

ARTnews

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Maureen Kelleher

Safe-T

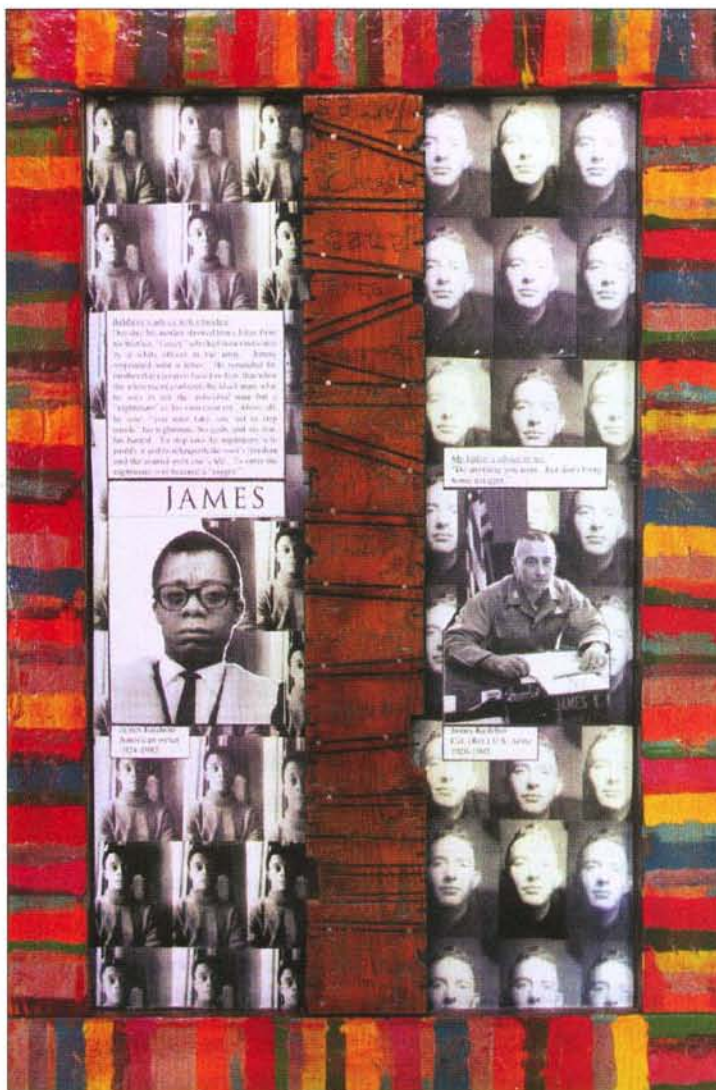
Maureen Kelleher's carved, gouged, painted, and collaged constructions are well conceived and passionate. These wooden wall hangings have the look and feel of folk art but the biting social critique of more conceptual work. A Hurricane Katrina evacuee now based in New Jersey, Kelleher was first inspired to make art after reading a biography of James Baldwin in 2001, when she was 42.

This, her first solo show, titled "Home Girl Don't Play," featured her earliest work, the disturbing *James* (2002). The space within a painted wooden frame is divided into two columns: on one side, a black-and-white photograph of a young Baldwin; on the other, photos of her father dressed in an army uniform. In typed text on Baldwin's side, the African American writer advises his brother on how best to handle racism, explaining that it is based largely on fear. Text on the other side quotes the artist's white father—also named James—bluntly saying that she may not bring a black man home.

The poignant *Cop Stop* (2004), composed of wooden squares painted in shades of green that evoke institutional tiles, is carved with the text "God help the poor schmuck who pees his pants and can't articulate a rational thought." (Kelleher once worked as a private detective, helping attorneys who represented men on death row.) And in *I'm Gonna Try. H. Tubman* (2003), Kelleher pays homage to the heroic former slave Harriet Tubman with a series of photographs. Cobbled together like memories of

events long past, Kelleher's works are intimate and deeply felt. It's surprising to learn that the artist is in fact white. But that is perhaps partly her point: to get viewers to grapple with their preconceptions about race. She is a gifted narrator, conveying her own experience of growing up in the South.

—Meredith Mendelsohn



Maureen Kelleher, *James*, 2002,
mixed media, oil, color Xerox, and carved wood, 30" x 20".
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