Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers   College of Art

Spring 5-17-2019

Black Stereotype

Rashonda Daniels

Blaize'B Daniels

Black ster·e·o·type

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BFA in Studio Art

Washington University in St. Louis

Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts

May 3,2019

Abstract

In my work, I create my own narrative regarding the stereotyping of Black people. The body of work that is discussed focuses in on the history of the Black stereotypes that dates as far back as the slavery era. Through my art practice, I address how the contemporary mistreatment of Black people stems from the historical foundation of negative Black stereotypes that were imposed upon us by Europeans. My hope is that by confronting our history we can eliminate so called "Black behavior" or bad behavior and accept it as simply normal human behavior.

ster·e·o·type

[ˈsterēəˌtī
p]
NOUN
1.   a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.
2.   a relief printing plate cast in a mold made from composed type or an original plate.
VERB
1. view or represent as a stereotype. (Marriam Dictionary)

The stereotyping of Black people stems from the slave era *when* the popular black caricatures Uncle Tom, Mammy, and Sambo were created to not only justify slavery but also demonstrate that Black people, in fact, enjoyed slavery (Ethnic Notions). Slave owners took the fact that slaves danced and sang songs as a display of their satisfaction with their lives when, in reality, this was how slaves coped with their mistreatment (Ethnic Notions). After the abolishment of slavery, 8 new negative stereotypes of Black people emerged to prove that, without slavery, Black people had no self-control (Ethnic Notions). These *11* stereotypes (**mammy, sambo, coon, Uncle Tom, Brute Negro, Nat, Tragic Mulatto, Golliwag, Sapphire, Jezebel, and Pickaninny**) are the foundation of how Black people are viewed to this day. I acknowledge the stereotypical view of Black people through my artwork by addressing these stereotypes and confronting them, straight on, for what they are, oversimplified images of Black people. I conclude that these very stereotypes provide the underlying explanation for why Black people continue to be mistreated and discarded as if we are trash. Unfortunately, within the Black community we have adapted to and internalized these negative stereotypes. Instead of establishing that our behavior is normal human behavior, we conform to the stereotypical tropes that were placed on us in the 1800's. Instead of addressing these stereotypes and the problems that stem from them and eliminating the stereotypes, by normalizing ~~what~~ is so called "Black" behaviors, we as

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a community want to just skip to a post racial world without the acknowledgement of our traumatic history. We frown upon black people who may have attributes of these caricatures which causes a divide between our community. Instead of coming together we move further apart from one another. Because we fail to confront the source of these deeply rooted stereotypes, *we* unintentionally ignore how Black children are negatively affected by the perpetuation of these stereotypes.

pick·a·nin·ny

[ˈpikəˌnin ē]
NOUN
offensive

1.   a small black child.
2.   dominant racial caricature of black children for most of this country's history. They were "child coons," miniature versions of Stepin Fetchit (see Pilgrim (2000)). Picaninnies had bulging eyes, unkempt hair, red lips, and wide mouths into which they stuffed huge slices of watermelon. They were themselves tasty morsels for alligators. They were routinely shown on postcards, posters, and other ephemera being chased or eaten. Picaninnies were portrayed as nameless, shiftless natural buffoons running from alligators and toward fried chicken. (Jim Crow Museum)

Pickaninny is a derogatory caricature that depicts children of African descent with pitch black skin, large red lips, gravity-resistant pigtails or just wild hair, with large white sclera and black pupils (Robin Bernstein 34). It is racist imagery of black children that *was* used as early as the 17th century but became widely known in 1852 due to Topsy that was in the popular book called "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (Robin Bernstein). In her book, Racial Innocence, Robin Bernstein states:

When threatened, pickaninny characters might ignore danger or quake in exaggerated fear; when attacked, they might laugh or yelp, but in either case,

they never experience or express pain or sustain wounds in any remotely realistic

way… The pickaninny may be animalistic or adorable, ragged or neat, frightened

or happy, American or British, but the figure is always juvenile, always of color,

and always resistant if not immune to pain. (Bernstein 34-35)

Through this popular stereotype, Black children were dehumanized and seen as "non-

child[ren]" that were senseless, not just in the South, but nationwide as well as overseas.

