



# *Preston Jackson*

*Julieanne's Descendants:  
Images from the Closet Trunk*

**Robert T. Wright Gallery ■ College of Lake County**

*Homegoin', 2007, Cast Bronze*



## Preston Jackson

### Julianne's Descendants: Images from the Closet Trunk

By Garrett Holg

Preston Jackson working on the wax model of *Blackleg Gal*.

Who am I?

Where did I come from?

One might think these are among life's simplest questions — more suited to the innocent quizzing of children than the serious inquiries of adults. Yet, they provoke the profoundest of answers — answers whose multiple inter-related voices resonate within the deepest recesses of our selves.

At some point in our lives most of us wonder “who we are.” For some of us the answers can be found close at hand, perhaps in a shoe box filled with faded photographs or tattered letters, a list of elegantly penned names in an Old World Bible, or in the telling of lovingly embellished stories that recall the triumphs and follies of long-ago relatives. For others, the answers may be harder to get at.

Preston Jackson restores lost identities. Through his art he gives substance to the shadows of vaguely sketched memories and half-remembered histories. His sculptures reconstruct lives and resurrect emotions that have the ability to bear upon what and how we think and feel today.

*Julianne's Descendants: Images from the Closet Trunk* is an exhibition featuring 20 recent cast bronze sculptures, which Jackson is currently showing at the Robert T. Wright Gallery of Art at the College of Lake County. Each is a composite creation — partly rooted in family reminiscences of Jackson's ancestors and partly rooted in the artist's own historical research into the unsettling times in which they lived.

In reclaiming these nearly forgotten lives, Jackson creates larger-than-life personages, whom he casts in heroic gestures against the backdrop of brutality, greed and slavery that dominated the cultural and economic landscape of the American south from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Each of the sculptures is paired with a written narrative also gleaned from reminiscence and research. These invaluable narrations, which Jackson describes as “historical fictions,” provide essential reading for an understanding of the artist's work.



*The Souvenir*, 2008  
Cast Bronze

Currently a sculpture professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Jackson is a master at telling people's stories. Over the course of a nearly 40-year career, he has become especially well known for his many public sculptures of famous men and women, such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. In this current exhibition, however, it is the unknown faces of history that he brings to life — giving us, in his own words, “faces we can look into.”

Many of Jackson's works are, in fact, penetrating portraits of individuals. In *The Souvenir* (2008), for instance, a woman dressed in her Sunday best boldly displays a photograph of a hanged man. We read in the work's accompanying text the woman's name is Miss Alberta and she is taking a very deliberate stroll in the smoldering aftermath of a race riot. The man in the picture is her father.

Jackson has given this audacious woman an intensely expressive face. It is a face that is challenging, determined, kind and resolute, yet also weighted with experience and sorrow, which the sculptor explores with keen sensitivity in heavily-lidded, drooping eyes. Here, as he does time and again, Jackson offers a raw glimpse into the human spirit. Miss Alberta is poetic in her purpose and in her pain. In the face of all that has been taken away from her she will not surrender the dignity that helps define who she is.

Loss and recovery of one's identity are major themes that run throughout Jackson's remarkable body of work. On one level his sculptures constitute an intimate 3-D family album preserving the memories of distant relations. But, on a more basic level, they embody a deeper universal exploration of African-American identity.

African-American history is truly a history of lost identities. The slavery system exploited every means imaginable and, at times, unimaginable to suppress the African's sense of individuality and self. Slaves were denied their culture, language and traditions. Their African names were taken away and replaced with American names. Families were

broken apart and sold piecemeal to the highest bidder. Blacks were forced to mix with other blacks they would not have ordinarily mixed with. Blacks mixed with whites. The willful erosion of African identity was pervasive, persistent and unforgiving.

In *Who Am I?* (2007) Jackson confronts the psychologically and emotionally deadening effects of this brutishly imposed negation of self. It is possibly the exhibition's most incisive work.

