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## Visual Pleasure and Racial Ambiguity

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Visual Pleasure and Racial Ambiguity

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Fine Arts

by  
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## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	iii
Abstract .....	v
Introduction.....	1
Paradise Lost .....	6
Expressionism .....	12
Beloved .....	16
Visual Pleasure .....	22
Movement in Painting .....	37
Conclusion.....	50
Bibliography.....	51
Vita .....	54

## List of Figures

<i>Trinity</i> .....	3
<i>Best Birthday</i> .....	5
<i>Ostracizer, Onkel Heine</i> .....	10
<i>Self-Portrait in Tuxedo</i> .....	12
<i>Ethel Ashton</i> .....	13
<i>Gravida 7 Para 3</i> .....	14
<i>Phallic Mother</i> .....	16
<i>Mother and Child (Nancy and Olivia)</i> .....	17
<i>Non je ne regrette rien</i> .....	23
<i>Trigger</i> .....	27
<i>The Black Camisole</i> .....	28
<i>Spring, still (singer)</i> .....	30
<i>Beach Portraits, Hilton Head Island, S.C., USA June 22, 1992</i> .....	32
<i>Spring, still (brother)</i> .....	33
<i>Spring, still (mother)</i> .....	33
<i>Spring, still (siblings)</i> .....	37
<i>Baby Love</i> .....	38
<i>Boyguide</i> .....	39
<i>Boyguide, study</i> .....	40

<i>Stonethrower</i> .....	42
<i>Baby Love</i> , detail .....	43
<i>Boyguide</i> , detail .....	45
<i>Best Birthday</i> , detail .....	48
<i>Aunt Marianne</i> .....	48

## Abstract

I struggle to present work that reflects a psychological expressivity which at the same time conveys intellectual concepts that are of concern to me. It seems that the fluidity of an image can communicate a certain pathos, and correspond to the fluid nature of one's identity. Drippy paint, distorted bodies, and vertiginous video clips can give an indication about what a body feels like from within. Depictions of these bodily feelings help to communicate ideas about what it means to be alive in general, and a mixed race woman, in particular.

Keywords: expressionism, Identity in art, mixed race identity, feminism in art, contemporary painting, racial identity in art, figurative painting

## I. Introduction:

“Debbie Do Dallas” read the handwritten label on a plain black VCR tape tucked in amongst my father’s collection of westerns and adventure movies. Viewing those words as a teenager caused me untold anguish, because of my father’s grammatical failure to make subject and verb agree, as much as the thought of him secretly watching sexually explicit movies. This anecdotal intersection of personal familial relationships, and the cultural context that leads to inequality of resources, in this case, access to educational opportunities between those of African and European descent, is the basis of my work. I’m telling personal stories which are necessarily touched on by the cultural context of feminist and racial concerns.

As a woman straddling the divide between Teutonic and African ancestries, my story is more relevant than ever in our current polarized political milieu. The novels of Zadie Smith provide me with a prototype of an approach to art making that includes both the very personal familial history and the interaction of that family with dominant cultural forces. It is with merciless candor that I bring untold family secrets, infidelities, addiction, and mental illness to the fore. Each painting is rooted in a pivotal memory from childhood and represents a psychologically intense moment of personal influence, set in a culture of sexual and racial tension.

One specific feminist concern addressed in my work is the psychological relationship

between mother and child. I refer to the theoretical writings of Jacques Lacan in which an idyllic relationship between mother and child existed in the pre-oedipal stage. Lacan postulates that during the Oedipal phase, the influence of our dominant patriarchal culture causes a rupture of the bond between mother and child. Many of my paintings and my video reveal my longing for that lost loving bond that existed before it was broken by the impact of our society's social rules.

The importance of visual pleasure in my artmaking is another issue of interest to me in the feminist realm. Visually engaging work, particularly related to depiction of the female form, has been a hot-bed of contention among feminist thinkers. The portrayal of the beautiful female for the consumption of the typical male viewer and his gaze has become taboo for an enlightened female artist. A further consideration to keep in mind when discussing the "gaze" is that it is the objectification of the female subject that is at issue. The objectified gaze may be held by anyone, be they male, female, trans, or queer. The portrayal of the objectified female form, in which only beauty, passivity, and availability are highlighted, robs the subject of her agency and will to think for herself. Such a portrayal is at odds with my intentions of providing my subjects with a depth of character and the capacity to flesh out their own person-hood. It is my contention, however, that visual pleasure and beauty of the female form can be an effective means of espousing feminist and other ideals that undermine the dominant culture. I want to embrace the power of visual engagement to draw the viewer into my world that does not

represent the status quo.

Negotiating psychological and cultural tensions is my driving force, and my communicative tools lie in very expressive and organic painting. Over the past several years, in the evolution of my painting style, I began by distorting the gestures and figures of my subjects to create a certain mood that coincided with the narrative of the painting. (figure 1) The literal outlines of these figures are for the most part intact and their expressive language lies in the exaggeration of personal features and facial attitudes. These works are painted in a choppy fashion that clearly reveals the hand of the artist, and refers to the constructed nature of identity.



Fig. 1. Ruth Owens, *Trinity*, 2017, oil on canvas, 48" x 48"

I have good reason to reject the construction of the female and Black racial identity by the dominant white patriarchal society. In both cases, I am considered “other” and not worthy of subject-hood. There is perhaps a unique sense of dislocation from a racial point of view when one is born in a predominantly Caucasian country as a person of mixed race heritage that incorporates both white and black. This feeling of dislocation is explored in the early expressive portraits of my family, which are set in Germany, my country of birth. It is fitting that these German paintings, which refer to my very early childhood, are reminiscent of the German expressionist painting style.

In my most recent work, (figure 2) I’ve moved away from the sketchy, choppy painting technique, and have embraced a more variegated and tactile painting approach. The surfaces are scratched, left bare, glopped on, and dripped on for a mood consistent with the emotive content of the image. The outlines of the figures are often lost, and they become integrated into the background, or each other, in a dynamic ebb and flow. The surface not only becomes a metaphor for the vulnerability of our physical bodies, but it further represents an attempt to embrace a fluidity of sexual and racial identity in order to subvert the prescribed identity dictated by our dominant culture. A Gerhard Richter-like scrape of facial features denies placement of a figure within the confines of a preordained cultural construct. Further, there is no metaphoric line of containment imprisoning the figure into a convention of structured racism or sexism.



