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GLORY B 2 GOD

by

DEBRA ELAINE JOHNSON

Under the Direction of Professor Joseph Peragine

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis paper is to investigate womanist theology and method, along with restoration practices involving spirituality and healing within the context of the visual arts. The thesis exhibition will attempt to create new visual possibilities that inform womanist theological scholarship in terms of promoting contemporary female religious imagery within a metaphorical language. While womanist theology is steeped in interdisciplinary practices, it has yet to consider seriously the studio arts as a means to explore and develop the womanist language. This study will investigate how essential and natural the visual arts assist our understanding of spirituality, especially through a womanist context.

INDEX WORDS: Womanist theology, womanism, spiritual, God, restoration, feminism, liberation, Afrocentric, collage, abstract, Pop Art, color theory, gospel, cosmos, metaphor, universalism, sphere, circle, cell, body, moss, soil, environment, community, universe, Afro, star

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DEBRA ELAINE JOHNSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2008

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2008

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Reeves

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Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2008

DEDICATION

First and foremost, all glory goes to The Most High, so I dedicate this paper and my thesis exhibition to the Creator, knowing that with God everything positive and loving is possible. This work is also for Afrocentric women and women of color, who face the triple oppression of gender bias, classism, and racism. I pray my work helps to heal the negative images of these women, which in our society, is politically incorrect yet socially promoted and accepted. Finally, I include my son Mason in this dedication, who's coming into this world and my life was the impetus for my spiritual growth and in pursuing a Master's degree.

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MOSS AS METAPHOR

My thesis work literally began from the ground. In my second year of graduate school I began collecting moss. I could not say why then, but it seemed necessary. I would see the moss everyday on my walk to campus after parking my car. The moss was bits of intense green squeezing up from between the sidewalk cracks or the decorative metal grates that controlled the tree roots from surfacing and corrupting the sidewalks. Despite the concrete and metal the moss survived, flourished, and made its presence known among the drab urban gray. This imposing green plant was intriguing to me so I began to pry it from its renegade home and bring it to my graduate studio at school. Eventually, I collected enough moss and its foundational soil to fill four casserole-sized aluminum containers, making it easier to water the plants and carry them to shaded natural light located outside my studio space. After a watering, the smell of the moss and dirt would fill the studio and as the moss would become revitalized from its baptism, so would I. My eyes would take in the restored brightness of the plants and after touching the spongy organic matter, I was energized by nature/God, too.

Although, I could not readily articulate why I needed the moss, it began to enter my work in the form of small sphere-like sculptures. I was already experimenting with fabric and three-dimensional soft forms, but decided to incorporate a metal mesh base under the fabric to create palm size spheres, some of which included an orifice. A patchwork of hand-sewn white cotton canvas strips worked as skin for the sculptures, and then I applied vivid color washes and pen marks to contour the mesh design underneath the fabric. After this, strips and round sections of moss and its soil were glued to the spheres. The orbs had the appearance of tiny globes or perhaps blown-up structures from

inside the body. This internal/external dual association is a fundamental component of the work that will be discussed later. The moss survived (for several months) the trauma of being removed from its initial home and adhered to a three-dimensional form. Sometimes the moss would become dry and lose its freshness, and then I would spritz the moss with water to keep it alive, creating living sculptures, which allowed it to return to its original state.

Moss became a metaphor for *restoration*, because throughout adverse weather, urban growth, rural upheaval, pollution, and human and animal imposition, the moss comes back green and gorgeous. Since the beginning of graduate school, restoration has been the overall theme I wanted for my thesis, because at that time I was going through a spiritual revival and growth in terms of my faith, along with making significant changes in my personal life, so the idea of restoration seemed appropriate and right for my graduate work. As the changes in my life escalated, the strength and stability of the moss was healing to me. As Karen Baker-Fletcher states in *Sisters Of Dust, Sisters Of Spirit*, “There is something healing about planting in whatever piece of soil one can find. The healing connection that takes place is not just physical or earthy; it is spiritual.”¹ Feeling the earth was [and is] vital to my spirit and in claiming nature as a part of the work; I must claim the Creator of that very nature, too. My belief system is that healing or restoration comes from The Most High, nothing constructive is possible without God and so I entitled my thesis, *Glory B 2 God*.

