

12-2018

# Transcending the Essence of Hair

Ashan Isaac Pridgon

Clemson University, [ashanpridgon@g.clemson.edu](mailto:ashanpridgon@g.clemson.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_theses](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses)

---

## Recommended Citation

Pridgon, Ashan Isaac, "Transcending the Essence of Hair" (2018). *All Theses*. 3009.

[https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all\\_theses/3009](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/3009)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).

# TRANSCENDING THE ESSENCE OF HAIR

---

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts  
Visual Art

---

by  
Ashan Isaac Pridgon  
December 2018

---

Accepted by:  
Valerie Zimany, Committee Chair  
Andrea Feeser  
Dave Detrich

## ABSTRACT

My work investigates the significant role and relationship that hair plays in African-American culture. Throughout history, African-Americans have used the styling of hair as a way of passing down tradition and expressing their individuality, cultural and political beliefs. Since the late 1970's there has been a constant struggle for African-Americans to wear their hair naturally without backlash from society. In my work, I use culturally based objects such as hair combs, afro picks, head wraps and other accessories to symbolize black pride. I use this framework to generate abstracted ceramic vessels and sculptures. The content of my work becomes amplified by the use of medium, large and life-sized scale to emphasize the importance of black identity and the challenges African-Americans face in society. The sculptures are anthropomorphized in form, which implies a sense of movement and freedom of defining space. Pinching techniques are used in both vessels and sculptures to create a rhythm and pattern which parallels the styling hair. The drawings of men and women on the vessels and sculptures display a range of styles, and history of hairstyles, that embody distinct personalities to express specific identities and struggles. My work draws on elements of popular culture, West African art, traditional pottery, and documentation of traditions passed from one generation to another. There is a great importance and symbolization of what hair represents culturally and individually to African-Americans in my work. Hair care is a method to express identity, culture and self-love. Through my perspective and experience, I have made work that sheds light on hair being essential to African-American growth, identity and way of life.

## DEDICATION

I dedicated this body of work to my girlfriend, Nikkita Gordon. Her patience and support has been vital to pursuing my dreams and making them a reality. Transcending  
The Essence of Hair.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my entire committee for their support in pushing me to be my best during this process. Specifically, I would like to thank Dave Detrich and Andrea Feeser for their flexibility, guidance and encouragement. Finally, I would like to thank my committee chair and advisor, Valerie Zimany for her patience, her knowledge, her sense of humor and constructive critique. I would like to like to thank my fellow graduate and undergraduate friends for their support throughout my time at Clemson University. I would also like to thank our Gallery Director, Denise Detrich for her assistance, counseling and flexibility with the gallery hours.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE .....	i
ABSTRACT .....	ii
DEDICATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
LIST OF TABLES .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vi
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION .....	1
II.   SYMBOLISM OF OBJECTS AND THE INFLUENCES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT.....	3
III.  THE PASSING OF TRADITIONS WITH HAIR AND ART HISTORY....	7
IV.  TENSION BLACKLASH, CONFORMING AND EUROCENTRIC.....	10
V.   EMBRACING CULTURE AND BLACK IDENTITY .....	16
VI.  CONCLUSION.....	20
FIGURES.....	22
APPENDICES .....	41

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	Page
A: Appendix A's Clay Bodies .....	42
B: Appendix B's Clay Recipes .....	43
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	45

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1.1	Gallery Overview .....	22
2.1	Target Pick .....	23
3.1	Body Pick 1 .....	24
3.2	Ancient Afro Pick .....	25
3.3	World Is Blind.....	26
3.4	What You See Is What You Get.....	27
3.5	Side Note, Self-Portrait .....	28
4.1	Natural Expression 1 .....	29
4.2	Natural Expression 2.....	30
4.3	Living for the City .....	31
4.4	The Road Less Taken.....	32
4.5	More Than Sports .....	33
5.1	Embracing the Natural 2 .....	34
5.2	Embracing the Natural 1 .....	35
5.3	She-Panther Waterfall.....	36
5.4	Mother Pearl.....	37
5.5	Kamria & Kionna.....	38
5.6	Roderick & Kineshia.....	39
5.7	Ashan & Nikkita .....	40



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In the late 1990s, I was taught to present myself in a certain manner if I wanted to obtain employment during and after my high school years. Selected teachers and a guidance counselor would initiate short classes on “How to Get a Job,” which included practical advice such as having a nice outfit, tucking in a dress shirt, wearing skirts or slacks with presentable shoes and belts, and keeping one’s hair neat. What resonated most with me was a comment that young African-American women needed to straighten their hair with perms and that black men should maintain short hair as opposed to having natural hair in dreads, braids, or afros, which could cost them a job opportunity.

Utilizing my research and personal experience, I investigate African-American culture with hair as the vehicle and entry point to introduce dialogue on black identity. My work depicts hair’s function as a vital role in African-American culture by incorporating inanimate objects, such as hair combs, afro picks, head wraps and other accessories, to symbolize black identity and to display the essence and spectrum of black beauty represented through hair. I use clay as the main material for my sculptures given its rich history in pottery and ability to document everyday life. Traditional pinching and coiling techniques form my abstracted anthropomorphic vessels, and the texture left by pinching implies a sense of movement and rhythm that forms the work.

