

Claremont Colleges

Scholarship @ Claremont

CMC Senior Theses

CMC Student Scholarship

2021

Painting While Black: Exploring Racial Identity Through Iconography

Blake Morton

Blake Morton

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses



Part of the [Painting Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Morton, Blake and Morton, Blake, "Painting While Black: Exploring Racial Identity Through Iconography" (2021). *CMC Senior Theses*. 2521.

https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/2521

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you by Scholarship@Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in this collection by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

**PAINTING WHILE BLACK:
EXPLORING RACIAL IDENTITY THROUGH ICONOGRAPHY**

By

BLAKE DEREK MORTON

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR KASPER KOVITZ
PROFESSOR TIA BLASSINGAME**

DECEMBER 4th, 2020

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	2
Introduction	3
Section 1	4
1. Historical Background	4
2. Post-Black Art	5
Section 2	6
1. Glenn Ligon	6
2. Kerry James Marshall	7
3. Kara Walker	8
Section 3	9
1. Production	9
2. Execution	10
3. Reflection	12
4. Bibliography	13

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly I'd like to express immense gratitude for Professor Tia Blassingame and her invaluable support throughout the semester, along with Professor Kasper Kovitz, Professor Nancy Macko, Professor Amy Santoferraro and the faculty of Scripps's Art Department for their encouragement during his time at the Claremont Colleges.

I'm indebted with innumerable amounts of appreciation for my community and family for supporting me unconditionally throughout these last four years at the Claremont Colleges. It's a blessing to have witnessed how far I have come and entertain how far I may go.

Introduction

“Why don’t you make art about race?”

After acknowledging the crass nature of this question its impact remained. Throughout my college experience the violent presence of American anti-Blackness proliferated social media as the “veil” was repeatedly being lifted. Publicized cases surrounding Black victims of police brutality increased in frequency and a subtle push grew in the back of my mind. A push to speak up and make artwork about race and racism. However this push was routinely weakened. A steady whirlwind of complex questions and considerations rendered me too flustered to respond.

The year of 2020 claimed its place as a historically tumultuous period in time. In addition to the advent of the coronavirus (COVID-19), the globe broke into furor in response to injustice. In the United States we witnessed an outcry in the face of the state-sanctioned murders of unarmed Black citizens such as George Floyd, Jacob Blake, Ahmaud Aubrey, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, Daniel Prude and countless others.¹

The force of this push to *just say something* grew but now it was followed by a hurricane of hesitation. This vortex of concerns surrounded the idea of making art about race and racism as a Black artist. A hazy space in my psyche with enough real-estate to invest into a project. An exploration grounded in the works of visionary artists within the contemporary Post-Black era. Artists such as Kara Walker, Kerry James Marshall and Glenn Ligon whose works resonate with the fears, anxieties and intentions that I wrestled with. I engaged with the iconography and historical background of the contemporary Post-Black era. A dive into the historical, philosophical and artistic implications behind making art about race and racism as a Black artists. Ultimately, through the aid of artists from the Post-Black era I created a three-part response to the initial question: “Why don’t you make art about race?”

¹ Julie Tate et al., “Fatal Force: Police Shootings Database,” The Washington Post (WP Company, January 22, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>.

Section 1

Historical Background

The timeline which led to the contemporary Post-Black era directly reflects that of African American history. Before the Post-Black era, African American art was significantly influenced by the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century. In response to the mainstream ideology of the Civil Rights movement a counter-initiative emphasized by its militant and self-determinist rhetoric rose into prominence. This initiative grew to be known as the Black Power Movement.² From the Black Power movement outgrew the Black Arts Movement which was referred to by notable contributor Larry Neal as the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of Black Power.”³ The Black Arts Movement was founded on its call for all creations of African American artists to evoke an unified image of Black cultural nationalism.⁴

The Black Arts Movement heralded images of radical Black male leadership, particularly that of the Black Panthers. The famous optic of men uniformly dressed in black leather jackets and berets, armed in the face of racial oppression. These militant depictions of Black male masculinity served as an emblem of self-determinism, strength and power. However, they were also signifiers of the essentialist regime witnessed by those marginalized *within* the Black community. As the Black Arts Movement sought to define a unified image of (heterosexual) Black male power, women and LGBT members of the Black community were dismissed out of concern that they would create a *weak* image.⁵ An essentialist and confining visual categorization of Black art grew from the Black Arts Movement. A consequence of limiting the potential of Black creativity and expression was the pigeon-holding of Black artists into designations of “Black” art reserved for old visual cliches that didn’t allow room for new ideas and expression.

² Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis. Gates, *Africana: the Encyclopedia of the African American Experience: the Concise Desk Reference* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Running Press, 2003).

³ Larry Neal. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Drama Review: TDR* 12, no. 4 (1968): 28-39. Accessed December 5, 2020. doi:10.2307/1144377.

⁴ Derek Conrad. Murray, “Introduction,” in *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London, United Kingdom: I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 1-34.

⁵ Derek Conrad. Murray, “Introduction,” in *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London, United Kingdom: I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 1-34.

Post-Black Art

“Post-Black art” contends that the previous generations’ conception of political and cultural values failed to evolve past its height within the Civil Rights era. A notable stagnation maintained by essentialist dogma prevented the evolution of new ideas in the realm of African American art.⁶ The term was first used in a 1991 *Artforum* article written by Art Historian Robert Farris Thompson in which he states:

“A retelling of modernism to show how it predicts the triumphs of the current sequences would reveal that “the Other” is your neighbor — that black and Modernist cultures were inseparable long ago. Why use the word, “post-Modern” when it may also mean “post-black”⁷

It is crucial to recognize that Post-Black discourse is not founded upon a naive wish for a post-racial world. On the contrary it identifies a yearning for fresh and expansive ideas surrounding Black identity, experience and expression. The notion of Post-Black art at its core is an affirmation that Blackness itself is not monolithic.⁸

Art historian Thelma Golden played a significant role in the early development of Post-Black art. In 2001, Golden utilized the term to characterize artists who disavowed being labelled as “black” artists, though their work was primarily concerned with redefining archaic conceptions of Blackness.⁹ Golden’s notes on Post-Black sparked heated contention around its meaning and purpose in the art world. The effect of Thelma Golden’s introduction of the term ‘post-black’ resulted in American writer and journalist

⁶ Derek Conrad Murray, “Introduction,” in *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London, United Kingdom: I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 1-34.

⁷ Derek Conrad Murray, “Introduction,” in *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London, United Kingdom: I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 1-34.

⁸ Rashawn Ray, “Black Americans Are Not a Monolithic Group so Stop Treating Us like One | Rashawn Ray,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, February 14, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/14/black-americans-are-not-a-monolithic-group-so-stop-treating-us-like-one>.

⁹ Derek Conrad Murray, “Introduction,” in *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London, United Kingdom: I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 1-34.

Touré publishing *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now* in 2011. Touré's piece consisted of over 105 interviews with African American forerunners of this new era. *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now* served as an influential critique of limiting conceptions for what it means to be Black.

The new Post-Black art movement consists of Black artists responsible for advancing past the stringent vision of leather-clad, militant and hyper-masculinized Black men. The codification of heterosexual Black male masculinity served as what art historian Derek Conrad Murray called a *regime of resistance*.¹⁰ With respect to post-Black artists such as Glenn Ligon, Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker, Mickalene Thomas, Kehinde Wiley and Kalup Linzy to name a few, Murray argues in *Queering Post-Black Art*, the ascent of female, gay and lesbian artists as innovators are crucial to the advancement of contemporary Black art¹¹.

Section 2

Glenn Ligon

One of the most influential luminaries within the Post-Black art movement is celebrated artist Glenn Ligon. Ligon, in addition to Thelma Golden, laid the foundation for the genre of Post-Black art through his work. One of his most notable works "Notes on the Margin of the Black Book" (1991-93) is a discursive reflection over Robert Mapplethorpe's 1988 photographic series *The Black Book*¹². Through this series Ligon curated existing commentary over Mapplethorpe's depiction and objectification, fetishization and eroticization of the Black male body¹³. Similar to his other works, in "Notes on the Margin of the Black Book" Ligon employs text as a device of juxtaposition for social commentary.

¹⁰ Derek Conrad Murray, "Introduction," in *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London, United Kingdom: I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 1-34.

¹¹ Derek Conrad Murray, "Introduction," in *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London, United Kingdom: I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 1-34.

