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Future-Relics: Monumentalizing Afro-Caribbean Identity

By

Greg Bailey

A thesis presented to the  
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts  
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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## **Abstract**

The use of monuments as future-relics to validate and preserve the identity of Afro-Caribbean people within the Anglophone Caribbean is the premise for the conceptual and physical development of my studio practice. My dissertation is about this practice and how the art work that I make, function in the way they are intended. The work monumentalizes Black identity in an effort to mirror the significance and resilience of the Black self within the Caribbean; a space that was created by Europeans to enrich their respective Empires. I put forward the use of established canonical art practices as a methodology to map one culture unto the other as a way of presenting the Black narrative to the Black viewer.

This investigation aims to reexamine considerations of how the Caribbean is defined by looking at how it was established and how it has transitioned from its colonial beginnings to its post-colonial standing. The reinterpretation of the Caribbean puts into context the Anglophone grouping of countries on which I am concentrated, with closer reference to my home country, Jamaica. Utilizing my own knowledge and experience, as well as, conducting research into the scholastic work of various historians, artists and records of the sociopolitical sphere, I present ways in which cultures are affected both positively and negatively. The case I put forward here, gives reason to the significance of Afro-Caribbean communities to reconfigure their own identity.

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## Introduction

The term Caribbean is a European brand. The Caribbean was developed to enrich and expand European Empires which came at the expense of slaves taken from Africa. The emergence of the Caribbean into western history, is documented as being discovered by the explorer, Christopher Columbus. Terms are very important within the historic relationship of Europe and the *New World*. There are many contradictions regarding the way history recorded events and a guileful use of language that has been kept alive through the colonial era of the Caribbean which is still being utilized in the post-colonial era, as well. Growing up in Jamaica and going to school at the primary level (between 1992 and 1997); my social studies classes taught about Christopher Columbus' discovery of Jamaica in 1492 and how he described it as the "fairest isle" of all the islands he had seen. It was also learned that when he discovered Jamaica, he met the native Arawak Indians. Interestingly, the details of the genocide he committed were not included in those lessons, neither were the wealth of gold and other valuables he stole from other territories of the New World. The teaching curriculum did not point out that the New World was pivotal to the renewed European world.

This paper is an investigation into matters of the Black identity in the Anglophone Caribbean. This premise has been explored countless times by Black artists but it still remains a topical matter. This is not a topical concern among artists of other racial identity, at least not to the same magnitude. The forcible displacement of Africans and the construct of the societies which we inhabit are the topics I explore through my art practice. My practice is foremost informed by my acquisition of knowledge through my lived experience in Jamaica and the works

of scholars: historians, anthropologists, artists and selected reggae pieces. I am fascinated by the visual culture with regards to that which is present and that which is absent; this paper aims to develop a perspective that can allocate a rationale for both. I argue that the lack of monuments and public art that recognizes the Afro-Caribbean people is systematic and that this geopolitical space is being choreographed by a cohort of the elite minority. Howard Johnson in his introduction to *The White Minority in the Caribbean*, put forward that, “white minorities shape the social and economic framework within which each of the lower classes operate and influence policy-making despite the advent of black democracies.”<sup>1</sup> My work aims to present the Afro-Caribbean people to themselves, so they may see the self as being one in the same and therefore resist becoming tools of puppeteers.

The Afro-Caribbean identity is used to construct the visual narrative in my drawings, paintings and sculptures. My work incorporates a wallpaper design that bears images that function as navigational tools that steer the audience through the geographical setting which focuses my work within a context. These visual tools; painting, drawing, sculpture, design and wallpaper are content within themselves, as I use them as platforms and as methods of distillation that have strong agency within the fine arts discipline of the western canon.

## Reinterpreting the Caribbean

The Caribbean is a broad geographical region that is made up of several islands and three mainland countries. Two of these mainland countries; Surinam and Guyana, are located on the north-eastern point of the South American continent. Belize also identifies as a Caribbean country and its location is in Central America. The Caribbean has a colonial history that records the reign and maneuvering of the European English, Spanish, Dutch and French Empires. Due to this colonial history, the current post-colonial status of the Caribbean is constantly seeking ways to readjust to better position itself to compete within a modern world. However, having to juggle innovative ideas with residues of a colonial past, seem a bit much to balance as the leaders and policymakers continuously fail to mutually benefit from financial deals. The countries in the region are not only disjointed geographically, but also through their political, economic and social structure. I was born and raised in Jamaica which is a part of the Anglophone (Historic-British) Caribbean. This fact probably best explains my interest in developing art works with a visual narrative that most directly, reference Jamaica and the Anglophonic grouping of countries.

The history lesson of Christopher Columbus' discovery of Jamaica in 1492 has been drilled into me throughout primary (elementary) and high school. That is Jamaica/Caribbean history to date! I find it quite a challenge to describe the Caribbean without exercising this European perspective. The Caribbean was constructed as a domestic subject of *Euroimperialism*, a term Silver Professor in Social and Cultural Analysis, Mary Louise Pratt, described as; "a perspective that gave Europe a centralized global perspective in relation to the rest of the world."<sup>2</sup> Recordings of Caribbean history, started with the landing of Christopher Columbus and his *discovery* of the new world. On his 1492 arrival to Jamaica for example, he came in contact with the Arawak

Indians, who from this historic account, we understand to be the natives of the land. Christopher Columbus and his crew eventually committed genocide on the Arawak Indians. In other European colonies, other aboriginal Amerindian people were subjected to a degree of brutality that also brought them to extinction.<sup>3</sup> By 1655, the British fought and conquered the Spanish, and then Jamaica became a British territory.<sup>4</sup> The British continued on a similar trajectory and by the early part of the nineteenth century, they became owners of other territories that were under the rule of Spanish, French and Dutch Empires.<sup>5</sup> English then became the official language of what is known as the Anglophone countries and language, as a device, plays a major role in the shaping of an identity.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting how even today, in the twenty-first century, countries such as Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and even Barbados that have gained political independence are not identified by their local dialect, but more so by their inherited language. My interpretation presents this situation as a psychological element that emphasizes the superiority of the colonizer's tongue in relation to the inferiority of the tongue of the masses. The Caribbean people, as well as, other post-colonial countries who have been left with the language of their colonizers, are left in a state of constant psychological subordination.

The impact of foreign countries and the way in which they manipulate the Caribbean, is not only identifiable through post-colonial residues such as language, architecture and political constructs, but also through economic distress. The early-mid to late-mid twentieth century, was the era within which most Caribbean countries gained constitutional independence from their respective European empires.<sup>7</sup> The production of sugar cane, banana and other agricultural products overtime cultivated a pattern of lesser and lesser profit and became paralyzed as a result of natural disasters such as hurricanes, diseases and competitive international markets.



The commercial impotence of agricultural crops was also linked to the loss of preferential treatment from Europe, with the emergence of the World Trade Organization (WTO) which brought an end to unilateral ties.<sup>8</sup> In the 1940s, North American companies started to explore the Caribbean's potential reserves of natural resources. Minerals such as bauxite, in the cases of Jamaica and Guyana, and oil in the case of Trinidad and Tobago, were explored and developed by North American companies.<sup>9</sup> We later saw the unfolding of a similar pattern to that of the slave-labor-operated sugar plantations; the foreign countries benefited financially, while the Caribbean once more, failed to retain any significant portion of the wealth it generates.

Looking at the case of Jamaica for instance, which started bauxite exportation in 1954 and became the world's leading producer of bauxite three years later with a production of nearly five million tons annually.<sup>10</sup> Alarmingly, this high production accounted for almost a quarter of all the bauxite that was mined in the entire world that year.<sup>11</sup> Take into account that over fifteen countries were in bauxite production at this time. It is understood that in 1960 while the North American companies were earning approximately \$105,000,000, the Jamaican government benefits amounted to approximately \$22,000,000. Additionally, only one percent of the labor force was employed in the bauxite sector at a time when the country possessed the highest unemployment rate in relation to its major Anglophonic Caribbean neighbors.<sup>12</sup> If one looks at the way in which the Caribbean aged and the repeated patterns where it least benefitted from financial negotiations with foreign entities, we would find that the region has been an easy prey that befits the gaze of predatory foreign investors. Within the last decade, China has been making numerous deals with Caribbean states and has been carrying out major infrastructural construction. The horrors of a similar pattern being repeated, provokes trepidation on the

outcome of these business relationships. The Caribbean was constructed to build European economies who slaughtered the natives then repopulated the lands with a large import of slaves from Africa and with a few Europeans who ruled and instructed them into sugar cane production. Today, in the twenty first century, we still observe a repetition with regards to the Caribbean's bilateral and multilateral business relationships where the Caribbean benefits the least from international deals.

