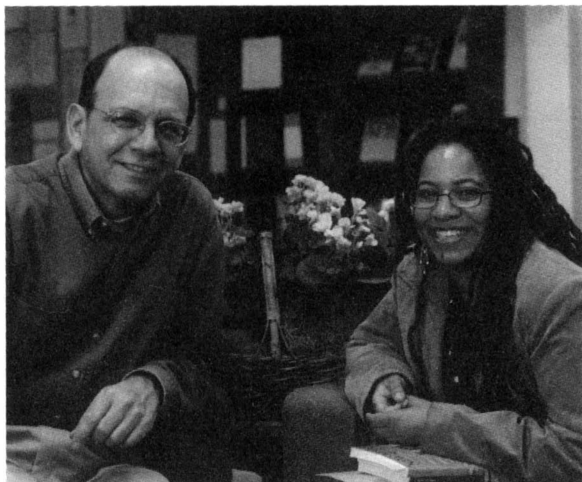
A Talk With Renée Stout



Robert Stewart with artist Renée Stout at the *New Letters* offices, October 2002. Photo: Betsy Beasley

"I AM TRYING TO CREATE ART that helps me put together what are only fragments," Renée Stout has written, "to try to create a whole." At roughly mid-career, Renée Stout, in person, reflects exactly that sense of inclusiveness and generosity. I was first introduced to her art by Robert Stackhouse, the artist featured in our previous issue, as we walked through the Belger Arts Center in Kansas City. The energy of Renée's personality seemed to jump out of her art, and led, eventually, to our first interview with a visual artist in *New Letters*.

Renée Stout was born in Junction City, Kan., in 1958 and grew up in Pittsburgh, Pa. She attended classes at the Carnegie Museum and later, in 1980, graduated from Carnegie-Mellon University with a bachelor of fine arts degree. Her early style was largely photo-realistic; when she moved to Washington, D.C., in 1985, she began to experiment with mixed-media assemblages, and other styles, many of which we represent in this issue.

Renée Stout's exhibit *Readers, Advisors, and Storefront Churches: A Mid-Career Retrospective* appeared at the Belger Center in the fall of 2002 (and is currently touring the United States). Other solo exhibitions have appeared at the National Museum of African Art-Smithsonian Institute, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, University of California-Santa Barbara, the Morgan Gallery in Kansas City, and the David Beitzel Gallery in New York.

—R.S.

To Put on Perfume & Make Guns

AN INTERVIEW WITH RENÉE STOUT

Conducted by Robert Stewart

NEW LETTERS: Renée, I have to start this conversation with something odd that just happened. You looked at the digital clock on this table—which is clicking away as we sit here—and saw what?

RENÉE STOUT: My birthdate: two, thirteen, fifty-eight.

NL: Well, that's a good way to find out when you were born. I also know that numbers are an important element of your artwork. Would that fit into the scheme of things in terms of a meaningful numerological event?

STOUT: The fact that that box was sitting here the whole time, and I didn't notice it until it has my birthdate, right then and there, well, let's say, this is where I'm supposed to be right now.

NL: How do numbers function in your art? In what ways do they influence what you do?

STOUT: It's interesting, because when I was in high school, one of the worst subjects for me was math. I've always hated numbers. I think, now, numbers are how I play with the idea of order—if you count, there is an order. At this point in my life, I want peace and some sort of order. Numbers have entered into my visual language as a way to explore those things. When I turned 40, I noticed my habit of putting numbers into my pieces—it was as if I were counting down the time, because now I'm feeling very mortal.

NL: Speaking of that, you've been influenced by both Christian and African spiritual traditions; and even within the Christian traditions, the backgrounds seem diverse. I'm wondering if you see this varied iconography as being in conflict, or if you are, once again, searching for a kind of unity?

STOUT: I am searching for harmony and unity, and I think I'm able to do that because I have a story when people ask me about religion in my own life. My mother and father often let me and my sister go to church with both of our grandmothers. One grandmother was Catholic at the time I was growing up; the other one was Baptist. So we'd go back and forth. My mother and father didn't go to church, but they instilled in us a strong sense of right and wrong, the fact of a higher power; they just never defined that for us. So religion wasn't really talked about at home. When I got older—I'd say, when I graduated from high school—I asked my mother and father, "How come you never made us go to church?" They said that when they were growing up, they were forced to go to church, and they had picked up on some of the hypocrisy in organized religion. They felt that they should let me and my sister make the choice about religion when we got older. Because they left it open for me, I'm not locked into one way of seeing what religion or

spirituality should be. I have this world view, which allows me to take anything that's positive from religion and mix it up. Most people might think that's an awful thing to do, but I feel free to do it, and it ends up in my work as a need for harmony among all religions. It's all to reach a higher goal. All religions have something interesting to offer. I'm trying to take the best from all of them.

