Plot and Escape

Paul Stephen Benjamin

Georgia State University

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ABSTRACT

According to Aristotle, plot is the means by which a story is told or unfolds. In my plot, I have revised the narrative regarding the artist of color. The “native informant” dies because there is no longer a need for him to exist. The artist of color escapes from the narrowly defined constraints of how his work can be viewed and understood. His work is considered for its accomplishments (or failures) technically, aesthetically, and conceptually.

PLOT AND ESCAPE

by

PAUL STEPHEN BENJAMIN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts
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PLOT AND ESCAPE

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife Cynthia Christine Benjamin and my two children Gabriella and Joshua.
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This experience could not be possible without the loving and unyielding support of my lovely wife Cynthia Christine Benjamin. I thank my children Gabriella and Joshua for their love, support, and understanding when I had to go to school early and leave late, sometimes missing bath time and bedtime reading. A special note of gratitude goes to two of my greatest supporters, Irma and Cleopha. When I decided to switch careers and move back home to pursue my dream of being an artist, their continual support never wavered. I would also like to thank the rest of my family, especially Patricia for her support.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In my exhibition *Plot and Escape*, I reveal the relationship between this body of work and personal identity through the use of the paint color *Lowes Valspar New Black 4011-1*. My use of black paint has raised questions regarding the perception that my work is primarily about race. I intend to address how the color black has informed my work and to discuss how I use the exhibition *Plot and Escape* as a means of exploring and emphasizing the richness and complexity of blackness (figure 1).

![Plot and Escape exhibition image](image)

**Figure 1.** Paul Stephen Benjamin; *Plot and Escape;* 2013. Welch Gallery, Georgia State University; Atlanta, Georgia.

Post-black

Post-black is a term introduced by Thelma Golden in the catalogue for the “Freestyle” exhibition at the Studio Museum of Harlem in 2001. She describes her ideas as being framed by artist Raymond Saunders. In his article *Black Is a Color*, Saunders said: “Racial hang-ups are extraneous to art. No artist
can afford to let them obscure what runs through all art—the living root and the ever-growing aesthetic record of human spiritual and intellectual experience.”

Golden explains: “Post-black was shorthand for post-black art, which is a discourse that could fill volumes. For me, to approach a conversation about ‘black art,’ ultimately meant embracing and rejecting the notion of such a thing at the very same time.”

She continues later in the introduction: “It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.”

I prefer aspects of Michael Eric Dyson’s framing of the concept post-black in his forward of Tourés’ book *Who’s Afraid of Post Blackness*. Post-blackness, he states, “doesn’t signify the end of blackness; it points, instead, to the end of the reign of a narrow, single notion of blackness. It doesn't mean we're over blackness; it means we're over our narrow understanding of what blackness means. Post-Blackness has little patience for racial patriotism, racial fundamentalism and racial policing.”

I believe that any categorization of an artist based primarily on race perpetuates the alienation and exclusion of that artist. Contemporary black artists have generally been categorized as “native informants” regardless of the concept and content of their work. The artist of color should not be expected to speak for “his people” through his work. Nonetheless, this burden is often placed on him by his community as well as the majority community, which often defines him as other. In my recently exhibited works, the color black is a signifier and entry point into identity through painting, sculpture, and video media. My works are about achieving aesthetic and conceptual success. In this way art informs identity without deteriorating into a discussion solely about race.

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3 Ibid, 14.
Categorizing Black

Kerry James Marshall in his lecture at the School of Fine Arts, Boston stated that in art history surveys, artists of color are generally categorized into two groups: multiculturalism and identity politics. To only focus on the attributes of an artist’s identity and not the craftsmanship or historical placement of the artwork will lead to artists of color being more marginalized in the future. The categorization of identity is a newer one, and when the works of the majority of artists of color are placed in this category it is a fringe subset. When these works are viewed in the future, they will likely be dismissed because the discussion will not be about the works’ achieving the standards of the academy through the principles and elements of design. As a result, when compared to works that have withstood the test of time, there is no comparison. Therefore, there is a greater potential that these works will fade into obscurity.

