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doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/1885328>

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# AMBIENT VOID

by

JOY PHOENIX M. SAVAGE

Under the Direction of Ruth Stanford

## ABSTRACT

The constructed works of Phoenix Savage point to the negotiated world of African Americans. Savage explores her artistic process in relationship to racial tensions both personal and historical.

INDEX WORDS: Cast ceramic eggshells, Sculpture, African Americans, Labor, Art, Slavery, Object, Narrative

AMBIENT VOID

by

JOY PHOENIX M. SAVAGE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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2011

AMBIENT VOID

by

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Committee Chair: Ruth Stanford

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John Decker

Craig Drennen

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2011

## DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to every human being walking the streets of Atlanta,  
oblivious to the enormity of human labor expended by the lash of the whip.

“So it is better to speak, remembering, we were never meant to survive.” Audre Lorde

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Thesis Committee Chair, Ruth Stanford, along with George Beasley, John Decker and Craig Drennen, for their insightful comments that guided me to the completion of this degree. While not a committee member, Mike Wsol served a critical role in bringing my work to fruition. His willingness to share his knowledge on parametric design was invaluable. In the construction of Ambient Void there were many students that assisted in string eggs, and supporting me through the process. I extend a heartfelt thank you to the following, Nimer Aleck, Paul S. Benjamin Kelly O'Brian, James Vanderpool, Eric Sarbach, Sarah Maundy, Laurie Martin, Andrew Cho, and others too numerous to mention. Throughout the installation process, notwithstanding, I was supported by two very able bodied assistants who stood on a ten foot ladder for a very, very long time, Thank you Kevin, and Lloyd. Thank you to a very supportive friend, Bebe. I extend a gracious hand of gratitude to my friends, family and ancestors who have continuously supported my artistic endeavors. Adupe.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world--I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

Zora Neal Hurston

I am not Black by accident, yet to be concerned with my blackness, suggests I am militant, too racially identified, meaning that I am too sensitive, or that I pretend that my blackness means more than it should. As a black artist I must either brandish a warrior's sword, or stand naked as the emperor without clothes; yet parade as if I am fully dressed. There is a nebulous space within American society that is wholly experiential with few descriptions suitable for explanation. The words of Louis Armstrong express my thoughts best. When asked to describe Jazz Armstrong replied "If you have to ask... you'll never know." Armstrong is not suggesting we should damn the listener for not getting Jazz, but challenges the listener to perhaps hear in a different way. He is suggesting that they listener, not intellectualize what Jazz is, but explore a the art of syncopation through the senses.

Experience has demonstrated that my works are expected to be Black, but not really. When they are accompanied with the historical narrative I employ to create them, that information is deemed "too much," and "un-necessary." When the work is not with historical narrative, then it fails to capture the dialog of aesthetic merit. There is a no win situation at play; history, socialization of the races and sheer consumption of

cultural appropriation deny the Black artists space to express an idea that is not freighted with race. I feel trapped in a space that dictates that my art must be about being Black. While at the other end of this space, when my art encompasses pure form, materiality, and concept, then I face the denial of my blackness. Critical analysis of principals of design within a work of art, as a rule does not include the topic of race. It would appear as if there is a difficulty in discussing works of art in terms of both race and its presentation of design principles. This point is illustrated in excerpts of reviews of the works of David Hammons and Martin Puryear. "There is something very meditative and transformative about his sculptures and the way in which they subtly play off recognizable forms. Puryear handles and controls his material in the most impressive and surprising ways. His sculptural abilities transform wood (as well as wire and tar) into unique forms that resonate in visceral and psychological ways."<sup>1</sup> Compare this with a statement regarding Hammons, made by Peter Schjeldahl of the *New Yorker*, "I didn't ask him what it's like being black in a profession that remains overwhelmingly white."<sup>2</sup> Had the writer asked Hammons his question would the question or its answer alter the aestheticism of Hammons works?

