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ABSTRACT

Historically, black visual art has held significance beyond its surface value as a source of beauty or entertainment. Black art has a long tradition of connections to activism. Black art advocates promoted the idea that art should be wielded as a tool for black advancement. However, in recent years, cultural theorists have declared that black art history has developed beyond this point and entered an era of post-blackness. Against this backdrop, I analyze the creative practices of contemporary black visual artists in Atlanta, GA to explore the varied ways that their art is a locus for activism and sociopolitical commentary. Their artistry is the basis for my interrogation of the question, what is this present moment in black art history, and what are the features of contemporary black artistic production?

Aesthetic Liberation: Contemporary Black Visual Art and Typologies of Activism in Atlanta

by

Spencer Stultz

B. A., Syracuse University, 2017

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Pan African Studies

Syracuse University
May 2019

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This work is a culmination of myself; my passions, the way I understand information, and represents the lens in which I view and experience this world. However, from the beginning I knew that my research is bigger than me, and that it was imperative that I did this work justice. I knew how much I admired the work of the creatives that I engaged and knew that my articulation of this research would be – in my way – a chance to honor them. This is not to place too much importance on myself. I knew that the people I interviewed had been researched before me and would be researched after me. However, there was something in me – something I am still unable to fully articulate – that knew that this work needed to honor these artists. I needed to be able to adequately describe Jamaal’s simplistic yet powerful propaganda art. I needed to honor the work of, with, and for art that both Tiffany and Lauren are so invested in. I needed to ensure that I captured the essence and ethereal nature of Shanequa and Angela’s artistry. Finally, I needed to articulate the way that both Charly and Tracy’s art makes my heart sing. All of these creatives reinvent the world that we live in through their work of art. To Jamaal Barber, Shanequa Gay, Charly Palmer, Angela Davis Johnson, Tiffany Latrice, Lauren Harris, Tracy Murrell and Fabian Williams: this thesis is dedicated to you and your work. May your creativity and success abound.

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different parts of myself that at many points seemed to be in conflict with each other. Your support, your patience, and your guidance has made me into a better scholar, a better artist, and a better person. Thank you for your mentorship. Thank you for your professorship. Thank you for your friendship.

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Introduction

I first encountered the concept of post-blackness during the fall of 2017 while reading the Studio Museum of Harlem's *Freestyle* publication (Golden, p. 14). Upon reading it, I remember being completely flustered. I was left with more questions than answers regarding post-blackness, and spent the evening devouring other publications that engaged, analyzed, and even attacked this concept. This encounter is what led me to pose many questions regarding contemporary black visual artistry, which eventually culminated in this body of work.

In 1993, Stuart Hall asked, "What sort of moment is this in which I pose the question of black popular culture?" (Hall, p. 104). Almost 30 years later, I am posing questions that resonate with Hall's query. What is *this* present moment in black art history? My thesis undertakes case studies to address this question by analyzing the art and artistic practices of contemporary black visual artists in Atlanta, GA. I explore their engagement with issues connected to black life to understand how their approaches and their creation of visual art forges connections between art and activism. The central concerns of my research are the manner and degree to which they contend with social and political developments. To what extent does their art constitute activism? This question has deep roots in African American art history. It was critical to the rise of modern black art in the twentieth century. It gained renewed significance at the dawn of the twenty-first century when cultural theorists declared the arrival of a post-black era. Post-blackness is an interpretive proposition intended to characterize this present moment in art history. It observes that artists are now afforded a freedom to create art that is not bound by concerns about "positive" and "negative" images of blackness. Against the backdrop of this claim, my thesis explores contemporary relationships between art and activism. It considers the works of black Atlanta artists in light of the history of strong links that exist between the two factors, which

created a genre of activist visual art. Thus, I am situating the present moment of black art production in a long tradition that appreciated and promoted the political significance of art.

I study black visual artists' art, their sense of themselves as artists, the extent to which they identify with a particular tradition of black artistry, and their engagement with social and political issues facing black communities. My research considers some of the ways that visual art serves as a locus for political discourse and/or social commentary. I explore how visual art is utilized for communicating and expressing themes and ideas associated with activism. In this context, activism can be understood as actions or practices that are meant to bring about social or political change. The people I research are all Atlanta-based artists and creatives who are of African descent. I chose Atlanta as the site for my research for multiple reasons. Atlanta has always been considered a mecca among black communities, with large populations of black people. It has been said that "the history of African Americans in Atlanta is synonymous with the history of Atlanta itself", which demonstrates how integral blackness is to Atlanta's foundations (National Park Services, Atlanta). Atlanta boasts of thriving black art scenes, with a plethora of institutions geared towards black artistry, including ZuCot Gallery, Arnika Dawkins Photographic Fine Art Gallery, the Auburn Avenue Research Library, the Apex Museum, the Hammonds House Museum, Peters Street Station, the Spelman Museum, Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries, and many others. These institutions support and promote black artistry and artists of the African Diaspora. They provide opportunities for artists to showcase their work and offer programming for audiences to engage art created by black artists. Atlanta boasts of a large population of talented black visual artists, which is ultimately why I decided to conduct my research there.

The visual artists that I analyze are Jamaal Barber, Angela Davis Johnson, Charly Palmer, Shanequa Gay, Fabian Williams, Tracy Murrell, Tiffany Latrice and ZuCot gallery manager

Lauren Harris. Jamaal Barber is a visual propagandist, who asserts his opinions and experiences through the screen-prints that he produces. He turns to woodcutting and screen-printing to voice his sociopolitical concerns, where he makes direct and insightful social commentary within his work. Shanequa Gay and Angela Davis Johnson are “mythmakers” who combat negative narratives and stereotypes regarding the black community within their work. Both artists create visual art installations and are creative with the mediums that they utilize in their artistry. Gay creates mythological creatures to address issues that plague black communities like police brutality. Johnson creates portraits and experiential art installations that bring her own imaginations and stories to life. Tiffany Latrice and Lauren Harris engage in the work that surrounds artmaking – primarily visual art. They work to cultivate spaces for artists that are often disenfranchised within the art world – specifically black and black women artists. Latrice founded TILA Studios, a creative space that caters to the needs of black women artists. Harris, gallery manager at black owned ZuCot Gallery, curates art shows consisting of work created by black artists. Charly Palmer and Tracy Murrell are visual artists who engage and present their perceptions of blackness, black experiences and black history within their art. Fabian Williams is a visual artist and muralist whose art is a form of advocacy for black communities. Jamaal Barber introduced me to various creatives and artists while I was conducting my research in Atlanta. I chose to interview these creatives because they all provide unique insight into visual artistry. Their varying creative approaches and aesthetic practices provide innovative ways to understand the relationship between art and activism.

My analyses of these creatives directly coincide with the central themes of my work. My initial research questions were:

1. How do the artists experience and utilize collaboration in the conception, production, and dissemination of their work?

2. In what ways is the art that I analyze discursive?
3. How and/or to what extent do contemporary Atlanta artists embrace or reflect the “post-black art” paradigm articulated by Thelma Golden and others? In what ways does the political character of their work mirror or depart from art produced in the Black Arts Movement? To what extent do they illuminate a distinctive “post-black art” aesthetic?

These are the research questions that I began with and are the questions that enabled me to begin these conversations. However, as I continued researching, I realized that my research questions shifted. The question that I was really posing was:

How and to what extent do contemporary black visual artists in Atlanta engage past and present social and political issues affecting black people’s lives through the production and presentation of art?

This caused me to shift my research focus. I kept my initial questions because they provide me a starting point, however I acknowledge the shift in what my research seeks to explore. As I conducted analyses of these creatives, I realized that there were fundamental themes that existed within the work of these creatives. The central themes that have manifested within my research are:

1. Visual art can contain social and political commentary and critiques, serving as the locus for these critiques.
2. Public art can shed light on issues and experiences related to black communities to wider communities.
3. There is a historical relationship between black visual art propaganda.
4. Visual art serves as the locus for counter-dominant narratives/mythmaking.

5. Creative practices can be a form of healing and self-processing, and art that is personal and expressive can also be a form of activism.

But wait! What does ‘black artist’ even mean?

What does it mean to be a ‘black artist’? Is there a ‘black aesthetic?’ What is this present moment in black art history? These questions have induced a variety of controversial debates both historically and contemporarily. As early as the 19th century and as recently as 2019 cultural critics contribute to discourse that interrogates whether black art can (and should) have the luxury of being created “for art’s sake” or whether it must be functional and used as a tool (Cunningham). Regulations made by artists and critics of what the art of black creatives should be are significant because they oftentimes have a direct influence on what artists create, and what they believe the market and audience demand from artists. Are there shared experiences or shared aesthetic principles that qualifies what black art is, or is it simply based on the ethnicity of the artist? Paul C. Taylor offers a definition of “black aesthetics” as “the practice of using art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds” (Taylor, p. 12). Henry Morris Murray also explores the practice of black subjectivity, which despite cultural shifts can be understood as a “concentration on African American concerns, perspectives, and voices” (Powell, p. 16) along with their experiences that exists as the main content of black visual art. Black cultural subjectivity enables black artists to articulate their understanding of blackness on their own terms, enabling them to be in charge of the narratives that exist.

It is important to understand what being black is in order to understand my usage of the term “black artist”. Being aware of all of the intricacies, complexities, and contradictions that exist within a development of the characteristics of black identity and experiences, I understand “black artists” to be a reference to people of African descent who create art. In this context I am

focally researching African American visual artists, so my usage of “black artists” refers to artists of African descent who were born in the United States. Richard Powell provides the most viable explanation of what it means to be a black artist in his book titled *Black Art: A Cultural History*. Powell provides an in-depth analysis of what it means to be black generally, taking in the social, historical and political implications of the term. He acknowledges that there is an extreme diversity in the range of complexions, body types and features that exist among people of African descent. Powell asserts the idea that black[ness] has always held deep significance both visually and conceptually (p.8). He goes on to state how “blackness is less a color than a metaphor for a political circumstance prescribed by struggles against economic exploitation and cultural domination: a state of consciousness that peoples of various pigmentations have experienced, empathized with, and responded to” (Powell, p. 10). Here, Powell acknowledges that part of what informs black identity is a history of shared struggle and oppression. He believes that the categorization of people of African descent is often contradictory, acknowledging that the term is problematic, recognizing both the “ideological pitfalls of categorical absolutes and generalizations” as well as the reality and even strategic necessity of the concept of blackness (Powell, p. 12).

He outlines 5 characteristics of blackness/black diasporic cultural characteristics based on Stuart Hall’s essay *What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?*. They are as follows: (1) a cultural struggle against claims of “racial quintessence” as well as dominant cultural and political forces, (2) the ability to proclaim common beliefs, goals and values that can be institutionalized into community based institutions and products (ex: black churches, HBCU’s, various cultural productions, styles of performance and religious worship etc.) that sometimes resonates throughout the African Diaspora, (3) an acknowledgement of shared life experiences & social encounters that promotes a communal atmosphere. This conceptual “collective life experience”

(such as racial and cultural discrimination, which cannot serve as the basis of an “authentic blackness” but can be understood as fundamental to black culture, as it is pertinent to its conceptualization and realization), (4) a “black aesthetic”; a collection of philosophical theories about the arts of the African diaspora that thrives in black communities, and (5) cultural productions that are not only alternative to mainstream counterparts, but are “proactive and aggressive in their desire to articulate, testify, and bear witness to that cultural difference (Powell, p. 12-15). Essentially, Powell and Hall state that black diasporic cultures are defined as the “things that significant numbers of black people do” (Powell, p. 15). These “things” can vary, referencing a range of crafted, constructed, invented items/practices produced within the black community. This includes “works of art, religious ceremonies, performances on stage or within athletics” (Powell, p. 16). The usage of “black people” and the black community” can be defined as the men, women, children and people who are of African descent, who are part of the African diaspora.

Historical Context: Post Blackness, the Black Arts Movement and the Harlem Renaissance

Post-blackness is a term that has been coined by the current Director of the Studio Museum of Harlem, Thelma Golden, and artist Glenn Ligon in 2001. Golden describes post-blackness as a point in art history where black artists are adamant about not carrying the weight often associated with the modifying adjective of ‘black’ artist. Instead, she argues, these contemporary black visual artists prefer to explore and redefine complex notions of blackness, which their work is oftentimes rooted in, freely, without having to adhere to particular aesthetic or thematic standards (Zara). Stuart Hall’s interrogation of black popular culture created the framework, whether directly or indirectly to Golden’s conceptualization of post-blackness. Her creation and characterization of post-blackness are answering the question that Stuart Hall posed: what is this present moment in black popular culture? What are the characteristics and traits of

this present moment, and how can it be defined or understood? Hall decrees that black popular culture has contradictions, as all popular cultures do, going on to state that black culture is “a site of strategic contestation. But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still habitually used to map it out...resistance versus incorporation; authentic versus unauthentic” (Hall, p. 108.)

Are black visual artists currently creating within a of post-black consciousness? If so, what does their work look like? Is there aesthetic or ideological characteristics that qualifies work as post-black, or is it a general way to denote these present years and the art produced by this generation? Hall proposes that black popular culture always includes a form of hybridity, and this is a proposition that cultural critic Touré seems to agree with. Touré argues that the number of ways to be black is limitless, and that an argument for an “authentic” blackness is unreasonable and impossible. If Touré and Hall are correct, what makes black art “black”?

Golden utilizes the term post-blackness to understand and articulate the point in American art history that we are now in; a point in time where she claims black artists are afforded a freedom when engaging a variety of black issues and experiences. It acknowledges that previously, a common expectation was for black artists to adhere to specific aesthetic, conceptual and social prescriptions created by other black artists and cultural critics (“cultural critics” can be understood as cultural commentators; they are intellectuals who offer up opinions, theories and thoughts on cultural phenomenon). Post-blackness proclaims that currently, art that is created during this time deviates from the aforementioned restrictions. Richard Powell expanded on the definition of this conceptual time period and clarifies that although people draw negative conclusions regarding post-blackness based on connotations of a total departure from racial and cultural blackness, it actually is a parallel (or shadow) racial/cultural preoccupation

that privileges a kind of playfulness, or an irreverence, with regards to engaging black identity, history and/or culture (Powell).

If post-blackness really is the contemporary moment in black art history that we are now in, that means that it generally marks the end of a previous era, when black visual artists may have felt that they must adhere to specific conceptual standards and dogmatic aesthetic principles. This feeling is a result of the expectations that others have had for them and the type of art they thought artists should produce. Thus, it is necessary to consider artistic discourse in earlier periods to understand the potential distinctiveness of the contemporary moment. This section explores two major black artistic movements; the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, seeking find evidence that explain some of the expectations regarding art production of these eras.

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement, was a sociopolitical and cultural movement within the black community that took place from the end of World War I until the Great Depression. During this time, there was a conscious assertion of the dignity and respectability of black people by black middle-class communities within the creative arts. In many ways, this movement was a “manifestation that blurred the boundaries between aesthetics, politics, and lifestyle” (Watson, p. 8). World War I led to an industrial surge in the Northern United States, which offered economic opportunity to black Southerners. This movement, known as a Great Migration, inspired a flood of migrants from the South to the North, and the “pursuit of a new life in the North gave rise to the concept and identity of the New Negro” (Campbell, p. 15). Alain Locke described black migration as an opportunity for metamorphosis, where black folk could shed the old chrysalis of the “Negro problem” and achieve spiritual emancipation (Campbell, p. 15). Scholars like Campbell and Watson assert the fact that the New Negro Movement led to revolutionary political and social perceptions and stances in black

communities. There were also political shifts, where black people transitioned from supporting the Republican to mainly voting for Democratic political party candidates. Organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, founded in 1909), and the Urban League (founded in 1910) were also gaining more traction, and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (founded in 1914) grew in popularity. These institutions supported and promoted concepts that led to ideological shifts within black communities. During this time, artists like Aaron Douglas and Lois Mailou Jones engaged political and social observations and offered commentary within their artwork. Visual artists contributed to the development of vital aspects of the Renaissance ethos, like the “glorification of the black American’s African heritage, the tradition of depicting black folklore, or interest in the details of black life” (Campbell, p. 13). Intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois advocated that this cultural movement pushed for ideals such as self-determination, and cultural expression that was free from conformity to stereotypical expressions of blackness and black experiences.

Du Bois also declares that “all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists” (Du Bois, pg. 8). He believed that art-making was an essential race-building tool and believed that it could be wielded as a redeeming attribute for the black community. This was during a time when segregation was ingrained into American sociopolitical functioning, and black communities utilized acceptability politics to appeal to white in order to gain access to social, political and economic equality. Du Bois wanted black art to influence white American communities to acknowledge the humanity and respectability of black folk. Artists from this era seemed to have a dual responsibility to articulate a racial identity that encompassed “authentic” black experiences while also assuming a positive representation of blacks for white society. Scholars like Locke and Du Bois believed that art “would be final proof that the New Negro not only had something positive to contribute to American life but had, indeed, ascended to new

cultural heights” (Campbell, p. 16). During the New Negro Movement, there was much debate about what the appropriate “black image” should be. According to Du Bois, the art that depicted the black experience had to be filtered through a lens of Beauty, Truth and Goodness that created a positive image of the black community as a whole (Du Bois).

Sterling Brown identifies five themes that characterizes art from the Harlem Renaissance, which include 1) Africa as a source of racial pride, 2) depicting black American heroes, 3) the creation of racial and political propaganda, 4) engaging black folk tradition, and 5) candid self-revelation (Watson, p. 9). Here, there are clearly defined subject focuses within the art and creative endeavors that was produced within the black community during this time. These five characteristics are what describes and characterizes art from that period as “Harlem Renaissance” or “New Negro Movement” art.

A similarity that the Harlem Renaissance and post-black eras share is represented in a statement made by Du Bois, who states that “the ultimate judge of black art has got to be you and you have got to build yourselves up into that wide judgement...which is going to enable the artist to have his widest chance for freedom” (Du Bois). This is significant because what Golden states as the biggest characteristic about her conceptualizations regarding this present moment in black art history is something Du Bois advocated for in the 1920’s. Black artists created their own creative communities, and still do, in order to have a space where art is “reviewed and acclaimed by our own free and unfettered judgement” (Du Bois). The Harlem Renaissance seems to share some of the same fundamental ideals as post-blackness. Was a goal of Du Bois’ advocacy during the Harlem Renaissance Movement to get to a point where black artists can operate in a theoretically post-black period of time?

The Black Arts Movement (BAM) was a revolutionary sociopolitical and cultural shift within black creative communities. Despite limited perceptions of the Black Arts Movement

being centralized in Harlem, movements took place in most major cities throughout the United States like Chicago and Los Angeles. The Black Arts Movement was the cultural counterpart of the Black Power Movement. The Black Power Movement encouraged black communities to awaken their pro-black consciousness, expand their global understanding, and to extend their conception of their identity/heritage to a global scale by acknowledging and rooting themselves in their African heritage. Amiri Baraka was a prominent BAM artist who is considered to be the father of the Black Arts Movement. The inception of the BAM can be traced to 1965 when Baraka moved to Harlem, NY and opened the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in reaction to the assassination of Malcolm X (The Black Arts Movement). He later produced scholarship that outlined the ideology of this physical and conceptual movement. Essentially, he described how the intention of many of the Black Arts Movement artists in Harlem was to cultivate an art form that was unapologetically and inherently black, communicating black experiences and history. This art was also intended to represent Black Power Movement ideals of self-determination, self-respect and self-defense, and be a “true Afro American art” (Baraka, p. 30). BAM artists wanted to foster a cultural movement that was created by and geared towards the black masses, intending to dispel the former connotations that art-making was a practice for only few members of the bourgeoisie class. There was a major emphasis on community-based art and the production of art that was accessible to the black community. Ultimately, these artists wanted to create art that was revolutionary, with the ability to lead to a sociocultural revolution (Baraka). These ideals were followed and promoted by Black Arts Movement artists like Baraka and Larry Neal. Artists who did not follow these practices were at times excluded from black artistic circles for creating work that the BAM did not deem black art, referring to black abstract artists as “white artists in black face” (Pindell). Black Arts Movement artists in Harlem were concerned with creating a black

aesthetic and art that was authentically black, which by theory and practice was an exclusive concept considering the fact that there is no monolithic way to be black.

What happened to artists who did not adhere to these specified standards? Artists like Howardena Pindell experienced cold receptions in black arts communities in New York because she was an abstract artist. At this time, there were widespread beliefs that black artists should create art about social issues. “Within the African-American community in the 1970’s, if you were an abstract artist you were considered the enemy pandering to the white world” (Pindell). To further explore this, I examine black visual art collectives that were formed around the time of the Black Arts Movement. I analyze these collectives to explore the differences in ideologies of black artist during this time and attempt to illustrate the nuanced understandings of what practicing artists believed the role of black artists could and should be. This will include an analysis of AfriCOBRA and SPIRAL. I will describe their philosophies, artistic practices and how they compare and differ from each other.