My use of the color black was initially a means of simply responding to space and covering form as well, filling it but at the same time creating a void. I consciously resist the suggestion that my work does or should place me in the role of native informant. As a result of this course of study, I recognized that the color black is also about my personal experience as a black man and about the disparate yet collective history of black people. This realization is reflected in my thesis exhibition Plot and Escape.

A number of years ago, I decided to use black as the main subject, color, and essence of my work. To me, the color black provides meaning. Blank sheets of paper become a music composition with the addition of staffs, notes, and directions just as my black painted works fill a gallery space. Other empty pages become a novel with the addition of text and punctuation. In this way, the black marks on white sheets of paper provide value and significance.

Choosing black as a color unifies all elements of my work conceptually and visually. This led me to question ownership of color and media used in works by other artists. In Edouard Manet’s 1863 painting Olympia, the darkest elements are the outlines of the main figure, the Afro-Caribbean attendant

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These elements have historical significance in that his use of the color black and the underlying social commentary caused a divergent movement in art. This movement led to a changing compositional aesthetic in terms of the picture plane and, more importantly, the prominent placement of Laure. Just as Manet moved the black figure closer to the foreground of his composition, I have deliberately chosen to conceptually incorporate the elements race, color, and identity in my work. The consideration of color in my work has also been informed by many other artists who have made conscious use of the color black in their work. The most significant impact came from Kazimir Malevich, Louise Nevelson, Ad Reinhardt, Romare Bearden, and Kerry James Marshall.

Figure 2. Edouard Manet; *Olympia*; 1863. Oil on Canvas; Musée d’Orsay; Paris, France.

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2. METHODOLOGY

Philosophy

My latest works exhibited in *Plot and Escape* represent an investigation and evolution of my use of the color black and a more astute way of incorporating narrative, identity, and history into each work’s dialogue. I focused on capturing each of the aforementioned aspects to make the work more complete and engaging. In this current work, my emphasis is twofold. As always, there are the aesthetic and conceptual components. Aesthetics and its significance in art academia have always been important in my creative process. Whether making a work of art or viewing one, the first requirement for the work to achieve success is that it meets certain aesthetic parameters. When this occurs, the viewer can investigate the physical qualities of the work, as well as critique the merits of the work on what is formally present. Even if the conceptual aspects of the work are not understood, the viewer should still be able to engage with the work. When the principles and elements of design conform to or oppose the historical nature in which works are critiqued, the works can be judged consistently. For instance, to not consider the side of a sculpture is to neglect the importance of it being an object intended to be seen in the round. As an artist and educator, it is important to me that each work passes these visual tests, eliminating the need to challenge or question processes.

Narrative

In my work, I have addressed the idea of narrative and the metanarrative. Reading Jean-Francois Lyotard’s essay *The Postmodern Condition a Report on Knowledge* revealed to me how narratives and metanarratives can become muddled thoughts and confusing to the reader. While the aspects and the truthfulness of these narratives may be relevant and factual, they may become cannibalistic and reduce the effectiveness of one’s overall statement. In my recent work, I have attempted to reduce the narrative to a whisper that someone wants me to repeat.
The color black as a narrative is open-ended. The color black can be described for its properties and qualities. In the book *Color Categories in Thought and Language*, the color black is described in this way:

In a functional sense, black is a contrast of color, i.e., the percept of black corresponding to a given region of visual space arises from light stimulating an adjacent area of visual space. Blackness, then, is not merely the absence of light. It is an elemental quality that arises from adjacent, stronger stimulation. This does not make black different from the chromatic qualities, since they too may be aroused by adjacent stimulation, i.e., simultaneous chromatic contrast. What makes black different is that it can only be aroused by adjacent stimulation.⁸

It is not my intent to go greatly into the subject of color theory or to debate the idea that black is an achromatic color versus a chromatic color. Rather, I emphasize that the color black for me has many fascinating aspects. A few of the more interesting points are how black covers and consumes spaces and how the color when explored conceptually relates to identity, race, and blackness for me as a black man.

I have used the color black in my work for the past ten years. During that time, the monochromatic use of black has meant different things to me. Initially, I chose to use this specific color because of its aesthetic properties. In my assemblage work, the color black provided unity to disparate objects. Painting the objects black also allowed the work to be about form. From a distance, the black objects appeared abstractly uniform. A closer look revealed the individual characteristics of the components (figure 3).

