

Bill Traylor

by Ekow Eshun



Bill Traylor's paintings offer no clue to his past. They are simple things. An image of a horse. A man wearing a top hat smoking a cigarette. A woman holding a jug. And I find it impossible to look at them without thinking about what they don't say. **Traylor** was a former slave and, thinking about his personal history, I'm reminded of the literary tradition of the slave narrative, graphic retellings of bondage and servitude that often strayed into mawkishness and sentimentality.

Traylor avers from looking back. This despite being 83 when he started painting, an age when memories that might have been suppressed for a

lifetime, come to loom over the conscious mind. His work suggests nothing of catharsis or a working out of issues. But neither are they the work of a man trying to avoid his personal history. Rather, there's a curious, halting reacquaintance with the world taking place. They speak of a man who, having perhaps gone through some unspeakable experiences, has learned to live since on his own terms.

There is no necessary logic or obvious meaning to his works because, I suspect, he may have been all too familiar with life as something capricious and absurd. Nevertheless he has made a peace of his own with what lies around him. And that after all is one of the useful roles that artists can play. They remind us how very unknowable the ordinary world really is. **Traylor's** paintings manage that task beautifully. They are modest and curious and unapologetically strange.

Not, I suspect, that different from the man himself.

Ekow Eshun
b 1968 (Britain)
author, broadcaster, editor