Colored Narratives

Rashawn C. Penister

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COLORED NARRATIVES

by

Rashawn Penister

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Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Major: Painting

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Abstract

My thesis delves into Black identity through the medium of painting and drawing. Colored Narratives shows a fictional world where people called Unknown, due to their pure Black skin, living in a world where they are outcasts due to their looks and characteristics. These paintings discuss Black identity from theories by Black artists and authors. The pieces in Colored Narratives are created from different passages and converted into a visual message to show through cultural and personal narratives. Through these artworks, they aim to provide a clear understanding of race, representation, and identity.
Introduction

These paintings are a combination of issues that deal with being black. They are fictional yet inspired by real events. Created by individual experiences, these paintings communicate the world through my perspective. These paintings are huge unstretched canvas and panels that show Black identity through race, trauma, representation, and stereotypes. Using modern painting techniques inspired by modern and pop art, I created work that connects a bridge with the viewers on how I see issues today and how they are connected to the past. This fictional world that I created were inspired by African Americans’ perspectives of living in America. These works are narratives created from my perspective on being a Black person.

My first experience with art started when my mom brought me a X-men comic book. For a five-year-old boy, I was amazed by the graphics from the book. Later in life, I was able to compare the mutants with African Americans due them being hated by another group for being different. Being exposed to comics set me on the path to becoming an artist. My work has vibrant and imaginative characters, blending elements of street art, graffiti, and illustration.

My style is unique linework, bold colors, and dreamlike aesthetic. I used bold, contrasting colors and details to provide the visual impact of the pieces. The characters seen in my artworks are achromatic due to their pure Black skin color. The characters are...
fictional people who are trying to find who they are in a world that sees them as outcasts by other groups. The reason the aesthetic is dreamlike is because we want to get away from the cold reality of the world. The characters are being discriminated against due to their identity. The paintings are a visual beacon for people to be ok with accepting their identity.

My art journey started growing up in a small town in Arkansas called Pine Bluff, I was the middle child of a family of five. Based on related stories and experience, the middle child, sometime, seen as the quiet and unusual one. In some cases, it proved to be true for me. I am the quietest one in the family. I do not mind spending time to myself so that means that I am an introvert. Video games and comic books kept me on solid ground as I was growing up. However, all that changed when I entered junior high and tried to fit in the culture. It was a disaster as I did not fit in, and I was often better by myself. But the worst came after I graduated when I realized that it was more to high school than just getting good grades.

After graduation I spent the first two weeks wondering what I wanted to do with my life. After attaining my associate degree, I decided to pursue social work but all that changed when my brother had an honest conversation with my dad explaining that he wants to do what makes him happy instead of just paying bills and dying. That conversation encouraged me to become an artist. During my time at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, I met Professor Henri Linton and Danny Campbell. Linton’s
large-scale painting caught my attention and inspired me to create large scale painting. I believe the bigger the painting, the better. Campbell bold color schemes inspired me to experiment with assorted colors.

After attaining my bachelor’s degree my art journey took a detour as I had to work different jobs to make ends meet. But going back to school to get my teaching license put me back on the right track. After the pandemic, I decided to pursue a master’s degree and was accepted by the University of Memphis. I created a series of artworks using playing cards as the main medium. I obtained the idea through two occasions. One, I saw a pack of used playing cards from casinos on sell at the dollar tree and decided to experiment with them. The second occasion was when I had a conversation with a fellow coworker about how people had to live their lives, playing the cards that are dealt. Artists that helped me produce the aesthetic and elements are painters Kehinde Wiley and Vitus Shell, Mixed media artist Delita Martin, and Printmaker Yashua Klos. The works are my way of confirming my love for the figure, bold colors, unique lines, and pattern. Now I am creating artwork that discusses the way blacks are portrayed in society. Are we destined to work for the rest of our life and die and abandon the things that made us human or is it OK for us to live our life the way we want it to be?
Colored Narratives

What does it mean to be black? It is the color on the skin, the way a person acts, or does it symbolize something? James Baldwin stated that black has become a beautiful color not because it is loved but because it is feared.\(^1\) My work discusses Identity. In my new series, the people in my painting are being seen as outcasts by society due to their culture and identity. The characters are colored black to symbolize how they are profiled and discriminated against due to their identity or not fitting in.