This curious and haunting cast bronze sculpture presents a black woman wearing a once fancy frock now riddled with holes. Standing quizzically before us, her face is hidden behind a powder-white mask whose cheeks are smeared with rouge. In each of her hands she also holds a mask. One is outstretched before her and she stares at it, as if she were peering into a mirror. Her gaze is unsure, even vacant, and it is uncertain what or who it is she thinks she is looking at. Embedded in debris scattered at her feet lay other discarded masks — skull-like and hollow.

Despite the cruelest and most corrupt of circumstances, kindness could be fostered and loyalties could be formed between blacks and whites, slaves and owners. These seldom recognized relationships, however, often proved to be murky and hard to disentangle. The bonds that were forged often engendered contradictory emotions.

In *Jubilation* (2008) a former slave dances unabashedly at being set free. Her joyful figure fills the right side of a cast bronze relief split in two by an actual rift that separates her from sobbing plantation owners and their farm. But, in Jackson's narrative, the rejoicing woman, whose owners taught her how to read, admits "I really felt sorry for our owners" and that "it hurts me that we have to part." Still, in the end, she only wants "to get as far away from this place" as she can.

Throughout Jackson's work there is one identity that remains a constant and emphatic presence. This is the female voice. Many of his sculptures feature women as his subjects and



*Who Am I?*, 2007  
Cast Bronze



*Jubilation*, 2008, Cast Bronze Relief



*Musings*, 2007, Cast Bronze

most of his texts assume a woman's perspective. It is the woman to whom the continuity of family is entrusted and it is she who maintains a deep and burdensome connection to nature and earth. Not surprisingly, Jackson often integrates his images of women with organic textures and references to roots, vines and flower-like shapes.

Perhaps the most emblematic image in this exhibition is the female figure portrayed in *Musings* (2007). In this formidable bronze, Jackson presents a majestic, almost regal female figure who still grips the chains of her recent enslavement. Her proud young head is exquisitely modeled like a royal Nigerian terra cotta portrait. She is Jackson's most direct link with Africa and she still possesses a strong sense of who she is and where she came from. Indeed, there is still so much of Africa that emanates from this woman that jungle leaves and vines grow around her and even appear to attach themselves to her. Her expression is one of innocence and utter disbelief.

*Julieanne's Descendants: Images from the Closet Trunk* is neither comfortable nor easy. It is, however, truly eloquent in form and word. With it, Jackson has created an impressive body of sculptural work — one that will inform and fulfill generations to come.

**Garrett Holg was a writer for ARTnews and former art critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*.**

**Preston Jackson**

**Web site:** [www.prestonjacksonart.com](http://www.prestonjacksonart.com)

**Education:** B.F.A., Southern Illinois University ■ M.F.A., University of Illinois

### **Professional Experience**

- 1989-Present: Sculpture Professor, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
- Regional Emmy Award, Host of “Legacy in Bronze – Fresh from Julieanne’s Garden”
- 1998 Laureate of the Lincoln Academy of Illinois

### **Recent Solo Exhibitions**

- 2008 Fresh from Julieanne’s Garden, Contemporary Art Center of Peoria, Peoria, IL
- 2007 Fresh from Julieanne’s Garden, Indianapolis Art Center, Indianapolis, IN  
Fresh from Julieanne’s Garden, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL  
Bearing Witness: The Art of Preston Jackson, Illinois State Museum, Lockport, IL
- 2006 Fresh from Julieanne’s Garden, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL  
From Bronzeville to Harlem, Bronzeville Visitors’ Center, Chicago, IL
- 2005 From Bronzeville to Harlem, African-American Museum of Iowa, Cedar Rapids, IA
- 2003 From Bronzeville to Harlem, Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, IL

### **Recent Group Exhibitions**

- 2007 A Creative Alliance: Artists Who Teach, Nicole Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 2004 Artist in the Studio, Lakeview Museum, Peoria, IL

### **Public Sculpture**

- Cast bronze sculpture of Irv Kupcinet, City of Chicago
- “Toward Union Lines” and “Emancipation,” Cast bronze, Lincoln Financial Sculpture Park – Riverwalk, Hartford, CT
- Cast bronze bust of Fred Hampton, Village of Maywood, IL
- Steel and bronze relief of Gwendolyn Brooks, Brainerd Library, City of Chicago
- Martin Luther King Jr. memorial bronze bust, City of Danville, IL

