

Queena Stovall—A Rural Virginia Life

Between December 1949 and November 1952, a 3-year span, self-taught artist Queena Stovall (1887–1980) completed 33 of her 49 extant paintings. The quantity as well as quality of the canvases she produced during that relatively short period of time is remarkable, given the fact that she was matriarch of a working farm that supported her family and that painting was relegated, by necessity, to her bedroom-studio at night.

Hog Killing (Dec. 1949) and *Cutting Out the Meat* (Jan. 1950) are Stovall's first two paintings and the catalysts for the productive years and prolific output that

followed. *The Empty Pen* (Feb. 1950), in concert with the first two works, completes a thematic triptych and is her only painting without figures or animals, yet filled with allegorical meaning. *"Lawdy, Lawdy, What'll I Do"* (Nov. 1952) shows the genius she achieved as a visual storyteller and is her most emotionally charged work of art. Together, these four paintings provide a rare glimpse into both Stovall's evolution as an artist and the extent of her extraordinary artistic and visionary capabilities.

Stovall's truncated attendance in an art class in November 1949 at age 62 was the result of her teacher Pierre Daura's

immediate recognition of her unique vision and self-styled technical approach to painting. When she submitted *Hog Killing*, in response to the assignment to create something reminiscent of Christmas, her instructor's only critique was not to alter it. Her choice of subject matter set in motion what would become the roadmap in all her subsequent works—to paint, as she said, "things I had seen and done and lived."

In rural Virginia, the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas was when hogs were killed and the meat prepared for consumption throughout the year. It was arduous and time-intensive work,



Hog Killing, Dec. 1949, oil on canvas board, 17 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 23 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.

entailing multiple steps over several days and necessitating many helping hands. Neighbors would help neighbors and the resultant bounty was shared among those involved. It was said that every part of the pig was used, except the squeal. While a grueling process, it was also a long-established seasonal ritual that brought community together and resulted in necessary provisions for families who primarily lived off the land. As Stovall remarked, "Do for your own family and then for the neighborhood."

In *Hog Killing*, Stovall deftly and with detailed accuracy leads the viewer

through the process: chopping wood for a fire to heat stones that would be shoveled into a tilted barrel of water for scalding the carcass. Afterward, the hog would be shaved, hung, cut open, and bled, and its organ meat extracted and strung up nearby. Remarkably, she visualizes and realizes the complete sequence of the day's activities on one canvas, concurrent vignettes playing out on a single stage of Virginia red clay. Her husband Brack watches the scene from his stool, the men focus on their individual roles, and the animals in the background add comic

relief to lighten the seriousness of the endeavor.

Stovall commented that she had never learned to sketch before she started painting. Thus, in this initial composition, she works out her ideas directly on the canvas, first placing figures in the scene (painting them, as she described, from the feet up) and then sculpting the background landscape around them. In *Hog Killing*, she establishes her signature use of rich, warm earth tones, details that stand out through touches of bright color (in this case, reds, yellows, and blues), and of figures in action.



Cutting Out the Meat, Jan. 1950, oil on canvas board, 17 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

Cutting Out the Meat is the logical sequel to *Hog Killing*, because its subject matter carries forward the butchering process from the first day to the second, after the hogs are left to freeze overnight. In this painting, the meat is cut, the fat trimmed and put into a container to make lard, and the hooves scraped off so that the feet could be cleaned and soaked in boiling water. Critical to understanding and appreciating Stovall's extraordinary and innate talent is that while the visual she presents is based on actual events and identifiable people depicted with remarkable accuracy, the scene, as in *Hog Killing*, is an imagined one. The artist stated, "I paint from memory and change things around sometimes to get the feeling or the scene I want."

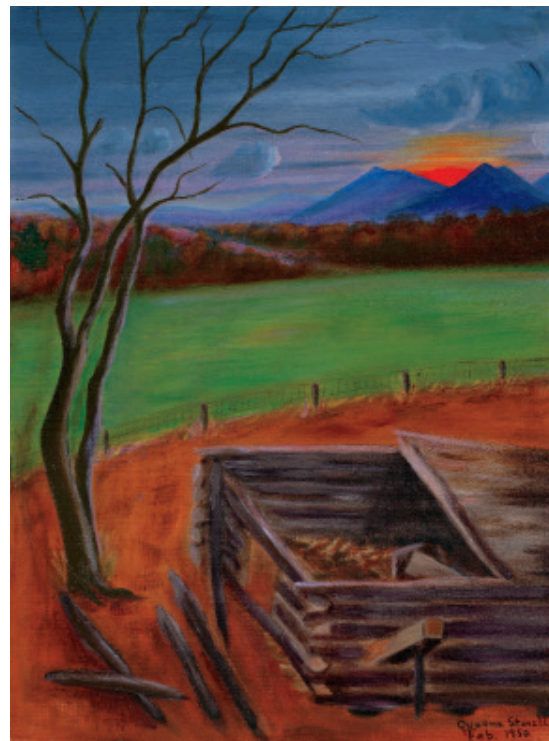
In *Cutting Out the Meat*, Stovall includes multiple buildings that were situated differently in her backyard, where the processing took place. These structures, based on loose sketches she made to work out angles and proportions, simultaneously anchor the composition and add interesting details relative to farm life. Inside the building on the left are hams curing and waiting to be smoked. The chicken coop near the middle includes an access ladder for the hens that would be removed at night to prevent predators from entering. A hand-cranked whetstone grinding wheel sits ready for sharpening tools. A round-bottomed basket for the delicate collection of fresh eggs is conveniently hung, as are dried red chili peppers used in pickling pigs' feet.