For my installation, I used Oriented Strand Board (OSB) to build crates which symbolize the shipment of cash crops, as well as African slaves being shipped in boats and buried in pine caskets and in (Figure 1.1.), *Gallery Overview*. The OSB was also used because of its rough texture and status as a less expensive wood, referencing the cheap labor of African slaves. I am using these associations of the pine crates to elevate their status, giving them a literal platform, while transcending them in a formal display of the work. I intend the OSB crates to act as a metaphor for the unseen.

Throughout history, hair styling has been used as a form of expression, identity and status, as well as a political tool, a source of self-love, and for passing down traditions. Social media, magazines, films, and society in general continue to manipulate audiences by pressuring African-Americans to become more Eurocentric through advocating lighter skin and straighter hair. Working as a lens, natural hair demonstrates society's resistance to African-Americans' fight to overcome oppression, stereotypes, suppression, and discrimination. Since the Civil Rights Movement, African-Americans have been using hair to construct identity and to resist conforming to Eurocentric views and fashions. I use culturally-based objects, such as the 1970s Afro pick, to represent black pride and to reaffirm black cultural identity. To emphasize the importance of black identity, my sculptures are sized proportionately larger than the original objects they represent. My goal is to establish the essence of hair and its importance as an expression of identity within African-American culture. In the following chapter I will discuss the relationship of hair, cultural objects, and their importance during the Civil Rights Movement.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SYMBOLISM OF OBJECTS AND THE INFLUENCES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Objects and artifacts have always played a role in human history and have reflected cultural identities. They further our growth and development and signify individuality and evolution. In my work I reference household objects that were used regularly in my childhood through the present. Objects of significance include combs, hair grease, hair wraps and other related accessories. These items represent a critical portion of my background and social identity.

*Target Pick* (Figure 2.1) is a large life-size ceramic bust that incorporates the style and emblem of the original manufactured 1970s version of the Afro pick. Through substantially increasing the scale of the work over the actual object, I elevate the status of issues of inequality and police brutality that continue to be ignored. The graphic under layering of the work is a faded gun range symbol that is shaped like a human target. Specific text is written into each target section that corresponds with issues that African-Americans must still face including inequality, discrimination, police brutality and racism. I specifically reference the “Black Lives Matter” and “I Can’t Breathe” movements which protest the injustice of African-Americans being shot, killed, choked and otherwise abused by police officers across the United States. The target text and

symbols are on the front side of the work and are faded and distorted. Superimposed over the target symbol there are figures on the front side and seven figures on the back of the work. These figures are the victims of police brutality in events from 2013 through 2015. The three figures in the front of the sculpture are the most recognizable to many people, such as Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, and Eric Garner. The placement of the figures does not follow the principles of foreground, middle-ground and background. However, with the use of color and brush techniques such as black contour lines, gray under painting to imply a gravestone, and dry brushing, I fade some of the figures back and pull some closer to create the illusion of scale and perspective. The colors of *Target Pick* depict a mood of darkness, with grays, browns, gestural overlaps of reds, and yellow and white to symbolize the flashing of police lights. These colors are applied as highlights and travel from one side to the other. The figure drawings that continue around the bust create a distorted, fragmented view in which the audience is implicated by the gaze of the victims as they move around the work.

The Afro pick that inspired the first *Target Pick* was one the most influential items that I was drawn to, given the powerful design and the iconic symbolism it embodies. The emblem of the fist originated from the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, where Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) member Tommie Smith raised his fist, saluting black power after receiving a gold medal for the two-hundred-meter race. The Afro pick was created by Anthony R. Romani in 1972. It represented black power during the Civil Rights Movement and continues to do so today. “ During this period many African-Americans sought to regain and reaffirm their cultural identity by no longer

straightening their hair to follow mainstream European fashions” (Ashston). The Civil Rights Movement was a time for change and sacrifice for African-Americans and society. Throughout history of the United States, African-Americans have been treated unfairly, experienced discrimination against, and could not vote. In the 1960s there was racial targeting, stereotyping, inequality, and police brutality. Throughout the Civil Rights Movement tension boiled between the races, and African-Americans started to band together, demanding equality, and forming groups and organizations like The Black Panther Party and OPHR. The Afro Pick became a potent symbol of black pride, identity, and unity. *Target Pick* embodies how African-Americans are still experiencing inequality, discrimination, police brutality and racism. Fifty years later by referencing the afro pick as a symbol, I suggest that black identity is crucial to create cultural unity and fight for equality.

During the Civil Rights Movement hundreds of artists responded with works that tackled issues of racial inequality, segregation, and discrimination. Some that are important to me are Charles Wilbert White, Norman Rockwell, and Faith Ringgold. White used mediums such as black and white graphite, lithographs, crayon, and paint to represent African American struggles and racial inequality in the history of the United States. In his *Birmingham Totem* art work, he depicts the aftermath of a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama on September 15, 1963. The Cahaba Boys, a Ku Klux Klan group, bombed a church and killed four African-American children. The drawing shows a little boy with a blanket wrapped around him picking through the fragments of what is left of the church. Norman Rockwell’s later work *The Problem We All Live* challenges

issues of prejudice. This work was inspired by Ruby Bridges, a young African-American girl who was the first black child to become integrated into a white only school. In the painting there are two U.S. Marshalls escorting her to the school. In the background there are racial slurs and signs of protest and panic. Another artist who brings awareness about the treatment of African-Americans and women is Faith Ringgold. She created acrylic paintings, quilts, hand-writes text on her work, and uses forms of storytelling to question about discrimination. In 1971 Ringgold created *The United States of Attica* as a tribute to all the men who were killed by the police attack in the Attica, New York prison. This work is a map of all the fifty states and lists the murders, fatalities, and victims of war across the country. Learning about White, Rockwell and Ringgold during the Civil Rights Movement has taught me how important it is to express what is affecting society through the use of art. By bringing these issues to the forefront, it commands attention and awareness furthermore, encouraging change. This led me to investigate the use of symbols and their implication of tradition, community within objects.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE PASSING OF TRADITONS WITH HAIR AND ART HISTORY