If I construct a sculptural object solely of Dixie cups, am I exploring form and materials, or making a statement about being Black in the South? Pinder notes in her review of black representation in art history that what I am describing is like, "writing with the left hand while erasing with the right."<sup>3</sup> While race affords white artists an element of artistic safe space, it invariably denies that to Black artists. I am not implying Black artists are forced to make only art about being Black, what I am suggesting is the

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<sup>1</sup> WWW. Word Press Blog, *Horses Think* January 7, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Schejeldahl, Peter. *The New Yorker* December 23, 2002

<sup>3</sup> Pinder, Kymberly. *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (Sep., 1999), pp. 533-538.

very point that Armstrong implied. Not that a viewer is incapable of understanding my artwork, but as with understanding Jazz, the people seeking to understand are using the wrong measure of analysis to gain their understanding.

The admixture of Black history as a key component of my work should not be the only basis for understanding the works. My works are the result of good design with aesthetic merits; this too should be a consideration of analysis. However experiences as proven that the minute a viewer fails to understand the “black statement” lurking within the works, then that failure condemns my art as well.

### **1.1 Artistic Approach: History**

My artistic practice consists of the creation of works using historical facts. Early on I chose to use history and historical fact to legitimize my work. It was clear to me my race would affect how people questioned my work. I erroneously perceived that if I used a real fact from history that I could move the viewer into looking at the aesthetics of the work. The problem with my approach has a lot to do with historical assumptions. As with any student, I was lead to believe that what we read in school was true. I believed that the extrapolation of historical facts was going to be experienced in the same way people accept historic facts learned in school. I believed that it was reasonable, that my sculpture *Picnic*, (*fig. 1*) embedded as it is with historical facts, should be as significant as the paining, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. An obvious difference notwithstanding *Washington Crossing the Delaware* supports hegemony.



(Fig. 1, Phoenix Savage, Picnic, 2007, Painted Found Objects, 12" x 20", Private Collection).

My sculpture references lynching and subverts the very idea of hegemony. However, nearly all analysis on Leutze's painting includes both issues of its historic merit and its aesthetic worthiness as a work of art. While the painting illustrates numerous historical inaccuracies, these seem to play no role in commentaries about the work's merits.

Because I placed such a high value on the legitimacy of historic facts, I sought to obtain this same legitimacy for my artwork as well as asserting my authenticity as an artist. What art school has shown me is that my white contemporaries do not share these same needs for artistic legitimacy. It is enough for a white artist to conceive and do. As one of my fellow white students remarked in an off handed congratulatory statement regarding my Fulbright Fellowship, "so you had to win that to compete against my nothing." As painful as this statement is, it is true.

## **1.2 Artistic Approach: The Object**

I am an object maker. I am a strong proponent for art as object. I am interested in the problematic relationship between social history and objects. I maintain my relationship to the object because I feel strongly that an element of the collective historical existence of Blacks in North America has been one of total objectification. By staying connected to the relationship between object/objectification, I am able to explore both my personal experience with race in America and that of the collective historical experiences of Black Americans. I use the process of creating objects as a platform for visual exploration of a past that is at best difficult to maneuver and often underrepresented in visual culture.

My relationship with my art as object of objectification is also an issue of dimensionality. A dimensional object offers the viewer navigable space to explore issues that heretofore may have gone uncharted. The incorporation of history as an element of the work's construction, asks the viewer to be receptive to the various meanings of the works. Perhaps I am asking too much? However, I have yet to discover a way out of this dilemma. I enjoy being Black and want to allow the interpersonal experiences of my human existence to be an integral part of my work, just as it is for white artists.

