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CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome back to *Sound Thoughts on Art*, an audio series from the National Gallery of Art. I'm Celeste Headlee. When we engage with art, it kick-starts our five senses. We hear music, or feel the beat of a drum in our chests. We see the vivid colors of a photo. We take in the three dimensions of a sculpture. We savor the taste of fine food. Sometimes, you can smell the carved wood, or the smeared oil paint.

But when there's crossover, when a piece of art activates multiple senses, and they begin to interact and intertwine, that's when things really get interesting. When we listen to melody, what images flash through our minds? When we study the brushwork in a painting, what do we hear? This podcast lives in that crossover, in the space at the center of our five senses' Venn diagram.

In each episode, you'll learn about a work at the National Gallery. And you'll hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts on Art* delves into our personal relationship with art, and the unique response we have to beautifully made things.

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In this episode, we take you to early 20th-century Chicago, and a new wave of Black American artistry springing forth from the minds and hands of a generation that was born free. Margaret Burroughs was a renowned visual artist throughout her lifetime, and she was active from her early adulthood in the 1930s, all the way until her death in 2010. But that's far from where her talents stopped. Burroughs was an educator, a writer, a poet, and an advocate for art that represented Black lives.

In 1941, Burroughs helped to found Chicago's South Side Community Art Center, a project of the Works Progress Administration, and the only such community art center that is still operational to this day. Burroughs was just 23 years old when it opened. Youth, and the vulnerability of being young and Black are recurring themes in Burroughs's work, and perhaps no piece of hers represents these themes more starkly than *Sleeping Boy*.

We don't know who this sleeping boy was, or if he was just a product of Burroughs's imagination. But you'd be forgiven for not assuming that he was sleeping. In a cut linoleum

print, Burroughs's boy is curled into a ball almost in the fetal position. A spotlight shines on him, contrasting the soft waves of his hair with the rigid lines of brick behind him. Is he outside? Is he safe? Burroughs leaves it to us to decide.

To Sa-Roc, a rapper and activist hailing from southeast Washington, DC, the boy seems vulnerable. He reminds her of Black children throughout American history, children who are so often put in the impossible position of being asked to stay young, and yet, forced to grapple with adult issues every day.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SA-ROC: When I saw this boy, and I immediately noted that the title was Sleeping Boy, but he didn't look like he was sleeping to me.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Yeah, to me either.

SA-ROC: Yeah, and when I looked at the surroundings, when I looked at this brick wall, he's obviously-- well to me, he was obviously outside. To me, he seemed to be crying or hiding. And I instantly thought about how the experience of so many young Black boys, and just young Black children in general who live in urban environments, who live in communities-- I'm assuming that if he's outside, you know, he's maybe a victim of an impoverished community, or a community or a family that is lacking of the resources to provide him with a secure home.

And then I noticed that the light around him, you know, is highlighting his figure. And it automatically made me think of like a spotlight, and how Black youth are targeted in these particular communities. And it made me think of like police spotlights. And in that regard, he seemed to be hiding from the glare of that spotlight. And I thought about the many young Black boys, like Tamir Rice, and Trayvon Martin, and countless others who are targeted simply because of their environment.

And you know, that brings such sorrow in how that must feel to have the weight of that, to walk around with the weight of that, and feel like you don't belong, yet, you're under a microscope constantly. And it was something about this black and white, and black and white usually implies like a starkness, and sometimes that starkness is utilized to make you feel. But black and white almost can serve in the opposite way, because when we think of like using color, when we think of color, we think of when we see an image in color it's more fleshed out. It's more relatable.

But I see this black and white, and I see this boy, and I think of this method that she's used is almost a way of showing how these boys, and these children are not seen as human, are not seen as beings of value, just as numbers, or just as a stereotype. So it was just interesting the multitude of just layers that I saw. Because looked at another way, you know, I see other images in that that made me think of other music that I've created that ties into that not. Not so specific to the experience of Black childhood in these urban centers, but the many ways that we as just human beings hide ourselves.

We look for light and validation outside of ourselves. And we hide what we think of as the worst parts of ourselves, or the parts of our story that we feel make us less than, or belittle us, or make us less worthy of value in the world. So that was the other way that I looked at it. So it's interesting how viewing an art piece leaves so much for interpretation, especially in visual art. Whereas, in storytelling, through the voice, through hip-hop, through writing, it's a little bit more clear of our artistic perspective because we're using language.

