Attempting To Adequately Position Elements as Analogies within a Defined Field

Kojo Griffin
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by

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Under the Direction of JOSEPH PERAGINE

ABSTRACT

The purpose of my Thesis is to further develop an artistic practice that involves a thoughtful, drawn out engagement with culture, utilizing immediacy, temporality and improvisation through the formal manipulation of different mediums. My research focuses on these ideas as a continual thread that runs through my work of the past twenty years and gives conceptual unity to the range of stylistic experiments that have come with my growth as an artist. The end result is collage, painting, video and installation that utilizes both the literal and parabolical tearing, cutting and pasting of elements together as analogies within a defined field. The defined field being both the formal area of the work, as well as the conceptual representation of my individual consciousness as expressed through my process. Moving between abstraction and representation allows me to sample my thoughts and present them through a methodology that is consistent with the cognitive interplay of abstract and representative thought.

INDEX WORDS: Black art, Post-colonialism, Post-Post-Modernism, Pseudo-Modernism, Post-Black, Momentism, Self-taught artists, Abstraction, Graffiti, Collage
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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my wife Christy Nitzanah Griffin and my sons Zion, Kether And Osiris for their unwavering support and faith in the face of a difficult journey.
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I would like to acknowledge the great support and assistance of the staff and students of GSU during this process. I am especially grateful for the encouragement of Craig Drennen and Lane Ketner in reminding me of how I got here in the first place.
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1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of my thesis is to further develop an artistic practice that operates as an “active” method of representing my thoughts about culture, human behavior and existence. In this sense “active” is meant to refer to a methodology that involves a thoughtful, drawn out engagement with culture through the formal elements of different mediums, utilizing immediacy, temporality and improvisation. These actions describe my philosophical approach to life as well as a means to represent myself in my work and as my work. As Maurice Blanchot writes of Cézanne’s “concern to express himself”;

“Does he sacrifice himself in this passion which knows no happiness simply so that his paintings might give form to the singular weather of his soul? This much no one can doubt.”

Humbly, I assert that my efforts are in spirit not that different from those ascribed to Cézanne by Blanchot. This idea of the self as the guiding principle in shaping content is the focus of my research and a continual thread that runs through my work of the past twenty years. As such, it assists in giving conceptual unity to the various stylistic experiments that have come with my growth as an artist. The end result is found in collage, painting, video and installation that utilize both the literal and parabolical tearing, cutting and pasting of elements together as analogies within a defined field. The defined field is both the formal area of the work as well as the conceptual representation of my consciousness as expressed through my process. The shifts between abstraction and representation in this work become an analogy for thought processes which mimic the interplay of abstract and representative thought in cognition.
1. **Early Development**

I began making artwork as a means of escaping the realities of life. This brief but melodramatic truth was the result of feeling unfairly placed in a body that was too fat and a life lacking enough qualities to keep me tethered to it with anything other than the promise of fantasy. Never feeling as if I quite fit in anywhere, bearing the burden of fat jokes, and awkwardly shuffling through life while preferring the comfort of my daydreams to a life that seemed outside of my control, I turned to art as a means of solace and ultimately communication. Making art gave me a *tabula rasa* for my thoughts about myself, people and life in general. Eventually I discovered that even if I didn't always fit in, people would respond to my thoughts and my voice in pictures.

By the time I reached High School I had walked through the galleries of The Boston Museum of Fine Arts several times during school field trips and while taking after-school classes there in sculpture and painting. I was amazed by the emotions communicated in paintings like John Singleton Copley’s *Watson And The Shark* (fig. 1.1) which I would revisit with each trip to the museum. I also became fascinated with the graffiti art that I had seen both around Boston and while traveling on Amtrak trains, as an adolescent, between Boston and New Jersey to visit relatives. I would eagerly await the various “pieces” or works of graffiti art, which would roll by as we passed through Connecticut, New York and New Jersey (fig. 1.2). The public display of painting seemed to me at the time to be such a bold gesture made by these shadowy figures whom operated in the clandestine theatre of night, yet were so confident of their ability to have a voice in the world. By twelve years old I wanted desperately to be a graffiti artist and to move
past my little book of sketches, which seemed insignificant in the face of these huge, colorful
statements.