Finally, I want to look at tourism and remittance. With the exception of Trinidad and Tobago whose oil is their main earner of foreign currency, Jamaica and many of the other countries, make most of their foreign earnings through tourism and remittance. Jamaica hosts an average of 4.3 million tourists each year,<sup>13</sup> while Barbados hosts approximately 1 million.<sup>14</sup> Almost all of the resorts are owned by foreign investors and as such, only a small percentage of the money earned in the Caribbean, remains in the Caribbean. As a result, the foreign dollar reserves are low and this leads to a continuous decline in local currency value. The trade value of the Jamaican dollar to the United States dollar over the past decades has been quite shocking. In 1970 USD\$1.00 was equivalent to JMD\$1.20, in 1972 USD \$1.00 was valued at JMD \$0.77, in 1990 the trade was USD \$1.00 to JMD\$7.24, by 2000 the dollars traded at USD\$1.00 to JMD \$43.39 and in 2010 the USD \$1 was the value of JMD \$87.33.<sup>15</sup> As of March 12 2019, USD\$1.00 traded at JMD\$126.62.<sup>16</sup> This pattern of devaluation also points to the trade disadvantages with regards to import and export deals. This is where remittance as a major avenue for earning foreign dollars has to be highlighted. The diasporic Caribbean accounts for an expansive population that is financially significant for the geographical space. These are the people who also perform the vital role of sharing their culture within major cities such as New York, Miami, Toronto and London to

name a few. The most recognized event of this cultural sharing phenomena is the Caribbean Carnival that is held annually on the United States Labor Day in Brooklyn, New York. This cultural celebration plays a significant role in the marketing of the region and in effect, encourages tourist visits.

The Caribbean continues to be a mobile idea as its constructs are so intertwined with connections that exist outside its geographical space. The culture changes continuously as it adapts and realigns itself with bigger land masses like North America and Europe which hold a large diasporic population, as well as, a historic-genetic tie. The commonwealth Caribbean territories all have a Governor General who functions as the representative of Queen Elizabeth II. This includes independent countries such as Jamaica and Barbados. Effects of these political structures are indicators of political puppetry. While the region continues to assess and renew itself, the Afro-Caribbean group is most divided regarding a consensus about their identity. The Caribbean space as a mobile idea, is linked to its peoples' association of their ancestral land as their spiritual and mental home. This realization is reflected in my work as it collages cultural signifiers from Africa and Europe with the Caribbean.

## Re-configuring Identity

The who-is-who is a constant negotiation of identity and the cultural value such identity is assigned, within the domestic environs of the Caribbean. Colonial residue, as I often call it, is the psychological effect that maintains a presence within the current affairs of a post-colonial state. *Out of Many One People* is Jamaica's national motto and it is basically a summary of, and an embrace of the importance of multi-ethnicity to function as a core cultural bond, which unites different ethnic groups. This motto also reinstates the very mixed racial make-up of the Caribbean's population. On the contrary, racial segregation as a colonial device, has transformed itself into what is best described as classism. I am using the term classism as it is described by the Wordweb dictionary which defines it as: prejudice based on social class. The psychological effects of the who-is-who and the we-versus-them scenarios continue to play out in the domestic environs of the Caribbean. As expressed in *The White Minority in the Caribbean*, there is the Jamaican who is Jamaican by birth and culture and there is the Jamaican who is Jamaican by birth but not culture. The cultural realization of these concepts of who-is-who and the we-versus-them goes beyond the issue of skin color and manifests through a psychological coding that Franz Fanon argued to be a last resort for the racialized social group to adopt the customs, doctrines and other attitudes of the "superior race" which in essence deracializes itself.<sup>17</sup> This is a mental state within which the colonized individual loses recognition of his or her racial identity and takes on that of the other; the colonizer. This psychological coding goes back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the wars between the Whites and the Maroons in Jamaica. A war that included the negro slaves who were recruited by both the Maroons and the Whites to provide service in combat.<sup>18</sup> The negro slaves were property; they were not a unit and as such

were used as a resource to man both sides of the war. This scenario created an atmosphere of distrust that led to suspicions of slaves performing espionage.<sup>19</sup> Contentions and distrust intensified as the Maroons were separated in two groups, the Maroons of St. James and the Maroons of Trelawny. A similar separation happened between the slaves who ran away to join the Maroons and the slaves who ran away and either returned or were brought back to their masters. This is the conundrum within which the complex history of the who-is-who is intertwined.

The social and political environs of Barbados in relation to the matter of who-is-who, more vividly illustrates this psychological coding as a product of colonial residue. Unlike most of its neighbors, Barbados has had very few explicit racial conflicts and are also considered the most “English” of all the Anglophonic countries.<sup>20</sup> Social and political manipulation continues to be a strategic move for elite minorities. The development of social groups in Barbados was designed by the dominant minority group and then put into action by using methods of “social, political and ideological indoctrination in order to achieve consent.”<sup>21</sup> The dominant class selects representatives from the dominated groups in order to secure their best interests. “The dominant class is prepared to make concessions to the dominated classes, providing that the long-term interests of the former are not challenged or undermined.”<sup>22</sup> The maintenance of a status quo then becomes the responsibility of the elevated group and this privilege in turn separates the black middle class into two groups; the black political elite and the general black middle stratum.<sup>23</sup> The contradiction of Black government representation for the Black masses surfaced through said government’s rejection and intolerance to any form of Black Power advocacy:

Ironically, Black Power is also strenuously resisted and rejected by black politicians who see it as a threat to their own status notwithstanding that they claim to represent the masses. The most telling evidence supporting this assertion is that, in 1970, when the Barbados Government introduced a bill severely to proscribe the activities of Black Power advocates, not a single political party in Barbados was prepared to oppose the Bill on behalf of the movement, and the bill had an easy passage.<sup>24</sup>

This kind of social maneuvering is structurally very similar to the conditions laid out in what is known to be the infamous Willie Lynch letter, on how to keep a slave in line. To some degree, it also parallels the situation of the Maroons who were a free group of negroes in Jamaica whose treaty of freedom with the British ruling class, bound them to capture and return runaway slaves back to their respective plantations.<sup>25</sup> What is clear, is the benefits the British reaped from this treaty through the service of the Maroons; the treaty kept the Maroons at bay while providing security for the Brits. This is the nature and source of colonial residue and psychological coding that affects the current affairs and is responsible for the organization of social groups within the environs of the Caribbean. This is strategy bears traces of the *divide and conquer* mantra as it pluralizes culture by dividing the general black middle class into groups that are then made to subscribe to different status on the social ladder. These histories highlight elements of a device that creates and maintains the value of skin color and class as social currency.

The reinvention of a Black identity, therefore, required a cleansing of Eurocentric ideals by sharpening a focus on Africa. In places like Jamaica, similar to Barbados, the political structure does not associate itself with this kind of Black advocacy, regardless of it being the home of Marcus Garvey and Rastafarianism. The consciousness of a group that aligned itself with ideologies of the Rastafarian concept of Blackness and Afrocentrism was met with brazen resistance by the Alexander Bustamante led government in 1958.<sup>26</sup> Police officials were ordered

to destroy homes of Rastafarians, cut their locks and arrest them on conspicuous charges.<sup>27</sup> This event led to a major event in 1963 known in Jamaica as the *Coral Garden Massacre*.<sup>28</sup> While Bustamante was not Black, there were Black politicians in his cabinet, as were the policemen who were charged with this operation. The aftermath of this operation bred an association of the identity of Rastafarians as rebels. The bipolar perspectives on religion by the general mass and Rastafarians, has also contributed to group separation within the broader scope of the general masses.

Rastafarianism and the creation and popularization of reggae music has emerged as one of the most influential instruments of cultural identity and Afrocentrism. What arguably emerged as the most powerful iconography from a wave of Black-conscious ideologies was the *Rastaman Lion*. The Rastaman lion is a totemic image that is made up of a lion's body and the head of a Rastaman. The emergence of this iconography bears reference to the Sphinx of Egypt as a powerful symbol coming out of Africa.<sup>29</sup> The hair of the *Rastaman Lion* is a representation of the rastaman's locks which symbolically reflect strength as it relates to the biblical accounts of Samson's unmatched strength due to his uncut hair. Patricia Mohamed's interprets the *Rastaman Lion* as being a representation of the:

Conquering Lion of Judah, the result of Garveyism of the 1920s and 1930s, the later Rastafarianism of the 1950s and 1960s, and the musical glamour and messages of Bob Marley and Peter Tosh in the 1970s, a new invention of the Black Caribbean male removed from slavery and metaphorically reinvented.<sup>30</sup>

Africa is hailed as the motherland within the interiors of Black-consciousness as proclaimed by Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley, Walter Rodney, Mutabaruka and other influential Black advocates.



