African American Artists and the Museum

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Contents

3 William Henry Johnson, *Children* (1941)
by Elizabeth S. Hawley

8 Horace Pippin's *Abe Lincoln, The Great Emancipator* (1942)
by Sasha Nicholas

13 *Dirty Gertie from Harlem U.S.A.* (1946)
by Yasmine Espert

17 Roy DeCarava, *Sun and Shade* (1952)
by Juanita Solano

20 Elizabeth Catlett, *Mother and Child* (1956)
by Perrin Lathrop

26 Joseph E. Yoakum, *Grizzly Gulch Valley Ohansburg Vermont* (n.d.)
by Kimia Shahi

32 Benjamin Patterson, *Puzzle-Poems* (1962)
by Antonia Pocock

41 Alma Thomas, *Untitled* (c.1968) *and Fiery Sunset* (1973)
by Natalie Dupêcher

45 Betye Saar, *Black Girl's Window* (1969)
by Abbe Schriber

50 Sam Gilliam, *10/27/69* (1969)
by Jessica Bell Brown

54 *On the Verge*
by Ashley James

58 John Outterbridge, *Broken Dance, Ethnic Heritage Series* (c. 1978–82)
by Nomaduma Masilela

61 New Orleans Video Access Center, Andy Kolker, Louis Alvarez, *The Clarks* (1978)
by Desiree Mitton

64 Howardena Pindell, *Free, White and 21* (1980)
by Maya Harakawa

68 David Hammons, *Untitled (Night Train)* (1989)
by Jenny Tang

71 Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras*, Flag Wars* (2003)
by Linda Green

74 Julie Mehretu, *Empirical Construction, Istanbul* (2003)
by Claire Schwartz

78 Glenn Ligon, *The Death of Tom* (2008)
by Swagato Chakravorty

84 Titus Kaphar, *The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) V, XV, and XVI* (2014–15)
by Debra Lennard

90 Kara Walker, *40 Acres of Mules* (2015)
by Caitlin Beach

William Henry Johnson, *Children* (1941)

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Produced in 1941, *Children* (pl. 1) dates to the period between 1938 and 1944, when William H. Johnson was associated with the Harlem Renaissance, then called the New Negro Movement.[1] Unusually for an artist of this movement, Johnson had spent most of his career in Europe. After training at the National Academy of Design in New York, he left for Paris in 1926 and spent the next twelve years in France, Denmark, and Norway. During this sojourn abroad, he absorbed the perspectival experimentation of Paul *Cézanne* and the Cubists, the figural distortions of Chaim Soutine, and the primitivizing tendencies of Paul Gauguin and the German Expressionists. He also met and married Holcha Krake, a Danish ceramist and textile artist whose knowledge of European folk art and design undoubtedly provided an additional influence.

Fig. 1.1 William H. Johnson. *Harbor, Lofoten, Norway.* c. 1937. Oil on burlap, 27 ¼ × 35 ¼" (69.2 × 89.5 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum

In these years, Johnson frequently declared himself a "primitive" artist whose blackness made him a more suitable painter of "brown skin coloring" than were white European artists.[2] However, aside from a brief visit to his hometown in South Carolina in 1929 and a three-month stay in Tunisia in 1931, Johnson had rarely worked with black models; for the most part, he produced expressionist Scandinavian landscapes (fig. 1.1). In "The Negro Artist and Modern Art," Romare Bearden complained that black artists were "not taking advantage of the Negro scene. . . . Instead the Negro artist will proudly exhibit his 'Scandinavian Landscape,' a locale that is entirely alien to him."[3] Though he does not mention Johnson by name, this is likely a swipe at the expat. Yet at this point in his career, Johnson had more experience with Scandinavian scenery than he did with "the Negro scene."

This changed in 1938. With World War II on the horizon, Johnson and Krake moved to New York, where Johnson started teaching at the Harlem Community Art Center, coming into contact with the artists of the New Negro Movement. In New York, his expressionist brushwork began to flatten out, and he turned to African-American subjects. Asked to explain this shift, Johnson replied: "It was not a change but a development. In all my years painting, I have had one absorbing and inspiring idea, and have worked towards it with unyielding zeal: to give – in simple and stark form – the story of the Negro as he has existed."[4] His French and Scandinavian works, which show little evidence of this claim, complicate his assertion. Struggling to earn a living from his paintings in New York, Johnson saw that black artists who thematized African-American culture were achieving a measure of critical and financial success.[5] As Richard J. Powell argues, "He realized that, in order to truthfully call himself 'a modern primitive,' he would have to interact with and artistically embrace his own African-American 'folk.'"[6] The pressure that he felt to do so relates to the "burden of representation" identified by Kobena Mercer in his description of marginalized artists "burdened with the impossible task of speaking as 'representatives,' in that they are widely expected to 'speak for' the marginalized communities from which they come."[7]

Johnson's works from this period often portray dynamic scenes of music and dancing, as in his Jitterbugs series of screenprints (c. 1941) (figs. 1.2-1.3). *Children* is calmer, offering an alternative characterization of African-American life. A slightly different version of *Children* was also produced as a screenprint, copies of which are found in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which titles the work *Three Friends (Three Girls)* and dates it to c. 1944–45 (fig. 1.4), and in the former collection of Mary Beattie Brady, where it is titled *Three Children* and dated c. 1940.[8] Although it is not known whether *Children* was produced before or after

Pl. 1 William H. Johnson (American, 1901–1970). *Children*. 1941. Oil and pencil on wood panel, 17 ½ × 12 ½" (44.5 × 31.8 cm). Purchase. 6.2016

Fig. 1.2 William H. Johnson. *Jitterbugs II.* c. 1941. Screenprint and pochoir with hand additions, 17 × 13 ¾" (43.2 × 34.9 cm). 284.2014

Fig. 1.3 William H. Johnson. *Jitterbugs V.* c. 1941. Screenprint and pochoir with hand additions, 17 × 13 ¾" (43.2 x 34.9 cm). 285.2014

the print version, the painting certainly has the flat quality of a screenprint, which makes one wonder if Johnson initially formed this composition with printmaking in mind.

In both the painting and the prints, three girls reside in a blank, nondescript space. Unnamed and flattened into cartoonish regularity, the figures reveal little of their subjects' identities, although the girl on the left appears to be the youngest, as indicated by her barrette-clasped pigtail. Their clothing, however, marks them as belonging to the urban middle class.[9] The carefully buttoned tops, smart collars, and decorative headwear characterize their costumes as "Sunday best" of the type worn by men and women of all ages as they promenaded along Seventh Avenue in Harlem, an area that became known as "The Great Black Way."[10] Photographs from the era show young women in peter-pan collars wearing the cloche, fedora, and beret-style hats depicted in *Children*. While studio photographers such as James Van Der Zee produced mainly black-and-white images, written descriptions of the fashion of the period emphasize the importance of color.[11] The jewel tones of the girls' costumes are in keeping with these accounts.

Fig. 1.4 William H. Johnson. *Three Friends (Three Girls).* c. 1944–45. Color screenprint, 15 ½ × 11 ⁹⁄₁₆" (39.4 × 29.4 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art

In *Children,* color is key not only in the young women's clothing, but also in their varying skin tones—the differences thrown into relief by their overlapping faces. Skin color was an oft-referenced, highly charged topic in the New Negro Movement in all areas of the arts.[12] Johnson himself was particularly attuned to the tensions of tone, having been born to a dark-skinned black woman who was likely also of Sioux Indian ancestry, and either her lighter-skinned husband, or—as the neighbors were wont to whisper—a white man. Richard J. Powell argues that "growing up with the mark of the white race across his face profoundly affected Willie," and he says of Johnson's classmates at the National Academy of Design: "They. . . sensed that he was uncomfortable whenever questions arose concerning his racial background. And given the free license that, historically, many whites felt they had in relationship to blacks, one can assume that Johnson was frequently asked about his race, and probably without a lot of tact or sensitivity."[13]

These experiences perhaps explain the tension evident in *Children.* The girls stand uncomfortably close together, lips slightly pursed or, in the case of the girl on the right, grinning nervously. Their stares coalesce in a tripled sidelong glance, evoking a sense that they are aware of being observed, categorized, and perhaps racialized.[14] This look is related to W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of the "double-consciousness" of African-Americans, the psychological challenge of "always looking at oneself through the eyes of others," as well as attempting to reconcile an African heritage with an upbringing in a European-dominated society.[15] Johnson wrestled with the implications of this dialectical identity throughout his career, prematurely curtailed though it was. Six years after completing *Children,* he was institutionalized, having succumbed to the effects of paresis. His works languished in a storage facility for almost a decade and were nearly destroyed before the Harmon Foundation stepped in, salvaging what it could.[16] *Children* was spared this neglect, as it had been purchased by actor-turned-Civil-Rights-activist Paul Robeson in the 1940s and remained safe in private hands until it was acquired by MoMA in 2016.[17]

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NOTES

1. When MoMA acquired this work in 2016, it was titled *Three Girls*. However, an inscription on the panel's verso in Johnson's hand indicates that the original title of the piece was *Children*. MoMA curators have elected to restore the original title.

2. In a 1931 interview with a Danish reporter, Johnson declared: "In reality, colored folk are so different from the white race. Europe is so very superficial. Modern European art strives to be primitive, but it is too complicated. . . . All of the darker races are far more primitive." In another interview, he argued: "Gauguin painted Negro portraits, but only with brown [pigments]. I, with my primitive nature, think that only I am in a position to perfectly describe the light effects on brown skin coloring, something that white people, as it is, can see, but cannot effectively translate." Bodil Bech, "En 'Indian-Negro' Maler i Kerteminde," *Tidens Kvinder* 9 (November 10, 1931): 10; Thomasius, "Chinos Maleren i Kerteminde," *FynsStiftstidende* (July 9, 1930), 3. Excerpts translated in Richard J. Powell, *Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1991), 69.

3. Romare Bearden, "The Negro Artist and Modern Art," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* 12 (December 1934): 371–72.

4. Nora Holt, "Primitives on Exhibit," *New York Amsterdam News* (March 9, 1946): 16.

5. Johnson had recognized the bias for African-American artists producing art with African-American themes years earlier, when he was living abroad and encouraging the Harmon Foundation to sell his work in the U.S. In a letter to the director of the Foundation, he noted: "I see from your catalogue [that] so many of your Negro painter[s] have paintings in American Museums, colleges, etc. Why not... sell my paintings as well? Perhaps I am not [a] local enough Negro painter?" In a subsequent letter, Johnson suggests that the Foundation lacked interest in his work "because it is not negroid enough—colored." See William H. Johnson, letter to Mary Beattie Brady, September 24, 1937, Harmon Foundation Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; William H. Johnson, letter to Mary Beattie Brady, February 25, 1938, Harmon Foundation Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

6. Powell, 123.

7. Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 235. While Mercer approaches this issue from the context of contemporary art and criticizes the "prescriptive demand" for representation as particularly problematic for "black art practices that are nonrepresentational, such as abstraction in painting and sculpture," his study is nonetheless pertinent to the pressure felt by artists like Johnson, whose earlier, more obviously European-inflected style, though representational, was criticized for not representing African-American culture. Mercer, 248.

8. Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, "Outside the Door," in *Represent: 200 Years of African American Art in the Philadelphia Museum of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 65-66; *William H. Johnson: Works from the Collection of Mary Beattie Brady, Director of the Harmon Foundation* (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 1995), 31.

9. Focusing on respectable, well-dressed, middle-class black figures was a common strategy for artists and writers of the New Negro Movement, who were invested in countering the enduring, psychologically damaging racist stereotypes that had long circulated in the U.S.

10. Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900–1950* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), 319–323.

11. Aberjhani and Sandra L. West. *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2003), 105–106. New Negro writer Effie Lee Newsome, in a children's poem published in 1940, celebrates Harlem children's "cheery dresses, suits and shoes / And those gay-colored hats you choose." Effie Lee Newsome, *Gladiola Garden: Poems of Outdoors and Indoors for Second Grade Readers* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1940), xv.

12. Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1929) explores the life and tragic end of a light-skinned black woman who passes as white. Thurman Wallace's novel *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) follows the life of a dark-skinned black woman who experiences discrimination by lighter-skinned African Americans. In "Young Woman's Blues" (1926), singer Bessie Smith belts, "I ain't no high yellow / I'm a deep killer brown" in celebratory allusion to her own dark skin. In his poem "Harlem Sweeties" (1942), Langston Hughes characterizes the spectrum of Harlem women's skin tones as "Rich cream-colored, / to plum-tinted black"—in other words, light to dark, with the full range appealing to Hughes. Johnson met Hughes in 1930 and gave him a painting in appreciation for the poet's work. Hughes reciprocated by sending Johnson a copy of his most recently published book, *Fine Clothes to the Jew.* Powell, 52; William H. Johnson, letter to Alain Locke, August 28, 1930, Alain Leroy Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

13. See Adelyn Breeskin, "William H. Johnson," in *William H. Johnson, 1901–1970* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971), 11; Powell, 5, 20.

14. The "sidelong glance" is often mentioned in discussions of the work of Kara Walker, a contemporary African-American artist who grapples with representations of blackness. See Jerry Saltz, "Kara Walker: Ill-Will and Desire," *Flash Art* 191 (November–December 1996), 82; Shawan M. Worsley, "Unholy Narratives and Shameless Acts: Kara Walker's Sidelong Glance," in *Audience, Agency and Identity in Black Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 41; Krista Thompson, "A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States," *Art Journal* (Fall 2011), 26.

15. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

16. Powell, "William H. Johnson and the Harmon Foundation," in *Against the Odds: African-American Artists and the Harmon Foundation,* eds. Gary A Reynolds and Beryl J. Wright (Newark: The Newark Museum, 1989), 89–97.

17. Alonzo J. Aden, director of the Barnett Aden Gallery, bought *Children* directly from Johnson in December 1944. Robeson likely purchased *Children* from the Barnett Aden Gallery soon thereafter. See Alonzo J. Aden, letter to William H. Johnson, December 11, 1944, William H. Johnson Papers, 1922–1971, bulk 1926–1956. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Powell, 189.

Horace Pippin's *Abe Lincoln, The Great Emancipator* (1942)

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Horace Pippin painted *Abe Lincoln, The Great Emancipator* (pl. 2), in 1942, at the height of his fame. Four years earlier, the then-unknown painter from West Chester, Pennsylvania, was included in the Museum of Modern Art's *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America*, an exhibition of works by self-taught artists who shared an "innocence and intensity of vision," according to the show's curator, Holger Cahill.[1] The exhibition won Pippin national acclaim and led to acquisitions of his work by museums and prominent collectors, making him one of the first African-American artists to receive widespread public attention.[2] By the time of his death in 1946, his art had appeared in exhibitions across the United States and in popular magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life*.

The artist's biography made his career all the more remarkable and his work all the more attractive to its admirers. Pippin began making drawings while serving in the first African-American infantry unit to fight in World War I. By the early 1930s, he had shifted to oil, using his left hand to prop up his right arm, which had been partially paralyzed in the war. During the uncertain years of the Great Depression and World War II, his heroic life story and homespun images appealed to popular appetites for folk traditions and reassuring themes of triumph over adversity. As Pippin rose to fame, white audiences frequently situated his art within stereotypes that associated the work of an African-American artist—especially one without professional training—with primitive authenticity. Lauding the "basic African quality" of Pippin's paintings, early critics characterized them as the work of a "crude, simple soul" ignorant of larger social and political concerns.[3]

In the early 1940s, however, Pippin made a foray into nineteenth-century American history that challenged such conceptions of his art. In two series of paintings, he depicted episodes from the lives of John Brown and Abraham Lincoln, figures who ranked among slavery's foremost opponents. While his John Brown cycle recounts the grim drama of the abolitionist's trial and death, his Lincoln series focuses on the president's moral character. Three of the four paintings in the Lincoln series portray scenes from the sixteenth president's childhood, emphasizing their subject's distinctive fusion of humility and fortitude—traits with which

Fig. 2.1 Alexander Gardner (American, 1821–1882). *The President (Abraham Lincoln) and General McClellan on the Battlefield of Antietam.* 1862. Gelatin silver print, printed later. 19 ½ × 15 ¾" (49.5 × 40.0 cm). Gift of Carl Sandburg and Edward Steichen. 550.1967

Pippin perhaps identified.[4] They also tapped into a broader fascination with Lincoln as a folk hero and wellspring of American values, which reached a fever pitch after the 1939 release of the Hollywood biopic *Young Mr. Lincoln* and publication of the second volume of Carl Sandburg's landmark Lincoln biography.[5] Public veneration of Lincoln only intensified in 1940, as the United States commemorated the seventy-fifth anniversary of his assassination and the end of the Civil War. When the nation entered World War II the following year, the mass media frequently portrayed President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as Lincoln's ideological successor, battling now for freedom on an international stage.[6]

Abe Lincoln, The Great Emancipator, the only work in Pippin's Lincoln series that focuses on a scene from the Civil War, points to these momentous events. In the painting, the artist depicts Lincoln's pardoning of a Union Army

Pl. 2 Horace Pippin (American, 1888–1946). *Abe Lincoln, The Great Emancipator*. 1942. Oil on canvas, 24 × 30" (60.9 × 76.2 cm). Gift of Helen Hooker Roelof. 142.1977

officer condemned to death for falling asleep at evening watch, testifying to the president's compassion and instinct for justice. Though Lincoln's pardon was likely announced by proclamation, popular histories often had him deliver the news personally to the young man.[7] Pippin followed this latter version, condensing the narrative into a dramatic nocturnal scene at a Union Army camp.[8] Rendered in the artist's characteristic muted palette and thickly brushed forms, the scene takes place under a billowing white tent that recalls Alexander Gardner's famous battlefield photographs of Lincoln (fig. 2.1) and creates a stark backdrop.[9] Illuminated by lamplight, the president stands over the soldier, gently placing his hand on the back of the white-shirted young man, who humbly kneels. They are flanked on the left by General Ulysses S. Grant and on the right by two rigid, nearly identical infantrymen.

Fig. 2.2 Thomas Ball (American, 1819–1911). *Emancipation Memorial.* 1876. Bronze. Lincoln Park, Washington, DC

The discrepancy between the titular reference to Lincoln as "emancipator" and the painting's apparent lack of allusion to slavery is striking.[10] Some have contended that Pippin—inspired by Christian values and an Emersonian desire to exalt the ordinary, or, more cynically, driven by the desire to please his newfound white audiences—depicted a "folkloric and generic national hero" rather than a "race-specific, abolitionist image."[11] And yet the composition may not be without racial implications. The scene is structured around symmetrical pairings and figural dyads: the two halves of the bisected tent, the infantrymen, Lincoln and Grant, the shadows cast by the two eminent men, and the pair of trunks on one side and the map and crate on the other. The kneeling sentry is the only element without an obvious visual counterpart, but perhaps Pippin had one in mind. Portraits of Lincoln with a kneeling freed slave were common in the nineteenth century, notable among them, the sculpture in Washington D.C.'s Emancipation Memorial (1876) (fig. 2.2).[12] In 1916 Freeman Henry Morris Murray, an African-American

Fig. 2.3 Horace Pippin. *Mr. Prejudice.* 1943. Oil on canvas, 18 ⅛ × 14 ⅛" (46 × 35.9 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Matthew T. Moore, 1984-108-1

critic, lambasted the paternalism of such iconography: "If [the kneeling slave] should speak," Murray wrote, "he would probably murmur, dubiously and querulously, 'O Mr. Lincoln! am I?'"[13]

The Great Emancipator calls this popular visual formula to mind and simultaneously elides it. The pose of the kneeling sentry ensures that the specter of the "supplicant slave" haunts the composition, yet by declining to place a subservient, eternally obligated black figure before a normative white gaze, Pippin subtly rejects a vision of Emancipation as coming solely at the discretion of a "master." The supplicant is set apart instead by his glaring whiteness. While the painting satisfied public demand for a generic, elevating nationalism, it also frustrated prevailing discourses surrounding race and American moral integrity by emphasizing white expiation rather than black gratitude. The year after completing *The Great Emancipator*, Pippin again invoked a fraught dialectic between the nation's democratic ideals and social realities in *Mr. Prejudice*, his most overtly polemical canvas (fig. 2.3). In the painting, Pippin, using an array of symbolic figures, including a brown-skinned Statue of Liberty, assailed the hypocrisy of racial discrimination amidst an international war for freedom.[14] Capitalizing on a similar, albeit more subtle inversion, *Abe Lincoln, The Great*

Emancipator captures Pippin's complex negotiation of the power dynamics that shaped both his art and America at large, thus refuting assertions of the artist's guilelessness and lack of political engagement.

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NOTES

1. Holger Cahill, "Artists of the People," in *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 100. Featuring 170 works by twenty-two artists, the exhibition was divided into European and American sections and traveled to five cities across the United States. The exhibition presented paintings by well-known artists such as Henri Rousseau and Edward Hicks, alongside those by virtually unknown figures like Pippin, who was represented by four works.

2. Pippin was represented mainly by two galleries during these years: Carlen Galleries in Philadelphia and Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery in New York, where his paintings were showcased alongside works by seminal American modernists including Jacob Lawrence, Charles Sheeler, and Ben Shahn.

3. N.C. Wyeth and art critic Dorothy Grafly, quoted in Judith E. Stein, "An American Original," in *I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin* (New York: Universe in association with the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1994), 11. While contemporary assessments eschew such racist condescension, some still equate Pippin's aesthetic simplicity with candor and ingenuousness, as if his work reflects an emotional world unmediated by social and political concerns. David C. Driskell, for example, writes that Pippin "remained at ease with the black experience at a time when many of his fellow artists were struggling to throw off the yoke of bondage evident in their art while at the same time attempting to make that art acceptable in style and form to an unyielding Euro-modernism art theory." "Introduction," in ibid., xii. Pippin's own statements (particularly his oft-repeated remark, "Pictures just come to my mind and I tell my heart to go ahead") are often mobilized to reinforce the idea of his art's authenticity and transparency.

4. Along with *Abe Lincoln, The Great Emancipator*, the paintings in Pippin's Lincoln series are *Abraham Lincoln and His Father Building Their Cabin on Pigeon Creek*, 1934; *Abe Lincoln, The Good Samaritan*, 1943; and *Abe Lincoln's First Book*, 1944.

5. Evidence regarding Pippin's source material for his Lincoln paintings is scant. Anne Monahan has argued persuasively that the John Brown series shows the influence of a range of visual and literary sources, and the same may be true for the Lincoln series. As a basis for the Lincoln series, Monahan proposes Wayne Whipple's book *The Story of Young Abraham Lincoln*, which appeared in its second edition in 1918. Monahan, "Witness: History, Memory, and Authenticity in the Art of Horace Pippin," in *Horace Pippin: The Way I See It*, ed. Audrey Lewis (Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania: Brandywine River Museum of Art in association with Scala Arts Publishers, Inc., 2015), 40–42. Richard J. Powell associates Pippin's Lincoln images with historical expositions organized by African-American community groups to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Thirteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution in 1940. Powell, "Recreating American History," in *I Tell My Heart*, 71. During these years, John Brown and Abraham Lincoln were also depicted by midwestern Regionalist painters such as Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry and by modernists such as Marsden Hartley and William H. Johnson.

6. Randall R. Griffey, "Marsden Hartley's Lincoln Portraits," *American Art* (Summer 2001), 40.

7. Steve Conn traces an array of cultural and literary accounts of the sleeping sentry story during the interwar years, notably its appearance in the second volume of Sandburg's Lincoln biography (1939). Conn, "The Politics of Painting: Horace Pippin the Historian," *American Studies* (Spring 1997): 12–14. See also "The Vermont Sleeping Sentinel: A Strange Civil War Legacy," New England Historical Society, accessed April 27, 2016. http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/vermont-sleeping-sentinel-unusual-civil-war-legacy/

8. By portraying the events in a nighttime setting, Pippin hints that they are to be read as occurring immediately after the discovery of the soldier's crime.

9. Gardner's photographs of Lincoln standing in front of army tents were reproduced in Carl Sandburg's 1939 Lincoln biography. Conn, "The Politics of Painting," 12–13.

10. It is unclear whether the work's title was chosen by the artist or assigned by one of his dealers, who sometimes adjusted his titles. Monahan, "Witness: History, Memory, and Authenticity," 42n23.

11. Powell, "Recreating American History," 74–78. Powell argues that Pippin's characterization of Lincoln reflected the artist's desire to "indulge his overwhelmingly white, affluent, and racially tolerant clientele." Monahan positions the Lincoln series as a universal morality lesson, calling it "a kind of civic 'lives of the saints.'" "Witness: History, Memory, and Authenticity," 42. Connecting Pippin's art to Emersonian values, Cornel West argues that "Pippin's link to Abraham Lincoln is not so much to the president as emancipator of black people nor the president as hypocrite (e.g. supporter of black colonization and exportation to Central America), but rather to Lincoln as the folk hero who is believed to have said that God must have loved common folk because he made so many of them." West, "Horace Pippin's Challenge to Art Criticism," in *I Tell My Heart*, 45–46.

12. Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 172–174. 8-9. The Emancipation Memorial, created by artist Thomas Ball, shows Lincoln giving the benediction of freedom to a kneeling black man. Frederick Douglass presided over its dedication in 1876, with President Ulysses S. Grant in attendance. The memorial was created with funds supplied by freed slaves and African-American Civil War veterans, but these donors apparently were given no say in the design.

13. Murray, quoted in Boime, *The Art of Exclusion*, 153.

14. *The Great Emancipator* can be resituated within the themes of political and social justice that Pippin explores not only in *Mr. Prejudice*, but also in his final group of paintings, the *Holy Mountain* series (1944–46). See Judith Zilczer, "A Not-So-Peaceable Kingdom: Horace Pippin's 'Holy Mountain,'" *Archives of American Art Journal* 41 (2001): 18–33.

Dirty Gertie from Harlem U.S.A. (1946)

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I got a sugar daddy, a sailor, marine, and a preacher man if I want to take the time to work on him.