This unrealistic stereotypical view point of Black children, enabled their inhumane treatment

throughout slavery. Black slave children were subjected to the same degradation and

stereotyping of enslaved adults (GI: EBGH) Since Black children were subjected to the

same abuse as the adults, there was no distinguishing between Black adults and Black

children thereby pushing Black children to be adultified at an early age. The process of

adultification comes in two forms: "socialization, in which children function at a more

mature developmental stage because of situational context and necessity, especially in

low-resource community environments; and a social or cultural stereotype that is based

on how adults perceive children 'in absence of knowledge of children's behavior and

verbalizations.' The latter form of adultification, is based in part on race." (GI: EBGH 4).

This study is acknowledging the adultification of Black children stems from slavery.
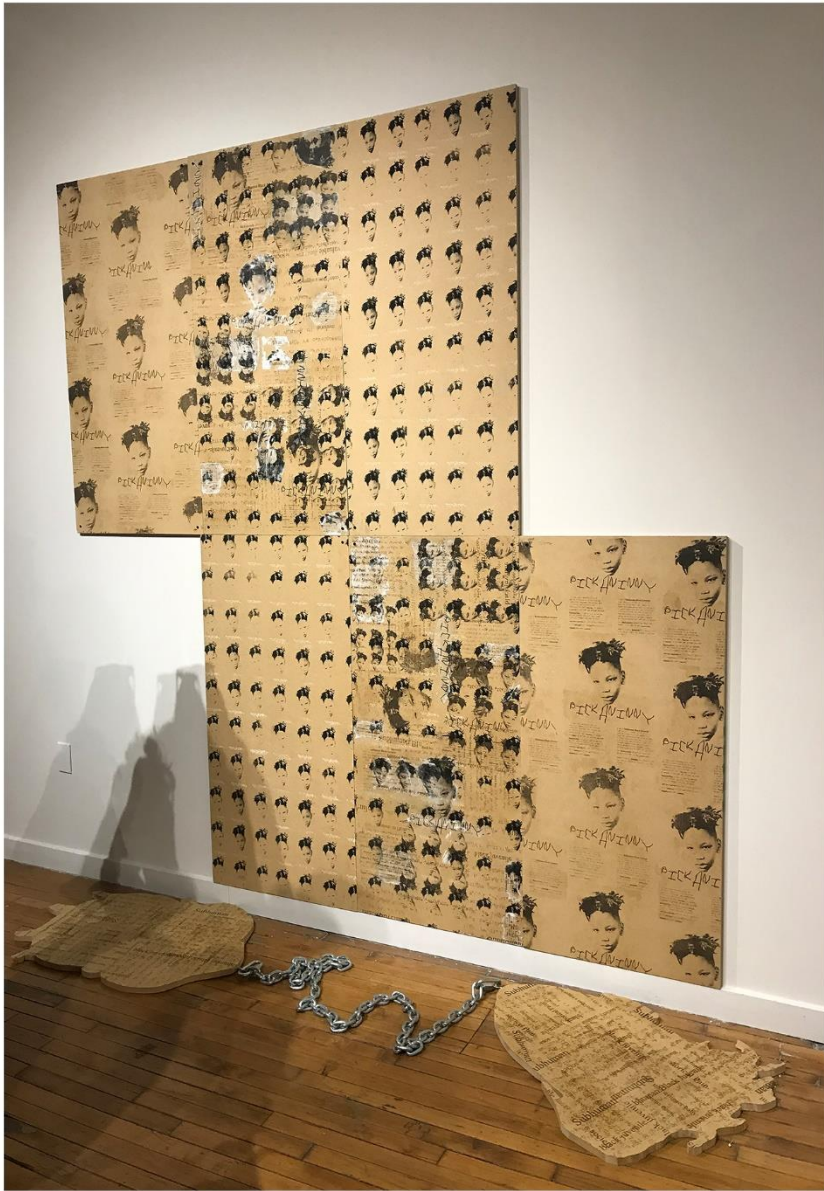
Why My Black Child?

