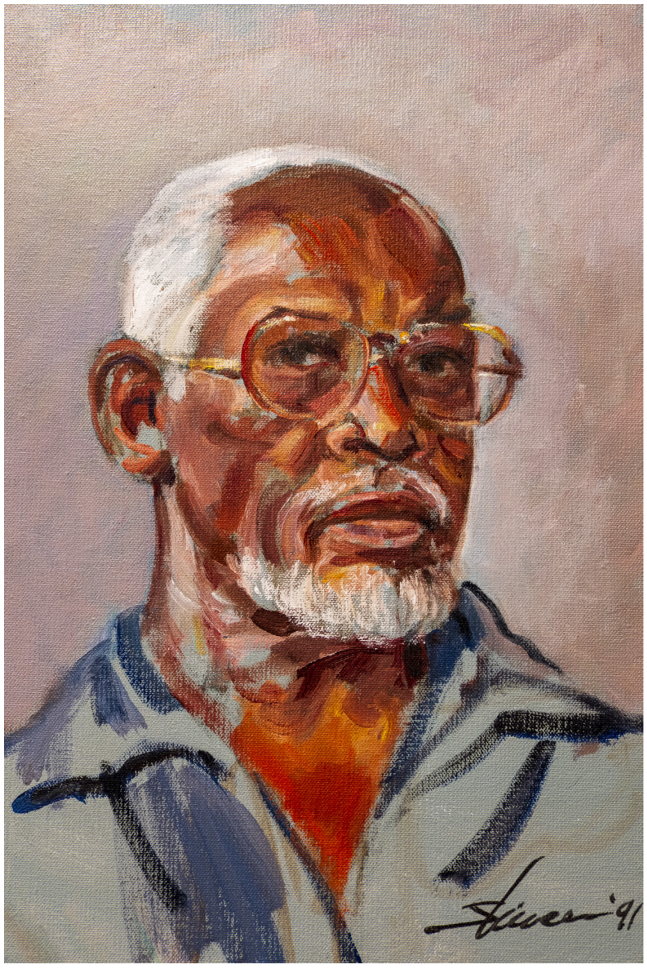
# Clarence Shivers—Tuskegee Airman's Art and Influence

José Antonio Arellano

The work of Clarence Shivers— a painter, sculptor, Tuskegee Airman, and retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel— demonstrates how art can embody in form the otherwise intangible qualities so lauded by military culture. Shivers's oeuvre exudes a belief in the power of determination, fueled by exceptional competence, to resolutely resist subjugation. His paintings and sculptures enable an aesthetic through which the recognition of excellence assumes the weight of a national history in which such recognition had been foreclosed.

The direct address of this self-portrait's gaze, for example, offers a facial expression that solicits our interpretive judgment, calling forth a response from the viewer in which one's recognition is normative. You should, upon looking at this painting, recognize the marks of intellect, the embodiment of dignity. And if you really look at the painting, you might recognize, in the frankness of the gaze, the depiction of judgment, as it were, looking back. The portrait acknowledges the viewer, holding us to account. Like the life of its artist, the painting leads by example, calling us to rise to the occasion it brings into being.




***Self-Portrait*, 1991**
**Collection of Peggy Shivers / Photo by Stacy J. Platt**

Shivers's most well-known work, *Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, is located among the statues of the United States Air Force Academy's Honor Court, near the Cadet Chapel. Referring to his statue, Shivers describes his desire to capture the pride he felt as a Tuskegee Airman:

***The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, 1998**
**United States Air Force Academy / Photo by José Antonio Arellano**

> I wanted to get that [sense of pride] into that sculpture to be seen by other people. Not only pride but *competence*, the fact that he would be standing, looking at you and saying, 'I *know* I'm good,' because that's the way I was. When I finished flying training at Tuskegee, I never thought I'd do that. I hadn't even finished high school. But when I finished that program, I realized at that point I could do any damn thing I wanted to do if I set my mind to it. And believe me, I've lived that.[1]

Notice the revealing slip in his account when he describes the statue as "looking at you." The life-sized statue is resolutely *not* looking at us while he holds a parachute over his shoulder and looks toward the sky. The slip reveals the extent to which Shivers had the viewer in mind as he created a statue that is not ostentatiously performing competence so much as embodying it without the need for an audience. This competence is a central feature of the sculpture, and our task is to recognize it.

