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TRADITIONS OF MEN

CORNELL UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL

APPROVAL OF WRITTEN STATEMENT

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Graduate Field: Art

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COMMITTEE SIGNATURES:

Chairperson:  Date: 4/30/21

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(Student Signature)

Traditions of Men

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts

by Kirk Henriques
May 2021

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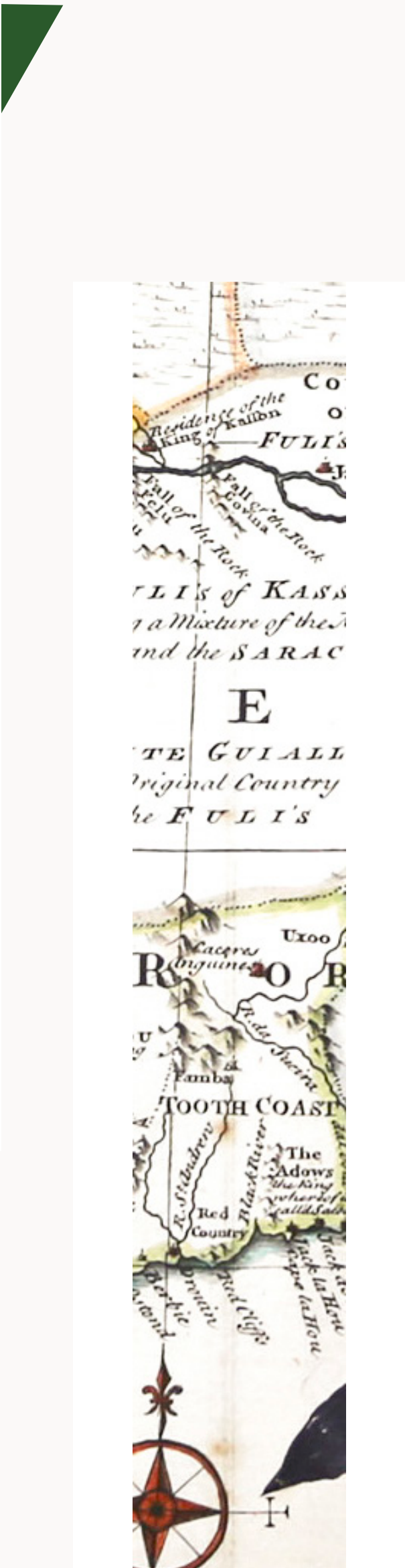
Abstract

By engaging with the history of painting, my decision to use non-traditional surfaces instead of traditional canvas is to disassociate from the history of portrait painting as the legacy of European colonialism. I'm interested in using old master techniques such as glazing to examine how identity is shaped by oppression and assimilation. These transparent glazes over the paintings build layers over time and speak to the washing over of customs and expectations placed on one generation to the next. This thesis will explore the power relations that influence identity, assimilation, and family gatherings such as Christmas. How do these structures govern our behavior and shape our views? The work is meant to disrupt the pagan symbols and iconography of Christmas. Challenging traditional rituals that have been inherited by colonial narratives. How does one act on one's own self-interest in the face of obstacles in a culture that never embraced or included black people?

A vertical strip of a damaged, textured surface, possibly a book cover or endpaper, showing significant wear, discoloration, and peeling. The surface is primarily reddish-brown with patches of white, blue, and dark brown. A metal mesh is visible at the bottom.

Artist Statement

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A vertical strip of a dark, textured surface, possibly a book cover or endpaper, showing a dense, dark, and slightly irregular pattern. The top edge features a small, bright yellow, textured area, likely a piece of tape or a label.

ARTIST STATEMENT

As a painter, I devote my studio to explore figuration and abstraction as an investigation into landscapes, time and memory. My work investigates power structures embedded in the construction and definition of spatial and temporal narratives. Each space has its own protocols and constructs that are in opposition to blackness. How do black people take up space? How are rhythm, posture and style an integral part of how black people explore/define/craft their own being or assert their presence?