Figure 1.

**Ras Clarence 'Guilty' Williams**

*Rastman Lion*, Paint on concrete wall. Date unknown

The *Rastaman Lion* is usually depicted with an Ethiopian flag that is raised on a staff which recognizes a symbolic power in the 1930 crowning of Haile Selassie I as Emperor of Ethiopia, a pivotal event in the early twentieth century for recognition and Black leadership. His visit to Jamaica in 1966 acted as recognition and validation of the Rastafarian faith.<sup>31</sup> This groundwork of the pioneers of a new Black identity promoted a liberation of the mind from Eurocentric sentiments and manifested claims of success through the propagation of the Rastafarian culture. The impact of the Rastafarian influence has transcended the conventions of the physical look to an appeal with the message of love and humility as its core concentration. Grammy awarding



winning reggae group Morgan Heritage dedicated a song to this message titled, *Don't Haffi Dread* (You Don't Have to Have Locks); the song went on to convey that being rasta is "a divine conception of the heart."<sup>32</sup> Contrary to this message of love for all, the *all* problematically excludes homosexuals and often, women as subjects..

The psychological coding of identity and indifference are projected through various accounts of cultural pluralism. The interest to identify myself through the representation of images that embody my likeness is neither a strange nor a unique pursuit. It is a stage that many individuals at some point must arrive at, a stage where consciousness of self and decisions of identity must be realized. It is a state of consciousness that is left for the world to understand and acknowledge as seen through the existence of cultures such as the Olmecs, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Mayans, the Incas, the Qin Shi Huan Empire, the Rapa Nui people of Easter Island and so forth. I represent myself as a plural existence through the different faces of my people as the I, as a single entity is insufficient for cultural preservation. Historically, culture and identity have been preserved through ruins and artifacts. They function as archives. This is how I envision the functionality of my work, as the re-configured identity that is not indebted to concessions and clause of colonial fine prints.

My work deals with the Caribbean people and more specifically, those of Black ethnicity. Being displaced and brought into a geographical space and then abandoned and left to re-shape and re-configure the *self* has been an ongoing situation. Stuart Hall, Norman Girvan, Brian Meeks and other Caribbean scholars wrote on these situations. These thoughts along with the teachings and philosophies of Marcus Garvey, the poems of Claud McKay, Louise Bennett-Coverly, the music of Robert Nesta Marley (Bob Marley), Hubert McIntosh (Peter Tosh) and the wave of later

reggae artists like Sizzla Kalonji, Buju Banton, Damion 'Junior Gong' Marley, Chronixx and Protoje, have significantly contributed to the growing influence of the Rastafarian beliefs. My thoughts about identity have also been influenced by Caribbean paintings of the market-woman as a symbol of self-reliance. These different stimuli have collectively functioned as a framework which helps me to project my ideas of identity re-configuration, in opposition to this colonial history of identity compromise. My works are an addition to the tapestry of iconographies that have emerged from these prior investigations of self and the creation of meaningful images, literature, poetry and music.

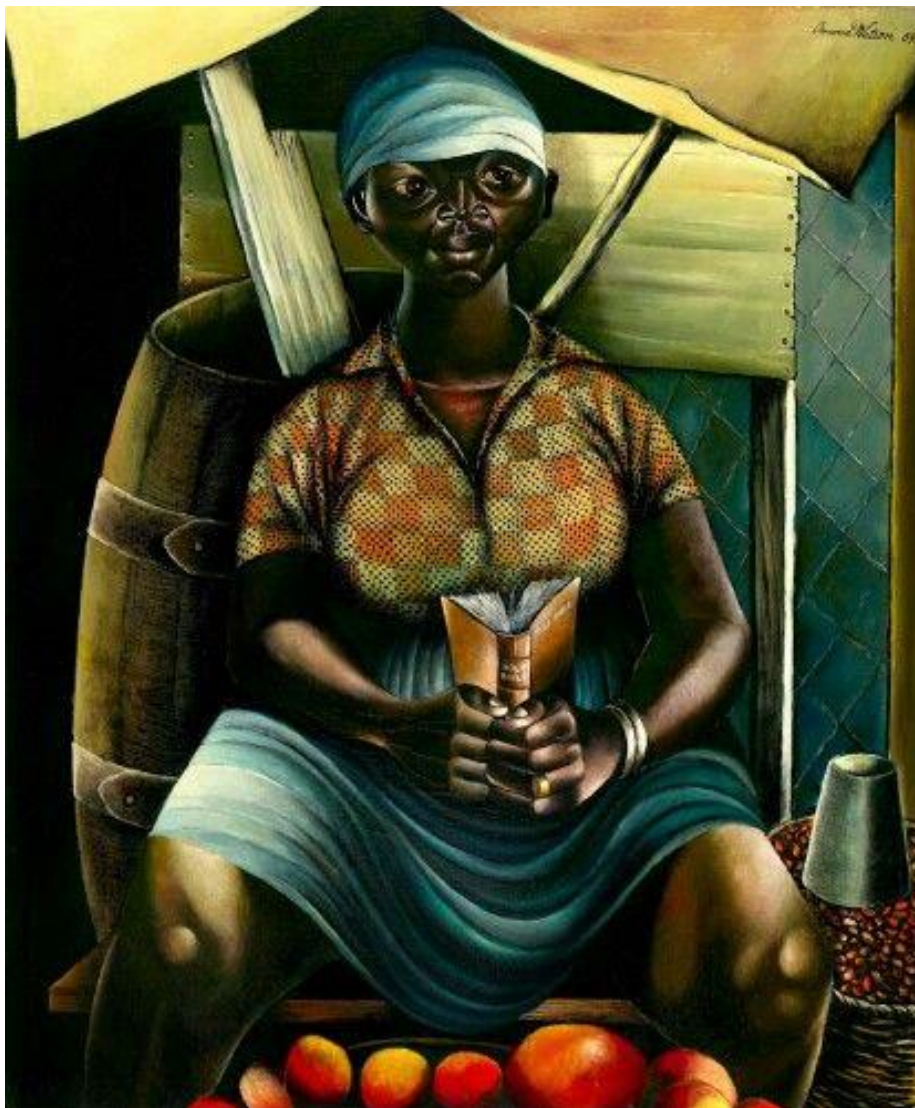


Figure 2.

**Osmond Watson**

*The Lawd Is My Shepherd*, Oil on Canvas, 40"x34"

1969.

The scene depicts a market woman with her beans, ripe fruits and bible in hand. The painting reflects confidence, firm religious belief and independence through trading.

## **The Black Image as Content**

Representation of the Black figure has undoubtedly infiltrated topical discussions within mainstream contemporary art in recent years. What is even more fascinating is the fact that contemporary Black artists have been making bold statements through visually commanding works about Black people. These bold statements are critical contributions to the discourse of and around the reshaping and re-representation of the Black figure in canonical art. In effect, this contribution has challenged the canon and has pushed it to become more diverse. Black artists' representation of Black people exhibit authenticity and a visual vocabulary that fluently renders our own narrative of culture, identity and visual aesthetics. While contemporary art making provides accommodation for an excessively broad practical approach to art, the discipline of painting within the traditional sense, boasts an unparalleled prestige among other art disciplines.

Within the sea of Black contemporary painters, I wish to engage the practice of Kerry James Marshall and Kehinde Wiley in an analytic and comparative discourse with my paintings. This analysis provides a comprehensive perspective regarding the re-representation of the Black image in contemporary representational painting. This conversation aims to provide information as it relates to the interests and the thought process that goes into creating these paintings. To a considerable extent, admittedly or not, western artists who consider themselves professional practitioners in the discipline of fine art, do so with the intent of being recognized within the western art canon. This claim makes no exception for Black artists. Being a Black artist myself, I want my work to be within the canonical grouping of important cultural contributors; not to fit-in, but to elevate the contemporary discourse on art that deals with Blackness. Even more so, my ambition leans to the fact that I am a Jamaican artist, whose work explores ideas about my



My work *Arrangements*, depicts four Black figures, three are partially clad while the fourth who appears to be walking out of the painting, wears a tank top. He carries the Pan-African flag over his shoulder which is placed in the top left corner of the painting. A silhouetted depiction of the top section of the Jamaican coat of arms is painted faintly in the background where a crocodile and an indication of floral décor is visible. A table is placed in front of the figures that holds an arrangement of objects which includes: books, CDs, various farm produce and a rum bottle. The female figure to the left, holds a tray in her left hand that has a bottle of Red Stripe beer and a can of Bass beer, as well as, a peeled lemon. *Arrangements* is a compact painting that carries a dense narrative. While the still-life arrangement contributes a crucial part of the painting's narrative, the representation of the figures is the main concern for this analysis which looks at a traditional approach to figure painting. In *Arrangements* and *Girl with Locks* (Figure 4.), I am representing the Black figures with a charismatic rendering of the skin. I am applying paint through a meticulous process in which, I render different colors into each other. In the process of so doing, I try to develop a harmonious interaction between hues, where I blend one hue into another by mixing multiple values to stimulate optical temperature shifts and create the illusion of form. I am using ochre, umbers, reds, blues, purples, greens and white paints to make the illusion of well-polished Black skin. The concentration on the meticulous rendition of the Black skin also engages a complexity of Blackness that has not been fully dealt with in the western art canon. The act of exhibiting ethnic richness through skin is partly the reason why these figures are minimally clad. The physicality of the bodies is also meant to be shown; a physicality that is naturalistic and uncontaminated by the lure of muscular exaggeration. The figures stand their ground, and confidently own the space they occupy within the dimensions of the canvas while



the painting symbolically seeks to demand its space in western art history. The central figure is the only figure that takes time to interact with the audience, and he does so with a firm gaze that stares directly into the eyes of its viewers, unquestioning and assertive.