In my research I also explored how symbols, colors, and patterns hold meaning in West African culture, traditions, beliefs and history. Throughout history, art making has been a way to record and document surrounding environments, cultures and ways of life. My initial work, *Body Pick 1* (Figure 3.1) series closely followed the symbols and colors associated with Ghana, West African textiles and fabrics including kente cloth and Adinkra. Each color usage tells a story and has a traditional meaning while the symbols signify heritage, expressing value, wisdom and philosophy.

In *Ancient Afro Pick* (Figure 3.2) I synthesized the West African sources and began to evolve my work into a more expressive, gestural form. The work is large-scaled, commanding attention and suggesting importance. With this piece I employ traditional coiling and pinching techniques to create movement and energy. In my previous work I would pinch the ceramic vessels and sculptures then smooth out the surface of texture. My new approach began to embrace the anthropomorphic texture made from pinching, implying rhythm and patterns related to hairstyles, such as braids, twists, afros, and cornrows. It also suggests the repetition in styling hair and permanent imprint of the artist hand. The sculpture is filled with symbols that are deeply carved, which guide the viewer around the work. The patterns are used as focal points, encouraging interaction and the symbols repeat on each side of the piece, creating a sense of balance. The prongs of the

pick are anthropomorphic and abstracted, resembling fingers and hands. There is also a sense of movement that radiates through the piece. This work questions and celebrates the substantial role hair plays in society.

The next series of three ceramic works, *World Is Blind, What You See Is What You Get*, and *Side Note (Self-Portrait)* (Figure 3.3 - 3.6) all incorporate additional research on universal pottery traditions and Ancient African pottery. The works are medium-sized male and female busts combined with a vessel bottom. Each figure has a unique composition, facial features, hairstyle, and elongated form. The lower section of the work represents the tradition of early ceramic pottery, used for storage and transporting objects. I use the vessel form in the series to represent the body, and suggest giving and sharing to build community.

Among my influences were two nineteenth-century African pottery works: *Lidded Vessel, Female Figure Eyline*, made in Nigeria, Abeokuta region and *Mangbetu Figurative Vessel* made in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *World Is Blind, What You See Is What You Get* and *Side Note (Self-Portrait)* merge traditional elements of these works in both their figurative heads and vessel form bodies, but updated them with contemporary hairstyles.

The line, painting style, bright colors, and composition in Ernie Barnes' work also influenced my sculpture. The elongation of his figures generates a lively energy that flows through the work. With my series I display the beauty of African American hair with three distinct styles and facial expressions. The hairstyles form the lip of the vessels



with overlapping and high-relief carvings. The figures eyes are closed, another face is tilted and looking from the side. This suggests that the figures feel they are constantly being judged about their hairstyles. The characters in Barnes' paintings all his characters have their eyes closed. He states:

I began to see, observe, how blind we are to one another's humanity. Blinded by a lot of things that has, perhaps, initiated feelings in that light. We don't see into the depths of our interconnection. The gifts, the strength and potential within other human beings. We stop at color quite often. So, one of the things we must be aware of is who we are to have the capacity to like others. But when you cannot visualize the offerings of another human being you're obviously not looking at the human being with open eyes. We look upon each other and decide immediately: This person is black, so he must be. This person lives in poverty, so he must be (CNN and Barnes).

My series of work, *World Is Blind*, *What You See Is What You Get* and especially *Side Note*, *Self-Portrait* reflects my personal experiences of dealing with constant stares and judgment from other students in my first semester at Clemson University. I felt uncomfortable from the gazes of others and from myself still trying to accept my newly grown natural hairstyle. The three sculptures depicted my personal and shared experiences of judgment and assumptions.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### TENSION, BLACK-LASH, CONFORMING AND EUROCENTRIC

There has always been a tension with African-American attempts to express themselves through the styling of hair. Assumptions and stereotypes of hair styles tend to place African-Americans in specific categories, for example: having dreads, braids, or cornrows associate an individual with drug dealing, thuggery and spending time in prison. Hair is one way we negotiate race in the United States. In *Natural Expression 1* (Figure 4.1) and *Natural Expression 2* (Figure 4.2) I simplified further towards creating vessels and emphasizing natural hair. I was influenced by contemporary artist Sonya Clark, with her use of materials and cultural meanings associated with specific objects. My sculptures are formed by coiling and pinching techniques creating a hair-like texture that covers the vessels. Each work has a unique and distinctive shape and composition that help express individuality of the individual portrayed.

I became interested in Sonya Clark's use of hair techniques to investigate notions of discarded culture and how she incorporates human hair as a symbol. The hair represents the essence of identity. Viewing her work led me into thinking about black cultural experiences while combining objects. I started to practice braiding hair using yarn, getting the feel of how patterns developed through repetition. I then applied that technique on the vessel forms, using small coils and wrapping them together to create intricate patterns to form braids, which gave me a strong appreciation for the dexterity and patience of hair stylists. In *Black Hair Flag*, Clark painted a Confederate flag on a canvas using stitched cornrows for the stripes and Bantu knots for the stars. She used

hairstyles and techniques that refer to African and African-American roots and how they have impacted identities in the United States South. In my *Natural Expressions* series, I crop the figures face and focus on natural hair forming the vessels using patterns and pinching to create an implied rhythm in the work.