Eventually I met some like-minded friends my freshman year of high school and my edu-
cation in graffiti art began by running around with them after school. I was a rank amateur, a no-
body in the world of “writers,” as Graffiti artists call themselves, but I was dedicated to digesting
the style of graffiti and regurgitating it in my own voice on walls tucked away in and around my
neighborhood. The exhilaration of stepping up to a wall with a limited amount of time to say
something to the world was at the time the most exciting thing I had ever experienced. As I tran-
sitioned from high school to college, from Boston to Atlanta that desire to share my thoughts
continued to drive me to pursue making art on walls, on canvas and on paper. Eventually I start-
ed to become aware of the existence of black artists like Radcliffe Bailey (fig. 1.3), Kara Walker
(fig. 1.4), and Ellen Gallagher (fig. 1.5) who weren’t graffiti artists or underground artists but
were part of a larger, global dialogue on art. I would imagine them as a group of people sitting
around a table, with all the artists in the history of art, having a really fascinating conversation
about art, and life and culture. I wanted to add to that conversation but with something different
to say. Like the 80’s hip-hop, post-punk and nu-wave musicians I admired, I wanted to develop
my own unique voice that could stand on the same stage as the Black artists I looked up to.

2. From Self-Taught to Self Aware

As an undergraduate psychology major I began pursuing ideas for making work that
would draw on my interest in human behavior. Several of my female friends, who were also
African-American had related stories to me about suffering sexual abuse at the hands of relatives who were never held accountable for their actions. Each one could tell a story of essentially being ignored by a parent or grandparent who wanted primarily to avoid a scandal that might be caused by confronting the perpetrator. These stories seemed to resonate with memories I had of dysfunctional relationships in my own family which I felt were often ignored, perhaps due to a tradition of cultural bias or distrust of mental health services among many African-Americans.

Ultimately I realized that by focusing solely on the problems in my own culture I might be missing the opportunity to address how those problems are endemic of the human condition in general.

This is where my first significant body of work began, with an effort to craft narratives that would capture and expose the “worst” common denominators of human behavior. Abuse, rape, violence, neglect, and infidelity are tricky subjects to tackle in paintings without trivializing the subject or seeming overly and sadly sentimental. This is especially true as relates to the Black community, given the historically colonialist and racist agendas aimed at questioning the moral fiber of Black people. This is further conflated by the consequent efforts of the Black community to retaliate against such systemized propaganda by burying many of our worse secrets in our families and attempting to present a morally unified front.

As the social commentator and writer Touré relates in his book *WHO’S AFRAID OF POST-BLACKNESS*;
“..in situations where you do something that your identity group is negatively stereotyped for, you will fear proving those stereotypes true and that will cause you to freeze and fail, or work harder to disprove them.”

In an attempt to avoid as many of those pitfalls as possible I started searching for surrogates that could act out the narratives that I wanted to create. I found inspiration in the works of German Expressionist Printmakers like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (fig. 1.6). As well as The Neo-Romantic figures of Diego Rivera (fig. 1.7), the darkly ambiguous narratives of Paula Rego (fig 1.8). and the portrayals of African-American and working class communities in Jacob Lawrence’s (fig. 1.9) colorful tableaus.

I admired in all of these artists the ability to capture what seemed the essence of human emotion and resilience to struggle, pain and heartbreak. In my youthful idealism I decided that I wanted to speak a language that would be recognizable to the whole of humanity. In order to create the distance to do this while invoking a recognizable intimacy, I began disguising my figures with animal heads, as rag-dolls and teddybears that stood in for the human actors while obscuring any trace of cultural or racial context (fig.1.10).

I continued this work for the next ten years creating a large body of work that included block prints, etchings, serigraphs, monotypes, drawings, collage, painting, installation and sculpture (fig. 1.11-1.13). It was, in effect, what defined me as an artist and it became the voice that would finally give me the platform to share my thoughts, like the graffiti artists I had admired as a child.
THINGS FALL APART

As it turned out I had not adequately planned for the changes that I would experience along the way to success. I found that after several very productive years I was seeing differently and feeling differently about the work I was making although it was bringing me a fair amount of critical and financial success. I was included in several important shows such as the Whitney Biennial in 2000, The “Freestyle” exhibit at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 2002 and The Corcoran Biennial in 2003. In addition I had garnered critical attention and gallery representation in New York, Atlanta, Boston and Italy with ensuing solo shows at each location.

By 2004 I began to feel confined by both the stylistic boundaries of the work and the increasingly negative stories I was portraying. Added to that, the pressures of the combined market forces of dealers and collectors who were clamoring for more violent narratives were subtly influencing me to supply a demand for bodies of work.

Despite the success and accolades I wanted a change that would allow for more freedom in the range of both the form and content which might shape my work. Feeling inspired by Phillip Guston’s successful shift form Abstract expressionism (fig.2.1) to his quirky brand of figurative abstraction, I reasoned that such a dramatic shift, having some historical precedents, was possible. I set out to prove that theory when in 2004 after my second solo show with my New York gallery I decided to stop the work I had become known for and to redefine my work with only the general idea that I was searching for more freedom from limited conceptual and formal boundaries. I was increasingly attracted to the methodologies of Abstract Expressionists like ear-
ly Guston, Joan Mitchell (fig. 2.2), Asger Jorn (fig 2.3) and the more contemporary Charlene Von Heyl (fig.2.4). I met Thomas Nozkowski (fig. 2.5) when we both participated in a group show at The University of Nebraska, and found myself enthralled by his paintings and his patient process for discovering the identity of a painting over extended periods of time. With all of these artists I found that what resonated with me was the sense that they had managed to capture chaos in a bottle and spill it into random puddles on a canvas. Upon viewing their work one finds that there is a continued push and pull between intentionality and automatic painting, which is synthesized into a harmonious and complete whole. Those qualities appealed to me as what seemed to be the most honest methods of crafting work. Honest in the sense of demanding the sort of immediacy that improvisational Jazz demands of a musician in combining technical rigor with intuition and presence.