Figure 4.  
*Girl with Locks*, Oil on Canvas,  
20" x 16". 2019



Figure 5.  
**Johannes Vermeer**  
*Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Oil on Canvas,  
18" x 15" 1665

I am utilizing a lighting technique that can be seen in many seventeenth century European paintings; paintings such as Diego Velázquez's *Triumph of Bacchus*; *Las Meninas*; Charles Le Brun's portrait, *Everhard Jacob and His Family*. The use of this lighting technique is an aesthetic element in my work that I employ to facilitate a visual articulation linking to canonical art history. I intend for this lighting technique to create a visual quality in my paintings that will reference a time where Black people would not be depicted as central figures in paintings of this nature. In

*Arrangements*, Black people are not only central figures; they are the only race that is portrayed. There are several visual devices that artists use to reference art history in their works and I am making reference to lighting technique and the pivotal role it plays in the creation of visual atmospheres in still images, as well as, in motion picture. *Game of Thrones*, *The Lord of the Rings*, are prime examples of works that use this lighting technique. Movies with medieval settings always appeal to my taste and hold some of the most alluring visual sensations. The lighting is normally soft and the scenes are lit rather gracefully but meticulously. The viewer is given specifics to look at and this control significantly downplays visual noise, creates focal points, uses gestalt and draws the viewers' eyes around the picture plane.

In contrast to Kehinde Wiley, whose works directly imitate the composition of old master paintings, I consciously try to resist this temptation. I am not necessarily interested in reworking compositions of the old master paintings, but instead try to find more subtle and strategic ways of referencing them. Some of these decisions are manifested in the painting of *Arrangements*. The use of posture, lighting, rendition of objects, as well as, elements such as the peeled lemon, the inclusion of books and even the cut watermelon which, all converse directly with how they have been presented throughout the history of traditional painting. Seventeenth century Dutch still-life paintings were used to exhibit the colonial grasp of Empire and the engagement with imports from Asia. The still-life set up in *Arrangements* reflects the commodification of agricultural products like cocoa, sugar cane and rum as a distilled spirit from sugar cane and invites the European colonial era into the contemporary discourse. The books provide a source of knowledge and are labeled *New Caribbean Thought: A Reader*, giving the painting contextual placement and reference.

The lure of certain compositional aesthetics cannot always be overcome and as such, *Girl with Locks* is a manifestation of me yielding to the temptation to rework the composition of Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Figure 5.). I utilized the compositional strategies of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* to depict a young Black woman. *Girl with Locks* is not depicted with earrings or any other forms of jewelry. Her beauty is within her being. She, being a Black woman whose skin I render, again, with color and a concentration on lighting as an aesthetic component. The boldness in her eyes, the ease in her smile and the golden glow of her complexion radiates an aura of confidence and self-love. Her locks are subtly lit as they fall harmoniously down to her shoulders and create a natural frame for her face. Conceptually, this painting presents a beauty that is not subscribing to the Euro-western art aesthetics of beauty that is paired with the embellishment of jewelry and other worldly accessories, but rather a beauty that relies on an inner recognition of the conscious self.



Figure 6.

**Kehinde Wiley**

*Equestrian Portrait of the  
Count Duke Olivares,*

Oil on Canvas, 108" x 108"

2005

22



The significance of referencing the canonical history of art, establishes its rationale within the visual language through which we have been sensitized. To this sensibility, Kehinde Wiley creates his paintings by investing heavily in the compositional quality of old master paintings as an essential element of his works. He paints Black people depicted in postures from historic paintings. His reuse of postures within which white men are portrayed in art history, is a symbolic gesture to comment on position and authority that solidifies a power relationship between art history and putting Black individuals as his central subject.<sup>33</sup> However, the way in which he generally lights his subjects is different from the way I lit the subjects in *Arrangements* and *Girl with Locks*. His lighting tends to be more crisp which results in his figures having sharper value contrasts. Additionally, unlike my paintings that employ a yellow radiance of light, Wiley's employs a radiance that appears to be a white tint. These decisions then become significant factors in the overall aesthetic and psychological placement of the work in time. Compare Wiley's *Sleep* (Figure 7.) and his 2005 painting, *Equestrian Portrait of the Count Duke Olivares* (Figure 6.) to Diego Velázquez's original 1636 painting that bears the same title (Figure 8.). They are placed in a different time by the way the figure is attired and the surrounding environment, but one can also notice the crisp white in Wiley's version versus the soft yellow radiance of light in Velázquez's original.



Figure 7.  
**Kehinde Wiley,**  
*Sleep,*  
Oil on Canvas, 132"x300"  
2008



Figure 8.

**Diego Velazquez**

*Equestrian Portrait of the  
Count Duke Olivares,*

Oil on Canvas, 125" x 94"

1634

I take into account the representation of self in these paintings where I find decisions of color to be important when representing the skin of Black people. As it relates to the practice of using paint to represent the Black skin, Wiley does not take much consideration into color transitions and temperature shifts. While this is not always the case, he seems more interested in utilizing tonal values and employs a local hue and then generates multiple tints and shades of this hue. I studied his paintings that were exhibited at the St. Louis Art Museum in October 2018. Prior to this experience, I only knew his works through books and the internet. This first-time face to face encounter gave me a true experience of their grandeur. The scale of his works are impactful and in essence, they challenge the very power exalted by the historic occupants.

Wiley's paintings exhibit emphasis on décor and historic postures from art history that, in his words, exalts the "bombastic" gesture of the subject.<sup>34</sup> Wiley trespasses on the territory of colonial empires, where he takes assets from their archives and boldly uses them to portray a people who were colonized, in a reversal of power dynamics. This gesture transcends the narrative of imitation; it is a reshuffling of the narrative in an effort to challenge the atrocities of psychological contamination within present perceptions that are affected by ideologies of colonial origin. While the wealth of colors in the Black skin is downplayed in Wiley's paintings, his portrayal of Black images, nonetheless, holds a significant place in the discourse of image and representation within the canon.

I do not think the blackness of the Black skin can get more literal than Kerry James Marshall's portrayal of it. Marshall uses black pigment to paint his Black figures; literally. Identification of self and the way the self is represented then takes on a pivotal role within this context. Marshall uses color to play on Black as a racial categorization and as a color description that make his paintings unique among other paintings. Through the literal use of black pigment to produce Black images, Marshall creates an iconography that has become a privileged artifice that is now being used by other Black artists. In 1980, Marshall painted a black self-portrait in which he used a character to play on negative, racist stereotypes. The painting titled, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, uses egg and tempera on paper.<sup>35</sup> It depicts the head and bust of a silhouetted Black man with white eyes, a broad grin which reveals white teeth and a missing tooth, a white shirt that stands out in stark contrast to the black silhouette and dark background. The inclusion of the eyes and teeth communicates that Marshall was not painting a silhouette but more so reinterpreting and overwriting the insults of the language of the Coon

caricatures, using his image as an eraser. This very image took on a new iconography of a Black consciousness and further projects a reasserted self. This painting draws reference to the invisible man articulated in Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*. Marshall challenges the linguistic ambiguities of painting by his construction and placement of the Black figure both as color and as image.<sup>36</sup> This act unfolded in a manner that contradicts the notion of invisibility as this very painting ignited visual dynamics within the sphere of image creation. As described by Carroll Duhnam, "This little jewel claimed a territory in which abstract values, intensity of facture, and personal symbolism collide while different notions of blackness, as subject, condition, and material reality, are conflated."<sup>37</sup> *The Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, was the birth of a visual pedigree that the Black figures who populate Marshall's works would radiate. Eventually the literal use of black pigment to represent Black people in his paintings represented a potency that shouts in the quiet spaces of galleries and museums. Marshall's practice of representing Black people with black pigment is being utilized by other Black artists and, in a sense, it alludes to an act that is race-specific. The transition of the exaggerated blackness of skin in the Coon caricatures to insinuate humor and racial degradation to the exaggerated blackness of skin in Marshall's paintings as an exaltation, maps a parallel to the transition of Black figures being represented as non-significant characters in historic paintings, to being central figures in contemporary paintings.

