

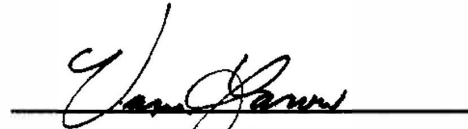
Blind Lemon Fisherman: The Lost Masters

By  
Joseph T. Swanson  
Master of Fine Arts

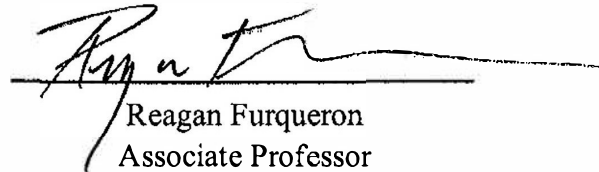
Herron School of Art and Design  
IUPUI  
Indiana University



William W. Potter  
Professor, Associate Dean of Faculty Affairs  
Advisor



Vance Farrow  
Associate Professor, Fine Arts Department Chair  
Committee Member

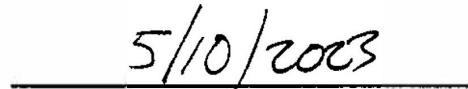


Reagan Furqueron  
Associate Professor  
Committee Member

Accepted: May 2023



Professor Greg Hull  
Dean of Herron School of Art and Design



Date

Blind Lemon Fisherman: The Lost Masters

Joseph T. Swanson

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art  
in the Herron School of Art and Design  
Indiana University

May 2023

## INTRODUCTION

*Blind Lemon Fisherman: The Lost Masters* (2023) is an abstract painting depicting the Whitewater Valley Gorge in Richmond, Indiana, throughout its long history. Memories and the history of this location inform my work. The landscape tradition has been filtered through my techniques and experiences, including my foundational years of graffiti writing. This work uses gestural abstraction and graffiti-derived mark-making and motifs to portray my own and imagined memories of the historic Starr Gennett site located in the Gorge during diverse moments in time, which relates to the work of the Richmond Group, to the studio work of Chris DAZE Ellis (b. 1962) and SABER (b. Ryan Weston Shook, 1976), and situates it within the framework of contemporary graffiti-informed artwork that Rafael Schacter (b. 1980) refers to as Intermural Art. This blending of styles and influences of landscape painting, graffiti art, and local history aligns with Schacter's definition of forming a combination of classical and subcultural aesthetics to create studio work that is influenced by graffiti (15-16). Before going into further detail, I will provide a brief history and explanation of the location that is the subject of this thesis.

The Richmond Group, like me, drew inspiration from the local landscape in East Central Indiana including the Whitewater Valley River and Gorge, a geological formation in Richmond, Indiana (Dingwerth 17). The Gorge, as I refer to it, is the subject matter of my thesis work, as mentioned above (see fig. 1). It was formed from giant glaciers melting and carving out the landscape during the Ice Age, leaving abundant fossil formations (Gorge 2). Much later it became a center for industry during the late 1800s. The Starr Gennett site, which I will refer to as Starr Valley from here on, is a historically significant area in the Gorge that once contained Starr Piano and Gennett Record's industrial campus that manufactured pianos and phonographs, pressed records, and is where many significant

musical recordings were made including early jazz, blues, and country music (see fig. 2). One of these recording artists was the influential blues singer Blind Lemon Jefferson (b. 1893 d. 1929), from which the title of this work is derived.

In the late 1990s, Starr Valley had been abandoned for about 20 years. Most of the buildings had already been demolished with only a few remaining. There were several locations in the Gorge where graffiti thrived, including a six-story concrete building in Starr Valley which I refer to as the Piano Factory, and the Main Street Bridge which spanned the Whitewater River. These were the spots where I first experienced graffiti art and created my own pieces on the crumbling buildings and bridges. Later, these graffiti pieces were demolished with the structures. The only thing left of this nostalgic time is my memories. In my thesis work, I am abstractly portraying these lost times, which are both my own memories and the memories I imagine the locations hold. I am adding my versions of the “recordings” of the Gorge. With this, I am building upon the other, earlier recordings of this place such as fossils formed from long-gone organic life, the 75rpm records pressed in the plant, the faded graffiti absorbed into porous concrete, or oil paintings of the Whitewater River the Richmond Group. Like the demolished Piano Factory, only the memories of their time in the Gorge remain and these recordings capture those moments. The location itself is also a recording of time, the river still flowing from the melting of the Ice Age and the landscape carved out revealing layers of sedimentary rock containing fossils. With this work, I am filtering all these “recordings” and capturing a new moment onto canvas.