Why not the use of my
own **Black** child when
I'm talking about **Black**
children? Why would I
use another **Black** child
when my **Black** Child
has the experience of a
Black child? That's like
 me capturing images
of another **Black**
woman when I'm already
a **Black** woman. I see the
experience of my **Black**
child. My fears stem from
me having a **Black** child.
At one point of time I was
a **Black** child. A child that
had experiences like no other
but a child that was absent
minded of my mother's fears.
My **Black** child is absent
minded of his mother's fears.
He is in a confusing battle
of being a man and a child.
Speak our own truth.
Tell our own story. We
create our own narrative.
Why Chance you ask?
Well I ask why not Chance?

Figure 1: Blaize'B "Quoting'Racial Innocence"" 2019

In my piece, "Quoting 'Racial Innocence," I depict my own son in the format of the pickaninny. Instead of the usual smiling child, my son's face shows sadness and exhaustion with the word Pickaninny printed right below his head. Another aspect of the piece is that the definition of the pickaninny is written in first-person as if he is saying this to the audience. As the viewer is reading this, they are also reading it in first-person as if they are saying this about themselves, or to someone else. The point of creating this work was to address the fact that at the age of 5, my son is being adultified by outside forces. Because he is a tall black boy, he is automictically assumed to be much older than he is. If he jumps toward another child too hard or takes away something too fast, he is automatically assumed to be aggressive. Because of the way he looks, my son is no longer considered a child, he is considered a threat. By the time he becomes a teenager, my baby will, to the outside world, be a threat to society.

Figure 1: Blaize'B"Quoting'Racial Innocence'"2019

nat.

[nat] *1.*

offensive

is an African American male who is angry, crazed, revengeful brutes with a bloodthirsty hatred for whites. (JCM)

I sometimes find myself falling into the trap stereotypical mindset. Because my son is tall, I imagine that he will automatically take an interest in basketball and think **BALL IS LIFE** when there is more to life than just being a professional athlete or entertainer. The black community sometimes looks to their children as their way out of poverty, but never giving them the tools to do so. Instead, we continue with the same stereotypically cycle where it looks like we never progress.

Figure 2: Micheal Ray Charles "LIFESBALL (FOREVER FREE)" 1995

Painter Michael Ray Charles's piece, "LIFESABALL," he depicts a pickaninny eating out a basketball, but the inside of the ball is a watermelon. Charles focuses on the stereotypical depiction of Black people and how we as Black people feed into the stereotypical tropes that are put onto us.
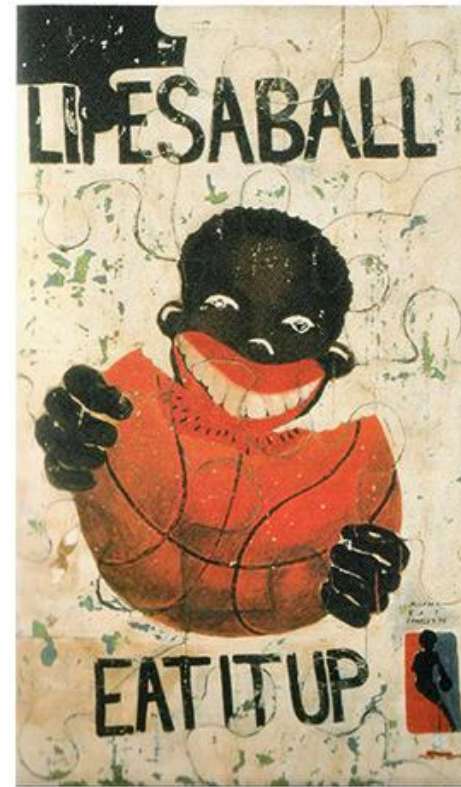
Co·on

[ko͞on]
NOUN

1. *NORTH AMERICAN*
   short for raccoon. A form of dehumanizing
2. *informal*
   offensive a black person. the coon is lazy, easily frightened, chronically idle, inarticulate, buffoon. (JCM)

Through this work, he addresses the stereotype that Black people are obsessed with and

love watermelons as well as the idea that Black people are only acknowledged when they are in entertainment, including dribbling a ball. In a way, he is stating that Basketball is another form of minstrelsy because basketball players are put on display for the entertainment of others.