In the time that I have worked solely with black, the narrative has taken on an underlying and coded meaning. The coded narrative was not limited to race. It was also linked with my identity, blackness, and being black. Present in the work but not overtly confronted are the stereotypes associated with black and blackness.

The decision to paint an object black in my works is not a political statement; it is simply the choice to use that color. I disagree when black is defined as not processing light or as having an inability to reflect light. In making this statement, I am not addressing black as a color from a scientific perspective but in how I use the color. When I see black regardless of finish (matte or glossy), it reflects light and cast shadows. Light can be seen in things that are saturated in black until the furthest depths of the object. When I think about the reflective qualities of black, I not only think of the highly polished Italian glass objects of Fred Wilson’s work but I also think of Richard Serra’s black painting titled *Abstract Slavery* (figures 4 and 5). When black gets darker, the outer portions and the elevated areas can reveal or refract light.
Figure 4. Fred Wilson; *Speak of Me as I Am: Chandelier Mori*; 2003. Murano Glass with Twenty Light Bulbs; American Pavilion; Venice Biennale, Italy.

Figure 5. Richard Serra; *Abstract Slavery*; 1974. Paintstick on Belgian Linen; 114 x 212 in.; Kröller-Müller Museum; Otterlo, Netherlands.
Influence

Combining the experiences of my youth and my MFA program, I have emphasized the importance of aesthetics and conceptual intent in my newer works. Growing up in Chicago, I was surrounded by cultural institutions such as the Art Institute of Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MCA), The Terra Museum of American Art, the DuSable Museum of African American History and the South Side Community Art Center. I was influenced by the dedication of these institutions, the artists whose works they exhibited, and the significance of the craft of art making. Chicago has a long history and visual vernacular that are unequivocally rooted in aesthetics and the principles and elements of design as determined by the academy. Even the groups who challenged conventional thoughts of the academy such as Chicago Imagist, Hairy Who, and Afro Cobra all fall into the Chicago vernacular.

Conceptually, my works have always had narrative qualities that addressed deeper considerations. My newest work has achieved far greater clarity in both aesthetics and concept. Sol LeWitt’s views of Conceptual Art emphasize the importance of the idea of the maker as stated in his essay “Paragraphs of Conceptual Art.” The idea is the material. The material choice is secondary. In fact, the idea is the art, and the artist’s idea is not compromised regardless of who executes the artwork. While I agree with his statements to a certain degree, I also feel that for artists of color, the nature in which their works are judged is equally important because historically works by artists of color have been marginalized when they haven’t conformed to Western ideals. For example, in Contemporary Art, Brandon Taylor describes white artist Vanessa Beecroft (figure 6) in this manner:

A very different kind of bodily politics is to be seen in the recent projects of Vanessa Beecroft, who, like museum-aware Conceptualists before her—Bruen, Charlton, Lawler, or Andrea Fraser with her pseudo-museum tours—has sought to engage the very dynamics of the space in which she works. Brought up in Italy amid the Splendors of Renaissance paintings of naked and near-

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naked bodies, amid the conventions of looking at bodies that the old traditions of figure-drawing required, then trained in architecture, painting, and scenography, Beecroft in the later 1980’s took the radical step of dispensing entirely with drawing to introduce the live model directly into the experience of the viewer.¹⁰

Figure 6. Vanessa Beecroft; VB 64; 2009. Deitch Gallery; Long Island, New York.

After reading this, I understand more about Vanessa Beecroft’s artwork. The foundation has been set, and now I can look at Bruen, Charlton, Lawler, or Andrea Fraser if I want to comprehend her work more in depth (figure 7). However, when Taylor discusses another artist just a few paragraphs later, he describes her work this way:

For no account of female experience in American art would be complete without the reference to the African-American heritage and to the history of slavery in particular. The young black artist Kara Walker, who represented the USA at the Sao Paolo Biennale in 2002, has acted as a lightning rod for the discussion of racial stereotyping since her debut around a decade ago. She

has displayed paper silhouettes of lewd and often horrific narratives that celebrate the African-American tradition. At the same time as evoking the prejudice that white Americans still bears against it.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Figure 7.} Kara Walker; \textit{Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War As It Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart}; 1994. Paper; 13 x 50 ft.; The Museum of Modern Art; New York, New York.