The interest that is perpetuated by Marshall's black images, doesn't simply accommodate a visual narrative of the Black subject within the discourse of canonical art. Rather, the discourse established a new value system for Black aesthetics, one of Black environments as a cultural space and an extension of the figure. Black-spaces such as barbershops, beauty salons and art

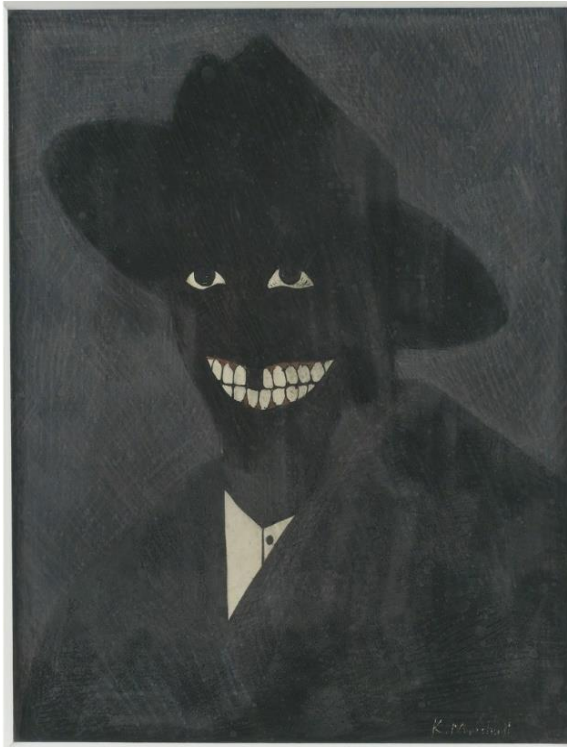


Figure 9.

**Kerry James Marshall**

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self,*

Egg Tempera on Paper, 8" x 6.5"

1980

studios as are, respectively, shown in works such as Marshall's 1993, painting *De Style*, which depicts the interior space of a barber shop and the related activities, his 2017 *Untitled* painting of a beauty salon/motion picture scene and another 2009 *Untitled* piece depicting a painting of a Black woman in her studio painting a paint by number composition of herself. The interest Marshall's Black figures generate, additionally, extend an invitation to the non-Black viewers to metaphorically enter these Black-spaces. The acceptance of Marshall's aesthetic appeal is symbolic of the acceptance of an invitation that would not be accepted otherwise; as such, Marshall shares Black cultural spaces while simultaneously accumulating a clout that consciously or unconsciously makes the lines of racial constraints become less distinct.

The overarching concept within the context of Black figurative representation is the act of situating the Black figure within the dominion of a visually rich tapestry. A tapestry of wealth that comprises the utilities of the traditional practice and the savviness of the contemporary



platform. This is a performance that further establishes autonomy for the Black figure by resisting ethical uncertainties and contradictions, while simultaneously participating in social and cultural exchange.



Figure 10.

**Kerry James Marshall**

*De Style*, 1993

Acrylic on Canvas, 104" x 122"



Figure 11.

**Kerry James Marshall**

*Untitled*, 2009

Acrylic on PVC Panel, 61" x 72"

## **The Self, Monuments and Future-Relics**

A convolution of thoughts that are fueled by the need to allocate the self, in an environment that is supposed to be home, but constantly supplies alien and suspicious contents that contradict the very notion of home, warrants an investigation into matters of identity. Being an artist, I go about this investigation with an aim to consolidate the ideas of self, monuments and future-relics into images. In reference to the Olmec heads from the Mesoamerican civilization that are dated c. 1200 BCE to 400 BCE,<sup>38</sup> I create drawings and sculptures of heads that portray my physical likeness. A likeness that is of African descent, becomes African-Caribbean. The work provides context for this Caribbeanness through the use of designed wallpaper as a navigational tool. The reference to these Olmec heads, essentially provides a kind of sensibility that facilitates a synchronicity of power and aesthetics into image. Additionally, there are other commonalities between the Olmec heads and my drawings such as, the representation of the Black subject and the preservation of culture through image which also exhibit awareness and embodiment of self. My drawings are titled, *Monuments*. Conceptually, they are representations of Black faces which I am projecting as future-relics that represent a group of Afro-Caribbean people. My works are drawn from photographs of individuals who are all Jamaicans; however, the continuation for this series of drawings, will depict individuals from other Anglophone Caribbean countries. The photographs from which I created these drawings range from photos I shot, photos I requested with specific instructions, to photos that were selected from some of my friends' social media pages. While my drawings are of people I know, some of whom are relatives and friends, these particular individuals were chosen in an effort to avoid using people who are famous. This choice helps to avoid a misinterpretation on the

viewers' part, as it relates to the individuals depicted versus the representation of a racial identity.

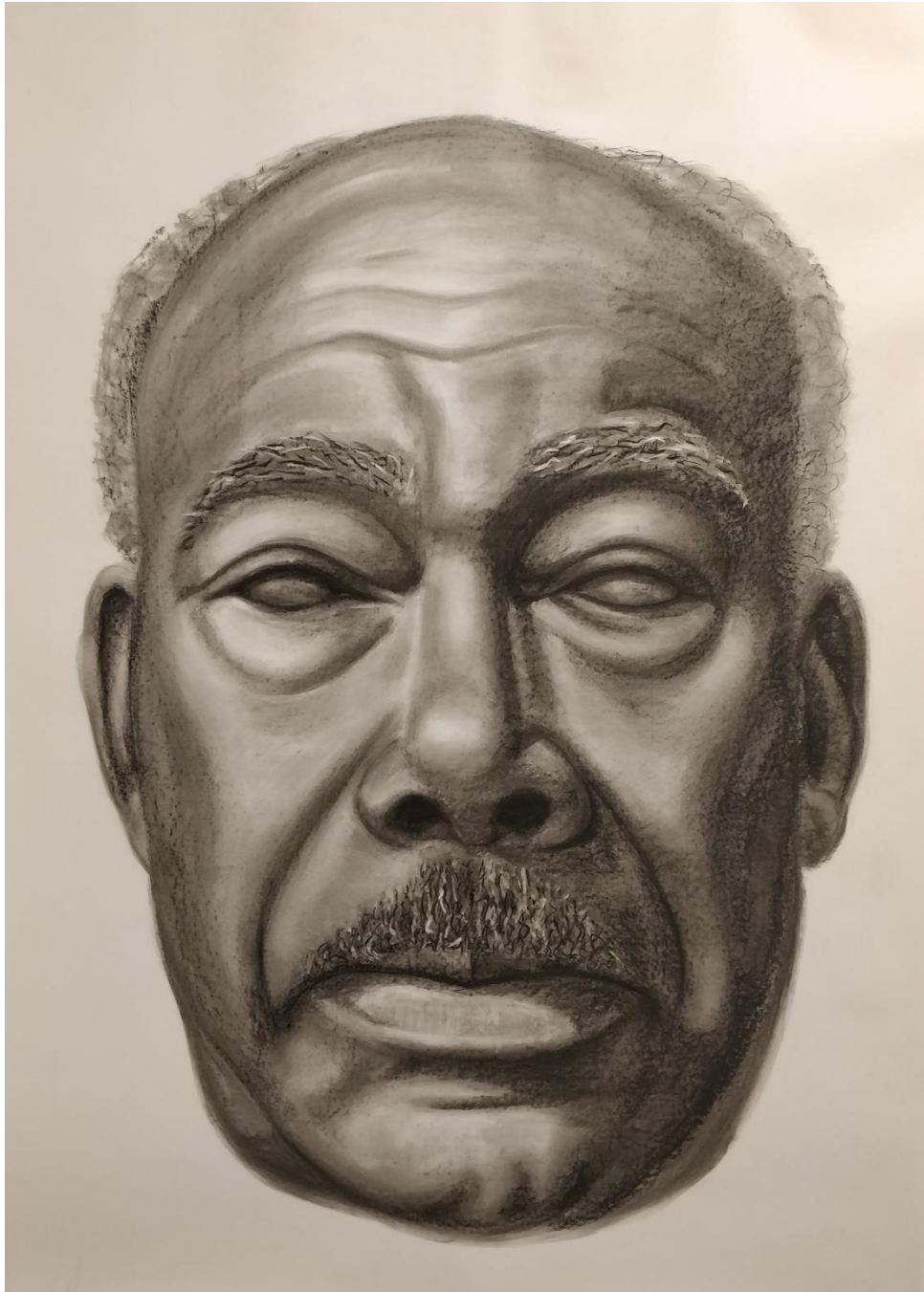


Figure 12.

