

# When I Breathe There is a Space

*An Interview with Buseje Bailey*

BY SUSAN DOUGLAS



**T**his interview was conducted in Ottawa during Buseje Bailey's tenure as artist-in-residence for Houseworks, a women-run and operated gallery-café. Ms. Bailey was part of an exhibition called *Black Wimmin When and Where We Enter* — including Clair Carew, Grace Channer, Dzian, Foluke Olubajo, Marie-Avrille Jordan, Khadeja, Kim McNeilly, Barbara Prezeau, Suli Williams and Winsom. The show was organized by the *Diasporic African Women's Art Collective (DAWA)*, and travelled across the country.

*Susan Douglas:* Your piece in *Black Wimmin* deals with your relationship to your mother and to your grandmother.

*Buseje Bailey:* Yes, I reach back to the two women in my history who I can readily relate to, my mother and, through my mother, my grandmother. To me, the women in our history are a very important aspect of our survival. They are the keepers of the traditions, they are the keepers of the culture, they are the ones who teach the tradition, who pass on the culture to the next generation. My daughter is also included in the piece. There are three generations of women — six images — my grandmother and her

child, my mother and her child, and me and my child.

*Susan:* Why did you make it in a box?

*Buseje:* It's in a box because a box can be interpreted on many levels. It could be a coffin in which to bury the dead or in which to bury the past. Or it could be a treasure chest where you keep your valuables. Being a Black woman and from a Black race, the African race, I find that a lot of our history is taken over from us. Putting it in a box is like saying, "Here, I am reclaiming and treasuring that part of my history. I am reclaiming that which you have taken from us. I'm putting it away here for safekeeping." Like saying that, "I'll never let you do that again." Which is also reclaiming what for me is a treasure — my identity as an African woman.

*Susan:* A lot of women use box imagery, sometimes it becomes a Pandora's box.

*Buseje:* Yes, that's exactly what I was thinking of when I did that, so to open it is, for me, like you don't know what you are going

to find. It could be treasure or you could be opening a whole mess of trouble for yourself. Let me see what I have to look forward to.

*Susan:* Who is your audience? Who are you looking to address?

*Buseje:* I'm looking to address all disenfranchised people who wish to listen to what I have to say or who're looking for a voice or for a medium to express their lack of representation in this society.

*Susan:* You have also spoken of the children you want to reach.

*Buseje:* Yes, part of my audience is young Black children. When I went through school I could not find anything in the history books to say that Black people live, exist, and work here. There is nothing about Black artists living or working in Canada. My child went through school and there was no such thing either. So I want to make sure that my grandchild and my great grandchildren will have access to information about Black artists in Canadian society. I've seen Black youths when they come to see my work on exhibition. They readily identify with the Black faces staring back at them. These are role models. They are saying, "Yes, people are writing about us, we are important, there is some reason to continue to live."

*Susan:* Is there a personal philosophy behind your work?

*Buseje:* My personal philosophy is to use my art politically, to make positive images, to represent us as we are in this society. We live, breathe and die. We work in the society. We are no better off, no worse off than any other human person. I tend to use my art to say that we are here, and we intend to stay here. We live here, we work here and we die here.

*Susan:* We were talking about the white male myth of transcendence and universality — art should go on and it shouldn't have any reference to the immediate present.

*Buseje:* Art should go on, art will go on. If I should die, today, tomorrow, there will be other Black artists to carry on what I am doing. The fact that we are not recorded or we are not represented in the society, that is a concern to me. But it is not just a concern to me as an individual Black artist. I am concerned because of our blackness and the fact that the society does not represent us and does not try to portray us in a positive way. What I would like to see is for us to be represented as role models, to be accessible to our young as they grow up and present to them positive images of themselves, of ourselves. But the idea that we — I — should go to any extreme levels to preserve my work, that is not my concern. That should be the concern of art historians.

*Susan:* Is the art of the past dead art, then?

*Buseje:* I find that, for me, art is immediate, it is happening, it is now, it is cultural. If the art is good, it will live on. Even though history has taught us that they obliterate our history, our name, our languages, the art lives on with us, it transcends many years of obliteration and it continues with me and it continues with Black youths. In the show *Black Wimmin When and Where We*

*Enter*, when people walked in and took a look at the work and realized that they had been transported to an otherness, to another place, it was quite evident that we'd made the connection between our past history and present lives.

*Susan:* One of the most exciting things for me about the show was the diversity of the means of expression. Your work, for instance, hangs on the wall. There was fabric, sculpture, a tent. You seem to be saying that the art that Black women produce is not something that is limited to being stuck on a wall with a frame around it but rather that it refers to daily experience...

*Buseje:* ...day to day...

*Susan:* ...and it's not distinguished from life.

*Buseje:* No, art in African society is not understood to be art in a European sense. From what we know about traditional African art today, it was not something you put on a wall. I don't think they even had a word for art. Pieces that Europeans call art were made to be used in everyday events, they were quite functional. A piece of fabric, for example — though great effort went into dyeing and designing — was made in celebration of an event, the initiation of a child from one age category to the next or the anointing of one person into office or harvesting or the birth of a child. These were what these pieces — so-called art pieces — were made for. For functional day-to-day living. Some of the things we do today continue this tradition. To illustrate the point, one of the events we celebrate in Canada today is the carnival, the one that takes place in Toronto in August. For a whole year a lot of the people who participate put their efforts into designing and making their costumes just for that day — and after the event is over, the costumes are discarded. People collect pieces as souvenirs but the tradition is continued through making. The level of skill is developed and passed on from one generation to the next.

