

— FIFTEEN YEARS —  
**THE ART OF  
LAURA JAMES**

**December 2, 2007 – February 24, 2008**

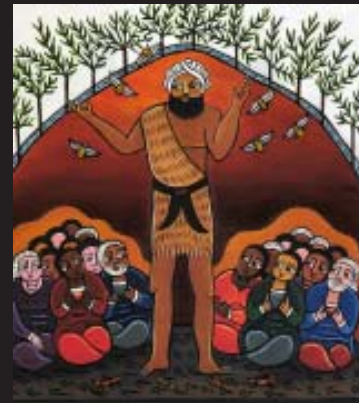


**CASTLE GALLERY**  
THE COLLEGE OF NEW ROCHELLE

# CONTEMPORARY IMAGES, ANCIENT TRADITIONS...

## FIFTEEN YEARS: THE ART OF LAURA JAMES

One of the first impressions upon viewing the paintings of artist Laura James is the complex framework of her artwork. Using bright colors, intricate patterns, and sometimes surreal imagery, James paints women, families, and scenes of everyday life. Color, form and line are each considered and executed harmoniously. Bold oranges, dynamic greens, meditative blues, and receptive yellows dictate form – the conveyor of color – circular, squared, cylindrical, and triangled. Her lines design the stages of understanding, reason, and values, each element leading the viewer into a conversation about time, place, and experience, linking relationships of people, events, and the natural environment. In the art of Laura James you will find transformative compositions emphasizing agency and tradition in contemporary settings.



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CURATOR: JENNIFER ZAZO

**Opening Reception: Sunday, December 9, 2–4 p.m.**

\* In conjunction with this exhibition, CNR will simultaneously mount its annual Holiday Exhibition from CNR's Kate Cauty Crèche Collection in Leland Castle parlors. \*

**The reception and exhibit are free and open to the public.**

*Fifteen Years: The Art of Laura James* is presented through the generosity of the many friends of the Castle Gallery and The College of New Rochelle.

ARTWORK BY LAURA JAMES®

**FRONT COVER:** Clockwise from top left: *5:00*, 2001; *Black Girl with Wings*, 1997; *Jesus in the Desert with Creatures*, 2001; *Maypole Mother*, 2001; *Jesus Walks on Water*, 1998

**AT LEFT:** Clockwise from top left: *Guardian Angel*, 1998; *Shepherds at Night*, 2000; *The Dress*, 2000; *John The Baptist*, 2000; *The Chase*, 1998

## FIFTEEN YEARS: THE ART OF LAURA JAMES

### ABOUT LAURA JAMES

Laura James was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, the daughter of Antiguan immigrants. Her childhood centered on educational pursuits, especially religious study. She began studying art in high school. During her college years, she worked at a photography store that afforded her access to monographs of well-known fine art and documentary photographers: Henri Cartier Bresson, Roy DeCarava, Man Ray,

and Dorothea Lange. While pursuing independent study in the history of photography, James was exposed to new scholarship in Black history and culture, particularly the Rastafari Movement; (an independent religion tied to pan-Africanism, which unites a common destiny for all African people through liberation struggle.) Through her intense cross-disciplinary study, James recognized an innovative and accurate way of representing Black people, visually. From her beginnings as a photography enthusiast, Laura James has been influenced by narrative and the lives of ordinary people. She draws inspiration from the visual and cultural materials of Black history and modern art. She incorporates iconography from ancient traditions and employs sources from literature, religion, and history. James thoughtfully weaves these influences into an insightful record of personal narratives accessible to various audiences. Like many artists who are women, the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of women occupy a significant space in her oeuvre. Today, after a decade of continuous study and production, her work has evolved into two distinct bodies that she identifies as secular and religious.

