RICHARD BEAVERS GALLERY EST. 2007

Clarence Heyward
EDEN
Exhibition Essay
by Charles Moore

The story of Eden is not merely a tale of origin, but a narrative of rupture. It is one of exile, labor, memory, and the unrelenting human desire to return to a state of belonging. In Eden, Clarence Heyward reclaims this foundational myth, challenging its role as distant theology and asserting it as a living allegory, one that resonates with the forced migrations, spiritual endurance, and unextinguished hope that define the African American experience.

Through painting and mixed media, Heyward situates Black subjectivity within the sacred architecture of Genesis. Employing his iconic use of green skin, a visual metaphor for the warping of perception, in this exhibition, he is insisting that the expulsion from paradise is not only a biblical event but also a recurring historical condition. From exile, though, comes resilience and redemption, exemplifying that the work of reimagining Eden is both aesthetic and ethical.

In Man in the Garden (2025), a Black Adam stands not as a fallen body marked by shame, but as a figure of divine likeness. Referencing depictions of a Black Christ, including Vincent Barzoni's mid-century iconography, Heyward collapses the distance between Adam and Jesus, between origin and redemption, and between Blackness and divinity.[1] The declaration embedded in the work—Adam and Jesus were made in the image of God. So was I—is more than a personal assertion; it is theological, political, and corrective. Against centuries of visual culture that rendered Black bodies as outside the realm of sacred representation, Heyward restores the Imago Dei, the image of God, asserting spiritual sovereignty where dehumanization once reigned.[2]

This reclamation continues in Eve (2025), a powerful reworking of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' Grande Odalisque (1814). Ingres's elongated, distorted female form, long read as an artifact of Orientalist fantasy and colonial eroticism, becomes, in Heyward's hands, a meditation on how Black femininity has been historically stretched, exoticized, and rendered available to the white gaze.[3] By naming this figure Eve, Heyward returns the first woman to her theological centrality while exposing how the myth of origin has been visually racialized, eroticized, and controlled. Eve is no longer a passive object but an ancestral presence. She is both bearer of life and target of systemic distortion.

The serpent, the final central character of the Edenstory, enters the exhibition as a biblical tempter but also as the shape-shifting logic of stereotype. In Forbidden Fruit (2025) and Food for Thought (2025), the watermelon becomes a double symbol. Once an emblem of Black self-sufficiency during Reconstruction, it was later transformed into a racist caricature weaponized through minstrel culture, postcards, and mass media.[4] Heyward's invocation of Barkley Hendricks' Star Spangled Chitlins (1967) and Frank Leslie's 1869 illustrations situates these works within a genealogy of visual assault, where pleasure, nourishment, and autonomy were recoded as signs of sloth and subhuman appetite.[5] The "fruit" of knowledge here is bitter, an education in how liberation itself was mocked, surveilled, and turned into a site of ridicule.

Across several works, the American flag enters the pictorial field as a charged and unresolved presence, at once a banner of democratic promise and a fabric of perpetuated contradiction. Echoing the biblical language of covenant and the promise of a chosen land, it bears the weight of a nation that has proclaimed liberty while repeatedly deferring its full realization for Black citizens. In dialogue with a lineage of artists such as Barkley Hendricks, whose Star Spangled Chitlins (1967) exposes the fraught performance of patriotism demanded of Black bodies, Heyward rejects the flag as a neutral emblem; instead, the flag acts as a contested surface upon which aspiration and betrayal are jointly inscribed.

Draped, fragmented, or partially obscured, the flag becomes a veil that both reveals and withholds, mirroring the condition of belonging perpetually promised yet structurally denied. Within the Edenic framework of the exhibition, the flag thus assumes a theological resonance akin to a contemporary tree of knowledge. Once a symbol through which the ideals of the promised land are made visible alongside the wounds of their historical foreclosure, calling the viewer to confront the unresolved promise between American democracy and the lives it has yet to redeem fully.

