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## Ed Love: A Biographical Dance

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# ED LOVE

## A BIOGRAPHICAL DANCE

By Monifa Atungaye

**A** major exhibition affords both the artist and his audience an opportunity to travel and experiment. It is possible to see a body of work as signposts of the artist's personal journey, as markers of a people's odyssey, and as soundings each of us may use to test our own depths.

We are able to look back in wonder—consider what personal processes and ideas *enabled* the construction of the work. We are able to examine the work in a historical context—consider what societal processes and ideas *forced* the construction of the work.

In SOUNDINGS, [Howard University Gallery of Art, September 14-November 26, 1986] we travel by examining one African-American artist's attempts to define his environment and to sort out the meaning of the elements of his landscapes. We can consider the geography of his dreams as well as the topography of his everyday, waking realities. We may travel with him through approximately two decades of personal time and thousands of years of mythological time. . . .

### Looking Back

Ed Love was born in Los Angeles, California on September 21, 1936. His parents were transplants from Mississippi and Texas.

In September 1954, after graduating from Manual Arts High School, he joined the Air Force.

After basic training in California, he was sent to Georgia and, a year and a half later, to Japan. He served in the Air Force for four years.

Love earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts (June 1966) and Master of Fine Arts (June 1967) at California State University.

In 1967, he studied in Sweden at the University of Uppsala. In addition to studying painting, drawing, sculpture, Scandinavian art history, and the humanities, Love began experimenting with light and sound projections. He returned to the United States in 1968 when he was offered a teaching position at Howard University by James A. Porter, then chairman of the art department.

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# Ed Love

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Listen to Ed Love tell his story:

"My family, like most families of the time, was an extended one. In L.A., our home was the way station for both my mother and father's people coming up from the South. They were all very work conscious. I remember discussions about Du Bois and Marcus Garvey on Sunday afternoons when we would all get together for dinner. . . .

"Manual was started as a vocational school and the 'fine arts' became a substantial part of the curriculum. In fact the school had the first nude model drawing classes of any high school in the United States. I learned much later that Jackson Pollack and Philip Guston had gone to school there. But I never took art or shop classes there. At Manual, I played baseball.

"Going into the Air Force was a way of growing up, a rite of passage. My father had left home at 17 and joined the Navy. It was hard to walk away from baseball with the prospect of playing with the Giants, but at the time it seemed the important thing to do.

"The Air Force did lots of things for me. While I had been in the South before as part of a family trip, my experiences in Georgia, without any kind of family protection, enabled me to better understand who my father was. . . . In Georgia there were some very serious lessons learned.

"Looking back on the two years in Japan, I can see I was tremendously affected by what I experienced. The sense of building. I saw how people lived, poor people lived. Their living spaces were very sensitive and uplifting in their simplicity. But there was more. In Japan I experienced people with a clear and focused sense of how they could control their environment. I witnessed people

who were 'defeated' holding on to their dignity. Their inventiveness was grounded in the possibilities of living poetically. I remember very clearly climbing a hill and coming upon a small shrine. And I realized it was there because someone felt moved to do it, to add something not only to his or her life but to everyone's life who happened to find that path. . . . And it was while I was in the Air Force that I really became exposed to a lot of music. Having Black men around me from different parts of the U.S. meant I was constantly being turned on to other sounds.

"I was married shortly after I got out of the Air Force. I went to Los Angeles City College and the University of Southern California intent upon studying and becoming an architect. But I found architecture in the United States was not what I had expected. I had wanted to make some kind of translation of what I had seen in Japan. There was one project that I worked diligently on. I was very excited by my ideas and by my ability to make the ideas work even though I had little money to spend on materials. When I brought in my model it was *totally* different from the work of my classmates and what was expected. They all must have thought I was completely out of my mind. Looking back at that, I see that I had produced some kind of sculpture. Not too long after that I dropped out of school for a couple of years. During this period I worked as a draftsman for Lockheed Aircraft and North American Aviation. . . . I had parked cars, worked as a janitor, waiter, bartender, and draftsman but knew there was no real future for me in any of that. When I did go back to school, I was much older than most of the other students. I found I had the most in common with the people working in the studio arts, particularly the sculptors and ceramists. I began to spend more time in the studios, talking and studying. And I began to take sculpture electives. The work was very attractive, particularly the physical nature of the work. . . . My father was that way . . .

even after working three jobs, he'd come home and go to work on the garage, trying to transform nothing into something.

". . . As I began working in sculpture, my first projects were these cement things which were very organic in form. I was making shapes, trying to see where they would go. I was using bent steel rods, tying them together to make armatures. The forms started getting larger and finally someone showed me the basics of welding to make the process easier. He left me hanging enough so that I had to teach myself the rest. It wasn't until much later that welding became a primary focus. My graduate sculptural work was a series of plaster, plastic, and aluminum experimentations focusing on color and form.

"When I came to Howard, there really wasn't a sculpture major. . . . I was hired to teach painting and to begin to teach sculpture. I started to use materials and tools that were basic and inexpensive. One of these tools was a gas welding torch. The process of welding is relatively simple. The materials are not restrictive and you can do a great deal with scrap materials. There was a junkyard and a bumper replating factory near the university. They became our primary source of materials.

". . . Being at Howard is very important to me. I think my teaching has lots to do with my believing that the environment can be affected and changed by people who care. And caring requires that you not be afraid of being critical, that you not be afraid to work, and that you believe everything adds up . . . that the 'second why' is most important in seeing." (The "second why" is an analytical tool Ed Love employs and teaches in visual criticism.) □

Monifa Atungaye is an anthropologist, researcher, and poet. She is collaborating with Ed Love on *The Osiris Papers*. The above was excerpted from the catalogue for the exhibition.



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