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What does art look like when it is unapologetically black? How does a Black American artist find voice within the lens of an institution that does not see him? *Black: Outside the Box* is a journal of expression that takes shape in the form of physical and digital workouts that express the ideas, hopes, dreams, and issues as it relates to the Black community. The work is multidisciplinary in nature with the hopes that it expands the view and understanding of what Blackness is and what it means to be an artist. With an aim that anyone who makes and feel they are unseen can find the freedom to make and create in a way that is true to themselves and their unique truth

BLACK: OUTSIDE THE BOX

by

Tramaine Wilkes

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Approved by

Dr. Sunny Spillane
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to any artist who is looking to embrace their voice in a language that is true to their native tongue.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Tramaine Wilkes has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES vi

CHAPTER I: YOU CAN'T PLACE ME THERE1

CHAPTER II: CAN BLACK BE BEAUTIFUL TOO4

CHAPTER III: IT'S AS BLACK AS I AM10

CHAPTER IV: DO YOU SEE ME15

CHAPTER V: WRITER'S BLOCK.....18

CHAPTER VI: I BREATHE IN THE SIDEWALK21

CHAPTER VII: SORRY IF THIS SOUNDS RACIST, BUT I DON'T WANT TO BE
WHITE.....26

REFERENCES28

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. MixTapes	3
Figure 2. Skool Daze.....	8
Figure 3. Damn Gina.....	10
Figure 4. Homecoming	12
Figure 5. Lamentation of Christ.....	14
Figure 6. My Flag My Truth.....	18
Figure 7. Blk No Mor.....	19
Figure 8. Yo Black Self	20

CHAPTER I: YOU CAN'T PLACE ME THERE

As far back as I can remember, I have understood that there were different worlds, or communities, that we maneuver through living in the United States. From ChinaTown to Little Italy. Or the Barrio's to the ghetto's. We have the academically gifted classes, and the "special needs" group. The artist and the jocks. Popular kids vs the weirdos and rejects. And even within these small community-groups there is even more division and separation. For example, let's take black culture. You have dark skin vs light, where you can hear a phrase like "stop acting light skin." Or "That's some house nigga shit." I say all that to say that I grew up understanding that where I am physically and what I might understand through "education" or life experiences, determines how I might move within a space. Or how the people within these spaces might expect me to behave.

While I was in high school and completing my undergraduate degree, my dad would constantly ask me "what do you care about more? Football or art?" My response would vary depending on the day. And my time of involvement between football and art would change week to week because I couldn't pick just one thing. Or be one thing. I was both. I was an athlete who cared greatly about art and figuring out how to become an artist. I can recall times where my fellow athletes would see me draw something and their jaws would hit the floor. Usually followed by "can you draw me a tattoo". Or when my undergraduate art professor came to a football game and noticed I was a star athlete. They were always amazed. But for me, it's just life. My life. I am a collection of histories, experiences, ideas, and motivations. I can go from the boxing ring to the museum. From a road trip to teaching in a classroom. And If you step into my studio it also shares the same duality and energy. You will see things like photos, paintings, drawings, products, poetry books, power tools, video equipment. What you might not understand

is how they all contribute to my practice. They let me move outside the boxes of just being a painter, writer, or photographer.

Stuck in a land with no ends

Searching for the ocean

I don't know if it's the motion

Or my emotions

Waiting for my eyes to open

The poem is a reflection of my inner dialogue. My curious nature. The debate between me searching for who I want to become versus the boxes I may try to fit myself into to please a narrative of validation or acceptance. It took about a decade and a pandemic to get me into grad school. Truthfully, I boxed myself in by thinking I did not have the skills to be accepted. I was also doing work to fit a monolift, or just because I could. This made me feel shallow. What was I here for? Luckily, the interdisciplinary nature of the program provided enough frustration and struggle for me to plant my flag in the ground and say "Dammit I'm Here! Right here!" It gave my language a visual manifestation. A remix. A collaboration of all my curiosities and experiences. Which plants me firmly outside the box, where I want to be.

When was the last time you saw a mixtape? An actual 2x3.5 inch cassette tape that you put in a boombox or walk-man? Probably the last time you owned a walk-man. Today's version of the Mixtape is the digital playlist that can be created on Apple music, spotify, or even youtube. I remember making mixtapes back in the 90's. And when cd players became more common, my focus shifted to cd-mixes to play while riding the athletic bus to away games. The physical art works are heavily influenced by music. I wanted to create a way for my art to be experienced beyond the gallery walls. And to provide an insight to the social and political themes

throughout the work. The biggest hurdle was figuring out do I make a real mixtape where you would need a cassette player? Do I make it all digital, or part both. Something physical with a digital component. The *Black Outside the Box Mixtape 2023* is a physical object. There are about 10 cassettes with covers that have a QR code that will lead you to an url where you can listen to the track list.

