

Isaka Shamsud-Din

American, born 1940

Hare, Lion, and Spider, 1967

Oil on canvas

Museum Purchase: Helen Thurston Ayer Fund, 85.39

Portraits of my friend from grade school, James Cunningham (the hare) and my twin brothers Cleve (the lion) and Steve (the spider), whose personal styles reminded me of those West African folktale characters that were the models for Br'er Rabbit stories that became popular in American books, film, and comics. I painted them live in three two-hour sittings in my San Francisco flat. "Black Power" had come to life and Pan-Africanism became an anthem, represented by the Pan-African flag and the ghost-like zebra. Expressing my desire for a unified African, African Diaspora people, reconnected to ourselves to reshape our world and save the planet. Cleve was a founder of KBOO FM Community Radio in Portland, Oregon.

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Brothers Phree, ca. 1990

Acrylic on wood

Museum Purchase: Robert Hale Ellis Jr. Fund for the Blanche Eloise Day Ellis and Robert Hale Ellis Memorial Collection, 91.7

For several years I sketched at a bar next door to my studio with the idea to capture some of that life, the meshing of figures/shapes, personalities, and my reflections. The painting, named for a black motorcycle club whose members sometimes relaxed there. Contrary to stereotype, no violent incidents occurred there in the nine years I was on the set. Peaceful people—everyday working folks. The painting combines several sketches. The pyramids I added ask the question, “What would we be doing, with knowledge of self—and slave reparations?” I’m sketching in the foreground, at a table on the left.

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Rock of Ages, 1976

Oil, gold leaf, and mirror on canvas

Gift of Damon Tempey, 2018.36.1

A portrait of my father, Isaac Edward Allen, Sr. (1898–1990). He was a master farmer, a magician with soils raising bountiful crops in 1947 without motorized equipment, with horses and mules in the backwoods of Queen City, in northeast Texas. Born in Utility, Louisiana, he later moved to Texas, where he married Geneva Jenkins (1918–2013). We were self-sustaining and independent due to our isolation and resourcefulness. In 1947, a group of armed white men took him away from our home. They beat him and left him for dead at a place named Bowie Hill. But he survived, travelled to Vanport City, Oregon, and sent for his wife and us ten children later. He moved to San Bernardino, California, in the 1960s and is posed in front of his garden. He was the first to encourage and support my growth and development as an artist.

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Babylon Dread, 1990

Oil on paper

Collection of Arlene and Harold Schnitzer, L2019.59.2

This is an old friend, Al Harris. He was a postal worker and really liked Reggae music. He was also a musician and was in a band called Sun Child. Al sang and played the thumb piano. I made an album cover for them too, but it never got released.

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For the Love, 1990

Oil on canvas

Collection of Arlene and Harold Schnitzer, L2019.59.3

This is a painting of a dear friend, Jean Vessup, and her daughter Aisha. It was an attempt to capture their warmth and closeness, a joy to behold. They were about the same height—4 feet 11 inches and 5 feet—small in stature, big in heart. This was a two-stage development, as many of my works are. I completed half of the piece at one live session in my studio, finishing it without the need for another sitting. The work flowed effortlessly and was finished in ten to twelve hours over a period of several days. The background is to accentuate and give movement and rhythm to the composition to complement the figures, the protective, confident gaze of the mother, the assured and secure gaze of the daughter.

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Land of the Empire Builders, 2019

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Artist, L2019.85.1

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As the Crow Flies, Portrait of Centralia, 1986

Iridescent oil pastel

Courtesy of the Artist, L2019.85.2