

Octavia in Gold: a work by Stacy Lynn Waddell

Tell Stories Filled with Facts. Make People Touch and Taste and KNOW. Make people FEEL! FEEL! FEEL! -Octavia Butler

The work of Stacy Lynn Waddell is rooted in ideas of transfiguration and alchemy, presenting a view that certain objects, images and words hold powerful and sacred potential to move and transform us. Her work illuminates the everyday and the familiar and challenges the viewer to observe even the most unremarkable situations with an artist's keen eye for the potential of growth and change.

Waddell is drawn to reactive processes that originate in analog photography, generating images with mercurial combinations of ink, paint, lasers, brands, gold, silver, smoke and fire. By creating work with beautiful and tactile surfaces, she entices viewers to look more closely and invites a deeper engagement with the underlying content. Waddell's material resourcefulness is shaped by a rural childhood in North Carolina and her experience as a high school art teacher, whereby nothing goes to waste and remnants of projects become the basis for new conceptions.

Whereas Waddell's thoughtful use of materials suggest a pragmatism, her inventive techniques take on a transcendent nature, resembling acts of faith and devotion that instill her work with a sense of the extraordinary. Many recent works are covered entirely in gold leaf, with contrasting gradients of gold delineating her subject matter. These gilded works, usually depicting figures or text, evoke wide-ranging artistic traditions such as Byzantine icons, Klimt's golden period, or Warhol's *Gold Book*. Waddell is astutely aware of gold's complex historical and cultural significance and its association with value and luxury; she cites this as a reason that she resisted the material for a long time, despite the impulse to work with it early on. However, after years of working in sepia and matte tones, the shimmer of gold leaf was an attractive alternative. She challenged herself to confront the historical and cultural associations of gold within the work.

The use of gold coinage in monetary systems dates as early as 600 B.C.E in Lydia, present-day Turkey, and largely persists through to the recent present. In the U.S., several acts to standardize gold's value were passed in the 19th century: the "Coinage Act of 1834" founded the *de facto* gold standard (a practice that was followed by most of the U.S.'s trading partners by the 1870s) and later formalized as the *de jure* gold standard in 1900. Globally, the 19th century marked a period of unprecedented economic growth, albeit disproportionately distributed, and the relatively free trade of goods, labor, and capital. Effectively, the gold standard contributed to the stabilization of the economic systems that supported the exploitative practices of globalization, industrialization, and free-market capitalism. In the U.S., this period coincided with the California Gold Rush, a movement that had severe consequences for the natural ecosystems of the Pacific Coast and for indigenous peoples living on California lands. These were also years in which the US transformed from a colonial economy to one of the biggest industrial powers in the world, largely because of slavery.



While the associations of gold with monetary systems are deeply engrained in our collective consciousness, Waddell points out that when viewed through a scientific lens, gold is fundamentally a chemical element—atomic number 79 on the periodic table.¹ It is the most malleable of all metals, and, as noble metal, it is resistant to corrosion and oxidation in moist air. Its anticorrosive properties make it uniquely valuable to engineering projects. These properties were of great interest to ancient and medieval alchemists.

Nineteenth and Twentieth century photography was itself a form of alchemy and magic for the individuals that pioneered the medium. Waddell frequently explores the historical aspects of photography in her work, often using commonplace family photos—sourced from her family’s albums, of which she is the officially appointed archivist—or vernacular photography mined from estate sales, card shops, or the local “scraps exchanges” found in her hometown in North Carolina. Waddell also employs portraits to address social injustices and to memorialize victims of police violence, such as Walter Scott, Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown. In *Untitled (Study for E.T.)*, a photograph of Emmett Till in his casket (which headlined national newspapers following his brutal murder in Jim Crow-era Mississippi) is rendered in black and white on a subtle floral-patterned paper. In the work, Till’s face is partially obscured by reflective gold leaf. Its beauty is off-putting given the outrage the image evokes; yet ultimately, Waddell’s adornment serves to dignify the human life portrayed and to cast a reflective lens back at the viewer.

In a recent work, *The Dawn of Our Kindred Sower of Parable (for Octavia E. Butler)*, Waddell interprets an iconic portrait of famed author Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006), the first science-fiction writer to receive a prestigious MacArthur “genius” award and the first African American woman to receive widespread recognition in this genre. In her stories, Butler explores humanity’s predisposition towards oppression and violence in otherworldly depictions of alien worlds or dystopia on Earth. Whereas previously science fiction was dominated by male authors and their equally homogenous characters, Butler placed powerful black female characters at the center of her stories, creating worlds in which her protagonists were unrestrained from the sort of gender and racial biases that Butler witnessed throughout her own lifetime.

Waddell’s work firmly establishes a relationship between material, processes and subject matter. In the case of *The Dawn of Our Kindred Sower of Parable (for Octavia E. Butler)*, Waddell addresses Butler’s ongoing interest in humanity’s hierarchical tendencies. Butler believed that the development of human intelligence was driven by the desire to dominate one another.² Evolutionary theory holds that humans developed an excellent capacity to categorize and assign value—to resources, to land and to fellow humans—and to in turn administrate, subjugate and exploit in accordance with these views.³ These hierarchical systems are connected to the value assignment of inanimate objects, such as gold, that create the financial instruments and power structures that allow a select few to subjugate the many.

By making Octavia Butler a focal point for her work, Waddell not only draws attention to the complex historical and social themes that Butler herself sought to reveal, but finds an artistic muse in Butler and her exceptional self-resolve and devotion to envisioning radically equitable worlds. Waddell effectively channels a message of strength, hope and radiance, and ultimately, inspiration.

Candice Madey, October 2020

¹ Stacy Lynn Waddell. Personal interview. 25 February 2020.

² Butler, Octavia. “NPR Essay - UN Racism Conference.” *United Nations Conference Against Racism* in Durban, South Africa, NPR, 1 September 2001. <https://legacy.npr.org/programs/specials/racism/010830.octaviabutleressay.html>

³ Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. New York, HarperCollins Publishers, February 10, 2015.