

“until something else comes along”

A survey of the work of Saffell Gardner
essay by Steve Panton

Over a career spanning 5 decades, Saffell Gardner has created a large body of work that combines a consistent and highly personal symbolic vocabulary with a relentless desire to experiment through new materials and techniques. Working largely within the tradition belatedly recognized as Afro-Futurism, and in many ways inheriting the legacy of his father Pleze Gardner, a self-taught metaphysician, Saffell has used his practice to imagine and explore the past, present and future of the African diaspora in America.

Central to Saffell's work is a creative state that allows him to move easily between abstraction and symbolism, and furthermore into a condition sometimes known as “ceremonial time”, where the past, present and future can exist simultaneously¹. He uses his work to explore the meaning of this creative state and uses this state to explore the meaning of his work. Over the years he has spent tens of thousands of hours there creating hundreds, if not thousands, of finished pieces.

Saffell's working process is founded on compositions that reflect his interests in Abstract Expressionism and Color Field theory. Over the years his style has morphed through many different media, and approaches that range from gestural to hard-edged taped and stenciled forms (Figures 1-2), but has remained, on the whole, instantly recognizable.

Abstract composition is the constant “armature” on which a further layer of meaning emerges from the synchronicity between unconsciously recurring forms and corresponding elements in the experience of the African diaspora. For example, sometime in the 1970's a distinctive “bow-tie” like form started to appear repeatedly in the work (see Figure 3), which Saffell eventually started to identify with the double sided “thunder-ax” of Xango, the Yoruba Orisha of thunder and lightning, an eternal moral presence dispensing justice from the skies. Robert Farris Thompson in his 1984 book “Flash of the Spirit” describes how Xango ceremonies are considered to have survived the middle passage relatively intact in some parts of the Americas and provide an important bridge in trans-

Atlantic consciousness². Thompson's writing, and his major thesis that more African visual culture and philosophy crossed the Atlantic to the Americas than is generally recognized, became an important reference point for Saffell and others of his generation.

In 1985 Saffell visited Senegal, a short but powerful trip in which he visited Goree Island, a memorial to the embarkation point where slaves were loaded through the “door of no return” onto ships for the middle passage across the Atlantic. Some time earlier, in 1980, he had produced an intense series of work with repeated visual and named references to the door, e.g. “Starry Door” and “Spanish Red” (see Figure 4). As a result of the visit, he started to associate the image of the door in his work more specifically as a vehicle for re-imagining the mental state of someone leaving their home continent and heading for a life of slavery in an unknown place.

An important, singular, piece from 1987 is Juju (see Figure 5), a large work with a significant presence that invokes the essence of the mask. Saffell sees it as a meditation on the creative spirit of pre-colonial African artists and their relationship to a traditional spiritual consciousness. He notes that traditional African art is rarely attributed to a specific named artist in the way that Western art typically is. Juju is a collective tribute to these countless anonymous creators.

The experience of the middle passage has been a consistently important concern in Saffell's work from the 1980s to the present day, and is often reflected through references to the ship, sails, the elements and the ocean. As shown in Figures 6-9, this imagery has persisted through different styles, series and media. The unsettling sense of the small boat at the mercy of the elements and heading to an unknown destination is captured particularly effectively in 1992's “Thunder Skies”, which is part of an extended series called “totems”, identified by their elongated aspect ratio.

Often accompanying the boat and the ocean is a characteristic “saw tooth” type motif which can alternatively imply shark's teeth and/or the vicissitudes of life's ups and downs. The shark's teeth references the legend that embarking slave ships were surrounded by sharks and that Africans would rather jump into the ocean than face a life of slavery. Visually quite similar to the shark's teeth is the image of the crown, as seen for instance in “Lost Kings”

(1989). The crown talks to the loss of personal identity that was inherent in the nature of slavery and the middle passage, and hence the corresponding possibility that any African American might be descended from nobility.

Another consistent influence on Saffell's work have been musicians from the outer limits of the American Jazz tradition. In the early 1980's he attended a performance by the legendary Art Ensemble of Chicago, and their ability to combine ritual, visual spectacle and multi-instrumental avant-garde jazz into a transcendental experience had a powerful impact. A consistent musical reference has been the equally legendary Sun Ra, who Saffell briefly met back in the 1970's and whose music he listens to on a regular basis, often naming his works after Sun Ra tunes. Things came full circle when Saffell's painting "Astro Black" (see Figure 10), named for a Sun Ra tune, was used as the cover for the album "Working Together" by trumpeter Marcus Belgrave and drummer/composer Lawrence Williams.

Clearly names like "Things are Orange on Saturn", "Astro Black" and "Mystical Afronaut" imply an extra-terrestrial dimension to the space that is being explored. Also, a tendency to include large sweeping arcs and spheres in works such as these creates an expansive feeling in which symbols such as the axe, the boat and the ocean start to imply planetary orbits and a larger cosmology. The term Afro-Futurism itself is relatively recent, not originating until 1993, but

clearly the tradition reaches back much further and Saffell's work as early as the late 70's / early 80's is part of it.

When he was growing up on Detroit's East Side, Saffell's father, a widely read autodidact and former preacher, told him that "religion is o.k for now. until something else comes along." Saffell spent a lot of time with his father, working landscaping jobs and absorbing his eclectic wisdom. In many ways his quest to creatively re-imagine and explore the past, present and future of the African diaspora can be seen as a continuation of his father's legacy. The French philosopher Michel Foucault once suggested that the search for enlightenment was "*a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them*"³", if that is the case, then the Afro-Futurist project, and by extrapolation Saffell's project, is eventually about the search for enlightenment.