*Future-Relic: Monument 8*, Charcoal on Paper, 60"x42"

2018.





Figure 13.  
*Future-Relic: Monument 5*, Charcoal on Paper, 52"x42"  
2018

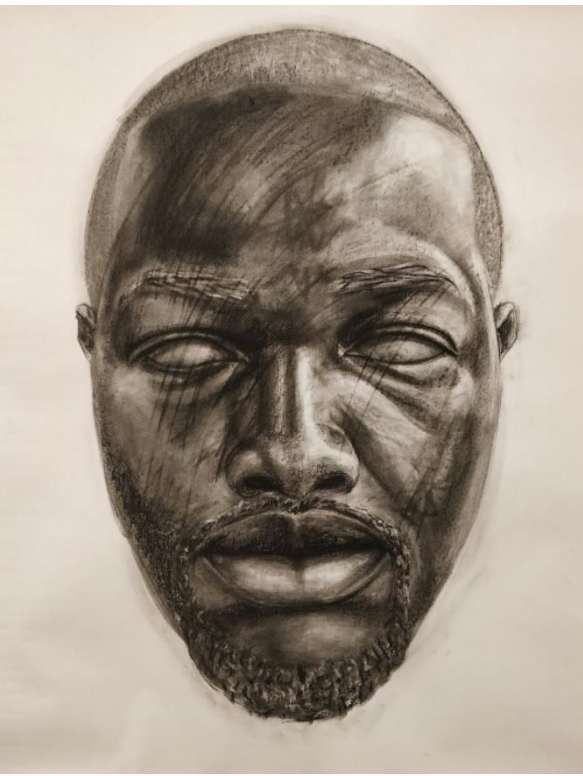


Figure 14.  
*Future-Relic: Monument 4*, Charcoal on Paper, 52"x42"  
2018



Figure 15.  
**Greg Bailey**  
*Future-Relic: Monument 3*, Charcoal on Paper,  
52"x42". 2018



Figure 16.  
**Greg Bailey**  
*Future-Relic: Monument 6*, Charcoal on Paper,  
22"x16". 2018

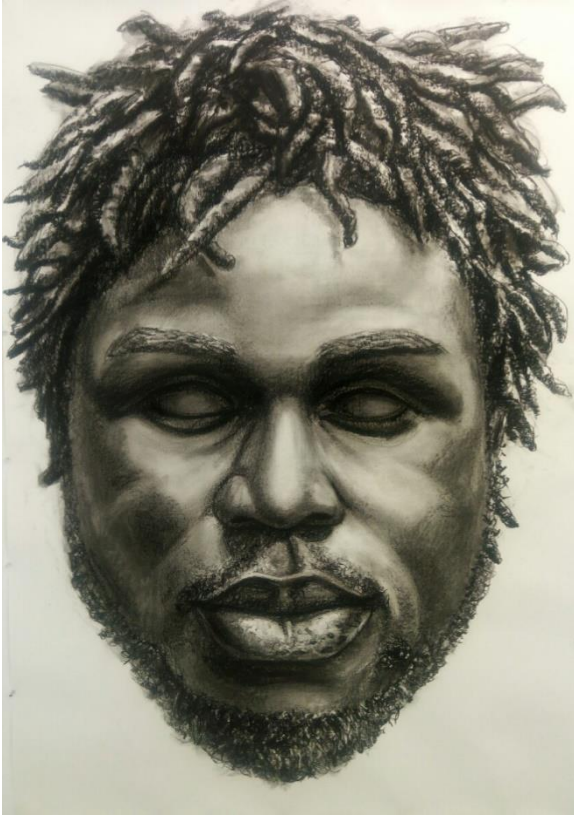


Figure 17.  
*Future-Relic: Monument 7*, Charcoal on Paper,  
60"x42". 2018

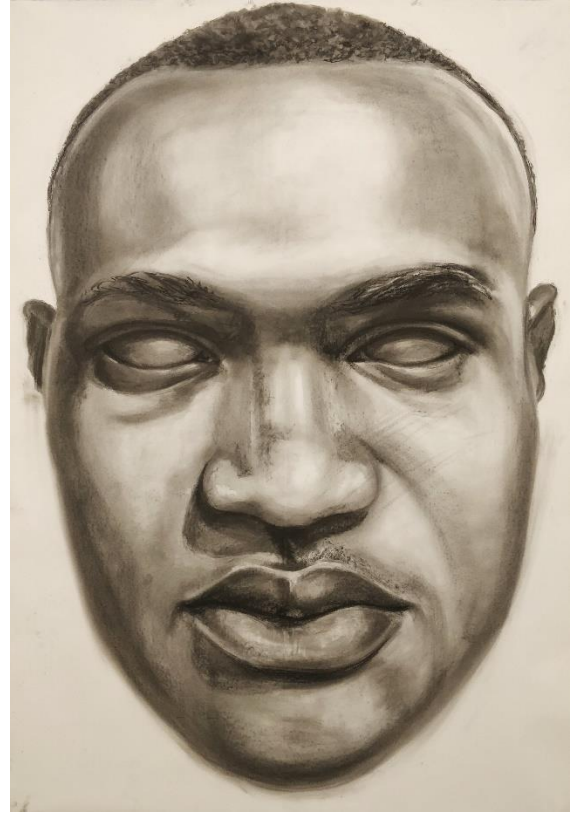


Figure 18.  
*Future-Relic: Monument 9*, Charcoal on Paper,  
60"x42". 2018

The drawings are meant to give the affect of sculptures. Since sculptures of these individuals do not exist, I employ drawing techniques to present a situation in which they do exist; a situation that is illusive but convincing enough to stimulate the imagination. This strategy is meant to elevate the drawings, by engaging the viewer's gaze through the use of scale, image and the choice of medium that was used to make the works. The drawings are 52"x42" and 60"x42" in dimension and they each depict a single head that partially fills up the surface of the page. Each drawing is, therefore, larger than life-size, which projects an overpowering effect on the viewer. The works confront the viewer with neither a passive nor a confrontational gaze, but

their assertiveness does exhibit an authority of the space that they each occupy. The works are made on Strathmore 400 series recycled drawing paper with vine charcoal predominantly and minimal use of soft compressed charcoal to get deeper tonal values. The combination of these media was a process that led me to draw, smudge, erase and redraw the same image on the same surface, repeatedly, until the marks harmonized into a whole image. Through the repetitiveness of this process, the drawings then create an atmosphere in which they become more than an object, but rather an interactive image.

The conceptual play, on *presence* and *absence* is aligned with the presence of Afro-Caribbean people and the absence of cultural artifacts that represents them within the region. There is also the presence of the drawings and the absence of the sculptures that they claim to represent. The works exude bold personality traits and while they confront the viewer, they resist being confronted as the absence of their iris denies the viewer access. Federico Bellentani and Mario Panico agree in, *The Meaning of Monuments*, that; “monuments represent selective historical narratives focusing only on events and identities that are comfortable for political elites.”<sup>39</sup> In the Anglophone Caribbean, the absence of monuments that represent the Afro-Caribbean presence and our contribution to nation-building symbolizes a political intent to undermine Afrocentrism. These types of political applications are hereditary within Caribbean societies and post-colonial nations which over time have developed a numbness to sly means of social and racial exclusion within their very surroundings.

Austrian art historian Alois Riegl, put forward that, “a monument in its oldest and most original sense is a human creation, erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human

deeds or events (or a combination thereof) alive in the minds of future generations.”<sup>40</sup> While the public sphere thirsts for Black monuments that will give recognition to the Afro-Caribbean mass, there are a few, such as Edna Manley’s *Negro Arouse*, and Laura Facey Cooper’s *Redemption Song*, erected at downtown Kingston and New Kingston, Jamaica, respectively.



Figure 19.

**Edna Manley**

*Negro Aroused*, Bronze, 8'. 1983



Figure 20.

