They Shouldn't Have Shown Me That Recipe

Travis Washington

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THEY SHOULDN’T HAVE SHOWN ME THAT RECIPE

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Requirements for the Degree of

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Given the task of describing or more approximately introducing my work to the reader through a language that has always been tertiary to me. I find myself searching harder to prove myself in a world with ways that I have never quite been keen on. Much like me, my work has always been more focused on simply its creation, internal conversation, and subversion. Through what I will describe as the first decade of my artist career or journey, my work has taken many turns, spoken many languages, studied many religions and histories, whether they be fabricated by realms of power or men of greed.

In my best attempt to break bread with the reader or “create a dialogue through the use of the “western language,” I will break down what I will describe as the ingredients of what I call my “Stew” (artwork), while elaborating on the importance of those ingredients and their significance contemporarily and historically. Also, I will dive into the techniques, or training and principles that allowed for the development of what I say is my own process in how I “whip my stew” (create my artwork). The reasoning for
me referring to my work as stew comes directly from my earliest experiences of creating, as a child sitting in either my grandmother (Boobie) or my father “JewDawg’s”, kitchen. As a youth I would watch these to artisans who had many skills. But it was their ability to create meals from absolutely nothing but the remnants of scraps that were left from meals past that would always spark my creativity. There were other artists in my immediate family but it was always the way that their hands moved, the fragrant aromas they created, the palettes of colors they used in their foods, and the lack of need for instructions that in my mind always began to turn a wheel that made me wander of the possibilities of what I could make. It also didn’t hurt that the food was “fye” (quite delicious).

In my artistic journey I was somewhat of a late bloomer. I had moments in my youth where I explored art, but had no clue of what I was really doing. For example, in elementary school around the time I was in the second grade. I loved to watch Dragon Ball Z; an animated cartoon. I would study everything about these cartoons from the landscapes, character anatomy, color schemes, fabric, any and everything in great detail. Then I would spend hours upon hours trying to replicate what I saw in the rendering of these figures that I was enamored with. From there I would take my drawings in a little binder with laminated sleeves to school the next day just to show them off to classmates and would eventually end up selling them. I got to a point where I would get requests from other students for specific characters and scenes. This
became my first experience with commissions without the knowledge that I was becoming a working creative.

I would not receive any formal training and teaching as the majority of the schools I attended in areas that I lived did not afford inner-city children with the opportunities or funding to study the arts. The closest I would come to any type of artistic knowledge would come from me sneaking into the room of my older cousin while he would be at football practice to gaze into his piles of sketchbooks where I would find illustrations that he had done from looking at comic books that he had collected over the years. In these sketchbooks I didn’t find copycat sketches of superman or batman, but figures studies of bodies and renderings of superheroes that he created from his imagination. The thing that captivated me the most was that my cousin only drew figures that look like us: only black action heroes and super women. I would study this book every day to the point I somewhat became obsessed with them and even stole some from time to time just to see if it was possible from me to mimic the marks, the same way that my big cousin would make them down to the tiniest detail such as the way he would do cross hatching to create cornrow braids for his figures. It was at this point that I knew that I wanted to make art. I wasn’t sure of how I would do it or even if it was something that was actually possible or if it was a tangible career choice, but I knew that I wanted to create.
In high school I got my first taste of an actual art class around the end of my 11th grad year. It was seemingly impossible to focus on though, as my high school career was mostly focused on survival and gang/neighborhood civil wars at that time. I was lucky enough to have two teachers (Robert Johnson, and Cecil Moore), who took the time to give me tidbits of instructions that sparked my interest, when I wasn’t in the principal’s office facing suspension or having one cleared. They were the first people to tell me that I have some talent and should try and pursue an artistic field. They even brought in a young man from Memphis as well, who was one of the animators of the movie Avatar to speak to me and show me that it was possible for someone as myself.