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***The Tuskegee Airman WW II*, 1980s-90s**
**Photo courtesy of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center**

A retrospective exhibition at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center in 2024 provided evidence of Shivers's ability to excel in what he set his mind to accomplish. The exhibition, titled *Clarence Shivers: Experimenting with Form*, displayed the impressive range of his artistic practice. From landscapes to portraiture, abstract paintings to sculptures, the work on display showed Shivers's curiosity, experimentation, and exceptional skill[2].

The various works on display allowed viewers to track the recurring motif of an upward gaze depicted in paintings and sculpture. A smaller bust, titled *The Tuskegee Airmen*, provided access to the facial expression that is otherwise more difficult to

examine closely on the USAFA statue. Even as viewers could look closely at the bust's face, its gaze looks past the beholder with a furrowed brow that bespeaks the determination so prominent in Shivers's figurative work. This expression exudes calm self-assurance in one's ability. Such assurance is evident throughout Shivers's life. He had never sculpted before taking on the USAFA statue. Determined to find a means to commemorate the Tuskegee Airmen, he effectively taught himself how to sculpt and sold small sculptures such as this bust to help fund the statue's creation.

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After the successful reception of *Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, Shivers continued to sculpt, focusing his efforts on depicting proud African Americans whose competence fueled their perseverance in the face of violent marginalization.

***Lt General Benjamin O. Davis***
***Military Aviation Pioneer*, 1980s-90s**
**Photo courtesy of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center**

This bust of Lieutenant General Benjamin O. Davis honors the Tuskegee Airmen's commander and the exceptional life he led. Davis transferred from the prestigious University of Chicago to attend the US Military Academy in 1932, where he graduated in the top 20% of his class in 1936.[3] He was the first black cadet to attend West Point in the 20th century, enduring far more than the usual strife of cadet life. He was one of the first black pilots

to see combat. The Commander of the 99th Fighter Squadron (the first black flying unit) and the 332nd Fighter Group, Davis was instrumental in the desegregation of the American Armed Forces. His life is a resounding testament to the power of individual achievement to enact social change.

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Shivers did not reserve the upward gaze for his military-inspired art. In this painting, a boy looks toward the sky expectantly. The painting reminds me of a scene in Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son*, wherein the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, looks wistfully at an airplane flying overhead. "I could fly one of them things if I had a chance," he "mumbled" to a friend, who in turn responds, "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you *could* fly a plane."[4] The scene, like Wright's novel, highlights the structural conditions limiting personal desires, thus foregrounding the limits of individual gumption in the face of legalized segregation ("if they let you") and poverty ("if you had money"). In his painting, however, Shivers depicts a far more optimistic view that contrasts with the bleaker tone of Wright's naturalism. Whereas Wright depicts a boy who appears to have grown up without a father, Shivers's tableau depicts the strength of the father's

***Strength of the Chain*, 1990s**
**Photo by Stacy J. Platt**

arms and hands, the size of which appears out of proportion against the rest of the family. In the background, a porch faintly indicates a home that secures the family. The painting thus provides an addendum to the infamous "Moynihan Report," published as *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965). Serving as Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan identifies a "tangle of pathology" within the "culture" of African Americans resulting from nonnormative households lacking father figures.[5] This painting does not offer a counternarrative to Moynihan's critique so much as a reinforcement of its assumptions. The image of a nuclear family provides the emotional foundation, enabling the boy's ambitions.

***The Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen*, ca. 1993**
**Photo courtesy of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center**

In *The Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen*, Shivers develops the optimistic view that propelled his life. The painting lacks a depicted horizon line, which allows the sky to envelop the subjects.