My first experiment in creating an abstract landscape was in an earlier painting from 2021, titled, *Main St. Bridge (Richmond, Ind.) 1920-2000* (see fig. 3). It depicts one of the early locations for my first visual experiences of graffiti, as mentioned above. My portrayal of this space was a breakthrough as it combined abstract graffiti elements, gestural painting,

and a defined theme which pushed me in the direction of my thesis work. The bridge was demolished 20 years earlier, and the painting depicts the former bridge throughout its 80-year history interweaved with my own memories. This is parallel to my thesis work dealing with the demolished Piano Factory in Starr Valley. The bridge, which connected the National Road across the Whitewater River, has a relationship with the Richmond Group, as well. It was portrayed in a similar context one hundred years earlier, which I will expand on later in this paper. Before that, I will analyze the work that is the centerpiece of this thesis.

#### ABSTRACT FISHERMAN

*Blind Lemon Fisherman: The Lost Masters*, is a polyptych work of six canvases, 42 x 84” each, grouped together on a gallery wall (see fig. 4 and 5). Although the canvases were painted individually, they relate to each other by palette, brushwork, and motifs to create one large piece. It abstractly depicts the Starr Valley in the late 1920s and the same spot millions of years before. This meshes with autobiographical moments of when I painted graffiti nearby in the abandoned Piano Factory in the late 1990s. The title is a reference to the recording studio that was in Starr Valley next to the Whitewater River, where Jefferson made his last recordings in September 1929 (Dahan 94). The name “Fisherman” is a play on words and refers to the river itself, and the shallow semi-tropical sea that once covered the area 500 million years ago during the Ordovician period. It also refers to the meditative nature of musicians, plein air painters, and graffiti writers as “fishers” in the nearby river. My mention of “Lost Masters” is a reference to the copper-master recordings that Gennett records were pressed from. Many of these masters, including outtakes that were never released, were routinely melted down to be reused (Kennedy 63, 125). During the Great Depression, thousands of these were hauled away in boxcars and sold as scrap (237). In the same vein, graffiti pieces slowly fade away, get

painted over, and are “scrapped” with the structure when it is demolished never to be seen again, such as the Piano Factory. In that case, graffiti-covered debris was hauled away likely used for construction fill, and the metal was scrapped and formed into something else. My work acts in the same way, as memories and ideas are reconfigured and blended into a new experience on canvas, in which I have made a new recording of the location.

My visual language and mark-making that have developed from my time painting graffiti have morphed into organic and industrial shapes and forms in this work. This is combined with acts of automatic writing and gestural painting as the picture is built up intuitively. Traditional graffiti motifs such as halos and drips, have transformed into fossil forms and organic shapes. Rounded and hard-edged outlines are exploded letterforms of faded graffiti pieces that are transformed into abstract debris of architectural rubble and underwater plant and animal life (see fig. 6). Repeated lines with thin paint strokes move up and down in a wave-like formation appearing to extend beyond the edges of the picture plane. Throughout the canvases, brush strokes with darker colors such as phthalo green are embellished with lighter colors like yellow ochre creating highlights and drop shadow, a technique prevalent in graffiti lettering. Thinned-down acrylic is intuitively brushed in areas creating shapes and lines. The paint is thinned only with water to create a flatness in surface texture. This flatness is like the way graffiti pieces are layered, one color at a time with bolder, opaque colors as “outlines” near the surface. To create a feeling of a foggy dissipating memory, layers of semi-transparent color have been rubbed and scraped to feather out the brushstrokes and soften spatters and drips revealing sections of the underpainting and primed surface.

