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## Recommended Citation

Irving, kahlil, "Black Matter" (2017). *Graduate School of Art Theses*. ETD 80. <https://doi.org/10.7936/K73J3BDB>.

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Washington University in St. Louis  
Graduate School of Art  
Spring 2017

# **BLACK MATTER**

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Chancellors Graduate Fellow

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington University  
in Partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

## Graduate Committee

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## Abstract

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History as we know it, is inherited. Racism, fascism, white supremacy, and Eurocentric dominance have been presented as normal and acceptable within our society for many years. This has allowed police officers to execute Black American's and not be acquitted for their horrendous crimes. As an activist I want to challenge the status quo. As an artist I am interested in investigating how I can present ideas embody or reflect contemporary issues and concerns. Using different colors can aggressively change how an object is perceived. Historical objects hold many important.

I explore many mediums, but an anchor material that I employ in my work is clay. It is of the ground that we all walk on and it has been used to produce objects and pottery for millennia. Using such a plastic medium as clay today can yield a multitude of processes and results to demonstrate my artistic concerns. While composing art works I am in opposition to the skewed historical information inherited from the past. As an artist I aim to make my experience relevant and heard. Blackness is limitless and deep. No longer does this color have to be used to further imperialist agendas but will be used to illustrate the unfathomable depth within whatever is covered in this color. There are a myriad ways to address this content, by making monuments, what clothes one wears, and more. This essay focuses on how I craft objects and installations that I hope bridge history and contemporary experiences to make a unique contribution to contemporary cultural production. Art is a noun and craft is a verb.

## Statement of authorship

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I declare that the material within my thesis statement has not been used for other awards from other institutions, and that all sources are acknowledged.

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I am a racial hybrid, raised in continuously changing and challenging circumstances; I established a way to hustle in order to grow out of the circumstances of my life. Having had to constantly build bulwarks and barriers to make my way I discovered worlds of possibilities beyond the roles provided by dominant culture. As an artist I challenge the status quo and find new ways of addressing the current conversation about sculpture. Using formal languages and historical objects as references, I am interested in color, form, and patterns, but I also strive to challenge art in and out of a modern colonialist perspective.

Race is a huge aspect of living in contemporary society. My life experiences have provided me with diverse perspectives that have informed my practice. Defining racial hybrid I understand that I am participating within the structure that segregates and isolates people from one another. In another aspect of the two words I use the term hybridity to support that I am aware of my diverse ethnographic background but I am not limited by it. In so many ways I see that I am defined by how people see me. Within my work I use how people perceive, view, and participate with my artwork as a means of protest showing the opposition I face in being who I am. In many ways I intend to celebrate my cultural identity also.

The transatlantic slave trade kidnapped, raped, and beat African people for centuries and destroyed multiple heritages of communities. The people who survived and made it to the west were a work force that carried information that is now engrained within the structure of the United States and in the objects they made. There is power in the remnants that past enslaved people left behind. That lineage is within my life and that part of history is knowledge I bring into my art.

Racism, fascism, white supremacy, and Eurocentric dominance are actively terrorizing the world. Art is a conduit that can be used to challenge these structures that plague contemporary experience. Throughout history, there has been pushback from cultures experiencing domination from European settlers, missionaries, and colonialists. The African Diaspora is a branch of this ethnographic lineage within the United States. How does the wrath of whiteness wash over the world and go free without any retribution to the black bodies that were forced into 400 years of free labor?

Claudia Rankine has recently taught a course at Yale University and she explains whiteness.

*“whiteness as a source of unquestioned power, and as a ‘bloc,’ feels itself to be endangered even as it retains its hold on power. Given that the concept of racial hierarchy is a strategy employed to support white dominance, whiteness is an important aspect of any conversation about race. This talk will make visible that which has been intentionally presented as inevitable so that we can move forward into more revelatory conversations about race.”<sup>i</sup>*

When reflecting on my own experiences and reading Rankine puts everything a bit more into perspective on why we are in the current state of affairs. Making art to change, challenge, and navigate the intense and painful history that binds Black people all over the world is a part of my mission. This essay focuses on how I craft objects and installations that I hope will bridge history and contemporary experience. The field of contemporary art is vast but I see myself working within both the traditional arts and conceptual art as an extension of Modernism. Part of this essay will explain and give examples of how I operate within these three territories. As an artist, activist, potter and scholar, I work to present an oppositional stance towards how inherited perceptions segregate materials like ceramics that are narrowly defined as merely craft.