There have always been standards for hair and beauty. Eurocentric roots are imbedded into society, fabricating a philosophy that promotes Eurocentric features as valid and correct. Media, advertising, television, magazines, billboards, and films help promote the Eurocentric ideal of straighter hair and lighter skin.

Eurocentric beauty standards have negatively impacted the African-American population since the 1950s. These standards challenge African-American's identity and way of life, creating social pressure to fit in with white society and paradoxically, with their own black community. Conforming to these beauty standards creates emotional stress about hair and skin tone including self-hate, depression, and weight gain or loss. During the early 1920s through 1960s a hairstyle called the "conk" was very common in the African-American community. The conk employs hair straightener, or chemicals, to relax the hair making it smooth and glossy (Gardner). Several well-known artists and musicians adopt this style, including James Brown and Little Richard. In his autobiography, Malcolm X describes a time where he got his hair conked, and the amount of pain that he endured for this hairstyle so that he could blend in with white society. X did this for years until he realized that he was suppressing his own identity. He stated,

This was my first big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all the pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man's hair. I have joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that black people are "inferior"- and white people "superior" that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look "pretty" by white standards (Haley).

*Living for the City* (Figure 4.3) is a large-scale ceramic vessel of Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin. The title of the work comes from one of my favorite Stevie Wonder songs, in which he sings about the realities of black family living in the United States in 1974. Franklin was a feminist and activist that used her voice as a platform to advocate change. Her songs mirrored responsiveness and talked about the struggles of African-Americans, especially women. She also went to churches and gave sermons. The vessel shape is anthropomorphic, and it has a small base that rounds out in the middle of the work and tapers in. The volumetric swell of the vessel implies that someone is singing. I use specific formal choices to bring out the different textures and colors of the figures' hair and accessories. The figures' hair is in high-relief and carved to encompass each unique hairstyle. The beads are brightly colored and rounded to create a sense of depth. Using slips, oxides and mason stains, glossy and matte glazes I embody each distinctive style, representing their identity and showing that natural hair is beautiful.

In making the vessel forms, I was influenced by Roberto Lugo and his activism. Lugo is a ceramic artist and painter that creates work challenging the conceptions of race

and poverty. His work is multifaceted with layers of conceptual undertones that are meant to be questioned and unpacked. Lugo's *Century Vase III American Refugee* is based on Karl L. H. Müller's *Century Vase from the 1876 Centennial Exhibition* in Philadelphia that portrays the achievements and progress within the first century of America. Lugo's vase, on the other hand, illustrates the treatment of refugees in the past one hundred years in the United States. Lugo expresses the feeling of rejection and being unwanted. Each flag represents the refugee's country of origin and shows how America is built on the foundation of other races. Lugo's work focuses on the struggles and experiences of the refugees during that timeframe, while it also speaks about the perception of otherness and identity (Essner).

My work, *The Road Less Taken*, (Figure 4.4) is a medium size, two-part ceramic vessel of Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick has been a leading activist for African-Americans equal rights while fighting against discrimination and police brutality. He uses his platform as an athlete to protest these social injustices. For this sculpture I used mostly my thumbs to create the afro texture to leave a deeper impression in the hair representing the impression he is leaving with his message of equality. This sculpture has a flat lower section of the vessel which symbolizes that he to remains firm and unmoved on the topics of inequality. The crate is also smaller than others, suggesting that he is taking a knee. The drawing of Kaepernick is detailed and depicts an outward gaze, looking at a better future. The second section of the vessel is an abstracted Afro Pick which is tilted to the side. The carvings and contour lines indicate that it is being twisted around. It is a metaphor for his protest and message being twisted by society. The colors

on the pick represent the American flag. The colors start to fade on the pick, losing their vibrancy and becoming diluted. The brown and blue on the fist and prongs signify the constant struggle between African-Americans and police.

*More Than Sports* (Figure 4.5) is a large-scaled ceramic vessel with the likeness of athletes LeBron James and Serena Williams. Both athletes have dominated their sport for many years and remain at the top of their game. These icons were chosen because of their commitment on and off the court. These figures use their celebrity platforms to advocate for change. They also use their status to promote dialogue on political issues and social injustices. James is well-known for his iconic beard, which is a part of his identity. It is very uncommon to see African-American men grow a large beard within the history of United States. By growing out his beard James is displaying a form of natural hair expression. On the vessel, his beard is abstracted and has a mountainous appearance. I wanted his beard to seem heavy, symbolizing his unwavering stance on equality. Several bright colors were used to highlight his beard and hair including, yellow, purple, blue, pink and brown. To highlight his role in being an activist, I drew an image of James wearing a suit and tie discussing his I Promise School, in Akron, Ohio.

For Williams, I wanted her long kinky hair to form the top of the vessel. I chose to draw her at an angle so her hair would continue to be seen as the viewer walks around the work. I used matte colors and bright slips to highlight her hair, mostly earth-tones such as, orange, red, brown and yellows. I specifically drew Williams in a tennis outfit to

discuss the recent controversy over her being unfairly tested for multiple random drug tests. Williams stated:

And it's that time of the day to get "randomly" drug tested and only test Serena.