¹ Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters Of The Dust, Sisters Of The Spirit* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 17.

WOMANIST WAYS

I am the woman who holds up the sky.
 The rainbow runs through my eyes.
 The sun makes a path to my womb.
 My thoughts are in the shape of clouds.
 But my words are yet to come.²
 -Ute

The body of artwork in *Glory B 2 God* is about building something positive that addresses the personal, yet universal concerns of a larger community that begin from the viewpoint of Afrocentric women and women of color. Because of this emphasis, I discarded the small sculptures and returned to drawing, painting, collage, and incorporated screen printing, which permitted more visual diversity in speaking about faith within the context of socio-politics and culture, and so defining one of the guiding principles of a womanist liberation theology.³ In 1983 Alice Walker first defined “womanist” in four parts. To summarize, womanist origins is taken from the word *womanish* that is derived from black women’s folk culture. A mother might have accused her daughter of ‘acting womanish’ or grown. In the womanist perspective it is not only rebellion against a mother’s authority, but “resistance to oppressive structures that would limit knowledge and self-realization.”⁴ While facing oppression, the womanist is assertive, resourceful, and capable, not unlike Harriet Tubman or Fannie Lou Hamer. In short a womanist is a black feminist who is not only committed to the well-being of her sex, but is dedicated to ensure the liberation, health, and peace of the global community.

² Ute, *A Book Of Grace: Words To Bring Peace*, ed. Margi Preus and Ann Treacy (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2002), 127.

³ Katie G. Cannon, *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 135-36.

⁴ Cheryl J. Sanders, *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 128.

Furthermore, she does not hate her “roundness” or bodily curves that speak to the institutionalized racism that penalize black women for their body types, which may include her natural hair and facial features considered opposite Western standards of beauty. She is ‘traditionally universalist’, understanding that the community comes in shades from saffron to onyx to vanilla, and peach, i.e., embracing those that may not look like you and respecting ethnic and cultural differences in others. The womanist loves food, music, the moon, and the Spirit, addressing her connection to cultural history and tradition.⁵ Finally, the womanist is concerned with mere survival and the feminist is interested in the quality of life.⁶ The black woman is in a unique position to speak about social and cultural oppression, since she is faced with the triple subjugation of gender bias, racism, and caste distinctions. The woman of color cannot afford to ignore one bias for another if she is seeking equal justice for her life.

Concerning the restorative themes in my art I wanted to support the Afrocentric woman, who is at the bottom of the social rung and often the scapegoat for the problems in society, as in the stereotypical “welfare mother” and the “ho” on the street. The black woman is seen with excessive sexual drives (she is regularly presented on talk and court T.V. shows requesting D.N.A. tests because she is not sure who her “baby’s daddy is,” implying her having multiple sexual partners and lacking responsibility), angry or defensive, childish, and not able to express joyful love towards her own family—all of which speaks to time-worn stereotypes begun during the Atlantic slave trade and European colonialism. The Mammy, Picaninny, and sexualized Jezebel characterizations are presently established in popular culture, music videos, news programs, television

⁵ Ibid., 126-29

⁶ Layli Phillips, *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 34.

shows, movies, and magazines. Even the mainstream art world celebrates and financially awards artists like Kara Walker and Wangechi Mutu who promote these characterizations in their art, and deem it politically correct since the creators are black women. The European mentality is that if African Americans will put out these images, actually celebrate the stereotype by demeaning their own people, then maybe it is okay for us to continue our bias and superior attitudes.⁷ However the onslaught of this negativity is damaging to the psyche and well-being of black woman and girls, and makes it easy to demonize or ignore them as unworthy. I believe visual concepts explained through black womanhood can be provocative without being filtered through a negative lens; and in my own work I want to investigate freeing black women and other women of color from these destructive labels, while coming from a place of positivity within a creative Christian liberating theology.