In seeking to expand the conceptual boundaries of my work I was immediately faced with the need to redefine my artistic vocabulary with new elements, which defied the limits of the figurative narratives that I had been using. Although the ambiguity of both the characters and the narratives had allowed for an open ended reading of the work, I wanted movements, gestures and shapes that were personal yet open to even greater interpretation.

I sought a type of honesty in my work that I was reading in the work of others. The revealing of consciousness through controlled expression seemed to be the best path toward an artistic freedom that would allow me to communicate any number of concepts to my audience. To this end I began making a number of paintings that eschewed the preliminary sketching and planning processes of my earlier work for a more direct approach (fig.2.6). I would find, in time
that this wasn’t the perfect solution for me and that the answer lay somewhere between improvi-
sation and planning.

3  THE LONG ROAD AHEAD

A resolution seemed possible to me if I could traverse the thin but worn path between
painterly expression and loose figuration. I felt that if I could find a personal vocabulary that al-
lowed for the inclusion of my thoughts while resonating with the thoughts and experiences of
others then I could find a common ground from which to communicate. Pure abstraction was not
so much my interest as was a desire to find a methodology that referenced the observable ele-
ments in life filtered through the lens of abstraction. Simply put, I wanted to achieve a back and
forth dialogue with the work, wherein it was both defined by my experiences and revealing new
experiences to me.

For this reason I was further inspired by Guston not only because of his ability to make
drastic shift in his work but for the formal and conceptual elements in his newer paintings which
effortlessly referenced and abstracted humanity. Conceptually the abstract expressionism of Gus-
ton, like Joan Mitchell and Jackson Pollock also resonated with my increasing awareness of the
physical properties of paint. That is to say, I was becoming more enamored of paint and what it
could do when not forced into the service of strictly rendering planned elements in a composi-
tion. Up to that point my work had hinged on creating somewhat tightly illustrated figures with paint as a purely formal element applied in alternately intense hues or pastel hues that served to diffuse some of the angst of the narratives.

In looking at the early work of the Guston there seems to be a similar struggle with his efforts to find an original voice free from overly derivative references to his influences. In his later abstract expressionistic work there was a kind of honesty in the approach that came from letting the paint be paint and thereby allowing for the potential discovery of new visual formulas that might exist outside of the realm of the recognized. With his biggest shift to the more representational cartoon influenced works, arguably his best known work, there is a balance of the intuitive looseness found in his pure abstraction and the social commentary of his earlier work.

I found myself drawn to a similar quality and approach in Charlene Von Heyl’s paintings which skirt the line between abstraction and figuration. They seduce with the promise of something that is somehow familiar yet kept at arms length by the processes they are subject to in her formal pursuit of new forms and experiences. Her references to cultural artifacts are constantly shifting from the pictorial space to the title and back. Cross-referencing each other in a relationship that seems at once purely visceral yet based on obfuscated references hidden in Von Heyl’s coded pictorial language.

I struggled for some time with the weight of these painters and their influence while being sure that there was a particularly “Black”\(^1\) way that I could interpret the process of abstract

\(^1\) For my purposes “Black” refers to the sum cultural tendencies of those who consider ourselves or are considered to be part of the African Diaspora. It is a rather amorphous concept that can refer to either a very specific cultural segment or the whole of the African people and their descendants.
expressionism. Much like Jack Whitten, (fig. 3.1) whom I wouldn’t discover until several years later, I wanted the presence of Blackness in my work to be in the process of me, as a Black person making the work. I wanted the form to be the content, insofar as the form would represent the immediate intersection of the sum total of all the influences that make me who I am.
4 THE RESOLUTION

At some point I began looking at the work of Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden (fig. 4.1) again and I became fascinated with their particularly African-American methodology of creating figurative narratives with elements of abstraction. There are spaces in their work, moments of abstraction that seem to stand alone without the need for the narrative. With both paint and collage they manage to deftly carve up the picture plane into sharp yet expressive geometric shapes that are uniquely African-American and Modernist.