How we look and who's looking creates a reliance on visual perceptions that define who we are as social beings. This power dynamic allows those who hold the most power within society to exercise control over others by dominating the visual representations while simultaneously creating a fictional narrative of those who lack power. My paintings jolt the viewer out of their comforting assumptions, perspectives and perceptions. I create new visual terms by challenging expectations of what the figure should be that includes at times forcibly ripping, cutting, and layering my works.

The surfaces of my paintings are not perfect or pristine, rather they are built up and then scraped down. For me this process is a metaphor for resilience; it is my personal experience of resourcefulness, of using scraps to make something whole and new. My use of unconventional materials is a way to challenge traditional painting and expand on my personal and historical narratives.

I intentionally explore lyrical marks, which explore tension between the social psyche of the figure and the formal expressiveness of the work. Thus creating an intersection where the formal and the conceptual elements of the work feed each other.

Much of black people in film and Western art have been defined visually in three small boxes: enslaved, in servitude, or impoverished. It is my intention with whom I paint and the surfaces I paint on, as a way to negate this singular story and limited point of view. I use my authorship of visual representation as a form of resistance through the exploration of how figures navigate visible and obscure obstacles on their way to liberation.

EARLY WORKS

When I think about representation of the black figure it is often one that is sensational, one historically linked to acts of trauma, or the black figure is often linked to some type of phenomena in sports or entertainment. It is in these limited views; I didn't see myself, but has ultimately set boundaries on my life to perform in different spaces. This for me is an inherent expectation of blackness constructed by both the imagery in media and the absence in art history. In my early works, the figures are surrounded in patterns to ask: How do we break patterns? How do the ways black figures were portrayed affect how things are now? What will current patterns suggest about the future?

At the start of my time in Cornell's MFA program, I investigated the way in which black people navigate different landscapes through code switching, bodily gestures, and adaptations. Each space has its own protocols and constructs that are in opposition to blackness. How do black people take up space? How are rhythm, posture, and style an integral part of what black people do?, Even walking is associated with style and individuality. And so I placed the figure in the paintings in a way at odds with their surroundings. Works like "*The Couple*" (2019), "*When we were young*" (2019) are my first explorations of this.

In "*The Couple*", a woman meets the viewer's gaze. A man looks off the picture plane, with an awareness of his presence in space. Visibility and invisibility is present in the constructing of the painting in the relationship between the ground and the figure. There is a tension in a landscape that renders the black body invisible, when the black body in public is hypervisible.



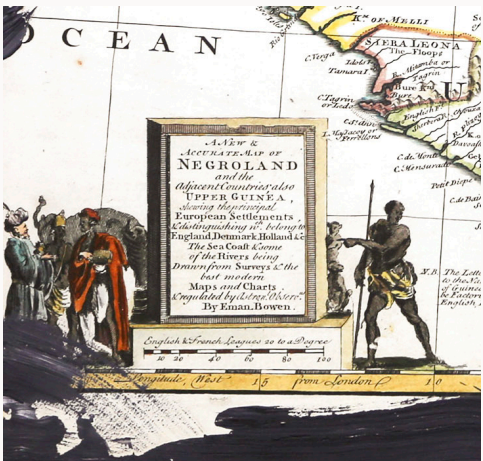
The Couple (2019), oil, acrylic, mixed media on wood, 48" x

In the painting, When we were young, the two figures share a moment of recognition of seeing someone that looks like you in an unlikely setting: an unexpected encounter in a field of color background. Their skin is fully rendered. Their gaze sees each other and no one else. These figures have their backs to the viewer, unbound to a repressive lens that could define them contrary to how they see themselves. Historically, Color Field paintings are a transcendental experience. They are an invitation to spiritual contemplation, outside the social and political. In this painting, I have complicated that by the addition of the figures that own the transcendental experience that we as the viewers only are privy to.



