



WITNESS

by Denise DiFulco

"I LIKE THE INTIMACY OF PAPER. I USUALLY WORK ON A DRAFTING TABLE SO MY RELATIONSHIP TO THE PAPER CAN BE SCRIBE-LIKE AT TIMES. IT PROBABLY HAS TO DO WITH MY LOVE OF READING AND WRITING."

"Violent" is a word frequently used to describe the content of Laylah Ali's '91 artwork. But the Williams professor dismisses that characterization: "Given what sort of violence is commonplace in popular culture, I think what happens in my paintings is relatively calm."

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that her paintings and drawings, though straightforward and intense, are informed by complex emotions and ideas. Her body of work is comprised of contemplations of race, power, gender, ambition, human frailty and murky politics. Pieces that at first appear cartoonish quickly lay bare their weighty concerns.

Her bold choices both of topic and technique have earned Ali solo shows at MoMA in New York, ICA in Boston, MCA in Chicago and the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis as well as international recognition at the 2003 Venice Biennale and 2004 Whitney Biennial.

A dual major in English and studio art, Ali found herself increasingly engaged by her art coursework during her undergraduate study at Williams. "I could bring my other interests—whether they were literary, political or personal—into my studio work," she says. "That combination worked for me."

Ali's career took flight with her long-running series the Greenheads, completed between 1996 and 2005. Typical of her distinctive amalgam of medium and message, its nearly 90 paintings depict a variety of what she calls "emaciated, brown-skinned superhero types with large, green heads." Their comic-strip features belie their serious subject matter.

While many aspects of her personal life have informed her art over the years, Ali doesn't discuss the particulars. "I ask questions or make commentary about stories that I understand to be happening in the world," she says. "The things that are from me and my history work together with the larger narratives. Hopefully the work gains by having a personal resonance as well as an energy that's focused outward."

From time to time, however, she does pull back the curtain ever so slightly. Ali says she was strongly influenced by both the physical and social environment of her native Buffalo, N.Y. The daughter of an

African-American father and a white mother living in an all-white, working-class neighborhood, she became attuned to social and racial dynamics at an early age. And the city's brutal winters left her shifting between "the harsh reality of dealing with the cold and an inner refuge of the mind," she says. "What does one do for those seven months? I developed a kind of elaborate indoor creativity."

That inventiveness was on full display in her recent "Notes/ Drawings/Untitled Afflictions," an exhibit of 40 drawings that incorporate text in her work for the first time in over a decade. The pieces were shown in fall 2008 at the DeCordova Museum

and Sculpture Park in Lincoln, Mass., accompanied by the catalogue *Note Drawings*. In an interview with Ali prior to the exhibition, the *Boston Globe* called the words and lists she employed "as odd and provocative as the characters Ali depicts," citing one drawing where an androgynous figure with a beard and blond ponytails bolts across the page over written lines such as "Women who have been burned up" and "Those who previously had a knife held to their throat." The bullet-point items—both the inflammatory and the innocuous—have a variety of origins, Ali explains. Some are bits of overheard conversation and news

from strangers or the media, while others are random thoughts.

The common thread throughout all of Ali's works remains the underlying tension. "I am more interested in what leads up to a violent act and the aftermath than in the violent act itself," she says. "More than anything, I think my work has been focused on the witness—those who witness violence and what is done with that kind of horrible knowledge."

She currently is working on a series of paintings for 303 Gallery in New York, which represents her along with Miller Block Gallery in Boston. However, she isn't quite ready to reveal her latest undertaking. When asked what she has planned next, Ali is as cryptic as she can be on paper: "Landscapes, maybe." ■



Untitled, 2005, gouache on paper

Courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery, New York

LINGUA FRANCA

by Jim Mulvihill

Like most great nonfiction writers, Michael Erard '90 has a knack for making readers care about topics that aren't even on their radar screens. In the case of his first book, *Um...: Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Mean*, the topic is verbal miscues that are often so minor, most of us don't even register them. Yet he and other linguists make a strong case that these missteps can be as revealing as people's intentional words.

In *Um...*, Erard explores studies of verbal blunders throughout history, "from Freud's fascination with the slip to Allen Funt's *Candid Camera*," *Publisher's Weekly* writes. But what keeps readers moving through the book's nearly 300 pages are the frank stories of Erard's own struggles with language woven throughout the narrative.

One endearing example of his openness comes early in the book, when he describes proposing to his girlfriend "as a blathering mess." Though a smooth, rehearsed delivery might have sounded better, he says, it also might have obscured honest emotions that communicate feelings more effectively—a linguistic Catch-22.

His willingness to put himself at the fore, warts and all, makes Erard all the more effective at "trying to communicate academic ideas to non-academic audiences." And yet, "The things I put in like that were things that I had to fight for," he says. "The editor ... was really very adamant that people weren't interested in me and that I shouldn't be writing about my own errors."

