

Cultural Daily

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Artistic Legacy: Rocking the Nation at the William Grant Still Arts Center

Mike Sonksen · Thursday, October 24th, 2019

The [William Grant Still Arts Center](#) in West Adams stands in elite company with sites like the Watts Tower Arts Center, the World Stage and the California African American Museum as a premier space for showcasing the Black Arts in Los Angeles. Named for the pioneering African American composer, the space dates back to 1977 as a gallery and before that the location was a fire station from 1926.

Their latest exhibit spotlights the [RTN Crew](#) otherwise known as “Rocking the Nation,” an all Black graffiti crew formed in 1988 in [South Central Los Angeles](#). Famed for their many murals, including the 787-foot long [Crenshaw Wall](#) and Slauson Traintracks, the RTN Crew has been one of the most prolific crews in the history of Los Angeles artistry. The two-month show, “Legacy: Rocking the Nation (RTN), 30 Years of Creativity” commemorates 30 years of RTN history and spotlights their far reaching influence across Los Angeles arts and culture. The exhibit will be up until November 23rd.

The Dean of African-American Composers

Before going further into the legacy of the RTN Crew, it is important to spotlight the legacy of William Grant Still, the namesake of the Arts Center. Born in 1895, [William Grant Still](#) was called “the Dean” of African-American composers and he was the first to have an opera produced by the New York City Opera. Though he was born in Mississippi and grew up in Arkansas, he lived most of his life in Los Angeles and when he finally passed in 1978, it was here. His longtime home was just a mile or so north of the gallery where West Adams meets MidCity.

In 1936, Still conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra and his first symphony, “the Afro-American,” was for many years the most widely performed symphony composed by an American. Still was close to legendary Los Angeles music teacher [Samuel Browne](#), the Black Music Teacher at Jefferson High School who broke the color barrier. Browne’s protege and genius in his own right, [Horace Tapscott](#) also wrote about meeting Still in his youth during the 1940s. Still wrote over 150 compositions including operas, ballets and symphonies and was also awarded three Guggenheim Fellowships.

Still’s long career includes too many achievements to list here, but another one of his major projects was [Troubled Island](#), a three act opera about the Haitian Revolution set in 1791. (The Haitian Revolution was the most successful slave revolution in history and is often overlooked in

the history books. For more on the story, read Michel-Rolph Trouillot's book, *Silencing the Past*.)

When *Troubled Island* first began to be composed in 1936, Langston Hughes was the initial writer collaborating with Still. Hughes left the following year to cover the Spanish Civil War and the libretto was finished by 1939 with Still and Verna Arvey working together. Arvey was a pianist and writer and eventually she and Still married and remained together for 39 years until Still died in 1978. The opera itself was not staged until 1949 in New York City and it received 22 curtain calls the night it premiered.

A mural on the outside southern wall of the William Grant Still Arts Center commemorates *Troubled Island*. Painted by Noni Olabisi in 2003, the mural named for the opera, according to the William Grant Still Arts Center's website depicts, "dramatically, the pain and suffering of the slaves and the rise to power of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, leader of the slave revolt. In the center of the pictorial saga is William Grant Still, with his spiritual 'eye' depicted in the middle of his forehead, conducting his powerful operatic score which expresses the need for a new era of interracial understanding, loving-kindness and God-consciousness on the earth."

Olabisi was assisted by Brother Boko in the rendering. The mural beautifully honors Still and also captures the spirit of the opera and the revolutionary energy of the Haitian Revolution.



The potent imagery of Olabisi's mural is perfect for the William Grant Still Arts Center because her work matches the fierce spirit of the shows they continue to curate. Moreover, she is also a close friend of the RTN crew.

Noni Olabisi is an icon in South Central and a prominent West Coast muralist. (Among her many works, Olabisi is also the artist that painted "The Protect and Serve" Mural on Jefferson and 11th Avenue a few miles southeast of the Arts Center. That mural celebrates the Black Panthers and it was painted in 1996.) Olabisi says her work is about "resurrection and transformation," and this directly corresponds to the trailblazing energy at the William Grant Still Arts Center.

