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Untethering the “Other”: Creating Spaces for Black Autonomy and Community

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Abstract

By complicating viewers' relationships to my painted figures through the application of the gaze, my work analyzes how America's colonial past affects our current landscape to find ways to break the cycle, and to make space for Black autonomy. Blackness should be free to exist without being tethered in a position of inferiority to Whiteness. Radical defiance, resiliency, and expressions of agency have been used by Black people for centuries, and their employment must continue to combat systems of oppression. Our history has been one of division, but mutual respect and cooperation are needed for our communities to stand against the foundations of racism and injustice this country is built on. Art can be used to remember the past, and to foster new realities for the future. The strength, agency, and perseverance of my figures, despite the scars of the past they bare, suggest a preparedness for the task of creating new social structures of mutual respect and community.

Although we are believed to be in a “post-racial” America, the ghosts of colonialism continue to haunt our landscape through systemic injustices that negatively impact people of color. As author and professor of law, F. Michael Higginbotham, discusses in *Ghosts of Jim Crow: Ending Racism in Post-Racial America*, racism today, in some cases, is not overt “...because Americans have agreed, collectively, that racism is morally wrong,”; however, it presents itself in our judicial system, education, healthcare systems, etc. (Higginbotham 141). Black identity has historically been tethered to Whiteness, limiting the definitions of what Blackness can be, and where and how it can exist. This tethering has always been in a position inferior to Whiteness. My art aims to untether Black people from this position through an acknowledgement of the ways this past presents itself in our current times. I establish my figures as subjects with agency over the ways they are seen and exist in their own spaces. Art can be a visual reminder of the strength and resiliency of people of color that the Eurocentric world works to suppress, and it can materialize new landscapes for us to exist.

The presence of Black figures in the history of Western painting has been limited to a few roles, usually as a slave or servant. Their identities are wrapped up in being objects of comparison meant to emphasize the wealth, beauty, and importance of their masters (Austin). In the portrait of Elizabeth Murray by Peter Lely, Elizabeth stands in the foreground proudly, looking directly out at viewers. Her servant leans out from behind her shadow to present her with flowers, his eyes locked on her face. Servants’ gazes being fixed on the White figures is a common motif in these 17th-19th century paintings. It further suggests that these unnamed individuals do not have identities of their own. Everything they do and are revolves around their superiors.



Figure 1 Peter Lely, *Elizabeth Murray (1626-1698), Lady Tollemache, Later Countess of Dysart and Duchess of Lauderdale with a Black Servant*, 1651

In my piece, *Through the Glass*, the foregrounded figure and his duplicated and distorted self are in a relationship of care. The distorted figure sits behind, his eyes avoiding viewers', while tending to the hair of the figure in front of him. The young man's eyes in the foreground, though, meet viewers directly. These figures' roles in this piece are similar, in this way, to the hierarchical roles of the individuals in Figure 1, with the submissive individual being at service of the foregrounded, dominant one. However, since the figures in my piece are the same person, the relationship becomes one of self-love and self-defense.

As African Americans, we must navigate the world being aware of our two-ness, our double-consciousness: how the world sees our Blackness, and who we understand ourselves to be (Du Bois). The relationship of the "I" and its "Other" extend beyond the relationship of Whiteness to Blackness, and into the "I" a Black person sees themselves as and the "Other" the

world sees them as. “My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly” (Fanon 86). Frantz Fanon’s description of how the pathologies systemically ascribed to Black bodies distort one’s self-view illustrates the internalization of this Otherness that is caused by racially charged external gazes. As viewers’ eyes probe the twenty fingers and two heads of the seated figure, the I comes to the defense of his Other as the audience’s gaze is reflected back at them through his. The mirror on the nightstand in the background, and the mirror-like proportions of the canvas and its refracted edges also make viewers aware of their role in this act of looking, forcing self-reflection on this moment of engagement. In this present moment, this Black man stands up for himself through the power of his own gaze. “By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: “Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality,” (hooks 116). Taking back our gaze is an act of agency a refusal of a life of objecthood, passivity, and Otherness; it gives us the ability to change the narrative of Black inferiority.