The only limitations on the painted sky are those of the canvas's borders, suggesting that the sky, here, is not the proverbial limit. The depicted desire for flight could thus be understood metaphorically as a depiction of ambition itself. Shivers's work focuses on the more positive effects of post-WWII military service, which led to improved policies for racial integration. He could paint with such assurance because his life affirms his belief in the power of a determined mind. Shivers received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Bradley University, where he graduated with Honors. He taught art at Jackson State University until his services as a pilot were needed during the Korean War. Shivers remained in the Air Force until retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel. He and his wife, Peggy Shivers, lived in Spain for a decade until they returned to the US, selecting Colorado Springs as their permanent home. Yet, black veterans could not always take advantage of their veteran benefits, including the low-cost mortgages and low-interest loans to start small businesses. According to the Smithsonian American Art Museum, "[B]lack veterans were not able to take advantage of this [military-provided] benefit because banks would not make loans for mortgages in black neighborhoods. Additionally, they faced rampant racism if they attempted to buy into suburban neighborhoods, which at the time were overwhelmingly white."[6]

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Not simply a convention of military statuary or a gestural motif associated with Shivers's depicted pilots, the upward gaze recurs in a small sculpture of Joseph Cinqué (Sengbe Pieh), who led a revolt on the Spanish slave ship *La Amistad* in 1839. The sculpture presents a symbol of liberation and heroic resistance against the immorality and illegality of the slave trade. Pieh emblematically stands atop the *Amistad's* anchor, which is connected to a severed chain. Part of the chain wraps around Pieh's back and figuratively morphs into a snake, which Pieh has hacked with the machete he wields in his right hand.

***Early Americans*, 1991 (painting, left) and *Cinqué* (sculpture) 1980s-90s**
**Photo by Stacy J. Platt**

This heroic symbolism contrasts with the more somber painting pointedly titled *Early Americans*. Whereas Pieh fights against enslavement by taking the metaphorical serpent of slavery in his hands, the painting depicts the horrific conditions of the transatlantic slave trade and the more tragic underpinnings of this country's founding. So, although a thread of optimism ties together many of Shivers's works of art, Shivers was not shy about confronting a far more brutal reality. Indeed, notice the central seated figure, whose furrowed brow and intense gaze stare directly at the beholder.

This portrait of Martin Luther King invokes the double exposure composition of 1980s photographic portraiture. Dr. King's upward gaze repeats the aura of hope characteristic of Shivers's art. The painting appears formally bisected, with a lighter right-hand side illuminating Dr. King's profile. Yet, the painting includes multiple light sources, as made evident in the shadows appearing on the other subjects' faces. A figure on the lower left-hand side also tilts his head upward with his eyes shut, his face bisected by the light coming from the left-hand side. The painting's composition brings together disparate walks of life: a younger man wearing a sports jersey is supported by an older worker wearing denim overalls, and a white clergyman walks alongside a black woman. Most of the subjects appear to join each other in song, with their heads held up, reaffirming the hope in Dr. King's gaze.

***Portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King*, 1980s**
**Photo by Stacy J. Platt**

Shivers's focus on optimism might appear as an example of what Lauren Berlant could characterize as the "cruel optimism," the attachments to unattainable ideals that structure one's longing by justifying one's misery.[7] Although Shivers tended to be motivated by optimism, however, his art also includes somber acknowledgments of optimism's limits.

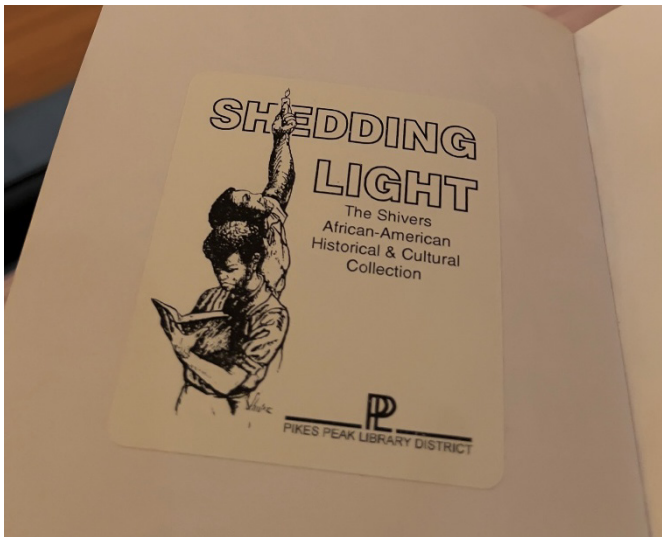
In contrast to the previous painting of Dr. King, the depicted figures in this image open their