The bottom canvases on the left and right side of the piece are underwater scenes, morphing and fading out, and above are foggy, churning seascapes. The middle two canvases

represent memories and relics of the location from human history. In these, I mesh the site's musical history, the decay of the factory buildings, the patinated copper masters, and molten metal morphing into destroyed letterforms from imaginary graffiti pieces. The bottom middle canvas represents Jefferson's presence in the Gorge. Some of the shapes appear to be organic, including one resembling an abstracted eyeball, which is a traditional graffiti motif (see fig. 7). In the canvas above a similar eyeball is present, this time representing my own essence in this location. It also depicts the marks I have left behind, the spray-painted walls, and my presence there. My likeness is crumbling and melting down, being re-cast into something which will never take shape visibly, but instead, metaphorically building up like sediment in time (see fig. 8). The recording of the paint on canvas captures the moment and allows me to leave my mark, like a landscape painting, a record, a graffiti piece, or a fossil.

The canvases are grouped together and hung on the wall two-high with about two inches of space between each painting. The center of the bottom row is at eye level, and the top is hung above. The long and narrow size of each one alludes to the size and shape of graffiti pieces on freight train cars and panoramic landscape paintings. Railroads are an appropriate reference to the subject matter of Starr Gennett, as the boxcars used to haul the "Lost Masters" away, and the now abandoned rail line above Starr Valley which was still in service during my teenage years. When I began painting on canvases this size, it felt natural to the subject matter and to the way I work because of its relationship to the size of graffiti pieces and landscape paintings. Grouping the canvases close together with the bottom center at eye level causes the viewers to look up to get the full image. They may pan back and forth while viewing to take in the whole picture like someone viewing a graffiti piece on a freight train car or scanning the horizon with their eyes.

The color palette uses earth, sea, and industrial tones to depict the Gorge and Starr

Valley. Mixtures of raw umber, cerulean blue, Venetian red, phthalo green, and yellow ochre, respectively, are used to achieve a landscape and industrial feeling. Shades of green and blue are reminiscent of what underwater plant and animal life from the Ordovician period may have looked like and the native vegetation of the area. Many of the colors I have mixed represent vintage spray paint colors of the late 1990s. This includes a golden yellow that represents *Summer Squash*, a color shade from that era. These color schemes were chosen especially for the top middle canvas which represents my time spent in the Gorge as a young graffiti writer. This palette is cooler with shades of blue, gray, and teal, which depict some of these vintage spray paint colors such as *True Blue*, *Smoke Gray*, and *Jade Green*. Shades of gray also represent the weathered concrete of the Piano Factory. Venetian red and raw umber both give a feeling of rusted steel and bricks. Teal appears throughout the top canvas and more in the one below which contains vivid shades of turquoise and burnt orange. Jefferson's "footprint" left in the Gorge is portrayed on this canvas as the lost copper masters. The color choices and movement in the painting represent both polished and patinaed copper and the molten metal of the "Lost Masters." Much like Jefferson's influence on musicians of our time, the painting is morphing and repurposing his recordings, but into a visual experience. Local graffiti art that I was inspired by as a teenager, has created a similar process of absorption and appropriation in my work which is also depicted. The Richmond Group paintings have also further inspired me to take on this subject matter and reimagine their scenery and subject matter in my work. This blends the styles and diverse influences of landscape painting, graffiti art, and local history. It aligns with Schacter's description of Intermural Art forming an amalgam of classical and subcultural aesthetics, which situates the work on its own, not graffiti but not landscape painting either (15-16).

