**“Tracing the History of the Delta Blues”**

As presented by Millsaps College Professor Sandra Murchison

“Are You Board, Let’s Get Smart” research methods group

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The idea of a geographic location, a personal identification with that place and a sense of one’s identity coming from those elemental influences is not new. What is new, however, is how all three of those factors inform the art of Millsaps Professor Sandra Murchison.

On Wednesday, October 12, 2011, our group “Are You Board Let’s Get Smart” attended our off-campus research presentation at Millsaps College. Our team member Symone Davis, graciously researched off site opportunities and arranged for us to travel together to attend the presentation. “Tracing the History of the Delta Blues” by Murchison, an Associate professor and the chair of the art department at Millsaps College, sought to honor the trail vis-a-vis a series of mixed media prints and encaustic paintings. Murchison’s research is the product of a grant from the Mississippi Humanities Council which made time for the study possible.

This professor did not discuss her research methodology noting the work in this project was largely subjective. Her historical research regarding the subjects denoted in each of the markers along the trail was largely qualitative and consisted of literature research and a few first person interviews. Murchison presented her slides in a powerpoint and sat in front of the screen on a stool (she gave birth to twins a mere three weeks later) while talking about each of the works represented. Her thesis sought to explore whether ‘place’ primarily influenced an art form and if that representation of art could be individually interpreted and understood by others not necessarily from the Deep South, let alone people from another country or culture.

I believe we all initially thought we’d be listening to snippets of blues music and discussing the influences of individual blues musicians impact on the genre in general. Walking into the lecture, the actual printed program should have given us a clue as to how different her thoughts and the visual findings represented in her multi-media pieces would be from our expectations. “Tracing the Delta Blues” is actually a metaphor for how she ‘traced’ the overlays, rubbings and pieces of collage, as well as the information obtained from her research onto the final renderings.

The mood in the lecture hall was very serious and attended by what appeared to be other professors and academicians. Clearly, it was more of a scholarly peer review than a concert or art exhibition. We were the only group of students, and of our group, I was the only Caucasian and the only one who seemed to be anywhere near the median age of the crowd in attendance. While one does not have to come from the same culture in order to appreciate an artistic expression, I wondered how Murchison (who is young, white and from the North) would be able to adequately convey a real sense of understanding about the blues and the places from which it continues to emanate.

The entire lecture was well organized, researched, scripted and presented. While she did not present numbers or detail what went into supporting her thesis, the pieces (and her descriptions of them) clearly depicted what she was trying to prove. The audiovisual aspects of this program were good, however, it was a bit dry and I would have loved for her to use audio clips from featured musicians, as well as video of the interviews, to hear and see how particular lyrics or information was portrayed in her art.

There wasn’t a musical note in the entire lecture, yet you could hear those mournful sounds as Murchison took us on a tour, stop-by-stop, of the blues trail. Each of her pieces used a repetition of similar treatment utilizing materials found on location; from rubbings of the sign itself, to the outlying physical surroundings, overlays rendering the nearby plants and weeds and sometimes a collage assemblage from litter found on the ground at each particular vista. The resulting work is what Murchison refers to as a ‘collograph’ or a piece comprised of canvas interfaced with rubbings, oil, wax and sewing.

We interviewed Professor Murchison following her lecture and surprisingly, each member of the group developed incredibly similar impressions of the artist and her work.

“The speaker showed great knowledge about the Delta despite being from a different part of the country. It was inspiring to see how well she incorporated her own art into the blues collection. Being from a big city, personally, I enjoyed hearing how the much the delta and the blues inspired a lot of the music I listen to today.”

– **Symone Davis**

“I thought the speaker was great. I really enjoyed the idea of her relating her love of art to the history of the Mississippi blues. The title of the subject made perfect sense after listening to the speech. I thought the collaboration of art and history was wonderful.” - **Aden Brown**

“We started out not wanting to go. We’d just came back from a long weekend, thought it was going to be dry and boring, tired, getting stressed over upcoming tests and so on. I walked in and said to myself as I looked at the slides, “Wow”! I became interested to get her take on the blues, she was very humble and she presented her work in ways you could never imagine. I didn’t think art could be like that, it was very real and you could feel the passion and the emotion in her work. I realized you could take the scenery, pieces from the site and make it into something incredible. The birthplace of BB King was really cool, you really felt like you could’ve been there and were actually on the trail.

I did think there was some irony in the fact there weren’t any other students attending and very few African Americans.

You learn life through experience and pain is part of that…that’s the relatable part of the ‘blues’ for people from all different countries, backgrounds and walks of life. I’ve never been to the Delta and it actually made me want to check it out. Murchison says ‘this is a prize’, I agree. I didn’t even know this opportunity in the world of tourism existed. Mississippi has an amazing opportunity to take advantage of this lonesome, beautiful scenery!

