

Louis B. Burroughs, Jr., Biography

Louis Bernard Burroughs, Jr. was born in 1945 and grew up near the shores of Lake Erie, in a black eastside neighborhood of Cleveland, Ohio. He attended a half-dozen schools before graduating from Glenville High School in 1964. None of the schools offered black history classes. His hobbies were swimming, making model airplanes and boats. Louis Jr.'s art ability was first noticed in the third grade at Observation Elementary School where a teacher encouraged him to draw images of cars, boats, and women in flowing gowns. By the time he graduated from high school, he had exhibited in the Annual May Show at the Cleveland Museum of Art and had painted murals for local businesses. From grade school on, he was an avid reader of science fiction and psychology and thought he might one day pursue psychology as well as art. Classmates described Louis as both mischievous and intellectual, more so than as an athlete or a model student.

Louis Coster Sr., his father, was the black great grandson of a white Alabama slave owner Benjamin W. Burroughs and Amy Chelse, a slave woman of African Jamaican heritage. He was a devout Baptist and self-taught auto body repairman who eschewed modern tools, preferring "eye" measurements. He did not smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol and had strong, sometime contradictory, dislikes. He had issues with ministers of the gospel and the Masonic Order of his father's going back to the 1870s, but loved singing four-part harmony in the Baptist church male choir. He loved family life, but traveled without regard to family responsibility. He was passionate about guns and hunting, but disliked the military, westerns, and sports. He violently discouraged his oldest son Louis Jr. from making art and expected that he would follow in his footsteps.

Louis Sr. ran away from his father's Alabama farm at age twelve because he disliked farm work. He had obtained six years of schooling, but desired more than working in the fields. When he was twenty years old, he arrived in Cleveland, met and married Clara Higginbotham Shirde. She was the daughter of Elk Masonic official, Victoria Higginbotham, and Aljoseph Shirde, 16 years old, and pregnant with their first child when they married. Clara was described as a vivacious young activist with interests in singing and nursing who had graduated the eighth grade. By 1950, the marriage which had produced five children, was on the rocks and headed for divorce. Even before the divorce, the family depended on welfare and grandmother Victoria, because Louis Sr. was chronically delinquent in child support and rent payments. However, the divorce did not stop Louis Sr. and Clara from producing two more children, totaling seven in all by 1955.

Members of both families had exited the south under the evil of Jim Crow in the late 1920s. The Higginbothams fled Mississippi in 1925, after the lynching of great uncle Elwood Higginbotham and the white mob immolation of in-law L. Q. Ivy. In Cleveland, Ohio, both families were participants in the Marcus Garvey Movement and the Future Outlook League,

precursors to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In Ohio, both the Shirde and Higginbotham families would endure forms of racism as virulent as any in the south.

Louis Jr. married pregnant classmate Gloria Underwood in 1965 in a Catholic wedding ceremony. She was studious and a devout Catholic. The marriage produced two additional children before it ended in a contested divorce in 1990. The divorce resulted in deep recriminations and an irrevocable estrangement from the couple's three children. From the start, the marriage was marked with bad luck. A mother superior and a Catholic priest who did not believe that Louis Jr. would be able to support a family as an artist, planned to place the couple's first child, Antionette Marie, in adoption. In response to Louis Jr.'s protest, they offered a deal in exchange – the marriage to Gloria Underwood - so that he could be a father to his daughter.

In the 1960's, Cleveland was a city intent on maintaining racial supremacy and black militants were intent on breaking down racial barriers. Policemen were killed and retaliated with dozens of brutal beatings and scores of killings of black citizens. Molotov cocktails lit up nights in response. President John F. Kennedy and his brother Bobby were killed as well as the Reverend Martin Luther King and Malcolm X., all of which drove Louis Jr. to become radical, agnostic, and suspend thoughts of being an artist. Instead he pursued a business career. In the early 1970s, the local *Cleveland News* accused Louis of being anti-white for selling homes to black families in white neighborhoods. He stated that being pro-black was not anti-white and that the article was more about creating a counter narrative against demands for fair housing. He learned later that the paper was a mouthpiece for the Cleveland's WASP elite and for the FBI. Today the city still remains racially divided.

Over the decades, Burroughs attended several universities, including Cleveland State University and art classes at the Cleveland Institute of Art and Museum of Art. His higher education was lengthened because he was often in contention with curriculum, even when it was against his best interest. Burroughs felt that most curriculum either omitted or distorted African American history. For over four decades, as he defended himself in the courts, thoughts of making art would not go dormant. He continued to read, especially books on art, transnational African and African American history. He remarried in 2005 to classmate Marlene Stoiber Burroughs Ph.D. and began to make art.

In 2006, he began building a body of work, reflective of his beliefs and "eye." He was further influenced by artists Jean Michelle Basquiat, Thornton Dial, Jean Dubuffet, and Kara Walker. His paintings are fusions of symbols and ideas, with irony and humor, and strong color. His themes are African and African American history, including slavery and rebellion, struggle and triumph, Katrina and 911. The settings are surreal and dreamlike. He has exhibited in numerous local art shows. In his view, that which is most authentic in art is autobiographical; anything else is sublimated pretension.