AfriCOBRA – the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists - is an artist collective that was founded in 1968 in Chicago, IL. Founding members include Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, Jae Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu and Gerald Williams. This collective’s creative practices and ideology has been described as “an aesthetic life force and a way of seeing the visual world coupled with social, spiritual, relational and political realities” (Jones, p. 99). Its members included in their manifesto aesthetic precepts that serve as guidelines for their artistic practices. This manifesto was inspired by “a negro art movement based on a common aesthetic creed” (Zorach, pg. 104). Members of this artist collective pledged their commitment to creating art that is inspired by people of African descent and their collective (and individual) experiences, by making art that is for “the people.” They wanted their art to be accessible by having direct, distinct, and clear messages - art that is propaganda – and art that is affordable for everyday

black folk. Their goal was to make art accessible to black masses. They also set out to create art that was based on community-oriented principles and focused on creating work that represented and promoted the ideas, values, and experiences of said communities. Barbara Jones-Hogu described AfriCOBRA's aesthetic principles as work that "involved 'black, positive, direct statements created in bright, vivid...coolade colours'" (Zorach, Jones-Hogu, p. 104). Ultimately, this artist collective created a manifesto which outlines philosophical and aesthetic principles that were to be followed by its members. This manifesto includes a reference to color usage as well as the subject and content of the art (Donaldson). Although the manifesto encourages freedom within the work of its members' art, it is relatively prescriptive. Members decided that "there is a black aesthetic and a black art" and utilized aesthetics as "a functional instrument in the struggle, [demanding that they] look into [black] culture...as the foundation for a set of principles based on commonly held aspirations and desires (Jones-Henderson). AfriCOBRA is directly indicative of the prescriptions of the Black Arts Movement that was detailed by Amiri Baraka. The BAM generally, and AfriCOBRA specifically both promoted creative practices that required an at times dogmatic adherence to certain principles and ideals. They both had an emphasis on fostering community based/accessible art that was loud, direct, discursive and revolutionary.

SPIRAL complicates this discussion because they focused on exploring what the role of the black artist was and what it could be during that time, instead of developing prescriptions. Members of Spiral include Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, James Yeargans, Felrath Hines, Richard Mayew, William Pritchard, Merton Simpson, Emma Amos, Reginald Gammon, Alvin Hollingsworth, Calvin Douglass, Perry Ferguson, William Majors and Earl Miller (Valentine). Hale Woodruff named the group SPIRAL because "from a starting point, it moves outward embracing all directions, yet constantly forward" (Cahan, S., Godfrey, M., Whitley, Z., p. 22). They never developed a distinct aesthetic or ideology, and their

collective was not prescriptive like AfriCOBRA. In some ways, SPIRAL expressed practices and conceptions that are similar to the concept of post-blackness. They formed the group to discuss the role of the black artist within the larger struggle for civil rights, and to engage common aesthetic issues (Bearden, Henderson). They debated how they were supposed to react to the discrimination that they were subjected to and whether they should engage issues like this within their art (Reigle). This artist collective questioned whether an artist should directly engage/express issues present during the struggle for civil rights, following the tradition of social protest painting. Could artistic achievement alone improve the status of black people? I add to their queries, asking; Can black artists who create art during this time period without adhering to prescriptive/dogmatic principles still be considered part of the Black Arts Movement? Where do the outlier artists come in, and what category do they fit in? Was the Black Arts Movement more of an ideology or a description of an era? These questions are relevant because they are similar questions that are still being asked in reference to the conceptual framing of post-blackness.

The Harlem Renaissance and the BAM were both cultural movements where debates regarding “black artists responsibilities to the black masses abounded, often initiated by youthful black provocateurs who lambasted their opposers without formal restraints or political inhibitions” (Powell, pg. 4). They both articulate a historical precedence of linking black art and activism. However, during these time periods artists and art collectives also expressed post-blackness sentiments before post-blackness was more formally conceptualized. Conversations that artist collectives like SPIRAL had during this time still resonate contemporarily. It can be argued that this collective, and arts advocates like Du Bois paved the way for Golden’s conceptualization of post-blackness, where a new generation of black artists exist “who desire to transcend race and distance themselves from the “black artist” label, despite the fact that their work in most cases is tethered to explorations of blackness” (Valentine, pg. 3).

While Golden was offering an interpretation of what this present moment in black art history was in 2001, other scholars presented ideas that contradicted post-black notions. Samella Lewis, a visual artist, art historian and cultural critic states, “the alternatives for African American artists have been quite clear. Either they must work to realize and promote the inherent qualities that make [black] art a valuable, functional force in society, or they must become absorbed in the dominant culture of their societies and lose the indigenous values of their vital cultural heritage” (Lewis, p. 3). Stating that black artists must assert the value of their ‘indigenous’ art, she alludes to the fact that if they do not engage blackness their work will be swallowed up by the trends and ways of the dominant art traditions, losing its individualized value. Lewis goes on to prescribe what she believes are the obligations and responsibilities that black artists have to assert their blackness within their art, as well as to their communities. This is important because Lewis created a list of prescriptions that she believes black artists must adhere to. These prescription state that black artists must (1) understand and utilize elements of their cultural heritage, (2) understand the power of art and use that power to inform and educate black communities, (3) establish a direct relationship with people at all socioeconomic levels, because black visual artists are obliged to be an interpreter and a community resource, (4) create art that is functional, makes sense to the audience it is created for, and employs images common to black lives & experiences, (5) create art that is a continuum of aesthetic principles derived from Africa, maintained during slavery and present today, (6) create a body of work that is affordable to black masses, (7) create art that enriches the physical appearance of the community, and (8) create a diverse art. It is clear that Lewis is drawing heavily on historical black artistic traditional practices, which included aesthetic and conceptional obligations/prescriptions that were created by black visual artists and cultural critics. Many of these ideas were created during and revolve around the ethos of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement (Powell).

Lewis's descriptions of the obligations of a black artist is significant, however, because it carries presumptions and regulations that are reminiscent of both of these major black cultural movements. It is what Golden states that this present moment in visual art history is now past, however it was re-published a mere two years after Golden's declaration of the alleged era of postblackness and directly contradicts its viability. How useful is Golden's conceptualization in understanding the art and practices of black visual artists contemporarily?

This overview of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement is significant to my research because it helps me to further engage contemporary artistic practices. The analysis helped me to explore the historical precedence that links black art and activism. These analyses have also helped me to understand that even during significant creative eras, there are always artists whose work deviates from the larger trends that exist during these movements. This does not negate the significance of these movements; however, it dispels narratives that exist which promote 'authentic' black expressions. The analyses also help me to understand that there is no singular form of 'traditional black art'. Just as blackness is not monolithic, neither is the artistry of black creatives. However, there is a long tradition of black folk engaging social and political issues within their art. This has encouraged me to seek an understanding of artists, their art, and their creative practices on their own terms. By understanding the ideologies of previous black cultural movements, I am able to better engage contemporary artists. Post blackness has offered a way to begin dialogue regarding the present moment of black art history, and what art from this present moment consists of.

Literature Review

This thesis is in conversation with scholarly literature that engages visual art and activism. Rebecca Jones', author of *The Aesthetics of Protest: Using Image to Change Discourse*, researches how visual images and aesthetic practices have a pivotal role in

developing modern activism and protests. She examines public discourse, and how alternative politics have become popularized through visual means, claiming that “even marches and demonstrations require photographic images to gain media recognition and in order to enter public discourse” (Jones, p. 2). She studies visual rhetoric, engaging Debord’s description of *détournement*, which is a way to actively transform art images of spectacle into conversations about protest (*The Society of Spectacle*). Essentially, Jones argues that images can be utilized as a more innovative and flexible tool than what traditional protest practices like marches, demonstrations, rallies and petitions offer (Jones). This is connected to my research because it engages visual images as a site of protest. It also looks at different ways that visual and experiential art is a tool for public engagement. James Belflower’s *Making Thought Matter: Postmodern Models for Material Thinking* explores a concept called material thinking, which is the process and practice that turns ideas and conceptualizations into artwork. He argues that when artists practice material thinking, they insert knowledge that is perceived into their artwork (Belflower). This work informs my research, as I assert in my conclusion how the art that I create is a form of artmaking that practices material thinking.

I engage Nick Wilson’s conceptualization of social creativity, which suggests that in this present day it is necessary to reclaim the power that creativity has when it is a result of human interactions in interdisciplinary ways. He states that the creativity of marginalized populations is as valuable (if not more valuable) as that of people who visibly work in creative industries (Wilson, p. 368). The concept of social creativity is related to James Rolling’s book *Swarm Intelligence*, which frames creativity as a “collective force that reinforces the success of the human species across innumerable fronts” (Rolling, p. 8). This is significant because both of these scholars explore the dynamics of social creativity. They engage how social creativity exists and manifests, and how interactions without borders (borders being economic, societal,

professional, industrial, and anything else that can categorize humans in a way that leaves other populations out) can induce and promote social creativity. Rolling researches how social creativity can be both underdeveloped and cultivated. I engage these concepts in my work by researching instances where black artists engage in creative collaboration. I explore how creative collaboration is a form of social creativity, which usually culminates into work that is bigger than what artists could have created on their own. My work explores how engaging in social creativity and creative collaboration enables artists to transcend their own ideas and abilities. Janet Wolff engages the social nature of arts in the social interactions that are necessary for their production, distribution and reception. In *The Social Production of Art*, Wolff questions ways that sociological approaches to the arts can help to conceptualize individual creativity (Wolff). This sociological approach can serve as inspiration for the individual who engages in creative activity. In *The Social Impact of the Arts*, authors Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett creates a quasi-historiography of claims made about the impact, value and function of the arts (Belfiore, Bennett). Utilizing an international scope, they explore both the positive and negative views that people traditionally hold regarding the arts in an attempt to reconnect modern policy debates with a complicated history (Belfiore, Bennett). Our work is reminiscent of each other's because my research conducts a brief study of black art movements in an effort to understand the conceptualization of post-blackness. I also explore the social nature of art by investigating the ways that contemporary black visual art is discursive.

Kellie Jones is a scholar whose work engages similar themes as mine. Jones conducted a regional case study of visual artists and the various social and political influences that informed their identities as well as artistry. In *South of Pico*, she combines geographical spacial theories with artist biographical sketches, historiographies of black migration patterns and analyses of the art of black visual artists and how all of these factors informed their narratives within their art.

She also analyzes the production of art created by regionally specific artists during 1960-1980, and studied how social, cultural and political phenomena influenced the work that these artists produced in Los Angeles, California. Her work is a regional case study that focuses on the external conditions that influence artists and the art that they create. Although our approaches and methods differ, both of our research engages social and political phenomena and its impact on the art that is created by black artists.

My work expands and adds to the existing conversations in my field because the primary focus of my work is mapping out and exploring the different varieties of visual activism. My work tries to understand the different forms that art activism takes within contemporary black artists work. This work is significant because it explores how art as activism sheds light on the different ways that art can function.

Methods

I carry out this research through mixed methods that include oral history interviews with practicing visual artists, discussions with cultural custodians, through the analysis of visual art, and by studying art exhibitions and exhibition catalogues. Atlanta, Georgia, where I conducted my research, has a thriving black artistic community that afforded me an opportunity to explore urban art and activism during this theoretically “post-black” artistic period. I began this work with an art historical approach by engaging what this present moment in black art history is in order to begin this conversation.

Utilizing the Snowball Sampling method, I began my research with Jamaal Barber, who introduced me to many visual artists. Because of the exposure I gained through my connection to Barber, I attended various creative events, conducted eight oral history interviews, visited various museum exhibitions, and embarked on multiple participant observations.

I chose to conduct oral history interviews as my method of collecting in depth information about these artists. Oral history interviews are “self-conscious, disciplined conversations between two people about some aspect of the past considered...to be of historical significance and intentionally recorded...Although the conversation takes the form of an interview...at its heart, [it is] a dialogue” (Shopes, p. 2). Oral history interviews provide a shared authority, where both the historian and the narrator are equal participants in a conversation, and there is not a hierarchy (Thompson), which I knew would permit the artists that I engaged to open up more. As a practicing visual artist, I understand that at times discussing your work can become very personal, and in order to fully engage with my core research question, the interviewees needed to feel comfortable enough to share their experiences. This method of research also allows the artists to carry whatever associations and experiences they deem important to their art into the conversation.

In addition to my written thesis, I create paintings and other visual images that engage dominant themes of my research findings. The themes I engage within my exhibition include, but are not limited to sociopolitical critiques, counter-dominant mythmaking and the production of visual art as a healing process. My exhibition, entitled *A Time for Joy and a Time for Sorrow*; displays how my research lies at the intersection of concepts and praxis. As a practicing artist, one of the ways I communicate and express my ideas is through the creation of visual images. Since the premise of my work is that visual art is discursive, with the ability to communicate ideas, and throughout my research I’m gauging the extent to which artists engage in activism within their work, this gives me an opportunity to extend the claims I make within my research and bring them to life. Painting portraits enabled me to gain a further appreciation and understanding of the art work that I engage. Not only was I able to gain deeper insight, I was

able to demonstrate the themes of my work by creating work that functions in the same way as the artists I engaged.

For my exhibition, I use the conceptual and creative methodology of portraiture to create my images. Portraiture is a method that “blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life” (Hackmann, pg. 51). As the portraitist, I am attempting to interpret my perspectives and experiences, and embody them into the portraits that I create. In doing so, I document my voice, authority, knowledge, experiences and translate them into the portraits that I create.

I approach my art analyses based on the recommendations of a Duke University Visual Analysis Publication. It describes the purpose of visual analyses, which is to understand and recognize visual choices artists make in creating the artwork with the intentions of developing a better understanding of the art as a whole. Duke University suggests the analysis address the artwork’s formal elements and indicates that there is freedom to supplement this factor with historical context and/or interpretations of meaning. The article recommends that the analysis includes a description of fundamental observations, the formulation of a claim about the piece of art, and support of the claim with observable details that analyze line, color, form, shape, texture.

In *The Art of Writing About Art* Paul Barolsky supports this approach, stating that a “description of what one sees is fundamental to art historian interpretation. Description is a kind of interpretation” (Barolsky, p. 257). However, the author encourages the art historian to take it a step further by pushing past mere descriptions and approach the analysis as one would a performance. He states that the art interpreter should “bring out the qualities of art with language marked by lucidity and energy...art historical writing need not be flat, tedious, vapid, bombastic, or lacking in sensuous immediacy and playfulness” (Barolsky, p. 262). Based on the author’s

recommendations, I take the liberty of approaching my analyses with a sense of both admiration and playfulness.

Thematic Introductions

Many of the following themes overlap within my analyses, meaning more than one of these themes are present in the work of a particular artist that I analyze. Thus, I will explain how I define and utilize each of these themes, with examples of how they can be manifested within visual art. These themes are: (1) Visual art can contain social and political commentary and critiques, serving as the locus for these critiques. (2) Public art can shed light on issues and experiences related to black communities to wider communities. (3) There is a historical relationship between black visual art propaganda. (4) Visual art serves as the locus for counter-dominant narratives/mythmaking. (5) Creative practices can be a form of healing and self-processing, and art that is personal and expressive can also be a form of activism.

The theme that is present within each artists work is how visual art is the locus for sociopolitical commentary. In the subsequent chapters of this work – specifically in the individual analyses of the artists – I detail more specifically how the artists engage these themes or how they manifest within the artists’ practice or pedagogy. All of these themes engage the founding principle of my research, which is an exploration of how black visual artistry has the ability to be discursive and serve as a form of activism in a variety of ways.

Chapter One explores the art and work of Jamaal Barber, visual propagandist. I begin with Jamaal because he creates propaganda in a way that follows black historical activist art traditions. I also frame his artistry as a form of labor, and in this chapter, I engage the work of art, and how this work leads to the creation of works of art. This chapter contends that his continued emphasis on creative collaboration is an extension of his art work that allows him to engage in social creativity. This chapter engages the theme of visual art functioning as a form of

propaganda. Barber's work contains direct, explicit messaging through both the images that he creates, and the words utilized to articulate what he wants the audience to see and understand. Visual art as a form of propaganda is art that in some way is used/created to promote a person's sociopolitical point of view. It is work that has a distinct and biased messaging that the creator wants the audience to know after viewing the piece.

Chapter Two engages the creation of counter-narratives through a process called mythmaking. This chapter explores the theme of how visual art can serve as a tool to create counter-narratives. Mainstream narratives are the most common narratives that exist within society about a minority group of people. These are explanations or stories that are told in service of the dominant social group's interest and ideologies. These cultural narratives are oftentimes "overlearned stories communicated through mass media or other large social and cultural institutions and social networks" (Hasford). They are systemic representations that exist in institutional structures that influence how society functions. The narratives either directly or subtly oppress less powerful social groups by legitimizing myths that justify the maintenance of inequality. I interpret and analyze the artistry of Angela Davis Johnson and Shanequa Gay and look at their differing approaches to the mythology that they create, and the ways in which they perform conceptual alchemy within their processes of mythmaking. I also extend the conversation of the work of art to community cultivators Lauren Harris and Tiffany Latrice. I examine the ways that these art workers create counter spaces for artists who have historically been disenfranchised (black and black women artists), and how holding and cultivating spaces and opportunities for these artists is a mode of activism.

Chapter Three is a study of the art of Charly Palmer and Tracy Murrell. This chapter explores how visual art can be a form of political discourse and social commentary. This usually manifests in two main ways: the first is when the actual image created depicts a form of activism

or is a critique of a political or social event. Charly Palmer's examination of the Civil Rights movement within his work is a way to both depict an event that has occurred, as well as critique the political structure and climate that forced this event/movement. Here, audiences can see how the art is the locus for this type of discourse to be had. Murrell engages black women in her work in a way that some could consider revolutionary; she depicts them as a place of peace, rest and beauty. Although neither artists consider themselves activists, and many could debate whether their art is 'activist art', I consider the subtle ways that they are recreating history and narratives about black communities.

Chapter Four embarks on a study of Fabian Williams' artistry. This chapter engages the theme of public art's ability to promote issues and experiences related to black communities. I propose that Williams' murals are loci for public discourse and community engagement. I research how historically the Wall of Respect in Chicago was a center for community building. I utilize this case study and the reverberations it had within black communities throughout the nation to understand the significance of Williams' work. I examine where the power and activism lie within this chapter. My study of Williams explores how murals contribute to the continuum of activism in visual art in less traditional and more nuanced ways.

I utilize the conclusion to reflect on ways that visual art – whether it is direct propaganda, or work that is deeply personal and expressive – can function as activism in black communities. It also engages the theme of how creative practices can provide an opportunity to interrogate experiences and sentiments. Although both parts of this theme manifests itself in different ways, foundationally it is the act of taking an internal sentiment or idea (a subject or experience that the artist grapples with) and by exploring it externally through the creation of their art, there is an inner release/change/exchange that takes place and is processed externally. My exhibition, *A Time For Joy and A Time For Sorrow*, enabled me to further appreciate and analyze the art of the

artists I engage. This chapter explores my personal practice of art-making as a way to demonstrate some of the themes of my thesis and to explore how the praxis and process of art-making can be in itself a form of activism.

Chapter One – Jamaal Barber: Visual Propaganda and the Work of Art



Figure 1: Jamaal Barber, *The Council*, 2017, woodcut, 37"x48". Southwest Arts Center.

“An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times.” - Nina Simone

This chapter analyzes the practices, principles, and art of Jamaal Barber. It is based on an oral history interview, informal conversations, and observations of his creative process. I explore how he approaches his artistry as a form of labor, and the ways in which his art is his life's work. Barber intentionally creates propaganda art, which is a classic infusion of art and activism. He creates work that follows black historic traditions of activist art. His work is reminiscent of Black Art Movement ideals of artmaking that is “unapologetically black”, and he makes social commentary within his art about black experiences and black identities (Barber). "My aim is to create a new kind of propaganda to spread messages that speak to all aspects of black life," Barber states on his website. His work provides direct examples of visual art that is discursive.

This chapter explores artmaking as a form of labor, and the ways that Jamaal's creative collaboration is an extension of this. Through the analysis of Barber's art and praxis, I explore what his connection between art and activism is, and the ways that he utilizes his art as a medium for civic engagement and public discourse.

Jamaal Barber is a printmaker who grew up in Littleton, North Carolina. He primarily works with woodcutting and printmaking. In the interview I conducted with him, he describes how the process-oriented practice of printmaking is what enabled him to find his creative voice (Barber, 10:01). Before he discovered printmaking for himself, he painted, and recalls never feeling fulfilled from it. His goal has always been to speak from his heart through his artistry, yet he found himself modeling his paintings after the work of others. The methodological approach that screen printing demands enables Barber to focus on clearly cultivating his creative principles. This process is what enabled him to chart his own path and has helped him to find and utilize his own voice. Barber's work is always centered around issues concerning black people in America. His work communicates his understanding and perception of the sociopolitical climate of the United States, and how that affects and impedes upon the lives of people of African descent. Within his work he engages institutional racism and its functions, and dominant history's accounts of black communities.