NL: At some point you became intimately involved in Haitian and African vodou traditions, with all of that symbolism. How did that happen?

STOUT: As a child, I was invited to attend Saturday art classes at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh. It was an art class for talented children in the public schools. We would meet on Saturday mornings with other kids from the public schools who were talented in drawing. We would spend the afternoon drawing from the display cases, and I often saw a particular figure that came from Africa, which wasn't explained. It was carved in a human form but had nails all in it. Later, I discovered the National Museum of African Art, at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., which had a better way of describing objects, and I realized that the figure I had seen as a child was an African power figure. Being an African-American woman, I started an investigation into African religions and belief systems, comparing them to what we have here in Christianity, and the way those two things combine in, say, a city like New Orleans or a place like Haiti.

NL: Who is Fatima?

STOUT: Oh! Fatima is an alter-ego. She is, I think, the second of two important alter-egos that I've developed in my work over the years.

NL: Does she fit into this vodou tradition?

STOUT: Yes. Fatima does. It's hard to explain what she is. My first alter-ego was Madam Ching, who was a fortune teller and a root worker, as is Fatima. At the point in my life when I developed Madam Ching, at about age 31, I was just developing into a mature woman and going out on my own, and Madam Ching was probably in her 60s. I imagined that somebody in her 60s would be self-assured and confident, which is what I was striving to be as a mature woman; so the work based on Madam Ching allowed me to say and do things that I could blame on her and not be responsible for. As I got to be 40, I experienced a failed relationship, and then—it happens in your early 40s, I guess—a woman starts reevaluating her life, and Fatima emerged. Fatima is middle-aged and closer to where I am right now in life. Through Fatima, I'm able to continue to work things out, as a woman.

NL: You one time said that Fatima is the woman you aspire to be.

STOUT: She is.

NL: She has a transcendent quality about her?

STOUT: Yeah. I think she accepts herself much easier than I do at this point. She's not ashamed of anything she is; she says what she wants to say, and I think that's the woman that I'm growing into.

NL: You said recently that you're moving into painting, where you're working with a more textured surface; you've also been working with Madame Ching, Fatima, and the Church of the Crossroads in what might be called constructs and assemblages.

STOUT: Yes. Found and constructed objects.

NL: It seems to me that your art has a kind of gritty quality—I don't want "gritty" to have the negative connotations that it might.

STOUT: No, that's the perfect word.

NL: This is not a pristine, easy, corporate—

STOUT: Right.

NL: —kind of artwork. And do you find that your audience responds to you in the ways that you hope it would?

STOUT: Well, it's interesting. I was actually trained as a painter at Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh; but I did not have sculpture courses. So, when just painting on a canvas became boring to me, I decided to work with texture, found objects, and bring all kinds of things into the work. I started doing constructions and mixed media—that kind of thing. Recently I've revisited painting, but now my approach to painting is different from when I started out, having worked through that process of doing sculpture and making constructions. Even my painting, now, is tactile and manipulated more than just by using a brush on canvas. It's more physical.

NL: One of the reasons that we at *New Letters* magazine were drawn to your artwork is because of this tactile, almost edgy quality. I mean, some of it is highly political. You have a wonderful piece that reminds me of a Joseph Cornell box.

STOUT: He was a big influence on me.

NL: It's a box structure called "Baby's First Gun"—which is hilarious and terrifying at the same time. Did this confrontational attitude develop slowly? I know you started out as a photo-realist painter.

STOUT: I was raised in Pittsburgh and left in my 20s; and I guess when you're younger it's all about you, and you're figuring out how teenagers are and young adults are. At age 27, when I moved to Washington, D.C., which is the most political city in the world, I guess I began to realize what was going on around me politically and socially, and I wanted to voice my opinion. So that grittiness that you talk about is how I'm trying to reflect the world I see in D.C. I had to express that. I wanted the viewer to feel how gritty it is because some people don't witness these things first hand—it's something on television. But I wasn't removed from it; I was immersed in it. So even if viewers don't see those things in the world, they get to feel them through my artwork. I'm glad that's the word you chose, because that's exactly what I want it to be—gritty.

NL: You use language in your art a lot, and you actually apprenticed yourself to a sign painter at one point, I understand.