◀ *Laura James*



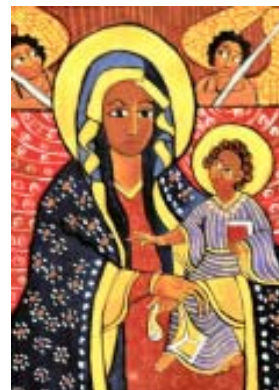
## CASTLE GALLERY/DEC. 2, 2007-FEB.24, 2008



▲ *Christ Enthroned, 2002*

James' religious work is drawn largely from her study of the Bible - its parables, lessons, and stories, and from Ethiopian art and history. She is fascinated by Ethiopia's history as the only Christian country in ancient Africa. That history countered her childhood religious study, which gave White missionaries credit for bringing Christianity to Africa in later centuries. During childhood, James diligently read the Bible, memorizing the poignant stories of David and Goliath, Joseph, and Daniel. In those stories, James imagined the people of the Bible as

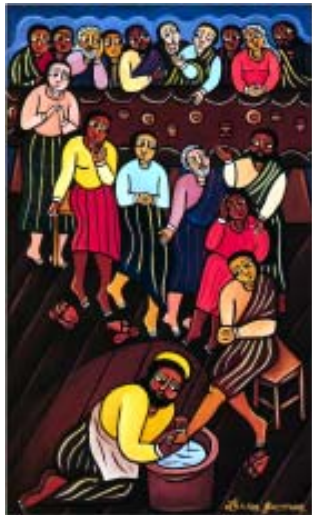
European, a reflection of the culturally predominant images of biblical figures. In Ethiopian art, history, and culture, James witnessed a reflection of Black people that would have a profound impact on her understanding of Black history and the foundations of Christianity.



▲ *Mary and Jesus, 1991*

In the fourth century, Christianity was widely practiced in Ethiopia. The biblical Arc of the Covenant is reportedly housed in St. Mary's Church in Axum. In 1930, Ethiopia coronated Haile Selassie I as Emperor. Haile Selassie I was believed to be a descendent of a royal biblical line, King Solomon and Queen of Sheba. The ancient traditions and biblical references have distinguished Ethiopia as the "African Zion." In examining the history and culture of Ethiopia and its rulers, James became intrigued by one particular form of visual culture, Ethiopian Christian Art.

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▲ *Washing Feet*, 2006

Drawn from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Ethiopian Christian Art is the pictorial art of Ethiopian history and culture. The art dates back to the early 14th century. Produced with great detail and splendid colors and form, religious lay men were commissioned by the church to copy scrolls, also known as Magic Scrolls for their healing powers and other forms of Ethiopian Christian Art (illuminated manuscripts, crosses, and panel paintings). In Ethiopian Christian Art, James, for the first time in the history of her religious study, witnessed popular images of Christian iconography that included majestic representations of Black people. Modeled from Ethiopian Christian Art and her deepening faith, a number of James' early works focused on the theme of guardian angels.

► *Names of Angels*, 2002



In *Names of Angels* (2002), James paints the progressive red, gold, and green colors of the African liberation struggle. With swirling text identifying the names of angels, James suggests the myriad of celestial energies that help guide our daily life. These are angels that are documented in sacred texts as well as those ancestors forever bound in our hearts and memories. Each angel radiates its own unique qualities -- from the texture of their hair to the shape of their eyes and skin complexion. The eyes are particularly mystifying. They serve as the doorway to the spirit. Over the years, her style has evolved into a simpler representation which makes the work more interesting.

After producing a number of angel paintings, James went on to paint such well-known biblical stories and figures such as the *Last Supper*, *Noah*, the *Tower of Babel*, *Ruth*, *Mary and Jesus*, and the *Last Judgment*. "Laura James has developed a signature style," notes Danny Simmons, a collector of James' religious work. "She is traditional, modern, and contemporary." To be sure, James' adaptation of Christian narratives and Ethiopian Christian iconography does not end in her religious art production.

## CASTLE GALLERY/DEC. 2, 2007-FEB. 24, 2008

In 1997, James began a series of paintings featuring women as angels. Historically, angels are seen as messengers of judgment and spiritual guidance. The first painting in this series, *Black Girl with Wings*, has become one of her more popular pieces. In this and other works like *Brooklyn Angels* (1998) and *Guardian Angel* (2006), James employs the symbolism of Christian art to a contemporary setting. *Brooklyn Angels* shows a golden winged woman in a floral dress on the rooftop of a residential building. Groups of pigeons surround her while she glances over the ledge. She sits, waiting, perhaps for other birds to collect around her. Dimmed by misty gray skies with transparent clouds and birds in flight, *Brooklyn Angels* suggest a hurried anticipation for events occurring in the spiritual realm. The transcendental nature of James' composition links her work to modern art movements such as Surrealism, art drawn heavily from the unconscious state -- dreams and fantasies. Surrealists were the most progressive avant-garde artist group to embrace the social and artistic contributions of women. Among other interests, Surrealism celebrated the naïve, primitive work of untrained artists functioning outside of mainstream West-

ern culture. Women artists such as Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and Leonor Fini (1908-1996) are identified or exhibited with Surrealists, though not official members of the group.

