

Jail Was Heat by Purvis Young

About the Artist

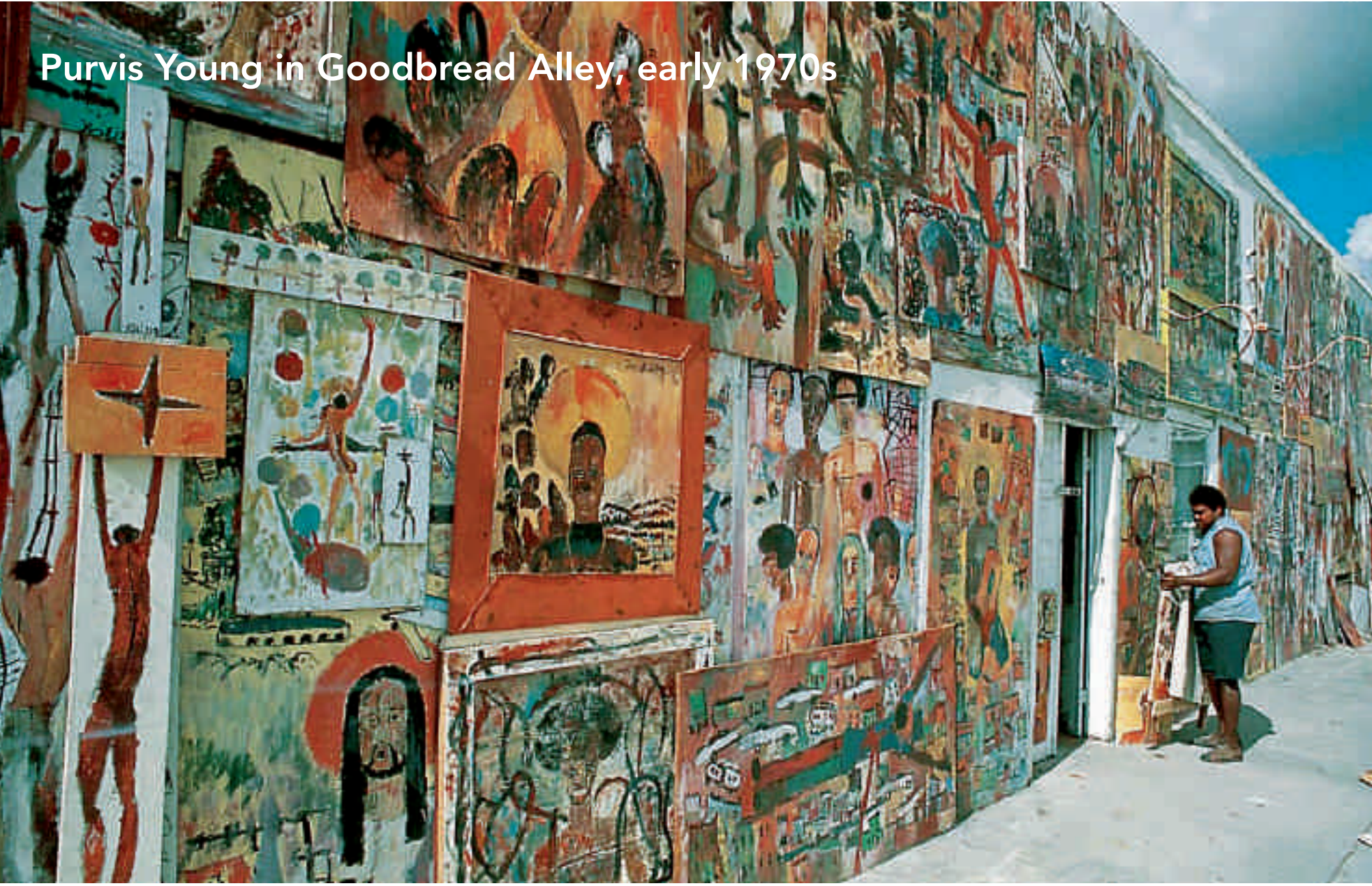


Purvis Young’s passion was to use art to address social issues and uplift his community. Born and raised in the inner city Miami neighborhood of Overtown, Young’s uncle taught him to draw. In his teens, Young spent three years in prison (1961–64) for breaking and entering. While in jail, he began to draw again, studying art books and finding inspiration in images of public murals as well works by Vincent van Gogh, Rembrandt, and Paul Gauguin. Upon his release, he made paintings about his community and nailed them to a row of boarded-up buildings in Miami known as Goodbread Alley, where everyone could see them. This installation caught the attention of the art world, and in the decades that followed, Young made thousands of works of art which are now in museum collections across the country

Young made art from found and repurposed materials that he gathered from his neighborhood. He appreciated the unique textures of found

materials and used everything from manila envelopes to discarded doors, mirrors, and even television sets. His work ranges from small drawings on notebook paper to wall-sized multi-panel murals. Through his art, he wanted to “paint the truth” by addressing issues of racism, poverty, and suffering. His goal was to create harmony. He said, “I’d just like to see peace. Then maybe I’d [take] my brush and throw it away.”

A number of reoccurring symbols appear throughout Young’s work that express his thoughts and feelings about his life and community. He said “I found out, I could tell a story with my artwork.” In the painting featured on this poster, *Jail Was Heat*, Young depicts a church and people with raised arms to express faith, hope, and redemption. Other symbols that appear frequently in his work are: giant blue eyes implying the all-seeing government; padlocks representing being imprisoned or struggling; boats serving as a metaphor for escaping from racism and suffering, wild horses illustrating freedom; trucks, trains, and railroad tracks suggesting movement, migration, and possibility; and angels and large floating heads signifying good people and the possibility of goodness in a strife-riven world.



Curriculum Connections

Art

Recycling into Art