Barber sends powerful messages through his artwork. Part of the discursiveness of Barber's work is that he oftentimes includes short and direct statements within his prints, which is his way of ensuring that the audience understands exactly what the message and purpose of the piece of work is. He engages black identity and experiences by analyzing and critiquing American political and social systems, as well as the various ways that the black community has been disenfranchised. He simplifies his messages so that he can clearly articulate what he is

communicating, which leaves a viewer with no room for misinterpretation of his stance on a particular topic or experience.

Barber has intentionally marketed himself as a visual artist whose goal is to create work that promotes and communicates his sociopolitical beliefs, specifically in relation to his understanding of black communities. He finds it important to discuss black identity holistically. His work touches on anger, the history of black oppression in the United States, the loss of identity, as well as love. The variety of content that he engages enables him to communicate his perceptions and experiences using his lens of Afrocentricity. He acknowledges that artmaking is his primary mode of communication and that much of his work is geared towards confronting 'The Machine' - the term Barber uses to refer to American social, political and economic infrastructures that disenfranchises the black community (Barber, personal communication, June 2018). He directly confronts some of the narratives that he has seen in the general public about the black community within his work. In 1940, Charles White stated, "I am interested in the social, even the propaganda angle in painting...Paint is the only weapon I have with which to fight what I resent. If I could write I would write about it. If I could talk, I would talk about it. Since I paint, I must paint about it" (Oehler, pg. 25). Much like Charles White, visual art is Barber's weapon of choice that he utilizes to confront and combat "The Machine". He states that he doesn't always feel completely confident and comfortable with verbal communication. However, he knows that his artwork speaks about exactly what he's trying to say (Barber, 40:06). His creative process is the "only coping mechanism that he uses," and he has described how this process has helped him articulate himself consistently throughout his life (Barber, 43:21). He states, "when you make a piece of art you get a kind of release, like you have expressed something that you were trying to express, and that you didn't have words for" (Barber, 43:45) This process enables Barber to process himself and his emotions in a productive

way, and he believes that if he doesn't communicate something within his work, it will never get out because he won't know how else to fully communicate it. His first solo exhibition, titled *Bright Black* did just this; he wanted the exhibition to showcase the conversation that he feels like he is constantly having with himself about the complexity of black experiences and black identity. In the *Bright Black* exhibition, Barber explores black American identity, touching on the complex experiences, setbacks and triumphs that shape African American experiences (Jbarberstudios). Later in this chapter, I analyze a series he created titled *The American Color Theory*, which is a body of work that was showcased in *Bright Black* that demonstrates this usage of his artwork as a weapon.

Barber's Art as Work leads to Works of Art

Barber treats his artmaking process as a full-time job, because until he began his MFA studies during the fall of 2018, and even while taking courses, it has been. Barber was employed as a graphic designer but was laid off of his job due to budget cuts within his workplace. He always planned on quitting his job to become a full-time artist, however when the decision was made for him, he began to fully to commit to his work. Making his artwork into a small business has enabled him to create amazing works of art. He believes that not having a conventional job pushed him to put more of himself into his art (Barber, 3:57). It forced him to invest more time into his craft and into developing his techniques, which allowed him to find and hone his artist voice. The fact that he has treated his creative practice with so much diligence is what he believes has elevated his work (Barber, 02:24). He is at work constantly, oftentimes working in his studio all day and into the evenings. He also teaches classes at Atlanta Printmakers Studios, which provides him access to screen-printing tools and supplies. Barber's approach to art as a form of labor suggests that "*art work* is no longer confined to describing aesthetic methods, acts of making, or art objects- the traditional referents of the term-but is implicated in

artists'...working conditions (Bryan-Wilson, pg. 1). Much like Art Workers movements of the 1960s and 70s, Barber is interested in social and political change, and utilizes his art to advocate for it, believing that art is a powerful tool that *works* (Bryan-Wilson). To be clear, art work is not simply a way for artists to capitalize off of their art and make money. Art as work is a useful framing for audiences to recognize how artists understand their art making practice as a vocation instead of a hobby.

Part of Barber's work includes his constant choice to collaborate with other artists and engage in collective art making. I had the pleasure of being present while Barber worked multiple times in his studio at Atlanta Printmakers Studio, however the most interesting session was where I was able to sit in on a collaborative session between printmaker Jamaal Barber and AfriCOBRA member Kevin Cole, an arts educator and sculptor. Their initial collaboration meeting included the two discussing their ideas for a few moments, however it did not take long for them to get to work. Figure 3 is a photo I took of Cole and Barber at work in one of Jamaal's studios.



Figure 2: Jamaal Barber and Kevin Cole, Atlanta Printmakers Studio, July 30th, 2018. Photo taken by Spencer Stultz.

Both artists appeared to be relaxed in their approach to collaboration and their personal creative practices, so the meeting was very productive. This experience helped me to understand how creative collaboration extends beyond artmaking. While they were outlining and planning their work, they discussed a variety of topics related to the business side of art making. Kevin Cole and his work has attracted a large following and collectors. He mentioned that some of his collectors have bought his work before he has even completed it, alluding to the high demand that there is for his work. This is significant because Cole repeatedly shared advice and wisdom regarding interacting with collectors, how to maintain collectors who are interested in one's work, and on how to sell items, stating, "I believe in us both making money!" (Cole, personal communication, July 2019). I saw how collaborative arts extend beyond a joint effort to create a piece of work; it also involves community building. Collaboration enables the artists involved to

push each other further and enables artists to walk through the door of success easier. Working with other artists who care about you and your work helps to successfully navigate the business side of visual art and understand the inner workings of the art world and how it functions (Barber, personal communication, July 2018).

Creative Collaboration: Innovation, Inspiration, and Utility

Barber has collaborated with a multitude of visual artists throughout his career. One of Jamaal's biggest creative influences is Robert (Bob) Blackburn, a black master printmaker. Blackburn's generosity is legendary, and he utilized his gifts to host diverse printmaking workshops in New York City throughout his life (Bob Blackburn Artist Biography). He has impacted the way Barber approaches collaborative efforts with other visual artists and informs why he has a deep commitment to community building. Barber knew early on that creative collaboration is important to him, so he ensures that creative collaboration remains a central part of his artistic career (Barber, personal communication, July 2018). He once had an experience at the Experimental Printmaking Institute at Lafayette College where he participated in an artist residency and being there solidified for him the concept of collaboration. He spent time working with artists that don't typically practice printmaking and was able to create alongside a master printmaker to collaborate. Thus, artists who don't usually engage with that medium have the opportunity to make prints, and Barber found this experience to be fascinating (Barber, personal communication, June 2018).

This made Barber fall in love with the exchange that takes place with artmakers through creative collaboration. He states that "the energy between two creatives start to multiply as they go through their creative processes" (Barber, 38:04). He details how they begin to trust and build a relationship with one another and how, once this relationship is established, they are able to push each other's boundaries more. This enables both creatives to push their comfort zones

further than what they would have done had they not been working with each other, which leads to a deeper and fuller artistic experience. It also gives artists a chance to explore or revisit mediums that they don't primarily work in. Barber finds joy in creative collaboration and this exchange that takes place between two artists, believing that there is no feeling like it. Creative collaboration serves as one of Barber's foundational artmaking practices.

For the *Bright Black* showcase, Barber connected with Natrice Miller, a photographer based in Atlanta, GA to collaborate on a project. He had created the American Color Theory (ACT) prints, which was a collection of work that illustrate principles that are used to govern skin color and how Americans interpret it (Jbarberstudio.com). When he shared his concept with Miller, she loved the idea and proposed a collaboration that would emphasize the work that he had done. She created a video that was narrated by his daughter, who was nine years old at the time. The film included black and white images that coincided with the audio, which featured his daughter who read the various text that was included in the ACT prints. Barber recalls the video's final product being incredibly moving (Barber, 18:30). Barber mentioned this collaborative project to illustrate the power of creative collaboration. Barber created the content within the American Color Theory prints, which inspired Miller, who then offered to create videography and audio to complement the ACT idea. When they came together, they were able to combine their gifts in order to transcend their own work and selves and produce a collaborative project that was executed beautifully. Barber recalls that he "finished the prints, completed the book formatting, but until Miller completed the video [he] recognized that something was missing, and there was a sense of completion that [he] got from the creation of that video and the creative interactions with her (Barber, 20:11). This sense of completion from that experience is the reason why he will always place an emphasis on the importance of creative collaboration in his career. One of the things that he values the most is not just the work that is

produced, but the fact that this collaborative production is mutually beneficial. The names of both collaborators can be attached to the work, which helps them both expand their creative audiences. Creative collaboration has the ability to enhance an artist's ideas and make them more well-rounded. When collaboration occurs, people are able to bring their gifts to the table, and offer strength in areas where others may be weak in. It enables artists to create art that is bigger than a singular artist and what they're capable of, paving the way for meaningful connection and artmaking.

Barber is currently planning a collaborative exhibition titled *400*, which is very different from a group exhibition. In group exhibitions, a group of artists all submit work to be shown in a single exhibition, oftentimes work that falls under a similar theme or topic. What is unique about Barber's proposition is that he has invited a group of visual artists to create joint work together. Instead of individual work created by individual artists being out on display, each piece that is displayed will be the product of a joint effort and creative collaboration. This dynamic and innovative exhibition conceptualization is completely indicative of how Barber prioritizes creative collaboration throughout his practice.

American Color Theory series

Barber intentionally chooses to continue the practice of engaging social and political issues regarding black life within his artwork. He makes it a point to directly confront The Machine that supports institutional racial & social inequality in the United States. Simultaneously, he confronts narratives and negative stereotypes that mainstream America create and promote regarding the black community. He believes that unfair and inaccurate stereotypes enable the oppression of black folk and utilizes his artwork to address and combat them. This act of creating counter-narratives is one of the ways that Barber's work serves as a form of activism.

He intentionally produces narratives that counter what many believe to be true, in an attempt to provide a more accurate and truthful articulation of black identities (Barber, 2:53).

Barber believes that race is one of the most important factors in American history, which is why his visual art consistently places an emphasis on this. His *American Color Theory* series, which was showcased in *Bright Black*, illustrates his understanding of racial relations in America. Color Theory in the visual art world is a practical set of guiding principles that inform color mixing and determines color value and relationships. Barber cleverly utilizes the different rules and focuses of the traditional Color Theory as inspiration while exploring American racism. Barber states that until individuals, and the nation as a whole, deals with the legacy of America's race-based policies, there is no way for it to truly move on and heal the racial divide (Barber, 37:22).

This section analyzes Jamaal Barber's *American Color Theory* serigraphs. I describe and interpret the art to illustrate how Barber creates propaganda and traditional activist art. I chose this series not only because of the intensity of the images and statements Barber makes within this work, but because it speaks directly to the theme of the *Bright Black* exhibition. The imagery includes powerful images that feature pivotal moments and figures in American history. The words that are paired with the images include direct and short statements that always have a deeper meaning. He mentions that racial injustice is what drives the content of his work, and through this series he is able to articulate his understanding and experiences of racial relations within the United States (Barber, 17:38). My analysis of this series includes my interpretation of the work as well as Barber's explanation behind his ideas. In a majority of Barber's images included in his American Color Theory (ACT) series, he includes photographs and images of black people's faces, however he only includes the bottom half. His inclusion of only part of a face speaks to the exclusion of a complete identity of the people whose faces are included. It is

as if Barber is commenting on how in America, black people are unable to be complete humans and citizens because of the racial tensions that exist. This displaced sense of identity is jarring for the viewer to witness, partially because many of the images appear to be torn, as if the fullness of the identity of black folk has been ripped from them.

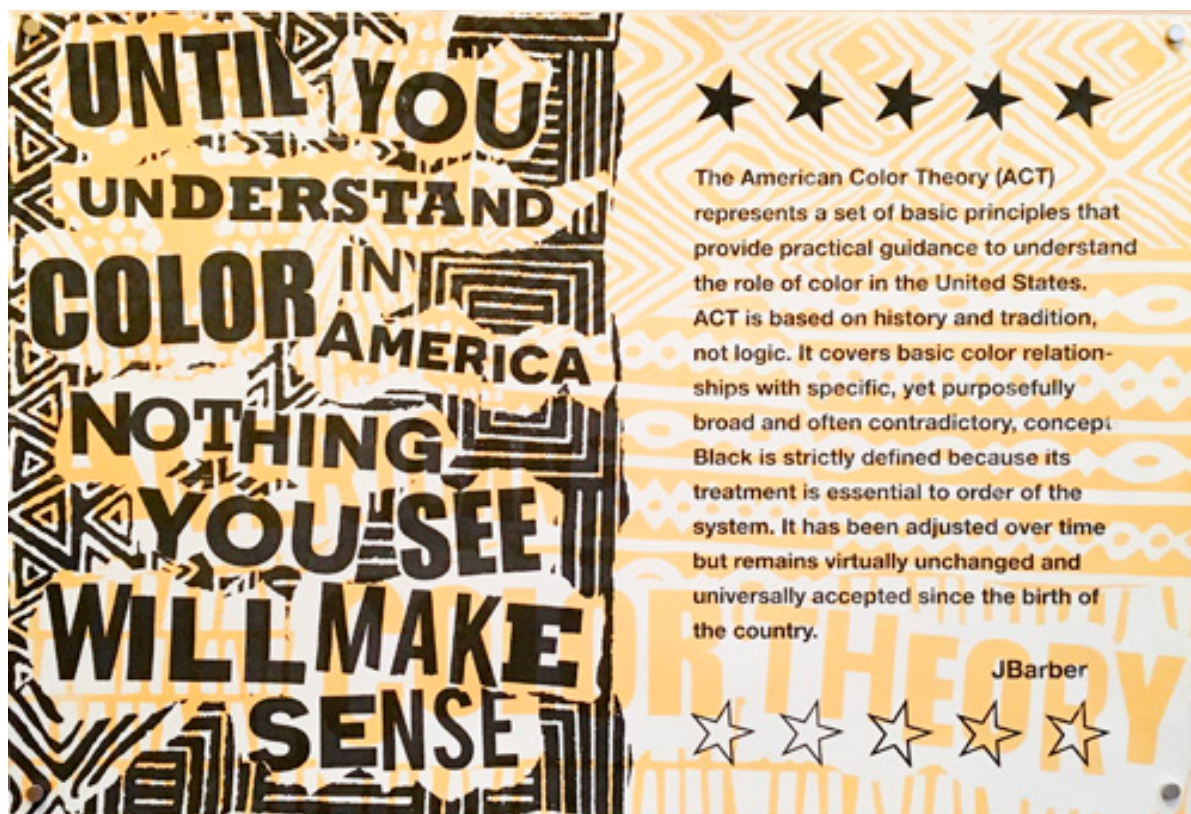


Figure 3: Jamaal Barber, American Color Theory Introduction, 2017. Print on paper; 15" x 22". Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Figure 3 describes what Barber is commenting on within his work. Drawing on the visual arts Color Theory, Barber expands on this theory by creating his own theory that is nuanced by the tone set in American culture regarding racial relations. He acknowledges that the racial oppression that has been passed down historically is illogical, as well as the contradictory and tense nature that exists regarding race in America. This explanation, along with the statement, “Until you understand color in America nothing you see will make sense,” enables the audience to understand the artist's framework and approach to the following work. Barber experiences this world as he does because of his identity as a black man, so that is the perspective that he uses to

articulate his understanding of the world, as well as critique the bigger issues that inform his experiences.



Figure 4: Jamaal Barber, *Color Associations*, 2017. Print on paper; 15" x 22". Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Figure 4 portrays the Statue of Liberty – a symbol of freedom, democracy, equality, justice and the belief that all humans were born with natural rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Ironically, although the statue of liberty is situated at the center of this image, possibly representing “core” American ideals, black faces are juxtaposed on either side of it. This image alludes to the idea that blackness is just as foundational to America as what the Statue of Liberty represents. It also seems to comment on the contradictions that lie between the rhetoric of freedom, life and liberty that the United States propagates and how America has consistently put structures and institutions in place to ensure that black people do not have access to these “natural rights.” The institutions that exist to disenfranchise Black people are just as American as

the Statue of Liberty. Barber contends that racial color associations have been accepted and promoted by everyone, including black communities.



Figure 5: Jamaal Barber, *Compliments*, 2017. Print on paper; 15" x 22". Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

In Figure 5, only the bottom half of what appears to be Martin Luther King Jr.'s face is included within the image. The text of this serigraph alludes to King's 'respectability politics', which included nonviolent protests that encouraged black community members to present themselves in a way that is 'respectable.' Their clothing and behavior were strategic and intended to place emphasis on their cause, which advocated for the black community to receive full American rights and citizenship. For a majority of his career he was easier for white America to accept and digest in contrast to other black leaders who were heavily critiqued for being too radical. Barber explains that "America loves Blackness that's in its place", alluding to the idea

that one must be black in the ways that the white majority finds acceptable in order for one to have their voice heard (Barber, 13:58).

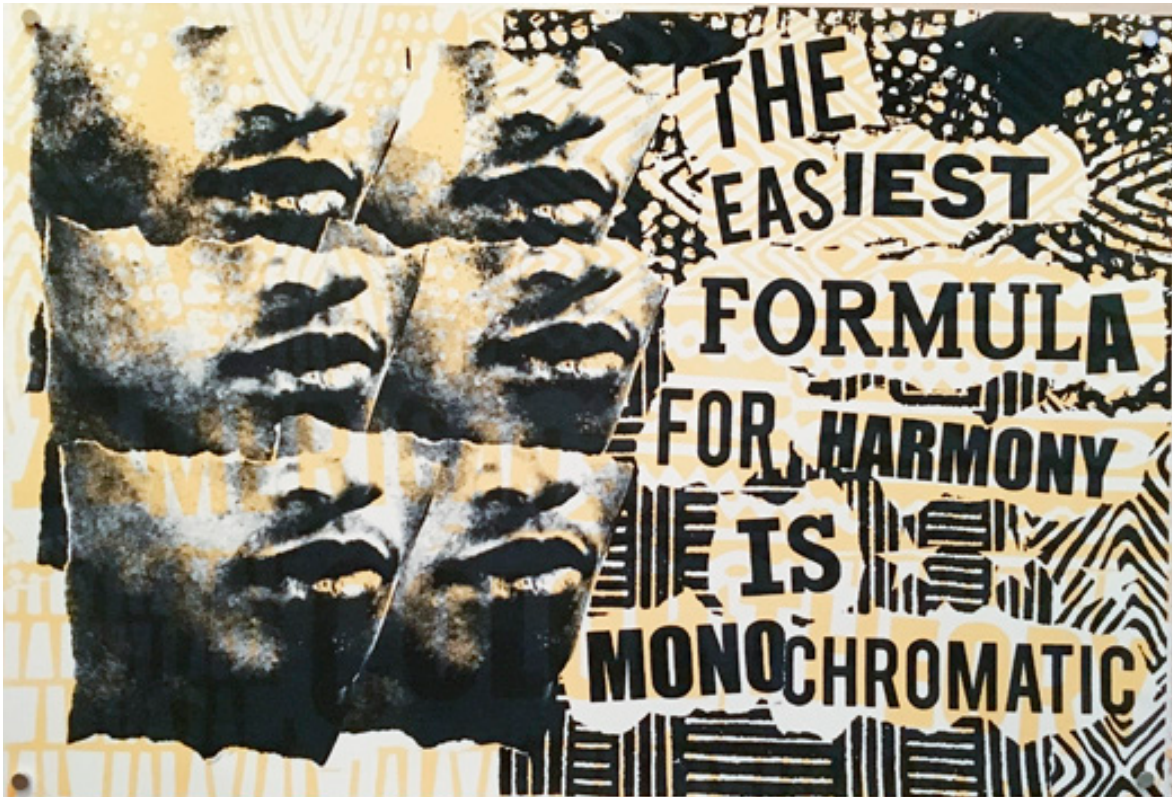


Figure 6: Jamaal Barber, *Harmony*, 2017. Print on paper; 15" x 22". Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

In Figure 6, Barber is commenting on integration, and the idea that segregation was arguably easier for all parties involved. The serigraph includes an image of the same face printed six times on top of each other. This is a metaphor for both monochromatic usage of only one color, as well as how segregation restricted the interactions of communities based on race. He could be drawing on his past, where he grew up in Littleton, North Carolina and attended a segregated high school. This serigraph makes the case that social segregation is easier for everyone to maintain harmony or peace. This could be alluding to one of two ideas. It could be making the case that segregation enabled communities to spaces in peace; possibly commenting

on how black communities were more self-sufficient during the Jim Crow Era. Or, Barber could be commenting on the fact that *easiest* formula for harmony is to remain segregated, but that is not always the best formula. What is best, and what is right for all parties involved oftentimes is not easy.

