CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECT

THE WHAT’S GOOD PROJECT: FINDING EVIDENCE FOR HOPE

In 2018, Drinkwater began The What’s Good Project: an ongoing collaborative archive of “what’s good” in communities across the United States via interviews, stories, and paintings. The What’s Good Project builds upon sociologists Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan F. Flora’s Community Capitals framework of asset-based community development that measures seven areas of community health: natural, political, social, human, cultural, built, and financial. According to research, shifting focus from community challenges to recognizing and strengthening community assets can result in more effective community improvement. In the last five years, Drinkwater has conducted interviews with nearly two dozen residents in Iowa and Mississippi and with a place-based focus. These interviews have inspired eleven painting series, which have been exhibited in both Iowa and Mississippi, and writings that can be found here: whatsgoodproject.com

Deep Roots, acrylic on wood
36” x 48”, 2022
At 15 people per square mile, Sharkey County, Mississippi, remains both very agrarian and intensely wild, as it houses both the Delta National Forest, the only bottomland hardwood national forest in the US, and the Theodore Roosevelt National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

Open to Change, acrylic on wood
20” x 30”, 2021
Despite a small population, Water Valley, Mississippi, has been home to one of the first craft breweries in the state, Fat Possum Records, Violet Valley Bookstore (Mississippi’s only queer feminist bookstore), and Base Camp Coding, a free, non-profit software development academy for Mississippi high-school seniors. Locals cite Water Valley residents are being open to change and willing to engage difference.

When I asked Oskaloosa folks to tell me the community secrets of collaboration, more than one person described the ability to sit around a table together and make things happen. Not to put too fine a point on it, but sitting together, face-to-face, on a regular basis is a powerful habit for building goodwill in communities because it builds social capital.

Buxton, acrylic on wood
12” x 12”, 2023
In 2022, the Nelson Pioneer Farm in Oskaloosa, Iowa, hosted Celebrating Buxton, a fundraiser to preserve the history of Buxton, a former coal-mining town in Mahaska county. Buxton was an integrated and predominantly African American community from 1880 to 1920. The Buxton community included Black doctors, lawyers, and business owners, as well as an integrated YMCA, community pool, and the Buxton Wonders, a winning Iowa baseball team.