

FAMILY, IDENTITY & CULTURE



PAINTINGS BY JOHN HUNTER

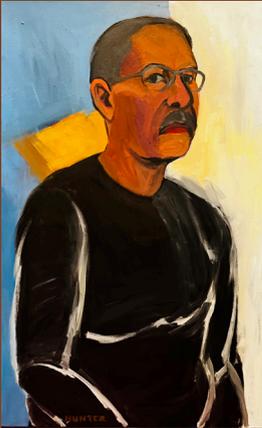
May 30 – August 8, 2024



Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College (CUNY)

*Image: 'Constant Gardener' by John Hunter | 2013 | Oil on canvas | Collection Godwin-Ternbach Museum

JOHN HUNTER



John Hunter (American, born 1942) is a Renaissance scholar, curator, author, and a painter of great sensitivity and undeniable skill. An early interest in architecture, and work as a draftsman led him to study at Wayne State University and University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, respectively earning master's degrees in art and art history. Hunter received a Doctor of Philosophy degree in 1983, and later studied at the Art Students League of New York. Hunter was a research fellow and museum curator at The Detroit Institute of Arts from 1971 – 1979, and a professor of Italian Renaissance art history at Cleveland State University from 1998 – 2003 and served as head of the Art Department and Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Social Sciences. In 2003, Hunter retired and moved to New York to live with his husband, Dr. Harold Kooden, where he acquired a studio and began painting again. Hunter has had periodic studio exhibitions from 2007 through 2021; and at Metropolitan Theatre; Carter Burden Gallery, NY; Art Gallery, Wayne State University, and SAGE Harlem Center. Hunter's continuing interests in education extend to a scholarship he is endowing to support students in sub-Saharan Africa in the arts and humanities at University of Michigan. Since 2019, he has published six novels. John Hunter is based in Oaxaca, Mexico, and New York City.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Family, Identity, & Culture celebrates the art of noted painter John Hunter, in a retrospective spanning two decades of artistic inquiry focusing on race, gender, and family history. This is the first museum retrospective of works on canvas and paper framed by Hunter's identity as a gay man of African American descent. Lyrical oil paintings and works on paper deal with themes simultaneously personal and universal in works that often mourn or celebrate life's central issues. Hunter's humanistic approach, of a Renaissance scholar and curator, author and artist, to paintings steeped in the history of art are informed by a unique sensibility. Family photographs, research trips to Africa, sketches of well-known works of art by Manet to Picasso, contribute to powerful paintings marked by fluid brushstrokes and a delirious use of color. One understands how an artist can absorb all the lessons of art history yet filter that knowledge through a particular lens.

Family, Identity, & Culture is divided into six themes that preoccupy John Hunter: Origins/Family, Racism/Living While Black, Africans/Ancestors, Colonialism, Familia, and Culture/Identity. As well as Hunter's own investigations into his immediate birth family, for example, his "Familia" series extends to lovers and friends in the domestic relationships of gay adulthood, born of choice, not biology. These evocative works explore the often-tenuous bonds of human relationships marked by illness, loss and the passage of time, while others suggest harmony, growth, and evolution. Hunter's seminal compositions recapture the idea that painting is still an essential mode of expression.

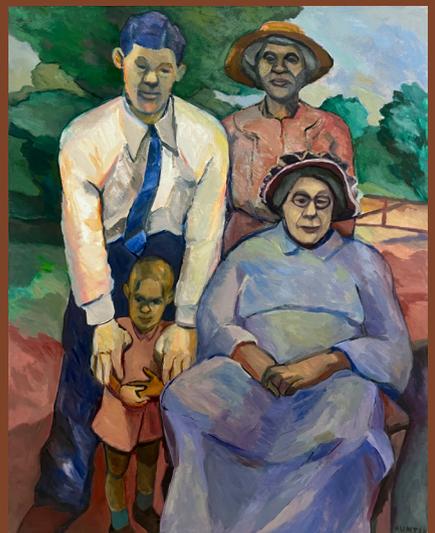


Dance in the Garden: Familia, 2008

Since I am African American, I cast my gaze in the direction of fellow people of color. This decision has determined the bulk of the painting I have done for the past twenty years culminating in the series of portraits made from photographs that I made during a visit to countries in West Africa. There was another subject, though, that I had hesitated to address—gay life. As a gay married man, I wanted to express my sexual orientation and depict the life that I had lived. This has been a driving impulse that has not only determined what I paint but how reflects the gay gaze. The *Familia* paintings, *Dance in the Garden*, and *In Hoc Signo Florebitis* all represent gay life as I've experienced it. I've discovered during the past decade that I needed to extend my interest in exploring history, being black, and gay to writing. What began as a peripheral interest has become a major pre-occupation.

ORIGINS | FAMILY

I began to realize that I needed to find subjects that were both more personal and more challenging to paint. I decided to use photographs. I wanted to paint my family but, unfortunately, they were, every one of them, deceased. I only had photographs, so I used them and created a series of paintings that gave me great satisfaction and brought my family back to life virtually and visually.