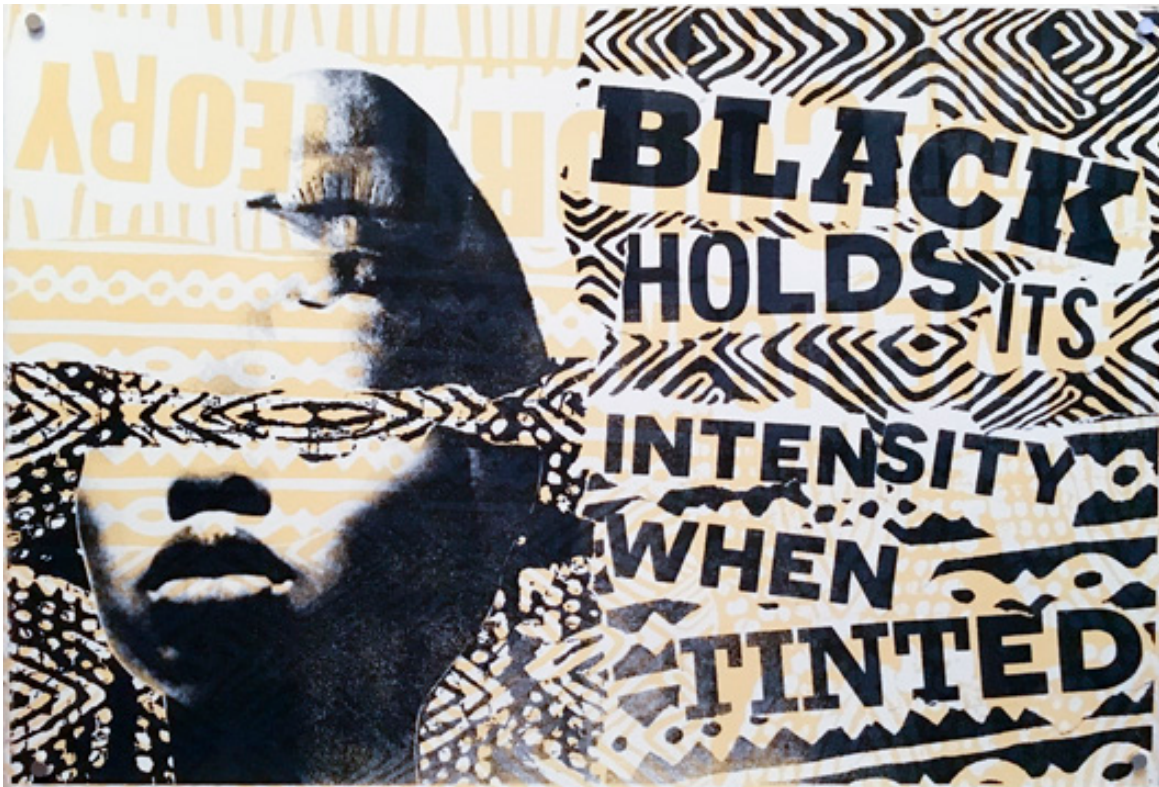


Figure 7: Jamaal Barber, *Intensity*, 2017. Print on paper; 15" x 22". Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Figure 7 includes Barber's commentary on skin complexion and colorism. He proposes that blackness consistently defines one's existence, even when they are mixed-race. Historically, the artist is referring to the 'one drop rule', and the idea that if someone has an ancestor of African descent, they were considered black. Even if someone had a black ancestor multiple generations before their existence, they can still possess phenotypical expressions of blackness. This attribution and identity association is oftentimes a result of a collective identity, and not always indicative of personal identification or experience. This collective identity groups all

black people as one, with the idea that to be black means to be one singular thing. This image shows the bottom half of two faces, one upside-down and on top of the other, alluding to the idea that no matter how you flip it, and no matter how it looks, you're always going to be black according to American standards.

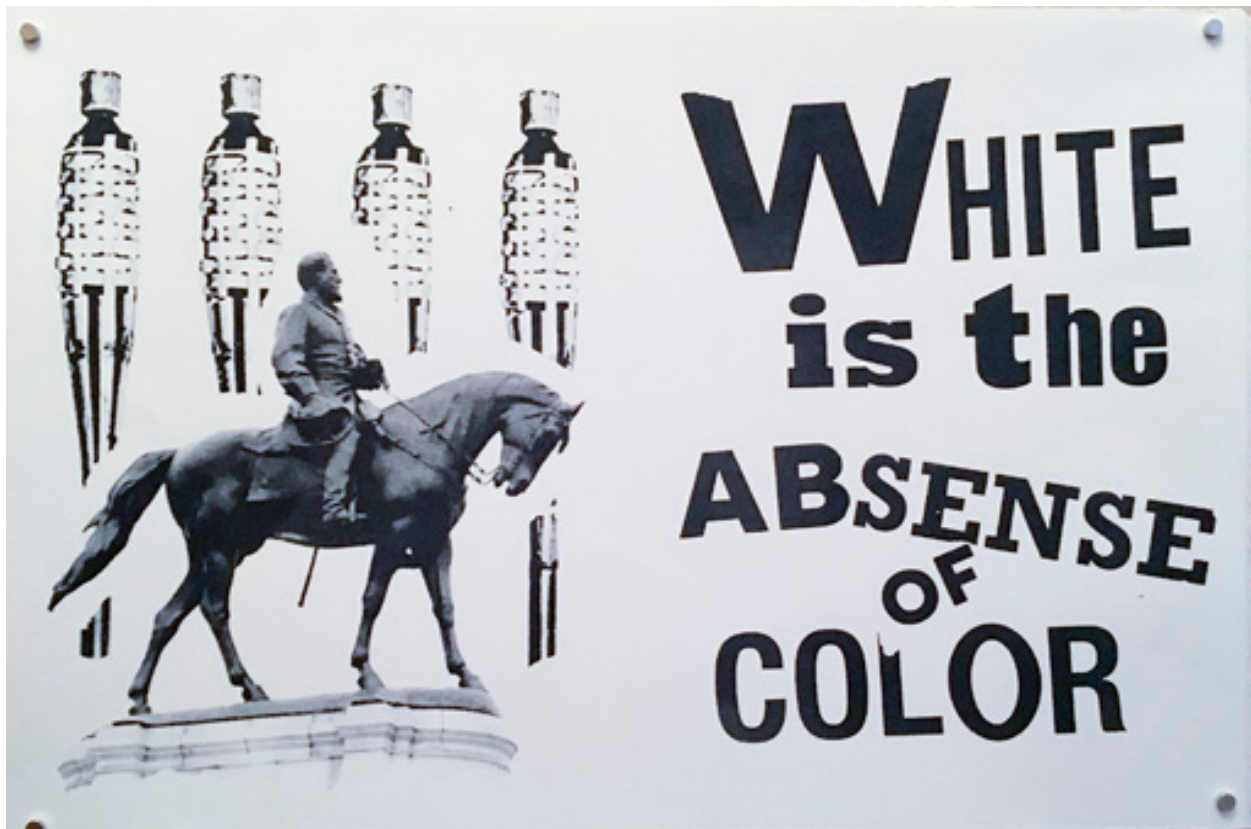


Figure 8: Jamaal Barber, *White*, 2017. Print on paper; 15" x 22". Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

In Figure 8, this image includes a white man on a horse, with torches in the background of the image. Although this isn't a direct reference, the image draws on common symbols of the Ku Klux Klan and the ideals of white supremacy and purity. At first glance, one might not notice the distinctiveness of the word 'absence', but upon taking a second look you can see how Barber utilized a different font within the different parts of the word, as a way to emphasize the senselessness of racism. He also makes the decision to spell the word 'ab-sense', instead of the

normal spelling of “absence” to further illustrate and emphasize this point. Throughout our discussion of this series, Barber reiterates that racial tensions in America are based on ‘history and traditions, not logic’ (Barber, 12:41).

In Figure 9, this serigraph confronts the contradictory nature of racial relations in the United States. It includes one of the “most influential protest images of all time”, which depicts black American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who won gold and bronze medals at the 1968



Figure 9: Jamaal Barber, *Neutral*, 2017. Print on paper; 15” x 22”. Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

summer Olympics in Mexico City (Brown). As they stood on the stage in front of a crowd and the star-spangled banner played, they both raised a closed fist, a powerful gesture during that racially charged year that paid homage to the Black Power Movement and was a symbol of black pride and solidarity. This silent protest that took the issues of black Americans to the world stage was an act that demanded freedom and demanded world powers to address the plight of black Americans during that time. Barber illustrated this concept by hanging a pair of handcuffs over the Olympic medalists who were protesting, alluding to their lack of true mobility and the disenfranchisement of the black community in America. During this period in time, black people were still being heavily and disproportionately policed, were kept from voting, and denied basic rights, yet they were allowed to represent America in the Olympics. One could interpret the

chains hanging above the heads of the black medalists as Barber commenting that one could make it all the way to the Olympics and still not be free. A Black American could be permitted to win medals for the United States yet return to their nation and be kept out of certain neighborhoods and from certain jobs because of their skin color.

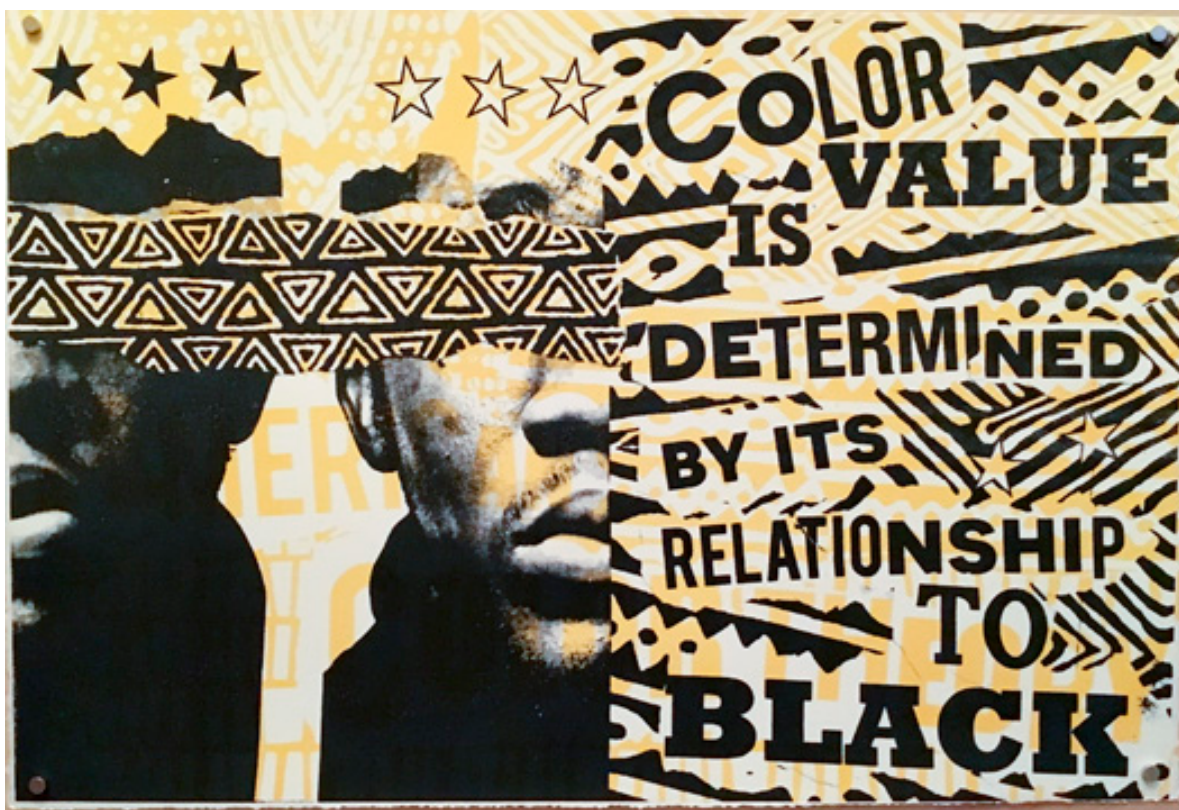
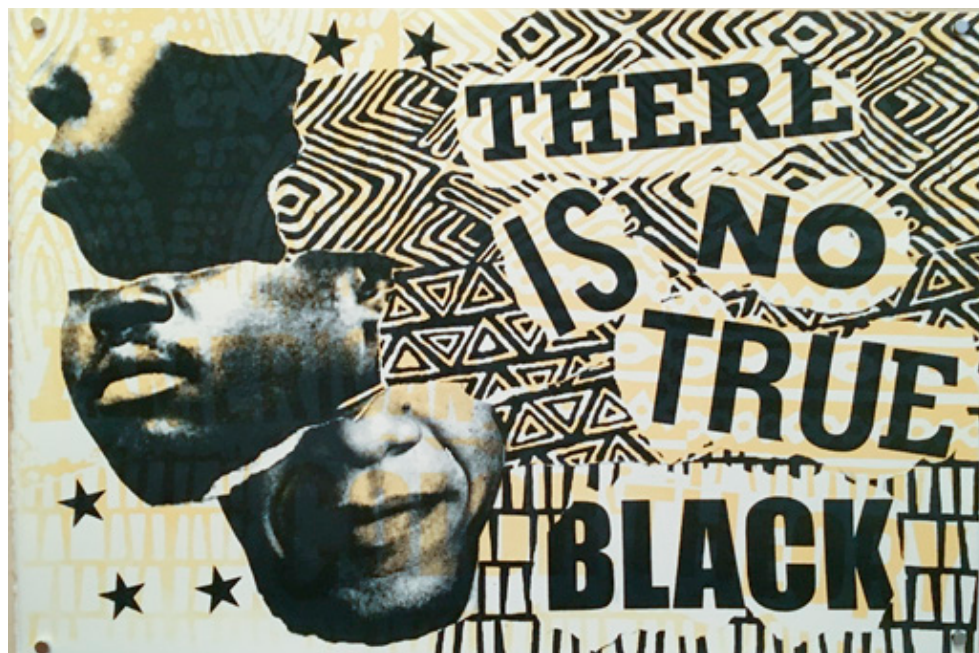


Figure 10: Jamaal Barber, *Value*, 2017. Print on paper; 20" x 26". Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Figure 10 references how human value deteriorates based on its proximity to blackness. What this means is that the darker someone's skin tone is, the more likely they will be treated unfairly or discriminated against than someone who has a lighter skin complexion. The images show the bottom half of two men's faces: the one to the left seems to have a much darker color value than the face to the right. Through this piece Barber proposes that whether one is looking at colorism and how people are treated based on their skin tone and hair texture, or whether one

is looking at neighborhoods and housing markets and how property values are lower within black communities, there is a distinct negative connotation to blackness. Barber calls out the sociopolitical and economic practices that enforce a system where blackness automatically equates to a lesser value.

Figure 11's serigraph uses the bottom half of notable leaders of the Black community's faces. One can see in the middle image the bottom of Marcus



Garvey's

Figure 11: Jamaal Barber, *True Black*, 2017. Print on paper; 15" x 22". Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

face, and the bottom image appears to be the face of former President Barack Obama. The words "there is no true black" alludes to the various 'black agendas' that popular leaders like these two have promoted for the black community. Garvey, the father of Black Nationalism, proposed radical ideals about blackness, and was a proponent of a separate nation for black people. He advocated for social, political and economic autonomy for black people, and sought complete self-determination. Obama's blackness was measured, scrutinized, and critiqued throughout his presidential campaigns and terms, and he has been accused of not advocating enough for the 'black agenda'. Both of these figures have bright and heavy histories and legacies, so it is only

fitting that their faces be included with Jamaal’s proclamation that there ‘no true black.’” It forces the viewer to acknowledge and confront what they may have considered to be the true version of black. It touches upon the fact that there is no monolithic blackness. This image inserts itself into conversations that are being had that argue that blackness is not – and never has been just one thing and manifests itself in a variety of ways.



Figure 12: Jamaal Barber, *Shades*, 2017. Print on paper; 15” x 22”. Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

In Figure 12, Barber seems to be commenting on colorism and how different variations of a color leads people to have different perceptions and reactions to this color (and person),

based on the variation. There is a plethora of stereotypes about the black community that at times are even reinforced by community members regarding skin color. Some include the preference of lighter skin tones and the devaluation of darker skin tones and mistrust of black people based on assumed criminality. Some members of the black community believe that people with lighter skin are more desirable and given access to more opportunities. Others argue that people with dark skin must prove themselves more, as well as face more scrutiny. This serigraph has two images of the same face, however the figure to the left is significantly darker than that to the

right. Interestingly, Barber chose to utilize the same person for both images instead of choosing someone of lighter skin and someone of a darker complexion, seemingly to comment on the fact that in reality, there is no difference in the two, no matter their skin color.

Barber concludes in Figure 13 that he believes black people experience similar treatment by society systemically, no matter how many "token" black people exist. Even if some black person rises above systemic



Figure 13: Jamaal Barber, *Black*, 2017. Print on paper; 15" x 22". Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

disenfranchisement socially or economically, they can still be subjected to oppressive treatment because they are still black. One cannot easily escape one's blackness and its social connotations. This image has the highest usage of true black than any of the others in the *American Color Theory* series and depicts a man who seems to be wearing a flag that seems to be a part of him and flowing around him. Reminiscent of the American flag, it covers his eyes and is wrapped around his neck. In other works, Barber scratches out the eyes of his depictions, alluding to the loss of identity that the figures he creates experience. The positioning of this flag could allude to the ways America attempts to devalue black identity.

This chapter set out to explore the ways that Jamaal Barber's artwork is a form of visual propaganda. His work is a reflection of the relationship that exists between art and activism, especially within the black community. His work ethic is reminiscent of greats like Charles White, and his emphasis on creative collaboration can be likened to the zealously generous Bob Blackburn. His biggest art inspirations are these black artist legends, and their influence can be found in his work and his praxis. Barber's work represents traditional modes of black activism within his art. His work is reminiscent of Black Arts Movement ideals because he creates art that is unapologetically black with a pro-black consciousness that is intended to be revolutionary. His approach to art as a form of labor, and as his life's work is what has enabled him to master his craft. Barber is an active participant in social creativity, and his work with creative collaboration as an extension of his work helps create opportunities for other creatives to grow in their ideas and abilities.

Chapter Two – Reimagination, Reclamation, and Veneration through Counter-Narrative Mythmaking

This chapter explores how visual artists Angela Davis Johnson and Shanequa Gay combat negative narratives about the black community and their personal experiences through a process of counter-narrative mythmaking. Counter narrative mythmaking, a term that I expand on within this chapter, is the process of recreating stories that combat negative stereotypical stories regarding people who are members of a specific culture or population. I also explore the work that black-owned art galleries and creative spaces geared towards exhibiting black visual artists do to foster artistic development through my analysis of ZuCot Gallery manager Lauren Harris and Tiffany Latrice, founder of TILA Studios. The chapter interrogates how creating spaces for counter-narrative art to be displayed and/or produced is able to also combat harmful narratives. I analyze how the aforementioned Atlanta-based artists and creatives develop new narratives for black communities through their work. I refer to this process utilizing the terms mythmaking, counter narratives and counter-narrative mythmaking interchangeably. I utilize oral history interviews, informal conversations and participant observations to formulate my analysis. Using a design concept of material alchemy, I analyze how creatives are able to utilize negative stereotypes and stories and recreate them into a theoretical “gold” through the process of mythmaking.

“Dominant cultural narratives” about blackness and the black community have existed in the United States for centuries. I utilize the term ‘dominant culture’ to refer to mainstream American culture and practices that are founded upon Euro-normativity, and in some cases white supremacy. I utilize the term minority culture in this setting to refer to black communities, who are minorities in terms of U. S. population and who are subjected to institutional disenfranchisement and negative stereotypes created by dominant cultures. Dominant cultural

narratives are a psychological phenomenon that refers to “stories communicated through mass media or other large social and cultural institutions and social networks” (Rappaport, p. 3). Eventually, the stories develop into systemic representation. This representation has the ability to manifest into subtle or overt mechanisms of oppression and control, which can influence personal beliefs and cultural norms (Hasford). Essentially, these narratives have the ability to directly impact circumstances, worldviews, and perceptions of reality. Social dominance theory proposes the idea that dominant cultural narratives have the ability to operate in a way that legitimizes myths that “justify the maintenance of unequal intergroup relations” (Hasford, p. 2). These dominant cultural narratives about minority cultures are often negative and harmful, which enable them to contribute to marginalizing subordinate groups (Hasford; McDonald, Keys & Balcazar). This marginalization has the potential to lead to psychological issues like low self-esteem, the depreciation of cultural attributes and identity, and self-hatred. In this way, dominant cultures are able to exert their influence and “dominance” because they have the power to shape the conceptualization of self and social beliefs of both the minority and dominant groups. Through mass media (commercials, television shows, and books) and even education (the way history books relay information and events), the myths created by dominant cultures perpetuate an influential form of propaganda. These myths can range from firmly held personal bias and stereotypes, to social, political and economic structures and practices that are based upon these sentiments. There is a tradition of black artists addressing controversial images through the making of counter-narrative art. This art disrupts the dominant narratives of race, causing audiences to be self-reflective of inherent social justice issues that still exist in American society (Jackson). Both Shanequa Gay and Angela Davis Johnson engage the myths that dominate their experiences as black people in United States within their work. They respond to the myths that have been created to oppress and marginalize the black community through processes of

recreation and reimagination. Lauren Harris and Tiffany Latrice combat these oppressive forces on an institutional level, by working in spaces that provide historically underrepresented artists opportunities to thrive. I refer to Harris and Latrice as community cultivators because their work centers around creating and curating spaces for artists.