Figure 2 Kaylyn Webster, *Through the Glass*, oil on canvas, 60” x 36” x 1.5”, 2021

The mirror motif is one I use in many of my paintings to keep viewers aware of their participation in this exchange with my figures. The people I paint are brought into the outside world through their gazes, and viewers are brought into the paintings through their reflections materialized in oil. In *Their faith unwavering*, viewers are placed within this family home. The one-point perspective and the scale of the foregrounded young boy sucks them into the scene. As viewers analyze the room from front to back, following the rhythms created by the figures and repeated forms, they finally meet themselves in the mirror on the back wall. The reflection sets them in the scene, but also places them as outsiders because of their distance and undefined form. They are allowed to observe but they are not in control; this space is not theirs, and their presence does not go unnoticed. Viewers are not simply looking upon an object from a removed, superior position, but rather from a more level playing field with the figures within the piece.



Figure 3 Kaylyn Webster, *Their faith unwavering*, oil on canvas, 60" x 48" x 1.5", 2022

Artists of the Western canon like Jan van Eyck and Diego Velázquez use the mirror to reveal their and their viewers alongside their wealthy patrons. Their figures have a certain level of authority and honor, as we can see from their dress, their entourage, the decoration of the rooms they occupy, and their ability to commission this work. These paintings' current standing in the canon reveals our society's continued valuing of the White and wealthy as the ideal standard, and as the pinnacle of achievement and worth. My employment of motifs from this canon as a Black female painting every day Black people suggests honor for my figures and others like them who have not been valued in this way. This further untethers of my Black figures from the inferior position of the Othered object in relation to viewers, challenging society's expectations.



Figure 4 Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Portrait*, oil on oak,

2'8" x 2'0, 1434



Figure 4.1 *Arnolfini Portrait*, detail



Figure 5 Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*,
oil on canvas 10'5" x 9'1", 1656



Figure 5.1 *Las Meninas*, detail

Wangari Mathenge's portraits also question social hierarchies based on factors like race and class. Her works deal with the ways that colonialism has added to the complexities of African identity across the diaspora in our current times. In *The Ascendants XVIII*, a woman sits adorned in colorful prints and patterns at a vanity while holding up a book. Instead of looking at the pages, she stares out at viewers. We are placed near the ground, causing us to have to look up at this woman to meet her gaze. The perspective here implies our position is inferior to hers. The rest of the title, *She Is Here and So Are You*, as well as her stare, forces us to be present in the moment with her, in her space. We are not in a comfortable position on the outside of the work where we can consume this object of the painting. We are having a human interaction. Despite what colonial histories have taught us to assume this woman to be, she sits in front of us with dignity and pride for her identity.



Figure 6 Wangari Mathenge, *The Ascendants XVIII (She Is Here and So Are You)*, oil on canvas, 80" x 80", 2021

I create abstract portraits as another layer of defense for my figures from the pains of the charged gaze, and of our landscape that has been tainted by racist ideologies. The realms of existence and the forms these Black bodies can take are expanded into new possibilities for life beyond the ones defined for us by our oppressive systems. *Transitions (for Virtner)* is a memorial piece for my father, who passed away from Covid-19. Failures in our country's health care system that stem from histories of racism cause Black, Hispanic/Latinx, American Indian, and Alaska Native people to experience higher rates of Covid related deaths and hospitalizations compared the White populations (CDC). Racist narratives constructing Blackness as Other present themselves in our science, leaving Black and Brown people at risk because their lives are not understood as being as valuable as White lives. Although my dad's physical form was lost to this disease, his spiritual form transcends this flawed world and enters a place where he can no longer be distorted by outside gazes. He is made up of all the colors of light captured within the

acrylic pieces that form the mosaic, and he exists in a space unknown to us; his new manifestation is a refusal of the Otherness that was assigned to his physical body. The space he now occupies is outside of our earthly ills, a space where all people are free. Visualizing and creating these spaces is necessary to provide us with belief that there are realities where systems of oppression and injustice do not exist, and that some versions of them are attainable.