CELESTE HEADLEE: For more on Margaret Burroughs and *Sleeping Boy*, we turn to Shelley Langdale, the National Gallery of Art's curator and head of modern prints and drawings.

SHELLEY LANGDALE: Interestingly, this print was made in 1953, right after a year that she spent in Mexico. So she learned to make linocuts, of which this is one, in Mexico. And one of the interesting aspects of the medium for her was that it was a relatively inexpensive medium. It was literally blocks of linoleum that were easily attainable, and something that could be used easily in the community center back in Chicago.

It also was a very expressive medium. You take the linocut block, and you have a knife that you carve into it, so you carve away the lines. And the raised area of the block will print. It's known as a relief print. And the knife moves very smoothly through the linoleum, which is a fairly soft material. And so you can get these wonderful gestures, and different nuances of curvature in the line and textures that you can create.

And what I love about this print is particularly how she articulates so well the different textures of the child's hair. You get a sense of the shine on his shoes with just the few white lines that she puts on the black, on the solid black of the shoe, the undulation of the wonderful soft folds of his clothing, and then the sort of more architectural straight lines that define the bricks in the background. Interestingly, we have titled it *Sleeping Boy*, because that's what she wrote on this particular print, and at the bottom where she signed it.

But in a different collection, the very same print, she wrote a different title. It is called Mexican Boy. So this is likely a recollection from her time in Mexico. It's an intriguing image, because I feel like you could have a different response depending on the day that you look at it. When we think of Margaret Burroughs, what stands out most is perhaps the subjects that she portrays, and her real interest in promoting Black artists, telling stories about Black life experience and history that were not typically found in a lot of art that people saw.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: What clues do you see about this boy, and who he is from this piece of art?

SA-ROC: His image seems to be highlighted. And that to me, looks like a spotlight. And the fact that he is-- or seems to be--outside, to me, that gives clues to his resources, his family's resources, or lack thereof, not being able to provide a home for him. And I just think about young Black children in many of these communities who in a sense, are targeted in many ways.

I look at his image, and I think of Tamir Rice, or Trayvon Martin, who they're in many ways, victims of their circumstances. And he seems to be bereft, and at the same time, hiding from this microscope. The only time that these children are seen very often are through a criminalizing lens. And that's what that spotlight makes me feel like, like a police spotlight, or a media spotlight, you know, that highlights their lack of humanity by calling on some kind of old crime, or blaming them in some way for being a victim of whatever circumstances, or whatever fate they've succumbed to.

Her use of black and white is interesting to me, because like black and white often is used for this feeling of starkness. And it can be very visceral in its effect. But to me, black and white can also be used to dehumanize in a way. Because we think of color when we see an image in color, that fleshes out that image. It makes it more real. It fosters more of a connection when something is in color, because it seems more real.

And I think the usage of black and white in this image kind of serves to highlight the ways in which these children are unseen, yet, you know, yet, put under this targeting scope, put under this spotlight for all the wrong reasons, you know? So yeah, it's just so interesting to me. But the

fact that visual art leaves so much up for interpretation, as opposed to verbal music, you know, sonic written work, I look at this, and I see so many layers to it.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: So was Margaret Burroughs a political person? Did she often include commentary, or reflections on politics and social issues in her art?

SHELLEY LANGDALE: Somewhat, but less so in her art. Her art tended to be much more about family and community, and at least in her printmaking, tended to be about family and community. It was political in the sense that it was sending-- it was pointedly sending positive messages about Black lives and history. She was definitely an activist.

That was one of the reasons she founded the DuSable Museum. She has included images drawn from history, including one that will be in an upcoming show, Afro-Atlantic Histories, that's going to open shortly at the National Gallery that shows a Black Venus. And she has turned it into a celebratory image. It was actually taken from a 18th-century publication about the slave trade. And she has sort of subverted it into a picture, a positive picture of a beautiful Black woman, and retitled it Black Venus. It may not be political as overtly in the sense that we think of posters and so forth of Black fists proclaiming Black Power, and things like that, but it remains political in her intent.