Sam·bo

[ˈsambō]
NOUN

1. *offensive* a black person.
2. *historical*   a person of mixed race, especially of black and Indian or black and European blood

3. blacks are by nature servile, fawning, cringing, docile, irresponsible, lazy, humble, dependent, prone to lying and stealing, grinningly happy and basically infantile. (JCM)

Playing professional basketball is one of the only ways that Black males can be successful and accepted in our society. This notion that **BALL IS LIFE** is what is repeatedly communicated on the basketball courts in the inner-city. Somehow dribbling a ball is the only way to get out of the hood.

Artist Kara Walker also uses the pickaninny stereotype very often in her works. Walker depicts slavery during the civil war era and is continuously criticized for her use of stereotypical imagery of African-Americans. Walker's art acknowledges that Black girls were also raped and impregnated during slavery just like adult Black women were being raped and impregnated by their masters. Walker highlights the sexual trauma that is committed on Black girls during slavery by creating silhouettes of various scenes of sexual violence.

Figure 3: Kara Walker "Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart 1994

Je·ze·bel

[ˈjezəˌbel, ˈjezəb(ə)l] 1. *(a Jezebel)*

1. a shameless or immoral woman. *offensive*

2. A black woman who is seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd. Historically, white women, as a category, were portrayed as models of self-respect, self- control, and modesty - even sexual purity, but black women were often portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory. From the early 1630s to the present, black American women of all shades have been portrayed as hypersexual "bad-black-girls." (JCM)

its purpose. Although her artwork doesn't have faces and it is her imagined imagery, Walker does acknowledge that the sexualization of African-American girls was very real during slavery. Her intent is to spark conversation about a subject that society has tried to hide under the rug. Kara Walker's acknowledgment of the sexualization of Black girls during slavery makes the viewer question whether or not the hyper-sexualization of Black girls dates back to the societal perception and adultifcation of Black girls during slavery.

My piece "Erasure" is a wood panel that is to be hung on the wall with chains. A poem called "**BLACK GIRL RIGHT HERE"** is printed on the wood panel repeatedly. The title "**BLACK GIRL RIGHT HERE**" is vinyl material placed on top of the printed poem. This piece speaks to the erasure of Black girls and Black women. As a community, we constantly speak on the pain of Black boys and Black men pain but, Black girls and women are continuously disregarded. Critiquing the fact that Black men say they love their daughters but treat Black women as if they are scum of the earth, as if a Black woman di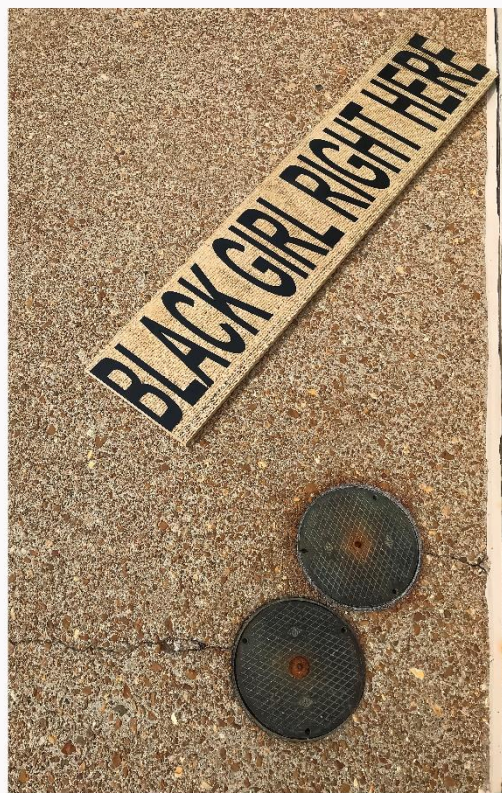d not give birth to them. Black girls go unnoticed. "Erasure" is a sign that says, "**BLACK GIRL RIGHT HERE**," but there is no Black girl there.