### **Bibliography**

*Remembering Kup*, Chicago Tribune, August 1, 2006

*Mix of Fiction, Rebellion and Redemption*, Chicago Tribune, February 26, 2006

*Slavery’s Heroines*, Chicago Tribune, February 3, 2006



*Who Dat?*, 2007, Cast Bronze

**Preston Jackson**  
**Julieanne's Descendants:**  
**Images from the Closet Trunk**

**Exhibition Checklist**

- 1 *The Souvenir*, 2008, Cast Bronze, 13" x 14" x 45"
- 2 *The Escape*, 2008, Cast Bronze, 12" x 32" x 29"
- 3 *Jubilation*, 2008, Cast Bronze Relief, 40" x 30"
- 4 *Funeral of Old Massa*, 2007, Cast Bronze,  
18" x 20" x 16"
- 5 *Blackleg Gal*, 2007, Cast Bronze, 18" x 14" x 36"
- 6 *Who Am I?*, 2007, Cast Bronze, 12" x 13" x 31"
- 7 *Jolly and the Baby Moses*, 2007, Cast Bronze,  
14" x 21" x 21"
- 8 *Musings*, 2007, Cast Bronze, 12" x 14" x 28"
- 9 *Who Dat?*, 2007, Cast Bronze, 27" x 10" x 24"
- 10 *De Footwarmin' Chile*, 2007, Cast Bronze,  
16" x 12" x 16"
- 11 *Ambiguous Encounter*, 2007, Cast Bronze,  
21" x 11" x 25"
- 12 *Homegoin'*, 2007, Cast Bronze, 21" x 17" x 39"
- 13 *Danger on Mule Head Island*, 2007, Cast Bronze,  
17" x 15" x 21"
- 14 *Six Fingers*, 2006, Cast Bronze, 14" x 16" x 32"
- 15 *Maria's Walk*, 2006, Cast Bronze, 12" x 25" x 31"
- 16 *Dressing Miz Eve*, 2005, Cast Bronze, 24" x 10" x 36"
- 17 *Claire Michele*, 2005, Cast Bronze, 12" x 12" x 36"
- 18 *The Emerald Tree Boa*, 2005, Cast Bronze,  
18" x 20" x 36"
- 19 *Corinne Nitel*, 2004, Cast Bronze, 32" x 16" x 36"
- 20 *Julieanna & T.J. Boykin*, 2003, Cast Bronze,  
25" x 18" x 20"

All dimensions measure width by depth by height

**Preston Jackson**

Preston Jackson was chosen a 1998 Laureate of Lincoln Academy of Illinois, the highest honor given to individuals in the state. A professor of sculpture at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, Jackson is the head of the figurative area and has served as chair of the Sculpture Department. In the course of his duties there, he of course influences developing artists and encourages their commitment to excellence and continuing growth. He also has made efforts to diversify both the staff of the Art Institute and the students, in an attempt to bring the study of art to a broader audience.

Jackson's personal work reflects his concern about the direction society is taking, and common themes are protests against war, racism, sexism, violence and injustice. Jackson is an amazingly prolific artist, and his work is varied and wide-ranging. He creates bronze figurative work, monumental steel sculpture and small abstract pieces as well as two-dimensional work. Jackson's Bronzeville to Harlem installation represents an energetic era emphasizing the flavor of the neighborhoods depicted. Jackson's work often examines our collective past and present in an historical and philosophical sense.

# Preston Jackson

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**College of Lake County ■ Robert T. Wright Gallery**

**February 27 – April 11, 2009**

## **Gallery Hours:**

Monday-Thursday: 8 a.m. - 10 p.m.

Friday-Saturday: 9 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Sunday: 1 - 5 p.m.

*Spring Break - March 30 to April 5*

Monday-Friday: 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Closed April 4-5 (Saturday-Sunday)

## **Gallery Information**

Voice: 847-543-2240

E-mail: [sjones@clcillinois.edu](mailto:sjones@clcillinois.edu)

Web page: <http://gallery.clcillinois.edu/>



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