

“Social Selves”

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Submitted to the faculty of the Herron School of Art and Design
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art
In the Herron School of Art and Design
Indiana University
May 2016

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Master of Fine Arts


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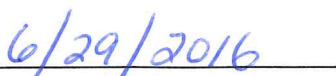

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Introduction

My first formal study of a public thing took place underneath a Los Angeles Freeway. The underpass wall graffiti had been buffered over with swatches of light and dark grey paints by city workers, producing abstract paintings with the concrete wall as canvas. I found a pleasant irony in how the act of effacing produced such an aesthetic effect- an effect which the city workers presumably did not see nor intend. This aesthetic effect from erasure made for a project that involved myself traversing underneath Los Angeles freeways, looking for and photographing painted concrete “canvases”.

In speaking of work from his photo book “American Surfaces,” Stephen Shore says “...all of it was looking at the culture, the built culture. That some of it is remnants of something older, with its own character, and some of it is modern American culture working its way through”¹. Indeed, the surface of things at times expands beyond two dimensional flatness and visual aesthetic to agents involved in creating and consuming such surfaces.

This expansion of two dimensional flatness to three dimensional dynamics is especially evident in cities alive with varying degrees of personhood imposed and projected upon surface, from an assertive representation of a car wash owner’s sexuality to an afro-centric mural contending with American urbanity as its neighbor. Personhood expressed publicly is a social affirmation of existence. According to Martin Heidegger, these affirmations constitute dwelling, a place where or state in which we feel physically and or psychically comfortable within space. How we dwell depends upon how we build and the thinking behind the building:

¹ Aaron Schuman, “Uncommon Places: An Interview with Stephen Shore,” accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.aaronschuman.com/shoreinterview.html>

Building and thinking are each in its own way, inescapable for dwelling. The two, however, are also insufficient for dwelling so long as each busies itself with its own affairs of separation, instead of listening to the other².

Importantly, the building that I refer to is not merely limited to the materiality of the building itself, but also refers to the action of taking a material and using it to make something, such as a painted display window of a business or a mural painting on a vacant building's sidewall. The suggested purposiveness of this "building" acts as an expansion from its two dimensional flatness.

The material I find and make images from typically comes from marginalized communities, for it is where I find agencies of projection at work, where image and its function are not too far removed from its creator, user, and or audience. Social affirmations are especially important among the marginalized who in most cases are deemed insignificant or invisible. The means by which this existence is projected in the public sphere and how it functions both physically and psychically among the marginalized are my points of inquiry. In examining my photographic practice that addresses this inquiry, I realize that I have ultimately gone through a cycle where two dimensional flatness expands to three dimensionality in terms of both content and form.

Method and Relation

My photographic practice stems from traversing cities by foot and bus, looking for and discovering objects, architecture, and landscapes that are humorous, strange, and ultimately revelatory with varying degrees of personhood. As photographs, the images of personhood lead one to animate and populate these inanimate things with virtues, aspirations,

² Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) 362.

and desires of the “man who lives there” -all human attributes. This active thinking on the part of the viewer ultimately forms a relationship with the image, and forming a relationship with the image echoes Heidegger’s reference to our own thinking when experiencing a particular location:

The relation between locale and space lies in the essence of these things as locales, but so does the relation of the locale to the man who lives there.³

My relationship with my subject matter begins once I decide to pull the cord to get off the bus and examine the object that caught my attention from the bus window. Often I feel a sensation of the object having a life in and of itself. Depending on the time of day, I may decide to go back to it when the light is ideal for the thing to be photographed. Or if I do not have my camera, I will sketch what I saw and how I think I would like it to be as a photographic image. Walking to the object forms an impression different from the one experienced while on the bus. Viewed from the perspective of a pedestrian, the object becomes larger in scale and more personable. This pedestrian perspective is important, in that I wish to create a sensation of the viewer experiencing the object from my view, as if the viewer is actually there standing and observing just as I did when I decided to make the image. I move forward, away from, and if applicable around, conscious of what I include in the frame, looking for some dynamic of the object projected in space. In the process of framing the object in space, I am present. And the viewer, in viewing the finished photograph, is essentially present.

The images I make form a two or three-way relationship between the original creator of the object, the user of the object, and its audience (myself and the general public). In all

³ Ibid., 356.

cases, the audience is part of the relationship (after all, a photographic image generally suggests that someone was behind the camera that made the image), but the creator or user might be absent, not considered as part of the relationship with the audience. Karl Marx in his “Communist Manifesto” speaks of worker alienation from the product produced for reason that the product goes through many workers to see its creation, thus forming a distance of recognition and sense of fulfillment between the finished product and the workers who created it.⁴ In finding degrees of personhood through objects, I am more interested in the closeness the creator has to the object as evidenced in its customization, a customization that reveals through imperfection and or novelty a personal existence made public. The object, placed in the realm of the social, begs a couple of questions that implicate the audience as having a relationship with the image: 1) What is the object trying to tell the audience and 2) How does the object function?