Erard's passion for words comes through not only in the lovely arrangements on paper but also in the time and effort he puts into the process. "The nonfiction writers that I admire are people who do long, 'hang-out' style kinds of reporting," he says, noting that Lafcadio Hearn and Joseph Mitchell are two of his favorites. "That was not only the tradition I wanted to honor but the kind of writing that I wanted to do."

Erard has been writing since around the age of 7. When he was 14, he started contributing to *The Haverhill Gazette* in Massachusetts. He majored in American studies at Williams and received a master's degree in linguistics and a Ph.D. in English, both

from the University of Texas, where he wrote for the Iowa-based *North American Review* and *The Texas Observer*, among other publications. Though he was offered an assistant professorship at University of Texas upon completing his doctorate, he made the difficult choice to turn it down.

Since then, Erard has built a career writing strictly about the topics that most interest him. His contributions to *The New York Times* have covered everything from an obscure linguistics blog (Language Log) to science-themed rock music (inspired by the band Artichoke, fronted by Timothy Sellers '90). Recently Erard won a prestigious Dobie Paisano fellowship from UT-Austin, which awards two writers a full academic

FOR ME, IT'S ALWAYS BEEN A CHALLENGE TO TRY TO CONQUER TIME AND MAKE MY IDEAS COME ACROSS IN THE BEST LANGUAGE POSSIBLE IN THE FASTER DEMANDS OF CONVERSATION.

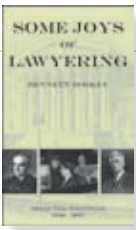
year of rent-free living in a secluded cabin on a 254-acre ranch as well as a healthy stipend. The fellowship, Erard says, is one more way he is able to preserve the autonomy he prizes "most of all."

A desire to not be bound by the word counts of periodicals led Erard to pen *Um...*, and now he's at work on a second book, about "the upper limits of the human ability to learn and speak languages." Erard again is at the heart of the narrative, on a personal quest to meet the world's most prolific language learners and understand to what extent their ability is inherited versus developed.

"That's the hardest question to get at and one that presents the biggest challenge for Americans in general," he says. "We have this natural distrust of aristocracy and this belief that anyone can do anything they want, so talking about some people being more gifted than others is a problem for us." ■



Wyatt McSpadden



FROM THE BOOKSHELF

Some Joys of Lawyering: Selected Writings, 1946-2007. By Bennett Boskey '35. Green Bag Press, 2008. Guidance for lawyers from a 60-year veteran of the legal field.

The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope: How Renaissance Linear Perspective Changed Our Vision of the Universe. By Samuel Y. Edgerton, Amos Lawrence Professor of Art History, emeritus. Cornell University Press, 2009. An artistic tool impacts art history, theology, science and technology.

Initiation. By Susan Fine '87. Flux, 2009. A Latino ninth grader encounters children of privilege at a Manhattan private school.

Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality. By Barbara Bradley Hagerty '81. Riverhead Books, 2009. How science is shedding light on the question of God's existence.

New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction. Edited by Donald M. Hassler '59 et al. University of South Carolina Press, 2008. A multidisciplinary analysis of trends and voices of the genre and what these signal about America's situation in world politics.

The Hourglass Solution: A Boomer's Guide to the Rest of Your Life. By Jeff Johnson '74. Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2009. How those approaching their 50s are, like young adults, able to pursue new directions in their lives.

Prendergast in Italy. By Nancy Mowl Mathews, Eugenie Prendergast Senior Curator of 19th and 20th Century Art and lecturer in art, et al. Merrell Publishers Ltd., 2009. A catalogue of the work of Maurice Prendergast during two trips to Italy.

To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise. By Bethany Moreton '92. Harvard University Press, 2009. How a Christian service ethos powered capitalism at home and abroad.

Green Witness: Ecology, Ethics, and the Kingdom of God. By Laura Yordy '81. Cascade Books, 2008. A work of theological ethics urges Christians to work for the environmental movement as a demonstration of faith in God's promise of the Kingdom.

SPRING BREAK STUDIES



These days, an increasing number of Williams students are using their two weeks of spring break to further their classroom studies by traveling (with or without faculty) to do fieldwork. Some of the recent destinations:

Washington, D.C.: Students in political economy professor Jim Mahon's "Political Economy of Public Policy Issues" are required to travel to the nation's capital during spring break to conduct interviews as part of their semester-long research projects.

Galapagos Islands: As part of their spring tutorial "Galapagos Islands Field Geology and Biology," geosciences professors Markes Johnson and Paul Karabinos took students to "ground level"—the site that inspired Charles Darwin—to observe how regional tectonics, volcanoes, species dispersal and evolution relate to each other.

A Reggae Concert: Political science professor Neil Roberts strongly encourages students in his "Rastafari: Dread, Politics, Agency" course to "observe their chosen artist in action to assess his or her impact on the audience" as part of a group project on lyrics and politics.

New Orleans: Students in the political science/Africana studies course "Race, Culture and Incarceration" traveled south with Joy James, the John B. and John T. McCoy Presidential Professor of Humanities and College Professor in Political Science, in 2006 to take part in Hurricane Katrina recovery work.

List provided by the Office of Experiential Education.