My artistic journey began as a potter. As I grew up and started learning more about the world I was transformed into someone not just making objects for use, but also engaged in the ideas behind them. Over the past two years I have completed a series of installations called *Undocumented*. This project spans twelve different exhibits, three states, several different institutions, and diverse configurations in armatures. It uses hand crafted black ceramic vases as metonymic signifiers for bodies, displayed at eye level, as a means of investigating conversations on color. The several hundred handmade ceramic vases I made can be simultaneously used as stand-ins for bodies, a mass of color, and as functional objects. It all began when researching and looking at what was similar among many historical objects. I used many vase forms as references and glazed them all in black, a skin, a glaze that chromatically joined them together.



ii

Before and After Sundown, Town, 2016

I use many materials in my work but since I started making art and pottery, clay has been a central part of my practice. Whether it is making wheel thrown pottery, slip cast forms that resemble ordinary objects, or abstract sculptures, clay has been utilized in a multitude of ways. Clay is malleable, it can hold any form, it is porous, and it can also be impervious to water with a variety of treatments to the surface. So the unlimited possibilities have always been a captivating aspect of using clay.

I have studied ceramic objects that were made in Europe, the United States, Asia, and Africa. The objects range from narrative vessels, elite dinner and serving ware, water jars, and studio pottery objects. As Susan Vogel states in *Art/Artifact* “ If we take them (African objects) out of the dark, still their movement, quiet the music, and strip them of additions, we make them accessible to our visual culture, but we render them unrecognizable or meaningless to the cultures they came from.” I am interested in investigating how historical objects can hold many cultural narratives of new and old histories simultaneously. That is where my *Soul Sitter* sculptures have come from.



iii

*Soul Sitters (Still Standing)*, 2017



The *Soul Sitter* vessels above are made by adding coils one on top of another on a banding wheel, compressed and modeled with a pushed down pattern. The *Soul Sitters* are made for display, not for common use. The viewer activates these works by walking around them and peering into their interiors. The drinking horn from Kuba, Zaire (below), made around 1938, is a specific reference that performs many functions. It is unknown what ritual this horn was used for, but when it is viewed solely for its craftsmanship it is determined a work of art. One aim of my *Soul Sitters* work is to grow from the activation and historical example of the drinking horn as a means of making my own ambiguous cultural artifact. I am explicitly making art objects while the horn is a cultural artifact existing outside of its original context.



iv

Drinking Horn, 1938

Like the large textured vases that I have built from slabs and coils, historical vessels have an intrinsic meaning to every layer of surface texture and the form. The vase below, from the DR Congo, has textures and carved shapes all over its exterior. Those symbols may be unknown outside the culture that made the object but are still visible to others. No matter who owns the object it carries that information on itself.



Water Vessel, 20<sup>th</sup> century

The water vessel was made in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>vi</sup> The specific date of when this object was created is assigned to the twentieth century. This vessel is inspiring to my practice because within the ornamentation are cultural narratives not known to many outside of the community that made them. The repetition in the carving has specific symbolic meaning; the vertical oval shapes emphasize the verticality of the tubular vessel above its round textured bottom. The textures are elaborate around the object and are made of six different patterns, whose symbolic meanings are unclear. This is the same idea I use for my *Soul Sitters*. As these objects are constructed my fingerprint is added and while it does not relate to any specific narrative it is a gesture to capture a similar ambiguity of pattern and texture to the historical objects referenced above. Within the objects I want there to be a thought that there is more, and that “more” is reflecting on history to make these objects.