## **1.3 Artistic Approach: Labor**

Many of my works specifically explore narratives related to Black American labor. One source of inspiration includes *DeBow's Review*, an agricultural publication from 1846-1880 known for its articles on the management of slave labor. Antebellum diaries are also of interest, as they are nearly surgical in their description of the daily labor habits of Black workers. Historian Charles Dew's research and writing's focuses on southern industrial labor relations on Iron Plantations. Historian John Blassingame skillfully uses the first person narratives of the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Slave Narratives in his publications on slave labor. These works provided deep caverns from which to mine nuances regarding how Blacks negotiated the use of their bodies relative to laborious tasks and their humanity. Labor is significant because it is embedded within historical action and is a form of action that silently objectifies collective Blackness. Whether Blacks were cultivating rice crops along the Georgia Sea Islands or smelting iron on Virginian Iron Plantations, their physical, psychological and spiritual will forcefully harnessed in the form of imposed labor served as the undercurrent for each of my sculptures.

## **2      Prior Bodies of Work**

I generally attempt to create a new body of work every ten to twelve months. Bodies of work for me consist of working consistently on an arching idea that guides the course of the work.

## 2.1 Aunt Jemima Redux

*Aunt Jemima Redux* removed the Slave from the Box and became an exhibition that allowed women to locate their lives within the historical narrative of domestic labor. As a personal example of domestic work, my mother graduated from college in 1978 which made her the first in a long line of women who would earn a living outside of the realm of domestic worker. While Betty Saar reimaged Aunt Jemima as a militant Black woman totting an automatic machine gun, I position the sculptures in *Aunt Jemima Redux* not as negating their role as domestics, but negotiating their labor within the complexities of race, gender, and class. The sculpture *I Wear Purple to Forget* (fig.3), offers both the dilemma and the interpersonal triumph. Unlike Saar's representation of the angry black woman, *I Wear Purple...* takes a heuristic approach aware of the domestic's position of powerlessness to prevent the sale of her son. She does not succumb to the denial of her humanity, but instead uses color, a color of royalty to sooth her memories.

There were twenty-one individual figurative sculptures made from plaster body castings that comprised *Aunt Jemima Redux*. *I Wear Purple To Forget*, (fig. 2), *Buttons Buttons*, *I Sell Flowers*, *Overworked*, *Say Jesus and Come to Me*, *Dinner is Served*, *Wade in the Water*, *Back Door Papa*, *No I Did Not*, *Indigo Green*, *Tar Baby*, *I Stole Ole Missus Gold*, *Ninnie Jugs*, *Juan Diego*, *For Sale*, *Free and Enslaved*, *Blood Child*, *Dear Nation*, *Too Black Brown Girl*, *Steal Away Quilt*, *Aunt Jemima's Box*.





(Fig. 2, Phoenix Savage, *I Wear Purple to Forget*, 2002, Handmade Paper & Plaster, Variable Dimensions, Destroyed Hurricane Katrina.)



(Fig. 3, Phoenix Savage, *I Wear Purple to Forget* (detail), 2002)

## 2.2 Black Like Me

*Black Like Me* takes its title from a Langston Hughes poem entitled

*Dream Variation.*

*To fling my arms wide  
In some place of the sun,  
To whirl and to dance  
Till the white day is done.  
Then rest at cool evening  
Beneath a tall tree  
While night comes on gently,  
Dark like me-  
That is my dream!*

*To fling my arms wide  
In the face of the sun,  
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!  
Till the quick day is done.  
Rest at pale evening...  
A tall, slim tree...  
Night coming tenderly  
Black like me.*

John Howard Griffin adopted the title for his memoirs of experiencing life as a Negro. Griffin was a white journalist who altered his pigmentation to experience the Jim Crow South as a “Negro.” Each sculpture’s title within *Black Like Me* serves as an entryway into the historic narrative depicted in the work. Created in 2007-2008, the body of sculptures also entitled *Black Like Me* became a reaction to my experiences while living in a small Louisiana town that was replete with racism. *Black Like Me* comprised multiple sculptures each exploring an aspect of my experience. Within the body of works comprising *Black Like Me*, I have selected to discuss *Fire In The Belly Of God* (fig.4) *Picnic* (fig.1), and *Johns Henry’s Legs* (fig.5). The other sculptures that comprise this body of work are: *Black Nostalgia*, *American Ndebele*, *Mississippi*

