

Rena Detrixhe - What Lies Beneath

Sweep it under the rug, that history. Cover it in beauty, in symmetry. Lay over it a veneer of gentility. Say: we are all kind and decent people here. We are civilized. We bring our fine carpets rolled and tucked and carried in wagons from Iowa and Nebraska, from Texas and Pennsylvania and the Old Country. We are not murderers. We are not thieves. We remember, yes, but only what we wish to remember. We do not choose to remember what lies beneath...

...the infant's cries, the mother's screams, the stench of burning clothes, burning churches, burning flesh, the howl the wind makes when it boils up into the sky and rains down destruction, the roar and crackle of fire, prairie fire, city fire, the padding of feet, people walking, horses walking, the ancient ones walking over the red earth, the drumming of hoofbeats, the drumming at ceremony, the voices singing, the iron creak of pumpjack pumping the earth's blood...

Comes the artist, sifting, silting, laying out the designs, stamping patterns; she tells us: walk in beauty, yes, but do not be deceived.

Here is Oklahoma's story, and it is the American story, intensified, distilled. Begun in sorrow and ethnic cleansing in the early nineteenth century, when the great southeastern tribes were removed from their homelands and forced here on the Trail of Tears; coming of age in the early twentieth century with racial violence and disenfranchisement, when the first laws enacted by the state legislature were Jim Crow, when the largest, most devastating assault by white Americans on black Americans in the nation's history was unleashed in Tulsa in 1921. For decades the conflagration known as the Tulsa Race Riot, when some 10,000 armed whites swarmed into the wealthy black district, looting, burning, killing, was "forgotten" in Oklahoma's history. In *America's* history. Swept under the rug. But this is our pattern. We have "forgotten" our past of ethnic cleansing and racial violence just as we have forgotten who are the land's original inhabitants, forgotten even the sorrows, the homesickness and violence and grief we carried with us when we migrated here.

Oklahoma has always been a land of migration, from earliest days when indigenous peoples came through following bison herds; it is also a place of sedentary mound builders and creekbank dwellers. A land of wooded hills and arid plains, flint-bottomed creeks and wide sandy rivers, rugged mountains and tallgrass prairie. Oklahoma's name comes from two Choctaw words, *okla* and *humma*, meaning red people. Our dirt is red, yes, but also brown and ochre and yellow and tan. At the lower layers, our red dirt is mostly clay, made rust-red by ferrous oxide – iron – an apt metaphor for people who have toughed out ecological disaster, genocide, and violent pogrom – and stayed. The coming together here of Black, White, and Native people is a dramatic story, violent, singular, but it is most often told in the broad outline strokes of the Master Narrative. Some choose to examine what lies beneath, to point the way to the underlayers: to uncover, discover, explore. This artist is one.

Rena Detrixhe sifts our red soil meticulously; she picks out stones and shards and trash, removes our imperfections, refines, refines again, makes from dirt and clay the finest, silkiest dust. She creates a gorgeous surface, smooth, enticing; you want to touch it. She cuts the soles of shoes, stamps the patterns, and in so doing she creates a map. A carpet, yes, a trompe l'oeil rug, but also a deep map of landscape and history, of territory and place. Her geometric patterns might decorate a Kiowa warrior's shield. The flowers and lacelike patterns could be lifted from a pioneer woman's needlework sampler. In settler days, women used to sweep their yards using homemade brush-brooms, creating fanciful, inviting patterns in the pounded dust. That story is here too, and also its worst extremity: those years when the wind blew fierce and the dirt roiled skyward, descended in a blanket of black dust, rust-red dust, and yellow, ochre, gray, tan, brown, choking our babies, silting into our lungs. The artist takes our stories, puts them into her rhythms,

her symmetry, her patterns, sifting, making fine, making pure. She shows us what beauty lies upon the surface. She asks us to seek what darker truths lie underneath. The act is meditative, the work ephemeral. Like the sand paintings of the Diné, it can be medicinal, healing. Like those of Tibetan monks or celebrants of Dia de los Muertos, it may be spiritual, too. The act says: We are here now. One day we won't be. The earth is ours now. One day it won't be. What shall we carry with us but memory? What shall we leave behind when we go?

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