Led by Director Ami Motevalli in conjunction with the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, the William Grant Still Arts Center has consistently hosted some of the most progressive arts event in Los Angeles including their African-American Composer Series and the annual *Black Doll Show*. The next Black Doll Show is currently being planned and it will be the 39th edition.

Rocking the Nation

This brings us back to the Rocking the Nation (RTN) Crew. Originally founded in 1988-89, they have focused on using visual art for community building and education as a means to unite disenfranchised youth. They are guided by the "each one, teach one," coda. Their spirit of building community and nurturing the next generation is very much in line with Horace Tapscott's vision with the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra.

The original members of RTN were Eric "King CRE8" Walker, Ases, Wise and Flex2 Most of the original members were at Crenshaw High School and as the 1990s went on, they began to paint murals across South Central and beyond. King CRE8 has steadily produced work around the neighborhood and internationally, professionally and commercially. The man stands as one of the

most prolific artists in Los Angeles over the last 30 years. It has been said that his charisma propelled the crew from the start.

Curated by [Aiseborn](#), RTN member since 2010, the current show, “Legacy: Rocking the Nation (RTN), 30 Years of Creativity,” features 150 original pieces, 500 photos and archived materials, film footage, music and original murals to commemorate their long history of art making. Artists included in the show are King CRE8, Mark7, Enkone, SANO, GAKNEW, Roder, Auxe, Aiseborn, Crown, P-Chuck, Mask, Midzt, Sight, Duce and music by Monstroe among others.

I spoke to Aiseborn and he said that celebrating the legacy and influence of the RTN crew is deeply important to him because often times creative pioneers are forgotten whether it be in art, music, poetry or other forms of expression. Street art is often a transitory medium and sometimes the art can happen so fast that a mural or piece gets buffed before its been photographed or noted.

The RTN crew has been embedded in the South Central landscape for 30 years too busy with doing the work to care whether or not anyone noticed. They have left their mark in countless murals, teaching art to youth and through public talks, but celebrating their legacy through this exhibit is especially important because its a thorough catalog of their prolific work over the last three decades.

One of the reasons Aiseborn used the word “legacy” in the show’s title is that he feels often times in the art and academic world there’s a “stolen legacy,” where the original purveyors of an art form or aesthetic get erased or not properly credited. In too many cases a popularizer comes along to be celebrated overshadowing the innovators who started the style. RTN’s pioneering work in the art form as well as the other mediums they have worked in has left a major mark on the Los Angeles landscape and the depth of work in the exhibit demonstrates this.

The show goes deep into their history from their first murals and how they formed while still in high school. Along the way they have collaborated with South Central icons like Noni Olabisi, the artist Snake Doctor, Ben Caldwell at the KAOS Network, B Hall from the Good Life Cafe and the celebrated South Central barber Frederick Douglas Ellis aka Good Fred.

In more recent years the crew has been included in exhibitions curated by the Getty, California African-American Museum and the El Segundo Museum of Art among others. They have also added a number of new members. As the crew has evolved they have also become a model of Black and Brown unity which is an accurate description of the changing demographics across South Central.

RTN also played an instrumental role in painting the murals along the Slauson train tracks between Budlong and Normandie. There’s even a section of the exhibit where they recreate the Crenshaw Wall with photos.

The Crenshaw Wall

[The Crenshaw Wall](#) is 787-feet long, 10 feet tall and stretches over a full city block centered at Crenshaw and 50th. In its current form it features 12 artists. Historically murals on the Crenshaw Wall date back to the 1960s, but in 2002 RTN took it upon themselves to really take the Wall to the next level. Titling it, “Our Mighty Contribution,” the wall features Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, The Black Panther Party, Jimi Hendrix, Louis Armstrong, Marcus Garvey, African-American military men, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, The Sphinx, Timbuktu, Slavery, Street

Dancers and Dizzy Gillespie among other images. What makes the mural even more incredible is that it was completed with almost no funding.