**Laura Facey-Cooper**

*Redemption Song*, Bronze, 11'. 2003

These public monuments were created in recognition of the Black identity as an embrace of a culture of self-reliance. While *Negro Aroused* stimulated the public’s imagination on its first exhibit in 1937 at the Institute of Jamaica,<sup>41</sup> the public received *Redemption Song* with mixed feelings upon its unveiling in 2003. The Guardian reported on the public’s anxieties and excitement:

“Every morning the nation's airwaves and letters pages are jammed with comments that range from the puerile to the priggish and the raunchy to the racial; every evening a permanent crowd of different people gather to point, laugh and engage in bouts of public banter that mix art criticism and sex education.”<sup>42</sup>

Conservatives criticized the *Redemption Song* monument due to their disapproval of nudity being on public display, while liberals embraced the pro-black ideologies and commended the sculpture for not following the styles of European Renaissance sculptures.<sup>43</sup> Newspaper columnist Mark Wignall reacted, “Just because Europe's classical statues had small penises, does not mean Jamaica must follow suit”, in contrast to Lloyd Smith, another newspaper columnist, who described the statue as “a rape of our democracy.”<sup>44</sup> The Jamaican public is rather vocal about their public monuments and displeasure can lead to vandalism as was the case with Raymond Watson’s sculpture of Marcus Garvey that was commissioned by the University of the West Indies. The public’s disdain for the sculpture led to it being defaced and its immediate removal demanded. The public was unconvinced about the resemblance between the sculpture and Marcus Garvey and responded to this as being disrespectful to the Right Honorable Marcus Mosiah Garvey, first national hero of Jamaica. Further arguments suggested that “the bust did not have the prominent African features associated with Garvey and persons could not identify with the younger-looking hero.”<sup>45</sup> The intended purpose of a monument provides no guarantee with regards to the public’s reaction.<sup>46</sup> The public may warm-up to some monuments, while others may take on different meanings as time changes, such as the American Confederate monuments. In developing countries, above all else, erecting monuments can trigger the public to rebel and voice concerns regarding the funding of monumental projects in contrast to better usage of the funds to take care of basic needs that are essential for the day-to-day survival of the people. The *Monument of African Renaissance* in Senegal is a prime example of this complexity.





Figure 21.

**Raymond Watson.** *Statue of Marcus Garvey*, Bronze, 7'. 2017

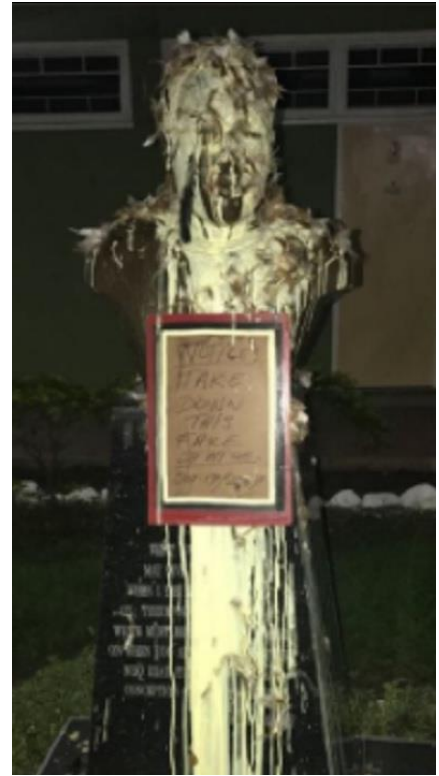


Figure 22.

*Vandalized Statue of Marcus Garvey*



Figure 23.

**Pierre Goudiaby**

*African Renaissance Monument*, Bronze, 160'. 2010

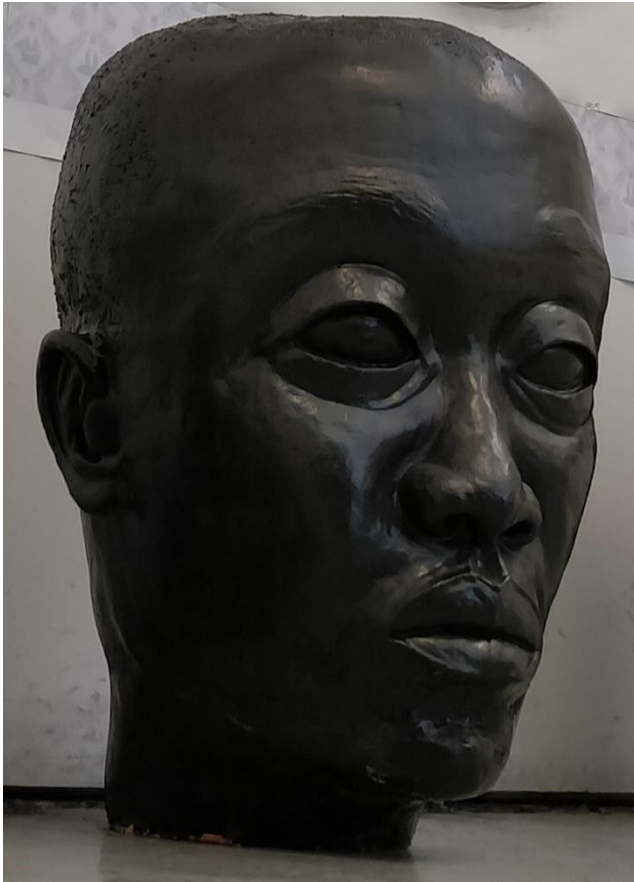


Figure 24.  
*Future-Relics: Sculpture 2,*  
Earthenware, 2'. 2018



Figure 25.  
*Future-Relics: Sculpture 4,*  
Earthenware, 2'. 2018



Figure 26.  
*Future-Relics: Sculpture 3,*  
Earthenware, 2'. 2018

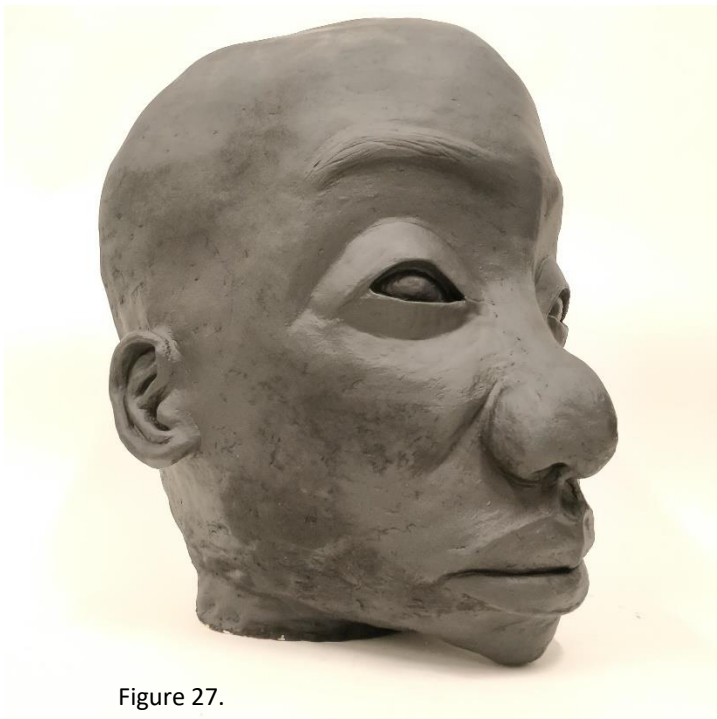


Figure 27.

*Future-Relics: Sculpture 1,*  
Earthenware, 2'. 2018

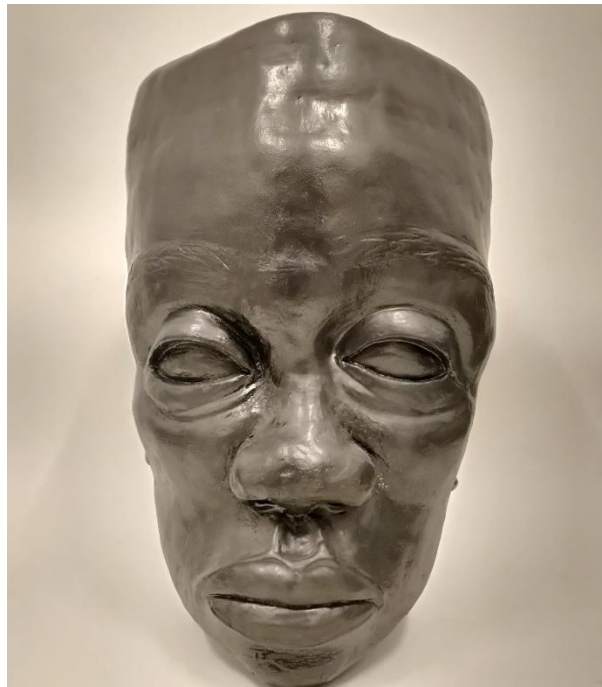


Figure 28.

