

Truth and Beauty: The *Fragile* Exhibition

Art by Richard Neal and Frank Anigbo

By Lauren Wolk

WHEN RICHARD NEAL AND FRANK ANIGBO ASKED ME TO CURATE AN EXHIBIT OF THEIR ART, I was honored and intrigued, and curious about what I'd find when I met them on a cold afternoon late in 2021 to look at their combined work.

Neal is a sixty-six-year-old white man who makes art at the Schoolhouse Studios in Barnstable Village. Some of the paintings he showed me that day were of simple structures that felt like sanctuaries, but most were filled with fire. Raging, uncontrollable flames consuming the homes of the poor. Anigbo is a fifty-five-year-old Black man who works in his home studio a short walk from the Schoolhouse. His paintings were primarily of his beautiful family. His wife. His young son. His tiny twin daughters. The soothing features of the home they share.

I looked at the disparate images.

The artists asked what I thought.

My reaction was immediate and absolute, but I was still shy about giving it.

Reactions to art are deeply personal and not always a reflection of the artist's intentions. Which is as it should be. Each of us has the right to respond to art in any way we see fit. But while I have a right to my opinion, I'm well aware that it's no more or less valid than any other. I therefore often prefer to whisper. But Anigbo and Neal were looking for a shout, so I gave them one.

Though I'd been friends with Neal for over twenty years, I'd known Anigbo for only about five minutes. By the end of our meeting, though, I felt I knew him well, too. I had told him the truth as I knew it. And it had echoed his own. And Neal's. The whole room shivered with bells. And I took a long step into a collaboration that has illuminated how, despite our differences, we are also, in many important ways, the same.

Over the next few weeks, I watched both artists work, experienced their art, and thought deeply about the exhibition we would mount in October 2022 at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis. I imagined Anigbo and Neal in their studios over the past two years, working in compounded isolation: both the solitude they sought, and the separation imposed by a pandemic. I imagined their focus fractured by national and global turmoil, but simultaneously



Richard Neal and Frank Anigbo, 2022 PHOTO BY ROBERT NASH

sharpened by seclusion. I imagined them both torn and mended in the process. I pictured each of them working toward new art and a new awareness of why they were creating it. A fresh understanding of how art is influenced by—and an expression of—the internal and the external: both self and surroundings.

Mostly, I asked questions. Their answers taught me a lot about both artists and the work they had asked me to curate.

“I often start with imagery that has a primal urgency, which demands that I make art, but I rarely fully understand it,” Neal explained. He was fascinated by the essential darkness of the “fire work” he was creating, but he was also intrigued by the memories that had ignited it. “In 2020, I began working on a series of paintings, sculptures, and collages inspired by the shacks and shanties I visited as a kid in Maryland in the 1960s. The homes of the poor Black kids who were my classmates. In many cases, these homes had been built before the Civil War and were remnants of slavery. I later burned one of the wooden sculptures I had made and was inspired to create the paintings in this exhibit. They came out very quickly at first, and they felt true.”

Meanwhile, a few blocks away, Anigbo continued to work on a series of paintings he had started years earlier when his wife was about to give birth to their first child. “My paintings are really about my anxieties regarding my capacity to shield my children from the profanities of the world,” he said. “Not just about race, but about society’s problems in general. The kinds of interactions that might damage them in some way. I do have a great deal of optimism, but I constantly think about the bad things that ultimately will happen as a consequence of life.”

Two completely different bodies of work. Two very different artists.

Their collaboration began when Neal found himself wondering about the nexus between them, and he approached Anigbo to discuss an exhibition. “I didn’t really have a mental picture of what that might look like,” Neal said. “I was drawn by the emotional power and the commitment of Frank’s work, but it wasn’t until I saw our paintings together that I felt overwhelmingly that there was a combined power greater than the sum of the parts.”

He was right. And that’s what I saw, too, when Neal and Anigbo showed me their work and asked for my reaction. “I see innocence and the destruction of that innocence,” I recall telling them. “I see the things we hold most dear and how vulnerable they are to the fires that threaten to engulf us.”

It was in both the similarities and contrasts between these two artists, their lives, and their



Frank Anigbo, *The Bath*, 2019–21, oil on canvas, 72 x 84 inches PHOTO BY ROBERT NASH

work that I saw the possibility of an incredibly powerful exhibition, just as they did.