Another story that is told about her often was in her own efforts to work against some of the rules interestingly, that we're experiencing right now with pushback against critical race theory. She would insert her own additional history lessons in her classes that she taught in high school that were not limited to the history of white governmental figures and heroes. But she would include Harriet Tubman, and George Washington Carver, and Martin Luther King, who was in the moment, in addition to others. And she tells stories about how the principal would show up at her door, and she would immediately slip into a sentence like, "and that's why Betsy Ross sewed the American flag." And then she would immediately as soon as he left go back to her filling in the history of Black lives.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Because I went back to look at what some of the headlines were during the year of 1953, a year that began in the US with President Truman announcing that we had developed a hydrogen bomb, the height of the Cold War, McCarthyism, Richard Nixon is sworn

in as VP under Eisenhower. The state of Georgia approved the very first literature censorship board in the country. I mean, this was a time that was very fraught. And then I look at this picture, and it just resonates with me, wanting to hide your head, needing that moment. And to that extent, I wondered to what extent to you this still feels relevant, because we're kind of in another one of those fraught moments in history, right?

SHELLEY LANGDALE: Yes, I think that's true. And there's been some interesting discussion around a fairly recent biography on Burroughs in this particular moment. One of the reasons she went to Mexico was because of increasing pressure on teachers who had to take oaths that they were loyal to the country, and did not have communist ties. And she was actually brought in to be questioned, and was told not to share that with anybody else, the fact that they had asked her to come in for questioning. And this is when she was teaching in the DuSable High School.

After she left her interrogation, she immediately shared that with other teachers. And that was one of the things that inspired her to go to Mexico to get away from some of those tensions in Chicago at that time, and particularly, directly in her teaching cohort. And it was that experience in Mexico where she felt that kind of leveled the playing field, and so admired studying with Leopoldo Méndez, who she had met in the United States when he came to lecture in Chicago. Seeing what the power of the printmaking workshop, the Taller de Gráfica Popular, could do in spreading the word, and helping to change peoples' attitudes and ideas that empowered her when she came back to invest in her own sort of activism, eventually establishing the DuSable Museum, working as an educator, continuing to direct the South Side Community Center through until she retired in 1985.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here is Sa-Roc's "Great Escape" in its entirety.

[MUSIC PLAYING - SA ROC, "GREAT ESCAPE"]

- Brown skin lady, Black Star Enterprise. Ran from the past like track stars win the prize. But everything catch us, my best times end in ties. And I can't seem to get the knots out, I swear I tried.

It's like every interaction a flashback. Memories want my flesh in pounds like a hashtag. That's why I got a twisted fate with this rap act. I leave a piece of me on every stage I rock, Baghdad.

Now every rapper whipping up white on they record. But that work almost destroyed my life for the record. Up nights cuz my daddy hit them pipes on the regular. Home with stained glass like a House of Christ. Where my blessings at?

And I know I got a lot to be grateful for. People dying, everyone my heart breaking for. But this pain an old friend, still can't shake the boy. What you try and leave behind you'll soon be facing towards.

Catch me if you can. I'm the gingerbread man. We running, we running, we running, we running, we running. They ain't gon understand. It's too rough for us land. Keep running, keep running, keep running, keep running, keep running, keep running.

Fam running their traps to weave tall tales, complex textiles to cushion the fraud trail. They tiptoeing on the edge without a guardrail, the bare truth got em like refugees, no Praswell. Ghetto superstars out euthanizing their souls. Stuck between negative forces like nuclei of prose. Addicted to bills so they keep an eye on the Jones. Hoping it don't blow up in their face, keep an eye on the drones.

I know poor too, I know hard knocks, I done bore the bruise of entire blocks trying to beat me blue and black. But that's a poor excuse to tell the world what you are not. Cuz what you bury is unearthed when they exhume your plot.

That's why I dive so deep in it. Cuz me and this relationship is codependent. Obsessed. I got so many miles between me and my trials I could be flying scot-free. But I'd still be running. What's next?

Catch me if you can. I'm the gingerbread man. We running, we running, we running, we running, we running, we running. They ain't gon understand. It's too rough for us land. Keep running, keep running, keep running, keep running, keep running.