## GRAFFITI AND LANDSCAPE

John Elwood Bundy (1853-1933) and the Richmond Group's presence in Richmond, Indiana, and the surrounding region is evident in the importance of the permanent collection at the Richmond Art Museum, and in other local public collections which I have frequented as a resident of this area. Having these works in the background has helped me absorb their local importance. As an abstract painter with roots in graffiti writing continuing with this landscape tradition may seem like an unlikely combination at first, but as I have alluded to earlier, the graffiti writer is essentially a plein air painter, working in the open air and capturing a moment in time. Graffiti writers and plein air painters develop a connection to the landscape and the city through painting outdoors. The landscapist makes sketches and studies, gaining inspiration, acquiring information, and later translating this in the studio. Bundy's studio practice followed this in that his "major works were usually, though not always, studio productions, he produced smaller landscape sketches in oil in the out-of-doors that were 'transplanted' to larger canvases" (Gerds 21). His process has also been described as, "[a]fter months of painting and sketching outdoors, he would return to his main studio with sketches as well as mental images, enough material to fuel his painting throughout the winter" (Fedders 10). Graffiti writers create outside, in the moment, and later use this outdoor experience and connection to a place as inspiration transforming it in the studio, as described by Schacter as Intermural Art, "The outside acts as the foundational premise for all latter production" (11).

*RICHMOND GROUP AND THE GORGE*

Richmond Group artists depicted the Whitewater River and Gorge frequently in their work, such as in, Bundy's, *Winter on the Whitewater* (1914), and *Old National Bridge* (1914) by François (Frank) Joseph Girardin (b. 1856 d. 1945). Bundy's painting depicts a river scene in Brookville, Indiana, south of Richmond on a branch of the same river that runs through the

Whitewater Gorge. Bundy's heavy brushstrokes show his artistic hand, a recording of his presence, and help portray a moment in time. His experience of peacefully viewing the river has been lost, but his studio painting has recorded the moment. Bundy's painted memory lets us wonder what that moment was like, again, like holding a fossil or playing a record. His painting, *Winter on the Whitewater*, was a studio work that used his memory, like the way I have created my Gorge work, and aligns with working from the "outside-in" as mentioned above.

Bundy, like me, felt inspired to portray this region, sometimes visiting the same locations repeatedly (Fedders 11). He "painted one tree at least twenty times" until it was cut down (qtd. in Fedders 12). He described his admiration for the tree as, "I know every twig, every bit of moss that clings to the trunk of this old tree" (qtd. in 12). The last time he went to paint it, it had been cut down, and he painted the stump (12). His paintings and sketches of the tree serve as a recording through time and are his way to capture a memory. This is related to my work in that we both are capturing the stages of a nostalgic place while making our mark on canvas. The difference is I am depicting a combination of these moments in time. My interest in relating my work to the Richmond Group began while researching local depictions of the Gorge concerning my earlier Main Street Bridge painting. During that time, I discovered a painting by a Richmond Group artist that portrayed the same subject matter and general idea in my own work but was painted one hundred years earlier.

When Girardin was commissioned to paint the National Road Bridge in 1914, he chose to paint a scene that no longer existed (Dingwerth 64-65). In my depiction of the Main Street Bridge, I coincidentally chose to depict a bridge in the same location as his that was also no longer there. My work is a representation of the bridge through its

lifespan, from construction to demolition. Girardin's painting, *Old National Bridge*, like mine, also portrays a bridge demolished decades before he painted it. Although he was considered "a true plein-air artist," painting from nature and reflecting what he saw, in this work he created a historical picture in which he "chose to paint the bridge the way it looked in 1885, instead of the commission date of 1914" (Dingwerth 59, 64-65). The former bridge, portrayed, was a covered wooden bridge that reached disrepair and was condemned in 1895 (Gorge 13-14). At the time of the commission, there was a temporary steel bridge north of the covered bridge, which he leaves out of the composition (14). Girardin may have used sketches for this scene, but his source and inspiration seem to come from his memory, a sense of nostalgia and longing for how things used to be, which may also have been attributed to the patron's request. Regardless of motive, he combined its former likeness with what was present when he painted the canvas. This relates to the way I have portrayed my version of the Main Street bridge, and the Piano Factory with my thesis work.