References

1. Mitchell, John Hanson, "Ceremonial Time: Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile", Perseus Books, 1997
2. Thompson, Robert Farris, "Flash of the Spirit", Vintage Book, 1984
3. Paul Rabinow (Ed), "The Foucault Reader", Pantheon Books, 1984, pp 32-50



Figure 1: **Mississippi Burning**, 2005, acrylic and pigment on vinyl, 54"x40"



Figure 2: **On the Edge of a Sword**, 2007, acrylic and pigment on 300lb watercolor paper, 22"x30"



Figure 3: **Cosmic Xango**, 1978, mixed media collage on 300lb watercolor paper, 23"x30"



Figure 4: **Spanish Red**, 1980, acrylic on paper, 46"x36"

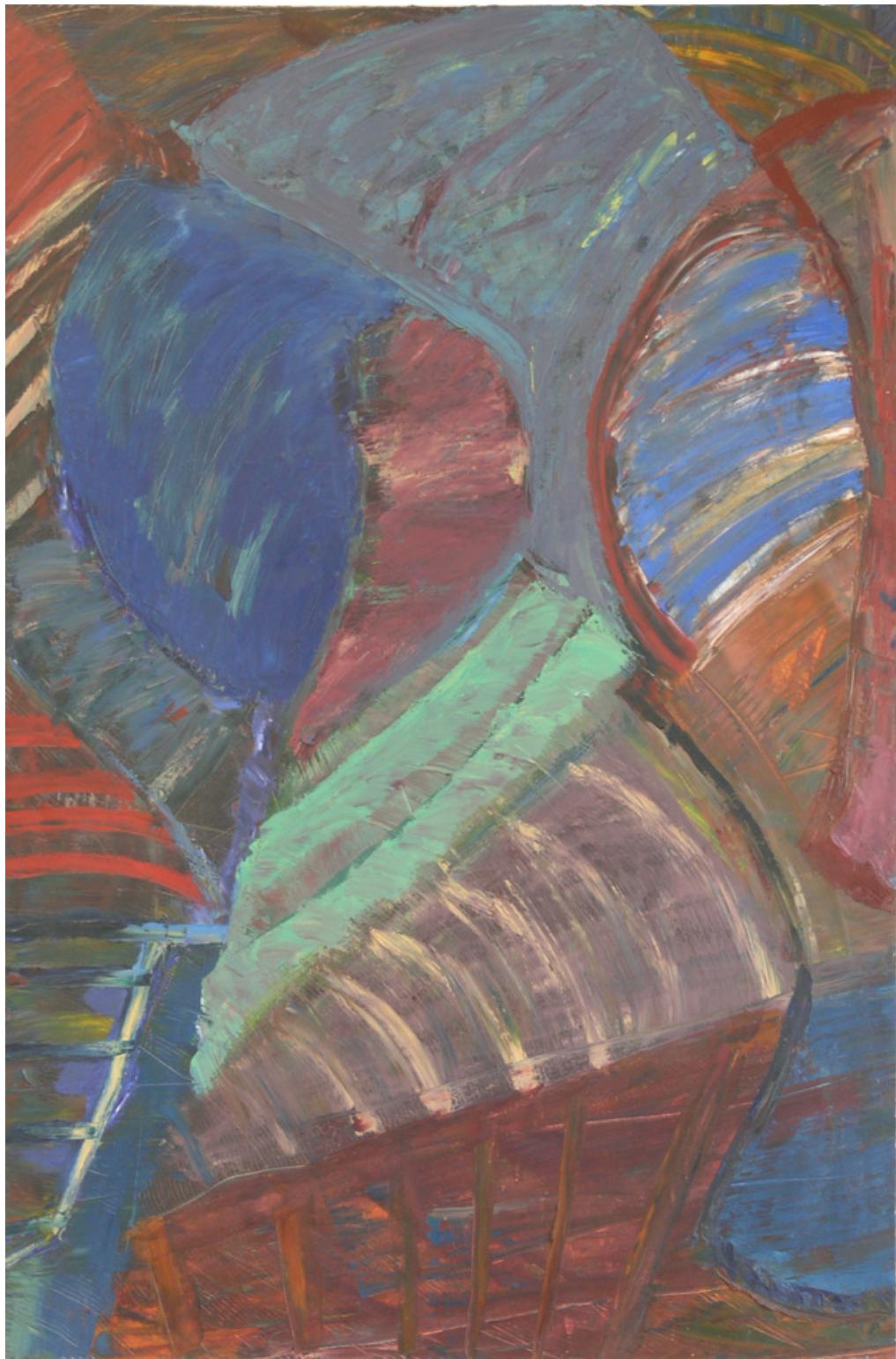


Figure 5: **JuJu**, 1987, oil on canvas, 72"x48"



Figure 6: **Lost Kings**, 1989, acrylic on paper, 60"x72"



Figure 7: **Mystical Afronaut**, 2006, acrylic on un-stretched canvas, 66" x 88"



Figure 8: **Crossings**, 2014, charcoal on paper, 24"x36"



Figure 9: **Thunder Skies**, 1992, acrylic on paper, 60"x21"



Figure 10: **Astro Black**, 1992, acrylic on paper, 74"x60"