*Medusa, They All Look A Like, Omo Ogun, Memory Board, Gilded Slave In A Box, White Noise, African Abacus and Ademmu Ketta Pa.*

### **2.3    *Black Like Me: Fire in the Belly of God***

*Fire in the Belly of God* was a direct reference to the decade of Church burnings that took place from the early 1990's into the next decade. Each tag suspended from the charred wooden crosses served to recall the name, location and date the church was burned. There were over 100 reported church burnings. These crimes of arson primarily took place in the Southern part of the United States. It was these Southern Church burnings that brought me South in 1996. Living in New Mexico, with a Black population of slightly more than two percent, I was awe struck to read news of Black Church burnings in my local paper. The articles were relentless and one church after another was burned. In some cases, two or more churches burned on the same night within the same community. The more I read the more I desired to understand for myself how these communities were fairing with these tragic events as well as their rebuilding efforts. There came a point when my curiosity of the news of these events took over my life. Within weeks of learning of the burnings, I was packing up and heading South, with no real formulation of what or where I was going. During the nearly ten years I spent living in Mississippi, I interviewed and documented nearly a half dozen communities in which a church burning had occurred. *Fire in the Belly of God* was intended to be hard hitting and undeniable in its visual cry for justice. The open circle was indicative of the universe and served as a way to symbolize a connection to

something larger than the small rural communities in which these church communities were located. The dangling tags emphasized the repetition of the crimes. With each charred wooden cross calling to mind Ku Klux Klan cross burnings, *Fire in the Belly of God* (fig.4) positioned contemporary history alongside that of swept away historical events that ignited racial animosity. The red raffia was both a device to signify fire, as well as Africa. Raffia is a frequent medium of indigenous African sculptures.





(Fig.4, Phoenix Savage, *Fire in the Belly of God*, 2008, Forged Steel, Charred Wood, Raffia, 72"x12"x 72", Permanent Collection, Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries, Atlanta, GA.)

## 2.4 ***Black Like Me: Picnic***

*Picnic* (fig. 1), while seemingly self-evident in its meaning is nonetheless visually surreal with its monochromatic black painted objects. The larger than life size eating utensils suggest the devouring of something. The benign nature of a picnic is thwarted by the presence of a hangman's noose.

Urban legend purports that the word picnic, is a derivative for “pick a nigger.” This false belief was so pervasive that for a good period of time, the lead page for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's website, (NAACP), decried its false-hood. Yet the rumors still persisted. Wikipedia informs the reader that the etymology of what is a benign engagement of communal fun did not derive from the practice of lynching.

## 2.5 ***Black Like Me: John Henry's Legs***

*John Henry's Legs* (fig.5), brings to mind childhood songs of the *Ballad of John Henry*, or the fable of the “steel driving railroad man.” Using materials as a clue, the legs of the sculpture are welded rail road spikes standing erect and strong to denote the superior human strength implied in the fable. The cast bronze feet are marred suggesting a hard existence. The real John Henry was a twenty- four year old man, sentenced to hard labor for a minor infraction at a local grocery store. While imprisoned he was leased out to mining companies hired to set dynamite along a mountain side to

make way for railroads. Legend has it that he challenged a steam drill and he won by a few seconds, but collapsed from exhaustion and died within in hours of his hollow victory.<sup>4</sup> The height of the sculpture mirrors that of the man, less than five feet tall.

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<sup>4</sup> Nelson, Scott. *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry: The Untold Story of an American Legend*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.





(Fig.5, Phoenix Savage, John Henry's Legs, 2008, Bronze, Welded Steel, 48"x 12" x 24, Collection of the Artist).

