A Painted Testimony

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Every individual has moments, events, and milestones that help mold them into unique individuals. As an African American artist born and raised in Memphis, TN, I am a culmination of my home, culture, and every person I have come into contact with throughout my life. During my time in the MFA program, I made it a point to use my body of work as a tool for self-discovery. It was vital for me to understand my identity and those I identify with to establish my voice as an artist. During my discovery process, I realized that I would be nothing without the people and meaningful moments that have shaped me. I view my complete body of work as a testimony. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines testimony as, "1: a solemn declaration usually made orally by a witness under oath in response to interrogation by a lawyer or authorized public official, 2: a public profession of religious experience."¹ I approached my thesis as a witness in a courtroom. My paintings visually declare authentic figurative representations of African Americans from my point of view.

The visual qualities of my artwork are narrative paintings that depict African American figures interacting within a diverse range of environments. I chose painting as my primary medium because historically, figurative painting was the highest form of art alongside sculpture. Unfortunately, most historical paintings seldom represented black figures, and if they did, they were presented in a negative light. For example, Edouard Manet's *Olympia* [Figure 1] shows a nude white woman lying on a bed while her black servant is handing her flowers. When describing Manet’s painting, Brombert says, “For centuries men had depicted women in ways that not only neutralized the unavowable male response to the female body but also regulated

women to visual objectivity.”

Even today, in mainstream media, Black people and women are still portrayed as less than human beings. I want this body of work to serve as a reminder to my culture that we are valuable to the world around us. One way that I highlight positive black imagery in my work can be shown in the Stay Still [Figure 2]. The image shows two young black men in a home environment, with one getting his hair cut. Hair plays a crucial role in the black community because a person's hairstyle serves as a form of self-expression. This imagery is a stark contrast with what mainstream media often portrays. Instead of highlighting violence or self-deprecation, I am highlighting African American men caring for one another.

Along with positive imagery, I would also like to allow my community to truly experience fine art. Many people in my community have not been exposed to the art world, and I believe these paintings will help forge a connection that will help open that door. I want my artwork to reach various cultures and give them a glimpse of what African American life is like through the lens of a young black man from Memphis, TN.

The importance of rendering the figure dates back to when I was a child and used to try to draw my classmates. I have always had a massive fascination with refabricating the world around me through two-dimensional art. The first part of my process involves acquiring reference photos. My work is centered around authenticity, so I use a camera to help record the subjects I am using. The figures that I highlight in my work are predominantly family and friends. I like to take several photographs to have multiple compositions and themes to choose from. Occasionally, I want to use older photos as a reference. Most of my family and friends do not know much about art, which helps with the candid nature of the images I take. Sitting with the subject and crafting the narrative is one of the most rewarding parts of my process. In this

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part of the process, I understand the psychology of the subject, which serves as the DNA of every painting I create. Lighting, color, contrast, environment, and the overall narrative are essential to my process of acquiring reference photos in order to select the ideal image. These elements are a must in order for the painting to reach its fullest potential.

The next portion of my process is bringing the paintings to life. After the scene is chosen, I select the ideal picture plane to display on. I typically work on stretched canvas. I decide on canvas dimensions based on how I want the viewer to engage with the scene. A larger canvas prompts the viewer to slow down and step back to take in all of the content. In contrast, a smaller canvas brings the viewer closer to the scene and prompts them to engage faster. For example, in my painting titled *A Woman’s Touch* [Figure 3], I wanted to put the two subjects on a scale larger than life. The painting depicts a woman styling a male's hair in between her legs. I felt that this nurturing dynamic needed to be viewed on a larger scale. The dimensions of this painting are 60" x 48" x 1", which drastically differs from *Splash* [Figure 4] with the dimensions of 24” x 24” x 1”. *Splash* depicts a cluster of children playing on an inflatable waterslide. I chose to make *Splash* smaller to best represent the feeling of a memory. Memories can often be quick, fuzzy snapshots from the past that are hard to hold on to, and I wanted to capture that.

