



On the Beach at St. Tropez (The French Collection, Part 1: #8)

1991

Acrylic on canvas, printed and tie-dyed fabric

74 inches by 92 inches

(187.96 centimeters by 236.22 centimeters)

1. The beach is where I go to look at men. I like to see my men's faces on other men's bodies. J'aime l'amour, Pierrot. The beach is my place to go over that in my life. But you, my son, are mon amour de la verité. You and your sister are my flesh and blood, my life. These men are just my fantasy, ma fragilité.

2. Love, like a hand on a hot stove, may burn. I was very close to a man I met on the ship coming over here. He took care of me when I was homesick for my mother. I would have married him instead of your father, but he deserted me. Il m'aime compètement. Maybe because it was only for a minute.

3. Almost anything short-lived can be good. He knew that, I didn't. Pierrot, my son, you are a man now with a family of your own. Try to understand me. I grew up knowing I was destined to live in service to others, in the kitchen, in the bed. Suddenly, at age 16 I was an artist living in Paris.

4. I escaped the cotton fields of Georgia and the side streets of Harlem to live as une artiste in Paris. I had a life more full than I could have ever imagined. The French said I was beautiful, Pierrot. They called me Mademoiselle Précieuse. In America I would be just another black bitch with a broom and a house full of nappy headed kids.

5. Sometime I actually forget who I am and where I came from here. To the French I may be a beautiful black princess or an exotic Queen of the Nile, but they want me to remember that I am not French. I am not white; in fact, I am very black. And very different. In America, they may hate me for that. In France it is

[Left side]

enough to point me out and name me différente.

6. Being different stands for a lot in France where everyone descends from Louis XIV ou XVI, or whoever the aristocratic royalty is most grand et royal. But I escaped the Jim Crow clutches of America. So I smile when they call me black princess, remembering my former name is black bitch.

7. When I arrived in Paris in 1920, I was 16 years old, Pierrot. There were a lot of Negro artists here when I arrived, painters and writers and musicians all seeking opportunity. Some came broke with only \$5.00 to their names. But I had \$500.00, a lot of money in 1920. My Aunt Melissa gave it to me.

8. “Go to Paris and prove to me that it is worth giving you every dime that I have for you to be an artist,” she said. She was lying, you know. Aunt Melissa always has more where that came from. Auntie would be proud to see my pictures. I know she would be proud that they let me be an artist here, though I can scarcely say they have made me one.

9. I fought hard for what I have as an artist. There is no one here giving out careers. I arrived in Paris without friends, an ignorant child. I met Pierre, Sr., your father on the ship, too. Pierre, Sr. was American born, but both his mother and father were French. He liked me immediately, and, in spite of the fact that I did not love him, he refused to let me go.

10. You are such a beautiful boy, my son, and if you want to judge me it is your choice to do so. But it will only make us both sad. I cannot change my past or yours. I abhor criticism. It is so useless to be judged in your later years, when you have no time to change. We must learn to change all that is amer à doux, bitter to sweet.

11. People may want you to blame yourself as much as they blame you. But never let them convince you that you are worthy of blame. No matter how many mistakes you make. If you are trying to do something the mistakes are not your fault, though you should be man enough to pay for them.

12. “Should anything happen to me, do you art,” your father said just before he died. “You can do it, Willia Marie, my Queen. I love you and my children. Be sure you tell them that. You will ask Aunt Melissa to help you raise our children. She will come to France to live.”

13. “But you will not go back to America. That would destroy you and the children and everything I want for you.” When Pierre died everything was all tied up with lawyers, French bureaucratie et paperasse, red tape. I needed time to find myself. To grieve properly. Aunt Melissa never wanted to live abroad. She came and took you and Marlena back to America to live with her. And I let you go.

14. It was all I could do, my son. Is that so hard to understand?

I know you are not asking the question. But I am, Est-ce que tu m'aime? Je t' aime, I love you and Marlena intensely.

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Glenstone