

# Harriet Tubman – Still Dangerous

By Mike Alewitz

August 1, 2000

*The remarks were given at the national conference of the AME Zion Church in Greensboro, North Carolina. The talk was about The Dreams of Harriet Tubman mural project created in Baltimore, Maryland, 2000.*

Thank you all for allowing me to be here this evening.

I was invited by Baltimore Clayworks, as one of 50 "Millennium Artists," to do a project in Maryland. Through discussions with them, and activists in the Underground Railroad Movement, I developed an idea for a piece of artwork - a series of murals called "The Dreams of Harriet Tubman."

Harriet Tubman, you may know, was narcoleptic or epileptic, (depending on whom you read.) She was a very spiritual woman and she had a lot of visions. Some were historical

events and some were more personal. It seemed like a good starting point to do a group of murals. Our idea was to create a series of murals around the state of Maryland that would highlight some of the aspects of this amazing woman's life.

## Harriet Tubman - Still Dangerous

As we began to create the murals, we ran into some problems.

One of the murals, which highlighted her role as an educator, called "Education for All," painted at a middle school in Harford County, was vandalized with racist graffiti and swastikas.

More seriously, the main mural that was to be painted in Baltimore was rejected by the group for whom it was designed. It showed Harriet Tubman as Moses - armed, militant, parting the seas of reaction. She is overturning a slave ship on one side, and a modern day slave ship - a sweatshop- on the other side.

What you see behind me is a small sketch of that image - a portable mural. It was supposed to be almost thirty feet high. Well it's not unusual for groups to decline murals. But despite the fact that a leading national artist, hosted by one of the foremost arts groups in Baltimore, funded by the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, in a program initiated out of the White House Millennium program - no major institution in the city of Baltimore would take the mural! A free mural!

It seems that almost a century after her death, Harriet Tubman still scares those who are in power.



MOVE OR DIE (Detail) From THE DREAMS OF HARRIET TUBMAN Project. Portable Mural, Approx. 7' x 21'  
Painted at the Museum of Visionary Art, Baltimore/ Based on a censored proposal intended as a major landmark work in the city.

## **Freedom Fighter**

This portable piece will tour the country, available for those who may wish to use it.

When the mural was declined, I was asked by the press if I would remove the gun. I refused to do so.

I don't want a kinder, gentler Harriet Tubman. She was a tough woman who lived in scary times. I don't want to make Harriet Tubman a meaningless icon that hangs in McDonalds to try to get you to buy hamburgers. She was a freedom fighter - and that is how she should be painted.

## **If Harriet Was Alive Today**

When you paint someone - as I've been painting Harriet, you get to know him or her quite well... We talk...

I asked myself: If Harriet could get down off the wall, or step off this banner, what would she have to tell us today?

What would this woman - who worked the fields as a slave, who worked as a lumberjack cutting down trees, and who toiled as a domestic worker until she was very old, because the government she had fought for refused to relinquish her pension - what would she have to say about the sweatshop conditions of workers today? What would she have to say about the plight of immigrant workers and those who have been disenfranchised in the boom economy?

What would Harriet Tubman - who fought with arms in hand, and led troops in battle at the end of the civil war - who made a revolution - what would she have to say about these elections we are watching? What would she say about the sons of wealth and privilege paving their way to the White House with international carnage and the periodic public executions of the poor?

What would she say - this fearless conductor on the Underground Railroad - a guerrilla leader who was called "General Tubman" by John Brown - what would she say about generals who wage war by remote control? Who sends rockets costing a hundred million dollars to explode overhead while children go without the necessities of life?

What would this woman - who served as a nurse - have to say about a country that provides everything which science is capable of to the wealthy - and nothing at all to 40 million of it's citizens?

What would Harriet Tubman, who organized an assault on the Troy, NY courthouse to prevent them from sending an escaped slave back down south - when more moderate voices said let the courts take their course - she went in and grabbed him - and she yelled "Take him to the river and drown him, but don't let them send him back into slavery!" - What would she have to say and do about Mumia Abu-Jamal and other victims of racist injustice who languish in our jails today?

And what would she have to say - almost 150 years after the end of slavery - about a country where the upper classes are intoxicated by the money they are "making" on the stock market - what would she say about that country that still cannot admit and recognize that the great wealth that exists here was build on the backs of slaves like her?

## **The Good Ship Zion**

I think I know what she would say ... because she said it. When Harriet Tubman was a conductor on the Underground Railroad, slaves would often become very fearful, and want to turn back. It was an incredible thing - to have to step into another universe. But they could not be allowed to turn back, for it would jeopardize the whole network.

Harriet Tubman carried a pistol. And she would put it to their heads. And she would say: "Move or die." And that is one of the reasons I kept that weapon in the mural. It is to remind us, in the year 2000, that we must move or die.

Today as we are meeting here, there are young people demonstrating in the streets of Philadelphia. They will be in the streets of Los Angeles, as they have been in Seattle and Washington D.C. There is a national discussion unfolding about reparations for slavery. It is all part of a growing movement that questions the division of wealth that exists in the world. And it raises the question of whether those who produce the wealth should get the wealth.

It's all part of one big movement. And I think if Harriet Tubman was alive today, and she saw that movement - she would repeat what she said about the Underground Railroad movement: "It's the good ship Zion, and it's time to get aboard."

With that in mind, I have decided to name this little piece "Move or Die."

I want to thank you all for allowing me to unveil it here. Harriet Tubman was a deeply spiritual woman. It's what motivated her life and her struggle. And it's an honor and privilege to be with you this evening.