

Give us a dreamer

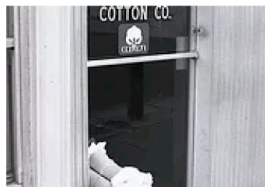
Michael Galbreth

*"They said one to another, Behold, here cometh the dreamer... Let us slay him...
and we shall see what will become of his dreams"*
– Genesis 37: 19-20



Lorraine Motel, 1968. Photos by Henry Groskinsky.

I first visited the Lorraine Motel in 1978 shortly after moving to Memphis to finish up school at Memphis State. I was curious. Ten years after the fact, it was still a motel. The only room that was unavailable was room 306. One could venture inside the room after gaining permission from the office. No charge. It had been converted into a makeshift shrine with yellowed newspaper clippings and faded photos pinned to the wall, along with dried flowers left from the occasional visitor, of which, it seemed to me, there were few. Rooms of this sort in motels of this kind often installed mirrors on the ceiling for an enhanced experience during one's stay. In lieu of this was a large, white neon cross providing a ghostly glow. Other than these few alterations, room 306 of the Lorraine Motel was indistinguishable from any of the other rooms there. When I lived in Memphis in the late 1970's, the downtown area near the Lorraine was host to the "white flight" phenomenon of the 1960's and '70's. It was mostly empty and mostly seedy.



Memphis, 1978, photos by the author

In 1989, eight years after I had moved away from Memphis to Houston, The Art Guys were invited to perform at a small alternative art space called the Memphis Center for Contemporary Art. It was a bit of a homecoming for me. I knew Memphis.

The Memphis Center for Contemporary Art (MCCA), despite its highfalutin institutional-sounding name, was a small, scruffy, [artist-run](#) alternative space located in a storefront building down on lower Main, just south of downtown Memphis. It was a couple of blocks up from the intrepid [Arcade](#) diner and the old, then abandoned [train station](#), and a few blocks down from [Beale Street](#). Even in the late 1970's when I lived there I could see its potential. Others did too, and ten years later, when The Art Guys were there, the [cultural gentrification](#) was underway. Our presence was evidence of that.



Memphis Center for Contemporary Art (MCCA), South Main Street, Memphis, 1989, photos by the author

The Art Guys were the opening act for the main attraction, the composer and performer [Ellen Fullman](#), who was there to perform with her "[Long String Instrument](#)." I had met Ellen a few years prior during my involvement with [New Music America](#). It was nice to share the program with her as a fellow performer.

The Art Guys were the opposite of Ellen's [contemplative, serene, sonic meditations](#). We were in the midst of our early absurdist activities, trying to make as little sense as possible, and mostly succeeding. Many of our pieces for the stage at that time were irrational and somewhat frantic activities, a concerted concentration combined with a carefree chaos. An approximate comparison would be a sort of Marx Brothers/Fluxus/[Kipper Kids](#) mixture, yet distinct from all of them.



The Art Guys, installation for performance, Memphis Center for Contemporary Art (MCCA), Memphis, 1989, photos by the author



The Art Guys, evening of performance, Memphis Center for Contemporary Art (MCCA), Memphis, 1989, photos by the author

In the few days prior and leading up to our performance, we wandered the immediate neighborhood around the MCCA gathering discarded detritus to decorate the space in order to enliven and spruce up the back of the gallery which served as the stage. Around the block, behind the MCCA, on the adjacent street just to the east, was the Lorraine Motel. So we walked over.

We learned that the Lorraine had been closed and that it was to be [converted into a museum about civil rights](#). The entire grounds of the motel had been fenced off with chain link so there would be no visit to room 306. The morning of our performance some workers with equipment were there doing something with the sign. They were taking it down to refurbish it and were discarding many of the elements. We asked them if we could have the small metal stars that were attached to a screen mesh near the bottom of the sign. A shrugged mumbling reply, "Sure."

Just down the street from the sign workers was a woman who seemed to be camped out on the sidewalk surrounded by a makeshift tent and hand-painted protest signs. So we walked down to investigate.