¹² Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, *Africana: the Encyclopedia of the African American Experience: the Concise Desk Reference* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Running Press, 2003).

¹³ Rachel Wetzler, "The Limits of Text and Image: Glenn Ligon at the Whitney," *Hyperallergic*, May 11, 2011, <https://hyperallergic.com/23800/glenn-ligon-whitney/>.

Though identity is a significant factor in Ligon's work, particularly race, gender and sexuality. Ligon refuses to call on the elements of identity as one-dimensional frameworks of art-making. Identity is not irrelevant in Ligon's work, though it subverts the all-too-familiar case in which an artist's identity subsumes the overall integration and reception of their work. An example of this being his extensive "Door" (1991) series in which he appropriated found text from the likes of Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Genet, Ice Cube and Jesse Jackson are stenciled in thick opaque lines of black ink against white wooden doors. As the text continues down the door it increasingly becomes illegible. The paintings were placed together in a gallery with audio-recordings of a slave narrative, Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," Bob Marley's "Redemption Song," and KRS-ONE's "Sound of Da Police"¹⁴.

Kerry James Marshall

A long-standing figure in the Post-Black art era is Kerry James Marshall, a successful painter who dedicated his life's work to visual narratives concerning Black visual identity and the Black American experience. Two major principles of Marshall's work are the necessity for Blackness in addition to the mundane and everyday lived experience of Black people to be represented in the Western canon of painting. Marshall's work is recognized for its depiction of Black Americans in rich, deep black pigment. Marshall attributes this practice to his belief in pushing past "rhetorical blackness."¹⁵ Marshall describes this rhetorical blackness as a disingenuous way in which Black people are referred to: "that they are so dark you couldn't see them at night unless they were smiling."¹⁶ In Kerry James Marshall's paintings one can depend on seeing depictions of Black subjects engaged in leisure, romance, portraiture, family life and other everyday phenomenon. Marshall utilizes this subject matter to engage with the

¹⁴ Rachel Wetzler, "The Limits of Text and Image: Glenn Ligon at the Whitney," *Hyperallergic*, May 11, 2011, <https://hyperallergic.com/23800/glenn-ligon-whitney/>.

¹⁵ Gabriel Coxhead, "An Interview with Kerry James Marshall," *Apollo Magazine* (Apollo Magazine, December 3, 2019), <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/kerry-james-marshall-interview/>.

¹⁶ Alastair Sooke, "Kerry James Marshall: Challenging Racism in Art History," *BBC Culture* (BBC, October 28, 2014), <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20141023-i-show-black-is-beautiful>.

politics of representation. In an interview with Apollo Magazine in March 2019, Marshall states his vested interest in depicting Black subjects as “self possessed” as to avoid “signifying difference or otherness.”¹⁷

Kara Walker

A force of the Post-Black art era with a body of work that often uproars controversy is Kara Walker. Walker is widely celebrated and also criticized for her explicit silhouette works scenes of often violent fictitious depictions of life as a slave in the Antebellum South. Walker works with the traditional Victorian medium of silhouette affixed in a panoramic orientation directly onto the walls of the gallery. Walker’s silhouettes create complex scenes reminiscent of a twisted folk tale told about life on the plantation. Through her work we come across explicit storytelling around sexuality, gender, race and violence--significant themes in the history of the United States.

Walker’s work witnessed criticism for its subject from audience members alongside other notable Black artists. Betye Saar’s criticized Walkers work on NPR Radio in 2008 stating:

“I felt the work of Kara Walker was sort of revolting and negative and a form of betrayal to the slaves, particularly women and children, and that it was basically for the amusement and the investment of the white art establishment.”¹⁸

Since then Walker has made declarations that she is not interested in being heralded as a role model for her work. In her artists statement for 2017 exhibition with Sikkema Jenkins & Co Walker exclaimed:

“I am tired, tired of standing up, being counted, tired of ‘having a voice,’ or worse, ‘being a role model,’ Tired, true, of being a featured member of my racial group and/or my gender niche.”

In an 2001 interview in *Art Journal* Ligon expounded on his usage of text and stated:

¹⁷ Gabriel Coxhead, “An Interview with Kerry James Marshall,” Apollo Magazine (Apollo Magazine, December 3, 2019), <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/kerry-james-marshall-interview/>.