It wasn’t until I decided that I would attend Middle Tennessee State University for undergrad that I actually got my first real taste of a formal art education. It was the first time I had heard terms like perspective, color theory, line weights, composition, conceptual, etc. I was a complete blank slate that was completely behind everyone in every class, because up until this point I was simply recreating what I saw. I began in the architecture and graphic design program as I was always informed those were fields that would produce jobs in the long run. The long hours of arduous computer renderings, kerning, and the melancholy demeanor of the fellow design students and professors drove me mad. It was a constant battle for me as I always thought outside of the box and even when I met the criteria of the assignment or approval of my peers, I was
punished by the instructor for my creativity and use of my physical hand and the aesthetic that I would produce.

It was in my second year during one of my chosen electives that I finally had a flash moment that set forth the journey that I walk to this day. As I sit in a large studio room, in walks this 5'0 tall Laotian, who demanded the attention of the entire class and a African American woman with a blue bandana around her head with gold eyeglasses. The first word of the small statured Laotian woman was (‘I know that the majority of you all are here because of your advised electives, but I’ll make painters out of half of you if you have what it takes. My name is Sisavahn Phouthavong-Houghton but you will come to know me as the Dragon Lady’). The black woman laughed and said “don’t y’all be scared now. These two women, Sisavahn Houghton, and Kimberly Dummons, would become two of the most influential participants in the beginning of my young art career. Sisavahn taught the most traditional of paths, hand picking the lumber to use in building my own stretchers and canvases, to the traditional Italian painting techniques like the verdaccio, and all the other techniques and teaching of the so often quoted “Original Masters” of the visual art/painting world. It was she who took me to my first art exhibition at the Frist Museum to see the 30 Americans Exhibition, where for the first time, I saw works exclusively by African American artists that would entirely change my view on art and what it meant to be a black artist. This is a point where my work began to shift from making works that blended my prior graphic design aesthetics with pop-
culture because it was what I saw as trendy. It was there that I was exposed to the likes of Nick Cave’s sound suits, the silhouetted figures of Kara Walker, the large scale works of Kerry James Marshall, all with emphatically and unapologetically black figures, as well as the large ornate patterned traditional works of Kehinde Wiley and the beautiful full assemblage pieces by Mickalene Thomas, among so many others represented in that exhibition.
It was after the spiritual experience of this exhibition that I began to see a change in my own work. My work went from being very balanced and heavy in the styles of typography resembling works like Barbra Kruger, to a new space where I didn’t have to think so much. It became more of an innate spiritual feel. What I knew and what I saw began to become the subject matter of what I would soon paint. The life experiences that I lived, the wars that I saw with my own eyes, the food that I tasted and prepped with my own hand now became the central focus of my works. They were depictions of the esoteric culture that surrounded, embraced and even scared me my entire life. Now I could visually capture and portray them in a language that could be
understood on many levels, and more importantly by those who looked like me, but did not have the knowledge that I was now a vessel of.

Kimberly Dummons, the artist who sat beside the Dragon lady on my first day in painting class would go on to become my ‘O.G’/mentor. It was under her tutelage that I began to delve deeper into the new body of work that I was creating. When she would see me working in my studio space, she would always find ways to challenge me to further step out of the box. In her passing by she would say things like “why is the painting so small, why paint a three ft., painting when you could paint a nine ft. painting”? The viewer may not like my work, but with that larger scale, they have no choice but to confront what it is that they are seeing. Or she would give advice such as to layer, layer, and layer some more, thus giving the piece more life. This technique would give the viewer something new to look at in the works each time they passed by, that they might not have seen in it the first five times. It was through the teaching of her mentor, that she was taught to pass on the knowledge, when she saw those worthy of it.

Dummons’ mentor has since been a major influence on me and, my very own practices. The person, artist, and mentor I am referring to is John T. Scott,“(1940-2007).” A renaissance man/artist to say the least, Scott’s artistic mastery included drawing, painting, printmaking, and sculpture; his subject matter ranged from self-portraiture to work with important political and social messages. African and Caribbean
cultures heavily influenced Scott’s work, inspired by mythical African ritual and blues music, a cross between African rhythms and western harmonies. His core method came out of an improvisational thinking, linked to jazz performance and musicians. Much like the way I was taught by my grandmother and father to cook stew, it was that spiritual improvisation that allowed me to link my past and use it in my own creative process. In seeing Scott’s work, I was able to combine those two worlds and find a process similar to my own. I stopped worrying about making paintings how a traditional painter would make them. No longer cared about capturing every little detail or making sure that the stray hairs and marks from the paintbrushes could be seen. I began to emulate what I saw which led to me experimenting with unbinding my canvases from the stretcher bars that held them tightly like I was taught.