These artists and community cultivators resist dominant narratives by creating spaces and artistic responses that counteract oppressive myths. They create art that proclaims their understanding and experience of blackness as a way to fight the negative myths. The works they create can be understood as personal acts of resistance. Common themes present in works by Angela Davis Johnson and Shanequa Gay are black female experiences, black identity and general experiences of black communities. They both portray their subjects with a sense of reverence, often referring to the incredible resilience and innovation that black women have demonstrated historically and contemporarily. They portray black people as divinities and recreate them as powerful mythological creatures. In a way, they perform conceptual alchemy, a term that is inspired by the concept of material alchemy. It is a part of the practice of material activism, a design theory. Coined by Mirial Ribul in 2014, material activism is a practical approach to democratizing the development and production of materials, with the goal of developing alternative models that can replace traditional practices. Jenny Lee introduces a design concept named material alchemy, which draws inspiration from the idea of material activism. The aim of alchemy in chemistry is to turn lead into gold. It centers the idea of taking something that is common and ugly with negative connotations and transforming it into something valuable and beautiful, with intensely positive cultural significance. Essentially, it is taking the bad and turning it into something great.

This alternative production process is similar to Johnson and Gay's artistic practices in that it seeks to perform a similar function - to democratize the art world through innovative and

creative approaches. These visual artists take old narratives and revamp them so that audiences and consumers can have their experiences and values reflected in the art that they see. Both practices have the intention to replace ‘traditional practices’ or ideas with more inclusive ones. In Johnson and Gay’s case, the ‘alternate production’ lies in the fact that they are black women artists who focally produce images of black women. These are images that are not proportionately exhibited in large art institutional viewing spaces. This is an example of the traditional practices that these artists are combatting; the exclusion of black women art and images in the mainstream art world. They are creating and recreating the narrative that barely exists within dominant art spaces. The creation of counter-narratives is a production of both a new aesthetic and a new representation and conceptualizations of blackness, through creative processes similar to material activism. Through the articulation and creation of myths in their works, Johnson and Gay enable – and sometimes force - all cultural groups to renegotiate their understanding of blackness. Their work acknowledges the negative stereotypes that exist about black people. They then harness them and recreate these stereotypes in a positive and more complex lenses, performing a form of conceptual alchemy.

Conceptual alchemy is a phenomenon that enables one to understand counter-narratives through mythmaking. Both conceptual alchemy and mythmaking are engaging items, stories, beliefs and practices that commonly have a negative connotation or value about the black community and turning them into something that is of worth, creating a positive cultural connotation to them. It is a process that weaves value into what dominant cultures typically associate with negativity, as a way for the artists to reclaim the power to control their own narratives. Counter-narrative mythmaking is a form of self-determination that aims to ensure that narratives about black people are not created only by people who are not black. By utilizing their artistic voices to create their own stories and myths, they are “transforming what is bad into

something better with the possibility [of gaining conceptual] independence” and the ability to control their own narratives (Ayala Garcia, C., Rognoli, V.).

Angela Davis Johnson: Mythmaking, and the Reimagination of What Could Have Been

Angela Davis Johnson oftentimes works with mixed media, combining a variety of paint, fabric and other materials in her work in order to accomplish her desired visual effect. Her recent body of work engages both trauma and resiliency among black people - specifically, black women. Using visual mythology, she recreates narratives and constructs experiential art spaces. Her *Blu Black* exhibition, a solo show held at Atlanta’s MINT Gallery illustrates her approach. It shows her interrogation and disruption of myths surrounding the criminalization of black people and the homage she offers to black female creatives.

In the first portion of *Blu Blak*, Johnson introduces the mythological concept of a Blu hole. As a child she grew up being told a fable about an immensely deep hole in her community in Arkansas, where, according to legend, whole trucks had been swallowed up. However, the Blu hole was also a communal place where people would gather to have conversations. She harnesses this myth and adds to it by imagining what else could have been lost in the Blu hole. She poses several questions to frame her exploration. “What if [emotional and physical] healing lies in the Blu hole? What if stories from the African diaspora during the middle passage, when people were thrown off ships or jumped – what if they went into these Blu holes to find their families?” (Johnson, 2:24). Johnson answers these questions by creating mythology, not only to explain and heal trauma, but to create an alternate mythical reality.

The exhibition begins by confronting the criminalization of blackness using a wall of mugshots of black people and images of missing black women. She embellishes the myths about black criminality and disrupts and invalidates them with her own accounts. Posing questions like

“What happens after the seeds of propaganda have been planted?”, Johnson engages the fact that dominant cultural myths plant seeds that grow into people’s beliefs, social associations, and realities.

Acknowledging that many of the dominant narratives do not function based on logic and are oftentimes baseless in their claims, she focuses on how they still inform the subjugation of black people.

She posted the mugshots and adorned them with stencils



Figure 14: Angela Davis Johnson, *Almanac of Infinity*, 2018. Photocopies of mugshots, photocopies of missing women, enamel paint. MINT Gallery, Atlanta.

and writing with the hopes of leading people to have conversations that can reframe the stories and negative associations. Almanacs – annual calendar handbooks that contains important dates and astrological information – are what has been stenciled onto the images, as well as the word infinity. Johnson associates almanacs with being able to forecast the future, and also mentions

that farmers refer to almanacs in order to decide when to plant the seeds for their crops. Johnson utilizes this metaphor to shed light on the seeds that have been planted by the “mythology white people created about the black community” (Johnson, 37:48). The mugshots are the metaphorical crops, as if to say, ‘this is the result of the criminalization of blackness’. She also utilizes it to encourage her audience to be mindful what their beliefs are regarding the criminalization of black communities. Johnson wanted viewers to take this moment to influence how they understand the narratives that currently exist, with the hopes that these shifts in perceptions change the future. In this portion of the exhibition Johnson practices material and conceptual alchemy. She takes mugshots, something that society deems as bad and criminal, and creates an opportunity for new and positive myths to develop by reframing the mugshots both figuratively and literally.



Figure 15: Angela Davis Johnson, *Blu Blak*, 2018. MINT Gallery, Atlanta.

Another part of the exhibit presents portraits of black female creatives to offer an ode to black laundresses. This work is inspired by a protest event that occurred during the summer of 1881, when black laundresses in Atlanta went on strike for better wages and better working conditions. They also went on strike as a way to gain respect for their hard work, asserting their dignity despite the harsh labor and working conditions. By 1880, ninety-eight of Atlanta's black

American women were domestic workers in the homes of former slave owners. The sociopolitical context of this time is significant; this strike took place after the Reconstruction Era. Black communities had made great political, social and economic strides during the 1860's and 1870's within the "Republican party, labor unions, churches, secret societies, and informal neighborhood networks" (Hunter, p. 75). After the Reconstruction Era, the progress that took place began to recede. This period of regression is what eventually led to Jim Crow laws. The black laundress strike was not simply a strike for fair wages for themselves but was a protest of the sociopolitical and economic regression that they were experiencing. These washerwomen mobilized while preparations for the South's first World's Fair – the International Cotton Exposition took place, which dramatized the protest. They also threatened a second boycott that included all household workers during the fall opening of the gala if their demands weren't heard or met (Hunter).

These women were strategic, intelligent, innovative, and resourceful. Their story inspired Johnson, and she wanted to create work that paid homage to these women, as well as other women who exude the same resiliency and determination. She draws inspiration from these washerwomen and decided to commemorate present-day black women creatives by painting portraits of them. Johnson forges a connection between the work that women of the past did with present day women creatives. Many of the black creatives she painted images of and the work that they do was made possible by protests of their black female predecessors. Both the protesting washerwomen and contemporary creatives seem to share the same spirit of community-oriented innovation. She utilizes portraiture to capture the essence of these women, and these portraits are intended to honor all women who impact their communities positively. In these portraits, Johnson intentionally chose to honor women who aren't all visual artists as a way to emphasize the work of artistry and creativity. The women she depicts are women who are

community builders in some way. This is work that isn't always acknowledged or celebrated as she believes it should be. Much like the laundresses who went on strike to get their hard work acknowledged, Johnson made an ode to black women both of the past and the present to acknowledge them.

Johnson used the format of the exhibit to create a unique experience for viewers. She suspended works in the middle of the room hung them in front of the walls instead of placing them against walls. This powerful move was the result of her intentional goal of creating a space where viewers must be careful not to touch these figures. Audiences had to walk around them and move out of the way of the art because she wanted them to take up space. This created an environment where black women were able to be the most valuable element of a space, in a way where it was impossible to ignore their presence.



Figure 16: Angela Davis Johnson, *Calling/Answering: Great Grandmother Listening*, 2018. Acrylic, fabric, strings, pins, bluing. MINT Gallery, Atlanta.

This piece of work contains the foundational essence of mythmaking. It involves taking that which one believes to be true and reimagining through elaboration of what was and what could have been. I analyze it to provide an in-depth understanding of Johnson's artmaking. *Calling/Answering: Great Grandmother Listening* features a portrait of Angela Davis Johnson's paternal grandmother, who she has never met and only knows stories about. (Johnson, 7:45) The

figure is a middle-aged woman who gazes directly at the viewer unabashedly. Her face is painted in Angela's stylized fashion that is a fusion of realism and abstraction. Johnson has coined a style that includes fluid yet confident brush strokes, where the highlights of the facial structure need not be blended perfectly for the development of a lucid and provocative face. Her hair, short and black, frames her face and stops around her ears in a simple, classic style. The figure has been painted onto unframed canvas, and the handmade clothes that her grandmother is wearing is hanging from the canvas as if it was draped onto the figure. She is wearing brown and green earth tones, with some of the patched-together fabric showing various floral pattern work. This could be an ode to Johnson's grandmothers work as a community healer. She would oftentimes use handcrafted natural remedies to heal others of various sicknesses (Johnson, 8:27). Creating this work by weaving fabric together for the garments that adorns the body and painting a face on unfinished and unframed canvas is intentional. Johnson has a deep desire to get to know her grandmother because she feels it would enable her to understand herself better. Thus, the portrait was created by piecing together stories Angela heard as a child and fabricating the rest of the details she didn't know (Johnson, 9:01). The story can never be finished, like the traditionally "unfinished" and partially gessoed canvas, because Johnson is unable to have a complete picture, figuratively speaking. The face of the figure looks directly at the viewer in a way that is not confrontational yet is not necessarily welcoming or inviting either. Her shoulders appear to be mid shrug, as if her body language is responding to the fact that a viewer may find it difficult to discern her mood from her facial expression. The work is suspended high above, seemingly intending to illustrate an inability to truly access what is being depicted. The height and precarious suspension of this work alludes again to the desire of the artist to access what is inaccessible. The placement of the figure in mid-air could signal a matriarch who was lost before

she was ever fully known and can be representative of the reverence that is typically shown in the black community to matriarchal figures.

Shanequa Gay: Black Decorum and the Veneration of Blackness through Refabrication

Shanequa Gay, a visual artist and griot from Atlanta, creates work that considers current social and ethical issues. She has a singular focus on the experiences of people and communities descended from the African Diaspora. She employs pattern work, sculptural figures and material decorum, utilizing a variety of mediums to communicate her ideas, including paints, prints, fabric, dinnerware and wallpaper. She chooses to create decorum-inspired work as her chosen weapon to combat negative narratives about the black community because she believes that the first human interactions with the world begin at home. Decorum, which can be understood as dignified behavior, dress, speech, etiquette, etc. is representative of a polite, dignified and elite society. Fundamental life lessons almost always begin with a mother figure, which is why she chooses in recent work to depict mostly female forms. The home setting is typically where people learn to love and be mindful of others. It is also where traditions of hatred and oppressive beliefs are passed down from generation to generation (Gay, personal communication, 2018). Thus, she chooses to utilize decorum as both her framework and weapon to address and combat negative stereotypes. She also utilizes it to expand on her understanding of her black experience, and experiences of others, choosing to portray both its pain and its beauty.

Gay frames herself as a griot who relates black history through the telling of stories of and for the black community. She interrogates black experiences and identities within her work, and acts as an intercessor of history. As an intercessor, she interrupts the negative stories that society and history enforce regarding black communities and recreates what she believes to be more accurate descriptions and perceptions. Here, she inserts stories of black experiences into American history as a way to intervene and interrupt the negative stereotypes that dominant

cultures propagate. Focally, she does this by depicting black women as divine creatures, able to withstand immense amounts of trauma, neglect, and abuse while simultaneously embodying and producing beauty and love.

The art that she creates narrates experiences and beliefs through her personal lens. Much of her work includes female figures that are reminiscent of a Southern belle who is dressed “properly,” yet tells stories that challenges the associated “proper” social traditions. A Southern belle is typically a young woman of high moral character who is a part of Southern upper-class. It is a term that describes a woman who embodies specific manners, appearances and attitudes associated with Southern pleasantry. These specific associations include characteristics like remaining chaste, marrying respectable men, and exhibiting Southern hospitality. Gay then deifies them by creating black mythical creatures; figures that more often than not have heads of animals with antlers. She “[fabricates] environments of ritual and memorial, depicting amalgamated images of familiar iconography, new gods, and mythical figures whose lives have been impacted by systemic inequalities” (Gay). By refabricating stories and creating counter narratives, Gay utilizes the notions of the physical and spiritual world to explore social concerns through her lens as a black woman.



Figure 17: Shanequa Gay, *Devout Sculptures*, 2018. Cardboard, fabric and mannequin; 10ft H (Skirt 4ft x 7ft, Shirt 2ft x 1.5 ft, Cardboard Sculpture 2ft x 2ft). Sumter Gallery of Art, Sumter, NC.

Devout Sculptures, an installation located at Sumter Gallery in South Carolina, depicts four larger-than-life figures. They are standing tall and are looking down at their audience with an air of majesty and menace. These figures are framed by black and gold decorative wall paper as a backdrop. The wallpaper includes the faces of different women who are integral parts of the design. The mythical forms are situated on a female human body, with heads of animals, some with antlers that are reminiscent of deer. Sculpted with a three-dimensional geometric shape, the

form of the heads is uniquely fashioned, and no two heads or identities are the same. The figures look down with protruding lower halves of their face, which adds to their mystique; they both draw a viewer closer to get a better look while also exuding a sense of other-worldliness. This ethereal nature is accomplished through fusing likenesses of animals that exist on earth in a disarming way. Their extreme height is one way that Gay's work is disarming; these almost-human figures stand ten feet tall. Her creation of bipedal hybrid creatures reminds the audience that they are made from creatures that exist on earth but are composed much differently than what actually exists. Their gaze, combined with body language that appears stiff yet powerful, seems to be commanding the attention and reverence of all who are below them. One can assume that these goddesses are waiting for the audience to bow before them as they watch with disinterest. The four figures are wearing long skirts situated at the top of their waist; although they differ in color and pattern, they are alike in their make and cut. The figures are also wearing collared shirts that have sleeves that extend down to the wrist. This formal wear is reminiscent of Southern tradition and decorum. Viewers may be unable to reconcile 'proper' female attire with animal heads that many might find unattractive. It appears that it was Gay's intention to force audiences to experience 'proper' American traditions as she understands them.

The artist utilizes these figures to memorialize women slain by police like Sandra Bland, Renisha McBride, Korryn Gaines, and Erica Garner (who although was not murdered, has trauma that earns her commemoration) (Gay). These are all black women who are victims of police brutality. Gay reimagines and recreates them as deities, so that the viewer encounters them as goddesses in the afterlife, who have now risen above their pain and trauma both literally and figuratively. In this installation Gay is taking stories of tragedy and weaving them into stories of victims who have the ability to overcome. She refuses to allow their stories to end in heartbreak and sadness, so she recreates these women as goddesses, more powerful than the people and

social practices that led to their deaths and traumas (Gay). Oftentimes, black community members who are victims of police brutality end tragically, without any justice for them or closure for their families. More times than not, police officers who commit these murders are acquitted, which leads to communities and families experiencing a sense of deep injustice. Gay utilizes decorum to signify the reversion of power to the *Devout Sculptures*. It appears that she is communicating that these stories don't have to end unjustly. Her artwork provides a way to fabricate justice for these deaths into material reality and reframe the lives that have been taken. She refabricates these women and their stories to give them another chance to determine the outcome of their lives; this time with the power to determine the outcome of the lives of others as well.

TILA Studios: Tiffany Latrice, Creating Space as a form of Activism

Artist and space creator Tiffany Latrice has had much success in bringing her innovative ideas into fruition. She is the founder of TILA Studios, a visual arts incubator for black female artists that empowers and enables them to create and showcase their work. This space is dedicated to providing opportunities for black female artists to build community, develop professional skills and to refine their portfolio through practice and critiques (Latrice). TILA Studios – founded in 2016 - has both a gallery and work space. The gallery has exhibited eleven art shows, facilitated sixty programs and showcased ninety-three artists. TILA Studios offers community-based programs including open critique night, workshops that aid the development of technical skills (figure drawing classes, painting classes, and other workshops all under the 'no boys allowed' umbrella), a book club and aid with applying to artist residencies and grant funding. TILA Studios also created an opportunity for black women artists to expand their brand and their experience by providing ten fully funded fellowships that took the chosen artists to Art Basel Miami. Naming the ten artists selected as Garden Fellows, TILA Studios offered these

women access to networking, creative experience and fosters their inclusion in the art world by ensuring they were present during important conversations of Art Basel. However, the most interesting part of TILA Studios is how seriously they take their commitment to catering to black women artists - only women of color are allowed to enter the workspace. Latrice holds a safe and sacred space for black women by creating a space exclusively for them. This practice was inspired by what developed into the ‘#MoreThanFour’ social media campaign. #MoreThanFour refers to the fact that only four percent of the art in museums are created by black female artists (Fluker). Latrice states that there are no public – and there are rarely any private – creative spaces that are held exclusively for women, let alone black women (Latrice, 20:38). Holding space through the creation of TILA Studios is not to combat the lack of space, but as a way of radically holding black women and their needs as sacred. She holds their needs sacred by creating and maintaining a space where they are the sole reason and priority for the space. This act of dedicating a space solely for black women indirectly combats the practice of excluding black women from opportunities to have their work featured in museums and art galleries. This alternate space advocates for the inclusion of black women and their art in mainstream museums and galleries, while simultaneously providing opportunities that they are systemically excluded from. TILA Studios has gotten national attention, which makes critics question mainstream museum practices and their exclusion of work created by black female artists. This campaign and this space represent a practice that has the ability to rewrite and reproduce the ideas about black women artists and the lack of representation and opportunity within the field of art. Latrice does this through a practice I first heard referenced by Latoya Hobbs during her 2018 Artist Talk at her *Salt of the Earth* exhibition at Syracuse University’s Community Folk Art Center. Hobbs stated that she painted black women who “cultivate communities”, a term that rings true of Tiffany Latrice. A community cultivator is someone who forges communities and strategizes on

ways to get the community involved to collaborate with them. Latrice embodies this practice, and states that, although she is a visual artist, “she is creating through the space that she creates for other people, which is currently her creative practice” (Latrice, 14:40). She is engaging in activism by advocating for and empowering black women. She also acknowledges that this advocacy can be done in a variety of ways - within artwork that combats dominant narratives regarding black women or through working with art and artists (Latrice, 21:38). Latrice has been able to fuse these two worlds, working both with visual artists and through the work of creating space and cultivating communities for them. She holds a space for black women artists to create work, and these artists often create art that combats dominant narratives. This shows how this space serves a twofold ability to combat dominant narratives and disrupt the lack of adequate representation of Black women artists in museum collections.

Space making and the fostering of Storytelling in Black owned Art Galleries

Lauren Harris is the gallery manager and curator at ZuCot Gallery – the largest black-owned gallery in the southeast region of the United States. This gallery is an extension and continuation of the long history of the black art community demanding inclusion while also creating spaces for the black communities to articulate their own stories. This is a space that is geared towards featuring and representing mid-career living black visual artists (Harris, 5:02). The gallery promotes black artists and teaches black people how to collect and invest in black art. This endeavor encourages black people consider themselves cultural custodians and support the work of black artists by buying their work. This term alludes to the fact that the black community is who embodies black culture in all of its facets, who keep it alive, carry it on, and pass it down, a compelling enough reason for it to be something worth investing in. According to Harris, all of the work that the ZuCot gallery shows is political, or reminiscent of who black people are as a community and of black historical experiences (Harris, 12:18). Cultural

custodians engage blackness in all of its complexities, exploring both individual and collective identities. Charly Palmer, a visual artist whose work is featured often at ZuCot, states that the gallery encourages the artists to conceptualize their work deeply, and to create a narrative that gives their art a life beyond surface value. One of the resounding themes of the art displayed at ZuCot is the strength and experiences of black communities. ZuCot gallery representatives choose to showcase work that has strong narratives because they believe that the narratives of the black community are valuable and important. This focus on art that centers black subjectivity enables artists to provide their own accounts of experiences and history without it being tainted by the dominant cultural lenses of whiteness. The term black subjectivity refers to art where black people, their experiences and associations are the focal subject. For example, some of Shanequa Gay's art focuses on black experiences regarding police brutality. The focus is on black people, their perceptions, experiences and understanding of destructive interactions with police. This practice centers the voice of black people, where they are the subject of what is being communicated within the art.