An example of a contemporary artist who is using and referencing traditional arts is Theaster Gates. *To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter* opened at the Milwaukee Art Museum, April 16<sup>th</sup> 2010, with a choir performance, food for the public, and an immersive installation. There were objects made by Gates, a performance film orchestrated by Gates, and historical storage vessels made by an enslaved man named David Drake. Gates’ aim for this exhibition was to bridge the labor of an enslaved African/ African American from the Antebellum South to labor and craft production in current day America. David Drake could read and write in English. Such literacy was against the law for people who were enslaved during the history of the United States.



vii

David Drake, Storage Vessel, 1860

When reflecting and reading his words inscribed on these objects, Gates used his experiences as a potter to broaden the conversation between his and Drake's experiences that relate to Black life in the USA. One work from the exhibition that expresses these qualities is *Vessel* from 2010. It is a medium sized ceramic vessel on wheels that has been gold leafed. The entire surface is covered in gold and the words "SHIP TO:".



This is a reference to the commoditization of objects made by African and African American labor. This vessel can be a stand in for people, an object that is carried and an object in which things can be contained. The embossed text is a reference to slavery. The embellishment is similar to other objects being adorned and gilded but this object still carries its negative possible function. Gates uses text, texture, and materials as a means to narrate a coded and charged message within this sculpture.



viii

Theaster Gates, Vessel, 2010

One aspect of material history is a narrative that separates art and craft, in which art is painting and sculpture, and craft is anything made for functional purposes or out of materials not presented historically as “art”.<sup>ix</sup> It has been said that art is a noun and craft is a verb. Over time I have learned that to craft or make anything takes time, skill, attention, and focus.<sup>x</sup> The desired result often relates to a specific function. Applying a layer of pigments to canvas makes a painting; casting metal in molds produces hardware. In the broader narrative, craft has been relegated to anything made out of clay, wood, fiber, and other materials that may be formed into objects that serve a function. No matter how paint has been used or is used, it is not described as craft. One of the functions paint can manifest is to depict representational imagery; to be viewed, be seen and to reflect reality. Clay can do the same. How are they different? The skill it takes to create contemporary art is inextricably linked to the crafting of materials. Art is when objects, installations, experiences that are not limited by anything. Art is not constricted by material specificity. When addressing this very conversation within my work, it is for me a solo performance and, when exhibited, a protest, my opposition to white supremacy.

Unfortunately there is still an idea of what are high art materials such, as bronze, steel, paper, or paint. I am taking this into consideration more and more as I approach constructing new work and addressing various themes. As a sculptor any material can be used. For example, in the *Soul Sitters (Still Standing)*, the large ceramic objects are sitting on top of a weaving made on a computerized jacquard loom. The design is a woven pattern that illustrates the pixilated image. Using this technology in my work, not only can I reference different historical designs and traditional objects but I can also intertwine the conceptual material further into the object. Process is as important as the finished work.

Each material comes with its own qualities. These range from surfaces, textures,

malleability, transformations, and so on. Each material has to be worked to become what I want it to be, fused together by a weld, fired in a kiln to become vitreous, and more. When working in the studio I believe that what it is I am making and how I am making it is within the object. The labor of addressing the construction or manipulation of a work along with addressing the conceptual concerns up to its final presentation is all included. My labor is both visible and invisible. When works are presented it is my desire that the viewer is able to understand the labor it takes in the process to produce the materials. Process is where many considerations are made to respond to the physicality of the work, the conceptual make up of the meanings developed, and contextualizing why I am pursuing this practice.

As an artist my production is also a means of protesting the hate and walls that have been built in many lives. To craft materials into objects demonstrates a trust and focus on the labor it takes to sustain a variety of relationships. The variety of relationships includes the materials I work with, my understanding of processes, and how I negotiate how the viewer will interact with the work I construct. How a work is constructed is as much a part of the content as the work itself. Depending on the material the work is made from it has specific properties and that is then encapsulated within the work of art.