— Gertie LaRue

Immediately following World War II, Sack Amusement Enterprises released *Dirty Gertie from Harlem U.S.A.* (1946) to a racially segregated market. The race film[1] presents a cautionary tale about a sharply dressed, scandalous entertainer on the fictional Caribbean island of Rinidad. Texas native Gertie "Dirty Gertie" LaRue's famous stripteases made her a star on Harlem's entertainment scene. Determined to escape a toxic romance with a jealous promoter, Gertie flees to the all-black island, where she befriends Diamond Joe (the sugar daddy), Big Boy (the sailor), and Tight Pants (the marine). Her most vocal antagonist, Mr. Jonathan Christian (the preacher man), prophesizes that indulging in sexual pleasure will lead the libertine lady to her doom. Still, Gertie's character remains driven by a fondness for laughter, liquor, and performances of romance tailored for the silver screen. The melodrama ends with a possessive lover aiming a pistol at Gertie in her hotel room. Even at her last breath, she fills the screen with an presence that is triumphantly loud and luminous.

In 2008, sixty-two years after *Dirty Gertie* was made, New York Women in Film and Television (NYWIFT) donated a restored 35mm version of the film to The Museum of Modern Art. The preservation effort was made possible by NYWIFT's Film Preservation Fund, which aims to "highlight women filmmakers, including several innovators."[2] Even though *Dirty Gertie* has been discussed primarily as a work by the African American male director Spencer Williams (1893–1969), it made a perfect candidate for NYWIFT's Film Preservation Fund. The film portrays pleasure, abuse, and entertainment in the wartime era from the perspective of a traveling black woman whose forthright sexuality is, in part, a form of resilience and survival.

Gertie LaRue's stunning wardrobe—ranging from revealing sheer skirts to slimming black suits—sets off her sensual, melodramatic movements. In 1930, sexually charged performances by actors of all races were cited as a "regulatory concern" in the Production Code of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America.[3] The legacy of this legislation is apparent in *Dirty Gertie*, an independent film whose self-indulgent female protagonist is punished for exhibiting sexual knowledge. Film historian Ellen C. Scott argues that costuming (which was not regulated by the code) allowed for "low" figures, such as "fallen [black] women," to appear desirable on screen. This "glamorizing" or "embellishment of a character's affect," as Scott calls it, is worth noting for its ability to upset or cancel expectations that black characters play roles that normalize their perceived inferiority.[4]

Francine Everett (1915–1999) (née Williamson), who played Gertie La Rue, was attracted to roles that allowed her to perform outside the "whitewashed" stereotypes preferred by the predominantly white Hollywood industry.[5] *Dirty Gertie* was one of the few theatrical releases in which she participated during her short career as a film actress. A North Carolina native with light skin and a brilliant smile, Everett performed in a troupe called the Four Black Cats before pursuing a career on the Harlem stage.[6] Like Gertie La Rue's, Everett's travels were prompted by her daring persona and dream to be seen. In *Dirty Gertie*, radiant close-ups augment her star quality and reify the illusion that Everett and LaRue are boundless entertainers unrestricted by the racial and gendered codes of their day.

Gertie is described variously in the film itself and in related materials as a "grand lady," "singer and prostitute,"[7] "famous Harlem stripper,"[8] "Jezebel," and "painted trollop." The flashy, wayward woman and the cuckold were in fact tropes in popular culture in the 1930s and 1940s. For the film, Williams and screenwriter True T. Thompson drew on W. Somerset Maugham's 1921 short story *Miss Thompson* (later retitled *Rain*). At the time, Maugham's widely read tale of a sex worker in the Pacific Islands was sparking conversations about the dangerous pleasures to be found abroad. Williams, known for his practice of adaptation, transformed this popular story for the race film audience.[9] Yet, according to film historian Thomas Cripps, Williams's adaptations, including *Dirty Gertie*, were "fumbling, poor, ill-lighted counterfeits."[10]

Pl. 3 *Dirty Gertie from Harlem U.S.A.* 1946. Directed by Spencer Williams.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Other trends, too, informed the production of *Dirty Gertie.* The Caribbean featured prominently in the artistic production of the day, functioning as a placeholder for blackness, promiscuity, immorality, and endangerment. In 1945, one year before *Dirty Gertie*'s release, *Carib Song* hit Broadway. This theatrical production by the all-black Katherine Dunham Company[11] merged the idea of the Caribbean with the dangers of illicit sexual affairs among black characters. Interestingly, the choreography for *Carib Song* was based on Dunham's research on dance in Trinidad, an island whose name is nearly identical to that of the place where Gertie sought refuge.[12] The Broadway connection might extend even further: the award-winning musical *Carmen Jones*, which opened in 1943, also featured an all-black cast in a wartime love story.[13]

Although Sack Amusement Enterprises targeted an all--black, popular audience, *Dirty Gertie* is now enjoying a revival among art audiences. In 1988, it was included in a retrospective of Spencer Williams's works organized by Adrienne Lanier Seward at the Whitney Museum of American Art; the film entered MoMA's collection in 2008; and, in 2016, it was screened at Film Forum, in New York, in the "Pioneers of African American Cinema" series, curated by film historians Charles Musser and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart.[14] The film also exists on several open-access online platforms, allowing viewers beyond the imagined race film milieu to witness the glorious fall of Gertie LaRue.

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NOTES

1. The "race film" genre encompasses films with content inspired by people of the African diaspora or that include people of African descent in the production and screening processes.

2. "Women's Film Preservation Fund Screenings at MoMA." Last modified 2005. Accessed April 29, 2016. http://www.nywift.org/article.aspx?id=193. An additional 35mm copy was donated to MoMA by historian Daniel Leab in 2009.

3. Ellen Scott, "More Than a 'Passing' Sophistication: Dress, Film Regulation, and the Color Line in 1930s American Films," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 41, nos. 1, 2 (2013): 61.

4. Ibid. The film's title, *Dirty Gertie*, suggests that venereal disease belies Gertie's physical beauty; her sexual relationships with the sailor and the marine signal the hazardous undertone of her "dirty" name. Numerous documentaries such as *Fight Syphilis* (1942) educated military personnel about the dangers of unprotected sexual activity with male and female partners. Versions of this didactic material produced specifically for black military personnel demonstrate that the race films were produced not only for the commercial sector but also as public service announcements.

5. Bourne, Stephen. "Obituary: Francine Everett." Last modified 1999. Accessed April 29, 2016. http://www.independent.co.uk/artsentertainment/obituary-francineeverett1102230.html. Other productions to which Everett is credited include *Toot the Trumpet* (1941) and *Tall, Tan and Terrific* (1946).

6. Ibid.

7. Bob McCann, "Francine Everett," in *Encyclopedia of African American Actresses in Film and Television* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 2010), 113.

8. "Dirty Gertie from Harlem, U.S.A. (1946): Brief Synopsis." Turner Classic Movies (TCM), http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/5823/DirtyGertiefromHarlemUSA/

9. The short story was also adapted in the Hollywood films *Rain* (1932), *Miss Sadie Thompson* (1953).

10. Thomas Cripps. *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 148.

11. "Katherine Dunham to Co-Star in Musical Play 'Carib Song'," *New York Amsterdam News* (New York), September 29,1945.13. "When Katherine Dunham, armed with a high charm voltage and a hidden camera, invaded Trinidad some years ago to learn the beautiful and exotic secret dances of the West Indies, she had no idea that one day hard-won knowledge would be put to good use on Broadway."

12. By this time, Trinidad was occupied by the U.S. military. See Harvey R. Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees: Trinidad and the United States Occupation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). I thank Huey Copeland for sharing this resource.

13. I am grateful to Amy Turner for allowing me to read her informative MA thesis on *Sadie Thompson*, and to Jacqueline Stewart for bringing *Carmen Jones* to my attention.

14. Paul D. Miller and Brett Wood were executive producer and producer of the series, respectively.

Roy DeCarava, *Sun and Shade* (1952)

Juanita Solano
Institute of Fine Arts, NYU

Literalizing adjectives frequently used to describe his photographs—“dark,” “obscure,” “opaque,” and, especially, “black”—Roy DeCarava’s *Sun and Shade* (pl. 4) shows two young boys playing outdoors. One of them, standing in bright light, points a toy gun at the other, barely visible in the shade. With his camera placed perpendicular to the subject, the photographer created an image that vacillates between abstraction and figuration, realism and metaphor.

Sun and Shade was taken in 1952, a foundational year for DeCarava’s career. Encouraged by Edward Steichen, DeCarava successfully applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship, becoming the first African American photographer to win the prestigious award. As stated in his application, his intention was to “photograph Harlem through the Negro people” and to “heighten the awareness . . . bring[ing] to our consciousness a greater knowledge of [this] heritage.”[1] But DeCarava did not elect to follow the documentary approach taken by photographers such as Aaron Siskind, whose images for *The Harlem Document* had been realized in the 1930s. Rather, he gravitated toward “creative expression.”[2] DeCarava explicitly expressed interest in using photography to create art rather than sociological or documentary studies of black people. The perpendicular shot, probably taken from the balcony of a neighboring building, speaks to the intimacy of his work. In the United States, until that point, blacks had been represented mostly either as stereotypes or as a problem.[3] DeCarava’s intention was to oppose those images with photographs bearing witness to the human condition of his people. He was motivated by both his social conscience and his artistic ambition.

One hundred and forty of the photographs taken during the fellowship period were included in DeCarava’s book *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), created in conjunction with author Langston Hughes. Notably, *Sun and Shade* was not included. DeCarava rarely permitted this particular photograph to be published because it was so difficult to reproduce: he claimed that it took him ten years to print it correctly.[4] And indeed, the reproductions in *Flypaper* lacked the quality of the original photographs. In particular, the subtle gradation of grays in the images’ darker areas was not discernable in the book’s printed photographs, which were extremely small. DeCarava’s insistence on achieving the correct gradation of tones and the long time and great effort he took to create his preferred version of *Sun and Shade* might also explain why this particular print was not included in DeCarava’s retrospective organized by Peter Galassi at MoMA in 1996.[5]

Experimentation with the tonal nuances of the darker areas in his photographs was a painstaking job for DeCarava, but one ultimately proved worthwhile as seen in *Sun and Shade.* At first glance, the child standing in the shade is barely noticeable. His figure emerges from the surface only upon careful inspection. This image demands time from the spectator. It requires us to look closely at an immense amount of detail in the dark areas of the print. DeCarava succeeded in making this detail visible when he shifted from printing from a full range of contrast, i.e., from pure white to deep black, to a narrower spectrum of deep tones.[6] This change was what ultimately allowed him to “modulate the grays,” creating more complexity in the dark areas.[7] The darkest sections of his photographs thus became legible, revealing content behind the veil and visualizing a subject or theme with enhanced intensity. By this means, DeCarava countered established racial tropes and transformed the way in which African Americans were portrayed, leading to what is known as the “black aesthetic” in photography.[8]

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Pl. 4 Roy DeCarava (American, 1919–2009). *Sun and Shade.* 1952. Gelatin silver print. 13 9⁄16 × 9 3⁄16" (34.4 × 23.3 cm). Gift of the photographer. 89.1959

NOTES

1. Roy DeCarava, application for the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, n.d. John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation New York.

2. Ibid.

3. Maren Stange, “Illusion Complete Within Itself: Roy DeCarava’s Photography,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 1 (1996): 63.

4. Wendy DeCarava, email to the author, April 13, 2006.

5. *Sun and Shade* is included in both the checklist and the catalogue of the exhibition. It can be assumed that for the retrospective, the curator and the artist decided to include a different print and not the one that MoMA owns. MoMA’s print was acquired in 1959, a couple of years before DeCarava created his ideal version of this photograph.

6. Stephanie James, “Extraordinary Shades of Gray: The Photographs of Roy Decarava,” *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of the Arts* 80, no. 1/2 Graphic Arts (2006): 60.

7. Roy DeCarava, *The Sound I Saw: The Jazz Photographs of Roy DeCarava* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1983), 11.

8. See Erina Duganne, “Transcending the Fixity of Race: The Kamoinge Workshop and the Question of a “Black Aesthetic” in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement,* ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Peter Galassi, *Roy DeCarava* (New York: Museum of Modern Art,1996).

Elizabeth Catlett, *Mother and Child* (1956)

Perrin Lathrop
Princeton University

Sculpture is my connection between nature and society. When I physically transform a raw material—wood, clay or stone—into an aesthetic expression of the life of my people I feel complete as a human being.[1]

— Elizabeth Catlett

Throughout her artistic career, from the 1930s until her death in 2012, Elizabeth Catlett explored the diversity of human experience through sculpture. The artist produced *Mother and Child* (pl. 5), a compact terracotta representation of a seated mother tenderly embracing her young child, in 1956. Though motherhood is a recurrent theme in Catlett's prints (figs. 5.1, 5.2) and sculptures, this figure group is one of her first sculptural attempts at the subject as a mother herself.[2] The artist had initiated her formal investigation into motherhood almost two decades earlier, with the now-lost limestone carving *Negro Mother and Child* (fig. 5.3), completed in 1940 as part of her MFA thesis at the University of Iowa.[3] This sculpture piqued MoMA curator Dorothy Miller's interest during a visit to the University of Iowa in 1941 and initiated an impactful dialogue between Miller and Catlett.[4]

Fig. 5.1 Elizabeth Catlett. *Mother and Child*. 1944. Lithograph. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

In her thesis, Catlett wrote of *Negro Mother and Child*'s formal and expressive inquiry: "To create a composition of two figures, one smaller than the other, so interlaced as to be expressive of maternity, and so compact as to be suitable to stone, seemed quite a desirable problem. The implications of motherhood, especially Negro motherhood, are quite important to me, as I am a Negro as well as a woman."[5] Sketches of the sculpture reveal Catlett's in-depth analysis of the female form in different media (fig. 5.4). Having come of age during an era of legally mandated racial segregation, Catlett sought in her reexaminations of this subject to represent a motherhood that reflected the everyday experiences of women who looked like her, affirming her commitment to creating work in which those formerly excluded from art historical representation could recognize themselves.[6]

Like all her sculptures, *Mother and Child* records Catlett's continuing development of a visual language capable of communicating successfully with her intended audience. Though Catlett freely experimented with the diverse range of visual sources at her disposal as a modern artist, her approach reflected a deliberate preference for accessible forms that would resonate with the working classes.[7] Drawing upon the modernist legacy of Cubism and abstraction, *Mother and Child* dynamically builds from the cube upon which the mother sits to expose the essential formal components that comprise the sculpture's simplified figuration. While working in the New York studio of Cubist sculptor Ossip Zadkine in 1942, Catlett learned to analyze historical West African sculptural forms as a means to understand abstraction in the representation of the human figure. This process resulted in works such as *Mother and Child* from 1942–44 (fig. 5.5).[8]

Though Catlett was initially exposed to West African sculpture while studying at Howard University in the 1930s, it was Zadkine who encouraged her to examine its formal elements for the first time.[9] In a lecture given some forty

Pl. 5 Elizabeth Catlett (American, 1915–2012). *Mother and Child.* 1956. Terracotta, 11 ¼ × 7 × 7" (28.6 × 17.8 × 17.8 cm). Gift of The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art, The Modern Women's Fund, and Dr. Alfred Gold (by exchange). 219.2011 13 ⁹⁄₁₆ × 9 ³⁄₁₆" (34.4 × 23.3 cm). Gift of the photographer. 89.1959

Fig. 5.2 Elizabeth Catlett. *Black Maternity.* 1959. Lithograph.

Fig. 5.3 Elizabeth Catlett. *Negro Mother and Child.* 1940. Limestone. University of Iowa (now lost)

years later, Catlett spoke of the ability of African art to "express an idea, or an emotion, or a feeling, or a vitality. . . Even though it's figurative, I try to use the form instead of the detail to express what I'm trying to say."[10] In *Mother and Child* (1956), Catlett dynamically combines spheres, triangles, cylinders, and cubes to present a powerfully human interaction in simple terms.

Catlett's commitment to figuration reflected the encouragement she received from regionalist painter Grant Wood, her professor at Iowa, to paint what she knew. It also corresponded with her interest, as a politically engaged artist, in the Social Realism of Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera,[11] who critiqued the economic and social injustices of capitalism through celebratory depictions of the working classes.[12] Catlett's seated maternal figure, with her hair pulled back in a pragmatic bun, a simple dress revealing a broad back, large hands firmly supporting her small child's body, and bare feet set in a stance that suggests assured movement, is a monument to the working mother.[13] Arrested in a brief, ambiguous moment, she either mourns or comforts the child clasped in her capable arms.[14]

Looking to work free of the pressures imposed on left-leaning artists in Cold War America, and supported by a Julius Rosenwald Foundation grant, Catlett traveled to Mexico in 1946 to complete her print series The Black Woman at the print collective Taller de Gráfica Popular, in Mexico City.[15] A self-supporting, non-governmental organization founded in 1937, the Taller was dedicated to raising social consciousness among the masses through the wide distribution of effective and accessible Social Realist graphics.[16] Upon finishing The Black Woman series under the Taller's auspices, Catlett returned to the United States to participate in the exhibition "Paintings, Sculptures and Prints of the Negro Woman" at the Barnett-Aden Gallery in Washington, D.C. (December 1947 to January 1948). Fearing that her political leanings, or those of her friends, might result in a subpoena from the House Un-American Activities Committee, Catlett decided to relocate permanently to Mexico around the time of the exhibition.[17] She renounced her American citizenship in 1962[18] and became a touchstone for both African-American and Mexican artists seeking to develop a visual language on their own terms.[19]

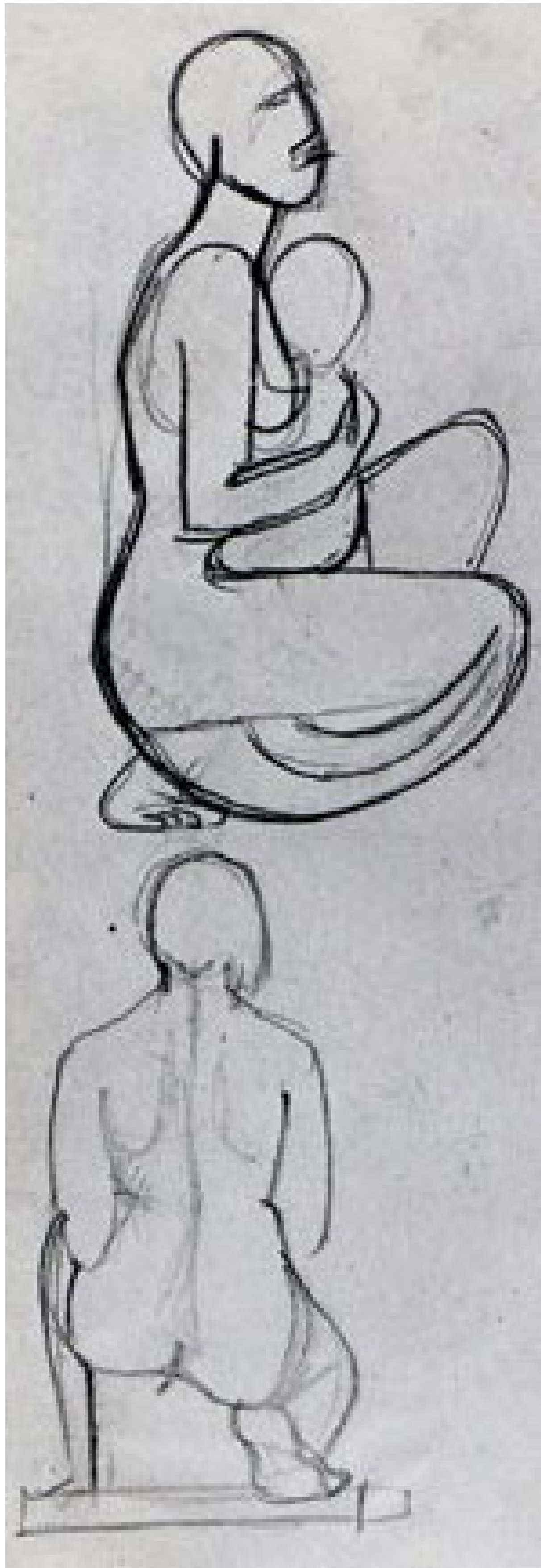

Fig. 5.4 Sketches from Elizabeth Catlett's MFA thesis "Sculpture in Stone: Negro Mother and Child." University Archives, Department of Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries. T1940.C36

Fig. 5.5 Elizabeth Catlett. *Mother and Child*. 1942–44. Terracotta. This image is the sole record of the sculpture.

During her first year in Mexico, Catlett studied terracotta ceramics with Mexican sculptor Francisco Zuñiga at the government art school, commonly known as La Esmeralda. Unlike the subtractive clay modeling method she had studied under Zadkine, she learned from Zuñiga the Pre-Columbian additive ceramic tradition in which coils of clay are built up around a hollow form. Catlett used this historically resonant method in *Mother and Child* (1956) to round the forms of the figure from the inside. Perhaps influenced by her experience as a printmaker, Catlett imprinted hair onto the figures' heads. She often moved between additive and subtractive media to explore the different forms offered by the inherent qualities of each. The carved mahogany *Mother and Child* from 1959 (fig. 5.6), for example, incorporates the patterns of wood grain into its curves and planes, while the elasticity of clay allows *Mother and Child* (1956) to swell from within.[20]

Fig. 5.6 Elizabeth Catlett. *Mother and Child.* 1959. Mahogany. Collection Berthe Small, New York

An implied meditation on loss courses through Catlett's sculptural ruminations on motherhood. Produced in the year following the brutal murder of black teenager Emmett Till in Mississippi, *Mother and Child* (1956) takes on the historical weight of its era.[21] Though Catlett's women are often represented with dignified heads held high, her 1956 terracotta represents a mother with her head bowed, nestled against the head of her limp baby, in reference to German artist Käthe Kollwitz's earlier stylized reflections on maternal mourning.[22] Yet, like Emmett Till's mother, who forced the world to face injustice by insisting on an open casket for her son, Catlett's mother communicates strength in the face of untold adversity.

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NOTES

1. Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture Lecture Archive, Elizabeth Catlett, 1985, p. 7–8. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

2. Catlett's interest in the repetition of subjects and forms in her printmaking practice is explored in Anita Bateman, “Narrative and Seriality in Elizabeth Catlett’s Prints,” *Journal of Black Studies* 47, no. 3 (2016): 258–72.

3. *Negro Mother and Child* (1940) won first prize in sculpture at the American Negro Exposition in Chicago, 1940. Catlett's former professor at Howard University James A. Porter wrote of this sculpture in his 1943 book *Modern Negro Art*, "The simple, round massiveness of the work exemplifies good taste and soberly thoughtful execution." James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1992), 142.

4. Correspondence between Catlett and Miller (1941 through 1943) resides in the MoMA Archives and registers Miller’s interest in Catlett’s 1940 sculpture *Negro Mother and Child*. The archives also document Miller’s letter of recommendation for Catlett’s 1943 application for a Rosenwald Foundation Fellowship, which would eventually allow the artist to travel to Mexico in 1946. “Elizabeth Catlett," Department of Painting and Sculpture Artists Records, Castells-Caziel, I.55. MoMA Archives, NY.

5. A. Elizabeth Catlett, “Sculpture in Stone: Negro Mother and Child” (MFA, University of Iowa, 1940), 1.

6. I am indebted to the following publications for their thorough and thoughtful accounts of Catlett’s career and artistic outlook: Melanie Anne Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000); Samella Lewis, *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett* (Claremont, CA: Hancraft Studios and the Museum of African American Art, Los Angeles, 1984).

7. In the introduction to her book *Art on My Mind*, theorist bell hooks explores the politics surrounding the visual language that an artist such as Catlett develops in her work. hooks insists that we confront “the way race, gender, and class shape art practices (who makes art, how it sells, who values it, who writes about it).” bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995), xii.

8. This earlier Mother and Child was shown in the 1945 exhibition *The Negro Artist Comes of Age: A National Survey of Contemporary American Artists*, in Albany, New York. Albany Institute of History and Art, *The Negro Artist Comes of Age: A National Survey of Contemporary American Artists, January 3rd through February 11, 1945* (Albany, NY: Albany Institute of History and Art, 1945), n.p.

9. “Elizabeth Catlett Interviews,” in *Artists and Influences*, ed. James V. Hatch and Leo Hamalian (New York: Hatch Billops Collection, 1991), 10:21.

10. Skowhegan, Catlett, 1985, p. 11. MoMA Archives, NY.

11. Diego Rivera affirmed the indigenous stylistic origins of his Social Realist murals in statements such as the following: "The colonial rulers of Mexico, like those of the United States, have despised that ancient art tradition which existed there, but they failed to destroy them completely. With this art as background, I became the first revolutionary painter in Mexico.” Quoted in Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, “African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School,” in *In the Spirit of Resistance: African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1996), 44.

12. Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico*, 27.

13. Shifra Goldman writes: "The language the Mexicans introduced in the United States was the pictorial dialect of social realism, which they had raised to its highest level of artistic development—in contrast to the visual clichés of Soviet socialist realism." However, the stylistic legacy of a Social*ist* Realist monument such as Vera Mukhina’s *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* (1937) is difficult to ignore in Catlett’s figuration, though filtered through her world view. Shifra M. Goldman, “The Mexican School, Its African Legacy, and the ‘Second Wave’ in the United States,” in *In the Spirit of Resistance: African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1996), 70.

14. As Kellie Jones writes of Catlett’s work within a figural, representational tradition, “Social realist roots give their [Catlett’s and artist Eldzier Cortor’s] pieces narrative and perhaps propagandistic implications.” Kellie Jones, “The Imagery of Women in the Art of Elizabeth Catlett and Eldzier Cortor,” in *Artist and Influence*, vol. 6 (New York: Hatch Billops Collection, 1988), 54.

15. This series celebrated the heroic lives of historical African-American female figures such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Thalia Gouma-Peterson, “The Power of Human Feeling and of Art,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 4, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1983): 51.

16. Goldman, “The Mexican School, Its African Legacy, and the ‘Second Wave’ in the United States,” 76.

17. Rebecca M. Schreiber, “The Politics of Form: African American Artists and the Making of Transnational Aesthetics,” in *Cold War Exiles in Mexico* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 44.

18. Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico*, 19.

19. In his important *Ebony* magazine article that reaffirmed Catlett’s importance for an American audience, Marc Crawford wrote, “A dedicated cultural nationalist, Miss Catlett tries to awaken other artists to the need for looking into their environments and cultures to produce legitimate and indigenous works to combat a sameness in world art that, she says, has been imposed by the United States and European countries.” Marc Crawford, “My Art Speaks for Both My Peoples,” *Ebony*, January 1970, 94–95. Found in “Elizabeth Catlett papers, 1957–1980,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, microfilm reel 2249.

20. Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico*, 118.

21. In his seminal book on black art, Richard Powell discusses Catlett’s more explicit engagement with the lynching of African Americans in prints from her 1946 series *...I Have a Special Fear for My Loved Ones*. Richard J. Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 116.

22. Catlett admired the German Expressionists, including Käthe Kollwitz, and their ability to communicate basic human emotions in a simplified formal language. See Michael Brenson, “Elizabeth Catlett’s Sculptural Aesthetics” in *Elizabeth Catlett Sculpture: A Fifty Year Retrospective* (Purchase, NY: Neuberger Museum of Art, 1998), 30.

Joseph E. Yoakum, *Grizzly Gulch Valley Ohansburg Vermont* (n.d.)

Kimia Shahi
Princeton University

Without marking, all ancestors become abstractions, losing their proper names; all family trips become the same trip—the formal garden, the waterfall, the picnic site, and the undifferentiated sea become attributes of every country.

— Susan Stewart[1]

We locate ourselves unto ourselves as we locate ourselves in the world of which we are a part.

— Randall Morris[2]

Joseph E. Yoakum's *Grizzly Gulch Valley Ohansburg Vermont* (pl. 6) is a small drawing of a pale blue river bounded on each side by darker blue and gray topography that seems to course with energy as it undulates outward toward the edges of the composition. Vertical hatch marks in pen amplify the sense of movement, drawing attention to the picture's worked surface as a site of repeated, obsessive meetings of pen and paper, artist and terrain. There is no Grizzly Gulch Valley in Vermont; Ohansburg does not exist on any map. Yet Yoakum's relationship to the imaginary places he pictured was not just a matter of fantasy or fiction. Instead, in drawings like *Grizzly Gulch Valley Ohansburg Vermont*, Yoakum staged a series of searching, layered encounters with landscape, highly personal negotiations between geography and self that unfolded in the process of making.[3]

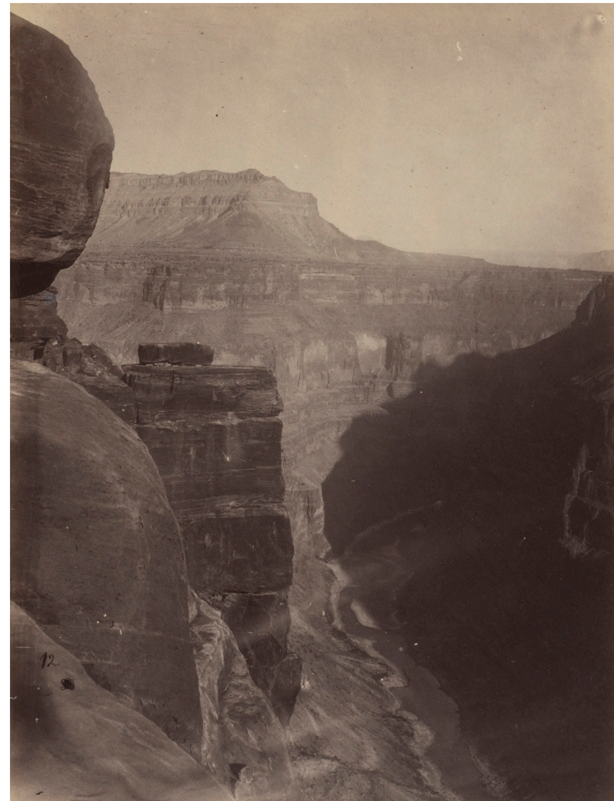

Fig. 6.1 William H. Bell (American, born Ireland. 1840–1882) and Timothy H. O'Sullivan (American, ca. 1840–1882). *Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, Mouth of Kanab Wash, Looking East.* Seasons of 1871, 1872 and 1873. Albumen silver print, 10 13⁄16 × 7 15⁄16" (27.5 × 20.2 cm). Gift of Ansel Adams in memory of Albert M. Bender. 87.1941.28

Yoakum referred to his drawings as "spiritual unfoldments," a phrase borrowed from the teachings of Christian Science, to which he converted as a young man.[4] His emphasis on the spirituality of his drawing practice foregrounds the presence of both an inner and a transcendent vision in his work. "Unfoldment" implies both opening and duration. It is as if the drawings constitute spiritual events in and of themselves, a fitting idea for a self-taught artist often described as visionary and for whom the impetus to draw first arrived in a dream—or so he liked to say.[5]

Yoakum began making pictures in his sixties—late in a life that included stints working for the traveling circus and the railroad, military service in Europe during World War I, a brief stay in a psychiatric hospital, and years of itinerant travel that he claimed covered six continents. In his Chicago storefront studio, Yoakum kept a supply of atlases, travel books, and encyclopedias that informed his drawings, in addition to a range of other printed matter, including circus posters, railroad tourist pamphlets, and nineteenth-century survey photographs of the American West (fig. 6.1) that likely served as source material.[6] However, for Yoakum, working in colored pencil, ink, chalk, pastel, and watercolor, with a roll of toilet paper on hand to blend pigments, the subject of a picture revealed itself only after its completion.[7] The artist called this process "spiritual remembrance," as if through drawing, tracing, and rubbing he discovered a means of excavating, tracking, and retracing his own forgotten paths through the world.[8] These paths are often represented as roads, like the one that winds through *Mt*

Pl. 6 Joseph E. Yoakum (American, 1890–1972). *Grizzly Gulch Valley Ohansburg Vermont.* n.d. Ballpoint pen and watercolor on paper, sheet 7 ⅞ × 9 ⅞" (20 × 25.1 cm). Gift of the Raymond K. Yoshida Living Trust and Kohler Foundation, Inc. 1793.2012

Fig. 6.2 Joseph Yoakum. *Mt Grazian in Maritime Alps near Emonaco Tunnel France & Italy by Tunnel.* 1958. Colored pencil and felt-tip pen on paper, 12 × 19" (30.5 × 48.3 cm). Gift of the Raymond K. Yoshida Living Trust and Kohler Foundation, Inc. 1174.2011

Grazian in Maritime Alps near Emonaco Tunnel France & Italy by Tunnel, 1958 (fig. 6.2).

Grizzly Gulch and *Mt Grazian* join four other landscape drawings by Yoakum in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. All save one of these came to the Museum from the collection of the artist Ray Yoshida. With Karl Wirsum, Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Christina Ramberg, Roger Brown, and others, Yoshida formed a cohort of artists known as the Chicago Imagists and Hairy Who in the 1960s and 1970s.[9] Active collectors of folk art, ephemera, and other objects by authors considered outside the traditional realm of the fine arts, many of the Imagists were taken with Yoakum's work and began to visit his studio regularly. They collected and exhibited his drawings, finding in them "qualities of fantasy," obsession, and innovation that they sought to incorporate in their own work.[10] Yoshida was particularly inspired by Yoakum, as is immediately apparent in the striated, animated forms in works on paper such as *Untitled (Analogy Series),* 1974 (fig. 6.3) and the cut-and-paste *Yipes* (fig. 6.4). Both of these collages have a repetitive, taxonomic quality akin to that found in Yoakum's drawings, in which forms often appear organized according to an unknown method of classification.

Similar, too, to Yoakum's work is Roger Brown's distinctively "schematic view of landscape."[11] In his 1987 *Family Tree Mourning Print* (fig. 6.5), for example, Brown inscribed the names of American wars in a "family tree" set against a gradient sky in a landscape with a view of what could be the Washington Monument. The print's symmetricality and strong graphic outlines resonate with Yoakum's style. Perhaps even more striking, it mixes personal lineage and national history in a manner that recalls Yoakum's conflation of real and imagined places. In Brown's image, tree and diagram are equated, placed between emblems of national

Fig. 6.3 Ray Yoshida (American, 1930–2009). *Untitled (Analogy Series).* 1974. Colored fiber-tipped pens on white wove paper, cut, torn, and laid down on tan wove paper, 19 5⁄16 × 24 3⁄8" (49.1 × 61.9 cm). Gift of the Raymond K. Yoshida Living Trust and Kohler Foundation, Inc. Art Institute of Chicago

Fig. 6.4 Ray Yoshida. *Yipes.* 2000. Cut-and-pasted printed paper on paper, 30 × 44" (76.2 × 111.8 cm). Gift of the Raymond K. Yoshida Living Trust and Kohler Foundation, Inc. 1177.2011

and individual identity (the monument and the silhouetted woman, respectively). In an analogous way, Yoakum's *Mt Grazian,* with its schematic layout, semi-aerial perspective, and treatment of trees and other features as iconic signifiers, suggests both a cartographic view of a particular locale and a point on the map of the artist's autobiographical geography.

While Brown's print is overtly political, Yoakum's drawing might be read in terms of the political construction of his own identity (note the prominence of "by Joseph E. Yoakum" in the drawing's title). Yoakum's landscape drawings participate in a narrative that the artist himself kept constantly in play: of African American, Cherokee, and Creek descent, he often claimed Navajo heritage. He maintained that he was born in 1888 in Window Rock, Arizona, "in the southwest territory before it were [sic] made the Navajo and Apache Indian reservation," rather than in Missouri in

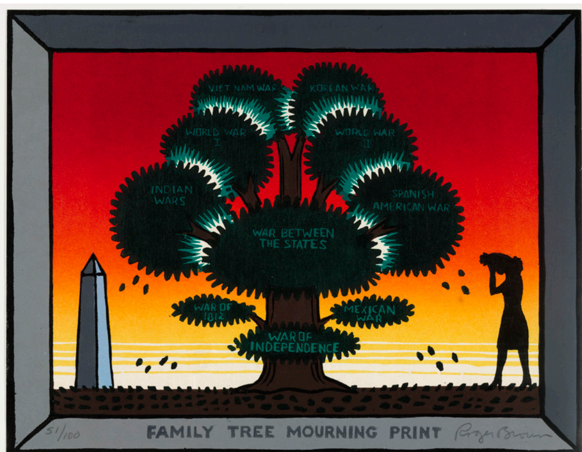

Fig. 6.5 Roger Brown (American, 1941–1997). *Family Tree Mourning Print.* 1987. Linocut. Gift of Richard Becker. 657.1993

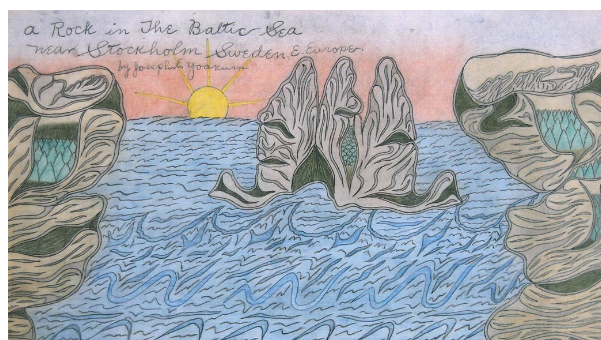

Fig. 6.6 Joseph Yoakum. *A Rock in The Baltic Sea Near Stockholm Sweden E. Europe.* n.d. Pencil and ballpoint pen on paper, 12 × 19" (30.5 × 48.3 cm). Gift of the Raymond K. Yoshida Living Trust and Kohler Foundation, Inc. 1172.2011

1890.[12] It is often remarked that Yoakum's drawings relate formally and possibly iconographically to motifs found in North American indigenous art, yet the drawings themselves resist being fully decoded. Instead, they occupy a liminal space between abstraction and figuration. In *Grizzly Gulch*, for example, Yoakum's emphasis on outline and pattern draw attention to the surface, while his rendering of spatial recession encourages a perspectival reading of the landscape.

The self, Yoakum's drawings tell us, can be fashioned via a schematics of position plotted on a sliding scale of time, space, and place. Resembling geological strata or sectioned tissue seen under a microscope, overlapping forms such as those in *Mt Grazian* suggest that the work's scale shifts wildly from the cellular to the cosmic, charting a course from interior to exterior, body to world, and back.[13] *Grizzly Gulch*'s rising forms convey a greater sense of pictorial depth; they press up against the surface like a series of overlapping screens that lock into place and compose the view. Their arrangement recalls conventions of picturesque landscape painting, or even the three-dimensional optical effect of twinned images in a stereograph, a device popular among armchair travelers well into the first half of the twentieth century.

In conversation with Ramberg, Yoakum once stated: "There's nothing I haven't suffered to see things first hand."[14] Yet in drawing after drawing, Yoakum presents what seem to be physically unattainable perspectives: we perch high above *Grizzly Gulch*, see through things and around them in *Mt Grazian*, and, in the undated *A Rock in The Baltic Sea Near Stockholm Sweden E. Europe* (fig. 6.6), even hover over water. If in his drawings Yoakum wanted to combine both the firsthand experience of travel and the intimacy of dreams, this desire stands in contrast to his interests in maps and atlases, which convey knowledge about the physical world by departing from what is seen firsthand. Along these lines, cartography's function as a planning tool becomes particularly interesting: might Yoakum's drawings anticipate a future as much as commemorate a past?
Yoakum often dated his pictures (including *Mt Grazian*) with a rubber stamp, an oddly impersonal addition to such hand-worked images.[15] The dates are not always accurate and thus destabilize the drawings' relationship to time.[16] Another way in which Yoakum plays with temporality in his drawings is through repetition. Although he did not make photographs or prints, he occasionally made carbon copies of his drawings, as Darrel B. Depasse has noted. He also employed a technique he called "embossing," in which he traced a design with heavy ballpoint pen on the cover of a drawing pad, so that the lines of the drawing were raised in relief when the cover was turned over.[17] *Grizzly Gulch*, *Mt Grazian* and *A Rock in the Baltic Sea* have centralized compositions, and each has its title handwritten in the upper left corner. These similarities lend them a regular, even serial quality that brings to mind picture postcards. If Yoakum's drawings resemble postcard souvenirs, perhaps they both anticipate an experience and preserve its memory after the fact, as *Grizzly Gulch's* blend of autobiographical narrative, cartography, and dreamscape suggests.[18] Instead of simply mapping Yoakum's personal geography, the drawing might record a process of imagining and remembering many possible selves traversing multiple possible worlds, from Vermont to the Maritime Alps to the Baltic Sea and beyond. In the end, however, it is drawing itself that anchors these pictures. Marking the contours of *Grizzly Gulch*'s topography, Yoakum inscribes his presence in the surface of the drawing, laying equal claim to its fantasy and facticity, returning again and again to mark and making as his most generative points of departure.

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NOTES

1. Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press), 138

2. Randall Morris, "The One and the Many: Manifest Destiny and the Internal Landscape," in *Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art*, ed. Charles Russell (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 128.

3. Called "one of the most original interpreters of landscape in the twentieth century," Yoakum produced about two thousand drawings in the last decade of his life, "roughly 95%" of which are landscapes. (Derrel B. DePasse, *Traveling the Rainbow: The Life and Art of Joseph E. Yoakum* (New York: Jackson [Miss.]: Museum of American Folk Art; University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 3–4. Yoakum also made portrait drawings of celebrities: see DePasse, *Traveling the Rainbow,* chap. 5.

4. DePasse, 17. Yoakum owned Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: Allison V. Stewart, 1912) and kept a copy in his studio (DePasse, 97).

5. Yoakum has been compared to figures such as William Blake, Henri Rousseau, and artists in the American visionary tradition, including Arthur Dove and Charles Burchfield. Possible parallels in Yoakum's work to the art of Dove, Burchfield, and those in their milieu seem especially worth pursuing further to illuminate how the classifications of "outsider," "visionary," "popular," etc., have applied to his and other American artists' work. Yoakum is also frequently identified as an outsider artist. According to Kinshasha Holman-Conwill, Yoakum is among the self-taught, southern-born artists of African American descent whose work has been embraced by mainstream artists and institutions. For Holman-Conwill, the growing critical and curatorial interest in outsider art exposes the problematic ways in which class, race, and authenticity are framed within a capitalist art world. On the other hand, she emphasizes that self-taught artists are mobilizing an expanding field of cultural production "that is resilient, resistant, inventive, and capable of developing *with or without* the sanction of the mainstream." Kinshaha Holman-Conwill, "In Search of an "Authentic" Vision: Decoding the Appeal of the Self-Taught African-American Artist," *American Art* 5, no. 4 (1991): 2–9; quotation from p. 7.

6. DePasse, 97.

7. Although Yoakum claimed to have begun drawing in 1962, accounts generally confirm that he began in the 1950s. See DePasse, chapter 1, for a detailed biography. For a comprehensive discussion of Yoakum's materials, methods and motifs, see chapter 6.

8. DePasse, 17.

9. DePasse 19. For information on the Chicago Imagists and Hairy Who, see http://chicago-imagists.com/

10. Yoakum was included in the Imagists' first museum exhibition, *Don Baum Sez "Chicago Needs More Famous Artists,"* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1969. The Museum of Modern Art showed six of his drawings in the Penthouse Gallery in 1971; the drawings were consigned to its Art Lending Service (DePasse 23). See The Art Lending Service and Art Advisory Service Records, 1948–1996, Museum of Modern Art Archives (moma.org/learn/resources/archives). Yoakum had a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1972, shortly before his death. A brochure with short essays by Marcia Tucker and Whitney Halstead was published on the occasion of the exhibition. See: *Joseph E. Yoakum*, Whitney Museum of American Art, October 23–November 26, 1972. Full text at https://archive.org/details/josephe00yoak

11. Bowman, 166.

12. DePasse, 5. This anecdote appears frequently in the Yoakum literature.

13. Critic Dennis Adrian has described the mountain and rock formations as "enlargements of cross-sections of cellular tissue, seamed and veined with curious stratifications like those blown up anatomical diagrams." (DePasse 25, quoting Dennis Adrian, "The strange and wondrous revelations of Joseph Yoakum," *Panorama-Chicago Daily News*, October 14,1972, 29). See also John Maizels, ed., *Outsider Art Sourcebook* (Herts, UK: Raw Vision Ltd., 2009), 166.

14. DePasse, 2.

15. "Joseph E. Yoakum," http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artist/?id=5515.; Lynda Roscoe Hartigan and Andrew L. Connors, *Made with Passion: The Hemphill Folk Art Collection in the National Museum of American Art* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990).

16. Of the stamped dates, DePasse notes, "Unfortunately, the accuracy of the stamped dates is somewhat questionable, because the children in the neighborhood often played with the stamps " (99).

17. DePasse, 100. DePasse discusses Yoakum's possible print sources at length. See especially chaps 2, 3, 6.

18. Stewart, 136–138.

Benjamin Patterson, *Puzzle-Poems* (1962)

Antonia Pocock
Museum Research Consortium Fellow, MoMA / Institute of Fine Arts, NYU

"Benjamin, do you remember the small café-tabac, rue Mouffetard, not far from the Place de la Contrescarpe? This is where we met." So reads one of Robert Filliou's "franco-american episodic poems of friendship," which are meant to be performed by the addressee, in this case Benjamin Patterson, while he or she is "having a meal, smoking, drinking coffee, turning on, laying in bed . . . the wish is that they should be having fun." The performance consists simply in "remembering the event, its circumstances, consequences."[1] One "consequence" of the meeting of Patterson and Filliou was the exhibition in July 1962 of the former's puzzle-poems in the latter's Galerie Légitime, a conceptual exhibition space located beneath Filliou's hat (pls. 7.1–7.4; fig. 7.1).[2] Like Filliou's friendship poem, Patterson's puzzle-poems demand playful participation: in order to realize the poem one must assemble the puzzle.

Fig. 7.1 Robert Filliou (French, 1926–1987). *Untitled* (Galerie Légitime). c. 1963. (Current contents of the beret are works by Filliou.) The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. 2147.2008

Patterson began creating puzzle-poems when he moved to Paris in 1962. Previously, he had been primarily a musician and composer. A classically trained double-bassist, Patterson completed his music studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in 1956. Unable to find employment in an American symphony orchestra—"America was not yet ready for a black symphony musician," Patterson recounts—he joined the Halifax Symphony Orchestra and then the Ottawa Philharmonic Orchestra in Canada.[3] In June 1960, he traveled to Cologne to learn about developments in electronic and experimental music.[4] There, an encounter with John Cage in the atelier of Mary Bauermeister prompted Patterson's exploration of sounds not typically considered "musical," such as the crumpling of paper in *Paper Piece* (1960). Patterson first performed this and his other early action music compositions at Galerie Haro Lauhus in Cologne during openings of exhibitions of Christo, Mimmo Rotella, Wolf Vostell, and Daniel Spoerri in 1961.[5] Spoerri, alongside Filliou, was one of Patterson's key interlocutors in Paris.

Constructed from newspaper and magazine clippings pasted on cardboard and housed in discarded commercial packaging, Patterson's pocket-sized puzzle-poems were well-suited to the small, mobile gallery housed in Filliou's hat (fig. 7.2). Filliou conceived of his *galerie dans le chapeau* after watching Orthodox Jewish peddlers of Swiss watches on the rue de Rosier. Without shop space, these industrious

Fig. 7.2 Left: puzzle-poem from Patterson's *A Volume of Collected Poems, Volume 7,* 1962, housed in a DMC embroidery floss box. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. 2649.2008.1-4. Right: a similar DMC box, intact

merchants pinned their wares to the insides of their coats, which struck Filliou as an apt way to bring art to a broad audience.[6] Patterson was familiar with this practice, as he was then earning a living as a door-to-door salesman of encyclopedias.[7] As he explained, "instead of staying in one place, like most buildings, [our gallery] comes to visit you. Door-to-door techniques."[8] The gallery under a hat invoked Marcel Duchamp's museum in a suitcase, the *Boîte-en-valise* (1935–41); portability was paramount for the nomadic lifestyle shared by Duchamp, Filliou, and Patterson.[9]

A hand-drawn map of the route Patterson and Filliou charted across Paris during a twenty-four-hour jaunt served as the invitation to the exhibition (fig. 7.3). With stops at

Pl. 7.1 Benjamin Patterson (American, 1934–2016). *Puzzle-Poems*. 1962. Metal box containing cut-and-pasted paper puzzle. Publisher: Fluxus. Edition: unique. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. 2666.2008.a-b

Pl. 7.2 Benjamin Patterson. *A Volume of Collected Poems, Volume 1, Poem 2.* 1962. Plastic bag containing photostat on card and four yogurt cups containing cut-and-pasted paper puzzle. Publisher: Fluxus. Edition: unique. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. 2668.2008.a-f

Pl. 7.3 Benjamin Patterson. *A Volume of Collected Poems, Volume 6, Poems 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24, 25.* 1962. Plastic bag containing photostat on card and three boxes containing cut-and-pasted paper puzzles. Publisher: Fluxus. Edition: unique. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. 2667.2008.1-4

Pl. 7.4 Benjamin Patterson. *A Volume of Collected Poems, Volume 7, Poems 32, 33, 34, 44 and 36, 37.* 1962. Plastic bag containing photostat on card and three boxes containing cut-and-pasted paper puzzles. Publisher: Fluxus. Edition: unique. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. 2649.2008.1-4

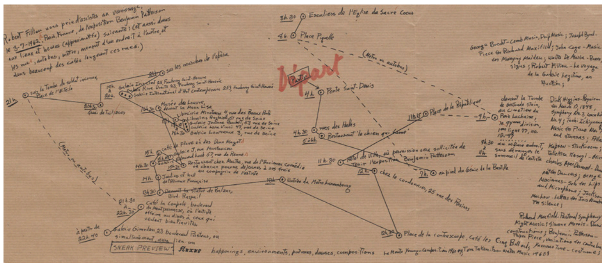

Fig. 7.3 Robert Filliou and Benjamin Patterson. Announcement for *Ben Patterson's Exposition à Paris and Sneak Preview: Fluxus*. July 3, 1962. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. 2163.2008

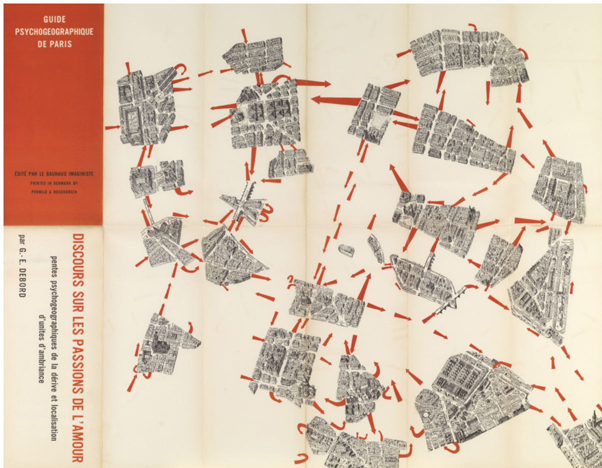

Fig. 7.4 Guy Debord (French, 1931–1994). *Psychogeographic guide of Paris: Discourse on the passions of love: Psychogeographic descents of drifting and localization of ambient unitie.* 1957

landmarks such as the Louvre and Père Lachaise cemetery, their outing recalls the mock guided tour, *Excursions et visites Dada: 1ère Visite,* organized by André Breton and Tristan Tzara in Paris in 1921.[10] In the 1950s, the Situationists launched a similar critique of tourism and other forms of organized leisure.[11] Guy Debord proposed the *dérive,* or aimless drifting, as a method to disrupt the habitual paths imposed on pedestrians by urban infrastructure, as illustrated in his *Psychogeographic Guide of Paris* (1957; fig. 7.4).[12] Debord explained that the "motive behind our theories on architecture or drifting" was "a passion for play . . . opposed . . . to 'ordinary life' characterized by a sense of duty."[13] Patterson and Filliou's touring exhibition likewise reframed work (selling goods on the street) as play (a Happening).

However, their emphasis on participation rather than disruption aligns Patterson and Filliou more closely with Amsterdam-based artist Stanley Brouwn, who was also part of the international Fluxus network. *Steps of Pedestrians on Paper* (1960), in which Brouwn placed blank sheets of paper on the ground to collect footprints, and *This Way Brouwn* (1960–1970), an ongoing project consisting of maps drawn by strangers whom Brouwn asks for directions, both result from interactions between the artist and passersby. Similarly, the circulation of the puzzle-poems, illustrated in the map on the invitation, is central to their meaning. They were not intended to last beyond the *vernissage*, when they were sold for 5 francs apiece to attendants in the Paris métro and other people who crossed the artists' path.