“In Richard’s paintings, I see the embodiment of what has terrified me, as a parent, over the last few years,” Anigbo said. “Seeing his paintings has clarified the validity of what I’ve been working on. I’m not overly romantic. I prefer to be rooted in realism. I paint things that trouble me. My reasons for paintings are often darker than the pictures may suggest.”

Darkness and light will contrast strongly in the exhibition that the artists eventually titled *Fragile*, but so will the emotional and the intellectual.

“I have long been fascinated with how the organic plays against the grid,” said

Neal. “The juxtaposition of those elements is an exercise of the intellect, but I am endlessly intrigued by how it can relate to the emotions. It may be hard to understand, but I felt a joy, rather than an angst, at many points while working. I alternated between my emotions and my formal thoughts about painting as I worked.”

For Anigbo, there is no denying the emotion that fuels his work, but he is dedicated to control. “I pursue intellect,” he said. “I want that to be the master of emotion. Otherwise, it is too easy for me to spin out of control and ruin the very thing I am trying to say. These days, I paint with very cold water in my veins.”

The piece that is, perhaps, the centerpiece



Richard Neal, *Burn It Down*, 2021, oil on canvas, 38 x 46 inches PHOTO BY ROBERT NASH



Frank Anigbo, *Killing Emmett Till Again*, 2014–20, oil on canvas, 48 x 52 inches
PHOTO BY ROBERT NASH



Richard Neal, *Sacrifice*, 2022, oil on canvas over panel, 44 x 48 inches PHOTO BY ROBERT NASH

of the *Fragile* exhibition is an incredible example of this balance between emotion and intellect: Anigbo’s painting *Killing Emmett Till Again*. This depiction of a police officer on horseback beneath the suspended feet of a lynched Black man is one of the most quietly beautiful depictions of horror I have ever seen. And it serves as the strongest link in the chain that connects Neal’s work with Anigbo’s.

“I believe in beauty as a powerful, reliable way of conveying truth without resorting to cheap offense,” Anigbo explained. “I don’t want to insult people, but I want to speak the truth, and if they should get offended by that truth, so be it, as long as I can defend that truth. It was very important for me to speak that truth in a way that, on the surface of it, was beautiful.”

Neal echoed that conviction. “As the fire paintings started to surround me, I began to muse about an audience reaction to the work. Would a roomful of these works be

too depressing or hopeless? But, as I often do when those thoughts creep in, I pushed them out—because negative things can happen when an artist dwells too much on a potential audience. It can change the work. Self-censorship can take over. You can be too apt to pull your punch.”

Conversely, neither artist thinks that his art should be a bullhorn. “I do not believe that it’s an artist’s job to respond to what’s going on in the world,” said Anigbo. “I believe in people being whatever they are and doing whatever they do.”

Neal agreed, adding, “Art can and should be many things. I thought of the awesome tool that fire has been in the development of our species, but I also thought about fire’s power to destroy. I thought of terrorism and environmental disaster. I thought of cross burnings and church bombings. But sometimes the paintings were simply about the power of orange, red, and yellow against black and brown, as much as, or more than,

any image or idea they evoked. I focused on shapes, textures, and lines.”

That relationship between form and function is yet another layer of *Fragile*. The exhibition is a study in contrasts and connections: emotion and intellect, power and, underlying all of it, vulnerability. ▣

Fragile, curated by Lauren Wolk, will be exhibited at the Cape Cod Museum of Art in Dennis, October 6–December 21, 2022.

LAUREN WOLK published her first novel, *Those Who Favor Fire* (Random House), in 1999. Dutton has since published her four novels for young readers: the New York Times best seller *Wolf Hollow* (2016); *Beyond the Bright Sea* (2017), which won the 2018 Scott O’Dell Award for Historical Fiction; *Echo Mountain* (2020); and *My Own Lightning*, released in May 2022. Wolk is also a visual artist represented by the Larkin Gallery in Harwich, Massachusetts, and an award-winning poet.



Frank Anigbo with work in progress, 2022
PHOTO BY ROBERT NASH



Richard Neal with work in progress, 2022
PHOTO BY ROBERT NASH