The essential commonality in my body of work is the use of oil paint. I like to use oil paint because of the natural results it can produce. My initial exposure to work done with oil paint was a painting my grandmother commissioned of her family [Figure 5]. As a child, I was intrigued by the realistic qualities of people that I knew as my grandfather, uncles, and father. Like that painting, I want my work to convey that same level of naturalism without trying to come off as photo-realistic. As I became more familiar with art history, classical paintings began
to serve as an excellent source of reference. In my opinion, one of the best examples of technical oil paintings is the *Portrait of the Princesse Broglie* [Figure 6] by Ingres. In the piece, he shows a high level of technical skill when it comes to representing life. Ingres successfully manipulates the oil paint to recreate the princess' stunning blue dress. Other than the incredible history behind oil paint, the material is excellent to paint due to its' slow drying time. The velvety consistency helps with blending, which is essential for painting skin and clothing. I use a limited color palette to help me mix all of the necessary colors that make up black skin, and I find that to be important in order for me to show the viewer that there is more color in black flesh than brown.

Next, my body of work pulls from a variety of resources ranging from historical and contemporary. Historical paintings serve as a foundation for the direction of my artwork. When looking at these older paintings, I look at how figures are composed, how paint is handled, and how the narrative is executed. A painter who had an early influence on the direction of my work was Jacques-Louis David. In his painting titled *Oath of the Horatii* [Figure 7], he paints a classic roman story that is larger than life. Mayer describes the context by stating, "The painting tells the story of the three Horatii brothers who vow to sacrifice their lives for Rome in a duel with the Curiatii brothers from Alba Longa and end an ongoing war between the two cities."3 This painting greatly influenced me because of the arrangement of figures on the picture plane. David stacks his figures in a balanced way to make the viewer feel they are inside the painting. This arrangement method is a creative way to display multiple figures without sacrificing a compelling composition. I used a portion of this technique in the painting *Splash*. The children depicted are caught in motion having fun on the waterslide. The painting freezes them in a small

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cluster as they are cut off by the corner of the canvas. The asymmetrical figures were a conscious
decision to contrast with the symmetrical waterslide.

My historical references are not limited to just paintings. As an artist, I am also inspired
by the work of Auguste Rodin. His work isolates each figure in a dramatic and heroic pose. One
of his most influential pieces for my artwork is titled *The Shade* [Figure 8], a bronze sculpture
from a more extensive work called *The Gates of Hell* [Figure 9]. Dominique explains the
reference of Dante’s *Inferno* by stating, “For this tour de force, he wanted to depict the
innumerable scenes that mark the descent into Hell. A subject of this kind was rich in
opportunities to express the passions, violence, despair, and tumble of fallen souls in contorted,
unbalanced and even luscious poses.”4 *The Shade* depicts an idealistic muscular figure that
appears to be using all of his strength to hold himself up. I am inspired by the juxtaposition of a
man with power appearing weak. This posing can be compared to my painting *Hard to Let Go*
[Figure 10]. This painting depicts a young black man posed from the back, looking down while
holding a basketball. Unlike most basketball representations, this not a joyful narrative. Instead, I
wanted to highlight this influential figure from a place of humility. The overall theme of this
painting reflects one's life and having to come to terms with reality. This authentic narrative
sheds light on how people who enjoy playing basketball eventually have to come to terms with
the fact that they may not be able to play professionally or go as far with it as they would like.
When composing this painting, I wanted to embody the same level of drama and contrast shown
in the sculptures of Rodin.

After establishing historical references to inform the direction of my work, the following
essential reference for my work is contemporary art. I must understand how current artists and

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4 Dominique Jarrassé, Rodin: A Passion for Movement (Paris: Terrail, 2001), 56
photographers represent black people in their work. The visual elements that I like to pay attention to from contemporary artists are how they execute the uniqueness of the figure, the authentic environments, and compelling compositions. One artist that does a great job highlighting the black figure alone is Barkley Hendricks. Hendricks is an American painter that predominately paints life-size portraits of black people. What is unique about his work is that he does not paint the environment around the subject. He mainly focuses on just the figure and the clothes that they are wearing. A great example of this visual is the painting *Icon for My Man Superman (Superman Never Saved any Black People – Bobby Seale)* [Figure 11]. The painting depicts a self-portrait of the artist wearing a superman t-shirt against a blank wall. Hendricks states:

"Where human subjects are, I address what is in front of me. The composition asserts the artist's self-assured individualism… I wasn't part of any "school." The association with artists I had in Philadelphia didn't inspire me in any direction other than my own. I spent my time looking to the Old Masters."