James demonstrates elements of Surrealist symbolism in works such as *Maypole Mother* (2001) and *The Sitter* (2001). Other works such as *The Party* (2002) and *My Little Baby* (2004) show similar representations of women and children and the relationship of the natural environment to physical and psychological space. James' representation of female bodies offers another accessible discussion on women's roles and responsibilities. She paints the female form in earth tones, deep colors, and broad lines, drawn from non-Western traditions and ethnographic studies. Identified within biblical or contemporary narratives, James' women are leaders in the home, workplace, and community. Their activities extend beyond those usually associated with women of a particular experience. James depicts her feminine subjects in the world in which she, and other women like her, live.



▲ *Black Girl with Wings*, 1997



▲ *Brooklyn Angels*, 1998

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▲ *The Party*, 2004



▲ *Maypole Mother*, 2001

In an ongoing series of paintings titled, *Nannies and Other Mothers*, James attempts to shed light on a subject long neglected by popular culture by telling the stories of countless women who leave their families to come to America, the United Kingdom, or Canada in search of a better life, taking jobs as domestic workers. Like many of the intimate portraits and epic narratives explored in her work, she is interested in evoking dialogue with her audience. An avid reader and visual storyteller, James is committed to producing images "that teach," traditional to contemporary subjects; Laura James accesses the framework of the human experience to include a broad audience worthy of self-representation and cultural agency.

Through public and private commissions, exhibitions, publications, and public lectures, James has created a body of work that has universal appeal and sustainability. Her work is featured in private and public art collections, most notably Reverend Calvin Butts of Abyssinian Baptist Church, the Hatch-Billops Collection and The Bridgeman Art Library.



▲ *Book of Gospels*, 2000

In 2000-2001, James was commissioned by the Roman Catholic Church to illustrate the *Book of the Gospels*, those chapters of the bible narrated by four apostles: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Published in the United States by Liturgy Training Publications, the Book of the Gospels is read every Sunday and is known for its rich illustrations. James's contribution to the new U.S. edition demonstrates the Roman Catholic Church's commitment to engage communities of color. The new edition also marks a change in the traditional style of painting used to illustrate these pivotal narratives from the Bible. An outgrowth of that publication has afforded James calendar images based on the Book of the Gospels, national solo exhibitions, and noted accolades and testimonials within the Roman Catholic Church and other religious denominations.



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In 2002-2003, James received a commission from the Newark Community Corporation (NCC) to construct a series of paintings commemorating the corporation's 35th anniversary. Established in 1967, NCC is one of the largest community development corporations in the nation. The series looks at Newark's development since the '67 riots. Housing, education and youth, arts and culture, health, and political activism are depicted in a series of 13 paintings. James' commitment to progressive politics and social uplift is shown in her detailed images of Newark residents and community leaders. In a kaleidoscope of dynamic colors, round forms, and pensive eyes, each figure possesses a key role in the painting's composition. James was also commissioned to paint *The 14 Stations of the Cross* (2006) for the newly renovated, ultra-modern Nativity Roman Catholic Church in South Los Angeles, California.

In 2003-2004, James was commissioned by The College of New Rochelle to create a painting commemorating the College's Centennial celebration. The painting, entitled *CNR, Love One Another*, is a celebration of the College's diversity and repre-

sents a wide, multi-ethnic slice of humanity. The painting is now permanently installed in Gill Library on the College's main campus in New Rochelle, NY.

▼ *CNR, Love One Another*, 2004



# FIFTEEN YEARS: THE ART OF LAURA JAMES

*Black Madonna, 2004* ▶



Most recently, the artwork of Laura James has been included in two special group exhibitions that will each travel nationally for the next three years - *The Black Madonna*, curated by Jennifer Zazo and *Seeing The Saviour*, a CIVA show, organized by Sandra Bowden.