### 3 *Mojo*

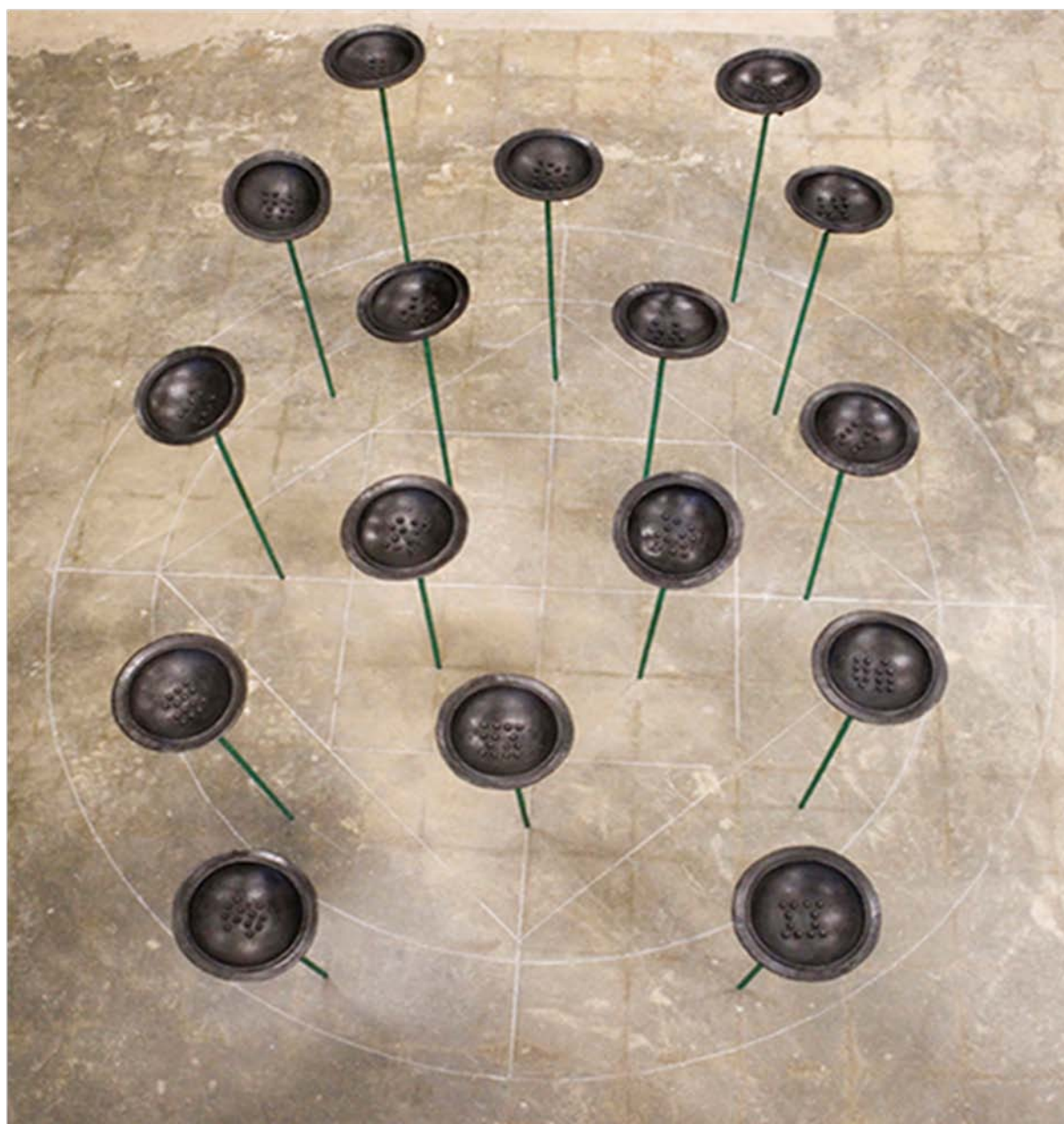
The collection of works entitled *Mojo* implies history without denoting it as pointedly as before. If before I was fundamentally saying do not ignore this history, then with *Mojo*, I wanted to explore the aesthetic merit of the works. I did not offer the viewer historical dialog. In the case of the sculpture *Mojo*, (fig.6) I employed the lost wax technique to cast iron, a medium and a process that denotes history.