I perform many roles in my art practice. I am a sculptor, potter, social and political activist, and community member. Curator Valerie Cassel Oliver writes in her book *Hand + Made: The Performative Impulse in Art and Craft*, she states “Craft is inextricably linked to performance. As a genre predicated upon process, it requires the doer or practitioner to undertake a series of tasks in the creation of an object regardless of its material composition.”<sup>xi</sup> Whether painting, metal casting, making pottery, everyone is performing when making. I propose that the performance is not limited to the act of production but extends to all aspects of presenting objects

or ideas that have been constructed or arranged.

Within the last couple years, the breadth of the work that I have completed has had a similar color palette. It has been predominantly black. Black is a signifier for endless space, it is similar to white in that it is infinite, and also a cultural identifier for descendants of Africans that were a part of the transatlantic slave trade. I use black as a signifier to represent color and a stand-in for what many believe is the absence of light. An argument I pose is that blackness is a color and darkness is the absence or the lessening of the reflections of light. Too often blackness is stated as synonymous with darkness even when the properties and meanings they represent are different. Making black negative is a tool that is used to continue and advance Eurocentrism as the dominant aspect of the racial hierarchy in western, and some non-western, civilizations.

Within the essay “Introduction: Domino Effect”, curator Hamza Walker explains, “There is a distinction to be made between race as a basis for continued discrimination and race as a principle of solidarity sought by a group that has already been defined as the Other”.<sup>xiii</sup> In Walker’s essay he discusses his approach to curating the exhibition “Black Is, Black Ain’t”, at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, in 2008. This exhibition is making a statement on how race operates within western culture. He states that race can be seen in two ways. One is that a group of people can be continued to be harassed, classified, and disrespected because of their ethnographic and cultural background. The other is using race to make a term to define and or identify a collective. Regarding the term “Black” it is a word to collectively identify people from the African Diaspora. The last part regarding the term “Other” is restating that even though the term “Black” labels Black Americans together they are still at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, with the Eurocentric elite on top. But what Walker explains are two functions of how race operates specifically in the United States.





xiii

ConcernedStudent1950; or the Johnson Family Reunion, 2016

To return to the different installations of the *Undocumented*, some themes present in this project are: the handmade object, labor, and the monument. As a potter I use the tool of the potter's wheel to engage a centuries old practice that has been performed all over the world. I

want to align a production potter's performance to that of a sculptor also. This act of executing hand-made pottery is another way to demonstrate the time spent on making the objects in the sculpture. While in the studio, I hypothesize and try to construct platforms and issues that viewers have to wrestle with, and in turn they have to exert their energy to fully understand the message within my installation.

One of nine sculptural installations in the *Undocumented* series, *ConcernedStudent1950; or the Johnson Family Reunion*, is a massive grouping of ceramic vases on top of a five-foot structure. The structure is comprised of found and purchased wood, fastened with deck screws. One of the major aspects of the work is a mass of black vessels so large that it can be read both as confrontational and celebratory. Since the rows of vases stand at eye level, the viewer cannot see to the center of the mass, much like when people gather for a protest, the sheer mass is impenetrable. The work also makes reference to garniture, a set of decorative accessories, more specifically vases. Historically the function of garniture was bought or stolen, or made to mimic, porcelain vases that were made in China and Japan. They were brought to Europe and adorned cabinetry, armoires, and mantels in the homes of the aristocrats. In contrast to garniture the vases within the *Undocumented* series are to stand in protest, challenge, or to represent a dynamic congregation of a mass. Also, the height of the mass is raised so viewers see themselves on the reflective surfaces. Glazes are like skins that lay on the surface of clay. Each vase is its own shape and form. Each object is unique. Using the color, mass, and structure all together, I present a composition that is relating to history but also can relay the social content that is present within contemporary Black experience in the USA.