Fig. 2. Ruth Owens, *Best Birthday*, 2018, oil on canvas, 48" x 48"

## II. Paradise Lost

A small brown girl stands on a bright green lawn between two crouching white women, one very young and the other very old. The subjects in my painting, "Trinity," 2017, (figure 1) comprise three generations posing for a photograph in the German garden of my birth town. Sandwiched between my mother and grandmother, I am the small girl whose interest is captured by an off-camera event (likely the antics of the family cat). My grandmother wears a crazed smirk on her weirdly cocked head, and although she's looking at the camera, she, like her granddaughter, feels no self-consciousness about being photographed.

My mother, on the other hand, bears a sheepish grin that belies a certain discomfort in facing the mercilessly revealing lens of the camera. Her uncomfortable smile is forced, although her hair is neatly coifed and her clothes are tidy and respectable. Based on appearances, she should feel less shame than the nappy headed shoeless child or the toothless grandmother in the sleeveless sundress. The source of her distress likely stems from her two companions in the photo. Having a mentally ill and socially outcast

mother, along with a “mishling”<sup>1</sup> child out of wedlock at age 19, could explain her squeamishness in front of the all-revealing lens of the camera.

Yet, out of the three figures, she is the most likely director of this photographic enterprise, so there must be an ambivalence in her desire to record this moment in her life that simultaneously exposes shame and and reflects familial love. That there is love in this scene is undeniable as evidenced by the mother holding the child’s right hand with both of hers, and the grandmother holding and pulling the child’s leg towards herself.

I chose this photo as a reference piece for my painting because it has emotional meaning for me. It demonstrates what is central to my work, the personal narrative that is influenced by culture’s omnipresent impact. I was not aware of being perceived as different by other people at this young point in my life. It is in viewing this photograph of our loving family group as an acculturated adult that I can see my “difference” and an emotional chord is struck.

“Trinity” explores a time in a child’s life during which natal memories are formed.

According to Griselda Pollock, a contemporary art critic born in South Africa, natal memories are formed by the small child and represent the landscapes and surroundings of their earliest experiences. Natal memory is not a flushed out visual memory that we

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<sup>1</sup> Mishling - German colloquialism for a person with a German and African-American parents, means literally mongrel, was originally a legal term for Part-Jew in the Nazi era

experience as adults, but more of a phenomenological one based on the sensory intake of a small child in their country of birth. Pollock describes it as such:

This concept of natal memory concerns a deep, often unrecognized memory of place and space associated with where we were born and pass those early years of childhood during which we absorb a feeling of location without the fear of estrangement...<sup>2</sup>

In Pollock's view, natal memory isn't a concrete topographical concept of the landscape, rather a much fuzzier remembrance that is more of an undefinable feeling associated with the place of one's birth. It is a memory that recalls a naïve time of having a sense of belonging to one's environment in the early years of life.

The painting "Trinity" is based on a photograph that was taken when I was a very young child and at an age when natal memories are formed. I must have absorbed sensory experiences that gave me a feeling of being at home and safe in the German landscape of my birth. The bright green grass, the smell of apple dumplings cooling on the window sill, the silky fur of a cat may all plausibly be sensory experiences that contribute to my personal natal memory. Unfortunately, this feeling of being "at home" could not be sustained for a person with brown skin in the predominantly fair skinned country of Germany. This is a situation in which the comforting feel-good characteristic of natal memory leads me, as an adult of mixed race heritage, to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about how to negotiate the concept of "home".

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<sup>2</sup> Griselda Pollock, "Back to Africa: From Natal to Natal in the Locations of Memory," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 5, no.1+2 (2006): 53.

When I spend time in the garden of the house in which I was born, natal memory is triggered and I feel safe and at ease, but my intellectual side tells me that the moment I step outside the front gate, I will be considered a stranger in my own country of birth and that I have no basis to envelope Germany into my sense of identity. A dislocation takes effect and I can no longer lay claim to the home where I was born and raised.

Pollock describes this phenomenon as it applies to the colonial, immigrant, or refugee, but it can also be applied to my situation as the child born out of the mix of cultures during the American military occupation of what was then West-Germany.

...natal memory could explain...the problem of the colonial, immigrant or refugee subject in relation to a place that, even by virtue of birth in that space, cannot be claimed as mine and cannot, therefore, provide that imaginary support for a sense of identity.<sup>3</sup>

There is a disconnect between the heartening natal memories associated with my place of birth and the intellectual understanding that I do not feel privileged to call Germany my home. How do those comforting early sensory memories find a place in the formation of my identity as a mixed race woman born and raised in an overwhelmingly Caucasian country such as Germany?

The idea of my personal sense of dislocation is explored further in "Ostracizer, Onkel Heine," 2017, (figure 3) an oil painting on canvas measuring 40" x 60". This painting depicts a life-sized version of my German uncle dressed in a stiff cotton shirt and dark

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<sup>3</sup> Pollock, "Back to Africa," 53.

trousers sitting in his respectable working class home smoking a cigarette. His face is shown in profile and reveals his disapproval and judgmental attitude toward the object of his displeasure, which is presumably located off the right side of the canvas. The turned down corners of his mouth typify a countenance that I had come to know well during a 5-year period of “ostracism” when he and my aunt would not speak to our family, even though we lived directly across the street. This punishment was doled out in response to the marriage of his German sister-in-law to a black serviceman, the union of my mother and father.



Fig. 3. Ruth Owens, *Ostracizer: Onkel Heine*, 2017, oil on canvas, 60” x 40”

It is one thing when complete strangers look askance at my non-European features of brown skin, wide nose, kinky hair, and un-germanically thin body, but it is quite another

when your own family follows the prescription of the inflexible social order and contributes to your sense of dislocation. Following the example of my mother, my reaction to such bigoted treatment was to ignore the perpetrators and to focus on the love and support of our nuclear family. Photographs from these early days provide the stimulus that sets in motion an artistic exploration of my gendered mixed race identity.

Roland Barthes says that we tend to look at old photos in times of loss, in his case, the loss of his mother. Perhaps my motivations are similar. It may be that I am searching through the family archive in response to the loss of “home.” There is evidence in those scratchy old black and whites that I did have a home, and my sense of dislocation can be set aside for a short time while I contemplate the small brown girl that is so intent on the intrigues of the family cat that she is unaware of the punishing ostracizers outside the garden gate.

### III. Expressionism

“Ostracizer, Onkel Heine” was painted with particular attention to clearly exposing his intolerant judgmental attitude. I feel comfortable with the style similar to the one used by the German expressionists to reveal some of the psychological aspects of the subjects of my paintings. “Onkel Heine” can be compared to Max Beckmann’s *Self-Portrait in Tuxedo*, 1927 (figure 4), in which the artist dons both the clothing and the judgmental arrogance of the upper class.