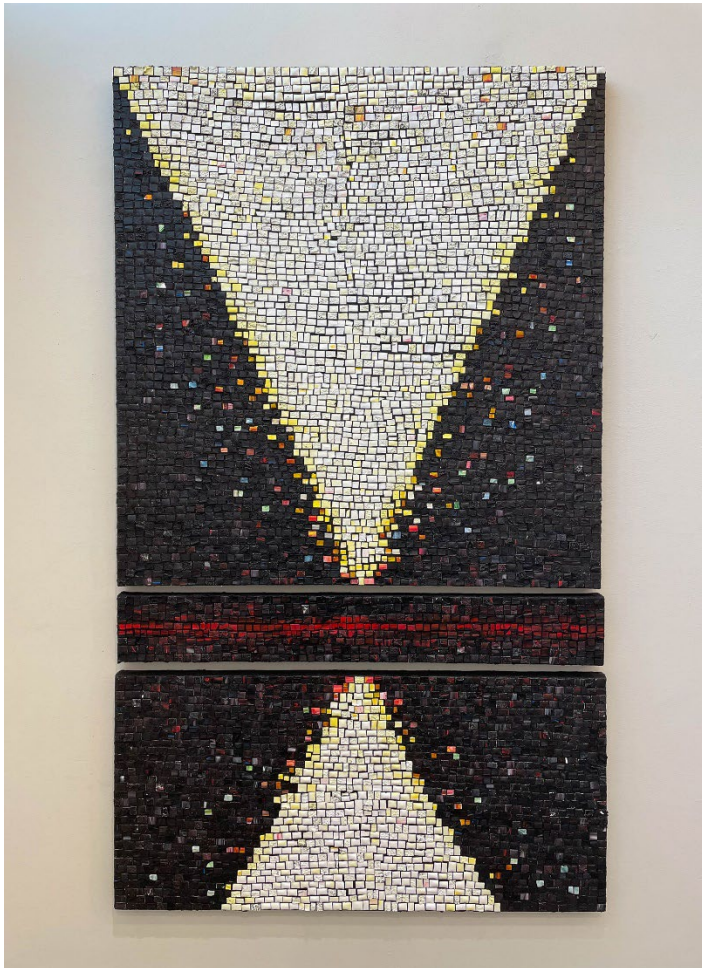


Figure 7 Kaylyn Webster, *Transitions (for Virtner)*, acrylic, canvas, and coarse pumice gel on canvas, 36" x 60", 2021



Figure 7.1 *Transitions (for Virtner)*, detail

The technique from *Transitions* was inspired by the work of Jack Whitten. Much of his work is built from “tesserae”, the dried pieces of acrylic paint that can take months or even years to make, (Traps). His series “Black Monoliths” includes portraits of important figures in the

Black community who have made significant contributions to the culture, and who have inspired Whitten directly (Traps). Some of these figures include Muhammad Ali, Maya Angelou, and Ralph Ellison. Extending this ethereal form to every day people like my father unite all Black people in these struggles we face, and it shows that we are all capable of reaching a place beyond this reality. It provides motivation to continue the fight until it is won.



Figure 8 Jack Whitten, *Black Monolith X (Birth of Muhammad Ali)*, acrylic on canvas, 84" x 63", 2016

Like how Whitten engages with Black history through specific figures, my photographic work investigates specific sites of Black history that reflect how the past manifests itself in the present. My series on the Mill Creek Valley neighborhood in St. Louis reveals how Black spaces have been historically devalued and erased, and asks what we can do at this moment to keep their memory alive.



The People's Hospital, 2219 Locust St.

Figure 9 Kaylyn Webster, *The People's Hospital, 2219 Locust St.*, inkjet print, 22" x 17", 2021

The neighborhood of Mill Creek Valley has a two-hundred-year history, and was home to about twenty-thousand Black St. Louisans, who made up about 95% of the total population. The area had a multitude of businesses, schools, churches, etc. However, it was considered a slum and was demolished in 1959 for urban renewal (Hemphill). Some buildings remain, like the People's Hospital, vacant or for sale. Other locations were taken over by parking lots and companies like Wells Fargo. The numerous examples of erasures of neighborhoods like Mill Creek Valley remind us of how largely unvalued Black people and Black spaces are in this country. The understanding of them as Other and non-essential allows them to be cast to the periphery of society and history. Acknowledging these pasts keep these sites alive, despite their attempted erasure. Also, by refusing to forget these pasts, we become better equipped to deal with these situations in the future, or to prevent them from happening at all.