xiv

Cashmere Palette Vases, Amsterdam Delftware, Holland, circa 1729

The vases are metonymic signifiers for black bodies, but are not limited to symbolizing a congregation of people. While not referring directly to recent protests in Saint Louis, Missouri; Columbia, Missouri; Baltimore, Maryland; and New York City, the work does allude to them. *ConcernedStudent1950; or The Johnson Family Reunion* is presenting a unique juxtaposition. The first part of the title references the student protest initiative at the University of Missouri-Columbia.<sup>xv</sup> As a way to confront racial injustice, the title also references the issue of black togetherness as a means of defending their rights against the status quo. The second part of the title, “The Johnson Family Reunion” also references black films, stereotypes, and representations in popular culture. Some read the amassment of black vases in “The Johnson Family Reunion” as a way of negatively classifying Black Americans; I see it rather as reclaiming and aligning the gathering with positive protest and togetherness. With the doubling in the title there is room created for more metaphor but also revolt, response, and reflection to analyze and see oneself in relationship to the layers of meaning in the work.



xvi

*The original 11 members of Concerned Student 1950 holding a news conference*

In the installation space the vases highlight the white wall and the walls become a framing device to heighten the presence of the color in the sculpture. The viewer stands together with the objects, furthering the concept of community. In her essay, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, Rosalind Krauss explains “through the representation of its own materials or the process of its construction, the sculpture depicts its own autonomy”.<sup>xvii</sup> In relationship to this work it is simultaneously all together one and in parts. You can see the many parts of the work but the meaning of it is in its mass as one whole sculpture.

In the essay “Blackness in Abstraction,” by Adrienne Edwards explains that there can be a “shift... away from the black artist as subject that instead emphasizes blackness as material, method and mode, insisting on blackness as a multiplicity.”<sup>xviii</sup> Historically color has been worked with as applied medium but, in many non-western cultures, color is also intrinsic within the materials used in making an object. In regard to *Concerned Student 1950; or the Johnson Family Reunion*, the objects are covered in glaze similar to skin. Even though the color is not intrinsically within the object it is still pertinent as metaphorically connected to when and how



people view other people, seeing the surface or skin first before the person within. The masses of objects are presented in a way that the whole must be read before individual elements can be analyzed, a difficult task because of the quantity of objects. Another aspect of the work is the way that the black glazes are each slightly different which can be seen when the viewer is closer to the sculpture. Glazes penetrate bisque clay surfaces prior to firing the kiln, and solidify and melt depending on application, thickness, and water volume. This work is fired in a reduction kiln up to 2400° F. reduction means that within the kiln there is an atmosphere exposing the ceramics to more unburned carbon than oxygen which chemically alters the clay to bring the iron within it to the surface. This results in more glossy objects, more crystals forming on the surface, and iron spots penetrating the surface of the object. Depending on one's skill level, the weather, and attentiveness, the firing process will yield variable results. The amassed objects are a collective and ought not to be seen as identical. They are similar and different in the way groups of people can be together and also unique. All the objects in the whole work exist as one, but the ceramic vases could easily be removed from this situation and used as vases.

Another artist dealing with similar notions of blackness and sculpture is Steve McQueen. "Presence can be conferred by size". This is a quote from Michael Fried. Steve McQueen's *Broken Column* (2014) was made to commemorate deaths of many young black men all over the world, but specifically thinking about his experience traveling in the Caribbean. In contrast to the mass and density of many objects in my installation McQueen's work includes only two components, a large polished black granite column, broken off above eye level, placed on a wooden palette, and nearby a smaller version, unpolished, that sits in a plexiglass vitrine on a white pedestal. We are both formally nodding to the black experience in the world. *Broken Column* is reflective, large in scale, and is portable. It is a vertical presence and the blackness of

the work is utterly material. *Concerned Student 1950; or the Johnson Family Reunion* is also almost completely black. The wood base is painted mostly black, the ceramics are glazed in black, and only some of the wood of the base is left untouched.



xix

Steve McQueen, *Broken Column*, 2014

I heard McQueen say in an interview that he makes work for all of us, he is an entertainer, and there is no way to separate art and life.<sup>xx</sup> His *Broken Column* is made of polished Zimbabwean Granite both polished and unpolished. It is a monument to the death of opportunity for young black men who die prematurely and it is not romantic at all. Hamza Walker talks about “blackness” and says, “Thinking about 'blackness' as a kind of difference that can bring people (black and white) together requires reciprocity, or the willingness to reexamine one’s own situation in relation to others.”<sup>xxi</sup>