In many ways, the Crenshaw Wall stands in the same company as the 2800-foot long “[Great Wall of Los Angeles](#),” in North Hollywood. The Great Wall was conceived by Judith Baca in the late 1970s and it tells a people’s history of Los Angeles in the same way that the Crenshaw Wall commemorates Black History.

The Crenshaw Wall is similar in scale with its coverage of so much history across its perimeter. In considering the importance of the Crenshaw Wall, the ideas of a Judith Baca essay really resonate. Baca’s essay, “[Whose Monument Where: Public Art in a Many-Cultured Society](#),” states that for too long most public art in Los Angeles and other cities across America often served power and dominance rather than the populace. Her work with murals over the last 40 years has been about showing another side of the city in the same way the Crenshaw Wall does.

“In many ways,” Baca states, “murals became the only interventions into public spaces that articulated the presence of ethnicity. Architecture and planning have done little to accommodate communities of color in our city.” Baca’s point illustrates why the Crenshaw Wall is so important and also why the history of the RTN Crew is equally important. Her life’s work has been about creating monuments that open up the lens and tell a bigger story. In the same essay quoted above, Baca asks, “How can we assist in creating a public memory for a many-cultured society? Whose story shall we tell?”

The power of the Crenshaw Wall is a testament to Baca’s point. RTN’s ability to tell a greater story of Black Los Angeles with “Our Mighty Contribution,” has inspired countless residents in South Central. One of them is Claudie Jones. Jones is a Los Angeles native, filmmaker and curator at the William Grant Still who is currently working on a documentary about RTN. He’s been seeing their work from the time he was in elementary school.

“Growing up in South Central Los Angeles,” Jones tells me “and seeing the Murals planted positive seeds in my mind about who I am as a person and brought me closer to black culture. To work on this Documentary is nostalgic.” Jones is not alone in being inspired and educated by the work of the RTN Crew. Excerpts of the documentary Jones is making can be viewed at the exhibit. I watched 30 minutes of the footage and was deeply inspired. Jones’ film also shows how RTN members have been involved in other elements of hip-hop culture beyond graffiti like dancing and making music.



[AK Toney](#) is a poet from Leimert Park that has known several members of the RTN crew for the last 30 years. Toney is particularly close to EnkOne. “EnkOne started doing Graffiti art at the age of 15 years old,” Toney remembers. “By the age of 17, he owned an airbrushing art business. He was putting characters and lettering on the shells of pagers, denim jackets, t-shirts, leather wear, not to mention writing with a crew I never knew about until later by individuals from within. Rocking The Nation made silent moves through their visual creations. Their statements were hardcore with imagery and imagination.”

A few members of RTN have also made music. One of them is Stroe One. “I eventually met Stroe One,” AK Toney says, “through Leimert Park Village’s own KAOS network, run by business owner Ben Caldwell. Caldwell an Elder and Mentor in the community of Leimert was even a part

of RTN. Stroe One is a humble artist on a real level of Hip-Hop culture. He is a legend in his own right with the paint on walls you would never realize were created by the street. The secret of Stroe One is that he also a lyricist of real visceral Los Angeles. He now has a single and video out that is bubbling on the Hip Hop underground and Social Media entitled *West Up*.”

Whose Monument Where?

Speaking of [Ben Caldwell](#), Caldwell can be seen talking in Claudie Jones’ documentary about RTN showing in the exhibit. He enthusiastically speaks of his love for RTN’s artwork and he says that he hopes that they will be one of the featured artists in the emerging “[Destination Crenshaw](#)” project. Currently in development, Destination Crenshaw is a 1.3 mile long outdoor art and culture experience celebrating Black Los Angeles. Caldwell’s point about RTN being one of the featured artists in this project directly ties into both Aiseborn’s idea of legacy and Judith Baca’s essay quoted above titled “Whose Monument Where.”



In this essay Baca also states: “Los Angeles provides clear and abundant examples of development as a tool to colonize and displace ethnic communities. Infamous developments abound in public record, if not consciousness—Dodger Stadium, which displaced a historic Mexican community; Bunker Hill, now home to a premier arts center, which displaced another; and the less well documented history of how four major freeways intersected in the middle of East Los Angeles’s Chicano communities.”