ZuCot represents visual artists who reclaim the power of their narratives and stories about blackness. When black people are the authors or creators of their own narratives, in addition to fostering the environments that house these works, they are empowered to combat the negative narratives that are still active creations of the mainstream culture. This empowerment comes from the fact that within these spaces black people have the sole authority to articulate and presenting their narrative. Creating and maintaining a space for the voice and stories of the black culture to thrive is powerfully agential, and black histories and experiences can deviate from the mainstream culture and be engaged more authentically.

ZuCot not only fosters this environment but fosters public engagement through a variety of programming centered around the art that they showcase. The gallery has an intense emphasis on engaging the local community. The founders and owners give talks at local public, private and charter schools in the Atlanta, area. They host events by partnering with major corporations, which provide opportunities for the artists that they represent. ZuCot hosts monthly “Art Tastings”, events where both young and old people can come and ask questions about visual art, creative practices, materials, etc. Art Tastings are meant to engage artists and non-artists



Figure 18: Onaje Henderson and Aaron Henderson, ZuCot Gallery Art Tasting, June 19th, 2018.

alike and create a safe space for audiences to ask questions and engage visual art in a comfortable setting. Black visual artists, curators and creatives are present to discuss the value of black art, how to contextualize it and to teach people how to appreciate and collect art created by black artists. They discuss the difference in value based on materials used and explain the ways that visual art can appreciate in value over time. Their goal is to build capacity within the black community, where knowledge about both works of art and the work of creating art becomes the norm in black communities with the hopes of this information trickling down throughout generations. This is what ZuCot gallery means when they assume the role of ‘cultural

custodians’; they advocate for the art of black artists and cater to the black community in a way that normalizes what the black art world offers. This public engagement helps them to reclaim and rewrite narratives about the black community not just conceptually but in practice, creating the opportunity to manifest material change.

Lauren Harris refers to the art world as “The Machine” (Harris, 21:17). ZuCot owners’ naming of this references the inner workings and complexities that make the art world function. She explains how the allusion of “The Machine” is similar to how people utilize “The Man” to refer to America’s social, political and economic practices that enable this country to exist and function as it does. This machine is something that no singular person has control over, and each part of it contributes to its holistic workings. Major art auction houses and large art institutions have the leverage and credibility to say, “this body of work and this person’s art is now important.” The worth and value of artists and their art is based on what people in power deem worthy. This is problematic when considering the history of racism in the United States, and how the insidious subjugation of black people has crept into all parts of the country’s workings, including the art world. During the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements, black artists were kept from having access to major art institutions. These historical black artistic movements offer examples that illustrate how racism impeded and shaped black creative practices in the past. They also enable audiences to understand contemporary dynamics and practices within the art world. This is what led to collaborative work, group showcases, and the creation of black art spaces – being kept from white ones. Characteristics of “The Machine” in regards to black art and artists include omission of historical and contemporary black artists from art survey texts and exhibitions, racially biased art criticism, the lack of art education in urban institutions, the exclusion of access to teaching positions, scholarships, and grants for young black artists, and the absence of work by black artists on gallery walls throughout the nation (Lennon).

Segregation and the overt and subtle subjugation of black art and artists have existed for centuries, systemically keeping artists out of museums on the basis of race classifications. These practices inspired events like the 1968 protest of the Whitney Museum of American Art by black artists and activists. The absence of black artists in the survey exhibition *The 1930's: Paintings and Sculpture in America*, which was on view from October 15-December 1, 1968 led to protests of the museum and this exhibition (Wallace). It also led to the formation of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), which demanded the “inclusion of black artists in the Whitney’s exhibitions and went further, calling for representation in decision-making and authoritative roles within the museum” (Wallace, p. 5). This is what makes the mere existence of ZuCot gallery and other black owned galleries so powerful; they are able to combat the workings of the Art Machine by providing an opportunity for equity and opportunity regarding the work black visual artists. Even during the Civil Rights activism of the 1960s and 70s, black artists rarely – if ever – appeared on the radar of the white dominated art world.

However, the advances of the Civil Rights Movement inspired various black artists to fight for inclusion in galleries and exhibitions, and for overall equal representation within the art world (Meyerowitz). Frustrated by the lack of opportunities within major white-controlled art institutions, black artists and curators established their own exhibition spaces (Meyerowitz). These protests brought major institutions bad publicity, but more importantly they led to the creation of black owned creative spaces. These protests shed light on the influence that black owned art galleries have, and their importance. When black people have control over creative spaces, there is opportunity to engage black art more freely. These spaces provide less biased art critiques, provide spaces for black art to be presented and artists to be represented, and have the ability to redress centuries of misrepresentation or complete omission of black artistry.

The work of rewriting and reframing narratives requires innovation and creativity. This creativity exists within black visual artists; people who make it their mission to combat harmful stereotypes associated with black communities. However, this innovation also lies within the people who work with art as well. This chapter explores the ways that visual art can be the locus of social critique and make political statements. The insertion of their voices into history and the dominant culture is a powerful tool that has the ability to influence social change. This further illustrates the discursive nature of visual artistry and its ability to promote tangible change in the world. The practice of creating counter mythology is a practice that has been advocated for within the black community for decades. Black leaders have fought for self-determination, in an effort to have control over their own lives, a practice that can only be possible through equity. Their work engages the African diaspora by practicing one of the fundamental concepts of Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism. Through their artmaking, Gay and Johnson are able to practice self-determination by taking control of their own narratives and utilizing their work to counter oppressive narratives regarding them and their communities. They advocate for black communities within their artwork, much how Harris and Latrice do in their work with art. Community cultivators like these two are individuals whose work creates opportunities for artists like Gay and Johnson. They advocate for the narratives of black visual artistry while also promoting the works of art through their work with art.

Chapter Three – History Makers and Re-Interpreters: Engaging the Soul of the World through Art-Making

This chapter explores the visual art of Charly Palmer and Tracy Murrell, artists who have very different artistic practices and aesthetic styles yet share some basic similarities. They both present their work in a way that represents familiar subject matter to viewers. In other words, they provide a re-introduction of the subjects they depict. The artists also engage issues without appearing to present a definitive activist perspective. For example, instead of asserting that black people are strong or the best at something, the artists present them in ways they consider to be true. These commonalities do not obscure the artists' distinctive approaches.

In this chapter I analyze how visual art can engage larger social issues even when it is not presented as propaganda. I explore how both Palmer and Murrell's art communicates ideas that are bigger and deeper than what is depicted in ways that are at times very subtle, searching for ways to locate the power of visual art that is beyond words. I do not place these artists in the same chapter based on similar art practices. Rather, I chose to engage these artists together because their artwork elicits the same reaction from me. Kerry Marshall describes this reaction as "that physical sensation, a shiver induced by the mere sight of a thing, is the elusive charge sought after, rarely achieved, and even more difficult to sustain by any artists trafficking in the allure of images. This is the ineffable dimension of art often labeled "the sublime" (Marshall, p. 19). Their work constantly elicits reactions from me that are beyond the scope of words. Both of these artists are able, through their art, to tap into a place that is reminiscent of Paulo Coelho's description of the Soul of the World in his novel *The Alchemist*, or "The Force" of *Star Wars* films (Rolling).

Charly Palmer engages in social realism, which is a form of realistic art making that address such themes as social protest in a "naturalistic or quasi-expressionist manner"

(Britannica Encyclopedia). Generally, this type of work offers renderings of human life, experiences and history that could contain socially critical commentary within it. Murrell and Palmer are unique in their subjects and portrayals. Although their subjects are almost always black people, they present their work in a way that reinterprets their subject matter to the viewer. Palmer documents black history and engages experiences of the black community within his work. Even when making sociopolitical commentary within his work, he does not explicitly attempt to take an activist stance. Rather, he relays information and his understanding of the sociopolitical climate. Similarly, Murrell does not create her artwork with the intention of combatting negative/harmful stereotypes regarding black women. Instead, she re-presents black women, depicting them as a source of peace and rest. Because this is how she experiences herself and other black women, this is how she chooses to depict them. She avoids dogmatic assertions, calling for everyone to love and appreciate black women. Instead, she depicts her figures as she understands and sees them.

Currently, both Murrell and Palmer are concerned with depicting the beauty of black people, focusing on the aspects of blackness that are cause for celebration. This chapter analyzes their respective foci and approaches based on oral history interviews and analyses of select art works.

Within his art, Palmer preserves historical occurrences, and articulates them from a black perspective – a view that until very contemporarily has been overlooked or devalued by dominant cultures. Through work like his Civil Rights series, Palmer is making and preserving history through the creation of visual narratives. He utilizes his art to express concerns he has about history and contemporary issues regarding black folk. Palmer is committed to depicting black experiences. Much of his work reflects his experiences and perspective as a black man in

the United States, and he is a “visual storyteller who elicits reflection and dialogue through his work (Jackson, p. 7).

Palmer’s Creative Focus and Evolution

Palmer’s art is intent on preserving historical occurrences within the black community and articulating them from a black perspective. He returns to black history in order to “promote social equality by producing and displaying inspiring images of [black] historical figures” (Oehler, p. 21). Because artists’ voices are their art, Palmer utilizes his images to comment on and depict historical, political, and social occurrences regarding black communities, practicing a sort of visual annotation. Palmer engages black history beginning with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade’s Middle Passage, and the history of black communities beginning with their introduction to the Americas as slaves.

Essentially, Palmer’s work appears to offer a retelling and annotation of history. He has made it clear that he doesn’t consider himself an activist. He approaches his work, first, as a way to express himself, and secondly to inspire dialogue from his audience. He comments on American institutional practices, re-articulating America as he experiences it. He reminisces on American history within his art through work like his Civil Rights Series. In much of his work, Palmer isn’t necessarily re-making history in the sense of attempting to re-write or alter what has happened. On the contrary, his art is communicating snapshots of black history, from his own perspective.



Figure 19: Charly Palmer, *Little Rock Nine*, 2007. Print on paper; 22" x 44".

This serigraph, titled *Little Rock Nine*, is representative of Palmer's earlier work, which focused on depicting significant Civil Rights Movement events. Much of his work during this period is geared solely towards depicting black history. Although this image is depicting the activism of members of the black community, it is not taking a clear activist stance. The image portrays the 'Little Rock Nine'. The Little Rock Nine were nine high school students who became famous for being the first black students to integrate a segregated high school in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. This action was pivotal and was a test of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional (Brown V. Board). This serigraph depicts the nine-black youth in the center of the image. They are all carrying books, indicative of the fact that they are either heading to or leaving school.

This image uses a variety of color which is common in Palmer's early work; he did not shy away from maximizing his usage of a full color palette. Palmer creates art in a way that fuses realism and abstraction seamlessly. Palmer's work is reminiscent to work like Romare Bearden's collages, specifically in the ways that he assembles body parts and clothing. In this image, each

of the youth depicted have hands that are not proportionate to the rest of their bodies and frames, which is similar to Charles White's practice, possibly to indicate the immense weight that has been placed in their hands. The background of this serigraph is a blend of colors, images, objects and letters that speak to the theme of the painting. The alphabet, which appears to have been filled into a stencil, could be a metaphor for education, and the educational equity that these students now had access to because of desegregation. Palmer decides to depict these students not as people typically understand traditional activists – which tends to archetypally include a form of confrontation or resistance, deep resolve, or heroic strength. Instead, he portrays them as the youth that they are. Some of the figures are smiling, with pleasant looks on their faces. Others seem to simply be present - an emotion that many students experience while at school. The figure in the middle appears to be quite serious. All of the figures gaze directly at their audience, which is indicative of the strength necessary to endure the frontlines of desegregation. However, Palmer seems to be positing the students in a way that asserts, “they’re just kids.” No matter what social boundaries they are breaking, and despite the political significance of their decisions, they are simply teenagers who are attending school. Palmer humanizes these individuals through his depiction of them. For the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the desegregation of American schools, Charly Palmer communicates the significance of this event, as well as the humanity of the young people who put their futures and safety on the line. Palmer's work raises a plethora of questions. Is depicting activism a form of activism? Or is it simply a form of history making, where an artist makes images representative of history? What role does the recorder of history – even as a bystander and not an actor - have in how history will later be perceived and understood? With respect to Palmer's understanding of himself and his work, I believe that the recorder of history has a pivotal role in how history will later be perceived. Even though Palmer does not consider himself an activist, he does include his personal understanding and experience

of history in his work. This can be supported through the word “courage” which is included in the top right corner of his Little Rock Nine painting. Although he is not intentionally creating propaganda or activist art, his perception of this historical event includes his personal bias, which the viewer of the art must engage – even if they disagree. This sheds light on how subtle messaging in art can influence social perceptions and historical understandings. Even if Palmer is not trying to influence the opinion of others, his work – and all art - still has the ability to.

Later in his career, Palmer transitioned from commenting on black history. He drifted from direct social and political commentary/depictions and now focuses more on celebrating blackness. He states that he no longer is at a point with his art where he wants to get approval, attention or tug at the hearts of people who support America’s institutional disenfranchisement (Palmer, 09:23). Upon realizing that the main consumers of his work are people that are already familiar with black history and the black experience, he felt that in a sense he was “preaching to the choir” (Palmer, 10:11). He began asking himself what black folk could do to help themselves. What can we do to celebrate and enjoy our blackness? (Palmer, 11:01)

One of Palmer’s main goals is to get to a point where he can paint the way James Baldwin writes (Palmer, 23:04). He wants to create art that makes a viewer feel the same way he feels when he reads Baldwin’s literature or when he listens to John Coltrane’s *Love Supreme*. These feelings are oftentimes akin to an out of body experience, where the artist is able to sweep you from your world into the world that their artistry creates. It is a “creative improvisation” (Rolling) that is able to depict experiences viewers may have had but have struggled to understand clearly. This is one of the greatest strengths of his work; it has the ability to transcend words and speak directly to emotions and experiences. His work is able to communicate in the “Universal Language of the Soul of the World” that Paulo Coelho describes. This Universal Language is a form of communication that is beyond words; it is communication that exists in

the non-material realm of emotions, experiences, and desires (Coelho). Even with his consistent practice of black subjectivity, Palmer has been accomplishing this goal since the beginning of his artistic career.



Figure 20: Charly Palmer, *Dripping Black*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas; 40" x 30". ZuCot Gallery, Atlanta.

Dripping Black is a recent work of Palmer's that is a visual representation of his new approach to engaging blackness and the experiences of black communities. This work articulates the intricacies of blackness. The image depicts the profile of a man with a dark skin tone complete with a rich blackness that literally is oozing from his skin. This is contrasted by a pair of white wings that have been attached to his back. The wings add to the overall beauty of the

black man that is depicted. The wings, which appear angelic, can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of his goodness or righteousness. There appears to be a sense of vulnerability that is being depicted because the man is shirtless, and as far as the viewer can tell he is naked. The backdrop of the painting is a solid blush pink color and in the top right corner of the canvas are a bouquet of pink assorted flowers. Palmer seems to be subtly addressing black masculinity by situating a “traditionally female” color and items within the context of a black man. He may be encouraging the viewer to expand their notion of what black masculinity is as well as what it can be. He may also be speaking to the fragile, more delicate parts that men stereotypically attempt to cover up or refuse to engage. Palmer is connecting symbolic items and colors that are not typically associated with black men, and pairs them with an ease.

Tracy Murrell: Interpretations of Black Female Beauty

Tracy Murrell is a visual artist, curator and creative in Atlanta. She previously was a curator at the Hammonds House for five years. The Hammonds House Museum is a historically significant art museum whose mission is to “preserve, exhibit, interpret and increase public awareness about the contributions that visual artists of African descent have made towards world culture” (Hammonds House Mission). She creates imagery that is concerned with the black female figure in silhouette form. Later in her practice, she became intentional about focally depicting black female forms. Prior to this, she had found herself constantly gravitating towards making images where she was able to see herself. It wasn’t until years into her practice that she realized how important it is for people to see the beauty in black women – to see what she sees (Murrell, 15:58). Murrell utilizes patterned paper and paper cutting methods to adorn her figures in ways that are beautiful and pleasing to view. She wants her work to be a point of rest for both herself as the creator and for her audience. Recognizing how chaotic and stressful life is, Murrell

wants to create a sense of peacefulness as one gazes at a black female silhouette (Murrell, 11:17). In doing this, she situates black women as a source and site of repose.

This simple re – interpretation of the black female form is the antithesis of many stereotypes that exist regarding black women, which characterizes them at times as angry or complicated. However, Murrell doesn't concern herself with directly depicting these complications, or focus on combatting them. Instead, she offers a refreshing way to experience black women. She depicts them as the source and locus for beauty, peace and rest. She is intentional about the pattern work that she utilizes in her work; she wants the work to be imagery that calms the mind. Early in her career, one of the only black papercutting visual artists that she knew of was Kara Walker, whose work Murrell says can induce depression and anxiety because of its subject matter. Because she came to art to find a place of rest, she wanted to create an art that still focuses on black female subjectivity but with the intentional approach of depicting black women as beautiful, calming, and with the intentions to evoke a sense of serenity. These two works that I examine are what Murrell calls “intimate” smaller works (Murrell, personal communication, 2018). They are made with Japanese Chiyogami paper and are part of a new series that she is preparing to debut to the public and present for sale.



Figure 21: Tracy Murrell, *Wherever You Go I Will Be With You*, 2019. Japanese Chiyogami paper, resin.

Wherever You Go I Will Be With You depicts two deep blue figures that are facing each other. Their heads are bowed in unison, in a prayer-like stance. The simplistic silhouettes of the figures are contrasted by the clothing and background which are lush in vibrancy and intricacy. The figures are framed in front of a yellow background that has various blue-green pattern work which fill up what would have been negative space. Navigating those various patterns are a flock of white birds, flying in all different directions. It appears that the two figures are sharing an intimate moment in a quiet place, when suddenly a sound scatters the birds that a moment before may have been resting. The birds are in motion, but the two figures remain still. Draped in

colorful robes, the pattern of the clothing provides the viewer with another set of surface decorations. The foundation of the clothing are color blocks of a gold material and is contrasted by blocks of red fabric that is filled with orange rippling swirls. These swirls elicit a sense of movement, which compliments the movement of the birds in the background. Layered on top of this patterned robing are bouquets of white and pink flowers.

Although this image appears to busy when considering the various patterns and colors, there is an inherent balance that it exudes. This may be because the two figures mirror each other, providing a sense of symmetry and coherence. Murrell positions the two figures in a way that shows that they are in agreement with one other, an interpretation supported by the affirming title of the work of art. With both heads bowed, the audience can deduce that they are in a meditative state. The allusions of Japanese cut paper craft, along with the robes that resemble kimonos in their print and draping fashion, suggests to the audience that something deeply significant is taking place between the two. Kimonos are traditionally worn on special occasions, and the intimate stance of the two figures coupled with the title of the painting are indicative that they are sharing a serious and sacred moment together.



Figure 22: Tracy Murrell. *Walking through the Upside-Down World*, 2019. Japanese Chiyogami paper, resin.

Walking through the Upside-Down World depicts a woman who is alone as far as the viewer can tell. She is mid-stride and appears to have her arms crossed in front of her. The background is cut from Japanese Chiyogami paper and has been shaped into large wavy swaths that move diagonally across the image's surface, creating a sense of rhythm between the undulations of orange paper with yellow rippling swirls and undulations of golden paper. The movement is not linear and coupled with the upside-down bouquets of pink and white flowers there is a sense of displacement and otherworldliness. The viewer can see that the figure is not looking straight ahead, but her chin is tilted downward as if she is staring at the ground as she walks. She could be watching the ground attentively as she carefully picks out a pathway for

herself because of the displacement she may feel from being right side-up in an upside-down world; or, she may be lost in her own thoughts. Either way, she appears to be frustrated, her arms folded and drawn tightly to her sides. It is unclear whether her frustrations lay in the fact that she is walking in an upside-down world, or if it is her frustrations that are causing her world to be turned upside down. All of these deductions are both a matter of perspective and interpretations, which illustrates the aforementioned point about Tracy's approach to her work. She does not always take clear stances and focuses more on the presentation of the image. She creates work that beautifully depicts black women. The ambiguity of some of her images provides a sense of freedom to the viewer, where they are able to insert their own understanding of her work instead of only seeing what she prompts the viewer to see.

Both Palmer and Murrell have the ability to speak in an emotional language through their art. This is where the power of their work resides - in its emotional complexity. As artists, their focus is to simply express themselves, and, through this practice, they are able to communicate in the Universal Language of the Soul of the World (Coelho) that is transcendent of time and space. Although their work is grounded deeply in the identity politics that they engage (both directly and at times in more subtle ways), both artists are still able to create works that people of all walks of life can appreciate, engage, and connect to. Their work is discursive, with the ability to communicate ideas that expand on larger social experiences and political events.