Out of all the players it's been proven I'm the one getting tested the most.

Discrimination? I think so. At least I'll be keeping the sport clean. I never knew that I was tested so much more than everyone else, said Williams, who already had been tested five times in 2018 before she reached the grass courts. "It will be impossible for me not to feel some kind of way about that (Jones and Williams).

More African-American athletes are using their voice and taking a stance on matters separating the United States. Using their celebrity platforms, they can reach more people and their message will be heard throughout the different media outlets. By embracing their natural hair and their culture, these athletes are showing other African-Americans that we are all going through same trials and struggles being black and that your voice will be heard.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### EMBRACING CULTURE AND BLACK IDENTITY

Hair is a form of expressing personality, heritage and self-love. African-Americans use their hair to represent who they are and to demonstrate the progression of black culture, starting to embrace natural hair beauty in today's time. In my previous work, *More Than Sports*, I was investigating the symbolization of natural hair in the content of African-Americans athletes. In my most recent work, I am examining natural hair from the perspective of average, everyday people.

*Embracing the Natural 1 & 2* follow the same patterns of pinching and coiling techniques that travel around the work. Both sculptures are dual-sided with a drawing of a woman on each of the vessel. The most noticeable aspect of the work is the hair. Both figures' hair overlaps and connects the different hairstyles together. *Embracing the Natural 2* (Figure 5.1) is a large ceramic oval shaped vessel with a flat bottom. With this work I am making more sculptural changes by intertwining the braids and dreads of the figure. I connect the different hairstyles together to show that one style is not better than another. In the work, each figure has a different facial expression. Using subtle hints to allude to the mood of the figures, I drew one figure with her head tilted, one eye-brow slightly higher than the other and lips tight. This shows that the figure is questioning the viewer's judgment against her hairstyle. The woman on the opposite side with the blue and black dreads feels judged because of hair while the figure with dark brown braids is



embracing her hair, and not letting judgment of others affect her. Both of these hairstyle help shape the top of the vessel.

*Embracing the Natural 1* (Figure 5.2) is a medium-size dual-sided ceramic vessel with two women on each side. With this sculpture I am becoming more specific in increased detailing and rendering of the figure. This vessel is not as circular as my other works, having narrow, flat width. Both figures are very detailed, showcasing their eccentric braids and dreads hairstyles, wardrobes and accessories. The dreads have an abundance of purples, blues, browns and greens that flow through the hair. There are several layers of colors and the high-relief carvings create a sense of movement and depth in the hair. The braids of the figure are golden-brown, red and yellow. The small carvings of the braids create rhythm and balance. The facial expressions of the figures signify that they are in deep thought and self-reflection about embracing the natural.

I was influenced by Chika Modum, who is an installation artist that uses specific materials such as black trash can bags, recycled materials, acrylic paint, digital prints, text and performance in her work. Modum is Nigerian-Canadian and her work speaks on identity, gender, stereotypes and race. Her work also deals with culture and beauty. In Modum's *Presence* installation she explores displacement in culture. The black trash bags are braided into intricate Nigerian hairstyles. This massive installation drapes down against the wall and across the floor. I was influenced by sheer amount of detail, the abstraction of form, and the elaborate patterns that created the cornrow braids.

*She-Panther Waterfall* (Figure 5.3) is a life-size ceramic sculpture that references the 2018 *Black Panther* film. It depicts a scene in the film where several African tribes gathered around a mountain side and waterfall. The sculpture is heavily textured with pinching and coiling patterns that form the work. The work is filled with various earth-tone colors, including browns, beige, red-orange, blues and greens. The top of the sculpture depicts the head of a female panther. The panther is gray, silver, black, brown and blue. The back of the sculpture is hollow, and it is carved into a waterfall. The water and inside of the cave is dark blue, green, purple and pink. I chose to make the panther a female because of the empowering cast of African and African-American women who portray super heroes in the film, which poses the question of what if Africa had never been colonized? The actresses had a range of natural hairstyles, many with elaborate coils and braids. This film instilled confidence in black people in part by demonstrating the beauty of natural hair (Fields).

In my family series of ceramic vessels, I include, *Mother Pearl, Kamria & Kionna, Roderick & Kineshia*, and *Ashan & Nikkita*. (Figure 5.4 - 5.7) These four ceramic works are dual-sided drawings of my family. Each figure is expressing their personality through hair. I emphasize the color and composition of hairstyle and detailed texture. The work is grouped together to symbolize a collective and community. I reflect on my family living under one roof, using the same combs and picks, however having different journeys and experiences embracing hair. My mother was very committed to natural hair while I was growing up. In *Mother Pearl*, I chose to use my mom's graduation photograph as a reference because of she expressed herself through the use of

her hair in the early seventies when judgment was at an all-time high. My mother always kept her hair natural; however for me and my siblings, it was short hair for the boys, and straight permed hair for my little sister while in school. Rarely did I grow my hair out, and if I did, it was mostly because she couldn't afford a haircut for me. Echoing the Malcolm X "conk" hairstyle and views, my mother wanted us to fit in with the schools we were attending. Rarely did I see a natural hairstyle being worn by an African-American boy or girl.