STOUT: Yes. When I graduated from Carnegie Mellon, in 1980, I couldn't find a job in the city that related to art; I had remembered that in high school I often passed a sign painter's shop on the way home. So one day I decided to go down and ask that painter to teach me how to paint signs. He was busy at work at his long board along the wall, and he said, "Sure, come on in." Over a few months, he showed me the brushes that I would need and the paints that I would need, and I got some jobs painting signs. That became very much a part of some of the subject matter in my paintings at the time, which would have been the early '80s. Later, when

I moved to D.C. in 1985, and as recently as a few years ago, I started hanging out with poets and writers. Through them I realized how images can be created with words. That opened up a new way of looking at image-making for me. So I decided to start writing within the work, because it extends the metaphor and allows viewers to create images, themselves, that build on what I've given them visually.

NL: Can I ask you to read a couple of passages from your art? I like "The All Souls House of Prayer."

STOUT: I'll tell you what I've also learned from poets is revision. So that is actually one of the first versions of this piece, and I think the latest version is better. This is on my piece called "All Souls House of Prayer."

> At the corner of 6th and "S" Streets, NW I stop to examine a sun-bleached chicken bone covered with ants on the sidewalk. A gray car pulls up to the curb. "Hey, how 'bout it babe," says the squat old man behind the wheel, assuming I must be searching for a lost crack ball. "Do I look like a crackhead to you," I snapped, standing up, arms akimbo. "You better get on, asshole." He speeds off, tires squealing. I round the corner and spot the single white roller skate in the grass, under the wrought-iron steps of the All Souls House of Prayer. I check to make sure it's still there every time I walk to the subway.

NL: I love the influence of the sign painting in your art. I'm particularly happy every time I look at the beef and pepper steak sandwich, which is in your piece called—

STOUT: "Food."

NL: "Storefront Church," isn't it?

STOUT: It's actually called "Food" but, yeah, people call it that because "Storefront Church" is written on the bottom. It's actually called "Food."

NL: The style of sign painting helps me, as a viewer, engage in the work on a day-to-day level. I want to stay on the idea of your more political expressions, though. I heard you earlier talking about children who turn to crime; you said something to the effect that those children didn't have the ability to use art as an outlet. You seemed to think that society is not forgiving enough of its children who become problems.

STOUT: Yeah, because, you know what it is? Adult society is pretty much responsible for the behavior of its children, in that we have to look at what images and behaviors we present to them—they're still in their period of formation. What we show them or present to them is what helps them become adults and forms the way they'll be. The cues they take are from what we represent. We have to take the blame for why children are turning out the way they are these days.

NL: That's becoming a rare attitude, isn't it?

STOUT: Yes. I brought this up the day you were listening to my talk about how children are being tried as adults when they commit certain crimes. We need to take a look at that. Why do we try a child as an adult when a child is a child? What purpose does that serve? What do we get out of that? I don't know the answers. I just want to know the thinking of people who've decided that this should be done.

NL: You have a startling artwork that's an assemblage/painting called "Point of View," in which the viewer is looking down the barrel of a gun. The art is uncompromising; yet you also have a sequence of guns

you've created with the names of some cultural heroes, such as the "Harriet Tubman" gun. That's harder for me to figure out.

STOUT: Well, it's hard for me to figure out, too. I mean, I think that gun piece "Point of View" is the one I'm still wrestling with and deciding what side of it I stand on. That was the thing I was asking myself, living in Washington, D.C. At times, there's a high rate of crime, and even as we speak, right now, there's a sniper going around shooting people. It's very disturbing. I lived on a street in D.C.—O Street Northwest—which was drug infested. They had an institution on the street that feeds the homeless, called S.O.M.E (So Others Might Eat), so I saw hundreds of homeless people everyday. Then a couple of children or, I mean, young men, whom I got to know and spoke to every day, got killed. So, my frustration about guns increased. One day I was sitting around with a group of poets discussing how to express our frustrations through artwork. Can you really do it? Is it immediate enough? So much gets lost in the translation when you're trying to create a piece, because anger might pass while you're still working on that piece; and you can't really express the way it was when you actually felt that pain or that anger.

One morning I got up and made a gun out of wood, bits of metal and bits of technology that were around the studio; and I wrote on a piece of paper: "After our conversation, I woke up with the overwhelming need to put on perfume and make guns." I had the idea of just wanting to be a woman, be beautiful; but the world I live in doesn't allow me to be that superficial—there's too much to see and think about. The metaphor I chose to express that was a gun, because it would grab the viewer. Once the viewers were sucked in by seeing this gun imagery and wondering what that's about, they would have to rethink what this gun is. Like you said, they were all named after heroes—Harriet Tubman, or John

Brown—those people fought to make society more equal. That's the other side of what a gun does. It also defends people. Still, to this day, I don't know where I stand on that issue. In a city like Washington, D.C., for the average person like me, a handgun is illegal. I can't use a handgun to protect my home. But the criminals have guns, so I'm left feeling vulnerable. I'm the fine, upstanding citizen who can't have a gun to protect myself. Meanwhile, there's a sniper running around. So how do I sort that out—you know what I'm saying? I don't know how I feel about it.