In fairness to Taylor, he mentions Goya’s \textit{Black Paintings} as a loose reference while also mentioning that Walker acknowledges Warhol and Basquiat as her heroes (figure 8). The main issue I have with his initial comment is that he says Walker’s work shows “the lewd and often horrific narratives that celebrated the African-American tradition.” In order to better understand Walker’s work, one can look at \textit{Goodbye Uncle Tom} the documentary/mockumentary that takes actual written accounts of scholars, ministers, politicians, and slave owners and restates their speeches, diaries, and interviews and performs them theatrically (figure 9). If the scenes represented in Walker’s works are “African American traditions,” then they are also white American traditions. Walker’s works are often embellished accounts

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 159-60.
Figure 8. Francisco Goya; *Saturn Devouring His Son*; 1819. Oil on Canvas; Museo del Prado; Madrid, Spain.
of the antebellum time period. There is both truth and folklore in these stories. If you mention Goya’s *Black Paintings* and do not elaborate that Walker is addressing the atrocities and mayhem of civil unrest during a time of slavery, then I believe you are either misinformed or you are displaying racism. An even more appropriate association to Goya may be his prints titled *The Disasters of War* or even his *Caprichos* prints (figures 10 and 11). The beautiful line work of Goya can be seen in the adroit cutouts of Kara Walker.
Figure 10. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Disasters of War*, c 1808-1814. Original Etching, Plate 33; National Galleries, Scotland.

Figure 11. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes; *One Hunting for Teeth*; 1799. Etching; Plate 12 of Los Caprichos; 8 1/2 x 5 7/8 in.; The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New York, New York.
3. DECONSTRUCTION

“Endgame”

The works in *Plot and Escape* represent a physical and conceptual deconstruction using Yve-Alain Bois’ essay *Painting: The Task of Mourning* and his idea of the “endgame.” I believe that the endgame is not an end but a continuation. To reach the end, one winds up only repeating and continuing because, on some level, all things are infinite. Finite things and thoughts are determined by the limitation of knowledge only. In my own work, I believe the endgame is a relevant theory. My work looks at history and historical events and deconstructs them not to totally negate what has occurred over time but to turn it on its side for a present and future look. I believe that in order to move forward, questioning the past is a part of the process but should not be the end result.

Using appropriated material, I create works of art that include intentionally chosen paint colors and everyday materials (newspaper articles, internet videos, etc.), and I investigate how they are used. I then reposition the appropriated material using concepts informed by race, identity, and history. The names of the commercial paints become the titles and are included in the description of the work. When *Lowes Valspar New Black 4011-1, Sherwin Williams Well Bred Brown SW7207, and Home Depot BEHR Premium Watermelon 120B-6U* are viewed in the context of American and colonial history, the works can take on loaded meanings (figure 12). My intent is to present these items as an investigation in painting, allowing viewers to form their own opinions based on personal experience and belief. I have only minimally altered the materials, and I presented the encapsulated view of combining multiple objects to form a whole. Determining whether the deconstruction of my previous work and concepts is a revolution or an evolution to my newer works is a matter of great importance for me. I believe evolution happens when the relationship of disparate places, different time periods, and unrelated materials coalesce, as in my work.
In the exhibition *Plot and Escape*, I examined the color black aesthetically and conceptually. This work references places, time periods spanning the past to the present, and stereotypes that have been propagated in the black community. To examine the color black, I also felt that I needed to look at my previous works in the same manner and get to the core of the original concept. While on the surface the older works were highly constructed abstract assemblages, they were also riddled with metaphors and narratives not easily perceptible to the viewer. The intent of the work and their titles was not to be elusive but to allow the viewer to engage with the work with some level of personal entry point.

The process of dissecting my work began with asking the following questions: Why did I choose assemblage? What is the significance of repurposed materials? Why did I use the color black? Assemblage has always been a part of my creative process. I enjoy salvaging objects and making something new out of them. Duchamp changed the way we look at the readymade object. He modified art’s original intent, repurposed it and, in doing so, changed the way art is made and viewed. It is
important to note that Duchamp removed the limitations of art and expanded its possibilities. Like Duchamp, I use appropriated objects and material. Familiar, everyday objects provide the foundation for my work. I manipulate the pieces in order to reveal the possibilities as it relates to my personal identity.

