school, because most of the white kids seemed to have both parents at home. I'm happy I went to white schools, because I think that I would not have made the decision to go to college otherwise. Most of the people in my neighborhood, with the exception of those two girls that lived at the end of the street, did not make it out of the projects. My boyfriend who lived across

the clothesline started selling drugs and somebody beat him up pretty bad. He was never right after that.

K: So, there was no biological father present, other than the father figure of your grandfather.

B: Yes. Sharon's brother Lonnie did have some influence, even though he was overseas because he had joined the Air Force. Every time we visited my mom's house on the weekends, she would let us do anything. My grandmother was the complete opposite; she was very strict. She kept us busy with chores after school.

K: How old were you during this time?

B: Maybe this was around second grade, making me 7 or 8 years old at the time. Initially, I was attending a Black elementary school named Washington Street School. This is where my grandfather would drop me off with his truck on his way to work. Then, desegregation happened. So, I was bussed across town to white schools.

K: What was life like growing up with your sisters Roni and Renee, and your cousin Sharon?

B: My mother was paying attention to Roni because she was the smart one. My mother paid an exorbitant amount of money for Roni to learn how to speed read. I realized that I needed to be smart, like Roni. I started drawing because Roni could draw, and later, in high school, joined the clown club because Roni had joined the clown club. With all of my family, I felt like an outsider early on. Roni was always with Sharon, doing things elsewhere, and Renee was in her own world because she was born developmentally disabled and has the mindset of a third grader. Years later, when Roni was

accepted into the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), I thought that this would also be the school I would attend, but I didn't get accepted. Even when Roni had already left for UNC and I began attending North Carolina Central University (NCCU) the following year, I thought we would get an apartment together. I liked my sister that much. When I was at NCCU I would hang out with Roni and her friends at their apartment in Carrboro. My sister was an influencer, a positive influencer, before there was such a thing.

K: You sound like you were trying to fit in. You had an older sister, Roni, who was the smart, popular one with the cool friends and was upwardly mobile. Then you have your sister, Renee, who has to be cared for constantly, because whatever she needed came first. The interesting thing about that, though, is that you may have been sensing, before you actually knew, that you did not share the same father. This is something you found out in high school, correct? Your intuitive senses were seeing differences that were also accentuated by a biological difference as well.

B: I looked different than Renee and Roni. Later, my mother shared that I looked like my dad, so perhaps she was subconsciously taking her disappointment in my father out on me by focusing her attention on Renee and Roni. I was the mistake, right? And the fact that he wasn't around made it worse. I was a pretty kid, who was incredibly shy. If you look at childhood photographs of me, I'm clutching or hiding behind my mother's leg or skirt. That shyness still resonates today.

K: I think you learned, as an adult, to become more assertive because of your profession. I am the same way. Growing up, I was very introverted because of my hearing; I had a hearing

loss, so I wore hearing aids. I would separate myself from the other kids because I could not keep up in conversations. That's why I stayed in the library and read books. They were a whole new world. But it also made me incredibly introverted. I didn't like talking or interacting with other people. I couldn't care less. In the museum world, however, you cannot be shy; you must be outgoing and assertive, so I had to train myself to do this. We have to force ourselves to be assertive; to project, to present, to get over preferring to stay in the corner and not talk with anybody.

B: I can be present now, thank God, because these are learned skills. Even now, however, when there are so many people clamoring for my attention and time, I have to tell myself that having friends and colleagues is a good thing. Take a breather; you don't have to say yes to everything. Instead of looking at their focus on me as a negative, I can instead realize that they care about me and think I am fun to be around. We as humans gravitate toward good energy.

K: That little girl who didn't feel like she fit anywhere actually fits everywhere and is very much loved. That is powerful.

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K: Because there were not many Black males present while you grew up, did you feel that impact?

B: I think it did. My mother did have boyfriends. She was very beautiful so she dated really handsome men. They seemingly were great, well-dressed, and nice, smart Black men. There was one guy named Archie Davis. He looked like Marvin Gaye. He would blow in like the wind, unexpectedly knock on the door and sit down and laugh and have a great

time like you had just seen him yesterday. Then he would disappear for years, and then he would blow in again. It was so unstable, and we never knew what was happening with him. It made me skeptical of men leaving or disappearing. I realized that my mom was choosing Black men who were not dependable, and who would abandon her.

K: You met your father when you were 17, because your mother flippantly looked at you when this man appeared at the house and said: "Oh by the way I need to introduce you to your father." I know I would have been mad at my mom if she did that to me.