*Written by Donna Thompson Ray, Independent Writer  
Edited by Jennifer Zazo, Exhibition Curator*

DONNA THOMPSON RAY is the President of Afua Trading Fine Art and Educational Services LLC, a full-service art appraisal and consulting firm based in West-field, New Jersey. Ms. Thompson Ray has a background in history education, fine art and photography, and museum studies. She is currently a doctoral candidate in American history at Drew University (Madison, New Jersey).

JENNIFER ZAZO is an Independent Curator and Founder/ CEO of P'Zaz Consulting. Work includes logistical support to clients relating to curating, exhibition design, strategy, and installation. Ms. Zazo's curatorial work began with *The Black Madonna*, originally curated for the Castle Gallery during Ms. Zazo's five year tenure as its Director. Independent projects have provided opportunities to work with organizations such as Zoomari Films, The United Nations, The Brazil Ministry of Health, Citibank, UNAIDS, The National Museum of Catholic Art and History, Bronx Council on the Arts, Hostos Center for Arts and Culture, Gay Men's Health Crisis and the Riverdale Mental Health Association.

# A SPECIAL THANK YOU

“ I often tell the story of how I came to start painting. I was walking down the street in my old neighborhood of Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, when I saw a copy of *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls* in the window of a botanica. I was drawn to this book, I bought it, took it home, and commenced to copying some of the images I found there. After a while, I made my own pictures, inspired by the most vividly dramatic book I could find, the Bible.

I remember looking at the Ethiopian scrolls and thinking, I can do this! So I did, over and over again, until I made it my own. I had the courage and determination to make my living making art. And, thankfully, I had people buy my work early on. Without my collectors, I simply would not have been able to do this. I am eternally grateful to them all, and especially to Laura Duncan, Lise Curry, and Denise Pierce, three of my collectors who I now consider my very best friends. A very special thanks to Richard D'Egidio and Patricia Brintle for helping me to collect some of the work. I must also thank my husband Christopher, and my children, Neville, Zuri and Mennen, my sisters Arlene, Sonia and Sharon, and my parents Eileen and Lauchland James of sunny Antigua. And finally, thank you Dr. Sweeny, and The College of New Rochelle for giving me this wonderful opportunity to be reunited with my work. Love to you all.”

Laura James, *Artist*

On behalf of Castle Gallery and The College of New Rochelle, we would like to personally thank all of the collectors who have so graciously agreed to lend their work to this exhibition. Their participation is greatly appreciated, as this exhibition would not have been possible without them.

## COLLECTORS:

Kwayera Archer-Cunningham, Rip Atanasio and Maureen Panzera, Valerie Bell Bey, Esq., Margaret Bernal, Camille Billops, Marjorie Borgella, Dr. Calvin Butts, The College of New Rochelle, Malik Cumbo, Wilkins Cumbo, Lise Curry, Richard and Anna D'Egidio, Br Tyrone Davis/Office of Black Ministry, Archdiocese of NY, Davenel Denis, Laura Duncan, Esq., Nyia Eady, Carol and Lawrence Finney, Janet and Clive Foster, Larry Gerbins, Liturgy Training Publications, Warren Gordon, Dr. Charles Grannum, Marilyn Hawthorne-Butcher, Murphy Heyliger, Tom and Lisa Holcomb, Grace Ingleton, Arlene James, Sonia James-Wilson, Max Jerome, Danielle King, Leon and Judith King, Diana Lamont, Ita Lamont, Maria Leonard, Liturgy Training Publications, Dana C. Lumsden, Anna Manhart, Sheila McLaughlin, Clarence Mosley, John A. Munoz, Ph.D. and Sherry Ross, Ph.D., Carol and David Myers, New Community Corporation, Nathan Ocasio, Tanya Odom, Empress Modupe Olufunmi, Larry Ortiz, Twila Perry, Denise and Dwayne Pierce, Anderson Pilgrim, Ayinde Sankofa, Lenn Shebar, Danny Simmons, Etoy Smalls-Raymond, Carl B Smith, Warren Stein and Beatrice Coron, Donna Thompson Ray, Dee Rissik, Zakia Spalter, Maureen Turci/Joseph Kleineman, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Tony Walters, James White, special thanks to Ed Whitley and Bridgeman Art Library

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