Womanist theology is still viewed as “extracurricular” to North Atlantic theological studies and is prescribed as not objective enough for analytical scholarship. Using a postmodern frame of reference, womanist liberation theology claims there is not a conflict in naming who you are and in speaking about your faith in your research.⁸ In shifting the theological viewpoint from a Eurocentric perspective, Womanist theology allows me a place where my work *and* voice (as a black woman) is taken seriously and given authority.

⁷ Howardena Pindell, *Diaspora/Realities/Strategies*, Proc. Of Trade Routes, History, Geography, Culture: Towards a definition of Culture in Late 20th Century Conf., October 1997, Johannesburg Biennale.

⁸ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 32-34.

COSMIC COLLAGE

To understand how restoration through womanist theology plays out in my thesis work a detailed description of “Symbiotic Funk” from *Glory B 2 God* is first given. The main color throughout the large-scale unframed collage is quinacridone red with brush-marked traces of bright pink and orange, and in the midst of this, deep-yellow crayon highlights other areas; but this is only the beginning of the optical assault. As your eye travels upward to the left corner, there is a huge floating head with an Afrocentric woman’s face made out of glossy magazine paper that reflects a shiny surface. More light play is seen in the figure’s giant bubble-cut, slightly vertical Afro. The hair is made of black paper underneath a fluorescent green screen print with a linear design that is drawn from organic moss matter. Tiny dots of yellow-green foil rest on top of the print and surround other circles of various neon colors resembling biological cells. More fluorescents are used which are similar to child-like outlines formed in chalk around the head and face. The expression of the figure is cool and placid (perfect glamour magazine pose), however, she is diffused with painted orange lips and blue striped scarification marks down her face which reference Africa, where life began. With averted eyes, she whisper kisses from her mouth, flat blue spheres with connecting webs, creating an optical illusion of dancing neon blue orbs against a neon red sky implying a continually expanding universe. Beneath the figure is a giant half-circle spanning the length of the collage, made by cut-outs from the original paper, then replaced with black paper to create a super sphere. An equally large cartoon-like star is in the foreground housing a smaller cluster of ice blue webs and spheres, and next to them are two small figures

donning white coats, rubber gloves, gas masks and black Afros. With bent heads, they are intent on their work as they look into a small abyss they hold in their hands.

“Symbiotic Funk,” comprises most of the ideas for my thesis, which are multi-layered in process, content, and meaning. Beginning with process, which involves calculated and intuitive ways of working, I initiated several techniques: collage, cut-outs, drawing, painting, and screen printing. Some of the materials were found, recycled, or given to me, and may be less than pristine. The original paper in “Symbiotic Funk,” left from another graduate student was cheap and slightly worn, with dented edges, but here was an opportunity to utilize a gift provided by The Creator, since at the time I was out of money for art supplies. Whether or not this paper would survive what I would put it through was left up to my faith, and being open to trust ideas from beyond my corporal existence. In choosing worn paper, I directly reference womanism that affirms creatively utilizing ones resources. The Pop Art movement used other means to diminish distinctions between “high” and “low” art. Artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein used commercial and traditional art practices as commentary on the consumer materialism of the 1960s by creating mass produced images.⁹ In my direct references to Pop Art I employ the screen print process that gives a graphic look to “Symbiotic Funk,” but the technique is consciously diffused by layers of collage applied within the piece for a more organic aesthetic. My research involved looking at art historical references, as in the artists mentioned before, but a significant part of the work deferred to what felt natural to me in the moment. Womanist theology affirms this approach as explained by Stephanie Y. Mitchem, a professor of theology and ethics, “Although it must be analytical, womanist theology is also recorded in the hearts of black

⁹ Absoluteart.com, Art History: Pop Art: (1958 - 1975), http://wwar.com/masters/movements/pop_art.html.

women and bears a strong resemblance to jazz....Jazz utilizes improvisation, which is ordering the never-before-voiced.”¹⁰ Celebrated folk artist and spiritual visionary, Minnie Evans was not academically trained in studio arts or art history, but was commanded by God on Good Friday in 1935 to draw. In her words, “Something told me to draw or die. It was shown to me what to do.”¹¹ She is directly connected with the Spirit and expressed black women’s moral wisdom through her art. Evans work transcends religious and denominational boundaries and has been compared to the sacred Tantra paintings of Buddhism and Hinduism, and in following the principles of womanism, Minnie Evans is a “universalist.” Womanist theology and method acknowledges alternatives ways of acquiring knowledge that transcend “reason” and validates black folk wisdom, female imagery, and a metaphorical language that constructs theological statements.¹²