B: I was mad at her. I was shocked, too. The madness thing came in a little bit later. How in the hell can you keep this a secret, and then just blurt it out when this man is standing at the door staring at me?

K: Wait a minute. Why was he at the house in the first place?

B: My mom had planned it.

K: They clearly had stayed in touch and were in communication.

B: Yes. He gave money to my mother every Christmas so that she could buy me extra gifts. If you were to ask him, he would have said that this was his way of taking care of me, at the capacity that he was able to. One day he told Mom he was coming over and that he would introduce himself as my dad. She was backed into a corner so she pointed him out as my father. His name was Cardrew Davis. I remember talking to him very, very briefly, and then I remember getting on my bike and going for a ride and just trying to process what had just happened. It magnified this sense of isolation that I had felt all my life that I was different, and which was now

intensified because I realized I only had half-sisters. All those times I felt like I was treated differently; it all came back to me because of this man standing at the door.

K: At first you knew Renee and Roni's father as your dad, even though he wasn't present either.

B: Right. Their father is the man listed on my birth certificate as my father.

K: But you didn't really see your birth father growing up?

B: No. My uncle Clyde used to always call me "Four-in", because four was the number of Cardrew's taxi cab, and when Cardrew would pick up the receiver to accept the call, he would say, "Four-in". Uncle Clyde knew before I did that Cardrew was my father, so he would use this name to pick on me when he would come over to my mother's house.

K: Did you go back and look at your childhood pictures and think: "I do look different from my siblings now that I know this?"

B: In the pictures, what I end up focusing on is how I'm usually hiding behind my mother's skirt, or I look very, very sad. I think that is indicative of this sense of loneliness and sadness, wanting to hide or be invisible. That's what makes the notoriety thing very, very challenging. It's really challenging for me to feel worthy of that sort of greatness that I hear when I give a lecture, and I see people crying because they're so touched or moved, or they're laughing, because of something that I said. I'm still that same shy kid who wants to literally crawl under the bed.

K: So, did you reach out to him and ask about getting to know him better?

B: Initially I did because when I attended college, I was broke. I was poor and didn't have a car. I thought he would help me. He said he would, but he didn't really mean it. After multiple asks, and me getting disappointed with him not coming through for me, I gave up and told him that I would never talk to him again. I didn't for a while, until my mother died. My mother was always saying, "I told you he was going to disappoint you, just like he disappointed me."

K: When did you reconnect with your father? You have completed many portraits of him within the last fifteen years.

B: After my mother died, I decided that perhaps I should get to know him because I probably have some issues around men. I was doing myself a disservice, so perhaps I should just meet him where he is and not say: "Well, you're my daddy, you didn't do ABC," but instead begin with a clean slate, realizing that he is getting old. I used to love going and sitting at old people's apartments and talking to them and keeping them company, so I told myself to go sit with him, have no expectations, and talk to him. That's how it started. He had some kind of surgery; something rare where they shaved his head and took some kind of tumor out of his head. That was the first painting that I made of him, lying in the hospital. Things were different for him, so we reconnected. I have learned so much more about him, and Black men in general, because of this.

K: Take me back to attending school. You started attending white schools somewhere around third grade, since desegregation of North Carolina's schools occurred in 1971. It was one of the last cities in the South to desegregate its schools.

B: That sounds right. I remember that Renee and Roni were already in school at the same Black school, but the bussing began with me. I was bussed to Irwin Open Elementary, Kiser Middle School, and Grimsley High School. Roni and Renee were also eventually bussed. Renee was in school with us, even though she was intellectually disabled. She was constantly picked on. Thankfully, Renee left the public school system and started attending a special school called the McIver Education Center, which ironically shared our last name. This is where Renee received her high school diploma.

K: What was it like for you, having been used to attending a Black school, to now finding yourself bussed to a white school? I never actually had that kind of memory being in a military family. We were always in these very mixed schools; mostly white, but there were a number of other folks that added diversity to the student population.

B: The biggest difference is getting on a bus and going across town. My mother used to say that she was terrified; she would be standing outside of the bus, practically crying. She said I kept looking straight ahead. I do that now; you have to look to the future; no looking back. I remember that I had a couple of teachers who were Black at the white schools. The Black teachers I had while attending a Black school, I remember fondly. Things changed however, when I was taught by Black teachers at white schools. I remember taking algebra. I had a Black woman teacher who was really tough as nails, and I was so horrible at math. There was this one instance where she was calling out people's last names and sharing their test scores. I was

horrified, because I knew I had not done well, and there were these cute guys in the class I was trying to impress and pretend like I wasn't poor and dumb. She started calling out grades. Amazingly, I made a decent grade on that trigonometry exam. Have I used what I learned about math? No.