Figure 4: Blaize'B "Erasure" 2019

Figure 4: Blaize'B "Erasure" 2019

The Black girl ultimately is not loved and will eventually not exist if her mistreatment continues. The behavior of disregarding Black girls starts early and leads into adulthood--an adulthood that leads to Black women to question their existence. Black girls get sexualized at a young age. They are treated as if they are objects. They are inhuman and can be violated at any time.*)* The black girl is to pick herself up and fix herself when someone else has broken her. She must carry the world on her back. She is strong, but she cannot show it because she must be ladylike at all times. She cannot be loud; she must be quiet, so she won't be assumed to be ghetto and uncontrollable. She cannot get angry. She cannot be too dark, otherwise she is no longer pretty. She must not depend on a man but shouldn't be able to survive on her own without one. A Black man is the key to a woman's

existence, even though the Black woman gave birth to the man. These tropes being put onto Black girls are why Black girls have a hard time wanting to exist.

Figure 5: Glen Ligon "Untitled"1992

In Glenn Ligon's pieces titled, "Untitled," he inspires his own conversation regarding being a person of color through these prints. Through overprinting the text, "I do not always feel colored," and, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," Ligon talks about his experience of being Black. As the print continues to go down, the overprint of these pieces begins to distort the text at the bottom of each of these pieces.
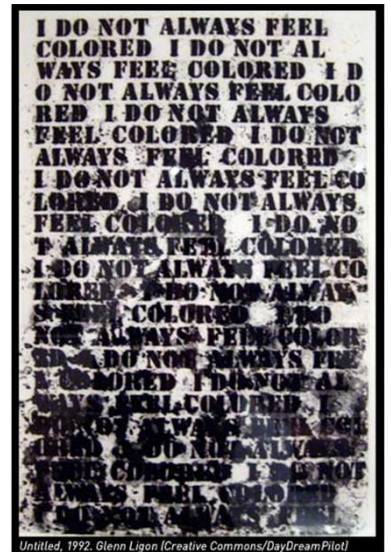

Figure 6: Glen Ligon "Untitled"1992

Br·ute

[bro͞ot]
NOUN

offensive

1. a savagely violent person or animal.
2. an animal as opposed to a human being.
3. is a savage, animalistic, destructive, and criminal. He is a fiend, a sociopath, an anti-social menace. Black brutes are depicted as hideous, terrifying predators who target helpless victims, especially white women. (JCM)

In a way, Ligon emphasizes that Black people can bluntly state their issues and yet they can still be distorted and interpreted to fit what the white viewer wants it to be instead of what it is. In some moments Black people do not always feel colored. The environments in which he may feel less colored are the environments where he is more than likely surrounded by Black people as opposed to the other text which talks about placing his dark skin into a white space. Ligon feels most colored when he invades a white space. Although he feels the most colored when he is in the white space, he is still putting himself into the white space to let the audience know he is in

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exist

Un·cle Tom

[ˌəNGkəl ˈtäm]

NOUN

offensive

NORTH AMERICAN

1. a black man considered to be excessively obedient or servile to white people.
   • a person regarded as betraying their cultural or social allegiance (JCM)

Figure 7: Blaize'B "$.99" 2018

I created a seven-foot Bamboo earring titled, "$.99," to address the issues of Black women's stereotypical style, and behavior being turned into urban trends. It is marketed and more profitable outside the community than inside the Black community. This earring invades the white space and takes over white walls. I created this earring to take back what is looked at as a trend when it is our lifestyle. This larger than life plywood replica Bamboo earring is *our* earring. Gold elastic fabric covers the wooden bamboo earring to give it an authentic shine similar to the earrings found in the beauty supply stores in our urban neighborhoods. In our neighborhoods, a pair of bamboo earrings is $.99 but the appropriating vultures that consistently exploit us for our style, sell the earrings for $15.99 on their websites, thereby making a bigger profit from our style than we do. There is an issue of non-black people acting Black but Black people can't be Black.