Fig. 4. Max Beckmann, *Self-Portrait in Tuxedo*, 1927, oil on canvas. 139.5 x 95.5 cm. Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum. From [www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/304344](http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/304344)

Another more contemporary artist that explores the psychological motivations of her subjects as evidenced in the gesture of the body and the expression of the face is Alice Neel (1930 -1984). An intense dedication to the psychological depth of a painting was Neel’s utmost goal in the figurative portraiture that dominated her artistic practice. Early

in her career Neel painted an unconventional nude portrait called “Ethel Ashton, 1930 which, despite its small size, packs a wallop psychological punch. (figure 5) The figure is extremely foreshortened from above and the head is disconcertingly small despite being the closest body part to the viewer. The subject’s eyes are large, apologetic, and seem to be full of shame for her large, droopy, naked body. Neel was proud of the uncompromising nature of this portrait of a woman beaten down by dominant patriarchal forces. Neel described this portrait as being “...great for Women’s Lib, because she is almost apologizing for living.”<sup>4</sup> Neel determinedly revealed the psychological “truth” of her sitter’s personality, and, sadly, the truth is not always so pleasant.



Fig. 5. Alice Neel, *Ethel Ashton*, 1930, oil on canvas, 24” x 22”. Hartley and Richard Neel. From Lewison and Walker, *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, 201.

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Hills, *Alice Neel* (New York: Harry H. Abrams, Inc., 1983), 30.

My naked self-portrait, "Gravida 7, Para 3," (2017) (figure 6) follows Neel's lead in revealing an uncomfortable truth in its attention to the psychological state of the subject. The title, "Gravida 7, Para 3," is the medical notation to describe a woman that has been pregnant 7 times, and has delivered 3 live births. The discrepancy between the numbers can be accounted for by miscarriages, or abortions, so "Gravida" brings up the uncomfortable subject of abortion in a self-portrait/nude format. Like the Ethel Ashton portrait, I painted myself in a foreshortened perspective from overhead with a small head to convey the sense that bodily concerns are of major import in this scenario. Also similar to the Ashton portrait, my limbs are amputated by the canvas edge which makes the figure seem helpless with a lack of physical agency.



Fig. 6. Ruth Owens, *Gravida 7 Para 3*, 2017, oil on canvas, 60" x 40"

While Neel may have been referencing the general lack of power of the female in our male dominated society, I am speaking about a specific aspect of the female condition when it comes to reproductive choices. I am exploring the feelings of ambivalence that many women encounter when weighing the option to abort an unwanted pregnancy, a decision men do not, in general, ever have to face. The burden of reproductive choices falls overwhelmingly on the female, and to date there is still no widely used method of male birth control besides the awkward and unreliable use of the condom. Vasectomy is an invasive permanent option that is rejected by many men. The shame and guilt of choosing to undergo an abortion is a uniquely disquieting feminine situation, and is usually not offset by male responsibility in terms of prevention. Neel's "women's lib" reference is just dated nomenclature describing the same issues that are currently causing anxiety and disequilibrium among women today: inequality of the sexes.

## VI. Beloved

Ambivalence and anxiety can be read in the wide-eyed face of “Gravida.” The disproportionately large eyes of the mother in my painting “Phallic Mother” (2017) (figure 7) conveys similar emotions. “Phallic Mother” is a portrait of my sister and her infant daughter smooshed together toward the upper left side of a 24” x 24” canvas. The figures are painted on a ground of deep purple, a color that signifies bodily bruising and pain in my eyes. This purple ground is allowed to come through in an unadulterated form under the eyes of the mother, which indicates that she is feeling the pain and fear associated with new motherhood. Alice Neel’s “Mother and Child (Nancy and Olivia),” 1967 (figure 8) similarly depicts a woman in the throes of ambivalence about her status as a new mother. Neel commented that the mother in her painting was afraid because it was her first child.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 7. Ruth Owens, *Phallic Mother*, 2017, oil on canvas, 24” x 24”

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<sup>5</sup> Hills, *Alice Neel*, 123.



Fig. 8. Alice Neel, *Mother and Child (Nancy and Olivia)*, 1967, oil on canvas, 39 ¼" x 36". Collection of Diane and David Goldsmith. From Lewison and Walker, *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, 223.

These are not your typical saccharine images of mother and child; they go deeper into a psychological reality experienced by most mothers. The use of a bold black line to outline the figures in both works point to the darker aspects of motherhood less explored in portraiture. This darkness is reiterated in the black clothing of the baby in “Phallic,” unconventionally eschewing the traditional pink or yellow of customary baby dress. The mother’s right eye area is pushed in leaving a dark absence on the side of her face due to the refraction of very thick glasses. The result is a fragmented face that is being pushed by the head of the baby who also has her hand wrapped around the neck of the mother. When the child begins to live, the mother begins to die. And, in an effort of retaliation, is the mother trying to push the baby out of the picture?

Although these mother and child paintings bring to light the anxiety associated with the responsibility, fatigue, and loss of independence associated with motherhood, the two figures are physically inseparably close in both interpretations. There is an undeniably deep bond that is also being referenced which has been best described by Jaques Lacan's theory on the construction of sexual identity. Lacan describes the phallic mother as a figure of central importance to the young child during the pre-oedipal period of its development. He describes the phallus not as a physical structure, but as a concept that indicates a position of power. In his view, the person who is in possession of the phallus can be male or female as long as they are the one holding the power. The child, in the pre-oedipal period of life, looks to their mother as the thing they most desire. This applies to both girl and boy child, and they both view the mother as the possessor of power and holder of the phallus.