**"Free At Last: Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Civil Rights Leaders* (1983 Miller High Life Calendar), Miller Brewing Company**
**Photo courtesy of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center**

mouths in anguish, not song, mourning the death of a young man. A white man looks away with his hand in his pocket as if to indicate the futility of his efforts to help or, more sinisterly, to indicate his complicity in the tragic scene. The hope we can associate with Shivers's use of the upward gaze here is *foreclosed* by death and grief. The expression "Free at Last" is juxtaposed with the realities of the ongoing struggles of the Civil Rights Movement.

**Image of the Shivers African American Historical and Cultural Collection label, which includes Shivers's drawing *Shedding Light*.**

**Photo by José Antonio Arellano**




In the 1980s, the Miller Brewing Company commissioned Shivers to create two calendars, *Civil Rights Leaders* in 1983 and *Black Political Firsts* in 1986. According to Peggy Shivers, because he was responsible for creating the images and the accompanying text, he needed to research the significant historical figures that would be the calendars' subjects. He went to his local library in Colorado Springs, but, as she puts it, he "came back… very disappointed. He just didn't find that much about African Americans in the library at that time."[8] Typical of the Shiverses' refusal to accept the

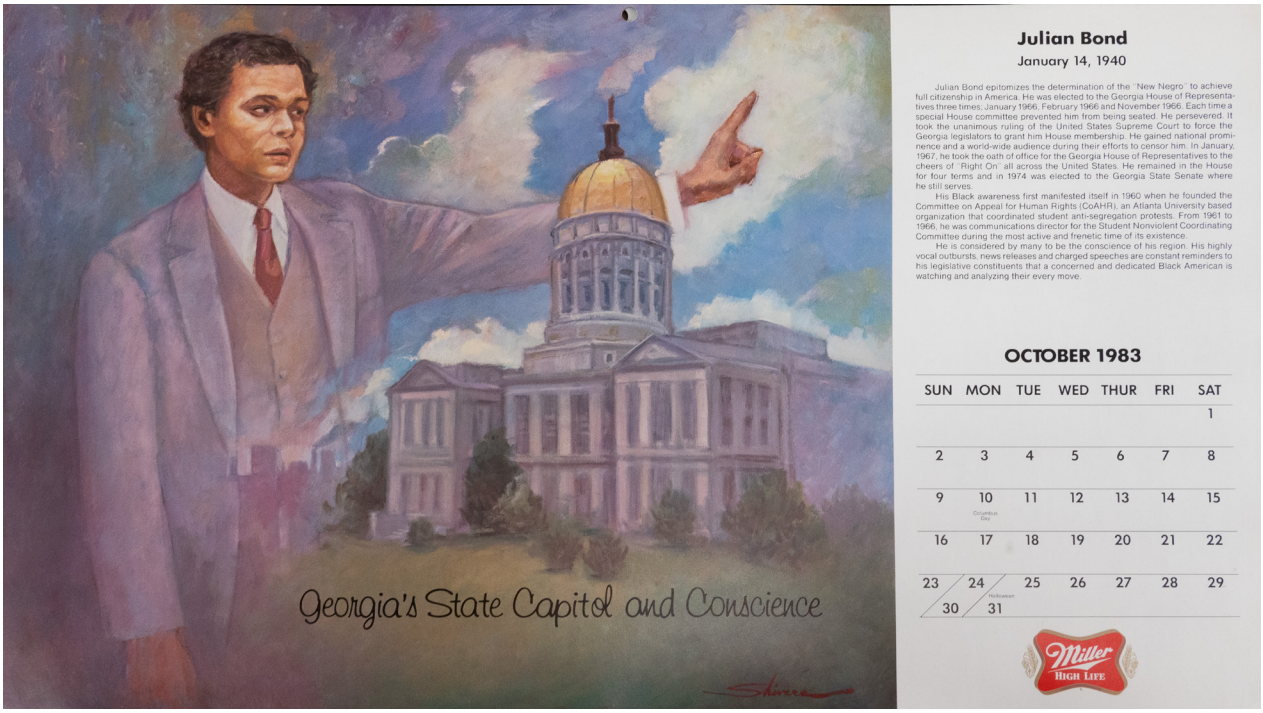

**Two examples of the books made available in the Shivers African American Historical and Cultural Collection.**

***Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II***
**by J. Todd Moye, 2010**

***Flight: The Story of Virgil Richardson, A Tuskegee Airman in Mexico***
**by Ben Vinson III, 2004**

**Photo by José Antonio Arellano**

limitations of their circumstances, they decided to dedicate some of the proceeds of an art sale to establish a fund for the Pikes Peak Library District. The