sap·phire

[ˈsaˌfī(ə)r
]
NOUN

offensive

1. Caricature portrays black women as rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing.
2. This is the Angry Black Woman (ABW). She is tart tongued and emasculating, one hand on a hip and the other pointing and jabbing (or arms akimbo), violently and rhythmically rocking her head, mocking African American men for offenses ranging from being unemployed to sexually pursuing white women. She is a shrill nagger with irrational states of anger and indignation and is often mean-spirited and abusive. Although African American men are her primary targets, she has venom for anyone who insults or disrespects her. The Sapphire's desire to dominate and her hyper- sensitivity to injustices make her a perpetual complainer, but she does not criticize to improve things; rather, she criticizes because she is unendingly bitter and wishes that unhappiness on others. She is a harsh portrayal of African American women, but it is more than that; it is a social control mechanism that is employed to punish black women who violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, servile, non-threatening, and unseen. (JCM)

Black women cannot be authentic to themselves; we cannot even wear our own natural hair. We cannot be too loud, nor can we be angry. But it's attractive when other women who are non-Black take on the characteristics that we get chastised for. We are told we cannot be who we are, but they can be us. We are told that our stereotypical behavior that is considered normal behavior for others will not be tolerated. Our blackness will not be tolerated by the outside world, but they will exploit our lifestyle.

In Mickalene Thomas's, "Do I look like a Lady?," she exhibits various Black women celebrities in a video. In it they are using vulgar language, acting as sex symbols, dancing, and performing for an audience. In this video, Thomas addresses the issue of how Black women are seen as being extremely aggressive and yet asexual. As the mammy figure

who is a person who is of servitude, but she is an asexual being that can still be lusted

after because of the fetishism of Black women and their bodies.

mam·my

[ˈmamē]
NOUN

2. *informal* one's mother (especially as a
   child's word).

   Offensive

   (formerly in the southern US) a black nursemaid or nanny in charge of white children. caricature was
   posited as proof that blacks -- in this case, black women -- were contented, even happy, as slaves. Her wide
   grin, hearty laugher, and loyal servitude were offered as evidence of the supposed humanity of the
   institution of slavery. The caricature portrayed an obese, coarse, maternal figure. She had great love for
   her white "family," but often treated her own family with disdain. Although she had children, sometimes
   many, she was completely desexualized. She "belonged" to the white family, though it was rarely stated. she
   was a faithful worker. She had no black friends; the white family was her entire world. (JCM)

Figure 8: Mickalene Thomas "Do I look LIke a Lady?" 2017

Mickalene exhibits these women in ways that shows the importance of their existence

to society. She shows the importance but also addresses the fact that Black women should

be able to be who they are with no limitations, that they should take pride in who they were

created to be. Whether that's a Black woman who is conservative and soft-spoken or a

loud Black woman with a filthy mouth. Even Black men who are supposed to protect her

look down at a Black woman if she is considered to be too ghetto. She may be deemed

unworthy because she is too dark or because Black men cannot see her as being more

than an object. These attributes do not make the Black woman any less of a lady. A black woman should have the freedom to be herself no matter the circumstances or how she may act because it is all *normal* behavior.

For things to begin to change in the Black community we must address not only the outside world but the issues within our world. By confronting the racial stereotypes that were imposed upon us during slavery and continue to affect us today, we can work on ways to eliminate the negative stereotypes and eliminate the false narrative that all bad behavior is Black behavior. We must seek to create a world that holds us all to the same standards and establishes the fact that the behavior of Black people is no different than the behavior of all other people. Black people are quite normal, and we should be not punished for being like everyone else just because of our skin tone.

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