

## Marion



Marion by Carmen Bunche, 16 x 20 oil on canvas. 2025

“Is that a dense crowd of people in a forest? Are those faces? Is that a leg? A bicep poking from a short sleeve shirt? Could that be a pregnant woman with her arm resting on her bulbous belly? What are those three purplish blobs in the upper third?” These were my questions as I studied “Marion” by Carmen Bunche. This painting, with more by Carmen and several other Wofford College Studio art majors was on display in the Student Center.

I didn't love the painting. It wasn't beautiful. The color palette was foreboding, troubling, unsettling: mauve, brown, gray, muted orange, muted blue, purple. Shapes were contorted, their origins ambiguous and elusive. Still, there was something compelling about this painting that intrigued me. I wanted to know more.

I arranged to meet with Carmen to talk about the painting which I was interested in purchasing. I wanted to know the story behind it and more about the artist.

We arranged to meet at my office at the college. A confident young black woman took a seat across from me.

As we introduced ourselves, I learned that Carmen is a native of Greenville, SC. She graduated from South Carolina Governor's School of the Arts in 2023 and is double majoring in Art History and Studio Art at Wofford College.

"Tell me about this painting." I prompted. "What is the subject? What was your inspiration?"

"As an artist, I prefer the viewer to make meaning of what they see. What do *you* see?"

"It could be a crowd of people beneath some trees but I don't know why they might be there."

Carmen nodded in agreement.

"The colors tell me it is not a happy occasion. I see three purple blobs in the upper third but I don't know what they represent."

Again, she nodded, apparently reluctant to disclose more.

"What is the meaning of the title? Is Marion a person?"

"Marion is a place." She divulged.

“If I tell you more,” she continued, “it may change the way you think about this painting. Once you know its origin, it may permanently alter what you think about it. Its meaning might be irreversibly altered for you. You might never be able to see it the same way again. You may not be able to enjoy it as much,” she warned.

“I want to know. I will live with the consequences.” I gently insisted.

“Marion is a town in Indiana. My inspiration was a well-known black and white photograph from 1930 of a lynch mob who broke into a jail where three black teenagers were being held for robbing and shooting a white man and raping his fiancé. When news came that the white man had died in the hospital from the gunshots, the angry mob broke into the jail and brought the prisoners to the courthouse square where they were lynched. Those three purplish spots represent those three teenagers.”

“Do you have the photograph?” I asked.

She showed it to me on her phone.

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I was appalled. The bodies of two lifeless black men dangling from ropes thrown over a sturdy tree limb. A dense crowd of men and women, all white, some staring into the camera, some smiling. A pregnant woman in the foreground. A young couple holding hands. A man with a Hitler-style mustache pointing to a body as if to say, “This is what happens when you harm white people.”

According to an NPR documentary, “local photographer Lawrence Beitler took what became the most iconic photograph of lynching in America.” On the evening of August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1930 when Beitler learned that the mob intended to lynch the prisoners, he set up his camera at the scene. He asked people to look into the camera just as he set off the powder flash. He spent the night in his darkroom making 6 x 9 prints which he sold for 50 cents each the next day. Thousands of copies were made and sold.

This particular photograph was the inspiration for Abel Meeropol's 1937 poem "Strange Fruit," which was recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939 and later by Nina Simone:

Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

Lynchings occurred all across America, not just the South as the song implies. Photographs of lynchings were common in newspapers nationwide. They delivered a clear message to Black Americans: Whites are in control. Any accusation of a misdeed by a Black person is punishable by public torture and death at the hands of a mob, the leaders and members of which will not be held accountable.

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I had been correct about several aspects: Carmen had chosen the colors and shapes to convey and yet obscure a very disturbing event, a mob participating in and being entertained by a lynching. Her figures were indeed abstractions of people in the mob. My guess that the upper half was of looming trees was also accurate.

Carmen was also correct: I will never be able to look at that painting again without remembering what it represents and being repulsed by the subject.

I now understood her reluctance to divulge her inspiration for this painting. Confiding to me, a 68-year-old white man whose views on race relationships she doesn't know might cause me to change my mind about the purchase.

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Lynching is not a pleasant subject. Racial prejudices are difficult to address. I don't know what my southern white ancestors in rural eastern North Carolina may have thought or done in those circumstances. I hope they would have been as offended and disgusted as I am, but who can say? My grandfather would have been 30 years old in 1930, the time of the photograph, a time when some historians claim that up to one third of the men in Indiana were members of the KKK. The KKK was a powerful political force: 50,000 members marched in the nation's capital. My grandfather would have been in his fifties and sixties when the civil rights movement was surging in the South and the racial violence and the KKK flared to prominence again. My parents would have been in their thirties during those years when the "N" word was spoken so casually. I'm proud to say they deleted that word from their vocabulary. They voted for Barrack Obama twice!

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"Of all the subjects you could have chosen to paint, why this?" I asked.

"The meaning of a story can be altered by the way it is told. Horrific events can be abstracted and softened so they can become unrecognizable or even acceptable."

Carmen’s artist statement on her website explains more fully: “Her practice examines the obscuring and softening of historical narratives, exploring how histories are distorted, concealed, or partially revealed over time. ...Bunche considers her work an evolving self-archive, shaped by her ongoing engagement with Black histories and the process of learning them. Rather than presenting direct statements, her work operates through suggestion, inviting viewers to look closer, question what is visible, and consider what remains unseen. Her practice opens up a space where past and present collapse into one another, asking viewers to reflect on their relationship to history and the narratives they inherit, uphold, or challenge.”