Thesis Works

Hustlers of Culture, a project that examines how various businesses cater to black consumers, addresses such questions. Twelve images taken from an afro-centric book and gift shop, a church, and a strip mall are mounted on a wall and anchored by an image of a superiorly graphic sign from a Church’s Chicken restaurant resting against the wall atop four

⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 203-243.



Fig.1: *Hustlers of Culture*, twelve 19.5x19.5 inch digital prints, five milk crates, 2015

milk crates that reads “Tuesday 2PC Leg & Thigh.” The use of yellow and red to fill the funky character style of “2PC” in the image hearkens back to soul artist Curtis Mayfield’s album cover design for the soundtrack to the film “Superfly” which uses a very similar color and lettering style. To the upper right from the anchored image sits an image of an ad for “Curly Remy” hair extensions featuring a fair-skinned, thin, black female model with long curly hair, while opposite from this image sits a framed sun-damaged image of a collage-style representation of Africa that sits above a sun damaged print of a Muslim mother embracing her daughter.



Fig. 2: Detail from *Hustlers of Culture*, 2015

In speaking of decoding advertisements, Gillian Rose cites Judith Williamson’s discussion of advertising’s relationship with its audience in the following manner:

Every ad assumes a particular spectator; it projects out into the space in front of it an imaginary person composed in terms of the relationship between the elements in the ad. You move into this space as you look at the ad, and in doing so ‘become the spectator, you feel that the ‘hey you’ ‘really did’ apply to you in particular.⁵



Fig. 3: Details from *Hustlers of Culture*, 2015

⁵ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Research with Visual Materials*, “Semiology: Laying Bare the Prejudices Beneath the Smooth Surface of the Beautiful” (London: Sage Publications, 2016), 134.

These social signs carry along with them various messages that serve various functions. The “Tuesday 2PC,” with its reference to 70’s soul music and cinema graphic design, elevates fried chicken to a level of hipness and cool making an unhealthy product that African Americans stereotypically indulge in more appealing, while the “Curly Remy” image embraces and promotes traditional Western notions of beauty with the model’s fair skin, thin frame, and long wavy hair.

Both images serve a function to create a demand or desire within the marginalized community. Opposite the Western notions of beauty in the “Curly Remy” image, the sun-damaged collage style image of Africa and the mother and child image suggests a notion of natural beauty unmediated by a product. Both mother and child image and Africa collage image speak of African American representations outside of popular Western culture, for there is no suggestion of European emulation. The use of white fabric to drape the smiling mother’s head tending to her child, and the strong lines used to render the elder’s face that occupies most of the frame in the Africa collage image both suggest an authenticity un-inspired by Western notions of beauty and popular culture. Furthermore, the fact that both images are sun damaged suggests a function that implicates both user and audience.

Apparently sitting outside the shop for a while, the works seem to have outlived their shelf life with their over-coated cyan hues implicating the shop owner’s motivations for still having the work in the display window despite its condition. Do projections of authenticity and non-Western notions of identity onto the public override the visual conditions of such projections? In other words, is it more important that we, the public, see the content of these images regardless of their defective forms? Is the shop owner suggesting that this is how s/he would like her/his clientele/audience/community to see her/himself? Is this how the shop

owner sees her/himself?

Through such investigative questions, viewers form relationships with these images with varying degrees of personal attachment to the representations. Thus, the projections of *Hustlers of Culture* carries along with it a dynamic of assumptions and assertions of and about the “you” that Judith Williams refers to: In this case the marginalized. Furthermore, the word “Hustle” contributes to this dynamicism, for it denotes both being responsibly active, as suggested in non-European identity affirmation, and being forcefully fraudulent towards a person or people as seen in the slick design of an unhealthy food item from a restaurant chain prevalent in marginalized communities.

Dynamic relationships between public projections and audience is further examined in the triptych *Home Fires*.



Fig. 4: *Home Fires*, two 22x22 inch digital prints, one 8x8 inch digital print, 2015

The first two images consist of a dilapidated car wash that appears to double as a house. Painted along the first half of the façade in image one of the car wash are three silhouetted, voluptuous female figures with gestures that suggest an expression of attractiveness and desirability. The two silhouetted women in image two suggests the same except the one thin silhouetted figure has a broad X painted over it. To the left of these two women sits a painted

male figure (presumably the owner of the car wash) facing these two women, wearing a tank top and hat with what appears to be a drink in his hand. Image three consists of a tightened shot of a rusted grill with a styrofoam cup over its chimney. Although no people are present in any of these images, people are represented, projected for us to view and formulate relationships between maker, user, and audience. Or perhaps the user of the image (the presumed owner) is the maker. At any rate, the viewer bears witness to the presumed car wash owner's sexuality in terms of gender and body type preference. In addition, the grill adds to the sociability of the place. In dwelling, affirming his existence, the car wash owner makes his desires and likes known to us despite how odd it may seem for a commercial establishment- overtly heterosexual and masculine. The tactile quality of painting as a medium of representation suggests a close relationship between maker, material, and thing painted. After all, the materiality of paint provides an index to the hand that renders the representation causing the image to extend outside the frame to the maker of the image.