The covers vary from paintings I have done and photos I have taken. The playlist is composed of interviews from Nina Simone to Tupac Shakur. And music from Sam Cooke, James Brown, Beyonce, Black Thought to Jacob Banks. I feel that having this physical-digital piece helps express the conversations I have in the work, but may not be able to have from person to person. The Mixtapes give you a chance to take Black Outside the Box. My upbringing, athletic background, and love for arists such as Michelangelo has made it easier for me to embrace the multidisciplinary nature of my practice. The battle within myself to fully understand that it was possible for me came from the idea that I thought I needed to be good at one thing to be recognized. Within these two years I have painted, taken photos, produced videos, made physical objects, conceptual works, works that use technology, work that you can wear. And it's all me.

Figure 1. MixTapes



CHAPTER II: CAN BLACK BE BEAUTIFUL TOO

A common theme has been repeated in many of my interactions, which has given me a great deal of anxiety and frustration. That theme or idea is that the art world doesn't care about your skill as an artist. One professional artist even said verbatim, “no one cares if you can draw.” I pride myself on trying to draw or render better every time I attempt to create. At this point I don't know whether it's ego, ambition, or discipline. But I am certain that not being skilled sits awkwardly for me.

The word skill can mean many things, in many fields, especially in art. For me, skill is the ability to render something with an accurate likeness using one's own perceptual abilities. To be able to mimetically represent what you see with proper proportion based on the judgment of your eyes, hands, and the decisions you make during the making. Growing up my older brother did art. He would come home from school and teach me the things he had learned. My days as a boy and teen were spent trying to be better than my brother. And then trying to be better than everyone around me. To be better, for me, always meant to render the human form on a master skill level that matches Rubens. My dedication to that pursuit is what fuels my ambition to represent the human body naturalistically. I want my hands to depict shape, color, line, and form in a way that represents the beauty and love I have for my community.

The other idea is who has the authority and controlling power on how black bodies are to be represented in the art world? This problem arises based on what I have seen and have read relating to the art market. Bridget Cooks', *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* gives a detailed insight on why certain artists have been marginalized in galleries and museums. She introduces us to the classification of “black art” which came to mean a designation for things that don't represent the white art. Words like “primitive” or “black life”

which meant “the black struggle.” Artists like Henry O. Tanner or Augusta Savage were amazing artists in the European painting and sculptural traditions, but these artists were kept out of the mainstream art books and lesson plans. The black artists that were represented were artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, possibly Charles White. But I can’t say for sure I really remember looking into White’s work. Maybe my ideas of form and representation were already wrapped up in the ideas of the Flemish masters. One of the saddest tales I take from Cooke's book is the story of an artist who would paint one version of an image just to get into a show, who after the show, would completely rework the image to something more pleasing in its handling of black representation. This is a direct example of code-switching. Representing yourself in one way in front of crowd ‘A’ and another to crowd ‘B’.

Has our representation become a fetish or gimmick? Wandering about the Venice Biennale I stumble into a gallery, the first room is filled with photos of a young african woman using her locs as “art” she is making her locs into line art. As I look at the images I wonder how much of her making these designs are about her expression of herself and how much of it is to get followers on Tik Tok. I think the ability to make your locs into art takes some talent and skill. But the images chosen and the overall aesthetic wasn’t pleasing to me. It came off as gimmicky. Not to mention black women still get asked by non black figures questions like “can I touch your hair?” Or my favorite, “How do you get your hair to grow so fast?”

Venturing into another gallery I see jet black bodies with faces that have one huge eye and one small eye. Kerry James Marshall is the first artist I remember using “black” as the only color for the skin. His figures are somewhat caricatured, but I can understand it. Is this the only way to be seen as black? To literally make figures where the skin tone is midnight dark? How

much of what is being sold at high value is telling blacks how to represent themselves in the art market?

My issue with “gimmick” is that it is not sustainable and comes off as false and humorous to those who are looking to art as a form of education and guidance. Like we are still dancing for masa. If I see my father play himself out of context in certain settings enough times it can rub off on me to do the same, knowingly and unknowingly. So if we see enough art and feel like we have to dance to be seen, we gonna start dancing and actually, sadly, many artists have.