Chapter Four – Paint the Power! Public Engagement through Street Art in Atlanta

This chapter explores street art and how murals can serve as a form of public engagement. I utilize theories regarding public art to consider the extent to which they shed light on street art and murals. I conduct this exploration by first describing the power of street art, specifically murals. I interrogate how murals have the ability to foster an exchange of ideas between artists and communities. I then connect these general themes to the black community, in order to link how powerful murals can be in fostering a sense of community and the communication of its ideals and values. I ask, where does the power of the murals that this work engages lie? Is it in the final production and in what the mural communicates, in the conceptualization of the image, or somewhere in between? I explore murals and their ability to communicate and function as a locus for public discourse, social change, and exchange.

I frame the discussion by examining a mural that is significant in black art history, known as the Wall of Respect. Its history contextualizes how transformative murals and street art have been in the black community. I then explore Atlanta artist Fabian Williams' visual artistry, which is saturated in themes of activism and resistance, as an example of how murals contribute to this continuum of activism in black art history. Finally, I compare the work of the Super Bowl host committee with regard to visual activism to the protest art that Williams creates. I conclude with an examination of murals by Williams, who has made it his mission to create resistance art throughout the city of Atlanta. I frame street art and murals as a form of public engagement and utilize two case studies to explore how this public engagement manifests and takes place.

Street art and Public Engagement

How is street art engaged and perceived by the communities that host it? To explore this question, it is necessary to define terms utilized in the chapter. Street art is art that is created in public spaces, oftentimes with the intention of proclaiming something and influencing public

discourses (Awad & Wagner). Street art is visual art that is inspired by or found in urban areas. Street art can take many forms. It is a democratic form of public art that is used to communicate views of dissent, “asking difficult questions and expressing political concerns (Art Radar). Street art is a form of public art. Murals, graffiti and visual images in public places are all forms of street art. Popular street art typically uses words minimally and is paired with a “graphic representation [to make] the point emotionally resonant” (Siegler, pg. 6).

The street art that I engage in this chapter is a form of resistance that is created with the intention of bringing about social change. This kind of resistance can be understood as “an act of opposing dominant representations and affirming one’s perspective on social reality in their place. [Scholars understand it to be] a social and individual phenomenon, a constructive process that articulates continuity and change, and as an act oriented towards an imagined future of different communities” (Awad et al.). Social change can be understood as the collective, symbolic, meaningful and substantial processes of change affecting society (Wagoner, Jensen, and Oldmeadow). What this means is that the art that I engage within this chapter is concerned with initiating process of change that can positively affect their societies and immediate realities.

The interpretation of all visual images is part of a social process because people perceive images differently as a result of their personal and socio-cultural background. Thus, images are not “passively perceived impressions of the world; rather, they construct a representation of the world, ourselves, and our social relationships, which can motivate collective action” (Awad and B Wagner, p. 7). In this same way, street art is able to embody multiple meanings, carrying a surface and underlying value that gives them their stability and effectiveness (Bartlett; Wagner). Street art is a form of public engagement that includes interactions and exchanges. These exchanges are initiated by the producer or creator of the art itself. The image is exposed to its audience, which includes both pedestrians and bystanders as well as authority figures, who

typically control what is allowed and what is not allowed in public spaces. (Awad et al). No matter who is the producer and who is the audience, the viewers of public art are able to produce arguments or counter arguments in response to the image (Davis & Harré), engaging in a dialogue and possibly an argumentative process (Lonchuk & Rosa). “We normally think about dialogue as a symmetrical conversation, taking place through language discourses, but the dialogue in street art is a visual one, that is relational, temporal, dynamic, power-based, and changing over time” (Awad et al.). Street art is powerful because it has the ability to engage tensions within communities and its audiences. These tensions can touch on – but are not limited to - social, political, economic and religious conflicts. Street art is able to depict the social realities of the time while also communicating new ideas that may violate or combat the existing realities. This is not limited to street art; all visual art has the power to do so. Public art is unique in the fact that it isn’t limited to gallery or museum spaces, nor is it easy to collect (Art Radar). Thus, artists are able to share their work directly with their community, which enables the artist to reach and engage larger audiences. In this visual dialogue, new ideas are presented, and old ideas are critiqued, leaving the audience to interpret based on their own sociopolitical background.

The Wall of Respect and its Lasting Legacy

The influence of public art has a powerful history in black communities. In 1967, an organization named the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) was founded in Chicago, IL, during the Black Arts Movement. Shortly after its inception OBAC aided in collaboratively creating an incredible piece of public art widely known as the Wall of Respect.



Figure 23: Organization of Black American Culture, *Wall of Respect*, 1967. 20-by-60-foot mural, Chicago, IL.

This mural and its contents offer “a crucial case study in how public art can be a staging ground for debates about community and identity” (Alkalimat, Crawford & Zorach, p. 3). OBAC hosted a Visual Arts Workshop, which included fourteen visual artists who alongside Chicago’s black Southside community created this striking mural. The Wall of Respect is significant because it was “a great declaration of Black unity based on a collective process of self-determination” (Alkalimat et al.) among a community of black people who experienced an awakening of cultural identity grounded in politics of liberation. The mere creation of this mural was a political act of resistance when one analyzes the sociopolitical context of this time period: it was created during the “Long, Hot Summer” of 1967 (Britannica Encyclopedia), where racial tensions between the black and white community culminated into nearly one hundred and sixty community uprisings.

Despite the social, political, and economic discrimination that black communities faced, they sought to define for themselves what it meant to be black, combatting the “racist negation of the black experience as deviant and inferior” (Alkalimat et al.). The Wall of Respect represented

a form of cultural resistance because it proclaimed the positive attributes of the black community, which challenged Euro-normative beauty and social standards. Abdul Alkalimat states that the Wall was significant because of its content, its context, and because of the impact it had on community members.

OBAC spent hours in debates about whose images would be included on the wall, wanting to vet them to ensure they were representative of how community members understood and viewed black heroism and excellence at the time. As it was an extension of the Black Power Movement, community members and artists both agreed that Martin Luther King should not be depicted on the Wall because he was not considered radical enough (Reardon). However, pivotal black leaders that were depicted on the Wall include Malcolm X, Nina Simone, Ray Charles, Charlie Parker, W. E. B. DuBois, Dick Gregory, and Bill Russell. This Wall is indicative of the shift that was taking place; a transition from the Civil Rights Movement to the more assertive and ‘militant’ Black Power/Arts Movement. Artists chose the predominantly black southside of Chicago – on the corner of 43rd Street and Langley Avenue – to host the Wall because of its cultural and historical significance as the locus for this project. Given the rich history of the black musicians who lived and performed in the area, it seemed to be the best option. Alkalimat proclaims that “it was beautiful, located deep in a black working-class neighborhood, and done by black people themselves” (Alkalimat, p. 5). Artists who contributed to the Wall recount how community members would suggest edits and changes to the images as it was being created. The artists would hear them out, and oftentimes comply. Visual artist Jeff Donaldson states that as he was creating a portrait of Nina Simone, someone who lived across the street from where the wall was being painted complained that it was ugly. This feedback led Donaldson to change the image he was creating (Reardon). This exchange between artists and community members shows how murals are oftentimes intended to reflect the identity and values of communities.

The Wall of Respect was a locus of activism that represented the ethos of the Black Arts Movement, which was rooted in black resistance and the reclamation of social narratives regarding the black community. It was so powerful that it was the site for external showcases of resistance and activism like live performances and speeches. The community would gather in front of it for performances of plays and poetry readings. The wall was the aesthetic and cultural culmination of black resistance during this time, and Romi Crawford states that “the juxtaposition of forms, such as paint and photographs signals and even encourages the layering of additional forms [of art] such as music, poetry, and performance, which also took place at the site of the Wall” (Crawford, p. 7). This wall was not only a visual representation of significant figures in the black community, but depicted people who advocated for intervention, action, and collaboration (Zorach). The wall was a symbol of pride and hope for this black community during a time when legitimate social change seemed bleak. The Wall inspired them to organize collectively, increase their knowledge of black history and have a sense of pride in themselves and their blackness. This inspiration can be found in the performances that took place in front of the wall, as well as the ripple effect it had throughout the country. According to art historian Michael D. Harris, more than 1,500 murals were painted in almost every black neighborhood in the nation in the eight years following the production of the Wall of Respect (Reardon).

Super Bowls, the NFL, and Activism: When Sociopolitical Commentary is Accepted, and When it Crosses a Line

The 2019 Super Bowl was hosted in Atlanta’s Mercedes Benz stadium. The decision was made to commemorate this event by enlisting eleven different artists to create roughly thirty murals that were inspired by Atlanta’s Civil Rights history. The Super Bowl Host Committee and WonderRoot, an arts advocacy center based in Atlanta, teamed up to make this happen. WonderRoot is “an arts organization that works to improve the cultural and social landscape of

Atlanta through creative initiatives and community partnerships... [with a] mission to unite artists and community to inspire positive social change” (WonderRoot). The Atlanta Super Bowl Host Committee acted as a mediator between the National Football League (NFL), the City of Atlanta, and the community of Atlanta. Traditionally, this committee is charged with organizing, orchestrating and supporting events related to the annual Super Bowl that enhance the host regions experience of it.

This project, titled *Off the Wall* was an initiative that set out to elevate stories and ideas that represent Atlanta’s pursuit of human rights, civil rights and equity for all Atlantans. This collaboration shared a mutual goal of sparking dialogue around social justice movements through the creation of public art and murals, stating that “it’s crucial for people to see how Atlanta has grown and these murals are the best way for us to tell these stories” (Diaz). This community initiative is intended to capture the past, present and future of Atlanta’s civil rights legacy as well as articulate current social justice movements. Each mural will be the result of “direct, facilitated community conversations that artists attended” (Super Bowl LIII). These meetings were facilitated by the Director of Ethics and The Arts Program at Emory University Center for Ethics, Carlton Mackey, and the founder of Preserve black Atlanta, Dr. Karchaik Sims-Alvarado. Forty-three conversations took place, engaging over one thousand participants in discussions over topics such as the “black liberation movement, race, women’s rights, LGBTQ issues, immigrant and refugee rights, worker’s rights, anti-ableism, gentrification and anything else related to civil and human rights” (WonderRoot).

Fabian Williams and Social Advocacy through Street Art

In recent years, Fabian Williams has focused on creating murals throughout Atlanta. His murals oftentimes depict popular black historical figures like Martin Luther King, James Baldwin, Muhammed Ali, and Malcolm X, however he always manages to put a twist on his work. He has an ongoing

series where he revamps the narratives of significant black civil rights leaders by portraying them as popular superheroes. He has created work depicting Malcolm X as Magneto, a character in the X-Men movies, one of Marvel's popular movie series. He has also

recreated Martin Luther King Jr. in various ways; he depicted him memorialized in the classic renaissance fashion with a golden circular halo around his head, and as Professor Xavier, another significant character in the X-Men series of Marvel Comics. He has also re-portrayed James Baldwin, a famous writer and author as the Human Torch, a character from the Fantastic Four superhero series. These are all significant because Fabian is reclaiming the historical narratives of these individuals and amplifying their significance by metamorphizing their stories. The depiction of these figures as superheroes with supernatural powers speaks to how Fabian



Figure 24: Fabian Williams (@OccasionalSuperstar), *Cabbage Town Black Superhero* mural, June 17, 2018. Atlanta.

perceives them; as beings that are stronger than the average human, and as people who have advocated for and saved the world. He shows that they are also superheroes, although most black heroes didn't wear capes.

As innovative as his work is, Fabian makes sure to give credit to the conceptual origination. He relates in an interview how many of the Marvel Comics were informed by the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960's (Williams, 21:04). The most overt depiction of this was in X-Men. These comics, and eventually films, told the story of the activism and fight for justice and equity. Metaphorically, Professor X and his "vision of harmonious human-mutant coexistence" (Ciampaglia) was representative of Martin Luther King Jr., while Malcolm X was depicted in Magneto's "rigid attitude toward the defense of mutantkind" (Ciampaglia). Lee stated that the popular X-Men series was a metaphor for the Civil Rights Movement. In his stories, Marvel Comics creator Stan Lee made space for a variety of differences, regardless of skin color, ethnicity, gender or religion, stating that "the only things we don't have room for are hatred, intolerance, and bigotry" (Ciampaglia).

Much like Stan Lee, Williams is after access to people's minds and hearts; he wants to create a body of work that communicates the idiocy of systemic inequality and oppression. He produces emotional content because he wants audiences to view things differently, and eventually adjust their behavior accordingly. Stan Lee was more of a chronicler of history by deciding not to take a clear stance on popular issues and simply relaying current events within his comics. Fabian Williams differs because he states that he is an intentional arts activist. He refers to his art as a weapon, and as his "tool to get people to see the truth" (Williams, 37:03). Williams likens the art that he creates to the work that activists did during the Civil Rights Movement. He creates activist art with the intentions of tugging at the moral compass of others, expressing that he is focused on depicting what he considers "the truth" (Williams, 13:22). He

also states that he creates activist art to influence the generations to come, with the hopes that his son won't have the same fears and experiences of inequality. Both Lee and Fabian seem to share similar sentiments; Fabian has oftentimes commented on the illogical nature of racism (Williams, 7:28). Lee also stated, "bigotry and racism are among the deadliest ills plaguing the world today. It's totally irrational, patently insane to condemn an entire race-to despise an entire nation-to vilify an entire religion" (Ciampaglia).



Figure 25: Fabian Williams (@OccasionalSuperstar), *T'Challa Ali and Colin Kaepernick*, 2017. Spray paint on wall. Atlanta.

The juxtaposition of Muhammed Ali and Colin Kaepernick in Williams mural (Figure 26) illustrates how he has depicted black leaders as superheroes. Muhammed Ali is depicted as T'Challa, the main character in the movie *Black Panther* - one of the most popular and highest grossing Marvel movies of all time. This is significant because T'Challa is the King of Wakanda

– an Afro-futurist black utopia. This movie has immense cultural significance within the black community, as it was the first Marvel movie to feature an almost completely black cast. It also was directed by Ryan Coogler, a young, black and wildly successful filmmaker. Essentially this movie is the type of positive representation of blackness that was almost non-existent in pop culture for centuries. This film is culturally significant because it is the first Marvel movie that has a superhero of African descent. It communicates to the audiences that black people are intelligent, resourceful, capable of creating and supporting complex civilizations, and ultimately states that black folk can be superheroes as well.

In one of the first murals depicting Kaepernick, Williams poses the athlete in a regal manner, wearing an Atlanta Hawks football jersey, to support his protest against police brutality. Because of his pride in Kaepernick taking a stand [or in this case a knee], he adorns him in his hometown team's jersey as a way to publicly embrace Kaepernick and what he advocates for. He also seems to be placing a call to action to both the NFL and the Atlanta Falcons in particular to end Kaepernick's blacklisting. Ever since Kaepernick began publicly protesting police brutality and American inequality by taking a knee during the national anthem before games, his contract ended with his team and he has yet to be re-signed. In an interview with NPR, Williams states that he believes that based on Atlanta's civil rights history, Kaepernick would be the perfect type of player for the Atlanta Falcons and the city of Atlanta (Williams).

Fabian Williams, also known by his artist name and social media handle 'OccasionalSuperstar' had an unsettling encounter with his work one day. On the first day of Super Bowl weekend, which was also the first day of Black History Month, Fabian Williams



Figure 26, #Kaeperbowl Mural, 2019. Spray paint on wall. Atlanta.

drove past his mural to find that the wall it was painted on was in the process of being demolished. Williams took to posting this incident on Instagram as it was happening, stating that this was an intentional action orchestrated by the NFL. Ironically, the Super bowl host committee has been advocating for social justice through the creation of murals that speak to/represent

Atlanta's history of Civil Rights with Wonderroot's Off the Wall initiative. However, he vocalized how it was uncanny that the mural just happened to be demolished the weekend that the Super Bowl was scheduled to take place. Refusing to believe that this was just a coincidence, Williams stated on Instagram that the way they chose to kick off Super Bowl weekend was to demolish symbols that advocated against inequality and for human rights, while celebrating an organization that infringes upon constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech. It is important to consider who the different social actors are and what the visual dialogue and tension is that occurs through the walls between these actors (Awad & B. Wagner). After seeing his work demolished, Williams responded to this action by creating even more murals of Kaepernick and encouraged other artists to do the same. Here Williams responds to actions and decisions of those in power within local government. What is interesting about this situation is

how he chooses to respond through public art. This demonstrates the power that Williams seems to understand that public art has.

The social and political significance of this action led to an intense community response. Frustrated by this incident, he resorted to a call to action, proposing a community mural event project called #Kaeperbowl.

This call to action, which asked for other visual artists to paint murals of Colin Kaepernick throughout the city of Atlanta in order to promote the messages that the football player advocated for, led to a city-wide community mural event. It encouraged communities that



Figure 27: Muhammad Yungai (@artofyungai, #KaeperBowl Mural, 2019. Spray paint on wall. Atlanta.

experience oppression to boycott viewing the Super Bowl, and to rally together to support causes that are important to them. Fabian's calls to action led to a total of eight Kaepernick murals (and counting) that various artists teamed up to create. Visual artists Muhammad Yungai, Yuzli Mathurin, Joe Dreher, Nels, Ziggy 2 Playa, C Flux Sing, Charmaine Minniefield and OccasionalSuperstar are those who stepped forward to contribute to the creation of these murals. There was an outpouring of support both financially and artistically.

This case study is an example of how public art and murals can be forms of public engagement. They can provide grounds for an exchange of ideas and communication via images.

They can also exist as a projection of what can be, where artists articulate what they hope the future will be through the development of these images. Williams is acknowledging social realities, Kaepernick's protest of police brutality, and the NFL's mistreatment of him. His art also communicates new ideas of what he imagines and hopes to become reality; Kaepernick being vindicated regarding his job with the NFL and respected for what he advocates for. This mural project represents what visual artists were keen on communicating: "We want Kaepernick represented and vindicated, and we want it now." Kaepernick has become a powerful symbol and the visibility of his face and the association that audiences make to his protest is empowering for community members. In this situation one is able to witness:

1. How powerful public art can be; how it can galvanize communities and can promote the views and values of specific communities
2. How it is a form of public engagement. In this case, an artist was engaging the ideals of many in Atlanta's black community. Authoritative figures respond to this by demolishing the mural. Finally, the community responds by creating more murals than before, depicting Kaepernick in a variety of ways. This exchange of ideas is not only powerful, but is indicative of the discursive nature of visual art. Much like public forums, where people's ideas are heard, debated, attacked, and exchanged – public art enables a similar type of engagement.

Williams' work engages the social realities of his time in an innovative way, utilizing his artwork to articulate his hopes and his interpretation of what truth is (Williams, 45:47). His work recreates history and depicts sociopolitical realities, voicing his ideas and inviting artists and audiences to be a part of this exchange. He consistently creates murals that depict images that are visual dialogues, with the intention of creating a form of propaganda and advertisement of his ideas. The example considered in this chapter show that the image isn't what holds the power in

community-oriented mural events. The very process of artmaking and the community engagement that entails makes political statements just as loudly as the work itself and is where a majority of the power resides. These political statements are able to reverberate as loudly as the cries at a public protest. These murals become sites of community activism, and even becomes community focal points. The murals alone are not powerful simply because of their aesthetics and the images they depict, but they are powerful because of how they attract community members. Collaborative engagement in the creation of these murals is where the power lies. It wasn't that pedestrians needed to analyze the art on the walls, but the mere presence of these murals has the capacity to foster community.

Conclusion: Process, Praxis, and Experiential Art-Making

“The creativity of the marginalized is as valuable (if not more so) as that of those who visibly work in the creative industries” (Wilson, pg. 368).



Figure 28: Spencer Stultz, *A Time to Confront*, 2018. Acrylic and fabric on canvas paper; 16" x 20". Community Folk Art Center, Syracuse, NY.

A Time for Joy and A Time for Sorrow is the title of my one-woman art exhibition which supplements my written thesis. I created images as a way of articulating, engaging and assessing experiences related to my research. I also created this body of work with the intention of demonstrating some of the dominant themes within my research. This exhibition came about as I was trying to think about the question of how visual art that is personal and expressive can address sociopolitical questions and experiences. It seemed that I could not fully process ideas based on artmaking without making art myself. The process of creating work that is both indicative of a dominant theme in my research demonstrates how visual art that is focally expressive is also a form of activism, and enabled me to conceptualize my research with more clarity. Because I am analyzing visual artists that create art that is discursive, I thought it was necessary to engage these concepts through demonstrating them myself. This led me to take a retrospective approach, where I utilize my lens as a black woman to engage overarching concepts. I utilize the black female form to navigate experiences regarding my identity. Throughout this exhibition I demonstrated one of the fundamental themes of my research, which is the reclamation of one's own narrative through combatting dominant cultural narratives. Because one of the fundamental claims within my research is that visual art that is deeply personal and expressive can also be a form of activism, I took a personal approach by inserting myself deeply into this work. I do this by interrogating the narratives and identities that other individuals and sociopolitical structures have created for me and combatting them through the creation and reclamation of my own. This exhibition is an occasion to reflect on how visual art, which often arises from deeply personal sentiments can function as a site or medium for social/political engagement and activism. My creative practice is a form of "human development in action" where I utilize black women forms to engage personal experiences and emotions (Rolling, 2018, p. 8). Through the methodology of portraiture, this exhibition explains deeply

personal experiences, and I literally embody these experiences into the forms and faces of the portraits that I create in order to process and articulate them. This chapter engages the theoretical conceptualization that has informed my artmaking process.