NL: So, your art is saying there are no easy answers?

STOUT: Mmm . . . sometimes they're simple, and sometimes they're complicated. It's both. I do still have the idea that there are some things in life that are simple.

NL: Name one simple thing.

STOUT: OK, I was discussing this yesterday with a woman who's going to be doing an article and came to take some pictures of the pieces I have up in the gallery. I said, look at our society; we have such a rich country. Yet I've looked out my front window and seen people without homes. Some people have way more money than they need; some people have nothing. So, if you have way more than you need, if you have more millions and billions than you can spend in your lifetime, why do you have to have more? It's simple to me: You take some of that—you don't just give it away—but you put it in places that help to change homelessness or that benefits people who don't have access to that kind of money. That's simple to me. That's just the simplest thing in the world.

NL: Could you say something about your work called "Between Night and Day?" I want to come back to another piece from your artwork, if you would.

STOUT: It was inspired by a trip I took down to New Orleans with a friend. I've been going to New Orleans off and on since about 1990. And I took a friend down there back in '98, and he was overwhelmed by the environment. In New Orleans, there are plenty of shops that sell roots and potions, and that's what's laid out on this board—a bottle of liquid (you don't know what it is), and a knife that I've actually carved. Some people look at it and don't realize that it's a knife that I've carved out of wood; I like the idea of trying to fool the viewer's eye by creating things that they think are found objects. Then there's some text. It's just a mysterious little layout, and a viewer doesn't really know what the ceremony's all about, or the little ritual's all about, but it starts like this:

> We visit Kruz in his shop.
> He announces, "There are
> 10 smells that make up the
> smell of New Orleans. Can
> you name them?"
>
> We laugh, because we had
> just had that discussion.
>
> I start naming:
> Urine
> old wood
> beer
> food, spices.
>
> Slim starts naming:
> Sex, pheremones, sweat.
> Kruz starts naming:

shit (horse's)
coffee
vetiver
magnolia (seasonal)
the Mississippi river . . . .

STOUT: That's part of it. The piece kind of sums up my feelings of New Orleans. A cast of characters moves in and out of spaces. It's like with the Fatima pieces, my alter ego. Fatima's friend Nipper wrote this in her journal right after she visited Fatima, who was trying to help her through some things. It's a portrait of Nipper, called "Nipper in a Trance":

> Saw the root worker, Fatima.
> Wanted to get to the bottom of why my head and
> heart are never in concert.
>
> In a trance, I recall the recurring dream, the
> one where I'm walking around a big, old house I
> just bought. I'm happy, because, even though it needs
> a lot of work, it's mine. Suddenly, at the end of a
> long hallway, I discover a door I hadn't seen
> before. I open it to find four or five large rooms.
> I stand in the doorway, overwhelmed by
> the possibilities, afraid to step through.

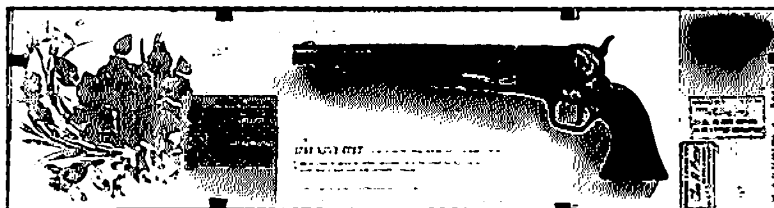
NL: I notice that so much of your work, even though it's confrontational, edgy, is really directed toward self-realization. You've said that you want people to get out of art a growing sense of their own identity.

STOUT: Part of me feels like my art should be about self-examination, and then I also want to record what I'm observing outside of myself. So there's a balance. I want to know, "Where do I fit in this?" When there's any kind of a confrontation, I ask: "What is my part in it?" I have to examine myself to understand what's going on outside, as

well, and what is my part in it, and how can I contribute to it or how can I make it better? I have to look at myself as one individual and think about the conflict within myself, as well.

NL: It's an interesting paradox in general, in that art almost always comes out of the immediate, the personal, the particular. Yet, people are always looking for a universal connection to it.

STOUT: When you do something that's highly personal, those are the pieces that people tend to understand the most. We all have questions about our existence, and I think when we're honest about that, others can recognize the same feelings. These are questions they've probably asked of themselves, or, you know, have discovered in the same search.



RENÉE STOUT
HARRIET CARRIED A GUN LIKE THIS, 1998. WATERCOLOR & COLLAGE, 7 X 28 INCHES.
COURTESY: THE JOHN AND MAXINE BELGER FOUNDATION. PHOTO BY DAN WAYNE.