When we were young (2019) oil, mix media on wood, Diptych 48x60 each

I began my interest in maps with a recent exhibition, titled "*Negroland*," (2019). I made to challenge the narrative of my ancestry that I learned in Social Studies as a young student. I was taught a whitewashed version of history, approved and upheld by the school boards due to the lobbying power of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The UDC joined school boards and exercised power over textbook publishers. Without UDC's approval schools would not purchase social studies books. The American history I learned favored to the Confederacy. This fostered a deep curiosity in me. I wanted to know what was beyond the slave narrative and why the name for a group of people kept changing over time. This exploration led me to a 1747 archival map, safely nestled



in the archives of Stanford University, in which of all of West Africa was labeled as Negroland.

This map introduced me to the work of cartographer, Emanuel Bowen. Bowen was commissioned by King George VI and was heavily sought after for his detailed maps. In

1747, Bowen also drew a map of Jamaica, in which the names of parishes remind the same through the generations of my family until present day. Power structures are embedded in the construction and definition of spatial and temporal narratives. These construct relations between time, space and place. Whomever governs and names a land adds a new layer to the understanding of black bodies and geographies.

In "*Legend*," I started a new way of working through exploring abstraction. I was inspired by Jack Whitten's theory of making a painting rather than painting it. I looked at the history of redlining that formed neighborhoods in Atlanta -- the place in which I grew up. I chose imagery of the landscape to depict a system of cultural codes. This was a way to understand the differences between two sorts of color theory: the color theory I studied in school, and the racialized color theory that denied black people access to home loans. Both delineate the space in which I grew up. The way I make the paintings complements the story each tells. I use common material that hold up to traditional works that tell something about the subject, my practice, my intentions toward the subject. I want the viewer to read the gestures and where in the work the formal and conceptual feed each other. I intentionally explore lyrical marks which explore tension between the social psyche of the figure and the formal expressiveness of the work.



Negroland, 2019 archival 1747 map, oil paint on wood panel



Legend (2020) dried house paint, wire mesh on weeds cloth. 34x 72 inches.



Appropriation, I know it when I see it, 2019, oil and mix media on wood, 48x60 inches.

As my work progressed, I focused on figures, which activate their spaces and have agency. "*Appropriation I know it when I see it*," is about seeing. In this painting, what the figures are looking at is denied to the viewer. It is only through the figures' body language that can we envisage what they are looking at. The light from the flashlight casts a shadow on the wall behind them signifying, their presence. By concealing what they are looking at from the viewer we shift the power structure to the figures.



Kumbaya (2020) oil on wood panel, 23 x 36 inches

In "*Kumbaya*", I painted my memory of singing in a choir as a kid while thinking about the sound of harmony all around me and how it vibrated through the space and the body. How is a figure integral to a space? and How does a figure impact its space, and vice versa?

TRADITIONS OF MEN

My thesis consists of a combination of large scale figurative and mixed media abstract works. I staged an exhibit of this work in a traditional museum space, the downstairs galleries at Cornell's Johnson Museum of Art. This work navigates a personal narrative of identity through traditions, exhibited in a traditional museum space. I explore the power relations that influence family gatherings -- for example, a Christmas celebration. The paintings examine how these structures govern our behavior and shape our view on traditions. My approach is to present new works in the grand narrative painting structure like Gustave Courbet, Francisco Goya, and Kerry James Marshall.

The narrative I choose to tell in this body of work spans over different time periods. I trace my family's relation to the history of Christmas, including my introduction to the holiday as a child. In the work entitled, *"X-mas"* a historical photograph from the 1920 of a post card of Christmas celebration reaffirm white supremacy. The black bodies are objectified and reduced to a symbol of the status of the white men in the photo. My distorting of this photograph by crumbling it is a way to eschew the colonial lens and shift the view from the objectified.