The readymade represented the work of an engineered process. Duchamp’s intent was to minimize work. In minimizing work and the process of work, Duchamp did not discuss the work it takes to mentally conceive art. In trying not to work, the physical efforts become minimized and the mental efforts of conceptualizing become more taxing than the physical. Most times, the readymade or repurposed item has achieved design success, stability, durability, and function. There is a beauty in finding an object, video, or idea that has gone through a process of acceptance and then modifying its original purpose into something new. Warhol was masterful in his use of appropriation and repurposing material, especially with his use of Campbell’s Soup, Elvis, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Marilyn Monroe (figure 13).

Figure 13. Andy Warhol; Black Bean; 1968. Screenprint on paper; Tate, Liverpool.

Deconstructing the Color Black

Because I have created monochromatic works using black for a long time, I was familiar with its possibilities as a paint color. The relationship of blackness and personal identity became a salient factor
and changed how I used color as a conceptual component. In depth analysis of the color black informed my aesthetic decisions and the conceptual manner in which I approached my new work. I began by manually applying black latex paint to tar paper, brown paper bags, and wood. The process included considering all the possibilities and associations with things that are black or that have even the slightest relationship to blackness. I focused completely on what black paint can become when applied to a surface and I began thinking about paint like the modernist and the proponents of abstract art as exemplified in my painting *Well Bred, Bred Well* (figure 14). I incorporated Clement Greenberg’s idea:

"The arts are to achieve concreteness, ‘purity,’ by acting solely in terms of their separate and irreducible selves."\(^{12}\) Evolving from a modernist approach, and investigating minimalism, my interest and research led me to reexamine the black assemblages I previously created. Painting on brown paper bags as in the

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piece *New Black*, I was interested in how the paint would cover the surface. Using a large commercial flat paint brush, I could limit the strokes it would take to get the desired coverage. This process allowed me to also reduce the number of brush strokes that were visible. The amount of paint that I applied gave great affect to the outcome and degradation of the paint as well as what was revealed and what was fully covered.
4. NEW WORKS

Monolith

In Mary Nooter Roberts’ article *Inscribing Meaning: Ways of Knowing* she notes: “Objects dating from ancient times to the contemporary moment illustrate how African artists have used both the diverse forms of letters, words and symbols and their meanings to create beautiful, empowered works of art.”13

In *Monolith*, I have deconstructed a series of quotes. Each quote was selected based on the criteria that (1) it referred to a certain specific person, and (2) it was made by a black person (figure 15).

![Monolith](image)

**Figure 15.** Paul Stephen Benjamin; *Monolith*; 2013. 9 x 13 x 4 ft.; Welch Gallery, Georgia State University; Atlanta, Georgia.

Only the portion of the quote that did not reveal the identity of the subject was used. In a very few cases, *he* or *him* replaced the name of the individual. My interest was in the abstraction of this seemingly

coherent but nonsensical statement. It was not important to me to reveal who he is. He is, in some ways, less important than the voices speaking about him. The fragments of quotes represent diverse views of blackness from within the black community. The statements represent voices of different people from diverse age groups and backgrounds whose notoriety and public opinion has changed over time. These distinct perspectives also reveal the collision of the past with the present. In spite of the many differences between the seventeen contributors, individually and collectively, they represent blackness. I was very interested in how a quote from Colin Powell would connect with a quote from Snoop Dogg. The fact that the two could coexist was extremely interesting to me. Colin Powell, at one time one of the most powerful military figures in the world, represented a black conservative voice and face of reason for many. Snoop Dogg, on the other end of the spectrum, received pop icon status and worldwide recognition for his rhythmic rap songs. The irony of combining the two quotes is that Powell, considered an American hero, and Snoop, a convicted felon whose defiance is obvious in his rap songs, can agree on something.