This use of the painted silhouette in representing a person and or idea eventually led to my practice of incorporating paint onto the surface of my photographs. Applying paint to photographs makes for a closer, more physical process of image making that goes beyond the use of ethereal light to a more tactile material to make an image, and if used properly can give more depth to an image going beyond a photograph's two-dimensional, flat form.

In *Dropping Shadows*, painted along a yellow sprawling one-story community center are bodily representations of ideals, aspirations, and services provided to the formerly incarcerated trying to transition to a productive life outside of prison.



Fig. 5: “Blue Collar,” “Untitled,” “Mentoring” from *Dropping Shadows*
19x19 inch digital prints, 2015

I found these representations along the building’s facade admirable and inspiring in that they address desired outcomes and practices intended to alleviate the cycle of mass incarceration and prison recidivism that disproportionately affects African Americans. With the goal of adding more dimension to the flat bodily representations, I applied paint to each representation, taking care to leave an edge of the original. This in turn gives each silhouette more of a physical presence, as if each body is coming off the wall casting a shadow. Hence, the three dimensionality of the work is twofold with respect to its form due to the application of paint and its content by way of how it functions within the community. Although these works point to an agency by the marginalized in projecting selves, at times a marginalized individual finds his/her image to be one of a perpetual denigration; where an image expands into a celebratory affirmation on one hand while expanding into a pervasive, racist ideology on the other.

Outside of my works produced from public objects in space for and or by the marginalized lies a work that utilizes a published photograph and text that examines this conflict of celebration and denigration. Photographer Roy DeCarava’s 1956 image titled “Dancers” features two near- silhouetted figures performing in the middle of a ballroom

dance floor sandwiched by seated viewers. The lines formed by the dancers' limbs, coupled with the audience, led to Roy DeCarava being conflicted with the image in terms of what the image projects:

...their figures remind me so much of the real life experience of blacks in their need to put themselves in an awkward position before the man, for the man in order to survive.... And yet there is something in the figures not about that; something...that is very creative, that is very real and very black in the finest sense of the word.⁶

DeCarava's ambivalence is very telling in that despite the fact that the audience viewing the dancers is black (the image was photographed in Harlem) and that there is a feeling of authenticity with the performers, the image nevertheless on the one hand projects unto him a less than ideal representation of selves. DeCarava's sentiment echoes sociologist W.E.B.

DuBois' theory of double consciousness, which, for DuBois, is an inescapable condition for African Americans:

It is a peculiar sensation...of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.⁷

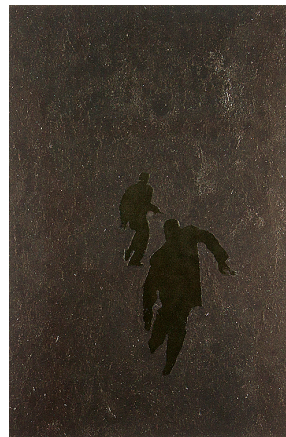


Fig.6: *Double*, after Roy DeCarava's 'Dancers,' Two 9x13 digital prints, acrylic, 2015

⁶ Roy DeCarava, "An Awkward, Graceful Dance," *New York Times*, November 1, 2009, accessed December 8, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/10/25/weekinreview/1101-seen-graphic.html?_r=0

⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 2.

Double, After Roy DeCarava's 'Dancers,' uses two reprinted images of the aforementioned piece, acrylic, and text. Side by side, both images are presented in a frame as a diptych accompanied with text consisting of DeCarava's and DuBois' quotes. In the left image, the dancers are painted into with a dark-brown metallic paint producing an effect that visually isolates the dancers from the audience in the image. In the right image, the audience is painted out with dark-brown metallic paint, again isolating the dancers from the audience but by opposite means. In the left image, a transformation of the dancers has taken place as their forms glisten among viewers in the ballroom. In the right image, what was once an audience is now an astral plane that envelops the dancers. As a diptych, the images complement each other as both visually negative and positive aspects of the same thing: a reverential gesture, through paint, to the dancers' projection that DeCarava himself ultimately concluded was "a very real and very black" projection. In both cases, the paint transforms the figures into isolated selves physically and psychically apart from judgement by others.

In examining my making process from photographing graffiti removal, to photographing projections of self in public spaces, to painting on photographs, I have expanded my work from two dimensional flatness to three dimensionality in terms of both content and form. Not unlike the agency exercised by the marginalized in rendering personhood through public imagery, I (a marginalized individual), through my photographic and painting process have followed suit in affirming existence. Peter Galassi stated that "The expression of self is nearly always an expression of relation to others."⁸ Through the objects and source material I make work from, I would like my work to do that: not only show selves

⁸ Peter Galassi, *Roy DeCarava: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 11.

through pictures but also create an opportunity of relationships between my work and its viewers creating a “...reciprocal identity of the personal and the social”.⁹

⁹ Ibid., 11.

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