*Susan:* So the art that is produced is also cyclical and organic...

*Buseje:* ...it's not ...

*Susan:* ...it's not universal and transcending...

*Buseje:* ...it's universal but it's not transcending. It is transcending in the fact that it is passed on from one generation to the next but you do not lock it away in a museum to preserve it.

*Susan:* The idea of cycles is often brought up with regard to feminist aesthetics as something that is particular to women. We started off the interview talking about *Where and When We Enter* you said that you enter as a woman and as a mother. Could you relate that back to cycles?

*Buseje:* Life is ...(Something is burning in your kitchen. Do you want to turn the recorder off?)

...

*Buseje:* The universe, the earth it rotates, everything happens in cycles, the seasons... it's hard not to operate in a cycle.

*Susan:* It seems easy for men not to.

*Buseje:* (laughter) I don't know if it's easy for them, they choose not to, but everything happens in a cycle. We do not live forever. People who wish to live forever try to get away from cycles but we live, we give birth, we die. The new child comes up, it lives, reproduces itself and dies. The season does the same thing, Everything is cyclical.

*Susan:* How is the experience of mothering tied to your creativity? Or is it?

*Buseje:* I have always been an artist, I've always been drawing. Even as a little child when I did not understand anything else I was drawing, it is something that happened to me naturally — the curiosity of making an image as opposed to transposing or transcribing figures. Also I was a mother at a very, very early age so that is part of my early experience, it became part of my creativity. My child was an important part of that development and a very important part of my choices. It forced me to make certain choices in terms of what I do and how I do what I do.

*Susan:* Has it formed your work in a specific way?

*Buseje:* Though I sometimes try to get away from it consciously I find that the mothering experience is a very important part of my work. I don't even try to hide it anymore. I just use it as an element of creating, as a starting point or as a point to get away from. I use it, it is there. And I don't apologize for it.

*Susan:* What you are saying suggests that you were at some point apologizing for it.

*Buseje:* Well, it was pointed out to me by a couple of young men when I was trying to apply for funding that the funding bodies might frown upon it or not find it to be terribly sophisticated. And I say, "I don't care, that is where I work from and if they choose to deny me funding for that let them do that but I will not stifle what I do or hide it in any way." I'm a woman, I am a mother and I will not pretend that's not where I am.

*Susan:* Is your experience common to other women?

*Buseje:* I don't see my experience as being exclusive at all. Where my experience is different is from a class basis in terms of finances and also from a racial point of view. It is hard for me and for many Black women to go out there daily and deal with racism, deal with being denied a job, with being pushed around. And then you have to pick yourself up and go home and encourage your Black child to smile, to go on, to have goals, to have dreams because there is a reason to go on and something out there to look forward to. The most difficult part of being a Black mother is that you have to provide nurturing and caring and inspiration for your child when you can't find any out there for yourself. Not necessarily inspiration but reason to go on, reason to believe that the world and things are going to change and be better for him or her when they grow up.

*Susan:* What about creating a space of your own? Does this happen because of marginalization and invisibility?

*Buseje:* If you are not visible then there is no margin. People who talk about marginality are already in the society and a part of the

society to some degree. So there is a margin for them. But when you are invisible and they can't see you, then they can't expect you to make way, and they do not create a margin for you, there is just this big void that you dropped off into. How you create a space is that you don't wait for people to create space for you, you don't wait for them to create a place so you can jump in and say, "This is the margin, that is the society and this is the margin." What you do is you start to push people over to make space and to make room for yourself. Saying, "Hey, I'm here! You are standing on me! Get off me!" And you make room for yourself.

*Susan:* Is your art a way of pushing back the boundaries and making space for yourself?

*Buseje:* I find empty spaces in my life. I find space to breathe. Whenever there is space to breathe, then that's where I create art. Because I have been able to say to myself: "I'm going to make art and I'm not going to wait for a space," people are starting to hear about me, or they are hearing me make noise. So some people have asked me to do work for them to deal with specific issues in terms of racism or race problems, and I breathe. When I breathe, there is a space. Under my ribs someplace. So I make room there.

## BERNADETTE RULE

### Cut Flowers for Linda

A wasting disease sawed slowly at her connections,  
creating an undeserved arrangement of empty pews  
around her coffin, where cut flowers assaulted  
the few mourners' composure.

Prayers for the quick and the dead  
knock against the walls of the hollow funeral parlor.  
Grief is not silent, only inarticulate.  
And only funerals occupy the funeral home.  
The dead are absent.

Back at the house, sandwiches and cakes  
have been formally arranged on the good table.  
But her children lean against stove or sink,  
pour themselves water glasses full of gin  
and begin the vigil in their hearts' chambers  
where she is safely interred.

Here, finally,  
is the resurrection and the life.  
Here, where clock and calendar are useless,  
Martha makes her candy yet and scolds for muddy boots,  
salts the eternal rabbit on the draining board  
and laughs with her sister far into Christmas night,  
leaning against the stove with a glass of gin.