#### *INTERMURAL ART AND PLACE*

Graffiti writers turned into studio artists, such as DAZE, SABER, and I depict the places we have a strong connection to with a sense of nostalgia, not unlike the plein air and studio works of the Richmond Group. In a studio setting, graffiti writers reconfigure and revisit the moments and spaces they associate with their early days of writing graffiti. This is present in my depiction of the Gorge and DAZE's and SABER's work. Much of the informal artistic training learned from graffiti is visible in our work as it surfaces in the presence of morphed letterforms and graffiti motifs. This is combined with more traditional methods of painting such as oil or acrylic on canvas. This fusion of graffiti technique and aesthetics with landscapes or representational painting, or in my case,

abstract landscapes, creates an amalgam of styles. Schacter describes Intermural Art as work that is informed by graffiti in several ways and is not an attempt to recreate graffiti in a studio setting but rather a reforming and reimagining of the skills, aesthetics, and work ethic learned from practicing graffiti (15-16).

NYC subway graffiti writer, DAZE, has been exhibiting work in galleries and museums since the early 1980s. In an interview he was quoted about his gallery work, saying, "I'm not trying to do graffiti paintings. There are elements of it that appear within the layering of my paintings, but my work is more about the urban diaspora of New York and what I have lived here" ("Daze"). Like Schacter's description, he is not recreating graffiti in the studio, but rather, his subject matter, technique, and process are informed by his graffiti. Much of his work is autobiographical and historical and portrays moments in time in places to where he has a strong feeling or connection. In another interview, he talked further about the urban landscape of New York City as a subject in his work. "I've used urban imagery since the beginning...My first series explored Coney Island, a place that has always resonated with me since my family took trips out there when I was a kid. It's a distinct part of the city and had historically been painted by Reginald Marsh and John Sloan in representational paintings" (Laster "Graffiti legend").

He and I have a shared interest in historical paintings and memories, and an appreciation for others who have depicted the same scenery before us. This situates our graffiti influences in context with art history while placing the work within an intersection of landscape painting and graffiti. DAZE and I are both depicting scenes that have been represented historically in art in each of our respective regions. His is related to the Ashcan School artists as mentioned above and mine to the Richmond Group. Although his Coney Island series is not related to his graffiti memories, other works of his are, such as

his painting, *Generations* (2017). In this piece, he creates a painting of a subway car in the 1970s and intertwines this with the present day. Laster describes DAZE's combination of a realist and expressionistic style in which he depicts the "interior of a subway car from 1976 with graffiti tags from artists of the period, on one section of the paintings and contemporary political graffiti on another" ("Graffiti legend"). We both depict nostalgic locations while blending different moments in time in our work.

SABER is known for painting the largest complex graffiti piece of all time on the concrete embankment of the Los Angeles River (Gastman, Neelon 6). Today, he is also a studio artist, whose work is abstract and gestural such as his *Symptomatic* (2021) series, which has elements of stylized lettering and aggressive line work developed from his graffiti pieces. His letterforms and motifs in the series have morphed into abstraction like in my work. Like DAZE, his work at times is representational and expressive, like his painting *LA River at Night* (2004). It depicts the area where he painted his famous river piece on which he adds illustrative components and embellishments to the canvas to achieve a hyper-realistic look. His combination of graffiti influence with cityscapes, and his use of the techniques and aesthetics of graffiti situates him within the criteria for Schacter's description of Intermural Art, like DAZE and my work. His painting of the LA Riverbed documents and captures an important moment and place of his graffiti career, but was created later in a studio setting, as I have done with my portrayal of structures in the Gorge and Starr Valley and in DAZE's interior depiction of a subway car from the 70s. The gigantic graffiti piece SABER painted along the Los Angeles River has faded away and has been painted over, but the memory remains. It is lost like Girardin's bridge, Bundy's tree, DAZE's subway car, and for me, the Piano Factory in Starr Valley.