library books purchased through the Shivers Fund constitute The Shivers African American Historical & Cultural Collection. The books in the collection include a label with a drawing by Shivers, titled *Shedding Light*, which reinforces his belief in achievement enabled by mental fortitude. In the drawing, one figure reaches toward the sky with a lit candle, illuminating the other figure, who is absorbed in reading. The upward gestures we have seen repeated in Shivers's art here allude to the enlightening power of literacy. Eventually, the Shivers Fund expanded to support an ongoing concert series and educational workshops in Colorado Springs, highlighting the contributions of African Americans to classical music.[9]




**"Georgia's State Capitol and Conscience: Julian Bond," *Civil Rights Leaders* (1983 Miller High Life Calendar), Miller Brewing Company**
**Photo courtesy of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center**

This painting of Julian Bond, included in the 1983 *Civil Rights Leaders* calendar, depicts the prominent Civil Rights leader Julian Bond (1940-2015). Co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Bond also became the first president of the Southern Poverty Law Center. He was involved in efforts to register African Americans to vote and served as the Chairman of the NAACP for over a decade. Although Bond was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 1965, the Georgia legislature initially denied his seat because of his opposition to the Vietnam War.[10] Bond's case went to the Supreme Court, which voted in his favor. He was seated in the House of Representatives in 1966. Shivers captures Bond's resolve by repeating the themes of ambition and progress shown through gestures of upward movement. Pointing to the sky, Bond's depiction implies the possibilities that await. His figure visually emerges with Georgia's buildings, indicating his place within the political scene despite the opposition attempting to keep him out.