During his creative process, Scott uses what he calls “jazz thinking” or “spherical thinking,” which enabled him to make connections between entities and ideas that may be invisible to others. Perhaps due to its jazz-like construction, Scott’s work often contains movement, either kinetic or implied. Many times, the movement of a sculpture is communicated in the “self-choreographed movements required by the viewer to fully experience his art.” The desire to invoke movement continues throughout Scott’s work, as his main objective is to “move someone’s spirit.” Scott attained national recognition during the 1980s, the years between 1992 and 2004 were his most prolific period. In
1992, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation awarded Scott the MacArthur Fellowship, or “genius grant,” given to individuals who demonstrate exceptional creativity in their fields of endeavor. Relatively few artists have received this honor, especially those working in the field of visual arts outside of New York. It is exactly this experience as a minority that Scott’s rich body of work addresses. His art brings attention to the national black arts scene and the political issues surrounding African American life and history. It was in seeing the way that he treated his figures, forms, and palettes of color that I realized that similar expressions that had always been present in my works were also from something bigger within myself. Many of my professors long thought that I was just impatient, and that these were unfinished portions of my work. In actuality they were finished and served just as much of a purpose as the highly refined forms. I just had yet to find the vocabulary and link, as to where they were
My works are biographical in that they come from moments stills that have been experienced by myself or other individuals who are woven into the subject matter much like the materials that they are painted on, layered with elements that explore fictional
narratives to connect the dots to non-fictional realities. I was once told in an art history class that photography was a moment in art and the history of people that captured points that would later go on to become documented, factual segments in our chronological history. Even with those documented moments that are not perceived as fairy tales or folklore anymore, the images are still skewed to that of the ‘photographer’. The click of the button captures the still moment(s) that they are choosing what is important or not important to include within that composition.

Within that space is where I find myself and my works coming into play. They stand as those moments or pieces of the pictures that were chosen to be cropped or edited out of the compositions that shape the history and representations taught to us. In a field that has been historically dominated by white people, particularly men, those represented in paintings were usually from that dominant group. Those trained in the academy to interpret paintings or artworks, have achieved the highest education. In this, it came to me, that like many others that look like me, (black, thugs, Afro American, or whatever category it is that we fit into in western society, and globally, were always seen and represented in one way: That being less that important and subservient.

Many artists have come before me and accepted the task of eradicating those notions, by correcting the miseducation of peoples. As part of the next generation, my works also seek to subvert stereotypes like a Kehinde Wiley whose portraits elevate the black body to a place of regality, by painting his subjects in the
same ways as those of the Italian renaissance masters. Or like Kerry James Marshall whose large soulful black figures showcase the hidden, daily lives of black people that the world doesn’t care to see. My works empower those that are depicted in them with clear intent. Showcasing the pain that has been endured and the scars that have been burned into the bodies that are so many, and the beautiful and abundant history that has been whitewashed for so long.

I work in a manner that is reminiscent of the way that my ancestors cooked and prayed, sang and danced. In its purest form, these are spiritual rituals for me, a connection from the past to the present, for the future. In my process all of the teachings and trainings are thrown out of the window. Over these years I have gotten to a place where I trust my hands as opposed to thinking or focusing on the end result. I visualize the images that I make for weeks at a time. They come from encounters I’ve had, stories I’m told, books I read, food I eat, and etc. My works are large, to the point that they are usually the size of a human man in height, so that the figures that they house are usually larger than the viewer. Filled with bright colors often reminiscent of those color themes that were found in one’s grandmothers’ home, or in the room parents would allow us children to sit in with the good couches. The materials I paint on aren’t often canvases, but found materials, such as old military canvas tarps, handmade quilts from a granny, or thrown and trashed old billboard signs. The purpose of this is not only because of the size of the material but also because these materials usually
hold a scent, a feel, a look that creates a connection to something, somewhere, or someone for myself and the viewer, that when it’s seen that automatically opens a door for dialogue between the work and the audience that otherwise might not be there.