I found that something resonated with me in the movements between the sharp spaces that Lawrence and Bearden created that seemed to reference an African aesthetic sensibility often evidenced in various textiles and wood carvings (fig. 4.2). My experiments in this direction began with attempting to use the most basic geometric forms to create patterns of abstraction that might approach something like a ubiquitous language (fig. 4.3). This idea was based on the widespread use of these shapes in early childhood education wherein the distillation of complex forms down to the basic shapes of circles, rectangles, squares and triangles is used as a learning tool. I felt that there was a disarming innocence in this approach that could possibly allow for an opening of communication between me, as the artist and a culturally diverse audience.

In addition to pursuing the two-dimensional representations of these shapes in paintings and collage I conducted a dialogical art project using children’s wooden building blocks as a means of fostering communication in a public setting. The experiment involved setting up building blocks in a public area and attempting to engage visitors in a type of free play patterned after
what they might have experienced as a child. I found that the blocks did serve as an opening to conversation or at least as a distraction that allowed for some level of discourse.

In his essay *The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond*, Dr. Alan Kirby alludes to this sort of phenomenon as a condition of the post-post-modern or pseudo-modern psyche,

This pseudo-modern world, so frightening and seemingly uncontrollable, inevitably feeds a desire to return to the infantile playing with toys which also characterizes the pseudo-modern cultural world. Here, the typical emotional state, radically superseding the hyper-consciousness of irony, is the trance – the state of being swallowed up by your activity. In place of the neurosis of modernism and the narcissism of postmodernism, pseudo-modernism takes the world away, by creating a new weightless nowhere of silent autism. You click, you punch the keys, you are ‘involved’, engulfed, deciding. You are the text, there is no-one else, no ‘author’; there is nowhere else, no other time or place. You are free: you are the text: the text is superseded.¹

Over the course of the final year of my thesis project those basic building block like shapes would continue to influence my paintings and collage as they transformed into fields of interlocking shapes (fig.4.4). I began making those shapes from sheets of graph paper that are torn and cut in order to mimic modes of cognition that are simultaneously both intuitive and calculated, analytical and synthetical. The resulting work is a combination of painting and collage that presents itself as abstraction yet refers in the shapes and colors to observable phenomenon. The goal of this process is to allow the work to stand-in for my thoughts while connecting with
the audience in such a way that the balance between ambiguity and reference is both enticing and puzzling.

An example of this is the painting *In Close Proximity With The Potential For Cross-Pollination* (fig 4.5) that was included in my thesis exhibit. *In Close Proximity...* is meant to present as both abstract and representational. With forms that reference flowers, the surface is first built up with layers of graph paper onto which paint is squeegeed before any shapes become recognizable.

Although the graph paper originally entered my work as a reference to the modernist grid and for its potential to help organize elements in my compositions, as it is laid down in layers with the varied markings of the squeegee applied paint, it becomes for me an analogy for the intersection of obfuscated order described by chaos theory and the lack of order that is randomness. This analogy is extended in the process of tearing parts of the paper back up (randomness) and reapplying those torn, and now cut, sections according to the complexities of my cognitive ordering (chaos).

In the final layer of meaning the painting is a commentary on the social dynamics of race relations. The Black and Pink flowers are references to race via skin color and the literal potential for genetic and/or cultural cross-pollination when people of varied genetic and cultural origins are brought into close proximity. The question posed by perhaps loosely alluding to Darwin’s experiments with orchids and natural selection concerns the debate over the default nature of humans as inclined to racialism or hybridization.
Making visual art has been my primary form of expression for as long as I can remember. I started drawing as an awkward child with encouragement, in the form of praise and art supplies, from my family and the guidance of public school art teachers. As an adolescent and young adult I idolized graffiti artists, imitated them and would eventually join their ranks becoming a semi-professional artist along the way, cutting my teeth, as it were by painting at first in streets and alleys and then for businesses on signs and buildings.

Lacking a true formal education in art those walls were my schooling in tackling large compositions as large sweeping areas to be transformed with thoughts and ideas. This informal schooling would give me the confidence to make an attempt at creating and sharing art in the arena of the art world despite the fact that I knew very little about it’s inner workings and was woefully unprepared for some it’s harsher realities.

Ultimately, the process of undertaking my research and experiments into what would become my Thesis, has helped me to understand that conceptually I have had the same goal all along, with different results. My work has always been about encapsulating my psyche in forms and sharing that with other people, as a means of communication. This effort, at communicating with my audience may happen through shapes, or sounds, or words, yet it is ultimately rooted in a personal semiology that is constantly growing through shared human experience.
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Figure 1.3 Radcliffe Bailey *Exodus*, 2002, Resin, acrylic, clay, photographs, and Plexiglas on wood, 80 x 80 x 4 in., Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS. Available from: http://webs.wichita.edu/depttools/depttoolsmemberfiles/ulrichmuseum/acquisitions/Bai-ley_Exodus.jpg.
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