CONCLUSION

My version of landscapes is a combination of gestural painting, automatic writing, and intuitive composition building that depicts a place through vastly different moments in time while connecting my own experiences to a larger ongoing narrative. The color palette, shape, and line in these works point to the natural world, human-made structures, architecture, and my formative years as a graffiti writer. I have portrayed the memories of a place filtered through my experiences which create a recording of the location. My polyptych painting of Starr Valley has deepened my connection to the location portrayed, to the work of other graffiti writers turned into studio artists, and has solidified my appreciation of the Richmond Group. This combination of traditional subject matter with technique and aesthetics associated with graffiti creates a blending of influences defined as Intermural Art by Rafael Schacter. As more graffiti writers use their informal training to create new work in a studio setting, this term will gain additional insight and academic research. Whether it was fossils made from sea life, the musician recording a song, the Richmond Group artist painting with oil, the teenage graffiti artist spray-painting their name on the wall, or me, the studio painter working a paintbrush onto canvas, we all have a connection to the Whitewater Valley Gorge as we have recorded our moment in time.



Fig. 1. Section of the Whitewater Valley River, Richmond, IN, digital photograph, 2023



Fig. 2. View Behind the Floodwall on Whitewater Riverbank. (The lone standing Starr Gennett building is peeking over the wall.) Richmond, IN, digital photograph, 2023.



Fig. 3. Joseph T. Swanson. *Main St. Bridge (Richmond, Ind.) 1920-2000*. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 75", 2021.



Fig. 4. Joseph T. Swanson. *Blind Lemon Fisherman: The Lost Masters*. Acrylic on canvas, polyptych, each canvas 42 x 84", 2023.



Fig. 5. Joseph T. Swanson. *Blind Lemon Fisherman: The Lost Masters*. Acrylic on canvas, polyptych, each canvas 42 x 84", 2023.



Fig. 6. Joseph T. Swanson. *Blind Lemon Fisherman: The Lost Masters (Detail No. 1)*. Acrylic on canvas, polyptych, each canvas 42 x 84", 2023.



Fig. 7. Joseph T. Swanson. *Blind Lemon Fisherman: The Lost Masters* (Detail No. 2). Acrylic on canvas, polyptych, each canvas 42 x 84", 2023.



Fig. 8. Joseph T. Swanson. *Blind Lemon Fisherman: The Lost Masters* (Detail No. 3). Acrylic on canvas, polyptych, each canvas 42 x 84", 2023.

## Works Cited

- “Daze: ‘Daily Commute’, Solo in NYC.” *Brooklyn Street Art, BSA Projects LLC*, 19 Feb. 2018, <https://www.brooklynstreetart.com/2018/02/19/daze-daily-commute-solo-in-nyc/>. Accessed May 2023.
- Dahan, Charlie B., and Linda Gennett Irmscher. *Gennett Records and Starr Piano*. Arcadia Publishing, 2016.
- Dingwerth, Shaun. *The Richmond Group Artists*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014.
- Fedders, Kristen. *Poetic Woodlands: The Art of John Elwood Bundy*. Richmond, Indiana. Richmond Art Museum, 2002.
- Gastman, Roger, Caleb Neelon. *SABER: Mad Society*. Gingko Press Inc. 2007.
- Gerdts, William H. *A Walk in the Woods: The Art of John Elwood Bundy (1853-1933)*. Eckert Fine Art Galleries, 2000.
- Laster, Paul. “Graffiti legend Chris ‘Daze’ Ellis has traded subway cars for canvas.” *Time Out New York*, Time Out, 20 Feb. 2018, [www.timeout.com/newyork/art/graffiti-legend-chris-daze-ellis-has-traded-subway-cars-for-canvas](http://www.timeout.com/newyork/art/graffiti-legend-chris-daze-ellis-has-traded-subway-cars-for-canvas). Accessed May 2023.
- Kennedy, Rick. *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy: Gennett Records and the rise of America’s musical grassroots*. Indiana University Press, 2013.
- Schacter, Rafael. *Street To Studio*. Lund Humphries, 2018.
- Whitewater Valley Gorge Park Committee. *History of the Whitewater Gorge*. Richmond, Indiana, 1983.