In *"Walcott portrait"* (Herold, Carmen, Roy, Dorthy, Angela, Ceretha Walcott & Aunt Jess), I paint a family portrait made in the 1950s in St. Andrews, Jamaica. I portray the generation that taught my mother the ritual of Christmas. My mother then passed on this ritual to me. The paintings are realized by employing traditional techniques such as underpainting and glazing. These transparent glazes over the painting build layers over time and speak to the washing over of customs and expectations placed on a generation to be passed on to the next. By engaging with the history of portraiture painting, I keep the formal aspects that I enjoy such as the modeling of the skin and sense of light. My decision to use nontraditional surface instead of traditional canvas -- and non-traditional subjects -- move away from the history of portrait painting as the legacy of European colonialism.

The work disrupts the pagan symbols and iconography of Christmas. I challenge traditional rituals that have been inherited by colonial narratives. In the painting, *"Hollyberry"*, in a 1970's Caribbean home, I allude to questionable behavior and ritual practices during the holiday that are not openly discussed: rape and human sacrifice. These unthinkable acts are a part of the celebration associated with burning of the Yule log and being under the spell of the mistletoe.



Walcott portrait (Harold, Carmen, Gloria, Dorothy, Roy, Ceretha, Angela Walcott & Aunt Jess)
Oil on fiberglass, 72 in x 144 in, 2021





X-mas, Inkjet on archival paper, 11in X 17in, 2021

When thinking about the pieces, "*The Burial of Tammuz*", and "*X-mas*" in conversation with each other, I start with the adult men with the letters painted on their chest in relationship to the boys at the bottom of the photograph. In this comparison, I want the viewer to be faced with the different power dynamics within this presentation. Manipulating the photo and crushing it shifts the viewer's focus to the bottom of the composition. The boy's body language and their style of dress is similar to the white men in the photo and a form of assimilation. This visually suggests how the boys adapted to these customs and protocols as a benefit and a path to being seen as equals. These terms of being seen as human are further ingrained over time being passed down through generations. My interrogation of this timeline from "*The Walcott Portrait*", "*X-mas*", and to "*The burial of Tammuz*" is a way to understand how traditions shape identity over time. I was interested in the arch from one pain to the next from being objectified in the "*X-mas*" piece, to assimilating in "*The Walcott Portrait*", and then breaking away from traditions in "*The Burial of Tammuz*".





The burial of Tammuz, oil on fiberglass, 138in x 150in, 2021

In *"The Burial of Tammuz"*, my investigation of these figures are through their act of self-determination. The scale of the painting allows the viewer to be fully immersed in the composition and be witness to this action of self-interest. How these figures use agency and are fully present is in direct opposition to how the adult men in *"X-mas"* are tokenized. In this work the viewer is met with a unified jovial gaze filled with freedom and liberation



Detail, The burial of Tammuz



Detail, The burial of Tammuz



Hollyberry, oil paint, lichen on fiberglass, 72in x 138in , 2021





Detail, Hollyberry



Detail, Hollyberry







Evergreen, acrylic paint on wood panel, 20in diameter



Strong drank, oil paint, Zobo, pomegranate on wood panel, 40inx 30in, 2021



In conclusion, this body of work investigates how one navigates a set of inherent terms by society. My interest in the ritual of Christmas came from it being such a big part of my growing up yet being so ignorant to its past. I'm confronting the unknown histories of this tradition of men by using figuration and

abstraction to explore the physical and mental landscapes that come with assimilating into society. In the works I'm grappling with self-realization in the face of obstacles in a culture that never embraced or included anyone other than white men. The history of Christmas that was once banned in 16th century eventually became the American tradition that proved to be a fertile ground with its symbolism and actions for me to explore as a way of understanding the narrative that I grew up with. To me this idea of self-realization and breaking traditions speak to the present. The belief that "what's in the past is in the past", overlooks the systems and laws that grew from that past and cannot be detached from the history of racism.

CONCLUSION







Stronghold, (diptych) 72in x 138in mix media on fiberglass, 2021

SPECIAL THANKS

MARIA PARK

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