Yet Eden is not an exhibition of despair. Its emotional gravity is counterbalanced by a persistent theology of care, kinship, and cultivation. My Sister's Keeper (2026), drawing on the story of Cain and Abel and Ottilie Roederstein's The Sisters (1900), reframes biblical violence through the lens of Black communal survival. The question "Am I my brother's keeper?" becomes, in Heyward's cosmology, a declaration rather than a denial. Survival in the wilderness of America has always depended on networks of care, particularly among women, whose contributions, often invisible, have sustained spiritual and cultural continuity.[6]

This ethic of tending reaches its most explicit articulation in Tending to the Garden (2026,

W.I.P.), which references Addison Scurlock's 1909 photograph Standing in Garden. Gardening here is both literal and metaphoric: a practice of grounding, of cultivating beauty in hostile soil, of asserting futurity in a landscape shaped by generations of violence.[7] The garden is no longer the untouched paradise of Genesis, but a site of labor, patience, and faith. The garden is a space where hope must be planted again and again, much like the African American journey, despite the knowledge of loss.

Throughout the exhibition, gold leaf, floral motifs, and luminous surfaces appear as signs of sanctification. Works such as Wildflower (2025) and Precious in Eden (2025) elevate the everyday into the realm of the sacred, echoing the long tradition of Black spirituals and sermons that imagined heaven as a tangible place of rest, recognition, and release.[8] In this sense, Heyward's Eden is not behind us but ahead. The Eden of the African American community is a promised land that exists as an ethical horizon rather than a recoverable past.

The final presence of figures such as Invisible Man (2021) and Telvin (2023) further complicates the Edenic metaphor. Visibility and invisibility, recognition and erasure, become contemporary conditions of exile. The wilderness is social, psychological, and political. Yet even here, Heyward's palette and compositional grace refuse despair. Saturated hues and radiant tonalities lend the figures an inner luminosity, as if light emanates from the body rather than falling upon it, while the compositional stability with which they are anchored in the pictorial field resists any sense of dissolution or disappearance. The figures refuse to recede into the margins of the canvas; they occupy it with a quiet authority, their scale, posture, and chromatic presence asserting a groundedness that counters the forces of erasure. Heyward's images render Black presence as both materially rooted and spiritually radiant.

In this sense, Eden ultimately gestures not toward a nostalgic recovery of an originary paradise but toward a future-oriented theology of becoming, in which redemption is imagined as a collective and unfinished horizon rather than a return to innocence. The promised land invoked here is not a geographic destination but a moral and political condition, one forged through centuries of spiritual endurance, abolitionist struggle, civil rights movements, and ongoing demands for recognition and repair.

Much like the biblical covenant that holds redemption in abeyance, always deferred yet insistently believed in, the African American pursuit of justice unfolds as a practice of faith enacted in the material world: in bodies that march, voices that sing, hands that build, and images that testify. His paintings function as visual psalms, lamentations, and praises intertwined,

bearing witness to a people who, like Adam and Eve, were cast into a world that demanded exertion, pain, and faith, yet who never relinquished the dream of restoration. Heyward's Eden becomes a site of prophetic vision, where the garden is reimagined as a future common grounded in dignity, reciprocity, and belonging, and where the labor of hope itself, in its persistence,

vulnerability, and resolution, constitutes a form of sacred tending, oriented toward a world in which grace is no longer exceptional but shared.

To tend the garden, Heyward suggests, is to believe in futurity. It is to plant beauty in wounded ground, to see divinity in oneself where history has denied it, and to imagine a promised land not as escape, but as collective arrival.

Footnotes

1. Vincent Barzoni, Black Christ (New York: Sacred Art Press, 1965).
2. James H. Cone, The Cross and the Lynching Tree (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).
3. Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," Art in America 71, no. 5 (1983): 118–131.
4. William R. Black, "How Watermelons Became a Racist Trope," Journal of American Cultural History 42, no. 2 (2019): 201–223.
5. Barkley L. Hendricks, Star Spangled Chitlins (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1967).
6. Saidiya Hartman, Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments (New York: Norton, 2019).
7. Deborah Willis, Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present (New York: Norton, 2000).
8. Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).