¹⁸ Howardena Pindell, “Introduction: Kara Walker-No/Yes/?,” Howardena Pindell, 2009, <https://pindell.mcachicago.org/the-howardena-pindell-papers/introduction-kara-walker-no-yes/>.

“Cultural translation, like any other translation, is always involved with loss, the untranslatable, excess meanings the indecipherable. Given the cultural context the literature and photos I am using comes out of, the demands of those texts and images, I am interested in when they fail to communicate, the space is opened up by not communicating.”

Section 3

Production

My process for this project was primarily meditative. I conducted sessions of pacing back and forth and writing down ideas and images that came to mind. In addition to these active meditations I also implemented a traditional technique of meditation in which I prompted myself with the initial question of “Why don’t you make art about race?” Afterward I would allow myself to go in a state of trance and take note of whatever came to me. This meditative practice was sufficient in getting started with a direction of where to go. Along embarking in transcendental meditation, I also would scroll through my camera roll with intention of working with found imagery in my creative process.

A significant factor in the production process of research and experimentation was dedicated to literature. In addition to reading Derek Conrad Murray’s *Queering Post-Black Art*, I also worked with Darby English’s *To Describe a Life*, an account of artworks created by Black artists in response to the current uptick in police brutality in the United States. An accompanying work of literature for this project was Cathy Park Hong’s *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. Hong’s essay-memoir was supplemental reading for this project concerned with the intersections of being a working artist of color within the context of the United States. All three of these works provided me with the courage to continue on this journey of exploring the depths of myself and this nation within the context of its history with Black artists.

Execution

The three works of art created in this thesis project truthfully created themselves. I didn't intend to respond to the initial question of "Why don't you make art about race?" with a three-part answer. The first of which was fear. This was an immediate realization after meditating over the question. I was fearful of the potential consequences I could face as a Black artist making work about race and racism. I thought about Ben Vereen, an actor, dancer and singer who attempted to utilize his art to criticize the racist and anti-Black realm of the United States at Ronald Reagan's inauguration. A gutsy move to adorn oneself Blackface in front of the President of the free world, which was followed by the program being cut and viewers barred from seeing his performance. According to artist Edgar Arceneux, who created a play in light of Vereen's exile after his stint, the multitalented renaissance man was committed to a theatrical show of satire purposed to shed light on the racist antics upheld in the great USA.¹⁹

Fear was ever-present in my consideration for not creating art about race. Not only did I fear being punished for speaking my truth, I also feared being pigeon-held. I thought about the entire premise of the Post-Black movement being born out of a yearning to escape the confines of being relegated as "Black" artists. A Black artist— whose sole function is to share their vulnerable experiences —and be commodified and diluted for superficial consumption. A Black artist whose work would only be valuable when institutions needed to satisfy a diversity quota, a Black History Month initiative or to conduct damage control after being "cancelled."

Kerry James Marshall's notion of "rhetorical blackness" and Kara Walker's prolific usage of silhouettes served as visual inspiration for the first piece of this project. I set out to create a depiction of myself as the Black figure confronting the giant owl from Bill Viola's 1998 installation "A Sleepless Reason." The owl later became an image that was critiqued for being irrelevant to the subject matter of the piece. After reflecting on this critique and expounding on the purpose of the owl, being a stand-in for

¹⁹ Caroline Goldstein, "I Was Brought to Tears!: Watch Artist Edgar Arceneaux Reinterpret a Tragically Misunderstood 1980s Performance," *artnet News* (artnet News, July 9, 2020), <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/edgar-arceneaux-art21-1893296>.

institutionalized whiteness, I received evaluative feedback that recognized its purpose along with its obscure position in the overall project. I let the owl remain.

The second response arrived to me as I experienced an anxious whirlwind of questions holding me hostage throughout this project. Questions such as “Do I have anything significant to contribute to the global conversation of race?” I was experiencing a cacophony of self-imposed and debilitating questions that ultimately hinder my growth. I decided to paint myself in my studio at my work station. My figure was positioned with frustrated body language in front of an empty desk to symbolize the experience of a creative blockage. To further express the inability to create as a symptom of this state of over-thinking, I held a blow touch to the canvas and singed off my face. Afterwards I decided to write a poem. Rather than worrying about what to say or how to say I decided to listen to how I *felt*. I digitally collaged three lines from this poem onto the 2d painting. This was in reference to Greg Ligon usage of text as a means of juxtaposition. In this piece I created a tension between the mind and the heart.