Baca’s point here directly connects to Destination Crenshaw and as Ben Caldwell says, it is imperative that the RTN crew be involved with the public art emerging at Destination Crenshaw. There has been a long legacy in Los Angeles of large scale decisions being made without consent of the locals whose lives are directly affected by the decisions policy-makers make. RTN’s effective [social agency](#) to uplift their community is exemplified in their work like the Crenshaw Wall. This independent spirit is also akin to the independent spirit of [Nipsey Hussle](#).

Speaking of Nipsey, the RTN artist GAKNEW, just painted a mural of Nipsey Hussle at Florence and Normandie. [GAKNEW](#) is a hip hop artist, poet, painter and social worker. Similar to other members of the crew, he has always used his work to build community. GAKNEW has used hip hop to help foster youth find their voice and heal from trauma. He even wrote a poetic novella melting hip hop and psychology.

[GAKNEW](#) first connected with the RTN crew in 2000 as part of the Hip-hop Movement Project but it would be several more years before he painted with them. He met CRE8, Poppin Chuck and Sano. “We all used to teach elements of hip-hop at MacArthur Park with Leyda Sol, sort of like J.U.I.C.E before JUICE was there,” he tells me. “Chuck was teaching popping (dancing), CRE8 was teaching Graff, and I did the emceeing,” he says. “It’s crazy because Dumbfoundead was a teenager in my class back then, before he became known at Project Blowed.”



“None of them knew that I painted because I had been on hiatus since like 94,” he remembers. “A couple of years before that I met Mark7 because I used to make these little hiphop flier newsletters that I would leave around the city, back when I had my UPS crew (Underground Poet Society). Mark used to collect them, not knowing who I was. He and a close friend of mine, DeShawn,

worked together and somehow started having a conversation about the newsletters. Mark told Shawn he wanted to meet me and that's how that came together. Mark was also an emcee at the time, so we became cool. Then over a decade later Mark was over my house and saw an oil painting I did of my daughter. We started having a conversation about painting."

"In the conversation I told him about a piece that I did on the side of a beauty salon on Manchester and Crenshaw back in Jr. High, like 1991. He was tripping out because he knew exactly what piece I was talking about. He then invited me to come out and paint with them. I was super rusty because I hadn't touched a spray paint can since the 90's."

"Painting next to those dudes was frustrating and almost embarrassing. I had never gotten heavy into graffiti like they were. I was more into the music. I had just been drawing all my life and always had an appreciation for graffiti. I played around with cans, but then left it alone. I've only really been known for painting over the past 6 or 7 years." GAKNEW continues to both paint and make music. He has a new hip hop project titled "It Was 1994," that will be released, October 25th.

There's obviously much more to say about the RTN crew. What's most important for this account is that their legacy is being honored in this very comprehensive show at the William Grant Still Arts Center. The show remains on display until November 23rd.

A final point that needs to be made before this piece concludes is that as West Adams, South Central and Los Angeles at large continues to transform, it is of paramount importance to recognize pioneers like the RTN crew and for that matter William Grant Still and the Arts Center named after him.

This is especially important to remember because up and down Adams new condos are coming to rise and there are also quite a few freshly painted murals. The RTN crew and the William Grant Still like the World Stage, Kamau Daaood and Horace Tapscott's Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra have been preserving the Black Arts long before the new developments and gentrifying carpetbaggers came to town. As Judith Baca says, "How can we assist in creating a public memory for a many-cultured society? Whose story shall we tell?"



RTN has been telling the real story of South Central for 30 years and the William Grant Still Arts Center has been doing the same for 42 years. These venerable institutions have been tirelessly serving their community from the start. Like Ben Caldwell says, it is only right that RTN be involved in future projects like Destination Crenshaw. There is an illustrious legacy of art in South Central Los Angeles, visit the RTN exhibit at the William Grant Still Arts Center to see it for yourself.

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