The phallic mother is the object of the child's sexual desire, and this dyad of mother and child provides the illusion of sexual completeness in the child's view. This blissful illusion is disrupted in the Oedipal stage during which societal directives prohibit the intense sexual attachment of the child to the mother. In Lacan's work, the father is the representative of our patriarchal society's rules, and he enforces his system by the threat of castration. As a result, the boy-child seeks out another female other than the mother, and the girl-child transfers her love to the father who now holds the phallus. To conform to the phallic order of the father, the child in the oedipal phase must repress

their dyadic love with their mother. The love is repressed into the level of the child's unconscious mind, and the development of a primordial absence ensues in Lacan's view. Kate Linker, a feminist thinker and art critic, describes the consequences of this repression in her writings on representation and sexuality. She proposes that "... meaning, or a "place" in patriarchal structure, is attained only at the price of the lost object."<sup>6</sup> The child's object of desire, the phallic mother, is lost in the process of conforming to the sexual identity deemed appropriate in our patriarchal society. With Lacan's theories in mind, we can perhaps reinterpret the paintings of mother and child as rendered by myself and Alice Neel. The fear seen in the expressions of the mothers may not only be related to the loss of independence associated with the day to day difficulties of caring for a frail and utterly dependent creature, but the fear may also be the result of the realization of the inevitability of a much deeper loss. The child which melds itself so closely to its mother in the pre-oedipal period will eventually have to transfer its love from the phallic mother to others according to the prescription of our patriarchal society. The memory of the original love for the phallic mother will be repressed and result in a primordial sense of loss. The mother knows this will happen because it has happened to her too.

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<sup>6</sup> Kate Linker, "Representation and Sexuality," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 396.

The children, on the other hand, cling innocently to their object of desire, not knowing what is in store for them in the future. This predicament brings up a number of questions in my mind. For example, if this intense love affair of the mother and child in the pre-oedipal stage is simply a fantasy in the mind of the child, then isn't it necessary that this fantasy be given up in the process of maturation? Is there a possibility of a society skewed less toward the patriarchal in which the love for the mother matures and does not require termination and repression? Could it be, that in such a society, loss of love and its repression are not characteristics of the mature adult? Without the primordial loss, can we function as happier, more generous and well-adjusted human beings? These questions are intriguing to me and the concept of the phallic mother keeps presenting itself in my work.

According to Lacan, the memory of the sexual dyad of mother and child is repressed into the child's unconscious, and is the primary initiator of feelings of desire. Wanting and desiring are not the same in Lacan's view. If something is wanted it can possibly be attained, if it is desired, on the other hand, attaining it will never be possible. Linker describes this relationship when she says that "[i]t is in this lack, the effect of a primordial absence (the dyadic union with the mother) that Lacan bases the instigation of desire, which is distinguished from want in that its satisfaction is never attained."<sup>7</sup>

The desire for the experience of intense unity with the phallic mother can never be

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<sup>7</sup> Linker, "Representation," 397.

attained in our patriarchal society, and this loss leaves an emptiness that is filled in by substitutions or representations of the lost object of desire.

The primary representation used to fill in the gap of the lost object is language, and in our culture language is dictated by patriarchal dominance. Therefore, the word, “boy”, functions as a fill-in for his loss by dictating that he replaces the love for his mother with love for another woman. Art can function as a representational fill-in for the loss of the phallic mother, and it too has functioned to uphold the supremacy of the male in our society by positioning the female as simply an object to satisfy his own sense of lack.

The woman exists only in relation to the man and has no subjectivity of her own. Often this involves depicting a nonthreatening, passive and unaware female that is pleasing and beautiful to look at from the male’s point of view, i.e. the male gaze. Painting for the visual pleasure of the male gaze has been the subject of much feminine criticism in the art world in the past. Since, as mentioned earlier, in our present-day context, the “gaze’ may not exclusively be limited to the male, perhaps a more accurate contemporary description would be the “objective gaze.”

## V. Visual Pleasure

However, the yearnings of desire can be a powerful motivator, and Mira Schor, a feminist writer and painter, suggests that visual pleasure utilizes the element of desire, and can be an influential tool in painting. Schor suggests that instead of ignoring the potent aspect of desire for visual pleasure, it should be used as a subversive tool to address issues that may be quite controversial or disquieting. Schor claimed the following in 1997:

The contemporary emphasis on the ideological purposes of scopophilia neglects the subversive potential of visual pleasure. Visual pleasure does not rule out politically or psychologically charged narratives.<sup>8</sup>

Visual pleasure can seduce the viewer into a work of art that is actually trying to cause an upset in the “accepted” viewpoint of our culture. A painting of a beautiful woman may initially tap in to the scopophilic desires of the objectifying gaze, but it can then lead the viewer into a consideration of subjectivity from a woman’s point of view.

A stunning object of visual beauty is Wangechi Mutu’s *Non je ne regrette rien*, 2007, which also contains disturbing and violent elements in its depiction of the black female nude (Figure 9). It is a collaged construction of ink, acrylic, glitter, cloth, paper collage, plastic, plant material, and mixed media on Mylar, that measures a mere 138 x 233 cm. in size. From a distance the piece presents itself as an aesthetically pleasing

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<sup>8</sup> Mira Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 154.

abstraction with a strong sense of shape and composition that generates activity and movement. Warm pinks, greens, and browns are masterfully balanced by cool purples, greens, and whites. Glittery sparkles, and textural plant material add to the visual enticement of Mutu's collage.



Fig. 9. Wangechi Mutu, *Non je ne regrette rien*, 2007, Ink, acrylic, glitter, cloth, paper, collage, plastic, plant material and mixed media on Mylar, 54 ½ x 92 ½ in. From Rubell Family, *30 Americans*, 142.

On closer inspection, *Non je ne regrette rien* is seen to be a contradictory depiction of a voluptuous brown woman who is in the midst of violent and athletic martial arts flip-kick. Coiled up next to her is a glittering serpentine creature whose mouth touches her voluptuous lips. The body of the woman has been fashioned

from fragments of images from pornographic, fashion, and travel magazines.<sup>9</sup> She is missing arms and a foot, and her lips and breast seem disproportionately large compared to the other features. Birds, feathers, leaves, grass, ferns, burlap, pearls, and watch-like mechanical images are superimposed over the body's energetic gesture. Her hair, which is the same scale as the torso, explodes into a sensuous, spontaneous play of browns, warm greens, pinks and reds that spread over the Mylar surface.

The serpent, in contrast, is more simply rendered in mainly purple with a luminous white coral surface pattern and just a bit of fern around its characteristic triangularly shaped head. Several splashes of blood red are also associated with the snake's body that has been violently transected in several places. That the powerful monstrous female perpetrated the snake's fragmentation is clear visually, and apparently she has no regrets about her destructive action as the title, *Non je ne regrette rien*, states. Mutu has created a monstrously powerful and extraordinarily beautiful female that is capable of both beguiling eroticism and fearsome violence.