The creation of art and the desire to understand what creativity is and where it comes from has led to a variety of discussions, debates, and even definitions. Some define art as a system of production, as a system of communication, as a system of interrogation, or as a system of improvisation (Rolling). Rolling states that “the way one defines art radically changes the practical applications of creative outcome as well as perceived identity of an arts practitioner-artist as shaper of beauty, or artist as preserver and expresser of potent tales, or artist as shatterer of beliefs and expectations, or artist as conjurer of unimagined magic” (Rolling, p. 5). I agree with Rolling that definitions matter, and how artists identify themselves will directly impact their practice and approach to their artmaking.

I approach my artmaking practice similar to Carole Kirk. Her research explores ways that contemporary visual art can be understood as a “cognitive process which is both agential and social” (Kirk, p. 114). As both artists and academics, we specifically focus on what is produced when the art practitioner “explicitly draws attention to the material, social and relational processes of making sense of the artwork” (Kirk, p. 114). We both interrogate how visual artists are able to utilize painting as a form of inquiry that enables us to explore and articulate “meaningful experiences” (Kirk, p. 103, Johnson, p. 101). This introduces the idea that artmaking is a form of “experiential inquiry”, which emphasizes “knowing” as a verb, rather than “knowledge” as a noun. What this means is that the process of creating paintings for my exhibition enabled me to explore a variety of emotions and experiences. Thus, the practice of art making can be posited as a form of research, which delineates the practitioner’s creative processes as a form of knowing information (Kirk; Barrett and Bolt). In my thesis I understand

this process as a form of thinking as well as a form of knowing. This process of external thinking is what leads me to a form of knowing that I would not have been able to arrive at otherwise. Academics like Bolt argue that artmaking places reality into the painting, which then reflects this reality back into the world, with the potential for profound impact and effects. Because of this capacity, the “visual image can move beyond pure representation, towards performativity, ‘to bring into being that which it figures’” (Kirk, p. 103, Bolt, p. 3).

As part of my research, my exhibition shows how visual art has the ability to contain forms and configure variations of reality. It offers a venue to explore how art’s depictions of various phenomena is able to provoke emotions and illicit reactions. It enables the audience to understand how artmaking is an exchange of ideas and realities. Visual art has the ability to make an impact in both the conceptual and the material world. Whether it is an overt form of propaganda or work that is expressive, visual art has the power to influence and inform reality.

My Approach to Art-Making

“Making involves handling materials, responding constantly to tactile, visual and emotional feedback from the emerging form. While I am manipulating and rearranging materials in my studio, I am making more than a painting – I am making sense [and knowledge]. Meanings and feelings emerge out of the sensory immersion in process. As I rearrange and paint images, the materials in front of me are imagination enacted in the physical and material manipulation of imagery. In this way, I incorporate materials as part of a cognitive apparatus, such that the ‘thinking’ happens on the canvas in a process of ‘extended cognition’ (Kirk, Clark). I use painting as a way of inquiring into the existential challenges” (Kirk, pg. 120).

The creation of art is not just making a painting. Painting is a form of experiential inquiry that leads to creating knowledge. In my case, I utilize this experiential inquiry to process information that I would not be able to access in other ways. Because painting and artmaking is a

mode of thinking for me, it is necessary that I think and create knowledge creatively. As Kirk and Clark state, there are modes of thinking that can only take place on canvas, which is different from the thinking that many people process verbally or through writing. I utilize my practice of artmaking as a form of experiential inquiry. I approach this work with a method that is similar to the method of Portraiture. Portraiture is a process that bridges aesthetics and empiricism, with the intention to capture complexity and subtlety of human experience (Hackmann). Portraiture is a form of ‘qualitative inquiry’ that enables research to appeal to intellect and emotion with the intentions of ‘informing and inspiring’ in a way that documents and interprets information (Lawrence-Lightfoot). Portraiture encourages the portraitists to always perceive what makes their subject unique, in order to capture their essence and nature. It is the goal of the portraitist to then weave these perceived truths into the actual portrait. My practice differs because I utilize portraiture as a method of depiction instead of practicing that distinct methodology. Because I am both the portraitist and my experiences are the subjects, it is my own ideas and essence that are being depicted within the portraits that I create. This diverges from the traditional portraiture practice, where the portraitist is focused on capturing someone else as a subject. Both bridge aesthetics and empiricism because they are basing depictions on observations and experiences as well as perceptions that are intangible and based on the senses. Like Shanequa Gay, who does not create the literal faces of the women represented in her work *Devout Sculptures*, I keep in mind that it is not necessary to include my face in each portrait for it to be indicative of myself and my experiences.

Portraiture as a mode of depiction is a similar method to oral history interviews, in that they both document the perspectives and experiences of the people [the portraitist is] studying. Oral history interviews are a dialogue between an interviewer and the narrator about aspects of the past that is recorded (Shopes). There is an emphasis on shared authority in oral history

interviews, which disassembles a power dynamic that could exist between participants in traditional interviews. This enables them to document their subjects' voices, visions, authority, knowledge and wisdom (Hackmann, p. 52). For this body of work, I was both the portraitist as well as the subject. I utilized images of other women to encompass the experiences and emotions that I wove into their expression and communicated in the titles of the work, which was always significant. It is the same concept of inserting – when necessary – perceptions as the portraitist that I believe will further explicate the essence of the image – it just so happens that I am the one that is perceiving and being perceived.

My decision to make my exhibition images personal offered me an opportunity to reflect on the processes used by the artists whose works I analyze. I utilize personal imagery, beliefs, and experiences to create art that has the capacity to speak to other people's lives and engage social issues. I use portraiture to insert my identity and perspectives into various situations and experiences. This is an effort to understand and explain how contemporary black artists experience and present their engagement with ideas, trauma, and political and social developments that affect black people's lives and identities. Artists like Angela Davis Johnson approaches her artmaking in a similar way: she turns to artmaking to both process and depict ideas like trauma and healing within her work. I also utilize this practice as a way to reclaim my own narrative. The most fundamental theme that my exhibition engaged was recognizing the general frameworks of my life: my spirituality and religion, and my identity. It was an articulation of this understanding, as well as a reclamation of my narrative by creating images that refuted the narratives that others have created for me. I am trying to portray my experiences, feelings and identity in ways that extend beyond simply representing my own facial features. I am interested in depicting the essence of these experiences and ideas. In this way, my artwork relates to the counter-narratives created by Johnson and Gay. We harness the narratives created

for us that may be harmful, negative, hurtful or simply inaccurate, and utilizing conceptual alchemy we rework them into a form of gold.

A Time for Joy and a Time for Sorrow exhibited at the Community Folk Art Center, an extension of the African American Studies Department of Syracuse University in Syracuse, NY. It was my first solo exhibition and debuted on February 19th, 2019. The Opening Reception was on February 22nd, 2019, and it ran until March 23rd, 2019. The gallery that my exhibition was housed in – a community arts center geared towards showcasing the art made by artists of the African diaspora – was perfect for my thesis exhibition. The Community Folk Art Center is a creative space that is “committed to the promotion and development of artists of the African Diaspora” (Community Folk Art Center). Also, the fact that it showcased during Black History month and showed through a majority of Women’s History month was significant; a gallery full of black female portraits was a visual culmination of both of these months.

The most significant part of my exhibition, aside from the creation of the work itself, was the Opening Reception and artist talk that took place on February 22nd. Instead of hosting a formal artist talk, I facilitated an artist walk instead. This process granted me freedom to discuss my work with individuals as they viewed it. I was both the artist and curator of the exhibition, and because of that I wanted to create a space where I could discuss both the practice of creating the work as well as the conceptualization of the show.

An artist talk is typically a formal event; usually the artist and the moderator sit in front of the audience, and the moderator asks questions that have usually been previewed by the artist. Then, after the formal beginning of the Artist Talk, the floor is opened up to questions from the audience. There is a sense of “I [the artist] am the sole authoritative figure in regard to my work”. That dynamic is something that I intentionally wanted to diminish in engaging my work with the audience. I wanted to balance reclaiming my own narrative with encouraging audiences

to engage and interpret it for themselves. This desire mirrors unanimous sentiments expressed by the artists I interviewed for this thesis. They all argued that what is powerful is not always the meanings they put into their work; what people get from it can be equally compelling and enliven their work. They place an emphasis and value on other people interpreting their art and enjoy when viewers find meaning differently than the artist. The perception of the art from the viewers standpoint can be as powerful and valuable as the actual art itself. This is indicative on the discursive nature of visual artistry. Artists like Charly Palmer and Jamaal Barber have communicated that their main goals in creating art is to express themselves, and for that personal expression to draw out a reaction from the public when their art is presented. This describes the exchange that exists within the presentation of art work, which can be understood as a form of community engagement.

The artist walk reduced formalities. I promoted communal conversation about my work and fostered an environment with intimate exchanges. I attempted to create a comfortable environment in a variety of ways. I introduced my theme and the framework that I approached my artmaking and exhibition with. I communicated with the audience with a bit of a hybrid mindset. I introduced a few technical terms in regard to my research when necessary, but, for the most part, I communicated in language that was as accessible as possible to people from all walks of life. This was intentional; I did not want viewers to feel shut out from the conversation if they weren't familiar with terminology or creative practices. Also, I constantly opened up the floor for viewers to offer their opinions and interpretations of the art instead of immediately offering my own. I recognize that oftentimes people feel as if they aren't informed enough or qualified to engage visual art, based on conversations that I've had with non-art practitioners. This action transferred the assumed authority from myself, creating an atmosphere of shared

authority, and I hoped that this enabled my audience to feel comfortable enough to voice their ideas regarding my work.

My thesis engages the discursive power and nature of visual art. I wanted to understand how visual art that is expressive can also be discursive in the art of the contemporary black artists that I researched and felt that by creating a space for viewers to communicate their reactions I could better gauge this. It was already evident to me that propaganda and activist art is discursive, because creators of this type of art are intentionally attempting to communicate their ideas through this mode of artistic production. What I was more interested in was seeing how more personal forms of expression, which in some ways are created primarily for the benefit of the artist to interrogate things, could also be discursive. I found that this form of art is more discursive than I initially understood. Based on the reactions and feedback from the audience, I learned that personal and expressive art can communicate to viewers just as loudly as art that is explosive and laden with direct messages.



Figure 29: Spencer Stultz, *20 Somethings*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas; 36" x 48". Community Folk Art Center, Syracuse, NY.

This thesis has been a chance to reflection on art as social commentary. Much like how the artists I researched conceptualized their frustrations and experiences with their paintings, I needed to do the same within my own work. Figure 30 is a visual representation of how I have experienced injustice, specifically on Syracuse University's (SU) campus recently. I have witnessed countless acts of hatred toward black people and others who have marginalized identities. At times they are microaggressions, and other instances are directly hateful and aggressive. My creative practice has been a way for me express and articulate my understanding of racist events that have taken place at Syracuse in ways that allow me to process my emotions. It made me especially appreciate artists like Jamaal Barber, who creates propaganda and social justice work constantly.



Figure 30: Spencer Stultz, at *A Time for Joy and a Time for Sorrow* opening reception discussing collaborative art pieces that were created during the event.

I also wanted to ensure that I symbolically pushed back on the rules that galleries and creative spaces enforce. In a majority of art galleries and museums, there are strict practices that are geared towards the preservation and safety of the artwork that is being presented. The viewer is told not to stand too close, not to take photos with a flash, and are forbidden to touch the art. While all of these rules are logical, I and others feel a level of discomfort in spaces like these, where the audience is monitored or watched by docents whose job is to ensure compliance with rules. I wanted to create a space that would directly compromise those rigid structures. From this desire came the idea to include an opportunity for attendees at the opening reception to paint within the gallery and create in a space that focally presents work that is completed already. I

offered two blank 24" x 30" canvases, a variety of paint and paint brushes that sat open for anyone who wanted to use them. I was looking for a way to break down institutional barriers and encouraged people to add their voices to the canvas. What happened was more beautiful than anything I could have ever imagined. Throughout the evening I watched the work on the canvas grow with each addition from participants. Many fed off of what others had previously added to the canvas, and these paintings morphed over and over again. Here, voices of the community became in conversation with each other. This helped to, if only temporarily, disarm the institutional barriers within art spaces that told viewers they cannot touch, and to stay away from the art. It



Figure 31: *Community Canvas 1*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas; 30" x 24".
Community Folk Art Center, Syracuse, NY.

accomplished this because it was a space within this institution that was completely dedicated to the opposite. It enabled the attendees of the event to be active and engage art in their own way. Within an exhibition geared towards storytelling, this was a space that encouraged the audience to tell their own stories and to interact with the expressions of others. This exchange is a form of social creativity. Reminiscent of Barber's constant insertion of creative collaboration within his

work, it enables people to have a hand in creating something that they may not have be able to create individually.

Part of what I hoped for from this experiment was to further explore and demonstrate how painting and artmaking can be a form of community engagement. I also created this space in order to connect the themes

of my research. Jamaal Barber and Fabian Williams have both engaged in collaborative and communal artmaking. Throughout my research I have noted how the image itself is not always as important as the participatory nature of the creation, and the process that occurs. Observing this process enabled me to develop a deeper appreciation for how the process of collaborative artmaking can foster profound communal

interactions. These interactions can be just as critical instances of power as the final image themselves. The expressions made by community members engaged one another, and all of this



Figure 32: *Community Canvas 2*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 30" x 24". Community Folk Art Center, Syracuse, NY.

took place within the canvas. This further emphasizes how the canvas and the art it holds is the locus for exchange and this exchange can both reflect and interact with the material world. It also further illustrates the interconnectedness of my exhibition to the themes of my research.

My research in Atlanta taught me that the visual artists that I encountered were not concerned with the conceptualization of post-blackness. Some misunderstand post-blackness as being post-racial, a concept that decrees that currently the United States is beyond a point where race is important, decreeing that racial discrimination and oppression no longer exist. Others simply do not care about what “this contemporary moment in art history” is, preferring to focus on their work than to define this present moment in time. It appears that post-blackness’s utility is mainly for art curators and critics-people whose focus is on discussing art instead of actually creating it. This conceptualization appears to be irrelevant to many black artists, who may operate within a post-black mindset without realizing it. Post-blackness differs from Black Arts Movement Artists, who created work with a heightened consciousness of BAM conceptualizations. These artists utilized Black Arts Movement conceptualizations as the foundations of the themes that their work engaged and even in their aesthetic practices.

My work tries to understand different forms that activism takes in contemporary black visual artistry. I understand that the act of artmaking within itself is not always a form of protest. However, in my work as well as the work of all of the artists I engage creating art is an emotional and intellectual process that is utilized to confront sociopolitical developments. This body of work contributes a typology that attempts to understand the varieties of experiences that artmakers have while creating and experiencing their work. It highlights the different kinds of ways that artistic practice can serve as social engagement.

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Visual Art

Barber, Jamaal. *American Color Theory Introduction*. 2017, Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Barber, Jamaal. *Black*. Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Barber, Jamaal. *Color Associations*. 2017, Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Barber, Jamaal. *Compliments*. 2017, Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Barber, Jamaal. *Harmony*. 2017, Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Barber, Jamaal. *Intensity*. 2017, Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Barber, Jamaal. *Neutral*. 2017, Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Barber, Jamaal. *Shade*. Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Barber, Jamaal. *The Council*. 2017, Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Barber, Jamaal. *True Black*. Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Barber, Jamaal. *Value*. 2017, Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Barber, Jamaal. *White*. 2017, Southwest Arts Center, Atlanta.

Gay, Shanequa. *Devout Sculptures*. 2018, Sumter Gallery of Art, Sumter, NC.

Johnson, Angela Davis. *Almanac of Infinity*. 2018, MINT Gallery, Atlanta.

Johnson, Angela Davis. *Calling/Answering: Great Grandmother Listening*. 2018, MINT Gallery, Atlanta.

Murrell, Tracy. *Walking through the Upside-Down World*. 2019.

Murrell, Tracy. *Wherever You Go I Will Be With You*. 2019.

Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC). *Wall of Respect*. 1967, 43rd street and Langley Ave, Chicago.

Palmer, Charly. *Dripping Black*. 2018, ZuCot Gallery, Atlanta.

Palmer, Charly. *Little Rock Nine*. 2007.

Stultz, Spencer. *20 Somethings*. 2019, Community Folk Art Center, Syracuse.

Stultz, Spencer. *A Time to Confront*. 2018, Community Folk Art Center, Syracuse.

Williams, Fabian. *Cabbage Town Black Superhero mural*. 2018, Atlanta.

Williams, Fabian. *T'Challa Ali and Colin Kaepernick*. 2017, Atlanta.

Yungai, Muhummad. *#Kaeperbowl mural*. 2019, Atlanta.

Exhibition Checklist

20 Something, acrylic paint on canvas, 36" x 48"

A Time for Joy, 2019, acrylic paint and fabric on canvas paper, 20" x 16"

A Time to Affirm, 2019, acrylic paint and fabric on canvas paper, 20" x 16"

A Time to be both Vulnerable and Ferocious, 2019, acrylic paint and fabric on canvas paper, 16" x 20"

A Time to Be Still, 2019, acrylic paint and fabric on canvas paper, 20" x 16"

A Time to Confront, 2019, acrylic paint and fabric on canvas paper, 20" x 16"

Community Canvas 1, 2019, acrylic paint on canvas, 30" x 24"

Community Canvas 2, 2019, acrylic paint on canvas, 30" x 24"

Community Gardens, wall paint and gold-leaf on wood panels, 6ft x 6ft

Do You Know Why the Caged Bird Sang?, 2019, acrylic and feathers on canvas, 48" x 36"

Freedom Comes With a Cost, 2019, acrylic paint on canvas, rhinestones, feathers, 24" x 30"

Iris, 2018, acrylic on canvas paper, 20" x 16"

Joy and Freedom, 2017, acrylic paint on canvas, 24" x 30"

One Day, All Them Bags Gon' Get In Yo Way, 2019, Acrylic on Canvas, 36" x 48"

Untitled (On loan from Private Collection), 2016, Acrylic and Oil Pastel on Canvas 12" x 16"

What A Time to be Alive, 2019, acrylic paint and fabric on canvas paper, 20" x 16"

What Am I Missing?, 2019, acrylic paint on canvas, 36" x 48"

Why Did You Let Them Get to You?, 2017, oil paint on canvas paper, 3 20" x 16"

Biographical Narrative

My mother is one of the very few creatives of our family, so her ideas, behavior, and decisions have always been out of the box, causing stirrings within the familial status quo. This is something that her and I have in common. We also share a free-spirited nature, and a desire to get out of Columbus (both of our hometowns) and see the world.

Growing up in Columbus, I attended a French Immersion school from kindergarden-8th grade. Beginning in kindergarten, we were spoken to in French and taught to read in French before English. Although I did not learn to read in English until roughly the second grade, once I got the hang of reading, I never put books down. These experiences are fundamental to my early conceptualization of the world, and what I believed was possible for my life.

During my most formative years, I attended school with classmates from all over the world. Some were from Guinea, some from Togo, some from Ethiopia. I was taught by instructors who were native French speakers from Belgium, Senegal, Sweden, and France. This early cultural exchange enabled me to have an expansive understanding of the world, and an early knowledge that there is much that exists outside of the United States. Reading, which I did as much as I could, was a way for me to transport to these faraway lands that I had heard of in class. My love for reading helped me cultivate a more intricate imagination than the one I already had.

I attended a college preparatory high school, which placed a high emphasis on academic achievement and performance. At the time the only person I knew who attained a higher education was my older cousin who chose to attend Morehouse College. Although I have always had an appreciation for blackness, my decision to attend Howard University is what enabled me to cultivate a deep understanding of what the African Diaspora is, and what it can be. I studied Political Science, with a concentration in Community Development, and was very active with

campus life. After my junior year at Howard, I decided to study abroad based on the incessant prompting of my French instructor. I could not have imagined that living in Strasbourg, France for a little over four months would be the most groundbreaking experience of my life thus far. This was the first time that I understood the word “minority,” and what it meant in terms of lived experiences. Previously, my entire life was spent in predominantly black spaces. This included the various internships that I held, where I worked under very successful black professionals. In France, seeing a person of color was always an event, and I initially didn’t understand the surge of comradery that I would feel upon seeing someone of African descent. I also could not have foreseen that I would decide to transfer to Syracuse University (SU).

At SU, I studied Political Science, and added both Painting and African American Studies as minors, hoping the latter minor could help me retain a small piece of Howard at this new University. My interests shifted from American and international politics to the politics of blackness, and the political nature of visual art. I graduated Magna Cum Laude with a degree in Political Science, and with a focus on black art and creativity. This shift led to the continuation of my studies at SU, as a candidate for my master’s degree in Pan African Studies. My research is a culmination of this shift and is indicative of me finally investing into my deepest interests and passions.