McQueen's sculpture is mobile and can travel but also apparently broken and not endless. *Broken column* is a sculpture that is not a ruin and did not fall into being a ruin. In the title McQueen explains that the work was never meant to be finished, but broken, not endless, or complete. When the large three-tier structure is present within a room, it is taller than a person but monumental like a gravestone. In its complete stature it is a mobile monument to social death, to many unmarked graves of those dead. The material and placement of the work allows the viewer to consider the position they are in, in relation to all the deaths and murders of black people. Black in this work can be understood on many levels. It can be read as the darkness of death, the possibility of infinity, and the power in presence. How color and form appears allows for a new understanding of how we see blackness in diverse material investigations.

Form can be a way to resurrect histories and lives. Steve McQueen is combining social issues and formal considerations. *Concerned Student 1950; or the Johnson Family Reunion* and *Broken Column* both are highlighting specific material usage. My work uses ceramic glaze to make reflecting surface and the other highly polished black granite. In each case the viewer can see their reflection. Michael Fried, in "Art and Objecthood", states, "I wish to emphasize that things are in a space with oneself, rather than ... [that] one is in a space surrounded by things."<sup>xxii</sup> This gesture of placing this work in this space is an example of how a work commands a certain amount of space, acts as a monument, and works to engage the viewer's physicality as well.

My work is not mobile in its entirety but is erect and stationary. It does not imply movement by way of being able to pick it up and move it with a forklift, I am forcing the viewer to deal with the prominence of the objects, their color, and the way I am engaging the installation space. Many works that I have made are large and show the viewer that there is no way around dealing with the concerns I have presented. When a room is full and crowded there are only so

many choices of movement someone can make. I emphasize that my works are not to be fetishized but to be respected when around them. The crowdedness around each installation and within each work is different and as the successive installations were transformed, so did the way I consciously guided the viewer to be more aware of their own physicality and choices. For example, *“I love who you are; I love who you ain’t”* (2016) is so large that it spans the width of the gallery. I gave the viewer the choice to walk through a very narrow space to gain access to the other side of the room. At a risk to their safety they could squeeze between the sculpture and the wall to view the installation from the other side of the gallery.



xxiii

*“I love who you are; I love who you ain’t”*, 2016





xxiv

*“I love who you are; I love who you ain’t” 2016*

In Alain Locke’s essay on “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts”, he explains “But even with the rude transplanting of slavery, that uprooted the technical elements of his former culture, the American Negro brought over as an emotional inheritance a deep-seated aesthetic endowment. And with a versatility of a very high order, this offshoot of the African spirit blended itself in with entirely different culture elements and blossomed in strange new forms”.<sup>xxv</sup> He states that even with the terror of the transatlantic slave trade that Black Culture has within it an inheritance that is unique and has evolved into something completing sole and rare. As I work, return to the studio, leave and return again, I press my fingers into process, into the reality of how Black people came to this country carrying parts of their cultural ancestry.<sup>xxvi</sup>

With the desire to construct, reuse, refuse, and rearrange there is a desire to keep digging into possibilities that get me closer to seeing my personal relationship to my cultural lineage. As a means of making my work, one aim is to signify my point of view. A large part of my work is to build realities just as intense as the one I am living, through form, content, and materials. When I was younger I realized that it is not available to leave my life, work, and practice up to whatever anyone else can decide.

I am looking to history for guidance and a model to think about the present. As I work in my studio and present myself in public I am working to reorganize and change a direction for the future. Within my work the colors are strategic and poignant. Now the work is comprised of a myriad of materials, armatures, and compositions. This change in the work is not only to diversify the material engagement but also to show that the conceptual layout is dynamic and diverse. I will continue to see possibility from everything that is shared with me. I will continue to make work that is timely and current but also with the hope that it is timeless and will always be relevant.

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