When it comes to fetish I believe to have a fetish is to have a personal pleasure that is borderline destructive. To fetish over something is all about the self. It’s selfish and consuming. I don’t want to be consumed! I don’t want my culture to be consumed. If you admire our culture, you respect it. You want to see it mature and go. I’ll give an example.

Let’s say we are walking down the street and you see a beautiful flower. You’re taken over by it. You love it so much you must take it home. So you take it from its natural environment to place it in your house. And as time passes, it dies on your living room table. But let's say you love it enough to leave it in its natural habitat. Every morning you take a walk to see it. It's been growing for months on end. It looks ever more beautiful and pleasing each passing day. Doing exactly what it’s supposed to do. Untouched by your consuming hands.

Growing up in a small southern town I knew there were two worlds I needed to navigate. The ability to code switch on demand was a must for survival. Code switching can loosely be thought of as acting differently in different environments. To change one’s actions based on his or her surroundings. On the football field I am one version of Tre and in the classroom, teaching a lecture I am another version. Or to be blunt and more real, in front of a cop or amongst large

numbers of whites I behave in a way that is meant for me to make it back home safely. Code switching can also happen within one's own community. So it is not mutually exclusive to black versus white.

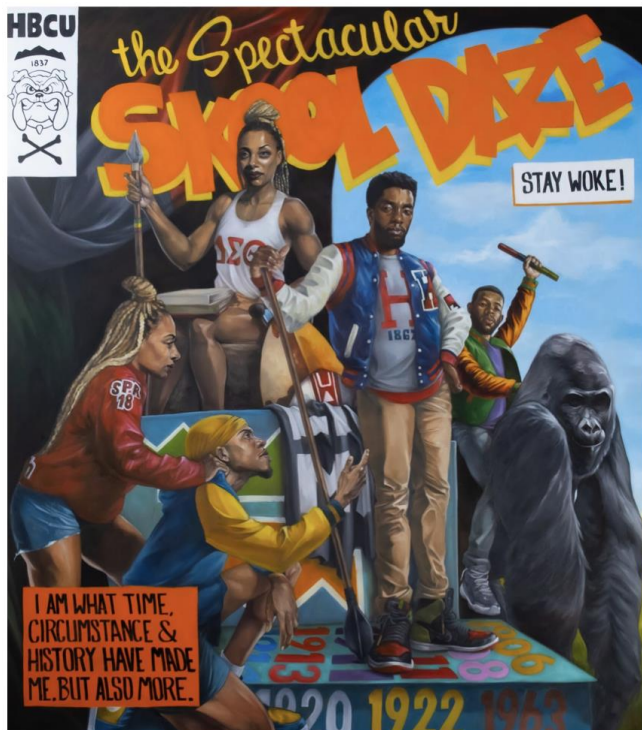
There is still warmth from the burning building Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. warned us about. We have been told white is right for so long we lack appreciation for our own abilities and truths at times. This might show up in conversations in statements like, "can you paint something less black?" So many of us are forced to wear a mask and believe black was not good enough. While feeling that black is beautiful, intelligent, and regal.

And even now, years have passed since the start of the Black Lives Matter movement, with an even stronger push for recognition and representation from what happened over the murder of George Flyod. We are seeing some changes when it comes to television and movies, but in the art world it still feels that representing blackness is taboo if it's not hurt, pain, trauma, jet black, or distorted by satire. Unless you're Kehinde Wiley.

All of that may sound like bitterness, frustration, anxiety, jealousy. The truth is, it is. Because at my core I want to see art that I feel a part of. Art that feels true for the eyes and brushes of its creator. Unfiltered by the lens of whiteness. Art that is Black for Black sake, unadorned by the limitations created by fetish. To see stories on canvas and installation that match what is happening on film and streaming sites. Stating all of that may be a bit much. We haven't even talked about my art making or practice. My making and practice all stems from who I am first as a black man, a thinking man, a striving man, before the artist even emerges. But because I am all these things is why I am an artist. I would be lost without art. I'm literally no good if I can't create. If I can't grow. If I can't experience art. And give the experience of art.