In speaking about content and meaning in *Glory B 2 God*, the body of my thesis exhibit can be divided into two factions, narrative and abstract. However the content in every piece contains metaphorical or literal elements that support other components within the work. Concerning the narratives and restoration, the Afrocentric female figures act as spiritual entities or real woman in history possessing supernatural powers as in the biblical characters, Vashti, Hagar, and Mary Magdalene (represented in the works). These black women are attractive, powerful, courageous, and very loving, which counteract the negative images from the media and mainstream popular culture. They are guides and nurturers to the humans they encounter, as in the universe within “Symbiotic Funk,” where the large figure is “giving birth” from her mouth and blue web matter is

¹⁰ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 46.

¹¹ Anton Haardt Gallery, Minnie Evans, <http://www.antonart.com/bio-evan.htm>.

¹² Delores Williams, *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 121.

helping to create the cosmos. Below her is a pair of humans, although inferior (they must wear gas masks to survive), they additionally contribute to the system that must have communion with God, the Creator, in order to work. All three figures have black Afros signifying their interdependence and mutual importance.

A similar theme is present in another narrative piece, “The Gospel According to M. Magdalene.” The figure of Mary is centered with machine arms that are cut from a 1980s era *National Geographic* article about the space shuttle. Inside her right arm is a tiny Afro-wearing man operating some controls. Mary Magdalene’s serene face communicates directly with Jesus and then transmits her knowledge to humankind; in the same way the real-life Mary Magdalene did with Jesus’ disciples, after Jesus came to her following His crucifixion. Enclosed in a bright lime-green metallic frame, the first impression of “The Gospel According To M. Magdalene” could be of a 1968 rock band poster. The paper is black, housing clusters of screen printed flat white circles behind Mary’s hair, which is itself made up of a reflective orange Afro of circles outlined with minute orange circles that form tentacles reaching into the atmosphere. The tentacles are another form of communication coming from the “natural hair” of the Afro, a power source that celebrates Afrocentric culture. Spray painted chartreuse spheres with bits of round reflective foil paper are dispersed in the sky among large blue and green tie-dye looking cartoon stars. The star symbols are a direct influence from the graphics of the pop shows of the 60s and 70s like *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In*, *The Electric Company*, and *Batman*. I remember these programs from when I was a little girl, and that they had various symbols, words, or stars that punch out at you from the T.V. screen to emphasize a point. My collaged and cut-out stars may represent the external sky or a flower in

nature, the internal signals our consciousness uses like the neurotransmitters in the brain, or the explicit interruption that anchors or frees us.

Popular culture is repeated in my work by using current issues of *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines as collage material for the figures that are not hand drawn. In addition, I used old and new volumes of *National Geographic*. With collage I construct new spiritual realities with subtle and overt commentaries about social and cultural issues, an example is “Vashti Said, ‘No!’.” Vashti is a beautiful Persian Queen from the Bible [Esther 1:10-22] who refused to dance and show off her body to her powerful husband’s drunken friends; consequently she was divorced and lost her throne.¹³ She might have been murdered or tortured for her disobedience. The Bible does not tell us what happened to her, but Vashti knew herself and believed in her power as a whole person. We can all draw strength from Vashti, despite gender, age, or culture. My portrait of Vashti shows her in the Cosmos standing on a cellular structure resembling a planet that sits among webs, spheres, and abstract neon red shapes. Her over-sized head is cocked to the side and sports an Afro with flowers. Her body, furnished by Mary J. Blige, is wearing a white power suit, a` la John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, and designer shoes. Vashti’s stance and facial expression say, “Don’t mess with me!” Four fluorescent tubes frame the piece that is made on black paper. The collage takes on another dimension when the gallery lights are completely off, and the black light emphasizes the spheres and odd shapes caught in neon, where the picture becomes a spaceship’s portal into an unknown galaxy. This piece is funky, again, pointing to the 1970s decade, with its clash of glitzy, flamboyant colors.