My mom passed down traditions of how to take care of and maintain our hair, especially to my sister. When Kineshia grew older, my mother taught her how to create different natural hairstyles. Now my sister has children and she will pass that knowledge down to her daughter. The *Roderick & Kineshia*, and *Ashan & Nikkita* ceramic sculptures demonstrates the change in viewpoint of my sibling's natural hair. It was not until we were older that we started to embrace natural hairstyles.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

My art investigates the importance of hair as a means of defining African-American culture. Using personal experience and research I explore the roles of hair using inanimate objects to represent black identity. I use ceramics as the main material for my vessels because of its rich history, traditional importance, and abilities to record and document life. The work is amplified by the use of large to life-size anthropomorphic vessels. By using traditional pinching and coiling techniques to form the vessels I am documenting a timeline of my shared experiences. Pinching on the work conveys the repetition and patterns found in styling hair.

For the installation of the gallery work I used OSB to build the crates. These pine installations symbolize the African slave's history of struggles. Using these associations of the pine crates I am elevating its status and giving it a platform to initiate dialogue on about black identity. The vessels and crates are not all the same size, which signifies status. However, each figure on the sculpture represents the overarching message of hair being crucial in African-American culture while facing the same struggles with identity.

The color of the hairstyles in making of my work is bright and energetic, displaying the essence of black beauty. While comparing color palettes from my West African textile research done earlier in the *Body Pick* series I noticed that my recent work of vessels and sculptures follow the same color choices in the earlier work. In the beginning I was using this research to understand how colors can represent and express

specific meanings in West African culture. With the most recent sculptures and vessels I now have a better understanding of how I can use color to express moods, bring energy to the figures personalities, and use it as another entry point to highlight the beauty of embracing natural hair. The carved and high-relief hairstyles help express individuality and community. I combine historic and contemporary figures with my personal narrative. By adding African-American celebrity activists, everyday people and my family portraiture on ceramic vessels I am commenting on the wide spectrum of natural hair and hairstyles communicating the feeling of black empowerment. Pinching and drawing the figures on the vessels and sculptures enables me to leave my permanent mark in history on the importance of natural hair.

