

# David McGee *Avenging Angels*

ADAA Art Show, October 30 – November 2, 2024



I N M A N G A L L E R Y

## David McGee *Avenging Angels and Other Blaxploitation Lullabies*

Stanford W. Carpenter, PhD

### ORIGINS

It begins with **isolation**. Then come the **fever dreams** and **tarot cards**. Followed by Blaxploitation memories of Pam Grier in a **gaze** of **lust** and **admiration**. Yet a horrifying **stillness reigns** supreme. Enter the **Avenging Angels ... Resistance, Vigilante, Pop, Nutcracker, Autodidact, Folklorist, Mulatto, Angel, Baltimore, Existentialist, Ninja, and Nunchaku!** Born of moments of contemplation and fashioned from the feelings evoked by Blaxploitation icon Pam Grier, wrapped in 19<sup>th</sup> Century garb, and engaged in moments of reflection. Each with a power and story all her own, together they are a story of struggle, flesh, fear, and sweet, sweet revenge. Their actions are the stuff of **legend** but their **presence** is the **reel story**.

### IT BEGINS WITH ISOLATION

The 2020 Covid 19 lockdown forced people into a state of isolation, cut off from the very human connections that, in other times, would have gotten them through the bleakest of circumstances. For many, it was traumatizing. But for David McGee it was something else. "I'm a creative. Being isolated and alone is ideal for me. The fact is that I needed to be alone to make my work."

And that he did, taking advantage of the silence and slower pace to get outside.

"Nature is enough for me. When I say nature, I literally mean nature. I mean going out, Shakespearean style and having a dialogue with myself. The great thing about Shakespeare is that all his major characters, before they begin to commit something wrong or justify something, go outside first to talk to themselves.

"I use nature as my confessional."

Still, there was something different about being out in nature at this time. Fewer cars, fewer people, less noise, an overwhelming sense of stillness. A world on pause, waiting to spring into action.

### THEN COME THE FEVER DREAMS AND TAROT CARDS

David went on to describe his conversations with himself as he walked, wrote, sketched, and painted for his audience of one. The more we talked, the faster he spoke: it was like listening to man caught up in a fever dream.

He described a story about a man being transformed by what he sees. Inspired by Don Quiote, David started to think about how “remembering bits and pieces of world history, art history, political histories, science, religion” can also transform in ways unique to each individual. From that came the idea for creating a series of tarot cards. Each card featuring an image and text that could transform the user. His mind was filled with images of Christ, Moors, religious relics, religious wars, and civil wars. “The American Civil War and all of the characters it invented” kept coming back.

And out of the Civil War came an image of a Black woman with a shotgun named *Resistance*. But she wasn't the only one. As the tarot card series grew and drifted ever more toward the surreal, more images of Black women would emerge with each one embodying a stillness that echoed those Shakespearean moments of contemplation that David so loved.

## A GAZE OF LUST AND ADMIRATION

David saw his first Blaxploitation film at a drive-in just outside of Detroit in the 1970s. “I was nine years old. I recognized the images. The language, the images, my father and uncles spoke like that.” But it's Pam Grier in *Coffy*, the story of Black woman on a mission of vengeance featured on movie posters holding a shotgun, that left a lasting impression. “I was spellbound ... she was Black, beautiful, and she took her life into her own hands.”

More than 40 years later David is still transfixed. “I remember in 2015; I did my first painting with Pam Grier in it called *Dora Maar*.”

He still remembers the *Coffy* movie poster of Pam Grier standing tall with a shotgun in her hand. There she is, “holding her ground and plotting her future. She just represents power, somebody taking control, regaining power over her own body.”



David McGee, *RESISTANCE*, 2019  
graphite and watercolor on paper  
10 x 8 1/2 in (25.4 x 21.6 cm)

Every man wanted her. And every man was afraid of her. "She was a superhero caught between the gazes of lust and admiration."

## **YET STILLNESS REIGNS SUPREME**

When we think of Civil Wars and Blaxploitation films, it's usually the action that comes to mind. But every action is preceded by a stillness, a moment where it's all about feelings, thoughts, plots, and internal dialogs. It's that Shakespearean moment that David is so fond of as an adult. But it was something he also recounts experiencing as a kid, long before his first encounter with the bard.

"There's a dialogue that Pam Grier has with herself, before she plots, before she takes her revenge ... you can't do that in closed spaces, you have to go outside and walk and see things in the void."

This stillness is integral to understanding the Avenging Angels. "The main idea of every painting is that you are witnessing the plotting, the interior workings of a person before they take action. The person is thinking. You see it in Westerns, just before the draw ... you see it in Pam Grier's eyes. You see it in a lot of situations where black people are trying to figure out how to get out of a dangerous situation."