I arrived on campus about two months before our first semester started. Got settled into my studio and I was ready. Excited to create on a scale larger than anything I have attempted before. I am heavily influenced by baroque art. The size, composition, handling, and its dedication to figure. There was a large canvas left behind by a previous grad. 8 feet tall and 7 feet wide. I dragged it into my studio, grabbed my sketch book and started working on thumbnails for a multi-figure composition. The overall intent of the work was pride and history. The original thought was archlike composition, drapery, and figures. The semester starts. An intense drawing class makes me question what else can be done to push this piece in a way that is true to me? I love comic covers, and Spike Lee joints. And the spectacular Skool Daze was born. In the paintings there are four human figures and a gorilla. The figures represent portraits of people who attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Figure 2. Skool Daze



The colors red, black, green adorn the drapery, a pair of sneakers and a batton. Dates for the first ever school dedicated to teacher blacks. The origin dates of the black Greek fraternities and sororities, also known as the Divine Nine (D9). Black lives matter flag behind the figure representing Chadwick Boseman, tribal shields and spears, and a quote by the author/activist James Baldwin.

As teachers and students would visit my studio and see my work, the name Kehinde Wiley comes up often. Who is a great living painter to be connected to. But I believe my work is different because of the layers of history I chose to represent. The painting is more a comic book cover and not a bright floral-patterned tapestry. I do love Wiley's size and depictions of the black figure. He is my north star for what is possible in the art world for a black contemporary portrait artist. In my painting we can see there's something different happening. The size and handling may be similar to Wiley, but we are in a different world. A different space. We are not just talking about black beauty and black pride. We are talking black history as well. And not simply today's history. We are talking about past, present, and future possibilities.

CHAPTER III: IT'S AS BLACK AS I AM

After completing *Skool Daze*, I went in a few directions. I wanted to see what would happen if I tried to not paint the human form. How can I still represent my culture without it being a person? I had a 48x48 wood panel, a hoop from another student, along with some brightly colored/painted wooden shapes that made my next piece, "Damn Gina". *Damn Gina* is a reference to the 90's black sitcom *Martin*. The design and layout is based on the *Martin* title logo, as well as the lebron 16 sneaker also dedicated to said show.

Basketball was not just a random subject to make work from. Growing up I wanted to be Allen Iverson, one of the best NBA point guards ever. I spent a lot of hours dribbling around the city.

Figure 3. Damn Gina



Playing basketball at dark playgrounds wanting to not suck. But the truth is I wasn't that great. I was good enough not to look like a bum. But art was always the driving force of anything I have done and still continue to do. One goal turned into 3 goals, as well as 3 scripts for short films and commercial content.

Painter, maker, script writer? That can't be right. But it's real. My fascination with films comes from watching documentaries, movies, tv shows and being intrigued by their worlds. Wondering what could happen if I made it into my own. These scripts are made to be a guide for now, and seen as a writing exercise.

I was introduced to creative writing as a form of expression in middle school. My seventh grade English class. We had to pick a poem and recite it in front of the class. At this time, I am a year removed from taking speech classes for stuttering. On top of that, I didn't feel connected to any of the poems we were reading in class at the time. But luckily I had a teacher who saw something in me that was latent in my eyes. She handed "The Rose That Grew Through Concrete," by Tupac Shakur. It was actually the first book I read in its entirety. My stuttering made me uncomfortable talking to people, unless I really felt a connection with you. I also came from a household where we did not talk about our feelings and emotions much, if any at all, poetry became a way to express my inner feelings safely. Without the risk of immediate confrontation and judgment. To be honest and transparent, poetry is my most true art practice. I feel the most free, flexible and fluid. Poetry shows up in two paintings thus far. "Icarus" and "The Lamentation of Christ." In "Icarus" I looked at a collection of poems I produced in a book titled "Through Colored Lines" and pulled lines from various poems in the book that I felt spoke to the image. "The Lamentation of Christ" as a poem that is more recent,

The dreams of the dead

Awake

I move my feet off the bed

Hands in my head

Took a step

And stumbled over a dream

That was left for dead

My aim in writing is never to confuse my reader. My goal is to connect to them as quickly as possible and start a dialog we can both participate in comfortably. For too long, and even now, words have been used to create barriers and isolate between groups of people. I believe words should be liberating and bring us closer to our common goals and truths as human beings, sharing life experiences.

Getting back to painting and my many influences I look at my creative practice as hip-hop. Hip-hop is not just rapping. Hip-hop is a group of sub genres that come together to make hip-hop a culture. These elements are dj-ing, Mc-ing/rapping, breaking/dancing, writing/tagging or bombing, and knowledge. Fun fact, the word graffiti was chosen by law enforcement. Early writers referred to their art as bombing and tagging.