After unlocking the first two levels of fear and anxiety, I arrived at the final stage of the game: the boss. Now that I discovered why I didn't create art about race, this final piece was the opportunity to create a painting in reflection over race itself. I thought about the psychological meaning of race and racial identity. Then I pondered over identity itself. Identity is the ego and the ego is one's amalgamation of their total life experiences. If our identity/ego is the lens through which we navigate the world around us, then what perceive of reality is merely a reflection of our identity/ego. I thought about experiences in which I would perceive something in my reality as an African American individual and notice my racial identity being reflected back through my perception. An example being the sight of a Black person hanging off of the pull up bars in the student gym invoking this visual schema of lynching my head.

I arrived lynching as the subject for this piece about racial identity though I didn't know how to approach this. How could I make a piece about lynching without being tasteless. I thought of Kara Walker's work and the immense amount of criticism she's received for her work. Yet she still continues creating a prolific body of work. Her work is beyond offensive but her work has an intention. Her work has an intention to offend and trigger, to recognize a hidden and scary truth in the fiction of her

silhouettes. In the spirit of Kara Walker's work I set the intention to utilize in lynching in my piece as respectfully as possible. That intention brought me to The Hanged Man tarot card, a symbol of a man purposefully hanging from his legs off of a tree limb. The man is hanging with the intention of allowing gravity to perform this metaphysical act of drawing the fears and anxieties out of him. It is a similar concept to lying upside down off of one's bed when they get hiccups. I found The Hanged Man tarot card to be the perfect reference for an explicit icon of releasing fears and anxieties and an implicit image of reverence for the racial trauma of being African American.

Reflection

After the final presentation I had to set time aside to reflect on how to ameliorate discussing my art when it is concerned with deep and personal subject matter. I came to a place where I accepted that though this will be difficult to continue a strategy to alleviate the process would be playing with the idea of subjectivity and objectivity. To create a body that is directly tied to a subjective experience while being visually represented with other people or objective phenomena

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Appiah, Anthony, and Henry Louis. Gates. *Africana: the Encyclopedia of the African American Experience: the Concise Desk Reference*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Running Press, 2003.

Coxhead, Gabriel. "An Interview with Kerry James Marshall." *Apollo Magazine*. *Apollo Magazine*, December 3, 2019. <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/kerry-james-marshall-interview/>.

Goldstein, Caroline. "‘I Was Brought to Tears’: Watch Artist Edgar Arceneaux Reinterpret a Tragically Misunderstood 1980s Performance." *artnet News*. *artnet News*, July 9, 2020. <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/edgar-arceneaux-art21-1893296>.

Gopnik, Blake. "Kara Walker, 'Tired of Standing Up,' Promises Art, Not Answers." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, August 16, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/16/arts/design/kara-walker-race-art-charlottesville.html>.

Murray, Derek Conrad. "Introduction." *Essay*. In *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights*, 1–34. London, United Kingdom: I.B. Tauris, 2016.

Pindell, Howardena. "Introduction: Kara Walker-No/Yes/?" Howardena Pindell, 2009. <https://pindell.mcachicago.org/the-howardena-pindell-papers/introduction-kara-walker-no-yes/>.

Ray, Rashawn. "Black Americans Are Not a Monolithic Group so Stop Treating Us like One | Rashawn Ray." *The Guardian*. *Guardian News and Media*, February 14, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/14/black-americans-are-not-a-monolithic-group-so-stop-treating-us-like-one>.

Sooke, Alastair. "Kerry James Marshall: Challenging Racism in Art History." BBC Culture. BBC, October 28, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20141023-i-show-black-is-beautiful>.

Tate, Julie, Jennifer Jenkins, Steven Rich, John Muyskens, Kennedy Elliot, Ted Mellnik, and Aaron Williams. "Fatal Force: Police Shootings Database." The Washington Post. WP Company, January 22, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>.

Wetzler, Rachel. "The Limits of Text and Image: Glenn Ligon at the Whitney." Hyperallergic, May 11, 2011. <https://hyperallergic.com/23800/glenn-ligon-whitney/>.