The touring exhibition of the puzzle-poems concluded with a "Sneak Preview" of works from the upcoming, inaugural Fluxus festival in Wiesbaden, Germany, including Patterson's now canonical Fluxus compositions Paper Piece and Variations for Double Bass (1960). The puzzle-poems bridge Fluxus, concrete poetry, and Nouveau Réalisme. Fluxus multiples often took the form of puzzles and games in boxes and were intended to be sold cheaply in artist-run shops. Producing a poem in the form of a puzzle was also Patterson's response to the interactive object-poems made by Filliou and their mutual friend Emmett Williams.[14] And his choice of materials—newspapers, magazines, and food packaging—relates to works by Spoerri and other artists associated with Nouveau Réalisme, a movement characterized by art critic Pierre Restany as the "poetic recycling of urban, industrial and advertising reality."[15] Converting used merchandise into objects of play, Patterson established a counter-economy. His puzzle-poems undermine the instantaneous communication of the advertisements of which they are composed. They require the active participation of consumers/viewers, who must first assemble his puzzles, and then puzzle over the poems revealed.[16]

At the top of one puzzle-poem, Patterson placed text extracted from an ad for the Hat Corporation of America: "There are some men a hat won't help" (fig. 7.5). He juxtaposed this tagline with a promotional photograph for the 1962 film *My Geisha*, starring Shirley MacLaine as an actress who masquerades as a Japanese woman in order to win

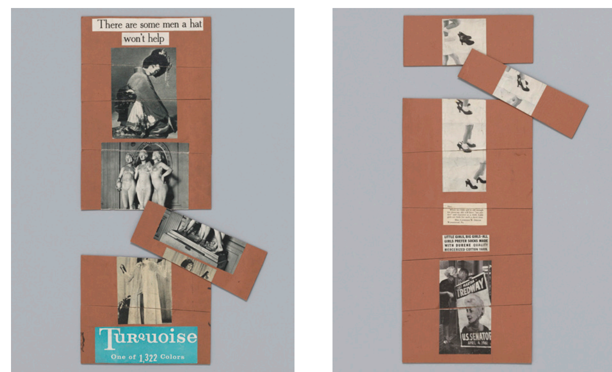

Fig 7.5 Benjamin Patterson. Double-sided puzzle-poem from *A Volume of Collected Poems, Volume 7.* 1962. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. 2649.2008.1-4

the leading role in a film version of the story “Madame Butterfly”; a sculpture by Paul Richer portraying three women that exemplify the divergent aesthetic ideals of the ancient, Renaissance, and modern eras; and part of an advertisement for house paint (figs. 7.6). On the reverse side is an ad for Durene socks, showing a little girl’s feet in what are presumably her mother’s pumps; a letter to the editor about girls playing dress-up; and a photograph of a U.S. Senate candidate from Texas, Martha Tredway, posing alongside a blown-up photograph of herself. These disparate fragments hinge on the theme of shifting appearances and performed identities, thus echoing the work itself, which is disguised as a consumer product and was first presented by the artists posing as traveling salesman. Patterson’s puzzle-poems, intended for a working-class audience, established what Filliou would later theorize as a “poetic economy”: “I am thinking about workers without whom there is no poetry, and I am looking for and I am doing research to find out in what aspect poetry, which is futile, could be useful to them. . . . How to go from Work as Toil to Work as Play.”[17]

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Fig 7.6 Hat Corporation of America advertisement. 1961

Fig. 7.7 Colorizer Instant Paint advertisement. 1961

NOTES

1. Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performance Arts* (Cologne: Kasper Koenig, 1970), 31–32.

2. The most comprehensive accounts of Patterson's exhibition of puzzle-poems in the Galerie Légitime are: Valerie Cassel Oliver, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Patterson," in *Benjamin Patterson: Born in the State of Flux/us,* ed. Cassel Oliver (Houston, TX: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2011), 24–26; Bertrand Clavez, "Patterson's Parisian Years," in *Benjamin Patterson: Born in the State of Flux/us,* 204–210; and Petra Stegmann, "Sneak Preview: Fluxus. Happenings, Environments, Poèmes, Danses, Compositions, Paris, 3 July 1962," in "*The Lunatics Are on the Loose...": European Fluxus Festivals, 1962–1977,* ed. Stegmann (Potsdam: Down With Art!, 2012), 43–47.

3. Benjamin Patterson, "I'm Glad You Asked Me That Question," in *Benjamin Patterson: Born in the State of Flux/us,* ed. Valerie Cassel Oliver (Houston, TX: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2011), 110.

4. Though he initially intended to visit Cologne for only a week or two, Patterson stayed on for nearly two years. He explained this decision in a letter to his parents dated July 11, 1960: "Darmstadt and Köln are the musical centers of the world. . . . I wish to reassure you that this is the right path even though now it may seem completely insane (to outsiders) (The same outsiders predicted that there would be no future when I first started at Michigan as a music major). . . . So please try to help me do what you have taught me, to do the very best that I can in whatever I attempt." Silverman Fluxus Archives, I.1005. MoMA Archives, NY.

5. Cassel Oliver, 109, 240.

6. Stegmann, 43.

7. Benjamin Patterson, telephone conversation with author, April 5, 2016. In a letter to his parents dated July 20, 1962, Patterson elaborates on this profession: "Why am I in Orleans? Part of the job, selling books—children's encyclopedie [*sic*]. . . Orleans is about 60 miles south of Paris, very interesting historical [*sic*] with several interesting monuments and buildings but they can be seen quickly and in general this business of being a tourist has come to halt for some time with me." The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Archives, I.1005. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

8. Benjamin Patterson, letter to his parents, June 26, 1962. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Archives, I.1005. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

9. Filliou was born in France and lived in California, Egypt, and Denmark before arriving in Paris in 1961. Patterson arrived in Paris in 1962 after residing in Canada and Germany. Patterson explored tourism further in later works, including *Tour* (1963), a guided tour in which participants are blindfolded; *Reisebüro Fluxus* (1994), a travel agency that provided tours to Fluxus sites in France, Germany and Italy; and *My Grand 70th Birthday Tour* (2003), in which Patterson travelled to Mount Fuji in Japan via the trans-Siberian express, staging Fluxus concerts along the way.

10. I am especially grateful to Jon Hendricks for pointing out the connection to *Excursions et visites Dada: 1ère Visite,* and for many informative and enjoyable discussions about Patterson's works in the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection. For more information on the *1ère Visite,* see: Janine Mileaf and Matthew S. Witkovsky, "Paris Dada," in Leah Dickerman, *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2006), 354; and Marius Hentea, *TaTa Dada: the Real Life and Celestial Adventures of Tristan Tzara* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2014), 161–162.

11. "A battle over leisure is taking place . . . whose importance in the class struggle has not been sufficiently analyzed. . . . the ruling class is succeeding in making use of the leisure that the revolutionary proletariat extracted from it by developing a vast industrial sector of leisure." Guy Debord, *Report on the Construction of Situations* (June 1957), in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents,* ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 45–46.

12. Bertrand Clavez contrasts the Situationist concept of "psychogeography" with Patterson's performances involving walking through the city, including the *vernissage* of his puzzle-poems in Filliou's Galerie Légitime as well as *A Very Lawful Dance for Ennis* (1962) and *Tour* (1963). Associating Patterson's performances with walking employed as a form of protest since the Montgomery bus boycott, Clavez asserts: "The displacements proposed by Patterson, though apparently innocent, had a deeply political meaning, whereas those performed by the Situationists were, despite their political assertions, more closely related to the history of the French bohème." Clavez also contrasts psychogeography with Daniel Spoerri's notion of topography: "Topography settles an open situation in which chance operations can turn into anecdotes, networks, and exchanges of utilities and ideas. Topography shows the situation as a ground and not as a field—that is, as a place to meet and not as a place to fight—whereas geography . . . is of military origin. Filliou's *Galerie Légitime* might be the best example of this open situation." Clavez, "Patterson's Parisian Years," 206, 208.

13. Guy Debord, "Architecture and play," trans. Gerardo Denis, in *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City,* ed. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani, 1996), 53–54.

14. For example, Filliou's *Poème Roulette* allowed viewers to create a poem by spinning a roulette wheel to select words. See: Michael Erlhoff, *Robert Filliou* (Hannover: Sprengel-Museum, 1984), 110–111,148. Similarly, Emmett Williams's "universal poems" were composed by the audience on blank sheets of paper with rubber stamps provided by the artist. See Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 51.

15. Pierre Restany, *60/90: Trente Ans de Nouveau Réalisme* (Paris: La Différence, 1990), 76.

16. Patterson explained: “The viewer . . . had to participate because you had to put these together to get the meaning . . . What I always liked about them was that the poems were double-sided so you really had to study to see if you had all the right sides up.” Benjamin Patterson, telephone conversation with author, April 5, 2016. Filliou’s “suspense poems,” made of found objects and distributed through the mail piece by piece, similarly frustrated instant gratification. See: Natilee Harren, “La cédille qui ne finit pas: Robert Filliou, George Brecht, and Fluxus in Villefranche,” *Getty Research Journal* 4 (2012): 129–130.

17. Robert Filliou, “The Principles of Poetic Economy,” in *Robert Filliou* (Hannover: Sprengel-Museum, 1984), 131–132.

Alma Thomas, *Untitled* (c. 1968) and *Fiery Sunset* (1973)

Natalie Dupêcher
Museum Research Consortium Fellow, MoMA / Princeton University

In an interview given in 1978, Alma Woodsey Thomas relayed an anecdote that would come to dominate critical interpretations of her work.[1] Stricken with arthritis in 1964 and unable to paint, she was reinvigorated by an invitation from James A. Porter to stage a solo show at the Howard University Gallery of Art.[2] "I decided to try to paint something different from anything I'd ever done," she recalled. "Different than anything I'd ever seen." Her search ended with an intensely personal discovery: "Why, the tree! The holly tree! I looked at the tree in the window, and that became my inspiration. . . . And every morning since then, the wind has given me new colors through the windowpanes."[3] This account set the terms: her subsequent work would be described as predicated on observation and transformation of the natural world—and, above all else, as coloristic.

By her own admission, too, color was one of Thomas's greatest and most abiding interests. Loosely associated with the Washington Color School painters, she was interested in the color theories of Johannes Itten and declared an affinity with Van Gogh (both she and Van Gogh, she said, worked in the "modern style of 'color being the sole architect of Space'"[4]). In late 1961, she attended the exhibition *The Last Works of Henri Matisse: Large Cut Gouaches* at The Museum of Modern Art, which prompted, two years later, her own, painted version of the French artist's cut-out *Snail*.

Less often remarked is her paintings' seemingly equal investment in exploring multiple angles of vision and imagined physical spaces. In interviews in the 1970s, the artist discussed the visual perspectives that she called upon in constructing her pictures: the first, the view from sitting at her kitchen table, afforded a look *out*, into her yard, at the trees and flowers—a lived, horizontal angle of vision; the second, a viewpoint of imagined verticality, looked *down*, on the world, as though from an airplane or spacecraft.[5] "I began to think about what I would see if I were in an airplane," she said in an interview in 1978. "You look down on things. You streak through the clouds so fast you don't know whether the flower below is a violet or what. You see only streaks of color. And so I began to paint as though I were in that plane."[6] From *across* and from *above*: these are the viewing positions into which Thomas imagined herself, and the space of beholding that the works create for the viewer. But the horizontal and vertical often coexist in a single picture, creating a rhythmic movement that oscillates between the two orientations.[7]

MoMA acquired its first two works by Thomas in 2015. Of the two, the untitled drawing (pl. 8.1) comes closer to exemplifying the artist's signature "Alma stripe" in which brush-shaped blocks of paint file down the canvas in vertical bands. Thomas often sketched out her compositions and rendered them as small watercolors before committing them to canvas. This drawing, for which she stapled and taped together several pieces of paper, looks like an artifact of that working process—an impression heightened by a water ring left behind by a drinking glass. However, the drawing lacks the penciled-in grid marks characteristic of many of Thomas's other preparatory drawings. How was the drawing made, and what kind of space does it seek to occupy? Is a picture a window or a workbench?[8] In this drawing, as in many of Thomas's works, the answer is "both."

Fiery Sunset, 1973, is a recognizably later work: the brush blocks have become irregular commas and dabs, touched on at odd angles. They no longer obey an ordered verticality, but scatter horizontally, within nodding distance of an all-over composition. The color tones darken from bottom right to top left: it could be dusk, with the sun tucking into the bottom corner and pulling light around itself. It is easy to imagine this as a scene Thomas observed from her window, looking out. At the same time, her comment about looking down from above—"nurseries as seen from planes that are airborne"[9]—reorients the painting's imagined space from the window to the ground. It suggests an aerial perspective, the city aglow as the sun sets.

In 1924, Thomas was the very first graduate of Howard University's fine arts program; in 1972, she became the first African American woman to be accorded a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. It was a small show, installed in a one-room gallery off the museum's main lobby, but nevertheless, it received a number of positive reviews. More firsts came in 2015, when Thomas's work was acquired not only by MoMA, but also by the White House Historical Association. With that, her painting *Resurrection* (1966) became the first artwork by an African American woman to join the White House Collection.

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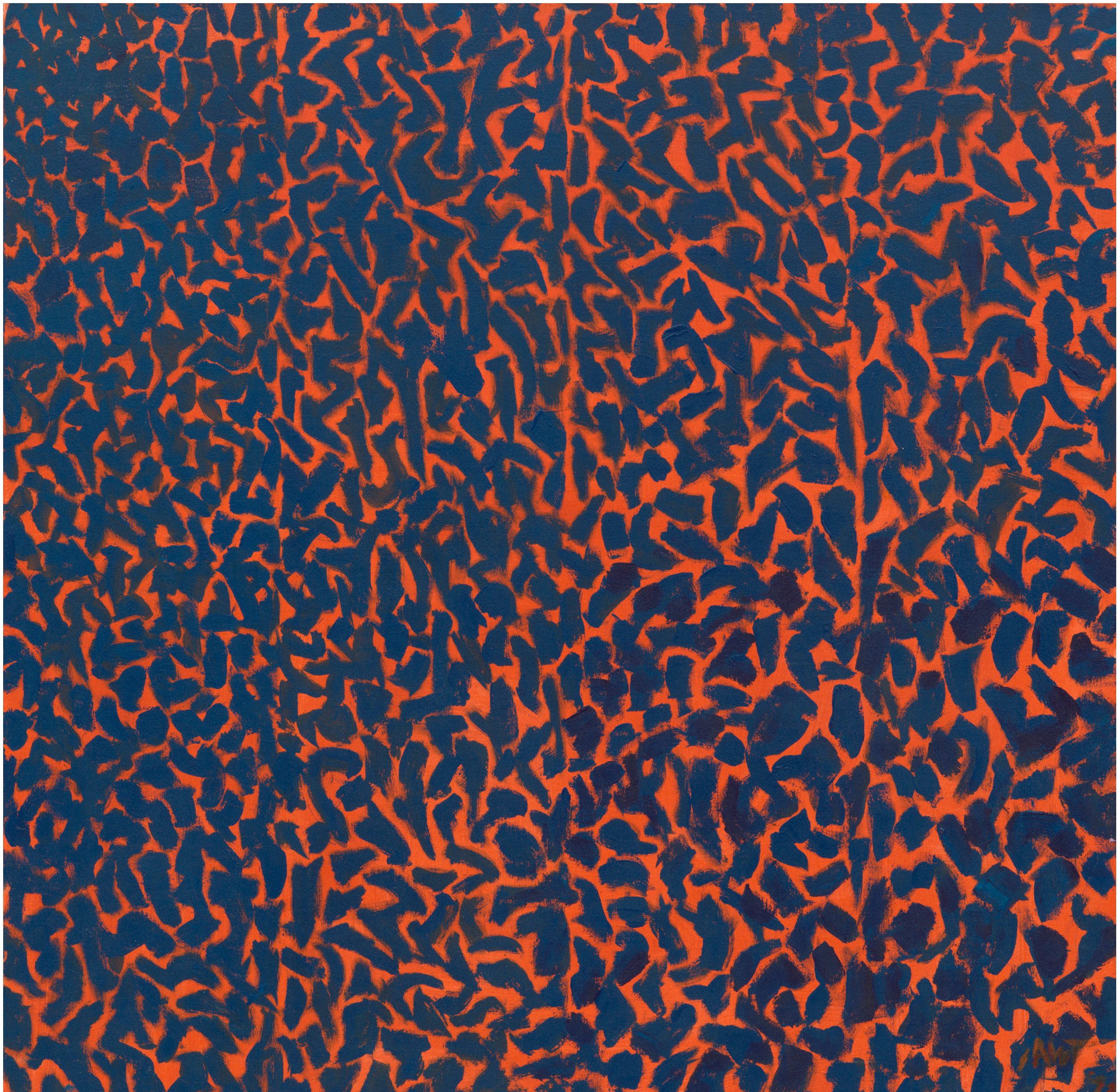
Pl. 8.1 Alma Woodsey Thomas (American, 1891–1978). *Untitled.* c. 1968. Synthetic polymer paint and pressure-sensitive tape on cut-and-stapled paper, 19 ⅛ × 51 ½" (48.6 × 130.8 cm). Gift of Donald B. Marron. 299.2015



Pl. 8.2 Alma Woodsey Thomas. *Fiery Sunset*. 1973. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 41 ¼ × 41 ¼" (104.8 × 104.8 cm). Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds. 505.2015

NOTES

1. Thomas became a full-time painter in 1960, at the age of 69, when she retired from teaching.

2. The resultant exhibition, *Alma Thomas: A Retrospective Exhibition (1959-1966)*, was held at the Howard University Gallery of Art in 1966.

3. Alma Thomas, quoted in Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 194. Reprinted in *Alma Thomas*, exh. cat. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem; Saratoga Springs, NY: The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery; Munich: DelMonico Books/ Prestel, 2016), 227.

4. Alma Thomas, quoted in *Alma W. Thomas: Paintings* (New York: Martha Jackson Gallery, 1973), n.p.

5. Thomas's works from the late 1960s are often divided into two groups on the basis of subject matter, a division that the artist herself encouraged. "My earth paintings," she wrote in 1972, "are inspired by the display of azaleas at the Arboretum, the cherry blossoms, circular flower beds." (This artist statement was reprinted in *Alma Thomas* [2016], 216.) For her space paintings, she took space exploration as a source of inspiration, declaring this connection in titles like *The Launching Pad*, *The Blast-Off*, and *Snoopy Sees the Earth Wrapped in Sunset*. But however much these groups are set apart by their subject matter, they are linked in their mixing of horizontal and vertical perspectives, conjuring multiple physical spaces and viewing angles.

6. Thomas in *Originals: American Women Artists*, 194. Reprinted in *Alma Thomas* (2016), 227.

7. For another take on Thomas's interest in space exploration, see Kellie Jones, *Energy/ Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964-1980*, exh. cat. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006). Jones writes that Thomas "imagined seeing her visions of earthbound flora from 'way up there on the moon' or 'planes that are airborne' [...], which signaled her progressive, forward-looking vision or Afro-Futurist thinking" (24). See also Lauren Haynes, "Painting Space," in *Alma Thomas* (2016), 101-105. Haynes argues that Thomas's "interest and response to space exploration and technological advancement" were another expression of the continual growth of her practice.

8. I think here of Leo Steinberg's essay "Other Criteria," in which he describes a radical change in "psychic address" in paintings from the 1950s, notably those of Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Dubuffet. The pictures, he writes, "no longer simulate vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals," and "the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes" (84). "The consistent horizontality," he continues," "is called upon to maintain a symbolic continuum of litter, workbench, and data-ingesting mind" (89). See "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 55-91, esp. 82-91.

9. Thomas in *Recent Paintings by Alma W. Thomas: Earth and Space Series, 1961–1971*, exh. cat. (Nashville, TN: Carl Van Vechten Gallery of Fine Arts, Fisk University, 1971), n.p.

Betye Saar, Black Girl's Window (1969)

Abbe Schriber
Columbia University

Extraordinarily crafted and meticulously detailed, *Black Girl's Window* (pl. 9) marks a key transition in Betye Saar's art. As part of her Mystic Windows series (1965–1970), the work encloses etchings and other prints within the frame of a found window or door and features occult imagery and materials sourced from thrift shops, parking lots, flea markets, and alternative bookstores.[1] However, *Black Girl's Window* also heralds what Robert Farris Thompson has called Saar's "ancestral phase," which emerged with her increasing black political consciousness.[2] After 1970, the artist's sculptural assemblages comprised altar-like structures invoking vodun, hoodoo, and other African diasporic spiritual practices.[3]

For Saar and many of her interlocutors and critics, the black silhouette in the bottom pane of *Black Girl's Window* stands in for the artist. She has frequently discussed the work as a self-portrait, its coded symbolism alluding to fate, destiny, and her own astrological identity.[4] A 1970 photograph (fig. 9.1) taken in Saar's studio in Los Angeles pictures her with hands resting atop the work's frame, as though to corroborate her close association with the assemblage. Yet *Black Girl's Window*, produced four years after the Watts Rebellion and one year following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., maintains a tension between private intuition and public upheaval. By 1969, Saar had divorced her husband and was living with her three daughters, supporting the family by working as a costume designer at L.A.'s Inner City Cultural Center. The work's closeness to Saar's sense of self, nascent feminism, and black girlhood reframes autobiography as a form of open-ended unknowing. Whereas the window motif traditionally lends itself to metaphysical exploration, in this instance, it helps Saar question the conventions of self-portraiture and challenge the very possibility of self-knowledge.

There is evidence to suggest that the "window" in *Black Girl's Window* might, in fact, be a door. The object's narrow proportions and small scale indicate that it could have been attached to a curio cabinet or small display case, while the placement of its hinges and latch suggest that it would open toward the viewer.[5] This hypothesis does not change the interpretation of the work as embodying a liminal psychic threshold, its assembled materials simultaneously occupying real and enframed, imagined space.[6] However, viewing

Fig. 9.1 Betye Saar in her Los Angeles studio, 1970

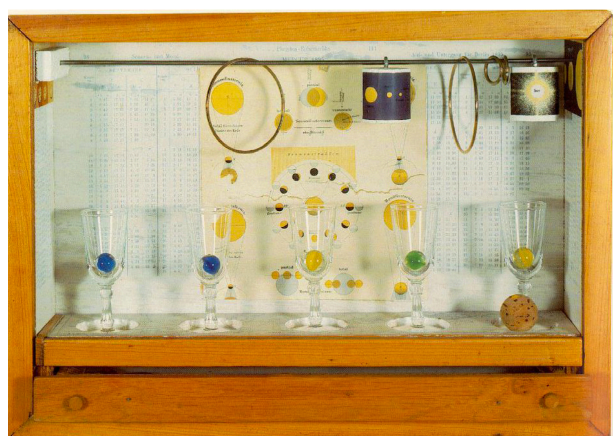


Fig. 9.2 Joseph Cornell. *Untitled (Solar Set).* c. 1956–58. The Robert Lehrman Art Trust

the window as cabinetry fits with Saar's structural use of compartments. While printmaking remains crucial to its construction, *Black Girl's Window* is among the first of Saar's pieces in which three-dimensional objects extend beyond the picture plane. Refusing the illusionist space of traditional painting, the window is used as a physical support to be looked at rather than through.[7] Saar "brought the graphics through to the other side,"[8] as she phrased it, and glued a black skeleton figurine and a found photograph, or "instant ancestor,"[9] to the front surface of the glass. Each of the top nine panes displays a distinct image: three of them include intaglio-printed crescent moons and six-pointed stars; others feature a cartoon skeleton, a painted lion, a

Pl. 9 Betye Saar (American, born 1926). *Black Girl's Window.* 1969. Wooden window frame with painted pasted paper, lenticular print, framed photograph, and plastic figurine, 35 ¾ × 18 × 1 ½" (90.8 × 45.7 × 3.8 cm). The Modern Women's Fund and Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds. 549.2013

vintage advertisement showing two schoolchildren—their skin colored in brown—with the numbers "6" and "9" affixed in the lower left corner, and a hand-colored phrenology chart superimposed over the top of a head (also colored in brown) shown in profile. In its intimate staging and jewel-box-like containment, the work is in dialogue with Joseph Cornell's Surrealist boxes (fig. 9.2), which Saar encountered in 1967 at the Pasadena Art Museum's Cornell retrospective.[10] After seeing Cornell's work, Saar began to use functional objects as framing devices. Her assemblages from that year, such as *Omen* (fig. 9.3) and *Vision of El Cremo* (fig. 9.4), introduce boxes and items such as metronomes and sliding drawers, which invite viewer interactivity. In *Black Girl's Window,* the eyes of the silhouetted figure in the lower pane are made of material found in trading cards, advertisements, and novelty items that allows for three-dimensional effects without the use of 3-D glasses or other external optical devices. When observed by a moving spectator, the figure appears to blink, such that its fantastical aliveness depends on the viewer.

Fig. 9.3 Betye Saar. *Omen.* 1967. Faith and Richard Flam Collection, California

Black Girl's Window echoes the broader use of futurist themes and esoteric knowledge by African-American artists and musicians in creating allegories of black liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[11] The painted silhouette in the lower pane reveals open palms decorated with the planetary symbols of palmistry, a gesture that some critics have connected to the desire for escape or a psychological condition of entrapment.[12] In fact, Saar derived her images of hands from the palmistry signage that proliferated in 1960s Los Angeles. She recalled seeing these signs at local gypsy encampments in the preceding decades; their arcane symbolism impacted the young Saar, as did colorful, vernacular sites around the city. For example, the Watts Towers, the longtime project of self-taught artist and architect Sabato (Simon) Rodia, held importance for many Los Angeles-based artists and revealed to Saar early on that junk and obsolete materials could find new, enigmatic life.[13]

Fig. 9.4 Betye Saar. *Vision of El Cremo.* 1967. Palmer Museum of Art, The Pennsylvania State University

Incorporating mystical symbols as signs rather than conduits, *Black Girl's Window* is not the product of a conjure woman or shaman in direct contact with the spirits, but an investigation of metaphysical aspiration as it is mediated by language and images.[14] This assemblage does not yet embrace the pointed critique of racial ideology found in Saar's later works, which include objects marketed as banal, racist kitsch. For instance, in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972, (fig. 9.6), Saar re-appropriates and empowers the figure of Aunt Jemima, a stereotype of black women's domestic labor emblazoned on a wide range of commercial products

Fig. 9.5 Betye Saar. *Liberation of Aunt Jemima*. 1972. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. In this case, Saar incorporates a string holder given the form of an Aunt Jemima figurine that holds a broom in one hand and a gun, added by the artist, in the other.[15] In *Black Girl's Window*, the hand-coloring of the brown figures indicates Saar's developing awareness of how visual culture produces or excludes black subjects. Yet, by maintaining ties to the window threshold and mystical phenomena, the work articulates black femininity through desire and aspiration—in other words, as an ever-changing, open question.

