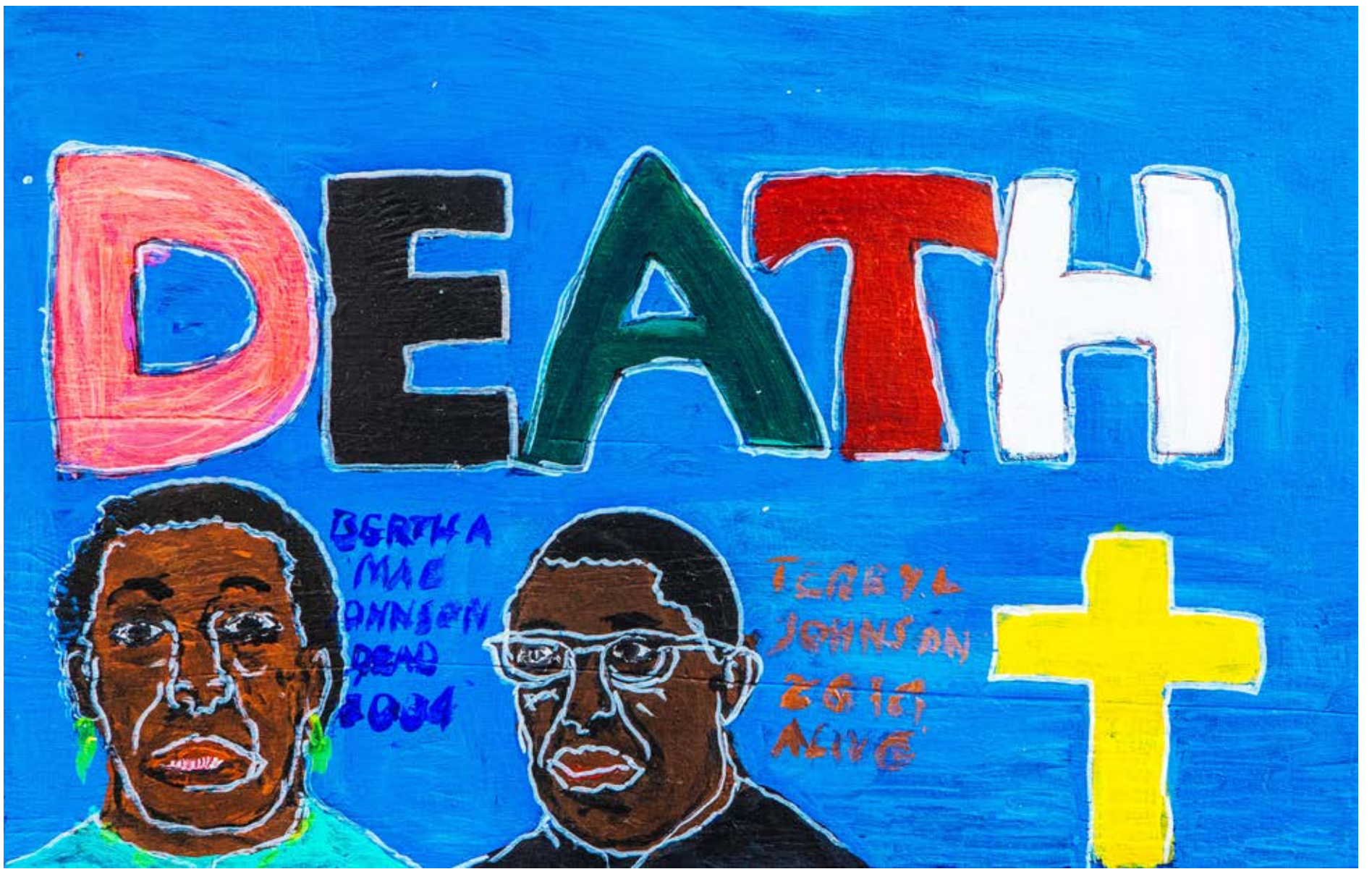




SHINING LIKE THE SUN

A photographic memory infuses the brilliant art of Perry Johnson | BY RACHAEL CARNES

Eugene artist Perry Johnson has a gift. His work is inquisitive and multidimensional, at once rooted in a folk art tradition while branching out towards something more visceral and visionary. Employing color, shape and text, Johnson’s pieces are composed, developed and hauntingly autobiographical.

When I first meet Johnson, he’s in the art studio at the Oregon Supported Living Program’s Arts and Culture Program, an old brick building on Lincoln Street by the train tracks where Johnson accesses free art classes every day the studio’s open.

He’s working on a drawing of a photo from a magazine, of a snake wrapped around a man’s neck.

“Python,” Johnson tells me, pointing to the animal.

A few minutes later, we’re sitting in the center’s cheery conference room.

Mija Andrade, the program’s director, says artists like Johnson, who come to the center for classes, including drawing, painting, photography and dance, are encouraged to explore new ideas in arts-making, with the supportive encouragement of staff and volunteers.

The OSLP Arts & Culture Program breaks down barriers to participation in the arts for people of all abilities and builds bridges to a more diverse and inclusive community, Andrade explains. They offer classes, workshops, exhibitions, mentorships and field trips for participants to other galleries and community organizations.

I ask Johnson what his favorite subjects are to make art about. “Paint on wood. Lots of people, and the whole body,” he says. “Paint houses, buildings, paint the city, animals.”

“He mostly likes to do portraits,” Andrade adds. “Do you think you might draw an animal today, Perry?”

“Snake,” Johnson says softly, as if to remind her of his

“Pearl Buck, Wilson, Sheldon, LCC,” adding, “liked Sheldon — graduate ’68.”

Founded in 1953, the Pearl Buck Center still supports people with disabilities and their families, helping them achieve their goals. Wilson Middle School, built in 1924 at 14th and Jefferson, later became Lincoln Elementary and was eventually closed and sold by the school district, becoming the Lincoln Condominiums of today.

Most of us are used to these kinds of transitions, as places fade, emerging as new structures or landmarks, or rebuilt unrecognizably. Few of us, however, can hang onto the delicate, ephemeral shifts in shape, color and light, all the fragile nuances that define a continually changing community. But Johnson can.

Johnson’s artistic work follows the evolution of Eugene architecture, often depicting structures, like his childhood home, as they appeared decades ago, compared to now. His photographic memory traces details, like the home’s paint color, the type of vegetation — small things most of us wouldn’t notice or remember — but within these side-by-side comparisons is something more, as if the past is thrust into the present, even the future, through

Johnson’s prescient eye.

Growing up, Johnson’s mother, a common subject in his art, worked as a housekeeper for a Eugene family. Johnson doesn’t speak much, or make much art, about his dad.

Johnson tells me proudly of his brothers: Terry, who also lives in Eugene, and Jerry.



current project.

Johnson, 66, was born and raised in Eugene, one of 11 children. He was also one of triplets — Terry and Jerry are his brothers — and there were complications at birth, causing some developmental disabilities.

When asked about home and school, Johnson ticks off,