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Romare Bearden in the Homeland of His Imagination: An Artist's Reckoning with the South

Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore
The University of North Carolina Press (May 10, 2022)
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Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore's inspiring biography traces the rise of a Black American painter, the great grandson of slaves, to a place of eminence in twentieth-century American art, despite the racism he faced.

Born in 1911 in North Carolina, Romare Bearden began his life "bathed in love and certain of his place in life." But the specter of white supremacy hung over his middle-class family: in 1915, they fled from the South for their own safety. They arrived in Harlem, where Bearden grew up; he also spent time in Pittsburgh. But the South forever claimed his heart.

Gilmore relates that painting his fragmentary, dreamlike recollections of his Southern childhood allowed Bearden to reclaim "a missing part of himself." Striving to reflect humanity's universal condition, he created an imaginary homeland in his work and peopled it with the Black bodies and spirits of his North Carolina infancy.

Through the Harlem Renaissance, the civil rights movement, and a thirty-year career in social work, Bearden kept painting. By the end of the 1970s, he had ascended to the top tier of the art world. When he died of bone cancer in 1988, Bearden's only regret was that he could not keep working.

The book's convincing argument against ascribing autobiographical intent to Bearden's work explains how such interpretations misrepresent his life, dismiss his extensive training, and ignore the universal nature and mystical qualities of his art. Luscious, full-color reproductions of his work show its evolution from cartooning to social realism to the abstract expressionism that almost derailed his understanding of himself and his art, and finally to the expression of his full identity in collages.

This is an insightful biography of one of the twentieth century's most preeminent artists, whose powerful, intimate work illuminates the beauty and resilience of the human spirit.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March / April 2022)

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