

# Raymond Saunders

## Coming to the surface.

By Duane Deterville

*"Because of the history of blacks and whites, the history of what is America, one has to be careful when other people project who one is in a public forum."*

—Raymond Saunders—Artists Observed 1986

*"Outwardly mischievous but inwardly full of overflowing creative grace, Eshu-Elegbara eludes the coarse nets of characterization."*

—Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*



Raymond Saunders/  
Courtesy of Stephen  
Wirtz Gallery

**T**HERE IS A MERCURIAL SYNERGY BETWEEN THE ARTIST RAYMOND SAUNDERS AND HIS PAINTINGS. WHEN YOU ENCOUNTER HIM IT BECOMES

clear why the best explanations of who he is are the paintings he has produced; the paintings and the man give off similar sensations. Both are black surfaces that hold the most playfully sophisticated and worldly expressions. Saunders' personality has a duality in it that brings to mind Eshu, the West African/Yoruba trickster god of thresholds and doorways. It's interesting to note that Saunders often-times uses discarded doors as his painting surface. Outwardly joking like a homeboy from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania but inwardly a sage who has been gathering inspiration for his work from Europe, West Africa, Brazil and China since the 1950s. It is no doubt that this combination of cunning and experience has given him the ability to elude the stereotypic characterizations such as "primitive" or "intuitive" that have been applied to Black artists such as Bob Thompson and Jean Michel Basquiat.

*"[F]or years interest in the black person was as someone who was naïve, or primitive and spontaneous, rather than anything Western, cerebral, linear. I've had too much schooling to think of myself as either naïve or childish..."*

—Raymond Saunders, Artists Observed, 1986.

Born in Pittsburgh in 1934, Saunders attended the Carnegie Institute and the Pennsylvania Academy, studying under Joseph Fitzpatrick, who taught Andy Warhol, Philip Pearlstein and Jonathan Borofsky, among others. In the 1950s, at the age of 20, he studied art in Paris on a scholarship. So it comes as little surprise that Saunders' career has seen his work shown in Paris, Japan, Greece, Burkina Faso and all across the United States. He currently resides in Oakland, California and teaches at the California College of the Arts, from which he graduated with an MFA in 1961.

*"In some instances I seek the content of children's brilliance, which is no more or no less than the brilliance of any other time in life."*

—Raymond Saunders



Painted by a ref-gee?!—Refugee as noun—One who flees for refuge to another country—slavery?, 2005

Mixed media on board

72 x 48 inches

Genius and mastery of one's craft is often marked by a palpable but deceptive sense of ease, an ability to maintain a childlike wonder and sense of discovery with the materials at hand. There is the sense of a creative, effortless stream of consciousness in process. Of course to produce that stream of consciousness means honing one's craft with years of study and practice. Saunders' jazzlike sense of improvisation brings to mind saxophonist Ornette Coleman's use of simple, almost nursery rhyme-like melodies for compositions that involve very complex notions about harmony, melody and rhythm. Saunders' paintings riff on children's drawings without condescension. He views them as having their own unique genius that is undermined by the label "children's art."

“ [The African] *does not begin by distinguishing himself from the object, tree or stone, the man or animal or social event. He does not keep it at a distance.* ” “...*the African...reacts more faithfully to the stimulus of the object. He is wedded to its rhythm.* ”

—Leopold Senghor, Prose and Poetry

The objects that are incorporated into Saunders' paintings are treated with the same respect that he pays to children's drawings. Handmade signs and doors find their way into his work in ways that make them balanced and beautiful. The object is not objectified. His work holds the ability to give the viewer a gateway into understanding the objects and detritus of the urban environment in a new way. Viewers who are preconditioned by the standard narrow Eurocentric focus of modern art history will want to associate this part of Saunders' work with Robert Rauschenberg and what is called "assemblage." However, Saunders' approach to incorporating the object shares a kinship with vernacular Black art in the southern United States and other parts of the African Diaspora. Art historian Thomas McEvilly speculates in an essay on Thornton Dial, a Black folk artist, that Rauschenberg may have been heavily influenced by southern Black folk assemblages found near Port Arthur, Texas where he grew up. In addition, Rauschenberg doesn't draw, and it is Saunders' exceptional

facility with *drawing* that makes for the poetic call-and-response between objects and handmade marks in his paintings. Enough cannot be said about Saunders' mastery as a draughtsman. The line quality of his drawings marries the economy of Matisse with the precision and delicacy of nineteenth-century French painter Jean Francois Dominique Ingres. In addition to that, the drawings are oftentimes done with white pencil on a black surface, carrying a mystic spiritual quality that brings to mind the sacred ground drawings of Haitian Vodou ceremonies called "veves."

The graffitilike marks and urban objects found in his paintings beg comparisons to the much more widely celebrated Jean Michel Basquiat. Saunders of course predates Basquiat by a decade or more in using these elements. It turns out that Basquiat was aware of Saunders' work and wanted to meet him but passed away before the meeting could take place. It is curious how there are no comprehensive books on Saunders' work and, despite major showings of his current work, no major retrospectives. He has survived his contemporary, the painter Bob Thompson, who died of a heroin overdose in 1966, and the much younger Basquiat. But Basquiat and Thompson have much more malleable histories because they aren't here to offer corrective commentary. It seems that the status quo art establishment finds Saunders—a successful, world-traveled artist; a "teetotaler" who does no drugs—more of a threat because he has the acumen and sobriety to control how he is portrayed in the public eye. Or perhaps, it is the paintings that serenely proclaim that Saunders carries knowledge of Western modern art history and a myriad of other vernacular art-making traditions that make it a challenging proposition to canonize him in "official" art histories through retrospectives. His paintings demonstrate a pluralist approach to creating art that exposes the Eurocentric hierarchies of "high" and "low" art worlds. ♡

Wedding, 2001

Mixed media on board

100 x 80 inches



The Color of Black, 2003

Acrylic, color pencil, paintstick, collage on plywood

96 x 49 1/2 inches