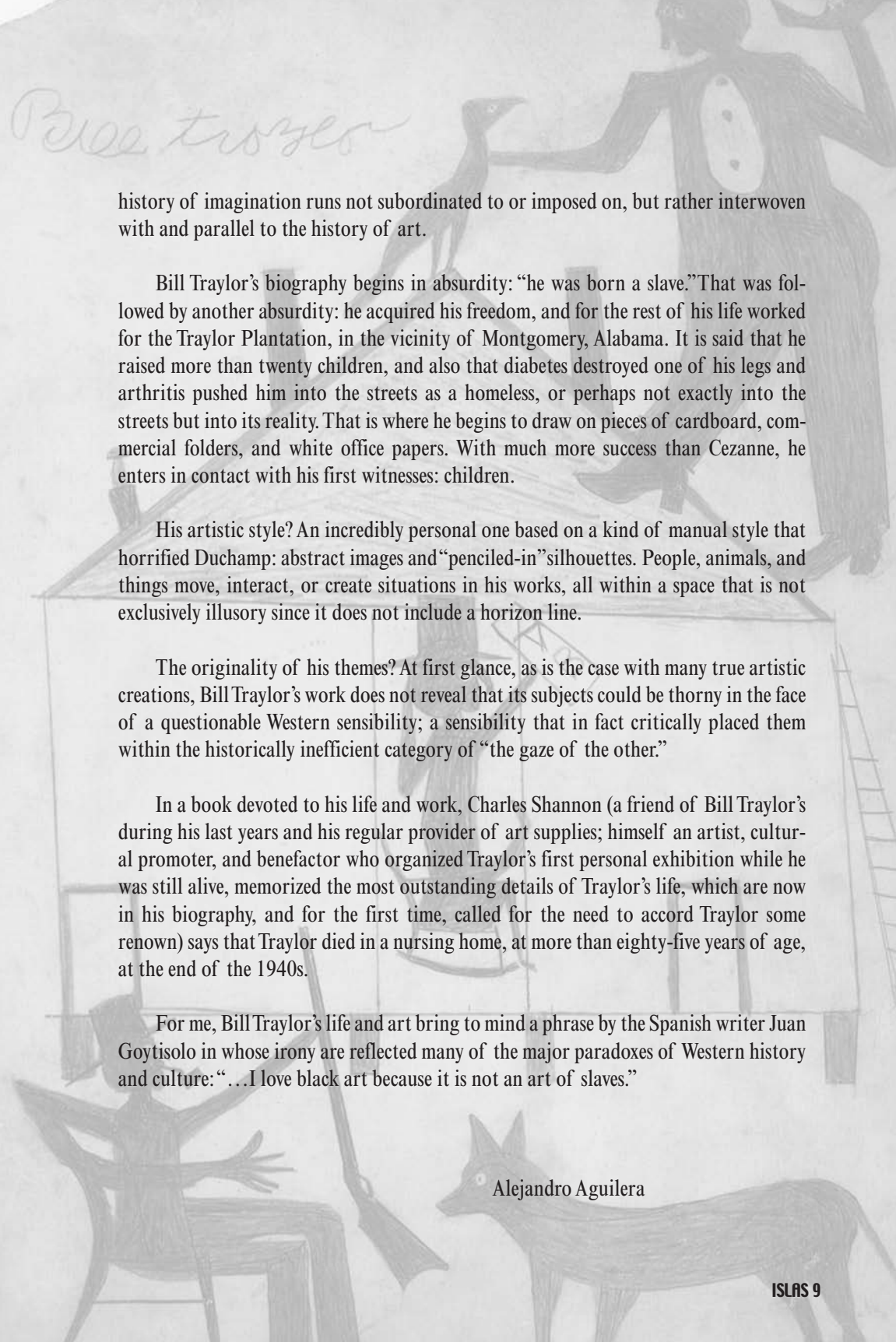


# Bill Traylor: A Singular Work

**B**ill Traylor is the first self-taught black artist whose work reaches acknowledgement both inside and outside the United States. His powerful singular case is more artistic than historic. It serves to illustrate how the



history of imagination runs not subordinated to or imposed on, but rather interwoven with and parallel to the history of art.

Bill Traylor's biography begins in absurdity: "he was born a slave." That was followed by another absurdity: he acquired his freedom, and for the rest of his life worked for the Traylor Plantation, in the vicinity of Montgomery, Alabama. It is said that he raised more than twenty children, and also that diabetes destroyed one of his legs and arthritis pushed him into the streets as a homeless, or perhaps not exactly into the streets but into its reality. That is where he begins to draw on pieces of cardboard, commercial folders, and white office papers. With much more success than Cezanne, he enters in contact with his first witnesses: children.

His artistic style? An incredibly personal one based on a kind of manual style that horrified Duchamp: abstract images and "penciled-in" silhouettes. People, animals, and things move, interact, or create situations in his works, all within a space that is not exclusively illusory since it does not include a horizon line.

The originality of his themes? At first glance, as is the case with many true artistic creations, Bill Traylor's work does not reveal that its subjects could be thorny in the face of a questionable Western sensibility; a sensibility that in fact critically placed them within the historically inefficient category of "the gaze of the other."

In a book devoted to his life and work, Charles Shannon (a friend of Bill Traylor's during his last years and his regular provider of art supplies; himself an artist, cultural promoter, and benefactor who organized Traylor's first personal exhibition while he was still alive, memorized the most outstanding details of Traylor's life, which are now in his biography, and for the first time, called for the need to accord Traylor some renown) says that Traylor died in a nursing home, at more than eighty-five years of age, at the end of the 1940s.

For me, Bill Traylor's life and art bring to mind a phrase by the Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo in whose irony are reflected many of the major paradoxes of Western history and culture: "...I love black art because it is not an art of slaves."

Alejandro Aguilera