Hell of a life. My wisdom came with a heavenly price. Death of my innocence, all the remains have been severed and sliced, evidence wiped clean. That's why I'm a little jaded, complexion a type green.

I know too many men trying to make minutes last. Past the final grains of sand descending into the narrow glass. Escaping their conscience like prisoner's clasps. Instead of owning it, like an ode to Fanon, we go on and wear the masks. This ain't finger-pointing, I'm no angel, I've been guilty of it.

Now with every sentence I can wash my sins, I'm filthy of it. Running, we've been running, now the moments creeping stealthily on up. Who am I to judge? I'm not completely healed myself, your honor.

A wise woman told me you'll never change your future's odds. If you don't stop and let reflection treat your suture scars. If I keep racing, my fate will mirror the youth I lost. A cautionary tale of how an evolution's paused.

Catch me if you can. I'm the gingerbread man. We running, we running, we running, we running, we running, we running. They ain't gon understand. It's too rough for us land. Keep running, keep running, keep running, keep running, keep running, keep running.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Tell me why you connected "Great Escape" to this piece.

SA-ROC: For so many of us, it just becomes easier to try to run away from this reality in which we are so often belittled, you know, oppressed, unseen, unheard, suppressed. So for a lot of people, we create fantasies, or we don't address, or we hide, or try to conform those parts of ourselves that don't blend in with mainstream society. We fabricate these tales of our backgrounds, because it does get exhausting.

And not even specifically about experiencing social injustice on a daily basis, but just constantly having to speak to your value, constantly having to fight for your right to exist. So some people would rather just ignore that part, or try to create ways in which to escape from these past lives, suppress the parts of themselves that are too painful to face. Whether that's collective history, whether that's personal or familial trauma, we find ways to hide from that, and compartmentalize those things within ourselves.

But the song "Great Escape" is that eventually all of these things come to light, no matter how much you hide, or try to run from it. And that's speaking to the individual. And that's speaking to this particular country. I think we talked a lot about the past presidency and then the one before. We saw racism and injustice rearing its ugly head.

And we had to yet again, say that this is not new. This is just a Band-Aid pulled off, you know? Because unless we address it, it is going to emerge again and again and again. So that's why for this piece, the "Great Escape" felt so relevant. Because I saw in his attempt to hide a version, another version of him will be facing the same fate if we don't work to address what he's experiencing, if we don't work to correct what he's experiencing.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

We tend to create these fantasies for ourselves, or we tend to ignore, try to escape, whether through-- some people use substances to escape. Some people use fantasy to escape. Like, so many ways in which we try to escape those harder parts of our lives that upon reflection, might cause us to break down, might cause us to lose our will to go forward. But in the “Great Escape,” the point of that song is that I’m recalling instances in my own childhood in which are painful memories, in which are painful for me to confront.

But those memories will continue to resurface and affect aspects of my life as I advance into adulthood, those parts of my childhood that I felt were lost, those parts of my innocence that I felt were lost that I attempt to suppress in my efforts to not write about them, and my efforts to not recount them, to relive them, those things are regurgitated in many different aspects of my life. And I think about when I see this image, and I see this boy I think about how if we continue to ignore existences, that will resurface and recycle throughout the course of this country’s history, throughout the course of our own familial and personal patterns. So yeah, that song really was just a call to remove the masks to, confront those darker parts of our past, or be faced with them when we’re the least prepared.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Another song you’ve chosen was “Rocwell’s America.” You’re referring to Norman Rockwell, who had been active, very active and popular at the time that Margaret Burroughs made this print in 1953. And I mean, some of the lines in there fit exactly what you’re talking about. “I keep burning in this personal hell til the inferno dies. Government feeding us [BLEEP] instead of truth. Giving birth to a dishonest nation-- we call it fertile lies.” Tell me a little bit about what made you associate “Rocwell’s America” with this piece.

SA-ROC: Probably because of my first interpretation of the piece as a young Black boy, a young Black child, and thinking about the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of Black children who feel targeted, and experience a very different experience of America than were shown on the sitcoms we grew up watching, or in the case of Norman Rockwell, usually his portrayals of American family life are very idyllic, are very white. And so it was just it just was in stark contrast to what I knew. And we think about the erasure of so many of these voices and stories of Black people who didn’t have the six- figure home, a hot meal on the table every night, who

were experiencing communities ravaged by the crack era, and you know, it was just this alternate reality.