Jacqueline Smith., Lorraine Motel, Memphis, 1989, photo by the author

We introduced ourselves and inquired about what she was doing. She said her name was Jacqueline Smith and that she had been camped out on the sidewalk for the past few months in protest of her [eviction from the Lorraine Motel](#). It turns out she was the last tenant there and had nowhere else to go. Now she was homeless.



Jacqueline Smith, Lorraine Motel, Memphis, 1988-90, photos by the Commercial Appeal and Thomas S. England/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images

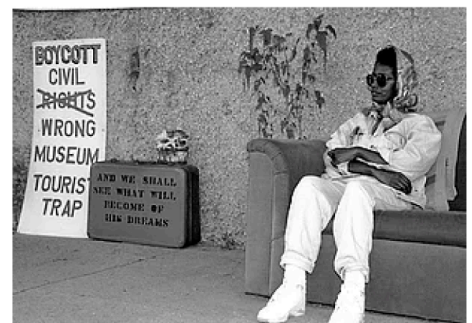
Articulate and well spoken, Jacqueline explained to us that she had [committed herself to living out in front of the Lorraine Motel](#) as a protest against converting it into a museum. The way she saw it, this would be the last thing that a champion of the oppressed and downtrodden would have wanted. Jacqueline reasoned that people would be better served if the place was left as affordable housing for people like her, not a [tarted up semi-Disney World knock-off tourist trap](#). We saw her point. As a consequence of our conversation, we befriended Jacqueline and later returned with a gift of a suitcase with stenciled cut-out text.



Jacqueline Smith with suitcase by The Art Guys, Lorraine Motel, Memphis, 1989, photos by the author

Over the years I've returned from time to time to pass by the Lorraine and to see if Jackie was still out there. It's been a long while since I've seen her. My understanding is that [she's still there](#).

I have never visited the [National Civil Rights Museum](#). I still have a metal star from the Lorraine Motel sign.



Jacqueline Smith with suitcase by The Art Guys, Lorraine Motel, Memphis, 1994/5, photos by the author and John Paul Jones III



memorial plaque, National Civil Rights Museum, Lorraine Motel, Memphis, present day



Chris Larson
"Lorraine Motel Sign Resited"
2016
ink jet print



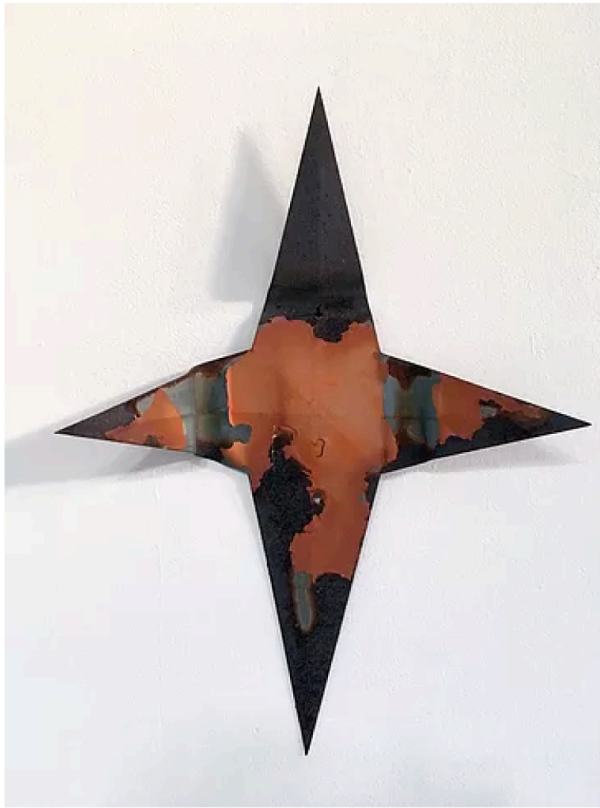
Sam Cranstoun
"Deconstructed monument
(Memphis, TN)"
2014
Acrylic, LEDs, neon
Dimensions variable, 4 parts



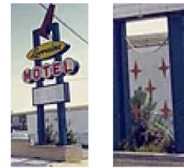
Lorraine Motel shower curtain
Fine Art America



hat
Gift Shop
National Civil Rights Museum



metal star from Lorraine Motel sign, collection of the author



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