I chose this idea of hip-hop because my art is a clash of multiple ideas and influences.

Figure 4. Homecoming



In my paintings “homecoming, Probate 2021, and the lamentation of christ, there is a mixture of vibrant colors, text, cartoon-like figures, realistic figures and some figures that are line work only. I have always been fascinated with unfinished paintings and sketches. Breaking away from the idea that the canvas has to be painted top to bottom or that the image has to be “complete” was freeing. In these works I am bringing together figures, abstraction, text, and found objects (in the lamentation of Christ and icarus). The writing style comes from a combination of Basquiat's handwriting aesthetics and my own poetry. There is a blend of collage, pop culture, history and black pride. I wanted to see where I could flex my skill but also make something that feels like a remix. Like grandMaster Flash creating the first loop on a turntable. Or Missy Elliots I can't stand the rain. To me and my practice a remix is a way of paying homage to the many influences that shape my creative practice but also doing something that is not mere copying. Trying to add to the vibrant and brilliance that was before, while opening possibilities of the present and future.

Looking at “The Lamentation of Christ” you will see a collection of figures that follow somewhat of a circular pattern. The positioning of these figures are in the ideas of baroque masters I admire. But we don't stop there. There is tagging in the top left corner, topped with gold, thinking about the icon paintings of the past. There is stencil text and numbers through the piece. Some of the stencil words are “LOVE, PEACE, LIVE, and DREAM.” The top right says “ANANSI”, Anansi is an African God within the Akan folktales. He is often depicted as a spider and known for being a god of knowledge and stories. Travel to the left of ANANSI and there is part of a poster of Tupac with praying hands. There are sneakers hanging from a wire in reference to fallen comrades within the community. The completed faces we can see are all

different. The face on the left is fleshed out with vibrant color. The face to the bottom right is marker and line work on top of a white ground.

The painting is overall a painting about choices. The two figures to the left, one is sitting waiting to accept the golden apple. The figure presenting the apple can be seen as angelic and demonic, I leave that decision to the viewer. The poem that was mentioned before is to the bottom left. What do you do after you stumble over your dream? Do you pick it up and continue its pursuit? Or do you leave it dormant, vulnerable and lifeless? Again, I leave that choice to the viewer. Even Anansi warns us that all of our decisions have consequences. Good and bad. But we are responsible for them. There is a blend of greek mythology, african proverb, european art, hip-hop culture, and writing. A remix.

Figure 5. Lamentation of Christ



CHAPTER IV: DO YOU SEE ME

I have spent countless hours in museums and galleries and find them full of beauty, knowledge, history, and inspiration, but find myself mostly inspired by the streets. Abandoned buildings turn tourist traps into skate havens. Billboards, bathroom walls full of tags, murals and bombing pits. How each mark leaves a trail of history behind it. And the idea of “is this finished?”. Although it may be a bombing pit, each artist brings a different history with them. A unique journey that is theirs alone. My love for museums and street culture may seem counter, but to me they are both the same. They tell history. They provide knowledge. They are beautiful. They provide inspiration.

So what happens when you take a lover of baroque art and merge him with a kid inspired by urban writers. We get an artist who wants to put high art places that they don't traditionally fit. Fuck your white wall and floral frames. Where's the half plastered brick wall and the old ladder? Over Winter break 2021, I had a show in an old mechanic shop. There were tags on the walls, oil spills, cracks in the windows. We had to get heaters to keep the space warm. I even threw up a few tags of my own. And painted a bit on the concrete floor. But beauty was in how the work I brought to the space was presented. My centerpiece, Skool Daze, was held up by an old scaffold for back support and on paint buckets to give it a little extra height from the floor. A few movable gallery walls provided backing for a few paintings, and other paintings were supported by whatever we found in the space. At first I was a bit skeptical if it could be pulled off. But the curation and location was just what it needed to be. My main question for my practice is “how do I get to the young me?” I was lucky to have lived in Prince George's County, Maryland in high school. So going to the museums was just a metro ride away. But growing up in Thomasville, North Carolina the only art I can was in class and from fellow friends. Well,

until I stumbled into an abandoned school where I was exposed to bombing and tagging for the first time.

You should be able to see high art no matter where you live. Being able to take museum grade skill and put it in a place where it is least expected can be life changing. And not for the artist doing the work, but for the people who will encounter it right where it is. It is one thing to see work online. Or through a phone. But we all know, it's different in person. The beauty of Venice seduces the eyes differently when you're there. The sound of James Brown's voice and bands hits different in concert than on the radio.