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NOTES

1. Betye Saar, *African American Artists of Los Angeles: Betye Saar* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program of the University of California, 1990), Tape 3, side 1.

2. Robert Farris Thompson, “Betye Saar, Chance and Destiny,” in *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (New York: Prestel, 2011), 72.

3. See Jane Carpenter, “Conjure Woman: Betye Saar and Rituals of Transformation, 1960–1990.” PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2002.

4. In a 1975 interview, Cindy Nemser noted the work as having “a special meaning . . . almost like a trademark.” Nemser, “Interview with Betye Saar,” *Feminist Art Journal* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1975–76): 23. Writer Ishmael Reed similarly echoed, “So then it’s like Betye Saar’s window and not a Black Girl’s window.” Ishmael Reed, “Betye Saar, Artist,” in *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 148.

5. I thank MoMA conservator Linda Zycherman for sharing her thoughts on this subject and for suggesting this possibility to me.

6. In this I am informed by Rosalind Krauss’s reading of Cornell’s boxes as “an attempt to project the structure of a psychological process outward into the space of reality,” as well as Saar’s remarks that “the window is a symbolic structure that allows the viewer to look into it to gain insight . . . .” See Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 31; and Saar, quoted in Jane H. Carpenter and Betye Saar, *Betye Saar* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Press, 2003), 15.

7. Consider, for example, Marcel Duchamp’s *Fresh Widow* (1920) or Ellsworth Kelly’s *Window, Museum of Modern Art, Paris* (1949). Each of these works mobilizes opacity to different ends: while Duchamp alludes to the impossibility of transparency in painting and language, Kelly uses the window as an anti-compositional device, meant to reduce the subjective presence of the artist and disrupt the conventional function of the index. See Yve-Alain Bois, “Ellsworth Kelly: Anti-Composition in its Many Guises,” in Ellsworth Kelly, Jack Cowart, Alfred Pacquement, and Yve-Alain Bois, *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948–1954* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1992), 9–36.

8. Nemser, “Interview with Betye Saar,” 23.

9. This apt phrase is Deborah Willis’s; Saar has often referenced the image as a stand-in for her white Irish grandmother. Deborah Willis, “Looks and Gazes: Photographic Fragmentation and the Found Object,” in *Betye Saar: Extending the Frozen Moment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 22.

10. Several Cornell boxes with themes of astronomy, navigation, and cosmology were included in the Pasadena exhibition.

11. Kellie Jones cites John Szwed’s discussion of Sun Ra and parallel Afrocentric spiritual epistemologies: Egyptology, African divinities and religions, the Nation of Islam teachings, the black church, and African-American folk practices such as conjuring and hoodoo. Jones, “To /From Los Angeles with Betye Saar,” in *Eyeminded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 170. See also Carpenter, “Conjure Woman,” as well as the crucial documentation of how black artists melded art with community praxis in *Now Dig This: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960–1980* (New York: DelMonico, 2011). More broadly, assemblage allowed materials to enact and signify blackness as open-ended and dependent on the viewer’s interpretation, avoiding the limitations of figurative realism. See also Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 164.

12. For instance, Cindy Nemser’s proposal of “the little black girl with her nose pressed against the window looking out.” Nemser, “Interview with Betye Saar,” 23–24.The symbols on the palms correlate to names of Greek or Roman gods, which in the study of palmistry are assigned to each area of the hand.

13. Saar, *African American Artists of Los Angeles*, Tape 3, side 1.

14. Many critics have overdetermined Saar’s interest in the occult, conflating her interest in mysticism with the artist as an active spiritual medium. Lucy Lippard, among others, has incorrectly assumed that Saar maintains an active knowledge and practice of tarot, astrology, vodun, and palmistry. Lucy R. Lippard, “Sapphire and Ruby in the Indigo Gardens,” in *Secrets, Dialogues and Revelations: The Art of Betye and Alison Saar* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California Los Angeles, 1990), 10.

15. Saar, *African American Artists of Los Angeles: Betye Saar* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program of the University of California, 1990), Tape 3, side 1.

Sam Gilliam, *10/27/69* (1969)

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Princeton University

On April 24, 1971, the Baltimore *Afro-American*, a newspaper targeting the black community, reported that Charles Wyche had been acquitted of kidnapping and first degree murder. He was a Black Panther and had spent over a year in jail awaiting trial. Two years prior, on October 27, 1969, the police had answered reports of a discovery of the sixth body in less than a year) in Leakin Park, Baltimore, Maryland. They quickly linked the crime to Wyche, among other possible assailants. The body—or what was left of it—belonged to Eugene Leroy Anderson, a Black Panther member suspected of having become a police informant. Under the aegis of J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI's Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPro) commenced aggressive surveillance and infiltration of the black nationalist group. Anderson had allegedly succumbed to law enforcement pressure and abandoned his pledge to black solidarity. His tattered clothes, barely draping his skeletal remains, signified a lesson perhaps, of a kind of intra-racial betrayal. In *10/27/69,* the large-scale abstract painting suspended from three leather thongs nailed to a wall, Sam Gilliam unveils such precarious formal and social allegiances. *10/27/69* dazzles and obscures, it is a work that is theatrically beautiful and anxious, perhaps, violent in its containment of bodily traces at the same time. As curator Jane Livingston remarked, Gilliam's work occupies "a position somewhere in between the realm of the frankly decorative painting-for-its-own-sake that Clem was telling us all to take seriously, and a new, rather uncomfortable and certainly unfashionable realm. . . the realm of the anthropomorphic."[1] Gilliam establishes for the viewer an embodied encounter with a work that obscures its reference to a slain body. This constellation of locations that Gilliam echoes the ways in which the public, black and white, was so deeply enthralled in the Anderson case. The black public in particular was not entirely convinced that Anderson was slain by his own party; some thought his murder was an attempt by the FBI to bring internal turmoil to the group's dwindling solidarity. Gilliam's title—the date of the discovery of Anderson's body—quietly indexes such mixed emotions and perspectives. What does it mean for an artist, a staunch abstractionist, a committed formalist who had just earned his stripes as the "son" of the Washington Color School, to sneak such a polarizing social event into the "sovereign" space of a gallery or museum?

When stretched to its full twenty-seven foot length, *10/27/69* reveals a series of painterly techniques used in its making: staining, soaking, pouring, dyeing, splattering. Installed, the work unfolds in three asymmetrical cascades flush against the wall like a sculptural relief resembling a baroque theater curtain or a billowing sheet spilling over an outdoor clothesline. Over fifteen feet long and ten feet high, it must be beheld optically but experienced spatially. Folding, gathering, and suspending are three of the operations most apparent in this work's structure; but upon further examination, *10/27/69* seems to almost evince its complexly painted surface. Echoing the canvas' lyrical movement, Gilliam has soak-stained the painting with a gradated concerto of vibrant, rose-colored pinks and golden yellows, shifting quite dramatically into a foreboding, dark application of violet acrylic pigment. Yet Gilliam's tonal shifts recur across the visible picture plane, unfurling in an almost dialectical sense. Red soaked passages might appear as canvas, or atop its very surface in splatters. Shadow and shading are intimated through purple and blue stains, yet rapidly questioned as literal shadows created by folds toppling one on top of the other. This is a monumental, durational work made over several cycles of staining, soaking, and waiting, across several folded arrangements and rearrangements, from the wall to the concrete floors of the studio and back, again and again. As much as the work alludes to the specific context of the tragic, violent events unfolding in Baltimore, it could also suggest a simple denotation of time passing in moments of pure speed and agonizing slowness.

The close of the 1960s was one of Gilliam's most dynamic periods of experimentation. Having just settled in Washington, D.C., he first explored geometric abstraction in paintings featuring permutations of polygons, triangles, interlocking rectangles, etc. In 1967 critic Paul Richard noted that it was "as if, between summer and winter," just before the announcement of the artist's first solo exhibition at the Phillips Collection to be held the following year, Gilliam had "abandoned the conventions of contemporary 'hard-edge' painting to return to the free brush work and fortuitous 'accidents' that liberated the action painters 20 years ago."[2] Indeed, when the artist completed *10/27/69*, he continued

Pl. 10 Sam Gilliam (American, born 1933). *10/27/69.* 1969. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 140 × 185" (355.6 × 469.9 cm). Sam A. Lewisohn Bequest (by exchange). 3.2014

to pursue operations such as folding and staining canvas that he had learned from Morris Louis, the established Washington Color School artist. *10/27/69* is a culmination of those earlier experiments, some of them evident in the work, others almost imperceptible. For example, the radiant sheen of *10/27/69* is the inheritance of Louis's innovative use of water tension breaker, a "gooey water-soluble acrylic pigment" added to acrylic paint to break down the medium's surface tension, thinning the paint and allowing it to soak into the canvas according to chance. Gilliam sometimes added aluminum powder to his works to produce a luminous, silky, shimmering effect.[3] He created fluid, watery effects by integrating the formal concerns of hard edge abstractionists and Color Field painters such as Ken Noland and Tom Downing. For instance, in *Shoot Six* (1965), he carefully constructed diagonal planes of paint by demarcating them with masking tape, which was removed after the paint had dried; in that work's blurry foil, *Paleo* (1966), he removed the tape while the paint was still wet.[4] Thus did Gilliam's experiments with geometric abstraction pave the way for the painterly processes he deployed in *10/27/69*.

Gilliam finessed the limits of the "waterbreaker" technique in several large-scale paintings combining multiple folds splattered with bright, cadmium-red paint. In *April 4* (1969), a work commemorating the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the artist seems to have been exploring how blood-colored paint splatters might signal politicized social events in an era of unyielding social turmoil. Still tethered to the formalist canon of modernist painting, Gilliam was simultaneously investigating the roles of scale and materiality in creating phenomenological encounters with a work of art, as were other artists at the time.[5] His interest in the work of Process and Minimalist artists such as Robert Morris underscores how he constantly sought to test such boundaries, as in the part-painting, part-installation work *Rondo* (1971), which was suspended from the ceiling and hemmed between the gallery wall and a wood beam.[6] Gilliam began testing the inherent qualities of cotton duck canvas—fluidity, looseness, and flexibility—as painterly properties. In the spring of 1968 he began to cluster, drape, and suspend heaps of soak-stained canvas. *Swing Sketch* (1968) was one of the earliest suspended paintings shown at the Jefferson Place Gallery's tenth-anniversary exhibition in August 1968. Gilliam's pivotal achievement with the drape paintings was that he dared to exchange illusory space for material presence, and wooden stretcher supports for architectural or environmental ones. Gilliam's canvases hung like curtains suspended from ceilings with ropes, or cascaded from walls. "I wasn't making sculpture," he argued. "I was reacting against painting."[7] For Gilliam, the art of painting had moved beyond surface and the horizontal picture viewed by an upright subject. Its broadened reach encompassed the spectator in an active, immersive experience. During preparations for the 1969 *Gilliam Krebs McGowin* exhibition at theCorcoran Gallery of Art, Walter Hopps, the curator, met with Gilliam and asked about his plans for the show. Gilliam reached for a watercolor on paper, crumpled and folded it, and presented it as a provisional model. Hopps maintained in 1970 that Gilliam, by accepting the spontaneity of drapery, produced a simultaneous tension and harmony, or even ambivalence, between the constancy of an unchanged painted surface and the open-ended variability of draped fabric.[8]

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NOTES

1. Jane Livingston, *Sam Gilliam, 1969–1975*, Klein Art Works, unpaginated. The essay was originally titled "Sam Gilliam: Small Drape Paintings 1970–1973" and was reprinted from a cat. published earlier the same year by a gallery in Washington D.C.

2. Paul Richard, "Sam Gilliam's Restless Art Cuts a Trail of Its Own," *Washington Post,* Aug 6, 1967
(E7).

3. Ibid. Artist Howardena Pindell has also spoken of "surface tension" in relation to Gilliam and African American abstraction. See "Interview with Howardena Pindell" in Kellie Jones, *Eye Minded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 231.

4. In an interview with Kenneth Young in September 1984, Gilliam accounts for his radical shift from hard-edge abstraction to fluid, unstretched works, arguing that "it was necessary to turn away from a sort of formalist dogma into a fluent doctrine that was more process oriented and that was equally intuitive. http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sam-gilliam-11449.

5. Critical to understanding the historical context of draped paintings would be a retracing of the dialogues about scale, space, the nature of sculpture, and a work of art's environment that Gilliam engaged in with artists Rockne Krebs and Ed McGowin. Walter Hopps's 1969 exhibition *Gilliam Krebs McGowin* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. sparked a conversation among the featured artists, all of whom were based in the capital. The work of Eva Hesse, Robert Morris, Daniel Buren, Claude Viallat, and Richard Tuttle are also relevant.

6. Howardena Pindell, then an assistant curator in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books at The Museum of Modern Art, linked Gilliam to the procedural in MoMA's 1974 exhibition *Printed, Cut, Folded and Torn,* whose title derived from the 1964 Free Speech Movement rallying cry in Berkeley, California: "I Am a Human, Do Not Cut, Bend, Spindle, Fold." *New York Times* critic Peter Schjeldahl called the exhibition "dubious," citing the "over-emphasis on technical matters in shows of new art" as "a common sin of museum staffs these days. . . . At a loss for any notorious new movement to proclaim, many curators seem to fall back on this sort of thing in preference to making hard critical judgments or asserting a personal sensibility. Thus revelations of how artists make art—an elevated but still cozy form of shop talk—stand in for any revelations of the meaning or value of that art." Peter Schjeldahl, "Non-Event at the Museum of Modern Art: Graphics Show on a Specious Theme," *New York Times*, July 21, 1974.

7. Sam Gilliam, oral history interview, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Nov. 4–11, 1989.

8. Walter Hopps and Nina Felshin Osnos, "Three Washington Artists: Gilliam, Krebs, McGowin," *Art International*, May 20, 1970, 32.

On the Verge

Ashley James
Yale University

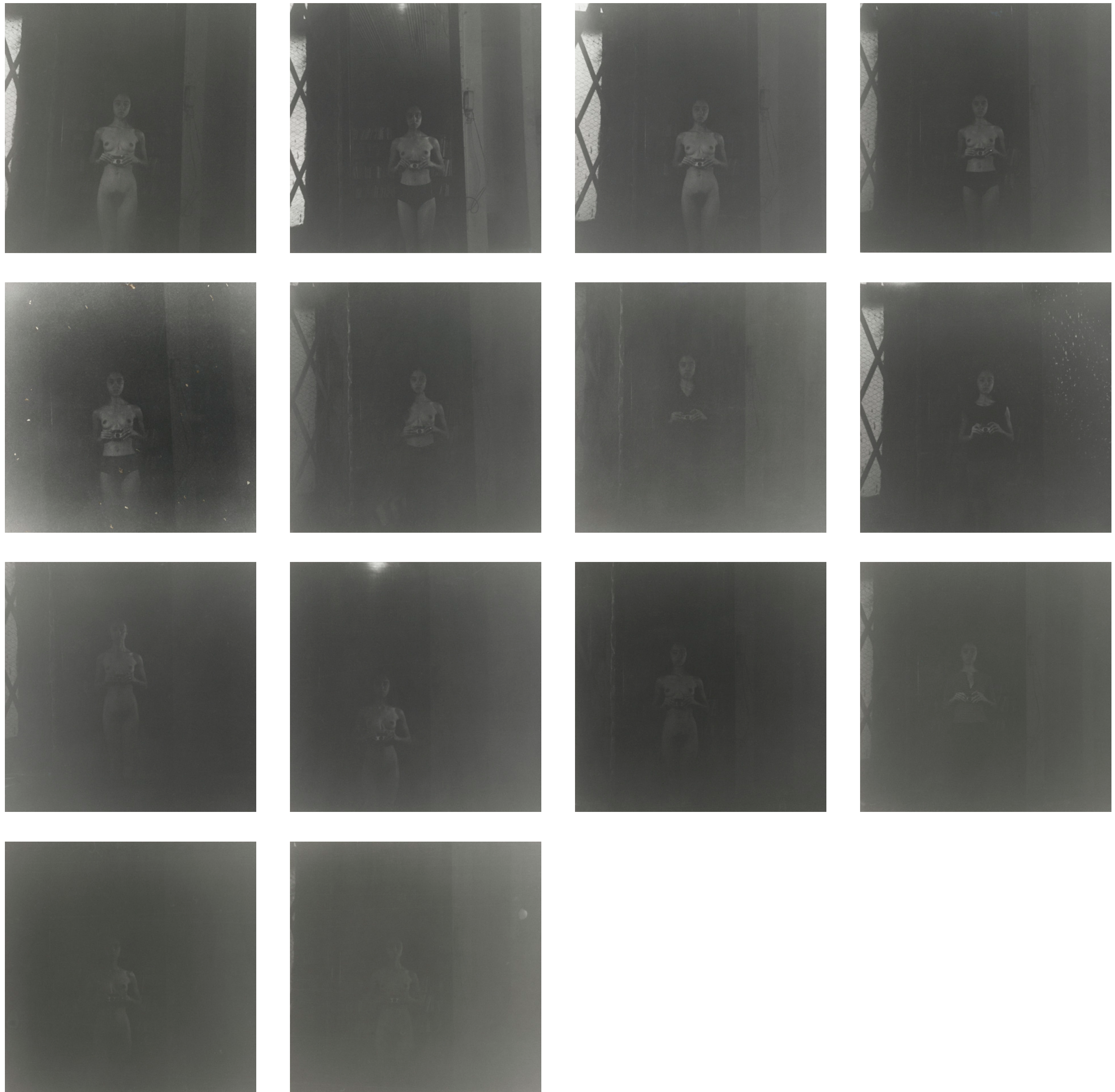
During the summer of 1971, Adrian Piper sequestered herself in her Lower Manhattan apartment and subsisted on juice and water while devoting herself to the study of philosopher Immanuel Kant's foundational text, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781–1787). Over the course of two months, Piper found herself increasingly consumed by Kant's writings, to the extent that she began to experience what she perceived as an encroaching disembodiment: she was literally losing the bounds of self through her engagement with a text that takes as its subject the limits of being—an effectively doubled undoing. "I would have to stop reading in the middle of a sentence, on the verge of hysterics, and go to the mirror to peer at myself to make sure I was still there," Piper later recounted.[1]

In an attempt to stave off what she took to be her increasingly likely material dissipation, Piper decided to document herself photographically. She tethered a Kodak camera to the frame of her full-length mirror, and at the onset of each bout with immateriality, would snap her reflection while standing in roughly the same position in front of the mirror. In conjunction with the photographs, Piper made sound recordings of herself reciting passages from the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The resulting sonic index of her physical presence was intended as a means of further solidifying her existence. "The sight and sound of me, the physically embodied Adrian Piper . . . reminded me of the material conditions of my mental state, that the *Critique* was a book with good ideas in it that I had chosen to study, and not . . . the entrance into a transcendent reality of disembodied self-consciousness," Piper later reflected.[2] In addition to the photographs and sound recordings, Piper also made copious notes on the *Critique*.

The public presentation of *Food for the Spirit* was both belated and fractured. Because the work was conceived as a private project, it was not initially intended to be viewed by an audience. The public was first made aware of it not through an exhibition but in writing, when Piper referenced *Food for the Spirit* in an article in *High Performance*, a now defunct arts quarterly, in the spring of 1981—a full decade following its making.[3] It would be another six years before the photographs were shown, in a retrospective for the artist held at the Alternative Museum in New York, in 1987.[4] For the show, Piper selected fourteen of her snapshots for inclusion, which she arranged in a notebook alongside her annotated pages ripped from the *Critique*. Yet *Food for the Spirit* has never been, and never will be, exhibited in its complete form. While some of Piper's annotated passages of Kant were included in this first exhibition, the sound recordings were not: they had been destroyed inadvertently by the artist's former boyfriend. Consequently, the original aural component of the work was never presented alongside the visual and written elements. Moreover, despite the survival of the written elements, the photographs have been given primacy, for in the 1990s, Piper enlarged the fourteen images to a sixteen-by-sixteen-inch format, and this is the form, unaccompanied by text, in which *Food for the Spirit* has come to be known.[5] The photographs are exhibited both as a set and individually; The Museum of Modern Art is one of the few institutions that owns the complete set of fourteen images.

While *Food for the Spirit* was a singular, arguably idiosyncratic philosophical experiment, Piper's interest in philosophy had been developing since the late 1960s and stemmed from the Minimal and Conceptual art practices in which she was engaged. Upon entering the School of Visual Arts in 1966, Piper significantly shifted her practice from figuration to an abstraction urgently concerned with the boundaries of art, a practice pursued first through systematic, schematic drawings and paintings often utilizing the grid; then through photographic documentation; and later through public performances foregrounding the artist's own body.[6] The year before she made *Food for the Spirit*, Piper carried out *Untitled Performance for Max's Kansas City*, a work in which she attempted to transform herself into a "disinterested" Minimalist art object by blindfolding her eyes, plugging her ears and nose, and concealing her arms in long gloves; she then roamed about Max's Kansas City, the popular Greenwich Village artists' hangout, in this muffled state.

Piper's aesthetic provocations, like those of other Minimalists and Conceptualists, stemmed from larger philosophical questions surrounding subjectivity and objectivity. However, as the art historian Kobena Mercer has observed, Piper's conceptual trajectory diverges from dominant pathways of the late '60s mainly because her initial pursuit of such questions took a distinctive Kantian route, and also because



Pl. 11 Adrian Piper (American, born 1948). *Food for the Spirit*. 1971. 14 gelatin silver prints, each 14 ½ × 14 ¾" (36.8 × 37.5 cm). Printed by Barbara Mensch, 1997. Number 2 from an edition of 3. The Family of Man Fund. 374.1998.114

she extended her inquiries into the academy, eventually obtaining a PhD in philosophy from Harvard in 1981.[7] *Food for the Spirit*, though it predates her professional academic career, is an index of what would later be revealed as Piper's lifelong investment—both through aesthetic and academic channels—in the study of what it means *to be,* as a living, breathing body in time and space, and often on the verge.

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NOTES

1. Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight: Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992, Vol. I*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 55.

2. Ibid.

3. Adrian Piper, "Food for the Spirit," *High Performance* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1981).

4. *Adrian Piper: Reflections 1967–1987* was curated by Jane Farver. The exhibition was shown at the Alternative Museum, New York, April 18–May 30, 1987.

5. John Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 289–90.

6. Adrian Piper, *Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object,* English/Italian edition, (Bari, Italy: Marilena Bonomo, 1975).

7. Kobena Mercer, "Adrian Piper, 1970–1975: Exiled on Main Street," in *Exiles, Diasporas and Strangers* ed. Kobena Mercer. Annotating Art's Histories: Cross-Cultural Perspectives in the Visual Arts (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 147.

John Outterbridge, *Broken Dance, Ethnic Heritage Series* (c. 1978–82)

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In an interview conducted in the late 1980s, the Los Angeles-based artist John Outterbridge explained the rationale behind his series of figurative assemblages titled Ethnic Heritage:

> *One thing about that series, too, was that it gave me an opportunity to research notions of a folk, like folk medicine, and recipes regarding voodooism, and things of that nature. . . . I looked at the doll series, the Ethnic Heritage group, as a body of work that would assist me in something that I really had not done yet, and that is to extend the fabric of many of the tales that are still untold from my sensibility, my point of view.*[1]

The series was composed of thirty-seven assemblages that Outterbridge produced from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. According to the artist, the first work in the group was *Sister Mamie,* a ragdoll he made for his daughter in 1971. The doll was dressed in Sunday finery—a fur-trimmed cloth coat, hat, pumps—and clutched a small purse. Constructed from found materials, *Sister Mamie* reflects Outterbridge's long relationship with the practice of salvaging, extending back to the salvaging work of his parents in North Carolina during the Great Depression. Later works, such as *Broken Dance*, express the artist's interest in excavating the cultural and affective ties between American and African cultures, and in addressing the socio-political realities of Black American experience in the United States. They also illustrate broad art historical concerns that reverberate throughout Outterbridge's practice.

Broken Dance combines the southern vernacular practices that Outterbridge remembers from childhood, the West African cultural expressions he studied, and the influence of Dada on late twentieth-century assemblage practices. The armless, doll-like figure, sits precariously atop a painted ammunition box with an attached radio antenna. Its large, inviting thighs, widely spread, are composed of sewn leather stuffed with rags and resin. Although the splayed legs appear welcoming and the pointed toe of the right foot grazes the ground ever so delicately, the left leg is amputated at the knee and ends abruptly in a primitive wooden prosthetic.[2]

The scrap-metal torso, fashioned mainly from a found faucet, has been described as bomb-like, a reminder of Outterbridge's experience in Germany during the Korean War, where he served as a munitions expert. The thighs and legs of the doll suggest a voluptuous femininity, while the faucet head clearly appears to be a phallic reference, one that perhaps conjures Max Ernst's leaky faucet, which addressed early twentieth-century anxieties about manhood in the face of increasingly emancipated women. Outterbridge's mutilated doll is a product of anxiety and trauma stemming from conflicts both at home abroad, but it is also beautiful, seductive, and rich in possibilities. Its hermaphroditic form suggests the generative and wholistic possibilities of collage, demonstrating that the medium is not just dispersive, but also collective.[3]

Outterbridge's multiple roles as artist, educator, and activist reflect a comparable collage of identities. At the time *Broken Dance* was made, Outterbridge was deeply engaged in assemblage work in Los Angeles. A transplant from North Carolina via Chicago, he had arrived in Los Angeles in 1963, two years before the Watts Rebellion. Dividing his time between working as studio technician and art director, and as an art handler at the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum), he expanded the repertoire of techniques he had learned from his father. During his years at the museum, Outterbridge encountered Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Mark di Suvero, among others, and gained full recognition of the profound marginalization of African American artists in the artworld discourse on assemblage.[4] It was this realization, as well as the 1960s Civil Rights movement, that compelled Outterbridge to dedicate himself to community art and activism initiatives. He volunteered at the Simon Rodia Art Center (at the Watts Towers), was cofounder and artistic director of the Compton Communicative Arts Academy, and directed the Watts Towers Arts Center from 1975 to 1992.