Purvis Young made art out of discarded materials, even televisions. What is your school throwing away that could be used to make art? Investigate items, large and small, that people are discarding. Discuss as a class how to transform them into works of art. What materials will you use? What ideas will you communicate? Where will the art be displayed?

Art as Social Statement

Young addressed social issues in his art such as poverty and racism. What social issue is important to you? What would you like to say about it? What colors, shapes, lines, and images could help convey your message? Record your ideas visually in a work of art.

Let’s Look

- What is going on in this picture? What do you recognize?
- Where do you see people? What might they be doing?
- What colors and shapes do you see? What mood or feeling do they create?
- Notice the frame around the picture. What might it be made of? How can you tell?
- Read Young’s quote, how do you think he paints the truth and helps create peace through his painting?



Jail Was Heat

Paint on weathered Masonite with nailed-on pieces of various types of weathered scrap wood, including yellow pine and plywood
43 x 34 inches
(109.2 x 86.4 cm)

Purvis Young

American
Born 1943, died 2010

Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection © Estate of Purvis Young

About the Painting

In this colorful, chaotic scene, a red, masklike face emerges from behind rows of rectangular buildings. Red vertical lines, like bars on a jail cell, extend toward a white church with a crowd of people on the roof. Expressive brushstrokes in bright colors dominate the picture and give it a lively feeling. The painting refers to Young’s time in prison as well as the sense of purpose that he found in art and religion. The church is a symbol of faith, hope, and redemption, for both Young and his community. The artist commented that the figures with raised arms represent people reaching for a better life.

Language Arts

Artist Statements

After completing a work of art that addresses a social issue that is important to you, write an artist statement. This paragraph should explain what issue you chose, your feelings about it, and how your piece conveys a message. Display the works of art and statements together in a class art show.

Social Studies

Overtown and My Town

Research Purvis Young’s Miami neighborhood of Overtown. What happened that turned a once prosperous neighborhood into an impoverished one? Has anything similar happened in a neighborhood in your city or town? What can people do to help uplift struggling communities? How can art play a role in that?