Plato wrote “our need will be the real creator.” I lived in poverty growing up. I remember not having a refrigerator, running water, or a couch. Because my mother was not always able to get us new clothes every year for school, I got into fashion by cutting up old jeans to make shorts and taking sharpies and highlighters to make custom designed t-shirts. Once computers became the norm in libraries and classrooms, I would staple printer paper together to make sketchbooks. We didn't have the resources for painting supplies so I drew a lot. Every day. Mainly with pencils, until I got the confidence to use pens and markers. My art making process is the same now as then. I take what I have access to and I use it. If you step into my studio you may see drawings and photos attached to the walls with push pins or even masking tape. Why? Because I couldn't afford to put them in frames. But should the work not go up because the presentation is not “museum” or “gallery” ready? Professors will take a look at the work and fixate on the pin. It often makes me feel like the work isn't good enough, but then I remind myself, if their only interest is the pin holding up the work and they miss the work, the work wasn't for them anyway. There are a series of basketball goals I've made. The first two were made from supplies left over previous students and scraps from the wood shop. But necessity doesn't stop there. While being

in Venice for the Biennale, a story my mother told me when I was younger kept creeping into my thoughts. In this story she reflects on the day she pretended to be white. She went to the front yard and got handfuls of white sand and put it on her body and face and “acted” as if she was white. She was the black sheep of her family. She was the darkest and because of that, her siblings would pick on her about her skin tone. Once back from the Biennale I had to get this story out. I have become a filmmaker because I want to tell stories of living people. To capture history that is sometimes overlooked. I grabbed my camera gear, went to my mothers apartment and got to work. A majority of my work is out of the need to say what's on my mind. What’s on my mind has nothing to do with trying to please the art market or the white art education I have received, it's about getting something off my chest and out of my brain. It may not always be polished. But polished is not what I am here for.

CHAPTER V: WRITER'S BLOCK

Because of academia and the vernacular used in these circles, I have a strange relationship with writing. As I have expressed before, poetry is my truest form of expression. I'm free to pursue language and think exactly how I feel. In 2016 I self published a poetry book titled "Trapped Between the Lines." The book consisted of poems written in middle school all the way to 2016 when I released the book. The book wasn't meant as a way to make money. A high school friend and I agreed one day we would produce a poetry book. It was my way of keeping a promise to my younger self. I use the book as a teaching tool when I'm teaching inner city students. It's a way for us to connect without me having to talk their ears off. They get an opportunity to engage when they want and for how long. But the words don't stop there, they also make their way into paintings, graphics, drawings and products. I'm a fan of street art, magazines and movie posters. So I look at words as art, within its shapes and conceptual meanings.

Figure 6. My Flag My Truth



I used to separate the two. I wasn't trying to be a professional poet. I also lied to myself numerous times saying I didn't want to be seen as Baqsuiat. But the biggest hurdle was my fear of not knowing how to pull it off.

My Flag My Truth is a simple concept that I honestly would not have thought about if it were not exposed to the number of artists presented during this program. As much as I love bold pops of color, this flag didn't have to be that. The words come from a poem I wrote titled *Fight Night*, which was written in response to *Rumble*; A mini boxing ring I made from discarded wood, boxing wraps and an extension cord. The flag is mostly black and white with a splash of red. The red text reads "My hero's didn't come from fairy tale books." and "Imma be real." The poem is about how fighting to be black is a struggle in America. It's a look into how history and identity has made me into the person and artist I am today. For some, the things I say in it may be hard to digest. It's a direct call to action to white supremacy. I let the reader know that I take pride and skin color. In the history that surrounds my culture and ancestry.

Figure 7. Blk No Mor



Another way words play a role in my work is through branding. My mother's acceptance of her blackness created a way to engage with her story and text in different ways. The mini-doc, conceptual products, and clothing. Blk No Mor and Lighten up was my way to engage with the American idea of beauty. I took blank cosmetic tubes and jars and created branding stickers for them. The tubes and jars are full of sand. The sand is a pull from my mothers story of putting

“white looking sand” on my face, arms, and hands so she could pretend to be white. “Yo Black Self ” was turned into a logo. It was a term used to poke fun at my mother by her siblings. I use the term as a badge of honor. I am black. So what. In the US there is a system built on the idea that black is bad, evil, ugly, dumb, not worthy. But to me black is beautiful, strong, caring, intelligent, and loving. My work is not meant to be overly conceptual. It's made to be exactly what it is for what it is. It's an entry point for a feeling and conversion.