The stereotypical characteristic of animalistic sexuality associated with the black female can be seen as an element that contemporary black artists would want to deconstruct. Wangechi Mutu, however, embraces and exploits the trope of the black female primitive nature to celebrate her transformative capabilities, while exposing the

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Enright, "Resonant surgeries: The Collaged World of Wangechi Mutu," *Border Crossings* 27, no. 1 (February 2008): 28-46.

absurdity of the stereotype. Barbara Thompson describes Mutu's intentions in her art making by saying that there are "racial and sexual differences which Mutu attempts to disrupt by alerting the viewer to the absurdity of both historical and contemporary racist ideologies conflating African female sexuality and complacency."<sup>10</sup> Mutu beguiles us with the visual pleasure presented in her masterfully created work of art, and in the subject of that work: a sensually displayed black female nude. However, on closer inspection this hyperbolically primitively feathered and adorned nude violently rejects the symbol of patriarchy (the snake/penis/phallus). *Non je ne regrette rien* exhibits sophisticated complexity in its use of the visual seduction of an exaggerated stereotypical image to ultimately reject that self-same stereotype in the final analysis. On initial view, my painting, "Gravida" (figure 6), presents as a female nude with a considerable degree of powerlessness in light of the fact that all four limbs are "amputated" by the confines of the canvas. This lack of agency allows for "safe" viewing on the part of an objectifying viewer giving in to their scopophilic desires. The soft pastel like colors of the figure and background contribute to the visual pleasure offered by this seemingly passive nude created for the desire of the objectifying viewer. The anxious expression on the figure's face and the distortion of the body which sinks from

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara Thompson, "Decolonizing Black Bodies," in *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*, ed. Barbara Thompson (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008) 279-311.

the weight of her decisions point to the cold hard seriousness of the painting's subject matter. The viewer, who was perhaps first drawn in by the prospect of viewing another passive female nude gets a taste of the anxiety that is experienced by the subject of the painting. Instead of a coy or compliant expression giving the green-light to scopophilic pleasures, an anxious and intelligent face signals that difficult issues need to be addressed. This is no time for mindless surrender to sexual pleasure.

In the case of "Trigger," 2017 (figure 10), an attractive young woman with exaggerated model-like proportions supplies the visual pleasure to seduce the audience. But the attitude of her lifted chin and her superciliously raised right eyebrow presents a woman that is calmly assessing **us** as viewers. "Trigger" is a painting in which the subject is viewing as much as she is being viewed. We are allowed to take in the beauty of her youthful face and enjoy the soft skin displayed by flowing yellow dress held up by very thin shoulder straps. Her passivity in allowing herself to be viewed as an object of desire goes only so far, however, and the crossed hands over her sexual area and the donning of boots ready for combat set up distinct boundaries which cannot be breached. Her footwear and bodily gesture communicate as much as her aloof facial demeanor, and indicate that while we are watching her, she is watching us and giving us clear signals regarding how much access we have to her body.



Fig. 10. Ruth Owens, *Trigger*, 2017, oil on canvas, 60” x 36”

The gaze and posture of “Trigger” is reminiscent of Edouard Manet’s *Dejeuner sur L’herbe*, (1863) a painting that caused considerable uproar in its initial presentation to the public. The furor was focused on the woman clothed only in her “virtue” while sitting with her two fully dressed male companions. Her most egregious offense is that she unashamedly assesses the viewer, while clearly acknowledging the fact that her nudity is on display. However, she allows herself to be exposed to the onlooker in a very limited fashion, keeping the more titillating aspects of her anatomy out of sight. Like the girl in “Trigger” she is in control of her own sexuality.

In 2004 Chantal Joffe painted *The Black Camisole* (figure 11) which also portrays a female subject assessing the viewer. A blond woman sits on a nondescript bench wearing 5 inch heels and a skimpy camisole that exposes her left thigh and backside. There are no arms in sight and the legs below the knee are impossibly thin and surely unable to support the weight of her thighs and torso. This physical weakness is offset primarily by the extremely judgmental tilt of her head and her tightly crossed legs. She is watching the viewer and presenting clear boundaries for our focus. A push and pull of visual judgments mimic the push and pull of power that is possessed and given up by the female subject in both paintings. There is a give and take which is, after all, what we strive for in any meaningful relationship, be it visual with a painting or romantic with a love interest.



Fig. 11. Chantal Joffe, *The Black Camisole*, 2004, oil on board, 300 x 120 cm. Victoria Miro Gallery. From Freeman and Matravers, *Figuring out Figurative Art*, 102.

A degree of agency is afforded to the subject that directly confronts her viewing audience. Another aspect of both *The Black Camisole* and *Trigger* that contributes to establishing the agency of the female subject is their exaggerated verticality. Joffe's work is 300 x 120 cm, more than twice as high as it is wide. The figure in *Trigger* is striking in its length, especially her neck and legs; if she stood, surely she'd be 9 feet tall. This emphasis on the vertical is in direct opposition to the classical depiction of the female nude in a reclining position, passively ready to be taken, visually or otherwise. In his essay on *The Black Camisole*, Raymond Geuss discusses how the painting's verticality gives the female subject an air of authority as in a painting of a pope.<sup>11</sup> Geuss writes that this very vertical painting gives the woman in the camisole an aura of power which is in contradistinction to the *grandes horizontals* that represent the nudes of the nineteenth century of which Manet's *Olympia* (1863) is a key example. Of course, the nudes that came before *Olympia*, such as Jean August Dominique Ingre's *Grande Odalisque*, (1814), had even less agency as mythological beings of fantasy or innocent victims that did not directly engage the gaze of the viewer.

I am sold on the power of visual pleasure to tap in to the unfulfilled desire of the viewer to address otherwise difficult subject matter. In my video, *Spring* (2017) (figure 12), an

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<sup>11</sup> Raymond Geuss, "The Radioactive Wolf, Pieing and the Goddess 'Fashion'," in *Figuring out Figurative Art: Contemporary Philosophers on Contemporary Paintings*, ed. Damien Freeman and Derek Matravers (New York: Routledge, 2015), 103.

even featured young woman sings soulfully against a hazy dreamlike cream colored background. The warm natural light on her tightly filmed face is so highly exposed that it blurs out any possible blemishes or unevenness on her youthful caramel colored skin. Her hair has a soft youthful shine, and her singing reverberates beautifully in that nondescript space which like the cathedral elevates the song to the heavens. Except for perhaps a short glimpse at the beginning of the video, she looks away from the camera for the duration of the piece. The viewer is allowed to observe her heartfelt and serious rendering of a call and response song. This is an earnest rendering of an African American slave/prison song by a physically attractive young woman of indeterminate racial makeup that most people can identify with.