## FIGURES



Fig. 1.1 Gallery Overview

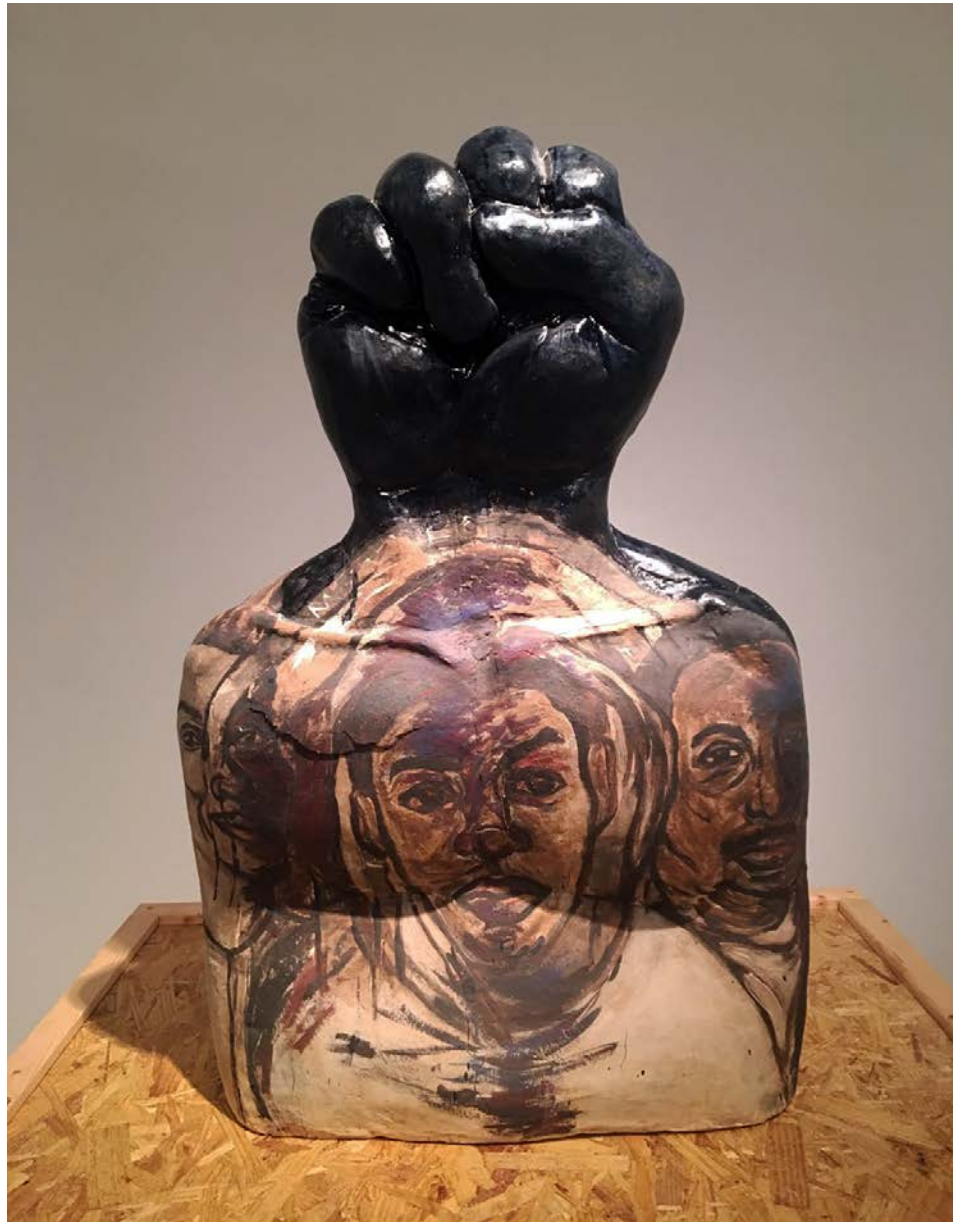


Fig. 2.1: *Target Pick*

Stoneware, wood base, "24x 22 x23," 2017



Fig. 3.1: *Body Pick 1*

Stoneware, wood, "38 x 13 x 5," 2017





Fig. 3.2: *Ancient Afro Pick*  
Stoneware, wood, "28 x 22 x3," 2018



Fig. 4.3: *The World Is Blind*  
Stoneware, wood, "26 x 15 x 8," 2018



Fig. 3.4: *What You See Is What You Get*  
Stoneware, wood, "24 x 15 x 7," 2018



Fig. 3.5: *Side Note (Self-Portrait)*  
Stoneware, wood, “23 x 13 x 8,” 2018



Fig. 4.1 *Natural Expression I*  
Stoneware, wood, "18 x 15 x 6," 2018



Fig. 4.2: *Natural Expression 2*  
Stoneware, wood, "13 x 8 x 4," 2018



Fig. 4.3: *Living for the City*  
Stoneware, wood, "20 x 18 x 7," 2018

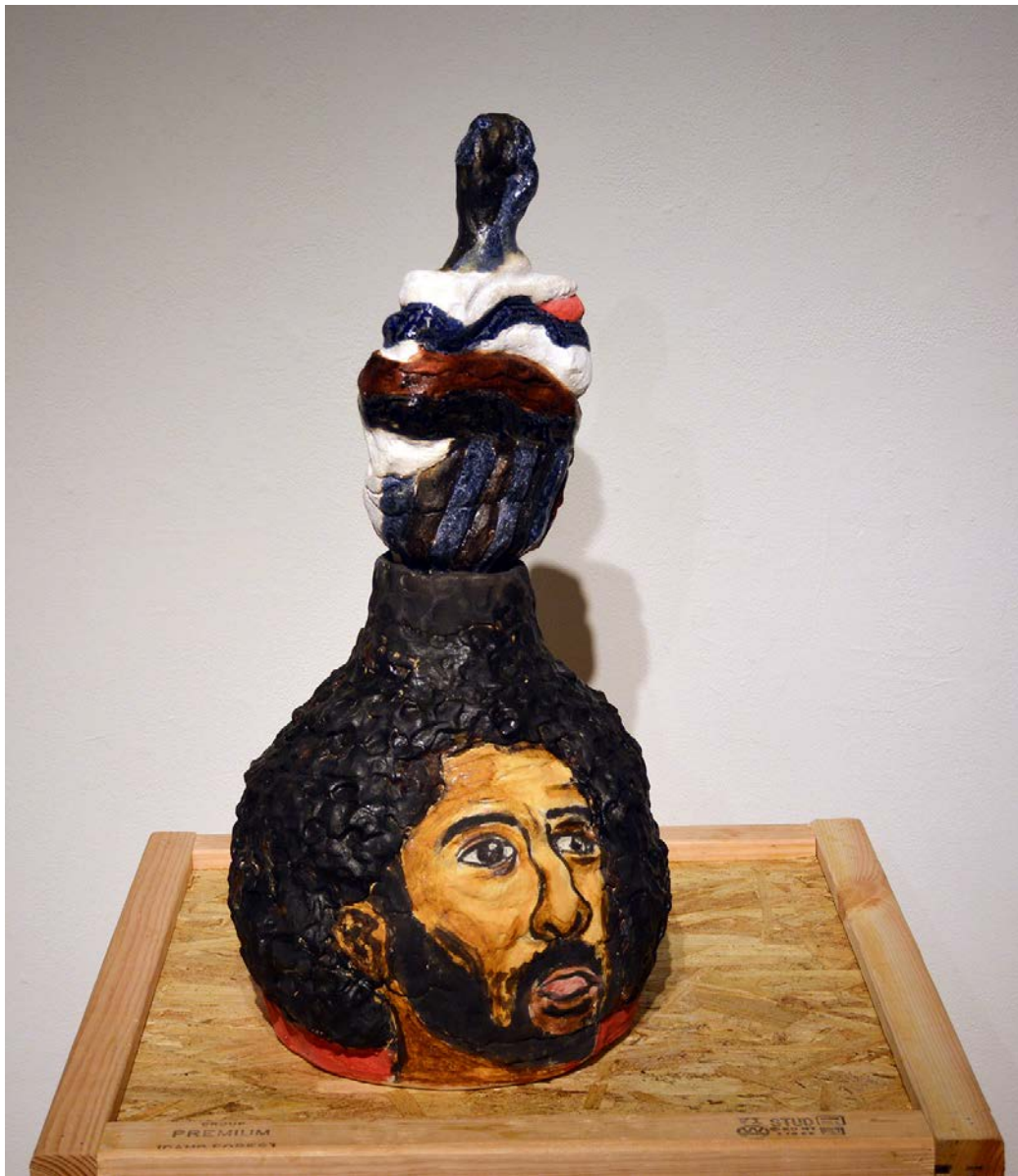


Fig. 4.4: *The Road Less Taken*

Stoneware, wood, "17 x 11 x 5," 2018





Fig. 4.5: *More Than Sports*

Stoneware, wood, "21 x 15 x 8," 2018



Fig. 5.1: *Embracing the Natural 2*  
Stoneware, wood, "18 x 15 x 6," 2018



Fig. 5.2: *Embracing the Natural 1*  
Stoneware, wood, "15 x 9 x 3," 2018



Fig. 5.3: *She-Panther Waterfall*  
Stoneware, wood, "69 x 24 x 14," 2018



Fig. 5.4: *Mother Pearl*  
Stoneware, wood, "14 x 8 x 4," 2018



Fig. 5.5: *Kamira & Kionna*  
Stoneware, wood, "11 x 7 x 3," 2018



Fig. 5.6: *Roderick & Kineshia*  
Stoneware, wood, "14 x 9 x 4," 2018



Fig. 5.7: *Ashan & Nikkita*  
Stoneware, wood, “21 x 16 x 7,” 2018



## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Clay Bodies

Cone 10 Peter Volkus Stoneware

Hawthorn Bond 50 Mesh	22.5%
Tennessee Ball Clay	22.5%
Gold Art	22.5%
Custer Feldspar	10%
Fine Grog	13.5%
Coarse Grog	9%
Bentonite	1%

Cone 10 Modified Peter Volkus Stoneware

Hawthorn Bond 50 Mesh	25%
Tennessee Ball Clay	22.5%
OM4 Kentucky Ball Clay	18%
Custer Feldspar	13%
Fine Grog	13.5%
Medium Grog	5%
Foundry Sand 80 Mesh	3%
Bentonite	1%

## APPENDIX B

### Glaze Recipes

#### Hirsh Satin Matte Base 04

Gerstley Borate	32%
Lithium Carbonate	9%
Whiting	17%
Nepheline Syenite	4%
EPK	4%
Flint/Silica	35%
Bentonite	2%

#### (Added oxides for color)

Manganese Dioxide	7%
Cobalt Carbonate	1%
Copper Carbonate	1.75%

#### Matte Glaze 04

Frit 3195	43%
EPK	14%
Whiting	43%

#### (Added oxide for color)

Red Iron Oxide	10%
----------------	-----

Appendix B Continued

Emily Meyers Blue 04

Barium Carbonate	40%
China Clay	19%
Nepheline Syenonite	19%
Flint/Silica	10%
Lithium Carbonate	5%

Eggshell Cone 6

Frit 3124	44.5%
Custer Feldspar	20%
Whiting	9.5%
Flint/Silica	8%
Bentonite	7.5%
Zinc Oxide	5.5%
Tin Oxide	9%