I’m an only child…I’ve seen my Mom struggle (they are divorced), she’s pushed me to try different things and to seek out opportunities. Murchison talked about her struggles and it was motivating to hear how she overcame them.”

- **Maurice Richardson**

“I found that the Mississippi blues history behind her paintings co-existed with her representations of the geography depicted in the art. Going to the lecture, I thought we’d hear music instead it was about those places along the trial right down the plants and the botany surrounding each sign on the route. I got the jist of what her research entailed and found it to be amazing. First and foremost, I never thought about how circumstances, physical place and visual influences might affect the musical perspective of a musician. I am not from the South originally so, I came away with a much better grasp of what it must have been like to live in the Delta in those times. True, poverty, and difficult social conditions are what we know about the lonesome music we associate with ‘the blues’ but the landscapes are also beautiful and that is a part of the music as well. Murchison’s art brings that distinction to the surface.”

- **Eric Davis**

Classmate Brittney Brown interviewed Murchison post-lecture, in fact, the day before the artist gave birth to twin boys!

“Murchison paintings were incredible and all of her work has a meaning to it. Some of Murchison paintings include the W.G.R.M Radio, The Riverside Hotel, Elks Hart lodge, and Crossroads. You can see these pictures and more on our group website [www.areyouboardletsgetsmart.weebly.com](http://www.areyouboardletsgetsmart.weebly.com) and click on off- site presentations. In some of her work, she shows images of disposable products which she feels that represents her struggles she went through in life. Murchison describes her encaustic paintings as gathering and observing imagery. The Rosedale painting was Murchison first wall portrait she created. The Rosedale painting has wax, oil, and collage on canvas, but most of her encaustic wall paintings contain wax, oil, and collage on canvas. Murchison’s drawing of the well-know songwriter and blue’s star, B.B. King birthplace is one of her well-know acrylic paint & pencil drawings. The clues of her work dealt with the pain her family inflicted on her. In turn, the pain caused her to find a joy in life which would be drawing. The question we asked professor Murchison, Why did you c choose the blues? She responded, “To promote the state of Mississippi and recognize a pride, also to bring people from different states to come to Mississippi and visit the Mississippi Blues Trail.”

**Sandra Murchison Interview**

**Q:** What was your inspiration for your Delta Blues Trail artwork?

**A:** Out of curiosity, I wanted to know more about the state I’ve been living in for 13 years and how the state wanted to promote itself and what it has turned its back on, historically, for all these years. Now, it’s being showcased as rare and special. I couldn’t help but wonder how it’s played out. It was really for cultural purposes. It was a curious thing. I also became interested in the Delta Blues because of my interest in the historic markers. It tells the reality that people are deemed worthy of making history or not.

**Q:** What inspired you to become an artist?

**A:** It was always there. I always loved drawing and painted. I began taking more classes as I got older. I knew I would always be drawing and painting. I didn’t know the career I would make out of it until later. In my early college years, I realized I wanted to teach students art because I knew I was very passionate about it.

“Mrs. Murchison was very nice about talking with me about her passion for art and her fascination with the Mississippi Delta Blues. Just from the brief conversation I had with her, I could tell that art was something that she loved. I actually enjoyed talking with her. Her kindness felt sincere. I didn’t really know what kind of response I would get from her because I know that this week was kind of hectic for her and she was going to be having twins the next day. All in all, the Mississippi Delta Blues inspired her because of the history it held and she became so interested in it that she wanted to display that in her artwork.”

- **Brittney Brown**

During the lecture, Murchison said her work investigates the “disintegration of cultural memory” and a “degradation of cultural identity over time”. This professor could have easily used information derived from a series of interview groups comprised of different cultures to provide empirical data as to whether their experiences with difficulty or with poverty have personally informed their own world view.

Nonetheless, Murchison proved her point albeit subjectively. We felt that indeed the researcher proved beyond a doubt how ‘place’ can shape art on many, many levels. Her hope is that viewers will be inspired to create their own journey by her stops along a trail. *Each of us* is an artist. *Each of us* has a story to tell in a medium all our own.

Every stop along the blues trail is situated close to railroad tracks as blues musicians tended to travel by train. There is irony in that, no matter how far each of us may go in life, we can never really get away from the ‘tracks’ of our own individual pain and our experiences. To travel and to journey may take on a more profound value by transforming pain into art, no matter what the form! We all have an opportunity to use the poorest, the most desolate of experiences and transform them. Collectively and individually, a remembrance of ‘place’, can serve to weave a richer, more intricate tapestry in the human conversation called ‘life’.