Stovall composes both *Hog Killing* and *Cutting Out the Meat* using a foreground, middle ground, and background, simplified in the former painting, more complex and nuanced in the latter. Her determination in rendering ever more challenging design elements without benefit of instruction speaks to her natural ability and growing confidence as a painter.

The Empty Pen depicts the end of the butchering day at twilight. Stovall commented, "There is always a lonely feeling when an enclosed space—even a pigpen—suddenly loses its bustle of life. The pigs are fun to watch; they poke their heads over the railings when you come to feed them; there is always noise and jostling around among them. Really and truly when you kill your hogs and go out that night where they were it really is lonely. After you've fed'em and talked to 'em you just kind of hate to look over in there."

Stovall's melancholy is palpable as she represents loss and loneliness through a darkened palette, a bare tree, the confines of the empty pen, and the eerie stillness of the scene. However, the artist also includes a blazingly beautiful sunset that tinges pink the sides of the tree, the pen, and the clouds, while also casting a soft purple glow on the mountains and into the sky, lending a sense of calm, serenity, and renewal to the vista. Sadness mixed with hopefulness in this single image illustrates the dichotomy of life in the country. Behind the tenderness and compassion for people and animals, there was a clear-eyed understanding of the hard work and tenacity it took to survive.

By the time "*Lawdy, Lawdy, What'll I Do*" was completed in November 1952, Stovall had honed her painting skills and grown more confident as an artist. One painting had been sold to a museum and four others through the highly respected New York Kraushaar Galleries that represented her. Stovall's creative process now included, at times, making a preliminary sketch, a figure for example, and then cutting it out and holding it up to the canvas to determine proportion.



The Empty Pen, Feb. 1950, oil on canvas board, 15 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 11 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.

If the result was too large or too small, she would repeat the process until it satisfied her sense of design. In addition, she began clipping out images from magazines and newspapers for inspiration and guidance.

In the case of "*Lawdy, Lawdy, What'll I Do*," a local newspaper photograph about a three-bedroom house fire was the catalyst for this dramatic and poignant work of art. She wrote about the painting: "Cabins were heated by open fires and cook stoves. Coal oil was used to start fires and light lamps. The burning home was a frequent tragedy—no running water and no one nearby to help—all was lost." Stovall reimagines the fire, substituting an isolated cabin in place of a house. In doing so, the visual narrative both relates more closely to her personal experiences of the dangers of remote living in the country and heightens the emotional content within the work.



"Lawdy, Lawdy, What'll I Do," November 1952, oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 20 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.

However, the true subject of and inspiration for the painting is not the fire, but the woman whose home is engulfed in flames and whose life has been tragically altered. The newspaper photo of the woman's anguished face, mouth agape and hands clasped, includes a caption below it reading *Lawdy, Lawdy, What'll I Do Now*.



Stovall skillfully and convincingly captures both the tearful expressions of the woman and her children as they look away from or toward the raging flames in

shock and the magnitude and horror of their burning home.

Details are not sacrificed to emotional content as empty water buckets and a partially burned broom illustrate the ill-fated efforts to extinguish the fire, the window muntins give way amid the searing heat, farm animals gaze in stunned stillness, and a mirror lays broken on the ground. Stovall painstakingly illustrates saved possessions that include recognizable household items of the period and items that were either owned by her personally (her brown tiered painting table) or repeated by her in other paintings (a pitcher and bowl set as well as cane chairs).

Soon after completing this painting, Stovall reported in a letter to a friend, "I think it is good, maybe my best." Likewise, her art dealer Antoinette Kraushaar praised the work when it was sent to New York for her review.

Stovall paintings are portraits of country life, images that portray in amazing fidelity the hard work, challenges, joys, and sorrows of farm life in rural Virginia. She said, "I don't think I could paint something somebody told me to paint unless it happened to be something I had seen or liked and could see in my mind's eye." Indeed, Queena Stovall's faithfulness to her uncompromisingly unique and personal vision is the bedrock of her extraordinary body of work.

—ELLEN SCHALL AGNEW
Independent Curator

Queena Stovall quotes are from interview transcripts by Claudine Weatherford in research for and cited in her book, *The Art of Queena Stovall, Images of a Country Life* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986).

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