Through his personal and professional work, Outterbridge met artists such as David Hammons, Melvin Edwards, Noah Purifoy, Bettye Saar, Dan Conchalar, and John Riddle, who were integral to his artistic development. With them, in the immediate aftermath of the Watts Rebellion, he collected and incorporated into his work the detritus that

Pl. 12 John Outterbridge (American, b. 1933). *Broken Dance, Ethnic Heritage Series.* c. 1978–82. Stainless steel, wood, leather, sewn cloth, and ammunition box, 34 × 29 ¼ × 33" (86.4 × 74.3 × 83.8 cm). Gift of Marlene Hess and James D. Zirin. 56.2013

littered the streets and began using materials such as rags and steel. All of the artists in this group were producing Dada-inspired assemblages, mining the city and their communities for materials that would resonate with their audience, who happened upon their exhibition sites in parking lots, libraries, and community centers.[5] With time, increased levels of organization, the expansion of the Watts Center's cultural programming, and the growth of a number of small galleries devoted to showing their work, these artists, most of whom are now fully absorbed into the annals of art history, were able to create a discourse surrounding assemblage and its lineage in California.

In the Ethnic Heritage series, Outterbridge merged the results of his research into folk medicine, voodoo, and cultural superstitions in the US and Africa, with visual culture idioms from West Africa and Dada practices and histories. Through the humanoid form of a doll, he brought these practices and histories together, and also raised awareness of great limitations—indeed, amputations—in modern art history.

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NOTES

1. John Outterbridge, interview with Richard Candida Smith, 1989–90. African American Artists of Los Angeles, Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles. Transcript, Charles E. Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections, UCLA, pp. 544–45.

2. With regard to another work from the Ethnic Heritage series, *Tribal Piece,* the scholar A. M. Weaver writes, "I think Outterbridge's intent here is ironic, meant to imply sensuality and passion, as well as to play on Western stereotypes pertaining to black sexuality and discomfort with any reference to frontal nudity." A. M. Weaver, "Reflection on John Outterbridge." *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 35 (Fall 2014): 36. While not focused directly on representations of black sexuality, my exhibition proposal positions *Broken Dance* within a lineage of artworks that address concerns related to sexuality through female-gendered forms.

3. Elizabeth Alexander, "Collage: An Approach to Reading African-American Women's Literature" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1992).

4. Outterbridge installed large survey exhibitions of art from both the East and West Coasts at the Pasadena Art Museum from 1944 to 1968. In a 1973 interview, he recalled the high caliber of one exhibition in particular, and its failure to affect the plight of black artists: "It was a fantastic show. It really took a lot of work to install it. A lot did happen in California from 1944 through 1968. But nothing happened with black artists or any black individual, who was an artist, according to what was installed in that show."

5. Outterbridge explains that it was a tough time for black artists: "The only place we could show was in parking lots of supermarkets, libraries, and community centers."

New Orleans Video Access Center, Andy Kolker, Louis Alvarez, *The Clarks* (1978)

Desiree Mitton
Institute of Fine Arts, NYU

Between 1977 and 1979, the filmmakers Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker shot and produced a three-part documentary series, *Being Poor in New Orleans*, focusing on issues of gentrification, poverty, white fear, and black-on-black crime. Soon after its completion, the series, which includes *The Clarks*, aired as three half-hour specials on local Louisiana station WGNO-TV.

At the time, the racially fraught topic of socioeconomic disparity was rarely if ever treated diagnostically by the city's media. *The Clarks*' successful distribution must be read, then, in light of changes being brought about the availability of new, portable video equipment, which was opening a new chapter in American broadcast television.

From 1948 to the late '80s, three broadcasting corporations—ABC, CBS, and NBC—monopolized, produced, and distributed television content for American audiences. By the mid-l 1960s, low-cost, light-weight video recording systems had entered the American market, and by the '70s, community video centers had begun to form alliances with local network affiliates and commercially independent TV stations.[1] Soon, a DIY approach to videography had burgeoned into an alternative television movement. Michael Shamberg's *Guerilla Television*, published in 1971, supplied the tag line for the movement and a manifesto for the producers of its technological radicalism and anti-commercial content.[2]

The Clarks registers these institutional shifts in television production and distribution. Kolker and Alvarez were subsidized by the New Orleans Video Access Center (NOVAC), which was founded in 1972 and continues to support local, independent filmmaking today. NOVAC gave the pair free rein to produce video content with an activist agenda.[3] Shot over a six-week period, *The Clarks* shadows Mary Louise and seven of her ten children as they navigate the highs and lows of life in New Orleans's notorious St. Thomas Housing Project. The film is composed of interviews spliced with scenes of domestic life—conversations and family meals shown in medias res. The Clark children are introduced individually, at intervals. Ranging in age from eleven to twenty-two, they speak of their hobbies, daily life in St. Thomas, and their visions of the future.

In the style of cinema verité, the documentary embraces the grainy quality of its medium (color video) while performing the principles of its genre: assumed objectivity, fly-on-the-wall observation, dramatic zoom-ins, and handheld camerawork.[4] *The Clarks* formalizes a cinematic philosophy and set of epistemological assumptions, and it bears comparison to precursors such as Shirley Clarke's 1967 *Portrait of Jason*. The Big Easy, as romantically conjured by our cultural imaginary, has a sonic cameo in the film: the sounds of New Orleans streetcar bells overlay the opening credits; later, a brass band surges down the streets of St. Thomas. A verdant capital of African diasporic culture, historic New Orleans and its rich history of multiculturalism are not further represented.[5] *The Clarks* focuses instead on a rundown section of the Central City/Garden District, spanning over ten city blocks.[6]

Through the intensity of vertiginous close-ups and a calculated approach to montage, Alvarez and Kolker engender a sense of urban claustrophobia, formally intimating social constraint. Daily life outside the walls of the Clarks' home is obliquely referenced. As the camera trails the matriarch on outings to collect food stamps or attend church, it provides glimpses of football practice and a fast-food restaurant. Community life and autonomy appear heavily restricted by a concern for personal safety. Alvarez and Kolker emphasize the ways in which urban geographies disrupt and stifle communities, isolating individuals according to their race, gender, and class. Nonetheless, Mary Louise successfully heads a matriarchal kinship network that cares for all members of her extended family. While the documentary is a critique of both American race relations and hegemonic city planning, it is also a homage to kinship networks that persist despite insufferable social inequity.

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Pl. 13 New Orleans Video Access Center, Andy Kolker, and Louis Alvarez.
The Clarks. 1978. Video (color, sound), 30 min. 479.1988

NOTES

1. Deidre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

2. Michael Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971).

3. NOVAC is the longest continuously running media-arts nonprofit in the southeastern United States. "New Orleans Video Access Center," accessed June 20, 2016, http://novacvideo.org/about.html.

4. Stephen Mamber, *Cinema Verite in America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974).

5. Richard Brent Turner, *Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

6. Alexander J. Reichl, "Learning from St. Thomas: Community, Capital, and the Redevelopment of Public Housing in New Orleans," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 21.2 (1999): 169–87.

Howardena Pindell, *Free, White and 21* (1980)

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The Graduate Center, CUNY

Howardena Pindell made *Free, White and 21* at a pivotal moment in her life and career. Shortly after leaving her post as Associate Curator in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books at The Museum of Modern Art and assuming a teaching position at Stony Brook University in 1979, Pindell was in a serious car accident that resulted in partial memory loss. Through her art, she attempted to reconstruct her past. *Free, White and 21* inaugurated the first body of work she made after the accident, a series grounded in autobiography and formally characterized by a return to the figure. *Free, White and 21* was also Pindell's first video.[1]

Fig. 14.1 *Free, White and 21.* 1980. Video still

In *Free, White and 21*, Pindell recounts her experiences with racism, both the ones she suffered vicariously through her mother's retelling to those she suffered firsthand.[2] Looking directly into the camera with a deadpan expression—a reminder of racism's insidious banality—the artist relates a series of stories dating back to her childhood and extending to her professional career as an artist, including her participation in the feminist art movement of the 1970s. (The limitations of the movement's racial politics inspired Pindell to make *Free, White and 21*.[3]) The video's chronological narrative is punctuated by the artist's impersonation of a white woman who reappears sporadically throughout the film in cat-eye sunglasses, berating Pindell for being "paranoid" and "ungrateful" (fig. 14.1). The white woman stands in for the white-dominated art world, her dialogue lifted directly from conversations Pindell had had with her white female peers.[4] Pindell plays with the symbolic function of skin throughout the video.[5] In the final shot, she pulls a sheer white stocking over her head, as if she were a bank robber (fig. 14.2).[6] The whiteness of her face is juxtaposed with the blackness of her hands, a reminder that Pindell assumes whiteness in the way a white performer wears blackface—merely as performance. However, a white performer slips into blackface from a place of privilege, whereas Pindell, in her performance, emphasizes her lack of it. And while blackface is traditionally worn for comic effect, at the expense of the race being performed, Pindell puts on whiteness with serious intent: to interrogate it as the source of racial privilege and prejudice. Pindell makes a similar point by wrapping her head in white gauze until it is fully obscured, and then unwrapping the gauze to reveal her face once more (fig. 14.3).[7] In yet another scene, she peels what appears to be a layer of skin from her face, rejecting the meaning attributed to it (fig. 14.4).[8]

Fig. 14.2 *Free, White and 21.* 1980. Video still

These moments supplement the video's main narrative but are central to how the work functions as critique. To emphasize skin—whether as a physical attribute or, as in Pindell's personal narrative, as a symbol of raced-based oppression—is to foreground the power it commands. Pindell does not critique a specific group of people (i.e., white women or white feminists) even as she implicitly expresses her frustration with them.[9] Instead, she exposes mechanisms of power: the video emphasizes the extent to which Pindell's white peers have used the power granted to them by their skin color to determine the field of artistic expression

Pl. 14 Howardena Pindell (American, born 1943). *Free, White and 21*. 1980. Video (color, sound), 12 min.15 sec. Uneditioned. Gift of Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley, Anna Marie and Robert F. Shapiro, and Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis. 585.2008

Fig. 14.3 *Free, White and 21.* 1980. Video still

Fig. 14.4 *Free, White and 21.* 1980. Video still

from which she, as a black woman, is excluded. This is perhaps most evident when the white woman with cat-eye glasses tells Pindell: “You know we don’t believe in your symbols, they are not valid unless we validate them”; and “Your art isn’t political either, you know. I hear your experiences and I think, well, it’s gotta be in her art, that’s the only way we’ll validate you.”[10] Pindell spent most of the 1970s making purely abstract compositions—richly textured canvases covered in numbered dots with no direct relationship to politics or subjectivity. And even though she actively participated in and supported the feminist art movement, her abstract art could not be validated by the feminist community because it existed outside the artistic field established by her white female peers. Without this validation, Pindell’s art was effectively silenced. She used her video to highlight the fact that this silencing was arbitrary, enforced by women whose power stemmed from the fact that their skin was whiter than hers.

Whiteness and blackness are not simply categories assigned to individuals based on physical attributes. As Pindell assiduously underscores, they are also concepts that *universalize* subjects, producing fixed identities associated with skin color. Pindell’s impersonation of a stereotyped white woman is a case in point. The success of the performance is not measured by verisimilitude. Rather, its potency depends on the viewer’s ability to see the woman as the representative of a larger group, a recognition that can be achieved only through the subconscious tendency to universalize subjects based on race. By wrapping her head in gauze, Pindell shows that she is wounded by this tendency. In response, she performs a model of subjectivity that emphasizes *becoming*, a non-teleological expression of race that relies on the critical potential of the particular.[11]

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NOTES

1. Pindell received her BFA from Boston University, where she trained as a figurative painter, and then switched to abstraction as a graduate student at Yale in the late 1960s. Pindell made one video after *Free, White and 21*. The later video, *Doubling* (1995), has been shown at the Kitchen and is part of that institution's collection.

2. The stories she tells range from a tale about her mother being washed in lye because a white babysitter thought she was "dirty," to another about her own experience of being passed up for accelerated high school courses because her teacher felt that a white student with lower grades would "go further." In yet another, she recounts that she was sexually harassed by a minister at a friend's wedding, at which she was the only non-white guest.

3. "I became more active as a feminist but then I got disillusioned as I came more in touch with racism in feminism and my own struggle. It has to do with clarity. Here I was in New York, trying to form myself as an artist and I'm dealing with basically white women's issues. But I identified with issues of my blackness in a racist society. I would say I was always yanked back and forth between racism, classism, and sexism. As ideas were forming and crystallizing over the issues of race, I was turned off by the white women's movement because their attitude was, 'what women first.' They would sort of trot me out with this big heavy resume as their token." "Interview with Howardena Pindell," in Kellie Jones, *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 223.

4. Department of Media Art Artist questionnaire, The Museum of Modern Art.

5. Here I associate the word "play" with the experimentation and curiosity that often characterize the early, critically important stages of an artwork's development, when technique and approach have yet to be subsumed by an overarching structure or goal. I mean to suggest that Pindell is *exploring what skin can do* formally and symbolically. I thank my fellow MRC participant Yasmine Espert for prompting me to explain my use of this term.

6. "Several years after I made the tape, when I saw the ending, I felt that it was symbolic of the women's auxiliary of the KKK. Instead of a white sheet, like a bank robber, the white character covers her face with a "polite" white stocking." Howardena Pindell, "On Making a Video: *Free White and 21*," in *The Heart of the Question: The Writings and Paintings of Howardena Pindell* (New York: Midmarch Art Press, 1997), 65.

7. This act of wrapping constitutes yet another link to Pindell's autobiography. According to the artist, it refers to the injuries she sustained in her car accident. "Um, and in the tape, I wrap my head. A lot of people wonder why do I wrap my head? And that's because I had the head injury." Howardena Pindell, interview by Lynn Hershman Leeson, May 9, 2006, New York, NY, *!Women Art Revolution*, Stanford University Libraries & Academic Information Resources, https://lib.stanford.edu/files/Howardena_Pindell-Updated_2011_03_22.pdf.

8. Pindell has never explained how she produced this effect. It may be that she used some variation of a common exfoliating product that is applied on the face in a thin, clear layer and is meant to be peeled off.

9. For an example of this interpretation, see "Howardena Pindell, *Free, White and 21*," in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt (New York: Phaidon Press, 2003),129. I suspect that one reason for framing the work this way in feminist discourse in particular is that Pindell's purported critique of white feminism could then easily be acknowledged, especially by including it in survey projects on feminism, which are normally written by white women. It is much easier to "correct" an exclusion than to consider the very mechanisms by which exclusion takes place. I believe *Free, White and 21* calls for such a consideration and, meaning that its critique still stands *despite* its inclusion.

10. Pindell, "On Making a Video: *Free White and 21*", 69.

11. My thanks to Professor Kobena Mercer for his comments on my paper during the May study sessions, which prompted my thinking on this issue.

David Hammons, *Untitled (Night Train)* (1989)

Jenny Tang
Yale University

The poor are not dirty, but sacred. Did Arte Povera know anything of poverty? Do museums ever create safe harbor for those without home, who must make place out of nowhere? We have all survived under unlikely circumstances. Crossing oceans whose water could not satiate, the enslaved were shipped across borders as cargo. But we carry our own borders with us even as we cross others, and David Hammons's art still professes an abstract truth, a blue truth and a truth to the blues: that those who chose to journey, and those who chose because choiceless, shall inherit this earth.

The bottles of Night Train Express and Thunderbird that comprise the circle at the center of *Night Train* are not clean but dirty. The grit at the bottom of these bottles is the material remainder of the black lips that have touched them, the only trace of a touch that leaves no trace. In this way, the bottles might not be clean, but they are pure, for they have been purified by the lips that sipped, guzzled, and grasped at the open to satiate their thirst. Hammons takes as his material the discarded bottles of a thirst created not by poverty but the inadequacy of voice to lend expression to a need that has never been answered. In its unrelenting intimacy with coal and cheap, fortified wine, *Night Train* attests to the poetic beauty of the base and the cheap, to the things that we burn and the things that might burn us if we let them. As Robert Farris Thompson writes, Hammons "knows all the places where the winos hide, in shame, their bottles, under mail boxes, inside streetlamps, within cracks between the buildings." By exposing the bottles hidden out of shame even when discarded, "Hammons at once exalts traces of the spirit and arrests the seal and substance of addiction."[1] *Night Train* goes nowhere but might lead us somewhere.

The first iteration of *Night Train*, exhibited at P.S.1 in 1990 at Hammons's *Rousing the Rubble* retrospective, did not include the coal now gathered at its base. Coal was reserved instead for *Kick the Bucket*, made the previous year with the same bottles arranged in circular form, but with a bucket as a keystone. The bucket marked the highest point of an arc that, as Thompson puts it, "maps points along an alcoholic's life, contrasting pleasure to finality." Installed against the wall at P.S.1, *Kick the Bucket* resembled a cairn, an archaic grave marker, but turned the colloquialism *kick the bucket* (die with a resonant finality) into a solicitation by placing the bucket at its apex. No gravestone, then, but a higher goal to aim for. Installed nearby on the gallery floor, *Night Train* resembled *Kick the Bucket*'s unencumbered döppelganger, standing still but capable of rollicking forward at any moment.

Now with coal at its base, *Night Train* is no less mobile but has become a portal, suggesting that the grave need not be a final destination. In a world that has left behind the discontented and the dispossessed, Hammons still takes them with him wherever he goes, rendering burden into poetry. The disjunctive spiral of bottles gives way to the rhythm of color, transparent and green glass modulated to echo in visual form the call of passing trains, telling you that time may be measured yet can form by new measures. The Polish poet Wisława Szymborska once suggested that we are divisible into material flesh and transcendent poetry. [2] Hammons is that rare artist capable of refusing this division, harnessing the poetic force of the material like a medieval alchemist determined to turn base metal into gold. Like an alchemist, Hammons regards matter as essentially transformative, catalyzing change and being changed in the process. As he once put it to Robert Sill, "I am going to make stuff with these new materials that doesn't necessarily have to do with my culture. But it will anyway, just because I made it."[3]

According to Sill, the public swimming pools in Hammons's hometown of Springfield, Illinois, were off-limits to African-Americans.[4] Consequently he never learned to swim, but since moving to New York in 1975, he has learned to dive and to dig in order to live. Robert Rauschenberg did the same, exalting transgression by dragging the street to his canvases. In breaking art's code, Rauschenberg remade it after his own image in his Combines. Hammons, having long ago lost faith in transgression, is happy to be a trespasser. In response to Sill's observation in 1994 that he always seemed to be able to stay one step ahead of the art world, Hammons said: "There are still so many cracks. I've got it figured out. They [the art world] don't know, can't figure out what I'm doing because they don't have anything to measure it with."[5] With *Night Train*, we are in a world out of measure, thirty seconds off an inch, a circle that is an incomplete embrace and therefore, perhaps, beyond measure.

Pl. 15 David Hammons (American, born 1943). *Untitled (Night Train)*. 1989. Glass, silicone glue, and coal, 42 × 42 × 30" (106.7 × 106.7 × 76.2 cm), width and depth variable. Gift of the Hudgins Family in memory of Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris. 53.2013

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NOTES

1. Robert Farris Thompson, "David Hammons: Soldier in the Army of Harlem's History," 1989, The Exit Art Archive, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

2. Wisława Szymborska, "Autonomy," *Wisława Szymborska: Poems New and Collected,* trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh (New York: Harcourt, 1998), 134.

3. Quoted in Robert Sill, "After Words," *David Hammons: In the Hood* (Springfield, IL: Illinois State Museum, 1994), 56.

4. Sill, "Introduction," *David Hammons: In the Hood,* 7.

5. Ibid.

Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras, *Flag Wars* (2003)

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Flag Wars is a documentary film about two communities in conflict in Columbus, Ohio. Shot over four years and first aired on PBS, the film portrays a historically black neighborhood, Olde Town East, as it witnesses an influx of gay, mostly white, homebuyers. Except for the opening scenes, which show archival footage of African-American families in 1950s Columbus, the film is shot entirely in the manner of cinema vérité: there are no interviews or voiceovers. Instead, the protagonists are tracked from a fly-on-the-wall perspective, creating a sense of immediacy and intimacy as they experience the unfolding of events. Narrative gaps are filled in with excerpts from national television and radio news broadcasts, attesting to the fact that the inequity and homophobia afflicting Olde Town East have become civic issues across the country.

For co-directors Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras, the question that sparked the film was "Does it look different when two historically oppressed groups try to live together?"[1] In response, the film provides nuanced characterizations of neighborhood residents as they struggle to contend with structural racism, homophobia, and privilege in the housing market, the judicial system, the media, and financial institutions. Home ownership, that quintessential part of the American dream, is the lens through which inequality—in the community, the media, and the law—is explored. The story of one resident, a spirited, terminally ill homeowner, gives the film its tragic arc. A single woman suffering from liver failure, she faces misdemeanor charges for failing to comply with housing codes she cannot afford to meet. The last five minutes of the film show scenes from her memorial service. These are followed directly by shots of a realtor assessing the interior of her vacant home, making it painfully apparent that while change is inevitable, it is not equitable.

Poitras's and Bryant's race and sexual orientation align the filmmakers with the communities in question. Bryant is black and grew up in Olde Town East; Poitras is white, lesbian, and an outsider to the neighborhood. Their collaboration suggests an attempt to overcome the power dynamics inherent in filmmaking. Voices from both sides are behind—and in front of—the camera.

The film's title alludes to the rainbow and Pan-African flags displayed in ever greater numbers on the homes in Olde Town East. For the filmmakers, these outward manifestations of allegiance to either the LGBT or the black community were emblematic of mounting tension and an entry point for examining how people present their private selves to the public.

Flag Wars carries on Bryant's commitment to remedying the under-representation of African-Americans in cultural fields as well as Poitras's interest in exposing the human impact of U.S. government policies at home and abroad. Bryant, while working as a graduate fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and as Director of Education at the Studio Museum in New York, was exposed firsthand to the art world's racial politics.[2] In 1974, she founded Just Above Midtown (JAM), a Manhattan gallery representing contemporary African-American artists such as David Hammons, Lorraine O'Grady, and Senga Nengudi. Poitras, after making *Flag Wars,* her first feature-length film, went on to direct a trilogy of films, *My Country, My Country* (2006), *The Oath* (2010), and *Citizenfour* (2014), focusing on the aftermath of 9/11 in the Middle East and domestic intelligence gathering, respectively. Poitras's work has since been the subject of exhibitions at Artists Space (2014) and The Whitney Museum of American Art (2016), both in New York.

Bryant and Poitras brought in collaborators to contribute to the film. Arthur Jafa, who worked on Julie Dash's 1991 *Daughters of the Dust*, the first widely distributed U.S. feature film directed by a black woman—about Gullah women in South Carolina—helped Bryant and Poitras create a visual style that echoes the film's storyline. Courtroom scenes have a bluish, anemic look, and in some scenes, experimentation with shutter speed affects the rendering of motion, making it seem choppy and the atmosphere unsettled.[3] A jazz score composed by Graham Haynes gives the film its aptly dissonant leitmotif.

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Pl. 16 Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras (American, born 1949 and 1964, respectively). *Flag Wars.* 2003. Video (color, sound). 86 min. Gift of the Jerome Foundation in honor of its founder, Jerome Hill. 809.2006

NOTES

1. Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras, "Flag Wars: Ask the Filmmakers," PBS, http://www.pbs.org/pov/flagwars/ask-the-filmmaker/.

2. Tony Whitfield, "Linda Goode-Bryant: Art Historian and Curator," *Artist and Influence* 13, 1994 (New York: Hatch Billops Collection).