The characters are inspired by paintings created by Kerry James Marshall. Marshall is known for his paintings that discuss Black experiences such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, and *The Lost Boys*. *A Portrait of the Artist as Shadow of His Former Self* depicts a cartoon like Black man in a grayish background. The man has a cynical smile exposing a missing tooth. Marshall’s stated that he got him inspiration from Ralph Ellison’s 1952 classic *Invisible Man*.\(^2\) The novel’s prologue, (“I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me”) is similar to the way most African American men are treated.

After painting *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, Marshall painted a series of portraits that make viewers question seeing or not seeing the black figure in the painting as a throne from a racist past (Blackface and oversexualized) or

\(^1\) James Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time”, (Vintage International,1993) 77
\(^2\) Helen Molesworth, “Mastry”, (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago,2006) 19
modernist art (primitivist appropriations and distortions). His works shows how blacks’ paintings are not well known in museums and is working to change it.

Most of these narratives are inspired by events that unfolded during the civil rights movement during the 1960s to now. The themes that they discuss are Historic trauma and resilience. My Dad would tell me how before the civil rights act was passed, opportunities were scarce for Black people. His stepfather was a sharecropper, and he did not get paid much for the high labor job. When my dad was in his teens, he had to leave school early to help with the job. He is glad things are better than before and hate when Trump said the infamous slogan “Make America Great Again”. Because when you look at it in African American perspective, when was America great for us?

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3 Molesworth, Mastry, 88
Targeted

The first piece that I created is called *targeted*. This piece is a painting that is 8 wide by 4 feet tall. The painting portrays a man with pure Black skin in the middle of the painting clutching his backpack. No one knows where he is going but one thing is for certain, something is on his mind as he's being watched by an unknown presence. In the background is a target practice paper to symbolize that an unknown presence is targeting him. The question is what is the unknown presence? Is it a thief that's just trying to make a living? An organization that has a sinister objective to keep a certain group of people living in constant fear? Or is it society that's keep reminded him that he's a statistic due to a system that has a history of locking up black men and giving them little to no help in redeeming themselves in society? Targeted was inspired by a story from Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the world and Me* when he described losing his friend to police brutality. Coates stated that Prince Jones was killed by a PG county officer who claimed the Jones tried to run him over with his vehicle⁴. Ironically, this piece was created during the backlash of the beating of Tyre Nichols. Nichols was a 29-year-old Black man who was pulled over

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⁴ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Between the World and Me” (One World, 2015) 77
due to alleged reckless driving by Memphis police. The incident led to him being dragged from his car, then pepper sprayed and tasered. Nichols tried to flee. When officers caught him, they beat him severely, leading to his death in the hospital. Five police officers, who were blacks, were charged with murder while two other officers were relieved of duty, and three EMTs were fired for failing to administer proper care to Nichols. The incident triggered demonstrations across the city of Memphis. Mark Anthony Neal, author of *New Black Man*, quoted “If the increased incident of racial profiling by police and retail outlet has taught us anything it's that America has rarely been nuts and is the demonstration of Black men of all ages, ethnicities, and economic status.”

Racial profiling is a double edge sword tactic that can be more harmful than successful in catching criminals. I was a suspect in a robbery that I did not commit on my way to work. When the officer approached me, he said I fit the description of the robber. Luckily, I was released when the witness, who was a co-worker, identity me as not the suspect. The police officer escort me to work and explain the incident to my boss. I explained the situation to my parents who were not thrilled at the fact that I did get them. I knew in my mind that their words would do no good, so I just comply with the officers. Even though it works in my favor, I was worried what would happen if it did not.

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5 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. “Regional Overview United States & Canada January 2023,” (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2023)

6 Mark Anthony Neal, “New Black Man” (Taylor and Francis Group, 2005)
My second brush in with the law was dropping off a computer at the person’s house for him to fix it. On my way there, a lady was on the phone watching me park my car and go into the house. I failed to mention the lady to the guy since I was running late to school. I was pulled over a couple of blocks away from school and was questioned by police on my reason for being there. After answering the question and confirming the story with the other person, I was let go. The police told me that the neighborhood I was in was being targeted by burglars while the residents were at work. And just like the last incident, I fit the description.

Using racial profiling to try to catch a criminal can result in getting the wrong person. Even though I was released, being detained can be demoralizing. Imagine growing up and staying out of trouble only to be targeted as a suspect because your skin colors or clothing match the description. Another aspect of the artwork is being targeted by people who are jealous of what you have. Burglary is well known in my hometown, so it is no surprise when it happens. My vehicle was burglarized when I accidentally left the car unlocked one night. I was shocked that I did not even think someone would take someone since the vehicle was old. Once again, targeted by burglars who wanted what I have since they do not have it. Targeted is a two-way street showing that you can be targeted by anyone and how the effect can leave you paranoid that someone is watching you. As Frantz Fanon, author of *Black Skin, White Mask*, stated “It was hate; I was hated, despised, detested,
not by the neighbor across the street or my cousin on my mother’s side, but by an entire race.”

