

WALK, IN THE DIRECTION YOU' GOIN' IN



The exploitation of farm workers, poverty and injustice forced a generation of African Americans to leave Alabama's Black Belt during the 1930s.

Many cast their visions north, to industrial Birmingham, to work in the rapidly expanding steel and iron mills. Others thought about leaving but lacked the resources.

Some boarded trains. Others walked. They left behind home and church and family; rural traditions and customs.

Families embarked on a journey of hope and optimism in search of a better way of life.

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Linoleum block relief prints with block-cut text, documenting one episode—out of many stories—of the struggle an African American family endured during their 1930s migration from the Black Belt to the northern industrial mill town of Birmingham, Alabama.

“goin’ no’t’h”

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Debra Riffe
D Riffe Design
P O Box 382322
Birmingham, AL 35238-2322

debra.riffe@gmail.com
www.debrariffe.com
www.driffe.blogspot.com

Photo Credit: Robert H. Eubanks

Debra Riffe
PRINTER

ABOUT THE ARTIST



DEBRA EUBANKS RIFFE is a native of Tupelo, Mississippi. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Howard University, College of Fine Arts, Washington, DC. Debra has traveled extensively and lived abroad for several years in Barranquilla, Colombia, South America.

Equally passionate about needlepoint as she is about block printing, several years ago Debra converted her original needlepoint designs into illustrations for block prints. This afforded her the opportunity to build inventory and to participate in juried art festivals. National and regional publications have featured Debra's needle art and block prints including *Needlepoint Now*, *Portico* and *Lipstick*. Additionally, her artwork has been profiled in *The Birmingham News* and *The Tupelo Daily Journal*. She was a featured artist in *Southern Living Magazine: Alabama People & Places*, August 2009.

Debra has received the honor of many juror awards. She has taught linoleum block relief printing at the Alabama Folk School at Camp McDowell, Nauvoo, Alabama and is, currently, teaching block printing at Samford University (Samford After Sundown).

Debra was a 2008 Award Recipient of a Grants to Individual Artists (GIA) presented by the Cultural Alliance of Greater Birmingham.

ARTIST STATEMENT

I enjoy the versatility and the immediacy of drawing with a pencil and the physicality of turning the wheel of a printing press. Through simplicity of form, I use basic art principles to convey shape, gesture, attitude, movement and emotion. My compositions are, exclusively, images of African Americans placed in rural southern surroundings, performing routine tasks in timeless, solitary reflective moments. These tasks speak of social status and identity; intimacy and a sense of place.

*"I illustrate activities and settings that I feel connected to."
— D. Riffe*



*"boss say, don't get trouble on yo' mind
and you be aw'rite"*

I appreciate the ordinary and I try to record details, within each print, that will stir an emotion the viewer might respond to. Magazines, books and the artwork of my favorite illustrators and artists are sources of inspiration. Occasionally, I will stage scenes and take digital pictures of friends and family, to use as reference photos, if I see a pose, an article of clothing or item that I find

interesting. I piece together whole images from various arrangements. My art is directly inspired by a time gone by—from the medium to the subject matter.



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THE PROCESS OF CUTTING A LINOLEUM BLOCK



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I begin every composition with a detailed pencil drawing. The drawing is reduced to basic line art which is drawn on translucent paper. I flip the drawing over and trace my image onto the surface of the linoleum block using carbon paper. The image is now ready to carve. Once I proceed there is no going back; whatever is extracted from the surface of the block cannot be replaced.

Using a variety of U- and V-shaped gouges, I remove areas which I do not want to print. The linoleum surface that remains uncut is in relief (raised) and will be covered with a thin layer of

black oil-based printers ink which is applied with an ink brayer (roller). Ink will not collect in the areas that have been cut away. The inked linoleum block is placed on the bed of a tabletop etching press and a sheet of high quality acid free printing paper is placed over the block. The paper and block are hand cranked through the press and the pressure from the rollers force the ink onto the surface of the paper.

Fine art prints are generally multiple images from a single master carved block. Each print is signed, titled and numbered just below the image area. The total number of impressions an artist decides to make for one image is referred to as an edition. Edition prints are numbered, with the first number being the impression number and the second number representing the entire edition, thus 14/50, is impression number 14 in an edition of 50. The numbering sequence does not necessarily reflect the order of printing. The edition number does not include proofs; only the total of prints in the numbered edition. Occasionally, I will produce an open (unnumbered) edition of prints.