I began casting iron with George Beasley after reading a book he shared with me called *Bond of Iron*.<sup>5</sup> I was not initially interested in cast iron. I thought it lacked the luster and high art status of bronze. Ironically those became the very reasons I embraced iron as a casting metal. Once I understood the relationship between cast iron and Industrial Slavery, I saw the connections this held for my work, particularly in terms of my object/objectification interest. It was a natural fit that I would work in iron.

The body of work entitled *Mojo* comprises nearly fifty cast iron objects. Many are individual units that assemble to make a whole. This can be seen with the sculpture *Mojo* (fig.6) is a sculpture that is eight feet in diameter with sixteen up turned lids embedded with a raised surface that serves as a code. The code is derived from the Ifa Yoruba divination system of Nigeria, West Africa, comprising 256 possible coded configurations that serve as communication between humans and the forces of nature. Each lid teeters precariously on steel rods, symbolizing the tenuous nature of a world in flux and balance.

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<sup>5</sup> Dew, Charles, *Bond of Iron : Masters and Slaves at Buffalo Forge*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994.



(Fig. 6, Phoenix Savage, Mojo, 2009, Cast Iron, Chalk, Steel, 96" x 48"x 96", Collection of the Artist).

#### **4. The Conundrum**

After creating the aforementioned bodies of work, it was becoming increasingly clear that most white viewers were not seeing what I intended with the work. They did not understand the totality of the work and the critical dialog intended to accompany the work never began. In most cases the conversation stopped shortly after the word “black.”

However, it was no longer significant to me as an artist that all viewers experienced the totality of these works. It was no longer vital to convey to the viewer the historical threads I had researched for each sculpture. I wanted my work to be engaged on the merit of its aesthetic worthiness. Could the audience enjoy it without in-depth understanding of its meaning? Did the work need to mean something to anyone other than myself? Was there an emotional and artistic benefit if I released myself and my art from issues of blackness, from history, from my own story or any story?

I have always sought to create works that satisfied my need to research and to have a connection to the sculptural process. My experience indicated that perhaps the audience just did not care or need to know what I knew. In which case, how successful would my art read if it were viewed as an object, divorced of information that revealed implications to Black history? My conundrum as an artist was finding an inner personal space of comfort to create and meet these challenges. How would I feel with the idea of divorcing my racial identity from my work? What is a reasonable expectation that I

should have of a viewer? What form of work would I need to make to shift the conversation to the aesthetic merits of the work? With my next body of work, *Ambient Void*, I set out to see if I could address these issues.

## 5. ***Ambient Void: An Answer?***

Creating the sculpture *Ambient Void* was an opportunity to explore various forms of resolution to my previous questions. I began with a set of personal challenges. I wanted to work in a medium that indicated fragility- so I chose to create over 12,000 handmade ceramic egg shells as the motif for the sculpture. Another objective was to avoid materials and methods that gave the work away as being “black.” Here again the white of the eggshells served to camouflage this issue. It was increasingly important that the resulting dialog regarding the work stand on aesthetic merits of visual interests, balance, repetition and intrigue.

I used eggshells because eggs hold childhood memories associated with labor. As a child, curious of the miss-matched porcelain teacups, saucers, and the inlaid decorated eggs that adored the dining room curio cabinet, I inquired of their unusual presence in our home. My grandfather, a longshoreman on the docks of the Delaware River in Philadelphia, PA, explained that in the process of off-loading cargo ships crates sometimes fell and dropped open. In many cases the workmen were allowed to retrieve the previously enclosed items. However, my Grandfather went on to say that there were also times when the men purposefully dropped the cargo crates. The implication being that open containers were fair game, and the workmen reaped the benefit. My

grandfather would present these tokens of his labor as precious gifts to my grandmother. My long held interpretation of these actions informed me that eggs, more so than the teacups and saucers, were a reward for hard labor. The juxtaposition of the gentle nature of a fragile egg to the calloused hands of dockworkers captured my imagination. “How far had the eggs traveled?” I would often ask my grandfather, who would gently handle the eggs, reading off their port of origin. The most beautiful were those eggs that traveled all the way from Portugal.