3. Bryant and Poitras; "Flag Wars: Filmmaker Interview," PBS, http://www.pbs.org/pov/flagwars/interview/.

Julie Mehretu, *Empirical Construction, Istanbul* (2003)

Claire Schwartz
Yale University

Created for the 2003 Istanbul Biennial and shown at the 2004 Whitney Biennial before being acquired by MoMA, Julie Mehretu's *Empirical Construction: Istanbul* (pl. 17) attests to the artist's enduring engagement with architecture and urban space. The canvas displays the characteristic grammar of Mehretu's oeuvre, in which maps, blueprints, pop culture imagery, vernacular forms, and abstract marks are layered in large-scale paintings comprised of both local and global symbols. Mehretu explains: "[*Empirical Construction*] is a portrait of a city, a personal response to Istanbul/Turkey and its relationship (metaphorically) to the rest of the world."[1] In this work, Mehretu engages the architectural history of Turkey, drawing on Istanbul's iconic Hagia Sophia and the ancient Tower of Babel as points of departure.[2] Legible symbols, such as the star and crescent of the Turkish flag, exist in dynamic concert with abstract lines and planes as well as with signs pushed to the brink of abstraction—such as the parallel rows of red, white, and blue triangles in the upper right quadrant, which evoke pennants hung in a stadium. Devoid of specific symbolic content, the flag-like shapes signal only the fact of affiliation, and questions of identity formation and national belonging are set out for interrogation.[3]

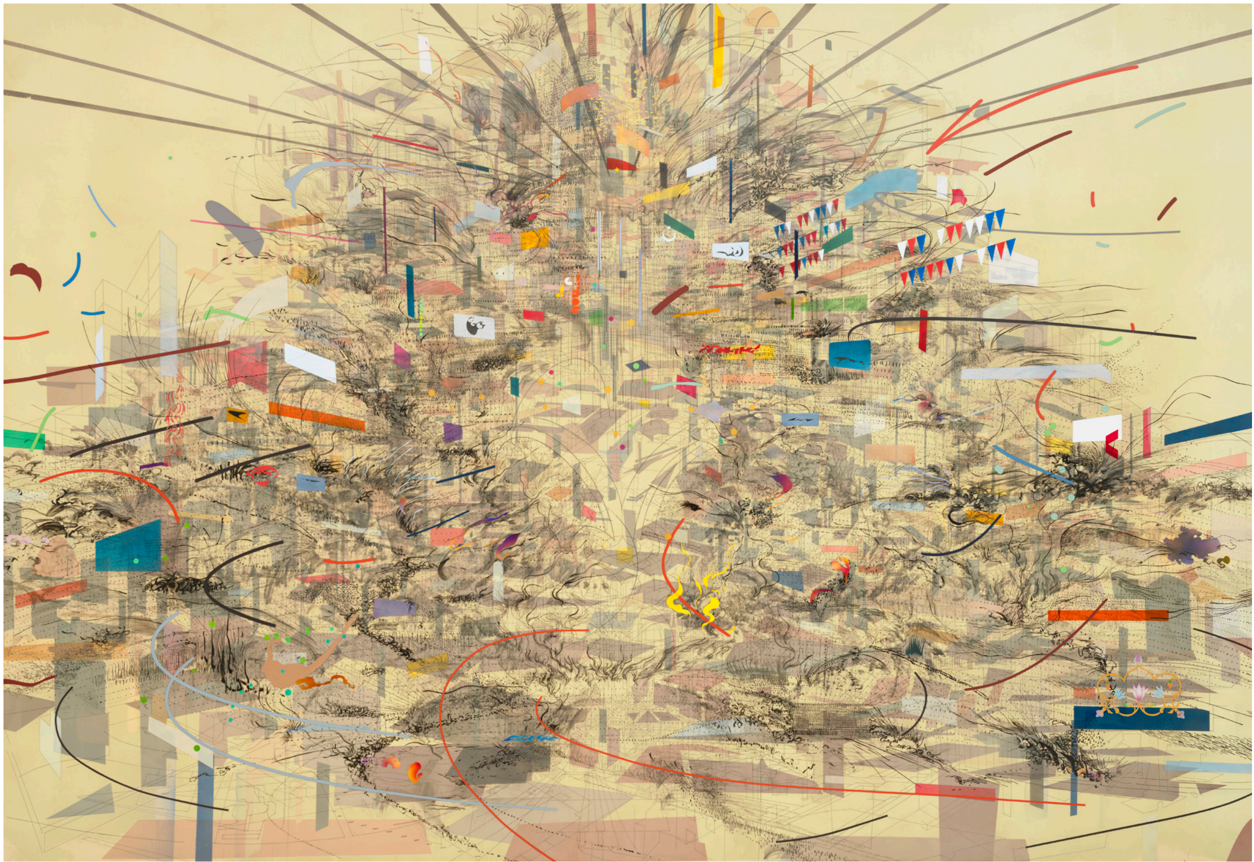
The work's title foregrounds experience (as opposed to appealing to logic) as fundamental to the urban encounter; and the spectrum of legibilities that populate the canvas demands that the viewer subordinate the impulse to make sense. "Empirical's" sonic resonance with "empire" also summons the role of colonialism in the making of the global city. The former capital of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, the city now called Istanbul straddles Europe and Asia, sharpening questions about regional affiliation and global flows. In *Empirical Construction*, these questions are evoked not only by the archival source material, but also by the distribution of matter. Even as the concentration of content in the middle of the canvas endows the painting with a center of gravity, dispersed gestural lines diffuse the point of view. A sparse patch in the midst of the chaos induces a sense of vigorous reconstitution, a feeling that "the center cannot hold."[4]

The scale lends the canvas a sculptural quality, suggesting that the viewer position and reposition herself before it. No single point of view is sufficient to absorb the whole. The size invites the viewer to step back; the layering and detail beckon her to approach. This play between distance and immersion enacts an undoing of Cartesian logic, playing out an intersubjective encounter as meaning is made and remade in relational positioning. Here, maps and blueprints do not function as overdetermining structures, but are instead unleashed as available vocabularies that comprise but one component of experience. Gestural marks of Sumi and India ink—Mehretu refers to them as "characters [that] plotted, journeyed, evolved, and built civilizations"—populate the top layer of the painting.[5] The impartial posturing of architecture's clean lines is relinquished, as the ink's uneven smudging foregrounds the artist's hand and the materiality of the medium.

Mehretu's work has been exhibited widely in solo and group exhibitions, including, notably, MoMA's *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* (2002).[6] Curator Laura Hoptman, riffing on Richard Serra's famous contention that "[d]rawing is a verb," holds that "for many artists today drawing is . . . a noun."[7] Her exhibition converged a cohort of contemporary artists whose drawings are neither sketches nor studies, but finished products.

While Hoptman usefully positions Mehretu alongside other artists who, in turning to the visual vocabulary of architecture, occasion a reflection on the conventions of representation in the making of social space, Mehretu's deployment of drawing with/in painting locates her work unstably between being and becoming, between building and ruination. Thin layers of silica and acrylic paint mimic mylar or vellum and endow the canvas with depth and a sense of accrual, reminiscent of the palimpsest of urban fabric, where multiple temporalities coexist.[8] Even as the sealant marks the bottom layers as off-limits—a past that cannot be directly accessed—its glossy, screen-like quality introduces a digital aesthetic, gesturing to another realm of global connectivity, a future that is perpetually unfolding.

Critics tend to view Mehretu's work in one of two ways. There are those who laud her non-figurative canvases as "post-racial" and others who read the work through the prism of the artist's identity as a black, biracial lesbian



Pl. 17 Julie Mehretu (American, born Ethiopia, 1970). *Empirical Construction, Istanbul.* 2003. Ink and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 10 × 15' (304.8 × 457.2 cm). Fund for the Twenty-First Century. 323.2004

born in Addis Ababa and raised in Michigan. Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick offers a way out of this critical bind. She writes: "If we imagine that traditional geographies are upheld by . . . [a] language of insides and outsides, borders and belongings, and inclusions and exclusions, we can expose domination as a visible spatial project that organizes, names, and sees social differences (such as black femininity) and determines *where* social order happens."[9] McKittrick's formulation of "domination as a visible spatial project" reveals the radical possibilities of geography for (re)considering social formations, and poses the question: what alternative modes of sociality emerge when conventions of social space are thrown into crisis? *Empirical Construction: Istanbul* probes these conventions, making way for new representational possibilities and relationships.

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NOTES

1. Collection Records, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

2. The Hagia Sophia, which was first a Greek Orthodox Church, then a mosque, and is now a museum, is among the architectural structures that are of interest to Mehretu for having outlasted their original functions.

3. Flags recur throughout Mehretu's work and are notable, for example, in *Stadia I* and *Stadia II* (2004). In discussing the series, Mehretu links the sporting sites to the disciplining of spectatorship and identity across a range of events: "Having spent time in Istanbul, Germany, Australia and then back in the States, I was really interested in how our whole experience of viewing the world was mediated through television and newspapers. It felt almost like following a match or a sporting event." See "Julie Mehretu by Lawrence Chua: Artists in Conversation," *Bomb* 91 (Spring 2005), http://bombmagazine.org/article/2714/julie-mehretu.

4. "The center cannot hold" is a line from W. B. Yeats's 1919 poem "The Second Coming," which expresses uncertainty about the state of Europe in the aftermath of World War I. The relief in density at the heart of *Empirical Construction, Istanbul* similarly evokes questions about the future of metropolitan/colonial centers and the social relationship they scripted in the context of a shifting global order.

5. Laurie Firstenberg, "Painting Platform in NY," *Flash Art* 35, no. 227 (November/December 2002): 70.

6. *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* revisited Bernice Rose's landmark 1976 exhibition of the same name. Rose's exhibition sought to reposition the medium—degraded as unserious by mid-century modernists—as uniquely able to serve as a record of the creative process.

7. Laura Hoptman, "Introduction" in *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 12.

8. Not only is the urban fabric composed of objects built at different times, the global city is also characterized by varied temporal structures. For more on jagged urban temporalities, see Okwui Enwezor, "Lagos in the Culture of Twentieth Century Modernity," in *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Iwona Blazwick (London: Tate Gallery, 2001), 45. Enwezor elaborates: "[The] very constitution [of modern cities] runs counter to Enlightenment logic. Take a small neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York: here we have arrived at the limits of historical narration that connects time and space. . . . [In] the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights . . . Hasidic Jews and Caribbean immigrants . . . occupy the same spatial grid, but live an entirely asynchronic temporality. Friday evening: as the deeply religious Haredim hurry home to observe Sabbath . . . [a] few blocks away the Caribbean youth prepare for an evening of reverie and social rituals that help bind them not to a place but to a culture; to an imaginary homeland."

9. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xiv.

Glenn Ligon, *The Death of Tom* (2008)

Swagato Chakravorty
Museum Research Consortium Fellow, MoMA / Yale University

Glenn Ligon received a BA from Wesleyan University in 1982 and took part in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. By the early 1990s, he had developed a distinctive artistic practice, combining textual appropriation and painting in works—on paper, linen, canvas, or wood panel—inscribed with passages from the writings and speech of a wide array of well-known figures, many within the African-American cultural canon. Ligon used stencil, oil stick, paint, and sometimes coal dust to repeatedly inscribe fragments of text, allowing the dense material to exceed the stencil's limits as he moved the device from left to right, and from the top of the composition to the bottom, forming each letter one after another. The process produced clear, legible text in the top few lines, but farther down, the letters' distinct forms gradually eroded and bled into an illegible black mass (figs. 18.1,18.2). Ligon recalls that he originally wished to keep the stencil and the paintings' surfaces "pristine" but found the failure of his attempts to do so unexpectedly productive.

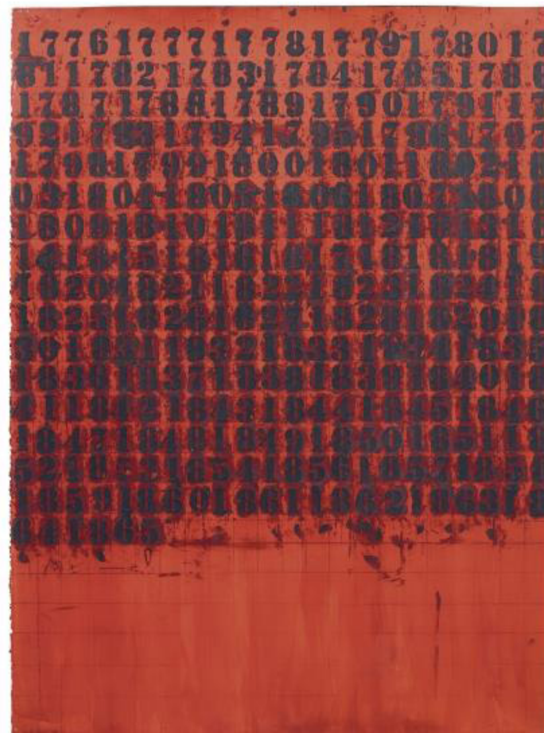


Fig. 18.1 Glenn Ligon. *Untitled* (1776–1865). 1991. Gouache, oil stick, and graphite on paper, 30 × 22 ¼" (76.2 × 56.5 cm). Collection Barbara and Howard Morse

This "failure" effectively underscores Ligon's personal ambivalence—resistance, even—toward strains of art historical discourse that tend to read art produced by African-American and black artists as "black art," thus obscuring the specificity of such works under what Kobena Mercer has identified as the "burden of representation." Ligon characterizes his approach as "more open-ended, more about questioning positions than establishing a single position," emphasizing that "[L]ack of location is [his] location." We find something of this indiscriminatory spirit across his text paintings, words for which come just as readily from Zora Neale Hurston and James Baldwin as from Jean Genet and Gertrude Stein. The absence of a specific position from which Ligon's text paintings "speak" arguably also signals the artist's own threshold position as a black, gay artist who has exhibited at many of the world's leading art institutions. Such resistance to self-identification with(in) a specific discursive position, as articulated through his text-painting work, helps contextualize his film *The Death of Tom* (2008).

The Death of Tom is a record of Ligon's efforts to recreate the final scene from Edwin Porter's 1903 adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852). At the turn of the century, traveling stage adaptations—"Tom Shows"—featuring a mix of white actors in blackface and supporting black actors were a performance staple across America. In the eponymous scene, Tom's death segues into a series of images that envision future black emancipation. Ligon created *The Death of Tom* at the Alberta College of Art and Design, where he had been invited by curator Wayne Baerwaldt to a four-day residency. Working in collaboration with cinematographer Deco Dawson and three students, Ligon cast himself as Tom to recreate the scene. However, the 16mm black-and-white film "[had not been] threaded properly and the result was a fluttering, out of focus image." Nonetheless, he decided to use the footage, transferring it to tape and subsequently DVD for exhibition purposes. Commissioned to contribute a score, the jazz composer and pianist Jason Moran adapted vaudeville performer Bert Williams's "Nobody" for the purpose. The film, according

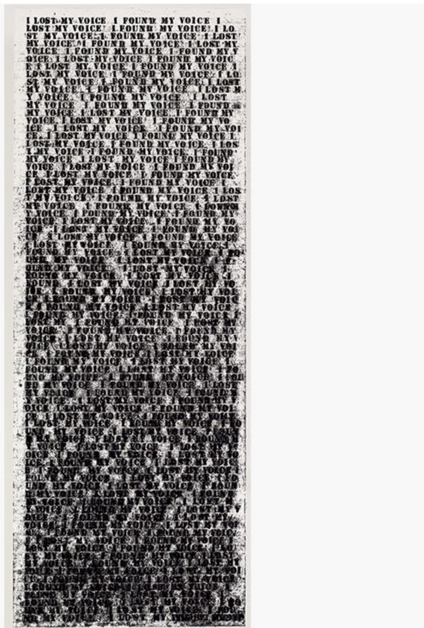


Fig. 18.2 Glenn Ligon. *Untitled (I Lost My Voice I Found My Voice).* 1991. Oil stick, gesso, and graphite on wood, 80 × 30" (203.2 × 76.2 cm). Collection Emily Fisher Landau

to Ligon's highly precise instructions, is intended to be screened in a light-tight, black-box environment.

In conversation, Ligon emphasizes first that *The Death of Tom*—his initial foray into moving-image art—should be considered an *installation* rather than a *film*, and second, that it should be understood as an *expansion* of his text-painting work rather than a *departure* from it. Although his positions may appear counter-intuitive, closer consideration of two aspects of his text paintings mentioned earlier—failure and illegibility—offers clarification, even as they underscore the threshold position *The Death of Tom* occupies within MoMA's institutional context.

The stencil's failure to contain the marks Ligon inscribes onto the surface of his text paintings— that is to say, the impossibility of keeping the surface "pristine"—indicates a coincidence of technique and subversion of stated intent. This failure articulates the messiness of history, memory, and narrative, as though insisting that boundaries invite transgressions. Commenting on *Untitled (1776–1865)* (1991, fig. 18.1), in which Ligon stencilled on paper the numbers of each year from 1776 (date of the American Declaration of Independence) through 1865 (the putative abolition of slavery), Huey Copeland remarks that "Ligon's work not only points to the lapses of memory that have been required for the republic to imagine itself but also suggests how the selective occlusion of the past continues to falsify our imaginings of the present." Certainly, the failure of recording and representation in *The Death of Tom* extends Copeland's analysis, linking historical erasures with the historical illegibility of the black body. However, more pertinent to Ligon's insistence upon the work's status as installation rather than (as well as?) film, might be to read Copeland's assertion of "selective occlusion of the past" in relation to institutionalized narratives that variously circumscribed cinematic spectatorship as well as film's fraught relation to the other arts. *The Death of Tom*, embodying technological failure and illegibility, and occupying a space between the thinness of the projected image and the fullness of architectonic form, challenges us to rethink the history of race and representation in cinema, the history of cinema vis-à-vis museums, and, especially, the history of race, cinema, and exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art.

The Death of Tom comprises numerous retakes and rehearsals, but its images elude identification of any bodies or concrete forms (fig. 18.3). We might think about this by recalling Jean-Francois Lyotard's notion of *acinema*. Framing cinema in terms of a libidinal economy of movement, Lyotard suggests that "bad" movement—moving images that are "dirty, confused, unsteady, unclear . . . " comprises cinema's intolerable excess. Acinema is resistance and therefore also political; it refuses assimilation

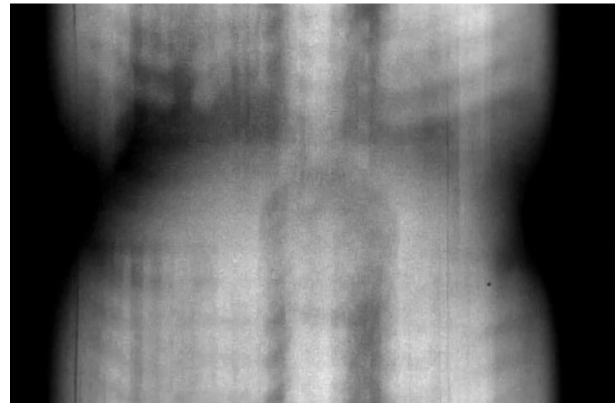


Fig. 18.3 Glenn Ligon. *The Death of Tom.* 2008. Film still

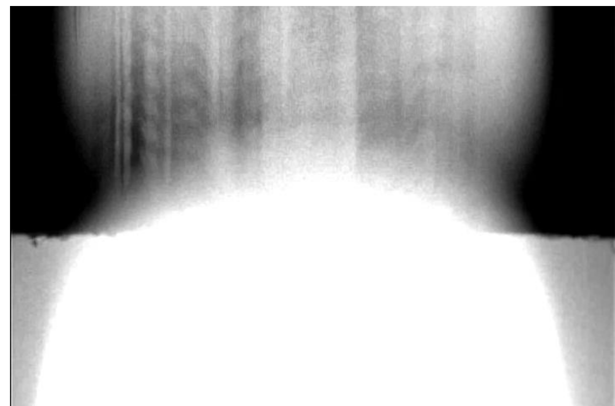


Fig. 18.4 Glenn Ligon. *The Death of Tom.* 2008. Film still

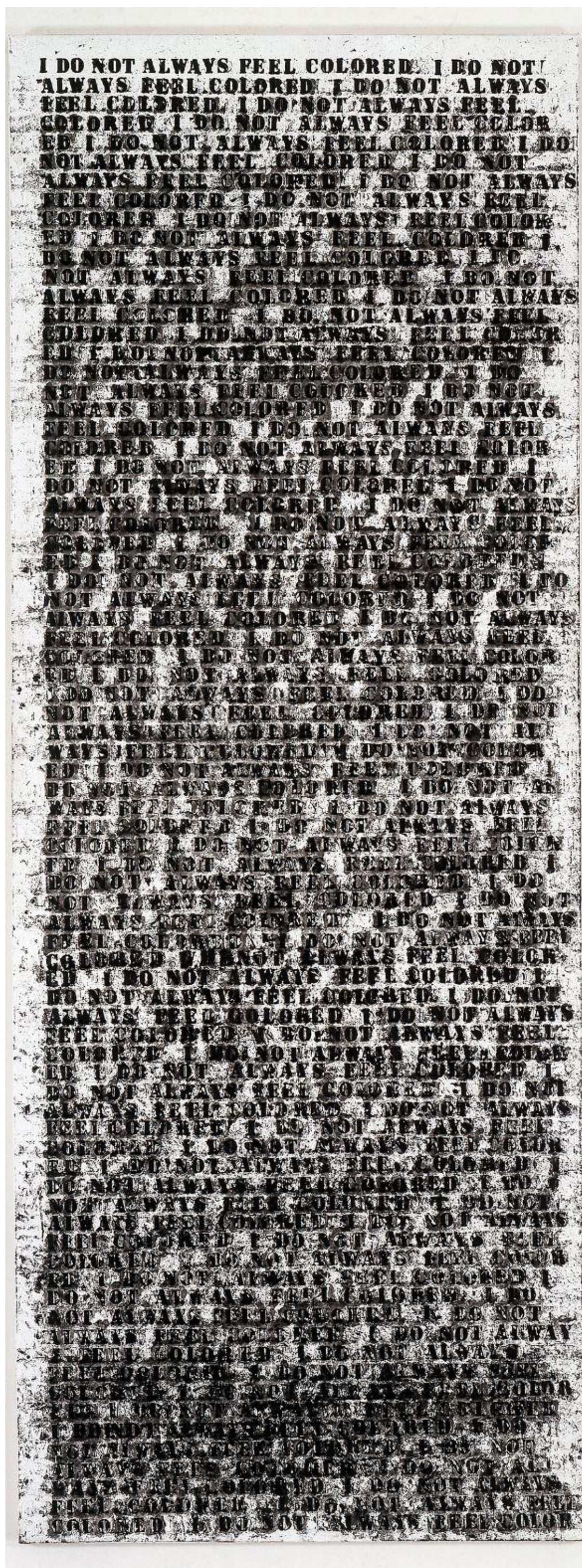
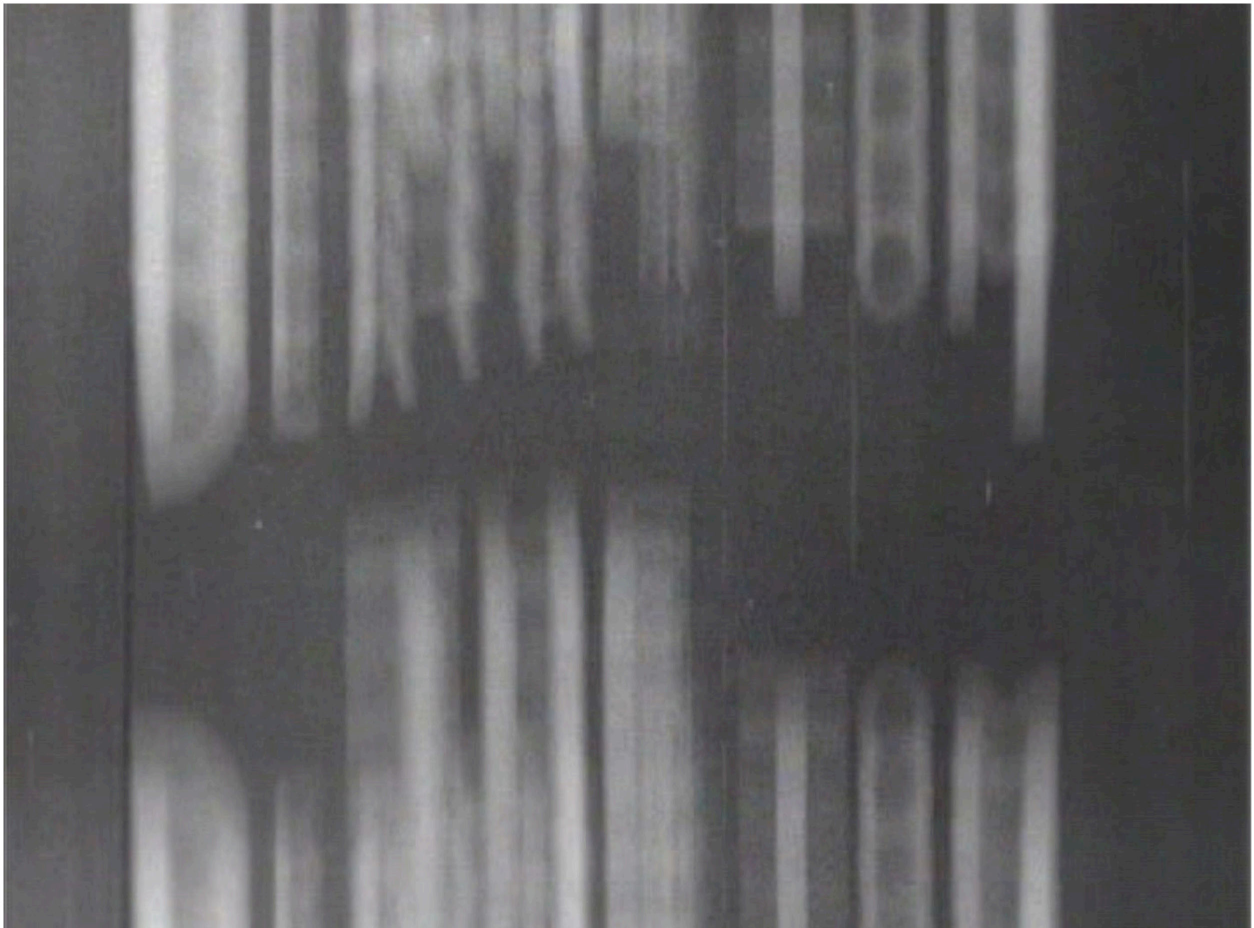


Fig. 18.5 Glenn Ligon. *Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored).* 1990. Oil stick and oil on wood, 80 × 30" (203.2 × 76.2 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of The Bohen Foundation in honor of Thomas N. Armstrong III

Fig. 18.6 Glenn Ligon. *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background).* 1990. Oil stick, gesso, and graphite on wood, 80 × 30" (203.2 × 76.2 cm). Collection Eileen Harris Norton



Pl. 18 Glenn Ligon (American, born 1960). *The Death of Tom.* 2008. 16mm film transferred to video (black and white, sound), 23 min. Gift of Agnes Gund, Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis, Ninah and Michael Lynne. 63.2009

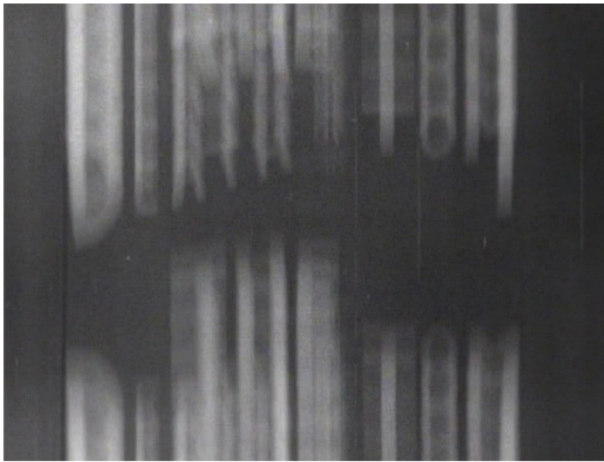


Fig. 18.7 Glenn Ligon. *The Death of Tom.* 2008. Film still

into or compliance with the dominant representational order, thereby calling into question the right to look. Midway through the work, an extended sequence appears in which the entire screen is flooded with dazzling white luminance (fig. 18.4). For the spectator, ensconced until this point in the darkness of the black box of the theatrical *dispositif*, this irruption of intense light is a distinct shock. Its unexpected duration can produce discomfort, a sense of being exposed, an all-too-sudden-consciousness of one's fellow spectators. Previously indistinct shapes in the theatre abruptly resolve into sharp visibility. This sequence and its effect re-mediate a pair of Ligon's text paintings from 1990: *Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored)* and *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)* (figs. 18.5 and 18.6), in a sense literalizing their implied duality.