**Oh Say**

The color black and its relationship to sound manifested when I saw the video of Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock in 1968 performing the “Star Spangled Banner.” Black cannot be limited to a singular sound. The “sound of black,” like the color of black is both quiet and loud, and sometimes occupies both ends of the spectrum simultaneously. In the book *Remembering Woodstock*—a collection of essays edited by Andy Bennett—Shelia Whiteley notes in her essay “‘1, 2, 3 What Are We Fighting 4’ Music, Meaning and The Star Spangled Banner” that the music of Woodstock was framed by the ‘nation identity’ of America and that identity was framed by the Vietnam War and the Black Civil Rights Movement. During this time, some black musicians sang songs of “unity and self-empowerment,” and “confusion and disillusionment.”

Originally, I was not a fan of Hendrix’s music. My lack of appreciation for his style of music can be attributed to the fact that I did not grow up listening to it. This negation can be credited to

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the paradigms and tenets of what can be termed authentic blackness. As a child, I implicitly understood that “black people do not listen to that kind of music.” Prior to the conversation of post-black, and still today, some have tried to dictate what the black experience should be.

Watching the video of Hendrix perform the national anthem was an epiphany for me. It affected me so much that I immediately felt inspired to use, in spirit, the “Star Spangled Banner” in an artwork. At the time, I did not know how it would manifest, but I was certain that the inspiration would not be in vain. Over time, I figured out the song’s perfect use. Hendrix’s performance was the impetus for my video installation *Oh Say* (figure 16).

![Image of Oh Say installation](image)

**Figure 16.** Paul Stephen Benjamin; *Oh Say* and *AaBbCcKkLl*, Installation View; 2013. Welch Gallery, Georgia State University; Atlanta, Georgia.

*Oh Say* consists of twenty television monitors and twenty DVD players continuously showing looped videos of different performances of the national anthem. The video performances include the following Black artists: Stevie Wonder, The Temptations, The Jackson Five, James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, Mariah Carey, Aretha Franklin, Toni Braxton, Whitney Houston, Luther Vandross, Patti LaBelle, Isaac Hayes, Beyonce, Keyshia Coles, Ashanti, Mary J. Blige, Destiny's Child, Aaliyah, Mo Cheeks, and Johnny Gill.
The individual performances were appropriated from internet sources and then altered into black and white, high contrast, and overexposed videos. The manipulations changed the videos from being highly representational in their original format to abstract compositions. The manipulations gave the videos a high graphic quality. By stacking the monitors one on top of the other, *Oh Say* becomes a unified performance. A significant part of the installation is its sculptural quality. In addition to the stacked TVs and DVD players are the exposed cords. By exposing the cords, I let the audience know that the installation is not just for entertainment. Openly revealing the cords cast the installation as a work site. The videos are no longer meant as only a source of entertainment, but they also become a historical record of blackness in America and abroad. The performances in the videos span from the 1960s to present day and reflect the time it was performed and the circumstances of that time. The diversity of the sound of black is revealed in the unique aspects of each performance. At the 1970 Baseball World Series in Boston, The Jackson Five sang a traditional version of the national anthem. The highlight of this performance is the distinct, high voice of a young Michael Jackson singing his solo: “and the rockets’ red glare, the bombs bursting in air.” In contrast, James Brown sang the national anthem at the 1975 Muhammad Ali versus Chuck Wepner fight. Brown’s version included lyrics from the black national anthem. He also solicited the audience to engage in a call and response. He exclaimed, “We want to be free!” and then commanded, “Everybody say free!” several times. In these two performances, as in all the others, black as a sound is simplistic and complex. The twenty performances contained in *Oh Say* reflect the diversity and complexity of the sound of black. It cannot be limited to a single category.

In *Oh Say*, black became a cacophony when I combined twenty different performances. Every time the videos played, the interaction of the sound changed because the length of each video is different. The volume on the TV monitors was set so that each video could be heard simultaneously. During the intervals of change, there were brief moments when harmony could be heard. However, discord was the dominant theme; the two together reflect the repetitive cycles in our history. They also demonstrate how unity and solidarity can emerge in the midst of unrest. I made a conscious decision to not synchronize the
music or words. The intent was to break down the narrative of the nation identity and allow the viewer to create a personal narrative about “the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

Valspar New Black 4011-1

While investigating the color black, I came across a paint chip named Valspar New Black 4011-1 at a local Lowes home-improvement store. Previously, the names of the colors I used did not make a difference. This time, the name of the paint color resonated like no other. New Black made me think about all the different types of black paints I had used, but it also made me think of black as it related to identity and blackness. Some of the thoughts were about how black people have gone through a series of ethnic description over the years. Lowes Valspar New Black 4011-1 now became a window through which blackness, race, identity, and history all merged into one coherent topic: the color black. I sought additional shades of black to use in my work, which then led me to investigate other colors that I associate in some way with blackness.