Four Generations (Montezuma), 2007

FAMILIA



In Hoc Signo Florebis (Spring) The Four Seasons, 2014

In the series of paintings I've called *Familia*, I tried to find ways to express gay bonding in our created families in visual, non-sexual terms. It was a challenge. Much of the gay art that I've seen leans heavily on sexual content which is fine and accurate but gay life is about more than sex. It is about all of the things that folks experience in non-gay life. However, how does one depict the particularity of gay bonding?

The paintings concern different subjects, but they all relate to family (*Familia*). *Picnic* presents a family of young, unrelated men who are mothered by a female friend. *The Boat* shows a man alone on the sea who has lost everything, including his family, and is searching for a new family. *Witnesses* represents two women who belong to a family of 'sisters.' *Transit* shows two types of families, one of persons related by blood and one related by race. *Huevos* and *In Hoc Signo Florebis* "By this sign we will flourish" are families of men related by sexual orientation.

RACISM | LIVING WHILE BLACK

“ The shocking change in style represented by “*Darius Must Die*,” “*Joel in the Traffic Stop*,” “*Reynaldo Meets the Man*,” and “*Kimani Had a Gun*” is directly connected to the narratives an theme of these paintings. The four paintings, not originally intended as a series, depict the artist vision of separate confrontations between Black men and the police in New York City. The abstract and angular compositions, and the violence of the brushwork, reflect the brutality of the subject matter. The influence of the German artist Max Beckmann is clear. Beckmann’s art was reaction to the violence and bitter political division of World War I. It is an apt these four paintings. ”

Jean M. Eggen,
Distinguished Professor Emerita of Law



Kimani Had a Gun, 2012

AFRICANS | ANCESTORS



Tchare Village, Togo, 2019



Abomey 2, Benin, 2019

I've learned by genetic testing, that my family descended from enslaved people from West Africa. This series of portraits from 2018 - 2020 are based on photographs I made during a visit to the West African countries of Ghana, Togo, and Benin. The names of the individuals are unknown except for Ben, Lake Bosumtwi, Ghana, who was my husband's and my driver during our car trip. The titles of the paintings identify the villages or towns and countries where these individuals lived. *Togo Zangbeto*, and *Dassa Zuomé 1*, Benin, represent people at festivals. The group portraits are of adults and children who wanted to be photographed: Tchare Village, Togo, and Davedi Village, Togo. The other paintings are individual portraits of a hotel servant; a village woman; a potter; a tour guide; and a hotelier.

CULTURE | IDENTITY

I'm impressed by gardens and gardeners. Once a gardener myself, I loved exploring the immense variety of plant material that nature provides and then selecting, planting, and observing trees, shrubs, and flowers grow, change, and express their biologically and environmentally determined selves.

Although I had painted still life of flowers and vegetables as well as parks and landscapes, I wanted to show gardeners in their intimate relationship with the plant world. This homage to gardening and gardeners features four specific persons: my paternal grandmother, Ethel Robinson Hunter, who grew in Detroit the first garden I knew; my husband Harold Kooden who created a rooftop garden for our apartment in New York City; my friend Charlene Gawa who worked in a public garden in Los Angeles; and an unknown Japanese woman on an island in Hiroshima Bay, Japan, who spontaneously invited Harold and me to visit her garden. The painting, *Dance in the Garden*, captures the joy Harold and I felt in his garden and the bemused interest of our dog, Ketut.



Regatta I, 2015

COLONIALISM



Go Ho Me, 2016

We are so gratified to share the work of John Hunter this summer at the Godwin-Ternbach Museum (GTM). This exhibition would not have been possible without the following lenders to the exhibition including Florence Levitt, Madeline Nomberg, and Jerri Sherman, and a donation from Frank Stark. John Hunter's colleague and friend, Jean M. Eggen, has provided an insightful essay on his work.

Dr. John Hunter and his husband, Dr. Harold D. Kooden, have designated most of the works in the exhibition as donations to the museum, thus enriching our holdings of BIPOC artists. Certain selected works from this collection are to be shared with entities on campus as a lasting endowment to inspire students, staff, and faculty for years to come.

We are thankful to Stephanie Lee for her masterful design compositions and operations support, Arnold Kanarvogel for his stellar exhibition design and exhibition installation, and Vansh Sharma for website maintenance and design.

Maria C. Pio and Louise Weinberg, GTM Co-Directors



www.gtmuseum.org

Godwin-Ternbach Museum | 405 Klapper Hall, 65-30 Kissena Blvd. Flushing, NY 11367
718.997.4747 | gtmuseum@qc.cuny.edu



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QUEENS
COLLEGE



Generous support for "Family, Identity, & Culture: Paintings by John Hunter" has been provided by Dr. John Hunter and Dr. Harold D. Kooden. Additional funding has been provided by the Friends of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Kupferberg Center for the Arts, and Queens College, CUNY. Education programs and initiatives are supported in part by the Milton & Sally Avery Arts Foundation, and public funds from the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with NY City Council. Additional support for the care of the collection is made possible by the Pine Tree Foundation.