### **5.1    *Ambient Void*: Intent of Idea**

I imagined *Ambient Void* as a sculptural installation, in contrast to my earlier reliance upon objects to carry the weight of narrative. In the case of *Ambient Void* I did not apply obvious narrative. I did not have a preconceived concept of what it meant in terms of black history or culture. I suppose that psychologically I was aware of my own *Ambient Void*. I existed as myself and as an artist in the studio, but at the same time, I felt a sense of emptiness, as in being of the group but not a *part* of the group. There are a host of reasons for that feeling none of which are completely racial. There are vast age differences as well as experiential differences that exacerbated this feeling of emptiness. As with the women depicted in *Aunt Jemima Redux*, I chose to harness the empty feeling and plug it into the sculpture with the negative space creating a woman. I was not racially specific in selecting a silhouette to extrapolate from.

It was important to create a feeling of vulnerability. Again this relates back to a heuristic model of human experience I perceive Blacks to have engaged in their battle

between their contested labor and their dignity. The presence of nearly 12,000 slip cast eggshells suspended in space required the viewer to engage the sculpture gradually as he/she approached in order to perceive the void of the human figure inside.

While *Ambient Void* is in keeping with other figurative works in my repertoire, it does not specify a narrative solely inherent in Black culture. *Ambient Void* was created employing parametric design that proffered a blueprint (Fig. 9) setting parameters that had to be followed exactly for the image to appear. This process removed all of the artistic intuition normally present in my art making process. Because of the parametric nature of the design I found myself emotionally detached, and completely removed from issues of race and history presented in previous work. The plan only provided a set of parameters that had to be followed, and a straightforward set of instructions as to how to relate to those numbers. The process did not present the option to feel one way or another.

## 6. Conclusion

I began my education experience at Georgia State University determined to create objects that were primarily made of cast metal. I sought durability, and permanence that I viewed as a record of not only my existence, but the existence of a Black experience. By creating works of immutability it was my belief that I was securing a place for both my personal experiences as well and Black experiences previously hidden. In the end, I created a sculptural installation comprised of fragile materials that are not permanent. At the end of the run of *Ambient Void*, each of the 260 lines of egg shells were dribbled into clear plastic Ziploc bags thus compressed into an unreadable

experience. Photographs serve as the only record of its prior formation and thus its existence. The sculpture did not belie any traces of race, ethnic indent or history. I have not fully resolved how I feel about the sculpture. I enjoyed the process of creating *Ambient Void*. However, there is a part of me that feels a sense of ambiguity with my relationship to works that belie racial identity when in society it is inescapable. I am still pondering how to resolve this and other questions rose in the creation of *Ambient Void*.





(FIG. 7, Phoenix Savage, *Ambient Void*, 2011, Slip Cast Ceramic, Collection of the Artist.)



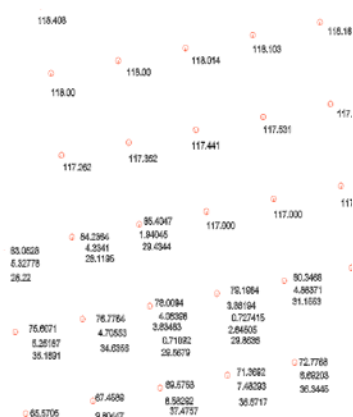


(Fig. 8, Phoenix Savage, Ambient Void, Slip Cast Ceramic Eggshells, 2011, Collection of the artist.)





(Fig.9, Phoenix Savage, Ambient Void-detail, 2011, Slip Cast Ceramic, Collection of the Artist.)



(Fig. 10, Phoenix Savage, Blueprint for *Ambient Void*, 2011, Rhino 3D, Collection of the Artist.)

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