Figure 8. Yo Black Self



CHAPTER VI: I BREATHE IN THE SIDEWALK

The art world has this obsession with influence. And these ideas of hierarchy within that influence. I am influenced by everything I see, hear, read, and experience. From a song, to a movie, to art history, and the idea of possible futures. I don't hold any single artist or practice as the golden standard. Although I do have my personal appeal to particular visual artistic aesthetics and disciplines. Those being figurative, street art, graphic design, documentary, photojournalism, music, dance, poetry. I used to feel like giving off a list of names and reciting art history would make me a better artist. Now I feel like it just makes talking about art messy and diluted. It's ok to feel what you feel in art without having to express a group of influences and a trail of actions that lead to the making. The challenges would be: am I being lazy? Would going deeper within my list of influences give my art more depth?

I come from a communal group of people. Where learning is shared. Where the who doesn't necessarily matter. All that matters is the action. For example, let's look at the Black Panther Party. What is typically talked about are certain figures of the movement like Bobby Seal, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and so on. The phrase commonly associated with them is "Black Power. Or Power to the people." What is not often said is the statement "Power to all the people!" And how the movement was responsible for uniting other national groups through organizations like Fred Hamptons Rainbow Coalition, which was a multicultural anitrace, anti class movement. Or That the Black Panther Party started the free breakfast program and brought acupuncture to the slums and ghettos to get community members off of drugs. There are many reasons why this information is not common knowledge, but some of it is that the leaders didn't care for the name or spotlight, it was about the community.

I come from a sports background, a lot of my art making and processing is tied to my athletic brain. Some things happen because they happen. This could be linked to the high level of conditioning used in drills that are meant to spring into action once the moment arises. The repetition makes the action and reaction more fluid. Second nature. You move without even really being conscious of it. But you know it's right and right for that moment. This is what aids in my creations springing up almost out of thin air. Being an athlete you must not be a one trick pony. Having only one skill will leave you on the bench. Different opponents bring on inconsistent challenges. Sometimes you need speed, other times endurance, strength, or just a better overall game plan. But one thing is for sure, and certain, don't be a one trick pony. This has a massive impact on why I express my ideas in multiple forms. Because it's necessary. At least it is to me.

Speaking of influence, you can say mine are connected like a braid. There is no "one" thing that informs the next they are all entangled from root to end. But strictly for the sake of pleasing the academics reading this here we go. Muhammad Ali instilled an appreciation for community and dedication to represent that community. Tupac Shakur showed me that poetry and art could be made within your own voice. Spike Lee and his cryptic symbols and language for story telling. I wish I could give you a list of bombers and taggers but they get clustered. Just know bombing was the first art I saw on a wall and not in a textbook. Each layer tells a history. And we can't leave without talking about Hip-Hop. It's innovation. It's ability to appear like the big-bang out of necessity. My art and thinking is within that energy.

Recently there has been an explosion of energy in my studio. The visual language has become dripped in language. Poems that I have written find themselves trapped on paper, canvas, and panel using spray paint and sometimes paint markers. One top of the poem are

abstract clusters of paint. The paint is pushed around the paper randomly, almost in the spirit of the abstract expressionists of the past. Layered on top of the paint we find a portrait drawn out using an oil pastel crayon. Some of the images are words on top of other words. This pulling away from figures or portraits has been a tad foreign, but has given me the needed push of expressing my ideas that is more honest to me. I have always wanted to bring pieces of my poetry into my work. This expansion has added a piece of freedom and connection I personally have been missing from my making. I also enjoy using various styles of text. Handwritten, stencil, graphic, tags. Using positive and negative space. Even using the stencil as the letter. The way in which the different styles and layering happen are more feeling than planning. I let the piece tell me. Like Quentin Tarantino says about writing dialogue for his characters, “I don’t know what they are going to say until they tell me... I let them tell me what to say and do...”