Histories held within the family home, and its qualities of protection from the outside world, have made it a site of importance for my photography and painting. My series *Madea's House* explores the ways the past and present interact in my family's home of over forty years by combining old and new photographs, and by locating artifacts of the past that exist within the current space. The black and white treatment of the image blurs time while the overlaid images complicate space by conflating the past and present images. They are active within one another and are only fully comprehensible to those who have lived in the space. What may be chaotic to outside viewers is comforting and joyful to those who are familiar with the home and its history. The layering of images here functions like my abstract portraits; it complicates viewers' understanding of what they are seeing to protect my subjects from distortions of the outside gaze. Since the spaces and forms cannot be fully understood, they cannot be simplified and skewed in whichever way viewers wish. The elders sitting around the table in conversation provide another layer of protection as they guard the space in the past and the present. This history and the people in the home are protected within it since their existence cannot be completely consumed by outsiders.



Figure 10 Kaylyn Webster, *Madea's House*, 2021

My latest piece, *The Get-together (Denise II)*, continues the conversation of *Madea's House*. Generations congregate around my mother, the matriarch of our family. Her figure is doubled, yet not distorted, signaling some extent of a double consciousness, but more whole than in *Through the Glass*. Her home and my sister's house, where she is currently staying as she recovers from her battle with Covid-19, are combined into one structure to illustrate how homeplace can exceed bounds of time and space. Conversation happens between all figures, and viewers are pulled into it as they are acknowledged by the child seated on the floor on the right side of the composition. The audience can make assumptions about what the conversation is, but they will never know for sure. The family business is kept safe, but there is space for a new conversation to begin.



Figure 11 Kaylyn Webster, *The Get-together (Denise II)*, oil on canvas, 72" x 48", 2022 (not complete yet)

The importance of dialogue and exchange, mutual recognition, and interpretation for the existence of democracy and for communities to hold together is emphasized in Meleko

Mokgosi's *Lex*, a work from his project "Democratic Intuition". The people are the focus in these pieces, not the institutions that are supposed to foster democracy (Mokgosi). This piece asks the people to do the work of effectively communicating with one another to create healthy communities of respect and cooperation. In talking about the ways the Euroethnic art world has triply negated "colored women artists", Adrian Piper explains how our populations have been divided and made to play in a zero-sum game where elimination of competition is necessary to progress individually; competition is anyone who threatens Euroethnic, heteronormative, male superiority (276). She then goes on to inform her readers that we can disinvest in this zero-sum game to join in on one that is built from cooperation, mutual support, dialogue, and sharing of resources (Piper 280). The current institutions of this country cannot be depended on to foster the change we need. The system is not broken; it was built to keep people of color in positions of inferiority and dependency within the margins of society. Since minority groups are a threat to the current system of White supremacy, we have the power to change it. It is our time to act.



Figure 12 Meleko Mokgosi, *Lex* (detail), 7 panels, 924" x 192", 2017

My latest series of work pushes the relationship between viewers and my figures further through direct engagement and conversation. The work features slightly larger than life-size portraits of individuals responding to the question "What do you wish people talked about

more?"; the responses they provided serve as the titles of each painting. Viewers stand face to face with these figures, locking gazes with them and listening to their desires. The range in levels of rendering within the portraits, the faces being highly detailed and the underpainting being visible in some areas, signals a materializing of these figures as the conversations begin. They are humanized as viewers get to know them, putting an end to their objectification and allowing them to exist as autonomous beings. The cleanliness of the white surface in the background is disrupted as interactions shift from being superficial to deep and more personal. These types of relationships need to be built between individuals so that we can construct new senses of community despite the systemic divisions that have been created between groups. My works aims to encourage a building of bridges across these divides so that we can form new institutions based on mutual respect, cooperation, and equity.



Figure 13 Kaylyn Webster, *How to win as a minority.*, oil and pumice gel on canvas, 30" x 40" x 1.5", 2022



Figure 14 Kaylyn Webster, *Mental health in the Black community.*, oil and pumice gel on canvas, 30" x 40" x 1.5", 2022



Figure 15 Kaylyn Webster, *I wish people talked more about Black women as complex human beings. Not just bearers of trauma, or perfect and magical creatures. But as people capable of being both flawed and beautiful.*, oil and pumice gel on canvas, 30" x 40" x 1.5", 2022

Our populations have been divided based on race, class, and culture. We must acknowledge these divisions' active presence in the norms of our current society and reject them. We cannot free ourselves of the chains of colonialism if we cannot come together on equal grounds to establish new systems to build our communities on. Art keeps record of all the histories we need to remember in our present, and it helps us to imagine new futures of prosperity for all. My pieces work to uplift Black people from the systems meant to keep them inferior positions so the necessary conversations to reach these new, healthier, more just futures can begin.

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