And when I look at this boy, I'm like, whose America is this? Where are the think pieces about this? What is his story? I don't see happiness here. I don't see-- to me, when I see him, I'm wondering if he's had access to a hot meal. He seems abandoned. So yeah, so that song for me, and especially talks about rallying together to protect these young Black boys and Black girls in the song "Rocwell's America," as I relate my own personal experience from childhood, and my instinct-- my instinct is, who's protecting this boy?

[MUSIC PLAYING - SA ROC, "ROCWELL'S AMERICA"]

- Keep your black thought and black fist. Yeah, I'm always on some Black [BLEEP]. Probably got me on their black list. I'm willing to die for these Black kids. Are you willing to die for these Black kids? We gotta survive for these Black kids. We gotta be wise for these Black kids.

[MUSIC PLAYING - SA ROC, "FOREVER"]

- When I wake up, no makeup, half naked, I feel like I'm the [BLEEP]. Pardon my language, but hang ups do not define the kid. No, I'm not flawless, I'm scarred up, and I'm fine with it. My body art a laundry list of all life's unkindnesses.

CELESTE HEADLEE: I want to go to the third piece that you chose, which is, "Forever." And again, I don't want to impose my own reactions to that on your thought process. So I'm going to ask you about why you chose this. But I had to say, when I was listening to your song, I kept thinking you were talking directly to this kid.

Because you're saying, "Shine on. Shine on 'em, baby. You're a star. You better be exactly who you are." I mean to me, I could almost hear your voice speaking to this child. But what did you think? Why did you connect "Forever" to Sleeping Boy?

SA-ROC: Because he's trying to make himself small. He's hiding himself. He is uncomfortable with this light that from whatever source, is glaring at him. So when I think about forever, when I think about encouraging us to find the light and to shine within ourselves, I am encouraging him in a sense, to reclaim the light, you know, and redirect his own inner light that's powerful,

and beautiful, and valuable of being seen, redirect that towards the world, show them not in an attempt to prove your worth, because you don't owe that to anyone. But be proud of who you are despite your circumstances. I talk about that a lot.

We oftentimes feel like our environments define us, and they follow us, or in many ways, haunt us for the rest of our lives, almost like we're stamped or branded by these experiences that make us fallible, make us stained, or imperfect. And I feel like society in this picture has stained this boy, and deemed him imperfect. So I'm encouraging him to stand, and shine, and take up all the space that he needs to. Because we need him, just as much as he needs his light.

There's a line in that song, "Spent half my life trying to find my light from outside sources, while the only voice that mattered came from me," and I see this spotlight in a sense, you know, in him experiencing this light from this outside source in a very negative connotation, but really, the only light that matters is the one that is within him, and the one in which he has yet to shine on the world.

[MUSIC PLAYING - SA ROC, "FOREVER"]

(SINGING) You betta shine on em baby, you a star. You betta. Be exactly who u are- Forever. Cuz they gon try and change your heart. Don't let up. Cuz You so damn fine, just the way u are. You betta shine on em baby, you a star. You betta. Be exactly who u are- Forever. Cuz they gon try and change your heart. Don't let up. Cuz You so damn fine, just the way u are. You betta shine on em baby, you a star. You betta. Be exactly who u are- Forever. Cuz they gon try and change your heart. Don't let up. Cuz You so damn fine, just the way u are. You betta shine on em baby, you a star. You betta. Be exactly who u are- Forever. Cuz they gon try and change your heart. Don't let up. Cuz You so damn fine, just the way you are.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks once again to Sa-Roc for joining us. You can learn more about her, Margaret Burroughs, and all of the artwork we talked about on the Sound Thoughts on Art web page, [nga.gov/podcast](https://nga.gov/podcast). Sound Thoughts on Art is a production of the National Gallery of Art's music department.

The show was created by Danielle Hahn, the National Gallery of Art's head of music programs, and it was mixed and produced by Maura Currie. To support the show, share Sound Thoughts on Art, and subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, or wherever you listen. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until we meet again, be well.

[MUSIC PLAYING]