In other paint stores, I found that seemingly benign paint color names drew an immediate visceral response. In my mind, the names had undeniable meaning within the context of American history, centuries of which included the institution of slavery. Three paint color names double as titles of my work, Valspar New Black 4011-1 Lowes, Home Depot Behr’s Watermelon MSL012, and Sherwin Williams Well Bred Brown SW7027. Conceptually, it was interesting for me to step back from the emotion of the connotations and stereotypes associated with these titles and combine the colors New Black, Watermelon, and Well Bred Brown painted on tar paper to create aesthetically rich paintings.

Watermelon has obvious racially stereotypical connotations and the color Behr Premium Watermelon comes loaded with this baggage. The painting Well Bred, Bred Well has less obvious associations for most people. As I exhibited the works, it was interesting to see the responses that people had to the titles and the work. While many people appreciated the evolution and the degradation of the applied paint, the underlying meaning was not necessarily apparent. This is not to say that some did not understand the deeper significance.
New Black

In the 2010 census questionnaire administered by the U.S. Census Bureau, Question 9, as documented on their website, gave three options for race for black people as “Black, African-Am [American], or Negro.” These choices, when confronted by the color New Black, made me question, “What is old black?” and “What is post-black?” It also raised the question, “Is ‘New Black’ relevant to black people and blackness?”

New Black has many implications as it relates to race and blackness. The perception of race and the negation or omission of the “other” is not isolated to black people and blackness. The works of Byron Kim, a Korean-American artist, address issues of identity through an investigation of the categorization of color in his work titled *Synecdoche* (figure 17).

Kim also collaborated with artist Glenn Ligon on *Black and White*, “part of a series critiquing the prejudices of art materials (cf. tubes of paint labeled ‘Flesh’ to connote tan hues).”¹⁵ My use of commercial paint directly addresses the color black and blackness. The colors I use are significant because of the names given by the manufacturers. My investigation is related to the connotations that can be drawn when encountering widely available paint colors including Well Bred Brown, Plantation Brown, New Black, Tar Black, and Watermelon. What has been particularly interesting about finding the color chip Sherwin Williams Well Bred Brown SW7027 is that my immediate reaction was not outrage. Instead, it was more disbelief and I had to ask the question, “Does anyone else see this?” The association that I made was to slavery and the practice by slave owners of breeding slaves to produce offspring with desired traits. In the series of paintings *Well Bred, Bred Well*, I created eight staggered pairs that

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alternated the words *Well* and *Bred* and then *Bred* and *Well*. Each set of pairs digressed in color and paint coverage from the top of the diagonally staggered work to the lowest paintings at the bottom. Each of the paintings had its own characteristics. Some were fully saturated and had puddles of paint build up; others were flawlessly covered, and still others were lightly painted revealing the tarpaper underneath.

There is a thread of time (past to present) that runs consistently throughout my work. Although I was born after the height of the civil rights movement, its results have shaped my thoughts about history and helped form my notions of blackness. The 1960s brought about a raised black consciousness. Many people were more overtly proud with unabashed fervor that hailed and celebrated being black and the diverse attributes of a collective people. The civil rights struggle led to the rise of the Black Power
Movement. Black power celebrated things that were previously considered shameful and lead to saying, “I’m Black and I’m Proud.” Greater association with African culture and clothing became very popular. Dark skin was venerated versus being shunned. In Audrey Elisa Kerr’s article “The Paper Bag Principle: of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism,” she records accounts of the paper bag test as being a way of discriminating against black people with darker complexions. Entry into organizations, business establishments, and social functions was determined by whether one was lighter than a brown paper bag. All of these things inform the work as it relates to the color black and its relationship to blackness.