Fig. 12. Ruth Owens, *Spring*, 2017, still from 5 min 40 sec video

On the other hand, although the cinematic value of the singing girl is high, she herself presents in a very natural manner. She wears minimal makeup, there is no evidence of

mascara, blush, or lipstick. Her hair is allowed to maintain its natural curliness, and is not heat blown into a bone straightness commonly seen in the popular media. Although the song is sung on tune for the most part, there are times when it becomes a little pitchy. She is not a professionally trained singer with the carefully constructed and made-up physical persona of a rock star. She is more like the average viewer, allowing empathy and accessibility to her message.

The unadorned singer in *Spring* displays a certain degree of vulnerability which allows the viewer to empathize with her. This is similar to the way Rineke Dijkstra's subjects are filmed at a vulnerable moment. For example, in her *Beach Portraits* (1992-2002) (figure 13) the young people are situated on the beach devoid of props and intricate backdrops, weary from swimming, and half-clothed in bathing suits. Indeed, just the fact of being in front of a camera imparts a certain uneasiness in most people. While Dijkstra taps into this vulnerability to gain the viewer's empathy regarding a young person's attempts at constructing an identity,<sup>12</sup> the vulnerability of the singer in *Spring* allows the viewer to open up to the plight of the African American with the associated legacy of slavery and false imprisonment. This legacy is not polite dinner party conversation, however, it can be made more palatable in an art work that plays with the viewer's feelings of desire and empathy.

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<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Blessing, "What We Still Feel: Rineke Dijkstra's Video," in *Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective*, ed. Guggenheim and SFMOMA (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2012), 31.



Fig. 13. Rineke Dijkstra, *Beach Portraits, Hilton Head Island, S.C., USA June 22, 1992*, 1992, chromogenic print, 117 x 94 cm. From Guggenheim and SFMOMA, *Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective*, 65.

The high production value and detailed editing of the young girl singing is interrupted by super-eight home movie clips taken in the 1960's and 70's by my parents. (figures 14 and 15) In contrast to the pristinely filmed clips of the young girl, the super-eight presentation is quite rough due to the old school technology and the amateur nature of the person holding the movie camera. The age of the film, the low-tech nature of the camera, and the transferal of the images from super-eight to CD to digital all contribute to a distortion of the color, contrast, and sharpness of the images. Strange flipping of

the film vertically and speeding up of the action are also characteristic of this footage due mechanical elements.



Fig. 14. Ruth Owens, *Spring*, 2017, still from 5 min 40 sec video



Fig. 15. Ruth Owens, *Spring*, 2017, still from 5 min 40 sec video

Quirky points of view and choice of subject matter reflect the human contribution to the rough nature of this footage. There is the typical family scene of a birthday party or a day at the beach, but the camera does not calmly follow the actions of the film's subject from beginning to end. There are distracted jerks and unsteadiness due to the inability to steady the handheld camera, which I can only assume were not deliberate on the part of the person filming.

Also, very often, when my very young father is filming my mother, the focus or point of view is exclusively on her body from the neck down rather than her whole figure. There is a sequence that shows my mother playing with my brother and me on an inflatable raft in a lake in 1960's Georgia. She playfully dumps us off the raft into the water a couple of times, and then steps aside to presumably rest and take in the scenery of the lake. During this entire film sequence, we see her head for only a split second, the overwhelming majority of the time we see her body (sans head) in a swimming suit. This headless body is very awkward to observe, but it gives some insight into the psychological state of mind of my father, the cameraman.

The viewer is perhaps drawn in by the clean and professional sequences of the youthful soulfully singing girl, but the super-eight footage reveals the messier truth of a mixed race family trying to find a place in America's segregated culture. The singing girl perhaps gives permission to the voyeuristic impulses of the viewer to observe the

intimate family scenes of this racially hybrid group. There is a tension of light and dark, and the desire for lightness provides an entrée to the darker and more painful yet socially relevant subject matter of race in our society.

My father took also extensive footage from the driver's seat of a car traveling through our black neighborhood in Augusta, Georgia. Cars and houses speed by, and, every so often, people can be seen walking or standing on the side of the road. For *Spring*, I pulled out the clips that showed people from the extensive footage of cars, houses, and landscape that my father filmed from the moving car.

I hated this tendency of my father's to film subjects outside of the family, but now I find this footage immensely valuable because it gives glimpse of the social environment in which we lived at that time. The backyard footage gives an intimate view of our family interactions, the birthday party scenes show the neighborhood kids in our space, and the anonymous street scenes show the environment in which we lived, an all-black neighborhood. And smatterings of the white community are included as well, to provide further context. There were no mixed communities in Georgia in the sixties, and because my father was black we lived in an all-black neighborhood. We were outsiders in this community and were considered a transitory phenomenon, or a quirk that would soon pass.

I lived in Georgia from age 4 until age 8, arguably, a period of my development that could contribute to the formation of natal memory as described by Pollock. And, indeed,

I do feel a familiarity with the warmth of the weather and the lushness of the vegetation of the southern states. There is a phenomenological feeling of “home” in the south for me related to the light, the feeling of humidity, and the vividness of colors. I especially remember looking out the window of a car at night marveling at the colorful lights of the traffic signals and Christmas decorations on the streets of Augusta.

The American South along with Southern Germany make up my natal memory of home. Unfortunately, the South similarly causes a sense of dislocation in my adult self who has the knowledge of the intolerance accorded to people of color. It is difficult to call the South home with this knowledge. My sense of dislocation is perhaps a major driving force in my art, to make palatable and acceptable the mixed race identity I possess. Griselda Pollock asserts that the collision between the phenomenological experiences of one’s early years and the knowledge gained on maturity produces the experience of dislocation which “can become thereby a motor or a topic for some other kind of working through: in analysis, writing or art.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Pollock, “Back to Africa,” 62.

## VI. Movement in Painting

Although we were not wealthy, my parents purchased a super-eight camera to record the now requisite footage of our childhood birthday parties and backyard antics in the 1960's and 1970's. This footage has proved to be an extremely valuable resource in mining my psychological past, and clips from these films have served as reference images for my paintings. However, instead of faithfully copying the images in a straightforward representational manner, I have attempted to heighten the emotional impact by use of collage, color alterations, and compositional changes. For example, the original footage used to paint *Baby Love*, (2018) (figure 16), has been corrupted to very muted black and purple colors. I have changed these colors to vibrant warm violets and cold deep greens and blacks in the painting (figure 17). The altered color scheme speaks more truthfully to the tension of warm and cold of memories past.