The figures always face the forward with a purpose. That purpose is directed at the viewer, but more importantly, to start conversation with the other works that they are housed with. The eyes of the figures are always black with a shade of grey inlay around the pupil. This is a direct connection to African ancestral ways of representing the form. The figures are often surrounded by patterns or hieroglyphic-like images that help to tell the stories within the context of each figure’s creation. African figures are also covered in some type of scarification or tattoos as it is a traditional right of passage where these markings show rank, tell stories within stories, and had to be earned. I believe some of these ideas and practices from Africa have survived in modern day
culture and expression.

Fig. 3. “Untitled” Travis Washington
Fig. 4. “Calling My Spirits” Travis Washington
During my time at my MFA program, I was forced to seek deep within myself, more often than not, I felt left out, as my work didn’t add up or count for much, according to the fancy of many of my professors. I felt that it was because I didn’t speak the language they spoke, I wasn’t their usual cup of tea, or they “just didn’t get it” as I was told on many occasions. Or possibly, it was that I just wouldn’t subscribe to becoming the classical lick-finish house flower painter that they wanted me to be, because they knew that I had the technical capabilities to do so. In this period of time, consisting of constant researching, soul searching, trial and error, I found that I was truly already set on the path that was for me. I found that the two intelligences that we all have, intellect and intuition (some call it that gut feeling) while both beneficial, I needed to utilize intuition more for my practice.

During this period, I experienced the biggest breakthroughs in my work. It became less of an assignment to make the pieces and more of a space for meditation. In this space all of my thoughts from the day, mental snapshots taken, little doodles that I made while sitting, listening, and watching the world pour out of me. The found materials begin to tell me their stories and the figures buried within the compositions show themselves. All of the technical principles of design, need to stretch canvases, or make ten color studies and underdrawings, disappears. The materials tell me where to
sew, how much to paint to add, when to scale up, where to cut and when to stop. I become a conduit and the piece is finished with the conversation between and the materials stop.

Scott made it his personal goal to make sure that he gave back. His main message to all of his students and everyone who came into contact with him, was too simply, and I quote “Pass it on”. These are words that to this day still ring in my ear as my mentor Kimberly Dummons, and and one of Scott’s last pupils, always pounded into my head, like the African drums Scott would make, that, “her job like his and one day mine will be to pass it on.” John Scott’s teachings and spirit have been pivotal, showing me that finding that space where you can believe in self and things are possible, especially coming from a place where I had never participated in the art world until I reached college. Their teachings and practices were a platform for growth that taught me to challenge the norm, and that there was a place for me.

In the act of these predecessors passing it on dropping seeds, my roots began to grow. My work became a pattern tied to the lineage of a new family tree, and the connection of bond and history in blood. The quilt patterns and materials I use speak to systems in which I/ we had/ are compelled to live with. But it also speaks to the structure of strength and support of our families, friends, and community, it becomes the strength in numbers, the common ground of our experiences and commonality of struggle to break free of confinement of negative expectations. Strength is evident in
the pride we take in knowing where we come from and how much we are a part of a
determination to support our mutual advancement, and become the beneficiaries of the
sacrifices of people who came before us binding, protective armor that also chafes. It
means we bear the burden of hesitation and anxiety of whether we are worthy of the
shoulders on which we stand. How can our struggles ever compare to the loss of life and
suffering of the sacrifices of others? Are the roots the platform that leads to freedom of
choice and will? Being the fruit from these strong roots I believe in the emergence of a
new strange fruit that will continue to subvert limitations, challenge the norms, and
inspire hope for the next generation of African American artists continuing the cycle.