Blackness as it relates to individual identity is not limited to one perspective. In Touré’s Book *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness*, he states: “I would like, through this book, to attack and destroy the idea that there is a correct or legitimate way of doing Blackness. If there’s a right way then there must be a wrong way, and that kind of thinking cuts us off from exploring the full potential of Black humanity.”

**AaBbCcKkLl**

I reduced the word black to its simplest form by repositioning the letters in alphabetical order. The perfect reordering of the word occurred because three of the letters when alphabetized—A, B, and C—made the change of spelling seamless, allowing it to be reorganized into ABCKL. ABCKL became a unifying point in the works that could be used in a multitude of ways. The lettering AaBbCcKkLl was used in the painting *New Black* and the series of paintings titled by the paint color used—(e.g., *Lowes Valspar New Black 4011-1* and *Sherwin Williams Well Bred Brown SW7207* (figure 18). Also the video *AaBbCcKkLl* had the reoccurring letters ABCKL included as a consistent motif.

Images with associations to blackness and the individual letters were selected for inclusion in the five videos that formed the work *AaBbCcKkLl* (figure 19). The word associations of the individual letters have as much to do with American history as they do African American history. I view the histories as actually being one and the same. The video is an amalgamation of past and current pop culture and

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American history. Combining the pedagogical approach of the alphabetized lettering and the images was a reflection on the past and the topics that I grew up with.

Figure 18. Paul Stephen Benjamin; *New Black*; 2013. Lowes Valspar New Black Latex Paint on Brown Paper Bag; 120 x 90 in.; Welch Gallery, Georgia State University; Atlanta, Georgia.
The video also provided a snapshot of how we learn and comprehend things. The pedagogical and learning aspect is the influence of my children. How my wife and I teach them is important and reflects a method of learning. At the ages of 4 and 2, my children are in the early stages of their learning and critical periods of development. This formal approach to learning is the simplification of concepts, terms, and ideas. This process of learning and development is a metaphor for time. When I think of the essence of learning, it also represents all the possibilities of the future. In some ways, it represents youthfulness. It also expands time. Children are often in the moment, but parents’ thoughts for their
children are in the future. In the case of A; abolition, Abraham Lincoln, Angela Davis, and apple are progressions from the past to the present. They are also metaphors and signifiers of the past, present, and future. The apple combined with the letter A on a television screen in the shape of a children’s block represents a tool from which children learn the alphabet as well as to count and to read.

The works are not intended to be didactic but are presented in a manner of giving the audience an entry point into the work. The work has many complexities, and the thought is that the aesthetic properties will stand alone. For most people, ABCKL seems like a code or signifier. Having young children influenced me to think in terms of pedagogical practice and to incorporate children’s blocks and letters into my work as foundational elements of learning. After considering how people read and think, I decided that placing the letters of the word black in alphabetical order would allow people to focus on the images rather than the immediate recognition of the word black and any resulting associations. On a set of five televisions, the video “ABCKL” scrolls images that begin with or are related to the letters that they follow. The images are a rolling historical look at things related to blackness. For example, the first television has the letter A and images related to Apartheid, abolition, and Abraham Lincoln. While there is an underlying investigation of identity and history as it relates to the color black at its core, the work is also about investigating the properties of material, technique, color, sound, and space.
5. CONCLUSION

My thesis exhibition title, Plot and Escape, has multiple meanings both as a title and as individual words. The intended focus is neither to confine meaning nor to have closed parameters on how the work should be viewed. The purpose is to have an open dialogue about the work in its entirety. In some ways, the title explores my personal interest in the importance of how information about my work is processed through what is seen as well as what is believed or perceived. Plot as defined by Merriam Webster’s dictionary is a small area of planted ground, a small piece of land in a cemetery, a measured piece of land, or the plan or main story (as of a movie or literary work). According to Aristotle, plot is the means in which a story is told or unfolds. In my plot, I have revised the narrative regarding the artist of color. The native informant dies because there is no longer a need for him to exist. The artist of color escapes from the narrowly defined constraints of how his work can be viewed and understood. His work is considered for its accomplishments (or failures) technically, aesthetically, and conceptually.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