Fig. 16. Ruth Owens, *Spring*, 2017, still from 5 min 40 sec video



Fig. 17. Ruth Owens, *Baby Love*, 2017, oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

In some ways, however, the corruption of the super-eight film over time is actually an asset in my painting practice. It results in a loss of a significant degree of visual information allowing me to experiment with abstraction in the figure and its surroundings. This abstraction and departure from the representational can go a long way in helping to communicate a fluidity of racial identity, to set the mood for a psychological investigation of memories past, and to speak to the vulnerability of brown and black bodies.

The super-eight footage taken by my parents in the 1960's was used in a direct unadulterated manner in the form of clips strung together in the video, *Spring*. Stills

from this footage were also used more indirectly as reference material for paintings such as *Boyguide*, 2017. (figure 18) I chose a clip from the video that depicts my 4-year-old brother guiding our father around on an air mattress in a Georgia country lake. This image was used as a basis for a small work on paper in which drawing, composition, and color decisions were determined. The painting on paper, *Boyguide, study* (2017) (figure 19) represents a significant departure from the original film still, especially in terms of the color. The old super-eight footage has a somber palette of mainly cool dark purples and blacks whereas the study incorporates warm yellows and rich alizarins.



Fig. 18. Ruth Owens, *Boyguide*, 2017, oil on canvas, 40" x 60"



Fig. 19. Ruth Owens, *Boyguide, study*, 2017, oil on canvas, 6" x 9"

The small water color serves as a starting point for the production of the larger oil painting. With many of the technical details already worked out, I am able to concentrate on the application of paint in a very expressive manner. In *Boyguide*, the paint is glopped on, scraped, dripped, thinly staining, and vigorously and gently brushed. A sense of movement and energy is achieved with this great variation in the “speed” of paint application, and a dichotomy plays out between control and freedom of the physicality of the paint on canvas. This movement can contribute to an exciting visual experience of the painting and relates to the visual pleasure of the work, but it also importantly figures in to my conceptual motivations in creating art.

Largely, I am interested in the empowerment of racially diverse women, not to idolize them as heroic flawless creatures, but to allow for their own specific characters to

unfold, not hiding the messiness inherent in the condition of being alive. The subjects in my work are engaged in activities in their own control. They have the agency to make their own decisions, and the viewing public gets a glimpse, with the feeling that there is more that happened before and after this glimpse. The actions of the subjects in my paintings are not exclusively for the enjoyment of the viewer, but the viewer is allowed to get a small snapshot of women and people of color pursuing their own agendas. They are pursuing their own personal narratives despite the judgements of culture at large which, in many cases, rejects the possibility black and female individuality. Further, movement contributes an important dimension to my work because of the idea of paint as a metaphor for the body and its vulnerability. Applying the paint with attention to its physical nature and bringing attention to how paint can be manipulated emphasizes paint's tactile values. Paint can be viewed as a stand-in for the body, especially the very organic formulations of oil paint. From the extremes of turpentine thinned color field effects (ala Helen Frankenthaler) to thick impasto application with the use of no medium at all, the boundaries of paint manipulation are pushed and stretched in a painting such as *Stonethrower*, 2018 (figure 20). The palpable nature of paint brings to mind the physicality of our bodies which can be stretched and bent and pushed to extremes of physical soundness. I use the metaphor of paint as body to spotlight the vulnerability of the human condition, especially as it applies to the bodies of women, and black and brown people.

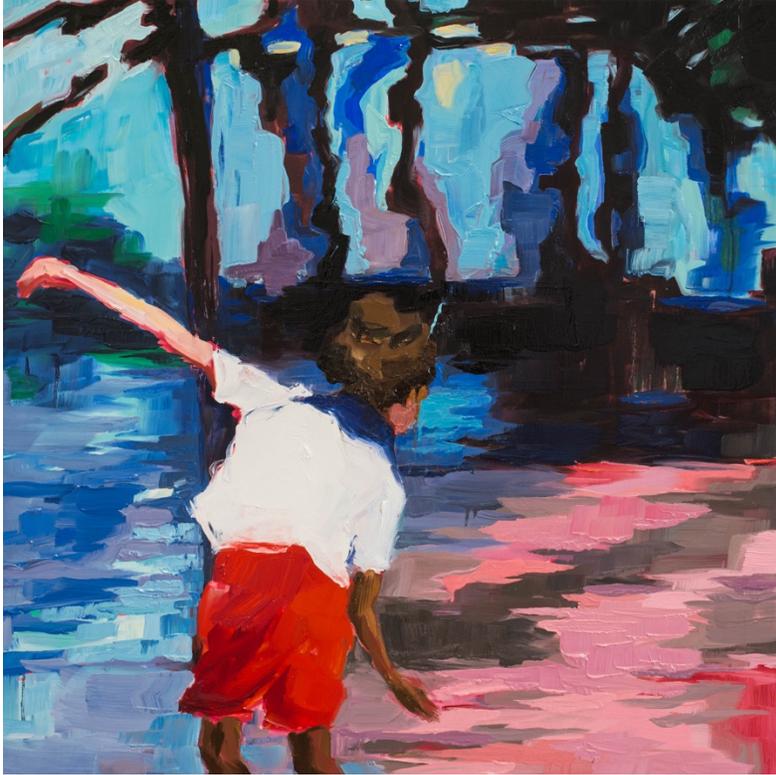


Fig. 20. Ruth Owens, *Stonethrower*, 2018, oil on canvas, 40” x 40”

Willem de Kooning’s women series from the 1950’s shows the female form dissipating into abstraction, and the surfaces are variously scraped, dripped on, and thickly impastoed. His use of paint as a metaphor for the body is clearly evident. Indeed, he is famously quoted as saying, “Flesh was the reason why oil painting was invented.”<sup>14</sup> De Kooning received much negative criticism for this series and his rough handling of the female figure, but it was perhaps a very apropos portrayal of the plight of the female body and its vulnerability. An honest depiction of female, brown, and black bodies in my

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<sup>14</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *Willem de Kooning Nonstop: Cherchez la femme* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015),17.

personal sphere must also make allusion to the vulnerability of these bodies to physical violence. A close-up of the small boy in *Baby Love*, 2018, (figure 21) displays his little face laid bare to the imprimatura, scraped down, dripped on, and glopped on with thick vehement heaps of black paint. The violent treatment of the paint for this small brown toddler may be foreboding of what, arguably from a statistical view, the future has in store for him.



