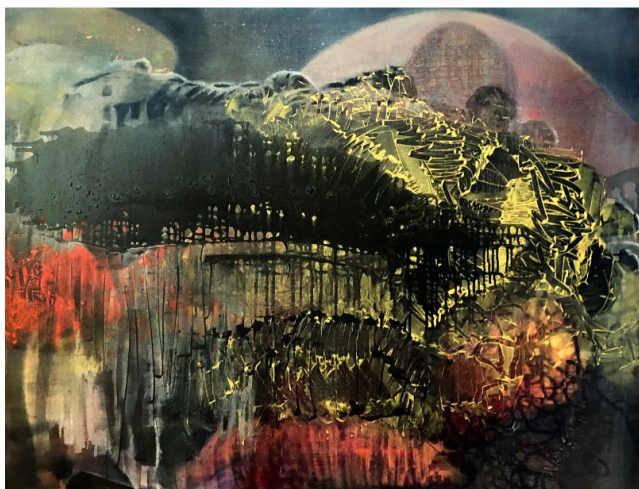


A CAPE COD ORIGINAL

THE SURREAL WORLD OF JOE DIGGS ARRIVES AT PAAM

Monday, June 30th, 2025 // Features, July/August 2023

Joe Diggs, *Stormy Weather*, 2018, oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

by lee Roscoe

Painter Joe Diggs is having two shows this summer: "Evolving Circles," a first-time solo exhibition at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM) and one which complements it, "Shaping Change," at Berta Walker Gallery.

He said that the show at PAAM is a retrospective of work created between 2016 and 2025. "There are circles in all my pieces. In college and grad school, I was always trying to figure out how to put a circle inside a square." And that quest turned into the basis for some of his compositions.

The show's theme is "about the circles of life" and the way that people and events intersect with each other and come 360 degrees around; the intersectionality of different disciplines, and how his landscapes, figural work, abstractions and new investigation of patterns circle into each other and move forward, "changing space, creating new spatial relationships." In his circle, "You start with art and end with art." So, his "Evolving Circles" exhibition is also a "journey of how the work came together" to reveal a kind "of surreal idea of how things happen — all part of the potion."

And that potion is magicked by a spontaneous creation almost like automatic writing; Diggs's art streams from his subconscious into his incredibly competent hands, like dream, like race memory, like the spirit of earth herself, to create canvases which are transcendent and transformative. The art, sometimes both figurative and abstract at once, dances onto the page; no wonder he calls his pieces "emotionally hypnotic gestural works." The artworks are authentic American originals.

For his subjects, there are people, there is blazing jazz, there is nostalgia without corniness; there's hard hitting history; there are lakes, dreamscapes; there is shape and color in his paintings small and large, oil and sometimes acrylic.

There's a large painting by Diggs of his grandfather, Joe Gomes, standing in front of the famous Osterville juke joint he founded, Joe's Twin Villa. He exudes a regal aura, a connection to the ground beneath his feet, and to pride of ancestry, as a Cape Codder, as a Black man and as an American.

The villa is a favorite of Joe's to depict. It hosted famous athletes, townies, celebs and the Kennedys alike to dance to live bands as well as the juke, eat Cape Verdean jag, southern style pork and chicken, and fresh steamers dug nearby. And there is memory, the memory of the arched wood cutouts at the bar at the Twin Villa, the wood which seemed like it was falling but in fact gave the place its funky style.

These roots are in part what have grounded and inspired painter Joe Diggs.

There are landscapes of his beloved Micah's Pond enchanting the property that Joe still manages and that has been in his family since his grandfather purchased it. There are old-style small Hopper-white bungalows for rent on it, though the post Prohibition-era juke shack down the street was painfully replaced in around 2008 by mega houses which Diggs tries not to drive by.

Diggs is a bachelor but not alone; a sister and brother are nearby, and he is buoyed by the supportiveness of his art community.

There's a sophistication, a cosmopolitanism in his art which someone exposed (forgive me) only to Cape Cod, might not have. He is not parochial in his art; even when it is a strictly local scene, he takes the local to a universal place well beyond strict realism, layered with mystery and allusions to the past.

Diggs's father was in the military, leaving as Sergeant First Class. Diggs was born in France. The family lived in Germany. He didn't come to the Cape until he was four years old, and said, "by then I'd seen a bit of things." Hip people from Manhattan and Boston came to Joe's juke shack. And after college Joe worked as a flight attendant for 15 years, seeing as much of the world as he could, using the proceeds to support his art; at one point he was bellman for the then new Copley Plaza Hotel, itself "a work of art."

I asked him: Do you get sick of having to identify as an African American artist? The whole subject of identity art is difficult — obviously being Black must have some formative effect on you and your work, yet you are not just a Black artist in the way that some artists are, or many Native American artists are. You are an American artist.

His DNA is part African (Benin and Togo), part Cape Verdean and part Irish. "I'm starting to explore my other ethnicities, the Irish side," he said. "It's interesting, the problem in talking about race is it tends to compartmentalize people, to put groups into segments. It places us (those of us who are recipients of racism) in the middle. People are thinking political instead of thinking personal." He said that he can be many categories, and that he is not an "African American" (a nomen he takes issue with) but (agreeing with me) an American. "The idea (of simply being a Black artist) is to limit myself and that limits the art."

Diggs said that being Black now in this political situation is difficult because of the increase in racism that should already have been dealt with.

"We kicked the can down the road for so long instead of getting it cured, we have this pimple which continues to come up instead of getting to the core of it and moving on. I'm not the spokesperson for Black people. All I know how to do is mix blue with yellow to make green," he said, noting, "I like to stay in my lane" while commenting that he would never want to disappoint his antecedents who were very much involved in civil rights, by denying who he is, what his heritage is.

He added, parenthetically, "That I own this (the property at the pond) is another aside of Blackness."

He talked about the bungalows on the property: "My grandfather's genius was to buy the buildings from the army" and refurbish them. "I'm fortunate," he said. "It's so rich. You can't go wrong when your subject matter is pre-loaded. The question is, 'Do I have enough life to get it all out?'"