## **ENTER THE AVENGING ANGELS**

Being inside an internal dialog is different from observing it. From the outside all one sees is an eerie stillness, an outward expression that conceals. It is the extension of a moment for an indefinite period of time. That's what makes it so unnerving.

"Stillness is frightening. And in the Avenging Angels you're looking at a female stillness that is more frightening than a male stillness."

At first glance, these women appear calm, reflective, surrounded by nature. But it's a surrealistic idea of nature. There are birds flying around. There are trees. But "you don't see a landscape or an actual ground." It's obvious that there is an intense space of nature humming around them. But you can't quite pinpoint the space, the location. It's a space of interior dialogue. All of this is contrasted by the threats that they carry, in most cases in the form of some kind of object ... a fetishization of their capacity for vengeance.

**Resistance.** The first. The crudest of them all, she stands ramrod firm, back turned toward the viewer, her face in profile, and shotgun in her hands. There is nothing subtle about her because she doesn't need to be.

**Vigilante.** If ever there was an expression that whispered, "child, please," it would be hers. Vigilante is based in part on a period piece painting of a Black woman putting a White woman to bed. The White woman is gone and there is an ax strapped to Vigilante's back. But it's the pillow we should fear as it foretells a violent, breathless end.

**Nutcracker.** If there is a gelding to be had, it will not be by scythe or vise. Rather, she will do it with her visage ... a look that "verges on madness." She is the promise of a particular kind of pain. She has witnessed horror and decided to take matters into her own hands. To look in her eyes is to be frozen in time. Whatever comes next will be less painful than her stare. Nat Turner wished he could be her.

**Autodidact.** Her paint brushes seem harmless. That is until she uses them to bring out, to luminate, the ugly truths and secrets behind the polite gestures and disarming smiles. Her ever so slightly sad eyes and blank expression the result of lifetime of seeing beyond the surface of things. She wears black in mourning of her innocence.

**Folklorist.** Her pen is mightier than the spear that she keeps within reach. Her expression is that of grim determination as she bears witness, seeking to chronicle every moment and do so within the moment "without the aid of scholars or mentors." She wears black because she is the death of lies.



David McGee, *Autodidact*, 2024  
colored pencil, graphite, watercolor on paper  
30 x 22 5/8 in (76.2 x 57.5 cm)

**Ninja.** Nature gave her some solid gifts: nun chucks, throwing stars, big hair, and an afro pick that screams power! Her Black power fantasy is your certain demise.



David McGee, *Mulatto*, 2024  
colored pencil, graphite, watercolor on paper  
30 x 22 5/8 in (76.2 x 57.5 cm)



David McGee, *Baltimore*, 2024  
watercolor on Arches 300lb cold press watercolor paper  
60 5/16 x 40 1/2 in (153.2 x 102.9 cm)

**Mulatto.** Ever so gentle, so light skinned, the appropriate amount of cleavage, almost a hint of alabaster contrasting her monochromatic blue dress. Everything about her is delicate and inoffensive ... except the Black Power Afro Pick in her hair. "She may be the most Pam Grier of them all." She is a social chameleon because she must be. But whatever she looks like, she knows who she is and where her loyalties lie.

**Baltimore.** The song, *The Wire*, the Civil War, the Underground Railroad ... small words and phrases that bring to mind bigger stories about the many poisons that have ended so many lives and incapacitated a nation.

*Stanford W. Carpenter, PhD. is a cultural anthropologist, sometime comic creator, and former archaeologist whose passion is people and the things they create.*

*Carpenter and McGee spoke at various times from October 8 – October 11. McGee's quotes were taken from these conversations.*



David McGee, *The Ninja*, 2024  
watercolor on Arches 300lb cold press watercolor paper  
60 3/8 x 40 1/2 in (153.4 x 102.9 cm)

David McGee (b. 1962, Lockhart, Louisiana) was raised in Detroit, Michigan and moved to Texas in the 1980s, where he established a multifaceted practice that examines the tangled narratives of art history, the mutable nature of language, and the politics of race and class. McGee lives and works in Houston, Texas.

McGee has had solo exhibitions at numerous regional institutions, and his work is in the permanent collections of The Menil Collection, Houston, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, The Dallas Museum of Art, The Grand Rapids Museum of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The W.E.B. DuBois Research Institute, Harvard University, among many others. His debut institutional survey, ***David McGee: The Griot and the Nightingale*** will open Fall 2025 at the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art (Charlotte, NC), organized by Katia Zavistovski, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

front cover image: David McGee, *Nutcracker*, 2024  
watercolor on Arches 300lb cold press watercolor paper  
60 1/4 x 40 3/8 in (153 x 102.6 cm)

This brochure was published on the occasion of the exhibition  
**David McGee ADAA Art Show 2024 solo presentation**  
October 29 - November 2, 2024

Publication © Inman Gallery  
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ISBN: 978-0-9672364-8-3

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