¹³Joyce Meyer, *The Everyday Life Bible*, (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2006), 753-54.

Color is an important signifier for my work because it informs its meaning. My palette had to be engaging to the eye, bright, and compositionally dense for intensity. Besides vivid hues I intentionally used black in my positive universe, reversing its negative stigma and as another restorative act in the work. In researching color theory I looked to Alma Thomas of the Washington Color School, known for her sensory illusions in reductive abstraction. Thomas was born in Columbus, GA in 1891, and pioneered many firsts in art history. She was the first woman to receive a degree in fine arts from Howard University in 1924, and later, in 1934 she earned a Master's degree in fine arts from Columbia. Thomas was the first African American woman to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum of art in 1972. Among her acquaintances were other Color-Field painters, Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, and Sam Gilliam; but Thomas relied more on direct references to nature than these artists and was interested in the ways technology influenced perception, as in her space paintings. Her layering of colors created brilliant optical imagery as in her piece, "Babbling Brook and Whistling Poplar Trees Symphony," from 1976. Alma Thomas was gifted at interjecting her observations of nature and contemporary culture while using non-objective content in her art.¹⁴

The abstract piece, "First Woman," from *Glory B 2 God*, was first among the cut-out shaped collages to be completed. Working mainly intuitively, I began with a screen print of circle clusters cut from another work; the circles were filled with fuchsia colored reflective foil paper. (Reflective papers are used in the narrative and abstract works as an interactive tool that include the viewer in the piece, but also represent water, cleansing,

¹⁴ Joe Fyfe "Alma Thomas's late blossoms: an African-American woman artist who emerged in the mid-20th century, Thomas was a pioneer throughout her career. A current exhibition suggests, however, that her greatest achievement may have been the nature-inspired abstract". *Art in America*. Jan 2002, 98-101.
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_1_90/ai_82012872

and baptism.) I added on to that, an earlier discarded black-and-white circle design meant for a screen print drawn on transparent paper, and then two other sections were added to complete the piece. One section fit into or on another part to build them up. For these collages the literal idea of support was important as a womanist theme. Different types and grades of papers were used referencing the traditional black folk ways of recycling materials to create something new and to recognize the need for diversity and creativity within the community—all parts of the whole are vital. The abstract collages without the figures are more subtle, but suggest spirituality and restoration in other ways. The content, which resembles blown-up cellular structures found in the body and nature, or perhaps reduced sections of the universe fallen out of the sky, are deliberately vague. Some of the works are on a human-sized scale and therefore equalize the viewer with nature and the cosmos, implying a harmonious relationship between the mind, body, and spirit.

Lastly, the thesis work includes two collages on wood cut-outs, “Atomic Balm” and “Fantastic Mirror,” which are shaped like weird bright cloud-bubbles with strange biological shapes and day-glow stars. Other works consist of several small white framed works, and two unframed small drawings of crosses that float in between the larger pieces. The purpose of exhibiting such diverse works is to provide eclectic access points for the viewer, meaning there is no one way to express spirituality, which is a very personal journal.

RESTORATION

Restoration is circular, an infinite cycle of beginnings and endings. This is the reason that the circle is the most dominant symbol in my work; it speaks about God and His love for us, which is never ending. It means that there is *always* hope, for change, and for redemption. We are reminded of this when we see that even in the dirtiest, grayest, hardest place, a brilliant spot of green moss can grow with the promise of life. My thesis is about the promise of life that we are given through God, however, it is not a passive existence that will carry us through. Life is an active integration or system of everything living as stated in Mary Magdalene's gospel, "The Savior said, All nature, all formations, all creatures exist in and with one another, and they will be resolved again into their own roots. [4:22]"¹⁵ Womanist theology speaks to how spirituality is an everyday occurrence that we have to engage, *Glory B 2 God* shows human interaction with the environment, the physical self, and the intellect, within a spiritual realm. All of these elements are bound by each other and cannot *positively* exist separately or without faith.

¹⁵ The Gnostic Society Library, The Gospel According to Mary Magdalene, <http://www.webcom.com/gnosis/library/marygosp.htm>.

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