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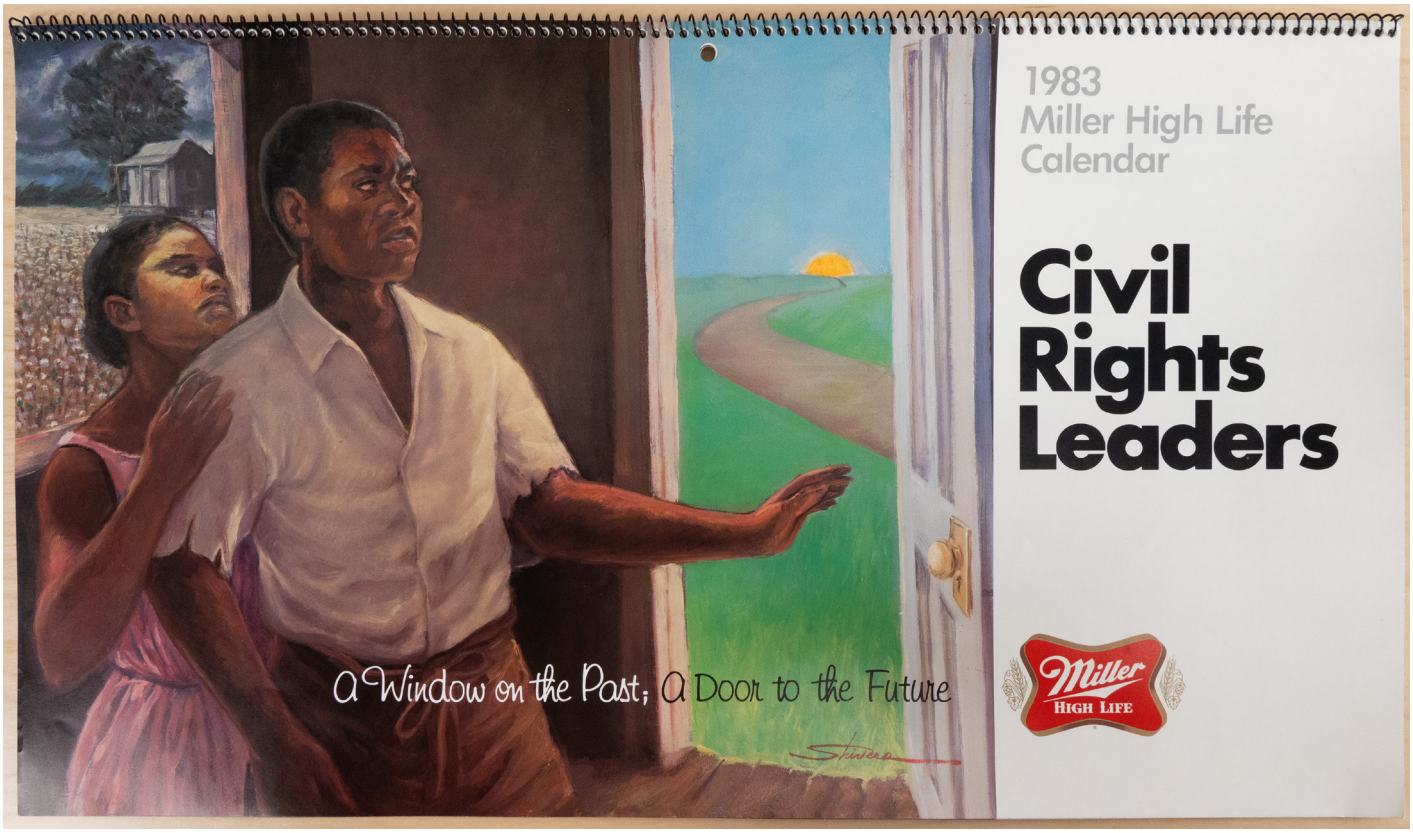
The painting on the cover of Shivers's 1983 *Civil Rights Leaders* offers a visual primer to the calendar's themes. A window reveals a grim landscape, indicating the violent history of slavery and sharecropping. The open door leads to a more optimistic future, represented by a path to a brighter horizon. Shivers represents the belief that courage and fortitude are necessary for the figures who are caught between the past and potential future. It is as if the painting suggests that they need only grab their partner's hand and take a bold step outside the familiar shelter and into the world of possibility. Shivers's calendar would thus justifiably be charged with the bootstrap mentality acerbically criticized by the political scientist Adolph Reed, Jr. Reed lambasts the standard narrative trope evident in biopic films depicting the lives of Civil Rights leaders. To Reed, these films appear to say to their viewers:

> [Here is a] Great POC [Person of Color] You Should Know About Who Accomplished Much (i.e., Was Successfully Great) Against All Odds And It's Uplifting To Know That You Could Be the Same If You Work Hard and Apply Yourself and Pursue Your Dreams Whatever They Might Be Against All Odds; Then the Force of Your Exemplary Character Will Show Through and Things Will Change (the Voting Rights Act Will Pass, You'll Make the NBA or the Red Carpet, or Be Able to Buy a House on Those Nurses' Aide Wages—Whatever) and You'll Be a Success At Least in Your Own Mind.[11]