Hendricks and I share a few similarities when it comes to our art-making process. We both understand the notion that to know where you are going, you must know where you come from. In the painting *Icon for My Man Superman...* he uses the figures' clothes and accessories to date this painting and uses them to make a political statement. Painting himself in a superman shirt re-contextualizes the thought that most superheroes are white. Understanding how clothing can affect the overall narrative of a painting is essential. One of my paintings that features subtle references through attire is titled *Listen to Me* [Figure 12]. This painting shows two friends

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5 Mark Benjamin, Godfrey et al., *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (Millbank, London: Tate Publishing, 2017), 194
sitting on a porch drinking wine. The friend in the foreground t-shirt is one of the highlights of the artwork. The shirt says gymnastics which references modern sports apparel. It was necessary to add those subtle design details to the shirt to allow this painting to mark history. When future people look at this work, they will know that these figures are from the 21st century. Unlike Barkley Hendricks, I need to consider the environment as much as the figure.

An influential artist who features the black figure in authentic environments in their work is Kerry James Marshall. Marshall is an African American figurative painter that highlights cultural narratives in his work. In his artwork, he uses the figures to accent the environment that surrounds them. A great example of this visual appears in his painting called *School of Beauty, School of Culture* [Figure 13]. The painting depicts various women and children inside a beauty shop. Petra Frank-Wit describes this painting by saying, “In a triumphant tableau vivant, he familiarises his audience with a black beauty parlor, a lively, carefree meeting place. Glittering heart-shaped mirrors are part of the paraphernalia, and black women – including their offspring – full-figured and dressed in vernacular styles.”

All of the visual elements added to the environment give the viewer more information to digest. I prefer the viewer to look at my work and feel like they are a part of the space. The authentic environments featured in my work and Marshall’s help reinforce cultural pride and give other cultures an artistic glimpse into African American life.

The last essential visual reference is the artist who heavily considers the composition. I believe the design can make or break an artwork’s effectiveness. Since my paintings are based on photographs, I studied how photographers composed African American life. One photographer that stood out to me was Carrie Mae Weems. Weems is a documentary portrait photographer.

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born in the 1950s. One of her works stands out to me is a photograph titled *Untitled (Eating Lobster)* [Figure 14]. The picture depicts a couple at a dinner table sitting adjacent to each other eating lobster. Deborah Willis says:

“The kitchen table is, for many of us, the spiritual place for open discussion. Many people gravitate to the kitchen when they smell food cooking. A kitchen table is where one finds comfort after a difficult day at work or school, where children spread their schoolbooks, where card and chess players convene. Topics discussed range from healing family strife to sharing family folklore.”

This description describes the feelings I want the viewers to walk away from looking at my work. The act of triggering emotions and memories through natural settings helps bring the whole painting together. When it comes to representing home spaces like Weems, the composition has to be heavily considered. In the photograph *Untitled (Eating Lobster)*, the viewer is put into the perspective as if they are at the opposite end of the table. The composition is creative because it uses an asymmetric balance. The man is looking down eating while the woman is looking up. The candid aesthetic is the visual that I go after in my work. This helps the artwork feel more natural. A great example of this visual can be seen in the painting titled *Reunion* [Figure 15]. The painting depicts a young boy caught in motion in front of a car. The painting is set at a cookout/ family reunion. The vehicle behind the young boy puts into perspective how small he is. The elements in the composition contrast each other; juxtaposing the young boy against the old car helps bridges the generational gap of black culture.

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Next, I will discuss the central themes and concepts that inspired the exhibition. Outside of all of my artistic resources, I pulled from various literary sources that help me better understand black identity. Since one of the major themes of my exhibition is black representation, I needed to research critiques of black culture from the African American point of view. One writer whose work heavily affected my artwork is Bell Hooks. Hooks critiques black culture with a feminist perspective, which proves to be beneficial. I lean on her insight when it comes to representing black women in my artwork. Hooks states:

Following in the wake of the success of drag queen RuPaul who created an image of black “female” beauty, affirming the aesthetic of long blonde straight hair, an image that suggests “if I cannot be a white woman I can at least look like a copy of the real thing” black female performers, sports figures, movie stars, and singers all began to go blonde.8

The delivery of her statement was harsh but still has elements of truth. As a black man, it is important for me to understand the true beauty of a black woman, which oftentimes is not what mainstream media teaches us. When it comes to highlighting black women in my art, I needed to have an honest representation. An adequate example of this representation appears in the painting titled Gaze [Figure 16]. The painting depicts a young black lady sitting in a chair looking off into the distance. What makes the scene unique is that the young lady has a dark complexion, short natural hair, casual clothing, and is still beautiful. This painting helps fight the negative connotations associated with beauty, and it also helps a little girl that looks like her feel empowered.