Fig. 21. Ruth Owens, *Baby Love*, detail, 2018, oil on canvas

On an even deeper theoretical level, I embrace movement in painting because it conceptually refers to the fluidity of identity, both of gender and of race. There is an inherent rejection of identities based on concrete binary paradigms in the flowing bodies and faces in my work. Orthodox binary divisions of male and female gender roles, as well as strict divisions between white and black races are categorically undermined by allowing a flow between classifications and thus destabilizing culturally supported artificial separations. Like the unique variation of lusciousness, scraping, dripping, and

staining produced by the paint, I refer to our very specific identities that cannot be simplified into dualistic terms.

With respect to fluidity of gender, I'd like to bring up Elizabeth Grosz, a weighty writer of feminist theory and philosophy, who calls such bodies "volatile," and seeks to decolonize the female body of phallogentric constructs prevalent in our society. Grosz does an in depth exploration and criticism of the philosophies and theories that espouse the opposition of mind and body as two poles of a binary system. It is her view that there is an inherent violence in such binary polarization, and that one element of the opposition (mind) necessarily assumes dominance over the other (body).

Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart.<sup>15</sup>

She further points out the how the body/ mind binary mode of thinking is intimately linked to the female/male binary constructs. The female is the body which is associated with brute animalism which must be transcended by the rational male mind that is also the site of consciousness. It is this abusive type of binary thinking about sexuality that I am metaphorically trying to subvert with the fluidity and unpredictable paint application to depict the subjects in my work.

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 3.

Before reading the title of *Boyguide*, many viewers perceive the standing figure in this painting as a young girl. A detailed view of the child's face indeed reveals an androgynous flow of moody browns and blacks set off by buoyant pinks, reds, and yellows. (figure 22) The choice of colors and the flow of the paint iterates the rejection of the binary constructs of male and female in this work, and opens up a space where free movement of gender identity can occur. The entire painting of *Stonethrower*, 2018, (figure 20) gives the impression of wavy movement that carries over from the water into the trees and into the figure itself, who is shown in an active motion of mid-throw. The thick application of paint and the dynamic diagonal of the child's gesture, portrays a girl active and engaged in a typically male and mildly violent childhood pursuit: throwing rocks into water. The separation between the binary categories of male and female is again unsettled in this wavy loose painting of a stone throwing girl.



Fig. 22. Ruth Owens, *Boyguide*, detail, 2018, oil on canvas

The other binary paradigm that I disrupt in my work is the racial binary of black and white. As pointed out by Grosz earlier, the binary construct necessarily and violently privileges the dominant element at the expense of obliteration of the other. While the dominant white race is considered humanely intellectual and morally superior, the black race is viewed as evolutionarily inferior, sexually deviant, and governed only by base instinct. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon, a writer and physician of African descent from Martinique, metaphorically likens himself to a dissected insect to highlight the surgically fixed construction of his black identity by the white gaze.

I crawl along. The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am *fixed*. Once their microtomes are sharpened, the Whites objectively cut sections of my reality.<sup>16</sup>

The binary racial construct of black and white, in which the black is violently held in a place of inferiority by the dominant white, is what I attempt to subvert in my work by blurring the lines between the polarized elements.

A riot of thickly applied color, a multitude of thin drippings, bare sections of imprimatura, and a scraped visage initially not discernable, are part of the visual extravaganza that swirls around the central figure of *Best Birthday*, 2018. (figure 2) Featured is happy tiara-donning 8 eight-year old, but cohesion is pushed to the limit in the activated party background where figures skirt in and out of abstraction in an energetic way. Viewers

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<sup>16</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 95.

may initially fail to notice the uniformed male figure on the upper left side of the canvas. (figure23) He is my Great-Uncle Alois that served in the Nazi era Schutzstaffel (SS) until he was shot by Hitler's regime for disobeying orders. The very loose painting of my great uncle in his SS uniform has further lost integrity by the incursion of abstract shapes from the background, and the scrape of the palette knife across his face and body. Both this scrape and the portrayal of family members are reminiscent of the post-modern work of Gerhard Richter. Richter has been known to be a frustratingly opaque master of double talk regarding his work claiming that he only wants to paint reality devoid of aesthetics, style, and personal experience. He has referred to his trademark haziness as his "reality" since our senses are incapable of detecting true reality. However, in a moment of transgression from his signature ambivalence, Richter has shed a bit of light on the reason for the fuzziness of his work. When he was painting from family photographs in the mid 1960's, he stated "I blur so that all parts move slightly into one another."<sup>17</sup> The blurred lines between he and his aunt in *Aunt Marianne*, 1965 (figure 24) suggest an emotional bond and love in which one doesn't know where one ends and the other begins.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Christine Mehring, "East or West, Home is Best: Friends, Family and Design in Richter's Early Years," in *Gerhard Richter: Panorama, A Retrospective*, ed. Mark Godfrey and Nicholas Serota (London: Tate Publishing, 2011), 33.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*



Fig. 23. Ruth Owens, *Best Birthday*, detail, 2018, oil on canvas



Fig. 24. Gerhard Richter, *Aunt Marianne*, 1965, oil on canvas, 120 x 130 cm. From Godfrey and Serota, *Gerhard Richter: Panorama*, 61.

In the case of the blurred visage of my great uncle Alois in *Best Birthday*, there is an intermingling of the SS officer and the seemingly innocent and joyful birthday party of his not so distant relative. The parts are moving into one another as Richter would put it, and is a reminder to myself that another binary set of terms (good and evil) is also not set in stone, and that we are all guilty of racial bias from time to time. The SS officer is a specter from the not too distant past that represents white privilege in its most savage manifestation, and it is an undeniable part of me.

## VII. Conclusion

Each of my paintings is associated with a personal narrative that stems from an emotionally significant occurrence in my past, usually relating to familial interpersonal relationships. Weaving through this personal account is the cultural influence of the outside world, specifically as it relates to feminist and racial concerns and their bearing on my African American and German identity. The search for home, and the desire to recover the love refuted in the oedipal phase of development are both attempts to recover past loss. These losses are due to the dominant white patriarchal cultural dictates that describe who is worthy of subject-hood and who is not. I employ the power of visual pleasure to present the possibility that women and non-whites may also display agency and self-hood. My personal stories set on a stage of our cultural environment offer glimpses into the negotiations and struggles that try to upend the conventions of structural racism and sexism.

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## Vita

The author was born in the city of Augsburg in what was then West-Germany. She obtained her bachelor's degree in Biology from Carleton College in Northfield, MN in 1981. She went on to graduate from Northwestern Medical School in 1986, and completed a fellowship in Facial Plastic Surgery in 1993. She practiced medicine in the city of New Orleans for 25 years.