

Image page 1: "Hanging On," 2022  
Mixed media on canvas 36"x36"

Image page 2, top: "Resisting," 2022  
Mixed media on canvas, 20"x16"

Image page 2, bottom: "Soaring," 2022  
Mixed media on canvas, 20"x16"

Image page 3, top: "Transcendence," 2022  
Mixed media on canvas, 14"x11"

Image page 3, bottom: "Flight," 2022  
Mixed media on canvas, 12"x16"

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'Maria Popova, from "Hope, Cynicism and the Stories We Tell Ourselves," *The Marginalian*. Web. <https://www.themarginalian.org/2015/02/09/hope-cynicism/>  
Last accessed 7/18/22.

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## SUZANNE SCOTT CONSTANTINE

### Interdisciplinary Artist and Writer

Mixed Media – Performance – Installation

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## STILL...AWAITING FURTHER TRANSFORMATION

### Suzanne Scott Constantine

*From here I heard what happened and I cried*

-t'ai freedom ford, poet, *More Black*

-Carrie Mae Weems, quoted in

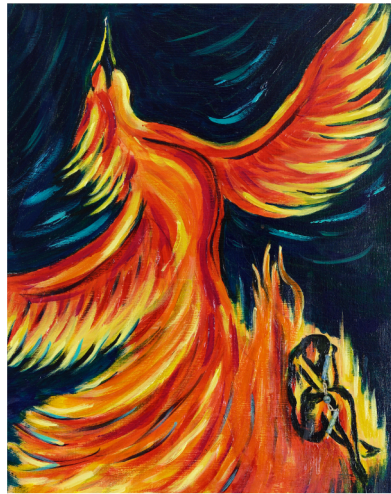
*"Grace Notes: Reflections for Now"*

From here, I heard what happened in Uvalde. I cried. From here, I heard what happened in Buffalo. I cried. From here, I heard what happened to Jayland Walker in Indiana. I cried. Before all that, I heard millions died from COVID and its variants. Thousands more from unpredictable weather events. I cried. Way back in the 1950s, there was Emmett Till. No explanation required. But you may or may not know about Amadou Diallo, another unarmed Black man. Almost 50 years after Emmett. Shot at 41 times outside his own apartment in the Bronx. Too many people to count in between and after. From here, I heard what happened and I cried. Again and again. Tears glisten but cannot add light in the depth of that darkness. The darkness is real. I yearn for change, believing naively that each event will be life altering. But the unfathomable happens again. And again.

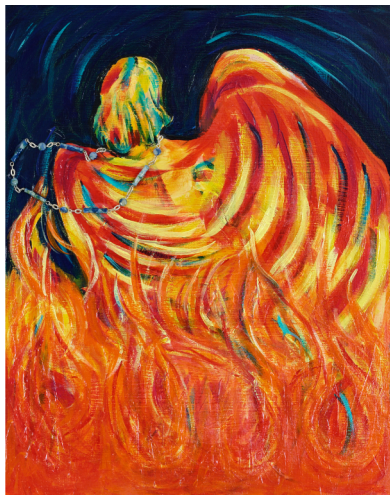
I begin a litany of troubles – rising sea levels, mass shootings, economic disruption, horrific war in Ukraine, insurmountable political divisions. My quest for remedies, resolutions, solutions propels me to my art. There's something about that mythic bird, the Phoenix, rising from its own ashes to a greater brilliance. Can I possibly be accepting the so-called "Phoenix Process,"

popularized by writer Elizabeth Lesser? She says it's a transformational odyssey – alas, not a pleasant one – to become better versions of ourselves. All right then. I'm in.

I readily concede that if I'm anticipating transformation, I have some bits of misery to encounter. Hence, my image of the figure hanging on to the Phoenix for dear life. The "Hanging On" piece is the first that narrates my story of the mythic bird's odyssey through deconstruction to reconstruction. It is not the complete narrative of transformation. It is not even the complete narrative of that artwork.



The work itself is an object lesson in transformations. The Phoenix is in its third transformation on that canvas. Underneath lies a living palimpsest of its history. The first artwork, born for a show in Northern Virginia in 2017, held the names of the Black men and women killed by police or white nationalists since 2003. Artist Carrie Mae Weems gave the audience the list of names as we left her performance of "Grace Notes: Reflections for Now." Over those names, I stamped linocut hands – reaching out – to help or to stretch up, to say don't shoot! I titled the piece "It's All About the Hands."



Two years later that same canvas, reappeared in a solo exhibition – my first in the OBX – in 2019 at Read 'em & Weep Bookstore. But it had gone through another dramatic transformation to include more names, some abstracted skyscrapers, crime tape, black string for graffiti-like marks. Some of the names, this time, were handwritten along the string marks.

Now in 2022, the same canvas appears as the Phoenix, the ultimate symbol of transformation. But is there really any ultimate transformation prior to death? Are not our transformations – even when

dramatic – conditional, temporary, complicated? And do we not believe that more transformation is required – all around?

Tell me, then, how does an artist and writer live and work in the tension between hatred, violence and disinterest on one side of the landscape, and love and peace on the other? We are caught in what Maria Popova calls "a tussle

with two polarizing forces ripping the psyche asunder by beckoning to it from opposite directions." She names the two poles critical thinking and hope. "Critical thinking without hope is cynicism," she says. "Hope without critical thinking is naïveté."<sup>1</sup>

Whoa. The last thing I want to be is cynical. But I don't want to be naïve either. As I toy with these concepts in my art, I am convinced that this oeuvre on transformation popped right out of my unconscious.

In my narrative of the Phoenix process, I resist. What I resist persists. I battle in that process until I have no fight left. When I finally relax, submit to the process, I shape-shift, conforming to the back of the mythic bird. In the final portion of the process, the odyssey into the Phoenix Process is complete. But my narrative doesn't end there.



In the aftermath of my Phoenix Process, creativity and lightness explode with insights, ideas, and new perspectives. I revel in a time of exuberance. I experience renewed buoyancy, vision, and imagination. It is a time to tap into the lode where my personal passions and dreams wait to be mined.

The light hues and feathers symbolize the great expectations for a future not consumed by the struggle. The feathers, ready to launch, symbolize an internal landscape of freedom. The ultimate hope, but never the end. Transcendence, perhaps. Transformation, perhaps. But it is always equivocal. Always incomplete. Never finished. And always possible.

I live in that tension in the spaces between. I still await further transformation.