“Marion” does all those things for me, especially after I became informed of the subject matter. In my opinion, Carmen achieved her intent as an artist.

I wrote Carmen a check for “Marion.” I asked her to sign and date the canvas, which she did on the upper edge of the back.

I wanted to possess this disturbing painting. It reminds me that history can be retold to make it less offensive. It reminds me of how dangerous and lawless a mob can be. It reminds me that some people in some circumstances can rationalize murder, can be entertained by cruelty, and can escape accountability. This was true in 1930 in Marion, Indiana, and it is true in today America, especially under the Trump Administration which fosters an “us” versus a threatening “them” mentality. Also, I want to support this young artist who, early in her career, is willing to confront difficult issues.

How does it feel for Carmen to be among the 8% of Wofford College students who are Black? In painting and subsequently hanging “Marion” on the Wofford campus where 80% of the student body is

white, and, most like me, would rather not see photographs of lynching, Carmen is asking her viewers to look beyond the surface, to confront the ugly underlying truth, to acknowledge misdeeds, and thoughtfully consider our values and relationships.

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Mary Helen and I have a growing collection of art. “Marion” hangs on a wall for all to see. Our guests would be disturbed if we were to display the photograph that served as its inspiration. Should someone ask me about the it, I’ll say, “This painting is an abstraction of a black and white photograph. If you want to know more, research “Marion, Indiana, August 7, 1930.” If they probe further, I might suggest reading “A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America,” a 2001 book by historian James H. Madison that informed me of the many issues that make Carmen’s painting so rich in meaning. If one bothers to investigate, one will learn the disturbing truth. Their “enjoyment” of the painting will be forever tainted, but their appreciation of it will be forever enlightened, just as mine has been.

GR Davis

27 May 2026

Additional material that informed this essay:

*A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America.* James H. Madison. 2001. Palgrave MacMillan.

“With the skills of a historian and the artistry of a journalist, Madison has written more than a study of lynching. In recounting an Indiana mob’s savagery, he explores how white and black Americans have remembered and forgotten the nation’s history of racial violence. And he reminds us that the legacy of that history touches every region of the country.”

W. Fitzhugh Brundage, William B. Umstead Professor of History  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

GR’s summary of several website sources:

They would read that people from throughout the county gathered in Marion when they heard that something big was about to happen in the aftermath of the death of a 21-year-old white man who was shot four times, and his 19-year-old fiancé was reportedly raped. The sheriff would not let the mob into the jail but did not or could not prevent some leaders from bashing down the iron door with sledge hammers and crow bars. According to one account, the first young man was dragged from the jail to the city square, along the way being pummeled by the mob. He had been pierced by a crowbar and may have been dead even before his body was hung from a noose. The second young man used his arms to prevent the noose from tightening around his neck when they pulled him up, so they lowered him, broke his arms, and pulled him back up. The youngest suspect, aged 16, had the noose on his neck when someone called out, “He’s innocent!” Inexplicably, he was spared, returned to

his cell, convicted of accessory to murder, and served four years. James Cameron lived to be 92 years old. He wrote his account in a 1994 book “A Time of Terror: A Survivor’s Story.” “I had done nothing really bad, but this was Marion, Indiana, where there was very little room for foolish black boys.”

PBS Wisconsin Documentary: A lynching in Marion (1994) 28 minutes  
<https://www.pbs.org/video/wpt-documentaries-lynching-marion/>

Interview with James Cameron, Tommy Smith was 18, Abe Smith was 19 Dust bowl in the plains, the great depression just beginning. The older boys went to “hold up” somebody. “...Images that hold our history, stories told in black and white.” “These images served as a form of social control.” “Pictures like these burned in a lesson, a lesson of fear.” Cameron stupidly joined his two older friends after playing horseshoes during the night. They to intended to rob a couple on lover’s lane, outside Marion. 21 year old Claude Deeter shot four times, and his fiancé, 19-year-old Mary Ball, who was reportedly was raped, but who stated at Cameron’s trial, that he was not involved in the murder, and that she had never been raped. In 1925, the KKK had 50,000 marchers in the nation’s capital. A powerful political force. Some historians claim that up to 1/3 of the white male population of Indiana were in the Klan. By 8 pm, a crowd of 10,000 had surrounded the jail and demanded, ignored pleas, beat down 8 doors, “Lynching was not a private crime. It was meant to be a public horror.”

Terrorism on American Soil: Essay by James H. Madison. A lynching in the Heartland: Marion, Indiana, August 7, 1930

[https://archive.oah.org/special-issues/teaching/2011\\_06/sources/day2ex1\\_photo\\_madison.html](https://archive.oah.org/special-issues/teaching/2011_06/sources/day2ex1_photo_madison.html)

Strange Fruit: Anniversary of a Lynching August 6, 2010 NPR Radio Diaries <https://www.npr.org/2010/08/06/129025516/strange-fruit-anniversary-of-a-lynching> a 12 minute listen

Transcript of the radio broadcast:

<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/129025516>

Getty Museum Collection: The Lynching of Tom Shipp and Abe Smith at Marion, Indiana, August 7, 1930 photograph by Lawrence Beitler (1885-1960) <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/1049CB>

Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror  
([website](#))

Book: Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (1999)  
James Allen (editor) Text by John Lewis, Leon F Litwack, and Hilton Als. Available on Alibris for ~ \$50.