K: I disagree. I think your brain uses math when you are strategizing about painting. You are calculating how much paint to use, for example, when determining the size of a canvas. Or you may be determining the proportions of a figure so that the body doesn't appear oddly shaped. Your brain is subconsciously doing the work of providing order to what you are doing as a painter. I don't think it's obvious, but I think all of those things that we were taught in grade school manifest themselves in one way or another. I don't take it for granted. I may not know exactly how these different mathematical principles work, but subconsciously that math is coming into play. I believe that Black teacher made you stronger as an artist.

B: Her name was Miss McCullough. I saw her years later, after I graduated from college.

She was proud of me.

K: How about the students at the schools you attended. Were they hospitable? Were they kind?

B: Among the Black students attending the same schools I was, I was picked on a lot. I was popular with boys, but the bigger overriding issue was that my family was poor. Our family couldn't afford things that other Black families participated in, such as Jack and Jill of America, an organization of Black

mothers focused on leadership, or buying clothes that were name brands. I even wanted to be a Girl Scout Brownie, but we couldn't afford the uniform.

K: You had two disparities. Not only were you going to a white school, where you were seeing a difference in class structure, you were also experiencing bias within Greensboro's Black community, because of being poor.

B: That's right. I was lumped in with people that were on the outskirts, because they lived in a house, but it was rented. That's how I became one of those on the outside of the margins, Black and white alike. Suzanne was one of my good white friends and white people didn't like her because she was goofy and awkward. There was also Robin, who was Black, and she also lived in a rented house. Another friend Cynthia, was popular. Her stature among us was higher because her parents owned their house, but she was really down to earth. I often thought of ourselves much like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer's friends, the misfit toys.

K: The more I think about this, you think things change, but sometimes, they just stay the same.

B: Look at me now, straddling two worlds due to my ability to afford certain things, and how I am perceived by Black people today. Black people who approach me will comment on how I made it out of the projects. This constantly makes me feel uncomfortable about money and status. I don't want people to see how I live, because I think they'll judge me.

K: Let's not forget that where you lived in Greensboro, North Carolina, was also the site of a pretty high- profile incident

between the Ku Klux Klan and demonstrators. This happened right outside the building where you lived, correct? Did you see what occurred firsthand?

B: It happened on a Saturday when I was the ripe age of seventeen. I was away at a job where I could make some money for buying clothes. The Greensboro Massacre, by which it became known, happened in 1979. The Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party came to our neighborhood, and shot and killed five demonstrators from the Communist Workers Party participating in a "Death to the Klan" march, including a pregnant woman.

I was at McDonald's working, and the manager came up to me and said: "Beverly, your mother wants you to take a cab and come home." I asked why, since I needed the money. He said my mother would tell me once I got home. I thought this was so weird; I was on the other side of town, busy making money, and wasn't aware of what was going on in the world, including what was going on in my own front yard. I didn't have my car, and a cab was going to cost an exorbitant amount of money to get to the other side of town. She must have called back because she decided to come get me, even though she was afraid to drive. A lot of what I am sharing with you is included in the transcripts from the trial for one of the shooters, because they interviewed my mother. The court asked my mother detailed questions about who she saw that day in ways that confused and tricked her and others who testified. I believe they set it up so that it was basically impossible for any of my neighbors and my mom to say, yep, that's him, right there. We were told that the men from the KKK were acquitted because in

videotapes you hear shooting first. They believed it was the demonstrators, and that the KKK had the right to defend themselves.[1]

K: Of course, the shooters were exonerated.

B: They did not go to jail. There were subsequent civil suits filed, but they were acquitted for killing those people.

K: How do you think this affected you?

B: It still affects me. If I had been at home, I would have been out there, right? It was supposed to be a peaceful rally and I think it scarred all of us. Sharon was in the house as well as Renee. What happened stressed to me the inequities of class, race and gender, so when I add all that up, it left me feeling like I am at the bottom. Today, I still feel like at least part of me is still at the bottom, because it is hard to succeed. Unfortunately, I have also chosen a career that really makes that very apparent, because white males win in the art world, much like the white males killing those people and getting away with it. Some things don't change. I can't change being Black and a woman so I will constantly be the underdog.

K: Where you lived in Greensboro, is it still there?

B: No. The street doesn't exist anymore. I believe what Greensboro did was hide any sort of evidence that they neglected the southeast side of Greensboro, which is where the projects were. They tore down those projects and rerouted the streets so it wouldn't be the same street. It is now a totally different street. There is nothing that can remind anyone of the history of what happened.