*Future-Relics: Sculpture 5,*  
Earthenware, 2'. 2018

My sculptures are not public commissions but they were conceived to serve as Black relics to a wide viewing audience. They are monuments within their own right. My monuments are earthenware heads that are colored with black pigment and are approximately 23"x16"x19" in dimension. These works do not aim to capture the resemblance of any particular individual but rather, aim to be an idealistic representation of the Black face. The features such as the eyes, the nose and the lips are slightly exaggerated; just enough to not make the representation comical. Both the male and the female sex are represented as this kind of balance is significant from a futuristic perspective. Representation of both sexes, projects a sense of equilibrium relating to procreation, as well as, intimate, communal and political affairs. Both the sculptures and the drawings share the same conceptual realization and aim to advance the discourse on Black identity and racial consciousness. In this way, both the drawings and the sculptures can serve the



African diaspora but they have the flexibility to give voice more directly to the Afro-Caribbean narrative; the narrative that started with the European contact and the formulation of the *New World*. This narrative is given context, by juxtaposing the drawings and sculptures with a wallpaper designed with patterns illustrating the 17<sup>th</sup> century trading ships and commercial goods from the Caribbean tropics.

My wallpaper design is made up of images of sugarcane, rum, cocoa, a 17<sup>th</sup> century ship and the *Redemption Song* monument. The different symbols are not mere accounts of their individual selves but rather, they speak more holistically about the slave trade, the transportation of goods back to England, the geographical location of the Caribbean lands that contribute to their fertility and ability to produce agricultural products that was profitable for commerce. They also speak to the slave labor of Africans whose victimization came at the expense of their sterility, endurance of the hot Caribbean climate, malnourishment and brutal treatment from their slave masters. The transition from this atrocious reality, to one within which the negro is aroused and sing songs of redemption should be celebrated and valorized within Caribbean societies. The significance of the wallpaper as a conceptual tool in my work, is linked to the use of wallpaper in England who along with France were the first European countries to use this decorative luxury artifact.<sup>47</sup> The link to England is further significant to my work since I am concentrating on the Anglophone Caribbean and how in the colonial era it produced great wealth that contributed to the privilege and opulence with which England reigned. The use of wallpaper as a signifier of opulence within English homes of merchants and aristocrats as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>48</sup> coincides with its use as a navigational tool that provides context and reference for my work. The

drawings are hung on walls that are decorated with this wallpaper. So too, the sculptures are meant to be presented within the presence of this wallpaper.

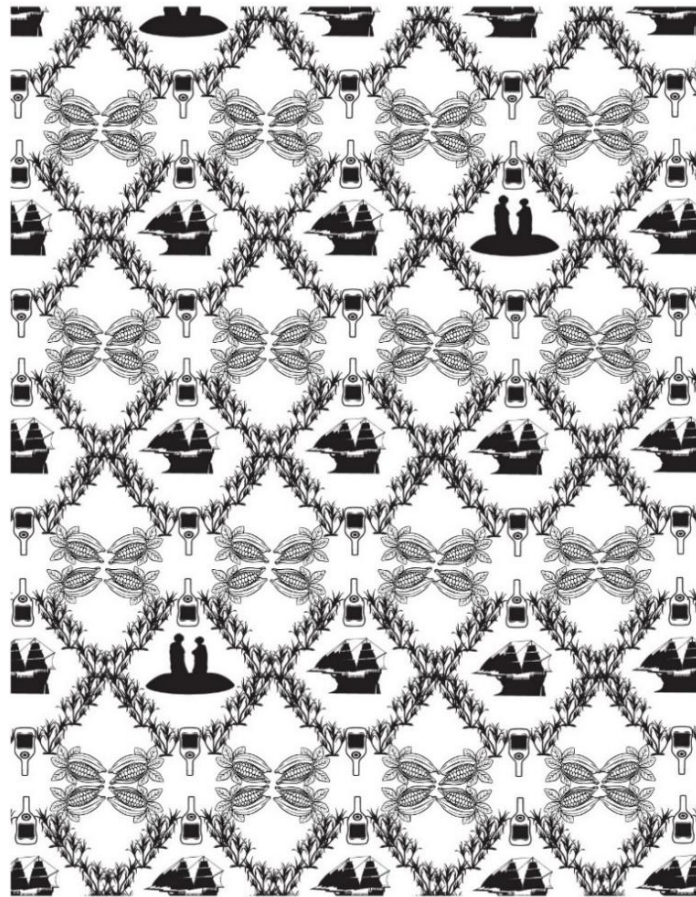


Figure 29.  
*Navigate*,  
Digital Design 2019

The use of wallpaper in my work and the way artist Renée Green uses it, coincides conceptually. In both contexts, the wallpaper is treated as historic object that bears significance to colonial European empires; a history which refuses to remain in the past and instead, lingers in the present. Green's work is in installation form and depicts scenes of racial violence through the images printed on her wallpaper and fabric upholstery which she uses to wrap what appear to be, otherwise nude bodies and furniture.<sup>49</sup> With act of wrapping the furniture and human bodies that represent various racial ethnicities with the printed fabric, Green allows the history

of racial violence to consume an environment that appears to be numbed, hence, unresponsive to being consumed. In contrast, the representation of Black faces in my work, refuses to be consumed by the environment that the wallpaper creates by exuding authority within the space that they are placed.



Figure 24.

**Renée Green**

*Staging: Commemorative Toile*, Installation.  
1992-1994

## Conclusion

In my re-interpretation of the Caribbean, I set out to better understand the contextual ground within which my work would function and influence my conceptual pursuit and artistic interests. I am a part of the socio-geographical Caribbean and my works aim to create a narrative that talks about these people. The narrative projects images that embody the presence of the Caribbean people. A narrative where they are the main subject of discourse. A narrative that aims to recognize their toil and hardship in the building of their respective nations. I represent these people as future-relics through imaginary monumental representations. The representations are bold, Black and embody Pan-African sentiments. My works also address the absence of monuments and public art that justly represent the Afro-Caribbean presence within the Caribbean. Additionally, my works function as meaningful images that contribute to the tapestry of iconographies, which have emerged through prior investigations of the Black self and Black consciousness through literature, visual and performing arts.

The investigation into the identification of the Black self, continues to be a topical issue within the discourse of Black scholarship. My investigation overlapped research and studio practice to create informed images that contribute to Black identity in the exploratory fields of visual arts and cultural studies. By analyzing the cultural setting, I was able to develop a visual aesthetic that would influence a reconfiguration of identity which effectively infiltrates and diversifies the western art canon, to validate Afro-Caribbean art through inclusion in the broader discourse. My work, therefore, is an ongoing investigation that aims to create an iconography that is intended to monumentalize identities. Identities that reflect and record my likeness, my

existence and ancestral lineage through a representation of the physicality of my people and the resources and goods of these lands that are my home. This investigative process uses drawing, painting, wallpaper and sculpture as historic devices and as a practice that readily provides context for observational experience and critical discourse. These modes of artistic practice are platforms that have established themselves as essential molds for cultural discourse. They also function as a facilitator for cross-cultural mapping of the colonial past and the post-colonial present which battle with historic residues that continue to affect the development and operation of the Caribbean.

The work I create in response to identity, culture and the Black presence, takes place in my studio. This happens through a process where my artistic skills and abilities take research and information and transform them into art products. The products are art works that represent the idea of monumentality and allude to sculptural forms such as the Olmec heads from c. 1200 BCE to c. 400 BCE Mesoamerican civilization. The drawings, in particular, are aligned with sculptural aesthetics in an effort to harness the essence of longevity and the preservation of the Afro-Caribbean presence in the Caribbean. My paintings reference contemporary Black artist such as Kerry James Marshall and Kehinde Wiley, who both have articulated a visual vocabulary of how Black artists are re-representing Black people and the Black imagination. I also reference the techniques and ideas of seventeenth and eighteenth-century European painting practices that dealt with colonial power, global trade and the mining of commodities from their various colonized states. I reference these data and reuse them as dialogues for a contemporary discourse that advances Black consciousness and validates the reinvention of the Afro-Caribbean identity in the Caribbean.

## Notes

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- <sup>46</sup> [https://orca.cf.ac.uk/96405/1/Bellentani\\_Panico\\_The%20meanings%20of%20monuments.pdf](https://orca.cf.ac.uk/96405/1/Bellentani_Panico_The%20meanings%20of%20monuments.pdf) Accessed February 5, 2019.
- <sup>47</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/art/wallpaper>. Accessed April, 21, 2019.
- <sup>48</sup> <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/a-brief-history-of-wallpaper> Accessed April, 21, 2019
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