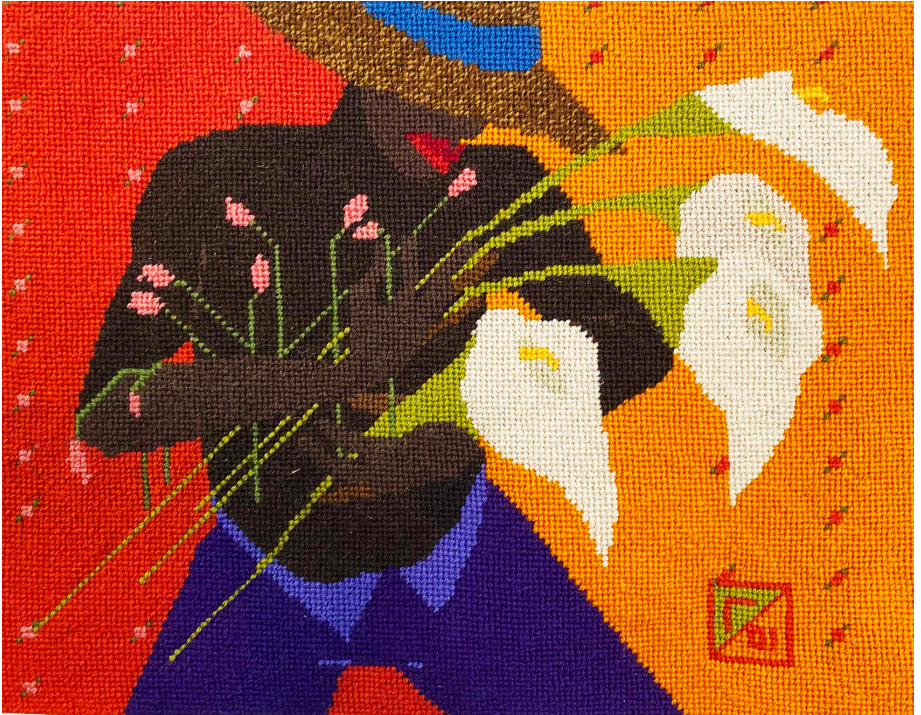




**WHO WILL KEEP  
THE MEMORIES**



## **DEBRA EUBANKS RIFFE**

**45th Montgomery Art Guild Museum Exhibition Featured Artist**

**Jennifer Jankauskas**

**Curator of Art**

Printmaker Debra Eubanks Riffe was born in Tupelo, Mississippi, and grew up in Washington, D.C. At the age of 14, in response to her self-described renegade behavior, Riffe's parents sent her to Tupelo to live with her grandparents, where the tight-knit local community embraced her. As an adult, Riffe relocated to Birmingham; however, she still finds inspiration in the community and landscape that surrounded her as a teenager.

Riffe illustrates her love of southern culture in her hand-pulled relief prints of woodcuts, linoleum block prints, and needlepoint canvases. The richly detailed narrative imagery recalls stories told by her relatives and draws on her own firsthand experiences. Her portrayals of African Americans in various everyday moments illuminate themes of music, social injustice, civil rights, illiteracy, and food inequality through a personal lens.

Despite taking a printmaking class at Howard University in Washington, D.C., Riffe did not formally incorporate printmaking into her artistic repertoire until she retired from a successful, 30-year career as a graphic designer. She initially invested most of her creative energy into large, colorful needlepoint

canvases. Moving away from the meticulous needlepoint canvases, Riffe turned to relief printing and recreated many of her needlepoints, like *who will keep the memories* (needlepoint 2001, print 2008) in black-and-white prints. Riffe has recently integrated color accents into her prints, harkening back to the brightly-hued needlepoint canvases.

Another new development is the addition of lace detail in several pieces. One day, Riffe haphazardly tossed one of her grandmother's decorative lace doilies, which landed on the face of the then in-progress print, *st. clair* (2019). The visual interplay between the bright lace and the intense gaze of the young man inspired her to incorporate more lace into her imagery. Riffe particularly relishes the elements of playfulness, chance, and freedom as they contrast the rigidity necessary to her earlier graphic design work.

In various works since the early 2000s, Riffe has sought to capture moments that convey unbridled innocence and joy and the meditative, organic quality of life

and nature as she experiences it. For Riffe, birds symbolize freedom and independence. She has depicted them sitting still on a branch, taking flight, or flying tightly in group formation. For example, in her linoleum block relief print, *the band of gideon roams the sky* (2012), Riffe portrayed a flock of birds swarming across the paper to represent a song her grandmother hummed early in the mornings. Riffe shapes the narrative of each print through the combination of imagery and the title. Always in lowercase, her titles are phrases that represent the dialects and cadences of southern speech and the Black vernacular, adding another layer to her visuals.

Instead of holding her memories close to her chest, only to be reflected upon in her mind, Riffe's imagery invites and evokes collective recollections. Woven together, these images and memories form a powerful narrative of the South, past and present. Riffe says her work "feeds her soul," and she hopes it strikes an emotional chord with those who engage with it.



## THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS

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**On the cover:** Debra Eubanks Riffe (American, born 1972), *i buyed my'sef free*, 2009, linoleum block relief print on paper; **Inside left:** *who will keep the memories*, 2001, needlepoint on fabric; **Inside right:** *sassy gal*, 2018, woodcut on paper; All works lent by the artist

*Who Will Keep the Memories: Debra Eubanks Riffe, 45th Montgomery Art Guild Museum Exhibition Featured Artist* is on view June 30 through September 24, 2023, and is held in conjunction with *Alabama A to Z*. It is organized by the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts and the Montgomery Art Guild.

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