Let's expand on this layering tactic. It can be found in the physical action of layering text on image, painting over half the subjects face or body, wood on top of wood, or in what is painted, drawn or said. My earliest introduction to layering came from watching a documentary on the Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli and his painting Primavera. The narrator talked about the time in which the painting was created, who commissioned it, and how some of the aesthetic decisions uncover a deeper and richer story if you understand the code. For example, the orange fruit tree is a symbol of the Medici family. Before this documentary I just thought choices were made because they looked pleasing. But this made me think, what were these paintings trying to tell me? Well maybe not me. But what was the message for the intended audience? This has become a visual maneuver I employ in many of my works. It may show up in the form of the colors red, black, and green referring to the pan-african flag. The numbers 619 for Juneteenth, the day negroes in Texas finally got the world they were free. Gold and its

connection to Egypt and other countries of the African continent. Quotes, numbers, portraits of known and less known figures of the civil rights movement and also african gods, warriors and rulers.

Layering is my way of encouraging research for the viewer. Some onlookers will get it because of previous knowledge. Some will not. It may just look pleasing, and that's ok as well. It's kinda like listening to an old enslaved song that is meant as a guide to the enslaved for freedom. For some it may just be words, but to others, a map.

Heaven's Door (From the Original Television Series "Underground")

By Alice Smith

I've seen death
But the moss stays the same
The drinking gourd
Runs throughout the blue haze
The wolf howls out
As he drags you to the grave
The Devil's grins
Haunts you on the way

So we fall down, to look up
Waiting to see Heaven's door
We fall down, to look up
Waiting to see
Heaven's door
River Jordan
Rises on high
Pulls you closer
To the Angel's light
And if you fall
You back up again
'Cause freedoms truth
Heals all your sin

So we fall down, to look up
Waiting to see Heaven's door
We fall down, to look up
Waiting to see Heaven's door

And one day Jesus' hand
W'lead us to the Promised Land
One day we will stand
Rejoicing victory

We fall down
To look up
Waiting to see Heaven's door
We fall down Mmmmmmmmm
Waiting to see
Heaven's door.

Get the picture. If you know, you know.

CHAPTER VII: SORRY IF THIS SOUNDS RACIST, BUT I DON'T WANT TO BE WHITE

I wanted to set this chapter up a little warmer. Letting the words sizzle to a climax that hits like a Dave Chappelle punch line. But the truth is what it is. We have been taught that white is right and all things beautiful, just, and worthy. And in my younger days I believed in this to be true. So I would try to sound white, dress white, watch white shows, listen to white music. I did this because I thought in order to succeed, I had to be more white. How does that happen? Very simply, because you get bombarded with news, media, and images that black is bad. And no matter what, if you want to succeed in things other than sports you have to become more white.

I love museums! Like, extremely. Not because I want to escape my area or disappear from my blackness, but because I love art. Museums provide a timestream of art and history that I can explore, connect, and learn from in one place. But because of colonialism, what I grew up seeing in museums, before the death of George Fflyod, was mainly White-Eurocentric art and artists. I respect European art. It gave me a hunger for scale and the human figure. I remember saying to myself “One day I want my art on a wall in a museum.” This was for a few reasons. One, because I figured this was the standard to success. Like making it to the NFL. My art being in a museum meant I made it. Two, because I wanted to see black folks that look like me in the museums I visited. So the museum provided validation that I was good enough. As an artist and a human. But the more I learn about the art world, art market, art education, and gatekeeping, the more I understand that my position in the art world is different.

I no longer care if my art is ever on a museum wall. I don't care if I ever have a show at the Venice Biennale. Be in a prominent art magazine. To seek out artist grants because it's “free money” or this “prominent” residency. My new direction is to provide space for other artists to

feel seen, safe, and unified. When I did my social practice tour, *Through Colored Lines*, I went to Tuskegee University in Alabama. It was a spiritual pilgrimage for me. Like Malcolm X going to Mecca. During my stay I heard a quote, a motto, a mantra. “As you climb you should also lift.” This hit me hard. How do I use my experiences as a bridge and not a gate? Our professors in the grad program say “take ownership” so much that it feels like we’re still selling slaves. But it has forced me to look at my purpose and position in the art world and more importantly to my community and the community I want to build. That community looks like “each one teach one.” Looks like community art talks, where we build a deeper connection to how we see art and converse about it. It looks like Uhaul Pop Up galleries. It looks like a *Different World*. Yes, that's a Hillman reference. It looks like Houston's Project Row House and Theaster Gates turning his house into a local only indie theater.

I appreciate the art, artworks and artists that don't look like me. They have helped shape my art practice in many ways, and have provided the flame needed to fully understand I don't have to be any of them. That I need to be me because it's important for the advancement of art within my own community. Letting other artists know that it's ok to be them, exactly how they are.

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