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8 Bell Hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation (New York: Routledge, 2015), x
Hooks also writes about empowering black people through visual politics and representation in art in her book, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. When speaking about black people's relationship with visual culture and art, she says:

“In contemporary times, television and cinema may be fast destroying any faint desire that black folks might have, particularly those of us who are not materially privileged, to identify with art, to nurture and sustain our engagement with it as creators and consumers. Our capacity to value art is severely corrupted and perverted by a politics of the visual that suggests we must limit our responses to the narrow confines of a debate over good versus bad images.”

This statement supports one of the major themes of my exhibition, which is that I want the artwork to be relatable. Most black people in my community have never been to an art museum, exhibit, or auction. It can be said that the lack of art appreciation in the black community is directly connected to privilege. My goal is to challenge the constructs of the art community. I want my community to see images of themselves in places that they have never been. I want to redefine what a successful artist is. My number one audience is my community and ecosystem of people that support me, not critics. I want my work to be valued by how many people it affects instead of what price I put on it. People know when you are being authentic versus just trying to make a quick buck.

Another literary influence for my artwork comes from the African American sociologist W.E.B Dubois. One of his most famous books is titled *The Souls of Black Folks*, released in 1903. It was important for me to examine this historical literature about race from the African

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American experience to how much has changed in 100 years. Du Bois speaks about black identity in America by saying:

“...the Negro is a sort of the seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense 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.”

Not much has changed from 1903 to 2021. Black people are still at a social and economic disadvantage all across the world. This statement especially helped me on my journey to self-discovery. I discovered that black people need to be aware of who they are and understand how the world looks at them. I wanted to use my exhibition to show the world how black people are just normal people. When people look at the body of work, they will not see all of the negative stereotypes; instead, they will see more relatable images. For example, in the piece titled *After a Long Day* [Figure 17], a black man is depicted relaxing on a couch by himself. There is a contrast to the aggressive portrayal of black men that mainstream media exhibits. This relatable image shows a man relaxing in his home, drinking a beer. He just so happens to be black; therefore, his narrative is skewed depending on who is looking.

In conclusion, I genuinely reached a new level of self-discovery in completing my MFA. In highlighting my community from my point of view, I developed a strong sense of black identity. I knew when creating this body of work; I wanted to do the work justice. I know that there is nothing new under the sun, so I looked at artists and philosophers whose thought

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processes were similar to mine. My goal was to display a consistent level of authenticity with every painting. I was able to achieve that by depicting full narratives of everyday life instead of just portraits. This work challenges the history of art by the positive representation of black figures in every piece. This exhibition will serve as a time marker for 2021. When people look back at the documentation of the work, they will recognize the period of the highlighted subjects. I hope that this exhibition validated the beauty of the black community and exposed other cultures to a new perspective.
Appendix

Figure 1: *Olympia* by Edouard Manet, 1863

Figure 2: *Stay Still* by Richard Echols, 2021

Figure 3: *A Woman’s Touch* by Richard Echols, 2021
Figure 4: Splash by Richard Echols, 2020

Figure 5: Untitled Family Portrait by Unknown, the 1980s

Figure 6: Portrait of the Princesse Broglie by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1853
Figure 7: Oath of the Horatii by Jacques-Louis David, 1784

Figure 8: The Shade by Auguste Rodin, 1904

Figure 9: Gates of Hell by Auguste Rodin, 1880 – 1917
Figure 10: *Hard to Let Go* by Richard Echols, 2021

Figure 11: *Icon for My Man Superman (Superman Never Saved any Black People – Bobby Seale)*

by Barkley Hendricks, 1969

Figure 12: *Listen to Me* by Richard Echols, 2019
Figure 13: *School of Beauty, School of Culture* by Kerry James Marshall, 2012

Figure 14: *Untitled (Eating Lobster)* by Carrie Mae Weems, 1990

Figure 15: *Reunion* by Richard Echols, 2021
Figure 16: *Gaze* by Richard Echols, 2019

Figure 17: *After a Long Day* by Richard Echols, 2019
Bibliography