Red Iron Oxide	3%

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fields, Jackie. *Black Panther Hairstylist Camille Friend on the Film's Empowering Looks: Black People are Beautiful*. People, 2018.
- Lovelace, Foyce. *Agent of Cha*. *American Craft*. 2016, pp. 44-51
- Smith, Kelundra. *A Conversation with Sonya Clark Who Tells Stories through Coiffured Canvas*. Art and Design Previews. Web. 27 September. 2016.  
<https://artsatl.com/conversation-sonya-clark-tells-stories-coiffured-canvases/>
- CNN, *the Art of Ernest Barnes from CNN*, 2010 CNN.
- Jones, Matt. *Serena Williams Says She's Being Discriminated Against with Random Drug Tests*. Web. 25 July. 2018. <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/>
- Bryant, L. Susan. *The Beauty Ideal: The Effects of European Standard of Beauty on Black Women*. *Columbia Social Work Review*, Volume IV. 2013. Pages 80-89.
- Schulman, Blair. *Roberto Lugo, Not Fearing the Message*. *Ceramics: Art and Perception*. NO. 98. 2014. Pages 48-51.
- Haley, Alex and Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. 1964. Web.  
[https://archive.org/stream/TheAutobiographyOfMalcomX/The\\_Autobiography\\_Of\\_MalcomX\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/TheAutobiographyOfMalcomX/The_Autobiography_Of_MalcomX_djvu.txt).
- Ashton, Sally-Ann. *Radical Objects: The Black Afro Comb*. *History Workshop*. Web. 10 February. 2014. <http://www.historyshop.org.uk/radical-objects-the-black-fist-afro-comb/>
- Brooks, Katherine. *Culture and Arts. These Are The Artists Of the Civil Rights Movement*. Huff Post. 06 December. 2017. Web.  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/12/civil-rights-art\\_n\\_4769268.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/12/civil-rights-art_n_4769268.html)
- Singh, Pal, Nikhil. *Black is a Country. Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy. Rethinking Race and Nation*. Harvard University Press. 2004. Page 15-57
- Hampton, Henry, Fayer, Steve, Flynn, Sarah. *Voices of Freedom. Attica and Prisoner's Rights, 1971. There's Always Time to Die*. February. 1990. Page 539-564.
- Gardner, Kayla. *Black Power in American Memory. Changes in Hairstyles*. 20 April. 2017. Web. <http://blackpower.web.unc.edu/2017/04/changes-in-hairstyles/>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY Continued

Essner, Elizabeth. Modern. Roberto Lugo Is Changing the World One Teapot at a Time. Wexler Gallery. Spring 2016. Page 93-97. Web.  
<https://www.wexlergallery.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Modern-e-pdf.pdf>