**"A Window on the Past, A Door to the Future," *Civil Rights Leaders* (Cover, 1983 Miller High Life Calendar), Miller Brewing Company**
**Photo courtesy of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center**

Reed highlights the limitations of the ideology that posits self-esteem as a magical catalyst that (somehow) transmutes structural realities. His barbed juxtaposition of nurses' aide wages and real estate prices foregrounds the all-too-real conditions that limit gumption. Strategic mass

mobilizations, labor organizing, and class-centered political efforts lead to change that accrues, not simply the promotion of self-esteem made possible by models of racial uplift.

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I want to suggest, though, that Shivers was aware of the shortcomings of an overly simplistic belief in individual gumption detached from the laborious struggle of collective organizing. In fact, in this painting of Fannie Lou Hamer, he appears to comment on the very


**"The Shareless Sharecropper: Fannie Lou Hamer," *Civil Rights Leaders* (1983 Miller High Life Calendar), Miller Brewing Company**
**Photo courtesy of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center**

shortcomings of overly optimistic art itself. Notice the framed image on the background wall that appears more joyous when compared to Hamer's frank look of tired exasperation. Considered alongside Shivers's repeated use of an upward, hopeful facial tilt, the contrast between the two depicted faces qualifies optimism by emphasizing the painstaking work of

ongoing political action. The document on Hamer's lap references her work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to register African Americans to vote, for which she was intimidated, beaten, and dispossessed.[12] Hamer was born into a family of Mississippi sharecroppers, whom she helped pick cotton from a young age. As she became involved in organizing efforts, she developed a reputation for her impassioned speeches. In one speech, she refers to the efforts necessary to produce change, stating, "And you can always hear this long sob story: 'You know it takes time.' For three hundred years, we've given them time. And I've been tired so long, now I am sick and tired of being sick and tired, and we want a change. We want a change in this society in America…"[13] Note the extent to which Shivers's depiction of Hamer intelligibly embodies the phrase, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired." Shivers's painting is thus decidedly not an example of what Tina Post describes as the "Black inexpression" characteristic of the "Deadpan."[14] While Post tracks what she views as a history of performative inexpression that frustrates interpretation, Shivers's painting remains urgently legible in light of a history of political activism.

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In Shivers's retrospective exhibition, the closest I saw to what Tina Post describes as a "deadpan" expression is found in the painting *Siesta*. The painting contains two faces, neither of which features the hopeful facial expressions and upward gestures characteristic of Shivers's work. A younger boy's profile shows that he may be looking down if his eyes are not closed entirely. The more prominently depicted woman neither looks toward the sky nor at the beholder. Even with such expressive withholding in view, this portrait invites our interpretive efforts. The woman's eyes suggest the pronouncement of critical judgment—of the boy,

perhaps, or of the viewer she appears to ignore. Although I have difficulty naming the figures' expressions, I do not doubt this woman's confidence or that she is *aware* of her self-assurance.

***Siesta*, 1993**
**Photo courtesy of Colorado Fine Arts Center**

I can surmise from her expression that she does not need me to affirm her self-regard or confirm her sense of beauty. The painting as a whole does not require me or any other beholder to complete its meaning; instead, we are prompted to recognize the meaning the painting formally embodies. A vortex emanates around the figures in the painting's background, focusing the viewers' attention and perhaps implying a generational relationship connecting the two figures otherwise separated by age. The painting appears to represent an injunction levied by

the older woman to the young boy to remain awake (thereby counteracting the titular "siesta") and aspire toward a higher purpose.

