

THE VISUAL STORIES OF JAMES RANSOME

The original paintings by James Ransome (b. 1961) in this exhibition are an exquisite visual journey through the American South, home to the majority of the thirty-eight million black people in America today and birthplace of the artist himself. Ransome chronicles the folk culture of African Americans through thirteen generations of struggle and achievement – from centuries of enslavement to the post-Jim Crow era. Picture-book stories unfold through the spirited illustrations of Ransome's artwork.

James Ransome found the inspiration for his fine art in the written stories of eighteen major children's authors. His artistic renderings of these texts featuring ordinary everyday people and their southern landscape give this show its particular vernacular quality. Rural people permeate his paintings. Ransome's visual stories capture the soul, the deep spiritual and emotional roots of black culture in the American South. His paintings make it easy to feel, to imagine, and to be embraced by an earlier, albeit imperfect, America. For example, we are brought into the world of slavery and the plantation in *Running to Freedom*, the sharecropper's farm in *Clara and John*, a baseball game of the Negro National League in *Satchel*, and the shouts of a street vendor pulsating through the New Orleans French Quarter in *Banana Man II*. Whether Ransome's subject is a segregated hospital of the 1930s, or a Texas fishing village, his art-narratives offer reassuring truths about the power of love in family, and community. Depicting the dignity of labor and the affirmation of black manhood and womanhood Ransome's artworks bring power to these stories of courageous and resilient people.

A delicate realism pervades the artwork showing the southern landscape. "Living close to the countryside gave me a special appreciation of its natural force and beauty," says the artist. These extraordinary paintings are informed by James Ransome's childhood experiences growing up in a rural close-knit black community in Rich Square, North Carolina. They eloquently convey his understanding and delight in America's rural folk, his passion for children's book illustration as a form of fine art, his love of history, and his deep reverence for the American struggle for social justice.

Joyce Bickerstaff