Mobilizing failure and illegibility toward critical ends, *The Death of Tom* intercepts basic spectatorial curiosity ("What am I seeing?") and redirects it: "What am I *not* seeing?" "*Why* am I not seeing it?" An alternate line of thinking thus initiated, the *conditions of exhibition* become the object of curiosity. The work's sole concession to legibility perhaps constitutes a kind of response: the title, "The Death of Tom," repeated eight times throughout the screening (fig. 18.7).

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NOTES

1. Glenn Ligon, conversation with author, May 4, 2016.

2. Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third Text* 4:10 (1990): 61–78.

3. Roberta Smith, "Lack of Location is My Location," *New York Times,* June 16, 1991.

4. The historical context, including Porter's own work for Thomas Edison's studio, is discussed at length in Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Scribner, 1990). For the many presentational aspects of Porter's take on *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* see Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 242–45.

5. Glenn Ligon, conversation with author, May 4, 2016.

6. See the object file for this work.

7. Egbert Austin ("Bert") Williams (American, 1874–1922) was among the earliest black comedians on Broadway to attain national stardom. Mr. Nobody was his best-known stage persona, first introduced in 1905. The character's signature song, "Nobody," is tellingly self-effacing to the point of rendering the speaking subject all but absent. See Esther Romeyn, *Street Scenes: Staging the Self in Immigrant New York, 1880–1924* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

8. Owing to institutional constraints, *The Death of Tom* was screened in a gallery alongside other artworks under study in the seminar convened at MoMA Feb. 11–12, 2016. The work was projected on a freestanding screen.

9. Glenn Ligon, conversation with author, May 4, 2016.

10. Huey Copeland, "Glenn Ligon and Other Runaway Subjects," *Representations* 113:1 (Winter 2011): 73.

11. For an account of the development of cinematic spectatorship as a cultural formation in the American context, see Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). For a critique of the cinematic apparatus and its constitution of spectatorship, see Jean-Louis Baudry, "Effets idéologiques produits par l'appareil de base," Cinéthique 7/8. For an exploration of film's and film culture's anxiety concerning its relation to the other arts, see Brigitte Peucker, *Incorporating Images: Film and the Rival Arts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

12. Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Acinema," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader,* ed. Phil Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

13. Nicholas Mirzoeff has written that "the right to look is not about merely seeing. . . . The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity." See his *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).

Titus Kaphar, *The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) V, XV, and XVI* (2014–15)

Debra Lennard
The Graduate Center, CUNY

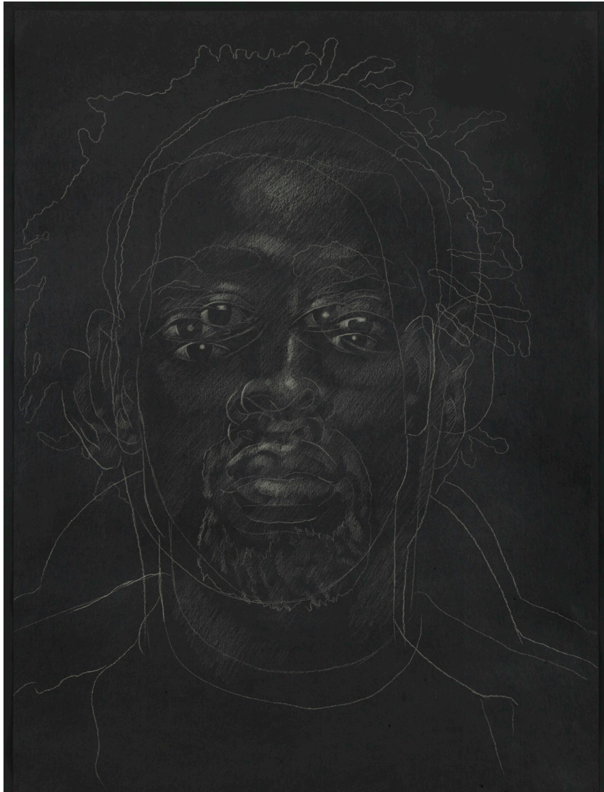
Drawn with a fine-tipped chalk pencil over the grainy surface of commercial asphalt paper, The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) V, XV, and XVI (pls. 19.1, 19.2, and 19.3) are three works in an ongoing portrait series begun by Titus Kaphar (American, born 1976) in 2014.[1] Although they are faithful likenesses, the portraits in these drawings are difficult to make out. Each is a composite image made up of three different, overlapping line drawings depicting its subject's head and shoulders. Delicately rendered, the faces are colored by the bituminous black of the asphalt paper.[2] The superimposition of chalk lines has the effect of repeatedly wrong-footing the onlooker's gaze as it attempts the facial recognition that typically occurs in encountering a figurative portrait.[3] In the trio of drawings—acquired by the Museum in 2015—this cognitive process is frustrated by, for example, the competing presence of three intricately overlapping sets of eyes, which hover on the paper's surface in uncertain spatial relation to each other. Without a stable point from which to begin making sense of each composite portrait, the experience of looking at the conflated faces—neither clearly behind nor in front of one another, owing to the transparency of line-drawing—is characterized by constant oscillation between clear reception and visual interference.

Fig.19.1 Titus Kaphar. *Jerome I–V (from The Jerome Project).* 2014. Oil, gold leaf, and tar on wood panel, each 7 x 10 1/2" (17.8 x 26.7 cm). Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

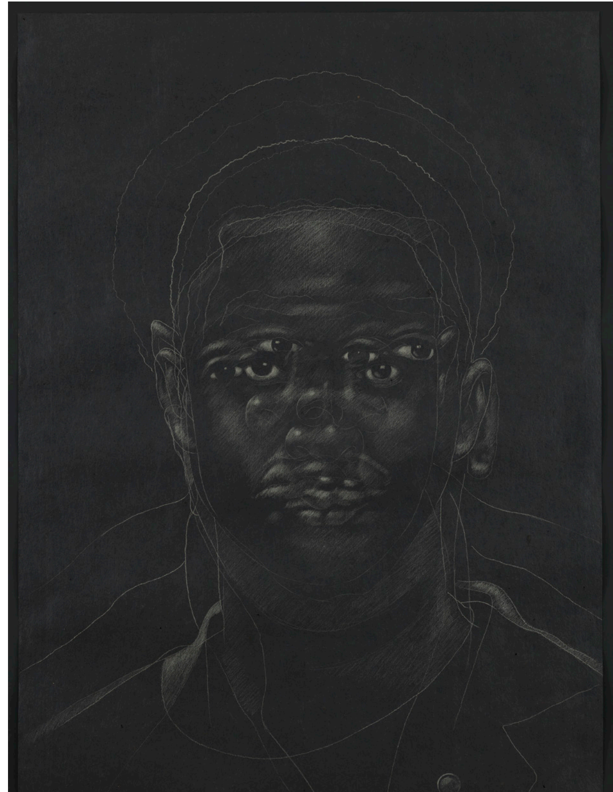
Fig. 19.2 Francis Galton (British, 1822-1911). *Criminal Composites.* c. 1878. Galton Papers, The Library, University College London

As the title of the series indicates, Kaphar locates these drawings within his earlier body of work, The Jerome Project. From 2011 onwards, Kaphar applied this title to his highly detailed, individual portraits of black males, rendered in oil paint on gilded canvases of assorted sizes (fig. 19.1). The background to this project holds important implications for the content and form of Asphalt and Chalk V (2014), XV, and XVI (both 2015). According to the artist, an online search for the prison records of his father led to a store of police photographs of ninety-nine recently arrested men, all of whom shared both the surname and given name (Jerome) of the artist's father. The majority of these men, Kaphar noted, were black.[4] Such a discovery speaks directly to the contentious issue of race relations within present-day law enforcement across the United States—what Khalil Gibran Muhammad has recently pinpointed as "the statistical link between blackness and criminality."[5] Kaphar implicitly plumbs this issue when deploying these found images as the subjects of The Jerome Project portraits,[6] using historically and symbolically charged materials such as chalk on asphalt (the crime-scene medium par excellence) and tar in their depiction.[7]

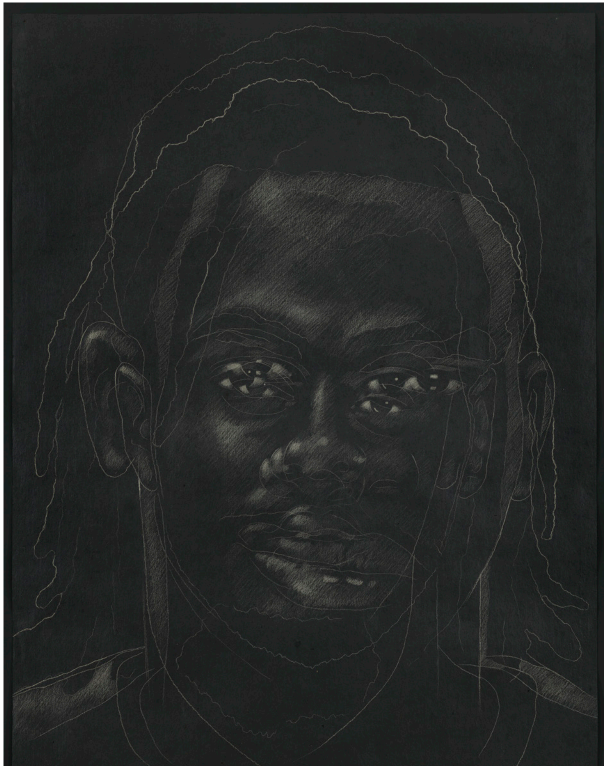
The Asphalt and Chalk drawings retain the compositional structure of their mug-shot sources to a greater degree than Kaphar's earlier paintings from The Jerome Project (note the consistent portrait orientation; plain backgrounds; head and shoulders in-frame; full faces exposed). What might this closer adherence mean? Kaphar's careful hand-drawing of the photographic police portrait elaborates the role of these documents in the construction of criminal identity, a role largely unchanged since photography's development as a medium. From that point onward, photography has been tasked with providing putatively objective records of the criminal.[8] The overlay of faces in Asphalt and Chalk V, XV, and XVI foregrounds this history, recalling the photographic composites of Victorian statistician Francis Galton, who in



Pl. 19.1 Titus Kaphar (American, born 1976). *The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) V.* 2014. Chalk on asphalt paper, 49 × 36" (124.5 × 91.4 cm). Fund for the Twenty-First Century. 528.2015



Pl. 19.2 Titus Kaphar. *The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) XV.* 2015. Chalk on asphalt paper, 49 × 36" (124.5 × 91.4 cm). Fund for the Twenty-First Century. 529.2015



Pl. 19.3 Titus Kaphar. *The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) XVI.* 2015. Chalk on asphalt paper, 49 × 36" (124.5 × 91.4 cm). Fund for the Twenty-First Century. 530.2015

1878 began repeating exposures on a single photographic plate in order to sift for an underlying "type" among assorted groups of faces (fig. 19.2).[9] Though Galton ultimately arrived at the conclusion that there was no "criminal type," Kaphar's drawings beg to differ with respect to present circumstances in America, within which, as Muhammad has highlighted, "black crime statistics are ubiquitous," and "white crime statistics are virtually invisible."[10] Rooted in an awareness that criminality is constructed rather than innate, these vibrating drawings of unalike black males, all seen at once, represent, in Galton's words, "not the criminal, but the man who is liable to fall into crime."[11]

As Claudine K. Brown suggests, the established format of the mug shot can negatively affect a viewer's perception of the pictured individual. For Brown, a mug shot on a notice-board turned H. Rap Brown from an "enthralling" in-person presence to "an anonymous stranger. He was no one's son, no one's lover, and a danger to all who might encounter him."[12] An argument might be made, then, for locating Kaphar's drawings within what bell hooks has called "a counter-hegemonic world of images that would stand as visual resistance, challenging racist images."[13] Kaphar's laborious translation of each portrait image from its original photographic medium onto a tacked-up sheet of paper enacts what could well be described as "resistance."[14] Carried out by hand rather than by machine, this translation introduces subjectivity into the interpretation of the "objective" photographic image, calling into question its claims to veracity.[15] Moreover, the juddering, layered portraits resist the gaze that seeks to lock onto and know an individual face: obstructed, the mug shot's identifying function is repeatedly arrested. How different this is from the experience of viewing photographic portraits of inmates of S-21, the prison of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge regime, as described by Thierry de Duve: "I found myself staring at the photos—or rather, at the people in the photos—one by one, for quite some time, until they emerged from the anonymity . . . and became individuals again."[16] Tightly intertwined in a huddle, the faces of Kaphar's subjects are granted an abiding anonymity. The potential import of such a scheme can be glimpsed in Huey Copeland's observation that "visuality itself has been construed as the mastering conceit from which black peoples have sought refuge."[17] Keeping identities from inquiring eyes, Kaphar's optical design achieves for its photographed subjects no lesser resistance than a refuge from visuality.

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NOTES

1. Asphalt paper is typically employed in building construction for the purposes of waterproofing. Kaphar had previously purchased the roll of paper that he eventually used for these drawings from a hardware store in New Haven, Connecticut (each sheet spans the standard width of the commercially sold roll). Titus Kaphar in discussion with the author, April 27, 2016. At the time of writing, the *Asphalt and Chalk* series includes twenty-three drawings.

2. Asphalt, black-brown in color, is a variety of bitumen. For a geological and chemical overview of the substance, see Nicholas Eastaugh et al., eds., *The Pigment Compendium: A Dictionary of Historical Pigments* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2004), 26–27.

3. For an account of how this subliminal process works, see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

4. "I looked up his name, we don't share a surname, and found 99 men with the same one. I was shocked about how many of them had similar criminal records, how many of them were black." Titus Kaphar quoted in Antwaun Sargent, "Artist Titus Kaphar on His New Solo Show and Unarmed Black Men in America," *Vice*, January 15, 2015, https://www.vice.com/read/titus-kaphar-on-his-new-solo-show-and-unarmed-black-men-in-america-111. Kaphar's discovery testifies to Allan Sekula's 1986 characterization of the photographic archive as "encompass[ing] an entire social terrain while positioning individuals within that terrain." Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 10.

5. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1.

6. The *Asphalt and Chalk* series includes portraits of black men of American nationality whose untimely deaths have featured prominently in international news coverage since the shooting of Michael Brown by Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014. A widely circulated portrait of Brown at his high-school graduation can be seen in *Asphalt and Chalk, Michael Brown, Sean Bell, Amadou Diallo, Trayvon Martin* (2014), for example, along with line drawings after press images of the other individuals named in the work's title.

7. The majority of Kaphar's earlier painted portraits from *The Jerome Project* are partially covered with a rough application of tar reaching from the bottom of the canvas upward. "I decided to start to submerge the paintings in tar in proportion to the amount of time they had served in prison," Kaphar has explained. "But the more research I did I realized that the amount of time that one spends in prison is only the beginning of their relationship to the system. And so the amount of tar I could apply just wasn't enough. Then, I decided to lean on the tar itself as a symbolic gesture of the impact of the criminal justice system. So works are fully covered and some are slightly covered. The tar also functions as a means to protect the identity of some of these individuals." Quoted in Sargent, "Artist Titus Kaphar."

8. Jonathan Finn provides a comprehensive overview of the intertwining of photography and criminal anthropology in his study of the subject: *Capturing the Criminal Image: From Mug Shot to Surveillance Society* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). As Finn notes, "law enforcement and criminal identification . . . depend on the veracity of the photographic image," xii. The history of the mug shot goes back to 1841, when French police began producing daguerreotypes of prisoners. Ibid., 6.

9. See Francis Galton, "Composite Portraits Made by Combining Those of Many Different Persons Into a Single Resultant Figure," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 8 (1879): 132–44. It is of interest that Galton's first experiments with composite portraits were made from photographs of criminals given to him by Edmund Du Cane (then the Director-General of Prisons for Great Britain) "for the purpose of investigating criminal types." Ibid., 135. Kaphar's interest in the composite, it should be noted, did not come from Galton, but rather from a composite drawing of a black adult male wanted by the police, seen during his years in college. Titus Kaphar in conversation with the author, April 27, 2016.

10. Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883), 14; Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*, 1.

11. Galton, "Composite Portraits": 135.

12. Claudine K. Brown, "Mug Shot: Suspicious Person," in Deborah Willis, ed., *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 137.

13. Bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," in Deborah Willis, ed., *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 46.

14. The labor of producing these optically confusing drawings often resulted in tension headaches for the artist. Titus Kaphar in conversation with the author, April 27, 2016.

15. On the subjectivity of drawing versus the supposed objectivity of photography, an instructive parallel is found in the hand-drawn illustrations of "cranial and facial characteristics" (sketched by a Dr. Vans Clarke) reproduced in Havelock Ellis's *The Criminal* (1890). The illustrations were attacked by Charles Goring in 1913 on grounds of the alleged non-objectivity of hand-drawing. This clash is recounted in Sekula, "The Body and the Archive": 53 (Sekula incorrectly refers to "Henry" Goring).

16. Thierry de Duve, "Art in the Face of Radical Evil," *October* 125 (Summer 2008): 22. A number of prints from Nhem Ein's photographs of inmates at the Cambodian prison of the Khmer Rouge reside in MoMA's collection (671.1995–678.1995).

17. Huey Copeland, "Glenn Ligon and Other Runaway Subjects," *Representations* 113, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 85.

Kara Walker, *40 Acres of Mules* (2015)

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Shortly after a visit to Atlanta in the summer of 2015, Kara Walker created the triptych drawing *40 Acres of Mules* (pl. 20). Across three giant sheets of paper, forms emerge from a gray wash of charcoal to coalesce in a chaotic melee. The scene is violent: mules rear and kick, bodies assault and penetrate other bodies, and swords, bayonets, and bombs abound. A Confederate flag billows in the background of the central panel, and Klansmen march at right. An anguished boy, with and bound, outstretched limbs delineated by heavy swaths of charcoal, appears front and center, as if a martyr of this hellish tableau.

40 Acres of Mules confronts raced and gendered dynamics of myth and domination with which Walker has engaged for over two decades in her art.[1] Her evocation of racialized caricatures and violent, sexual imagery has drawn as much criticism as it has praise.[2] Significantly, many have asked whether such representations bear the risk of reinscribing narratives of black victimization, particularly as they are consumed by white collectors or displayed as representative examples of "African American art" by mainstream art institutions.[3] Does a work like *40 Acres of Mules*, rife with images of bodies exploited and in pain, reinscribe such damaging narratives? Or does its transgressive imagery "reshape and recast racist iconography," to borrow the language of Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, in a new light?[4] These questions are open-ended, and the dialogues they may prompt are capacious. Attention to the work's initial conditions of creation and exhibition, and the dialogues it engenders with thematics of history, memory, and race, may open up further lines of inquiry in this regard.

Fig. 20.1 Installation view, *Go to Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First,* Victoria Miro Gallery, London, 2015

Fig. 20.2 Installation view, *Go to Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First,* Victoria Miro Gallery, London, 2015

40 Acres of Mules first appeared in *Go to Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First*, an exhibition of Walker's work that opened at London's Victoria Miro Gallery in October 2015 (fig. 20.1). There, Walker created and installed a group of works that dealt with the city in which she lived as a teenager, and specifically with the site of Stone Mountain, a theme park that stands in the shadow of a colossal Confederate monument carved into the landscape's rocky face.[5] A cut-paper installation, *The Jubilant Martyrs of Obsolescence and Ruin*, spanned the width of one gallery wall, and a cluster of watercolors forming the series *Negress Notes*, the other (fig. 20.2). *40 Acres of Mules* appeared directly opposite a photographic mural of Stone Mountain made by the filmmaker Ari Macropoulos in collaboration with Walker.[6] The black-and-white image shows the monument as it is embedded in its surroundings, the bas-relief forms of Confederate leaders Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson looming large over a recreational park with geysers and a reflecting pool. Its presence in the landscape, as Walker noted following her visit there with Macropoulos in July 2015, was a "scar," "an aberration," "a wound."[7] She remarked, "My first impulse was to find a way to get rid of it, or obscure it, or do something to it to change it, or just to destroy it."[8] A small watercolor landscape in the

Pl. 20 Kara Walker (American, born 1969). *40 Acres of Mules*. 2015. Charcoal on three sheets of paper, (a): 104 × 72" (264.2 × 182.9 cm); (b): 103 × 72" (261.6 × 182.9 cm); (c): 105 × 72" (266.7 × 182.9 cm). Acquired through the generosity of Candace King Weir, Agnes Gund, and Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine Farley. 33.2016.a–c

Fig. 20.3 Kara Walker. Page from **Negress Notes.** 2015. Watercolor on paper, 7 ⅛ × 10 ⅛" (18.1 × 25.7 cm). Victoria Miro Gallery, London

Fig. 20.4 Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973). *Guernica.* 1937. Oil on canvas, 11' 6" × 25' 6" (137.4 × 305.5 cm). Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid(18.1 × 25.7 cm). Victoria Miro Gallery, London

Fig. 20.5 Dora Maar (French, 1907–1997). *Photo report on the evolution of "Guernica."* 1937. Gelatin silver print on paper. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid(137.4 x 305.5 cm). Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid(18.1 × 25.7 cm). Victoria Miro Gallery, London

Victoria Miro installation seemed to do just that: the work features a blotch of black ink in the place of the stony men on horseback, its perimeter punctuated by bright red suture marks and veiny lines that radiate into the earth (fig. 20.3).

Likewise, Walker's triptych may be seen as both a response to and dismantling of the relief at Stone Mountain. The drawing's scale approaches the monumental, sprawling across an expanse of three leaves of paper that together measure eighteen feet across and over eight and a half feet high. Its heavily worked surface reveals forms that have entailed erasure, removal, and redefinition, physical processes that recall the reductive techniques of bas-relief carving as well as the protracted labor of fresco or mural painting. An oblong wash of charcoal, probably applied as powder and then smeared with a cloth or brush, spans the papers' width. [9] Figures are built up and erased from this ground by additional layers and strokes of charcoal. In many instances, it's difficult to tell where forms end and begin: at right, a woman rides a man who rides a kneeling woman on all fours; in the negative space above, the body of a rearing horse merges with hooded Klan figures. The drawing's contingency and disorder recall other images of disaster and war—notably Picasso's *Guernica*—and stand in contrast to the frieze-like logic of the rock-cut monument (figs. 20.4 and 20.5). Two heads in profile view resembling the carved faces of Lee and Davis on Stone Mountain linger at the left and right of the composition's lower edges. Central to the monument, they are reconfigured in the drawing as peripheral, their facial feature blurred by erasure, obscured by striding limbs, and trampled upon by boots.

As critics have observed, Walker's foregrounding of chaos and violence in *40 Acres of Mules* presents a likely reference to the pernicious implications posed by the persistence of so-called Lost Cause mythologies that inhere in Confederate monuments, imagery, and symbols that populate the Southern landscape.[10] Meanwhile, the work's title alludes to a different myth about the same landscape: the never-realized Reconstruction-era promise of land and property to formerly enslaved people.[11] In Walker's punning indictment of this failure, forty acres and a mule become forty acres of mules. Sketched, erased, and redrawn across this vast visual field, the subject offers testimony to something at once monumental and incomplete.

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NOTES

1. Two comparable works in MoMA's collection are the cut-paper installation *Gone: A Historical Romance of the Civil War as it Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994) and the print series Harpers' Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated) (2005), in which the artist interrogates and reimagines popular narratives of the American Civil War. Key bibliographic references for these and other works include Darby English, "A New Context for Reconstruction: Some Crises of Landscape in Kara Walker's Silhouette Installations," in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007, paperback reprint 2010), 71-135; Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) and Ian Berry, Darby English, Vivian Patterson, Mark Reinhardt, et. al., *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

2. The most frequently cited of these critiques is the letter-writing campaign led by Howardena Pindell and Betye Saar following Walker's 1997 MacArthur award that asked museums to boycott the artist's work. This campaign and related commentaries have been compiled in Pindell, ed., *Kara Walker – No/Kara Walker – Yes/Kara Walker - ?* (New York: Mindmarch Arts Press, 2009).

3. Michael D. Harris and Darby English offer productive analyses of this topic. See Harris, "Talking in Tongues: Personal Reflections on Kara Walker," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 29 (2011), 135; English, "A New Context for Reconstruction," in *How to See a Work of Art In Total Darkness*, 71–135; Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapeil Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 190–223.

4. Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker*, 35.

5. "Kara Walker: Go to Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First," Victoria Miro gallery press release (London, October 1, 2015).

6. "KEW ACM ATL," in *Kara Walker: Go to Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First* (London: Victoria Miro, 2015), n.p.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. I am grateful to Laura Neufeld, Assistant Paper Conservator at the Museum of Modern Art, for drawing my attention to this aspect of the work.

10. Exhibition reviews that have remarked on this reference include Anna Coatman, "Kara Walker, Victoria Miro, London, UK," *Frieze Magazine* 177 (March 2016),173 Louise Darblay, "Go to Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First," *Art Review* 67, no. 9 (December 2015): 122; Richard Martin, "Kara Walker's Wild Fantasies Address the Difficult Reality of Racism Today," *Apollo: The International Art Magazine*, October 9, 2015, accessed April 27, 2016, http://www.apollo-magazine.com/kara-walkers-wild-fantasies-address-the-difficult-reality-of-racism-today/ ; Janet Tyson, "An Encounter with Kara Walker's Poignantly American Work in the UK," *Hyperallergic*, November 4, 2015, accessed April 27, 2016, http://hyperallergic.com/250702/an-encounter-with-kara-walkers-poignantly-american-work-in-the-uk.

11. The notion of "Forty acres and a mule" originated in part from orders issued by the Union general William T. Sherman during his military campaign through Georgia and the lower South at the end of the American Civil War. Sherman stipulated that freed slaves might settle on land that was to be set aside for them in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. For the original text, see *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 1, vol. 47, part 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895), 60–62, accessed April 26, 2016, http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/textidx?c=moawar;idno=waro0099. A discussion of the orders' failed implementation appears in Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).