Shivers thus invokes the "black aesthetics" associated with the Black Arts and Black Power Movements of the 1960s and 1970s because his art represents black bodies' beauty and unquestionable dignity.[15] Yet, in this self-portrait, which can serve as a bookend to the self-

***Self-Portrait*, Date unknown**
**Photo by José Antonio Arellano**

portrait that started me on this narrative journey, Shivers also invokes the intuitions of artistic modernism. The painting appears as an artistic challenge, making visible what had been touted in the mid-twentieth century as modernism's capacity to enable freedom.[16] Neither fully abstract nor entirely figurative, the portrait expands its color palette when depicting skin color. The painter's strokes announce themselves as both representational and gestural,

simultaneously pointing to the subject while foregrounding the paint *as paint*. Shivers left the material support mostly untreated, foregoing the added illusion of perspectival depth. Yet, for all its gestural abstraction, the depicted figure remains legibly absorbed in thought, with closed eyes and pursed lips. Even Shivers's signature appears legible as both painterly strokes *and* linguistic signifiers. Shivers, here, refuses to choose between an abstracted, supposedly universal subject that must forego embodied specificity and an explicitly politically engaged realism. Shivers enacts the freedom to choose both.

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The United States Air Force Academy honored Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Shivers by interring his remains in its cemetery, usually reserved for USAFA graduates. When I visited his grave on a sunny Colorado afternoon, I encountered his epitaph: "He will be remembered for


**Clarence Shivers's headstone plaque at the United States Air Force Academy Cemetery**
**Photo by José Antonio Arellano**

the beauty and happiness he brought into the world." In a cemetery made possible by the reality of war, Shivers offers another poignant reminder of the genuine power of a life dedicated to heeding art's call. His life demonstrates the extent to which the arts are not mere handmaidens to more "productive" pursuits. When we consider the relationship between war and art, the latter may be considered an instrument of the former, yet such instrumentality will always fall short of what should be the higher aspirations Shiver's art enables us to see. His life offers evidence of art's capacity to embody our most noble qualities, however idealistic such representational embodiment may appear. Shivers shows us how art helps constitute the very core of a well-lived life.

**José Antonio Arellano** is the author of *Race Class: Reading Mexican American Literature in the Era of Neoliberalism, 1981–1984*.

## Notes

[1] Clarence Shivers, "My Life as a Tuskegee Airman: Clarence Shivers," Pikes Peak Library District, YouTube, 16 December 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge2PysShE-Y.

[2] For more information about the exhibition, see "Clarence Shivers: Experimenting with Form," *Fine Arts Center*, fac.coloradocollege.edu/exhibits/clarence-shivers-experimenting-with-form/.

[3] See "Benjamin O. Davis Jr," *National Museum of the United States Army*, https://www.thenmusa.org/biographies/benjamin-o-davis-jr/.

[4] Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 16.

[5] See Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Tangle of Pathology," *The Moynihan Report and the Black Family.* U.S. Department of Labor, www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan/moynchapter4.

[6] Smithsonian American Art Museum. "The Struggle for Equality." americanexperience.si.edu/historical-eras/post-war-united-states/pair-untitled-library/.

[7] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2012).

[8] Pikes Peak Library District, "Peggy Shivers: Music Legend and Philanthropist.," *YouTube*, 24 Feb 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGDk02Qnbbo.

[9] For more information about the Shivers Fund, visit https://shiversfund.com/.

[10] See Julian Bond, *Julian Bond's Time to Teach: A History of the Southern Civil Rights Movement*. Ed. Pamela Horowitz and Jeanne Theoharis. (Beacon Press, 2021).

[11] Adolph Reed Jr., "The Obamas' Rustin: Fun Tricks You Can Do on the Past," *Nonsite*, 15 December 2023, nonsite.org/the-obamas-rustin-fun-tricks-you-can-do-on-the-past/.

[12] See "Biography: Fannie Lou Hamer." ed. Debra Michals. *National Women's History Museum*, www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/fannie-lou-hamer.

[13] Fannie Lou Hamer, "I'm Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired – Dec. 20, 1964." *Archives of Women's Political Communication*, awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2019/08/09/im-sick-and-tired-of-being-sick-and-tired-dec-20-1964/.

[14] See Tina Post, *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression* (New York University Press, 2023).

[15] Paul C. Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Wiley, 2016), 2.

[16] See Meyer Schapiro, "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art," Art News 56, no. 4 (Summer 1957).