

# Thelma Johnson Streat 1912—1959

A very influential multidisciplinary painter, Thelma Johnson Streat combined fine arts with dance and performance. Born in Yakima, Wash., in 1912, Streat moved to Portland, Ore., as a child and studied at the prestigious Portland Museum Art School in the 1930s.

During the early parts of that decade, Streat made a name for herself with her canvas paintings, particularly “Rabbit Man,” which was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York during the early 1940s.

But soon Streat became even more famous for her murals. A Works Progress Administration artist during the Great Depression, producing canvases about African-American history and civil rights, Streat’s mural, “Death of a Black Sailor,” painted in 1943, reportedly earned her threats from the Ku Klux Klan.

One of the lucky few painters who achieved renown in her lifetime, Streat traveled all over the world and even worked with Mexican art icon Diego Rivera; Rivera’s style influenced Streat’s own, as did her study of indigenous art of the Haida Indians.

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In 1945 Streat relocated to Chicago where she taught art to children; she also had several major shows in Chicago and New York during this time. By 1947, she was one of only a handful of

Black artists with major New York art openings under her belt.

Her work was collected by Queen Elizabeth of England, Diego Rivera, Eleanor Roosevelt, Fanny Brice, and many rich and influential collectors all over the world.

She died at age 47, in Hawaii, where she and her second husband, Edgar Klein, established a children’s art project working with community youth.

Today you can see examples of Streat’s paintings at the Tyler Fine Art Gallery in St. Louis, Mo., including her pencil and ink portrait of opera singer Marian Anderson, the 1938 pastel on paper portrait of Thelma Bushnell, her pencil and ink drawings for the mural series “The Negro and Professional Life,” and many Diego Rivera inspired paintings depicting Northwest and Hawaiian indigenous cultural figures.



Thelma Johnson Streat

# Books: ‘American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights’



By Kam Williams  
Special To *The Skanner News*

“Whiteness... derives power from its status as an unmarked category... [It] never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations. This silence about itself is... the primary prerogative of whiteness, at once its grand scheme and deep cover.

Childhood, I argue throughout this book, is a primary material in the historical construction of that cover. Childhood innocence—itself raced white—secured the unmarked status of whiteness, and the power derived from that status.”

— Excerpted from the Introduction (page 7-8)

Why is innocence automatically attributed to white children in the U.S. while black kids are just as easily presumed to be malevolent, almost as if good and evil are color-coded in each group’s DNA? That is the question explored by Robin Bernstein in “Racial Innocence,” an annotated, historical opus in search of an explanation for the lingering discrepancy.

The author, a Professor of African-American and Women’s Studies at Harvard University, blames a deep-rooted racism which can be traced all the way back to slavery. She suggests that the divergent attitude about black

and white youngsters has been codified by the culture as reflected in literature, art, music and minstrelsy.

For example, in a discussion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, published in 1852, she points out how the Caucasian heroine Eva was the “emblematic child-angel,” pale, pious and cloaked in innocence. By contrast, her black counterpart, Topsy, was portrayed as the polar opposite, as having been “hardened and made wicked” by slavery.

Sadly, such characterizations survived into the 20th Century, as typified in film by the recently-deceased Shirley Temple, the bright-eyed, dimpled icon who often played the naive waif opposite relatively-worldly wise black children and adults alike, most notably, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. In 2006, Dakota Fanning, the reign-

ing blonde child actress, was asked to present Temple with a Lifetime Achievement Award as the screen legend’s heir apparent.

It is important to note that Dakota carried a Shirley Temple doll she inherited onstage, stating, “My mom loved her, I love her, and I know someday, my daughter will, too.” The problem is that the effort to maintain the sentimental image of the chaste white child continues to come at the expense of black ones who end-up subtly portrayed as deserving of suspicion, marginalization, criminal-

ization and second-class status. Telling traditional depictions of black and white tykes serving as chilling proof that the post-racial utopia is yet to be realized in American society.

BOOK REVIEW  
Racial Innocence:  
Performing American Childhood  
from Slavery to Civil Rights  
by Robin Bernstein

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