I created *Targeted* by preparing the wood for painting by gluing the target paper on the wood panel. Then, I painted the figure on a separate sheet of paper, cut it out, and glued it on the panel. The male figure is shown wearing a sweater with the word “target” across the chest area. The figure is holding on to this backpack fearing that something is approaching. The figure has a nervous stance. His eyes are the only part visible on his face. It shows discomfort due to the expression of the eyes. The figure is similar to painter Vitus Shell’s works except my figure is flat and fictional rather than being real.

**For the Culture**

The next piece that I have created is called *For the Culture*. It was inspired by “*The Lost Boys*” by Kerry James Marshall. In 1993, Marshall created *The Lost Boys*. The 10 x 10 square foot painting depicts two black figures. One standing up with a water gun in his hands while the other one is sitting inside an arcade machine car. The floor plane has a black and white checkered pattern and two gates on each side. Marshall created The Lost Boys as a memoir to young boys that are killed or lost in the system. The checkerboard in Marshall’s painting reminds me of chess and how it is more of a thinking

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7 Frantz Fanon, “Black Skin, White Masks” (Pluto Press, 2008) 89
8 Molesworth, Mastry, 88
game than speed. It makes me wonder how we are forced to play a game where we may not know the rules or have the pieces to play the game. The theme for this painting is trying to fit in. Our culture is often shaped by descriptions in media and literature, which can create harmful stereotypes. In New Black Man, Neal stated that hip hop culture has always been male centered it is expected that criticism of it is naturally conflated with criticism of young Black males.9

*For the Culture* is 100” wide x 55” inches tall. The painting portrays a lone figure riding a bike down a neglected part of a neighborhood. The huge red wall in the background is covered with caution tapes and pelleted with bullet holes to indicate crime. The figure is wearing a white shirt and blue pants to indicate today’s fashion. The ground has a black and white pattern to symbolize how society and hierarchy are portrayed. The word “culture” is shown in the background to symbolize that we live in our own culture. The letter e is hidden behind a tree that has eyes to represent the e. The eyes are metaphor for being watched by society who deemed Black men as being a danger to society. Black males have emerged center stage in American society as metaphorical figures at the center of larger issues.10 The tree is also an agent of change due to its roots bursting out the ground to represent change. *For the Culture* talks about how black people who are

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9 Neal, New Black Man,8
normal tried to fit in a culture to feel belonging or gain popularity but do not know what it means or does not fit in.

My third painting “Luncheon on the Grass While Chaos on the Street” discusses how the hip hop culture is seen as a burden rather than a positive. The painting depicts a scene where three people are sitting in a park that is being cut off from the public. The figures take reference from Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass* and *In the woods* by Kaws. His painting depicts a scene in which two fully dressed men are seated in conversation with a nude woman in a pastoral setting, enjoying a picnic on the grass. In my painting, the woman is on alert and not enjoying the scenery.

The figures are shown in bold lines, simplified shapes, and exaggerated features. The colors used are bold and contrast with each other to gain attention from the viewers. The painting is to depicts how hip hop or gangster rap corrupted the neighborhood and encourage people especially young Black males to live the lifestyle. Neal states that given the fact that hip hop culture has always been male centered it is expected that criticism of it is naturally conflated with criticism of young Black males.\(^\text{11}\) The left side of the painting shows two hooded figure exchanging drugs. What motivated them to be on a path that led them to either incarceration or death? On the right side are children that are running toward the scene. For them to be influenced by mainstream culture is yet to be seen. Thelma stated that hip-hop culture has become the signifier of Black male

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\(^{11}\) Neal, New Black Men, 8
heterosexuality just as Hollywood adventure flicks represent an idealized notion of white masculinity in contemporary American culture.\textsuperscript{12}

Conclusion

In conclusion, I created these narratives painting from individual stories and experiences of seeing the world in the eyes of a Black man. The paintings show figures who are fictional yet carried a sense of realness due from inspiration of real-life events. The goal is to connects the viewers and encourage them to understand the perspectives of African American’s identity and cultures. As Baldwin stated, “To accept one’s past-one’s history-is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.”\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Golden, Black Male, 31
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