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What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue

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Citation	Joseph Kyle Mckinney. "What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue." 2025. Thesis, Georgia State University. https://doi.org/10.57709/wn7m-bh90
DOI	https://doi.org/10.57709/wn7m-bh90
Download date	2026-06-09 03:09:48
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/15419

WHAT DID I DO TO BE SO BLACK AND BLUE?

by

JOSEPH KYLE MCKINNEY

Under the Direction of Pam Longobardi, MFA

ABSTRACT

The exhibition *What Did I Do to Become So Black and Blue?* is a series of paintings that explores the protective yet self-betraying act of maintaining calmness. Through the concept of “cool posing,” Black Men have had to adopt superhuman personas in response to social and historical marginalization. The creation of this secret identity masks one’s emotions to maintain a state of internal peace and to thwart stereotypes of black masculinity. This fantasized tool for survival can be seen in heroic narratives throughout history, particularly in neoclassical paintings and sculptures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and in today's comic books and films. This exhibition of paintings attempts to reimagine Black masculinity in its varied dimensions, creatively illuminating how societal conditions affect overlapping identities and mental health.

INDEX WORDS: Cool pose, Double consciousness, Black body, Nude, Void

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by

JOSEPH KYLE MCKINNEY

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

Master of Fine Art

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2025

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2025

WHAT DID I DO TO BE SO BLACK AND BLUE?

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May 2025

DEDICATION

To my younger self, who was confused, worried, and hidden. We made it. To my beautiful mother, my father, and my awesome ass siblings. To my friends who continue to push and inspire me. To God and to this universe. To the person who helped me feel and believe in love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my wonderful thesis committee and the professors at Georgia State University. I also want to thank my friends who helped to keep me sane through this journey.

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1 ORIGIN STORY

“Between me and the other world, there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. How does it feel to be a problem?”

-W.E.B. Dubois

As an artist and a Black man, I have found myself in a peculiar train of thought. I’m trapped between two worlds. A world where I am liberated and free and one in which the constructs of society bind me. A society that refuses to see me as I see myself but instead sees me as a speck on a vast whiteboard. This has led me through the process of soul-searching or perhaps soul-saving. As righteous as it sounds, as I paint, I believe it is my duty to carry on the dreams breathed into me by my ancestors. Yet, it is also my duty to be free and true to who I am. In the blackest moments of creation, I have no race; I am me. Still, the sorrow of the world finds my skin blue. It is at this intersection of liberty and burden, of freedom and sorrow, that I birthed this exhibition, and as I take you on this rollercoaster ride of how I became so black and blue, there are a few truths that need to be confronted and understood.

1.1 Black men are superheroes

No, they don’t fly through the sky, painting pathways through the clouds with the tips of their feet. Nor can they splatter the heads of their adversaries by shooting gleaming red lasers from the ball of their eyes. They can’t dismantle government-run crime syndicates that harm the commonwealth of humanity without taking a single bullet, and they damn sure can’t manipulate space and travel through time. Comics scholar Peter Coogan, in his book *A Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, describes a superhero as “a heroic character with a selfless, prosocial

mission: who possesses superpowers, advanced technology, or highly developed physical and/or mental skills.... Typically, superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is kept secret.”¹ The superpower of a Black man isn't found in his physical traits, as Western prejudices and ideologies have often been propagandized through the historical exploitation and fetishization of the Black male body. His power lives within his mind. It lives in his ability to remain calm, cool, and collected. He prides himself on his aptitude to navigate racially marginalized social structures while suppressing his inner bruises and distaste for injustice. He wears his poise, a mask of cool without it ever touching his face. “The cool mask belies the rage held in check beneath the surface.”²

I was oblivious to my superpower for the first 18 years of my life. I was small, weak, and unhinged. I fell victim to evil villains dressed as class clowns whose jokes echoed laughter throughout the classrooms. Fortunately for the jokers, I was no Batman. I never had the newest clothes or shoes; in fact, I never valued material things because my family could never afford them. I wasn't a hero; I lived in fear. I was afraid of my father and his unrelenting rages towards my mother, siblings, and me. I was scared of getting B's on tests, for failure would mean I would forever be trapped in the sorrow of my environment, and I was constantly worried that people would see that I was different. If any of these three fears were to come to fruition, my life would end catastrophically. To avoid this, I became stoic; I buried my emotions and pretended I didn't feel a thing until it became a reality. I created walls that would take 30 years to break down. I became a dreamer wrapped in ink and animation, a quiet child who wandered through worlds sketched in bright colors and bold lines. Saturday mornings became a sacred ritual, each

¹ Peter Coogan and Peter MacFarland Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Monkeybrain, 2006).

² Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemma of Black Manhood in America* (Simon and Schuster, 1993).

flickering cartoon a portal, each Yu-Gi-Oh card a spell, each comic book a universe waiting to be unraveled. I found escape in pages and pixels—but more than that, those cartoons permitted me to dream about my own worlds, which have largely influenced my art today.

One of the most compelling aspects of the animated universe is the superhero's pro-social mission—their ability to be political and intentional while maintaining the illusion of an ordinary life. Comic books and films have long served as reflections of American desires, histories, and ideologies, and my work functions similarly as a visual response to my internal dialogue. Let's take a stroll through comic book history. Consider the first issue of *Captain America*, published March 01, 1941, nine months before the United States entered World War II. On this iconic cover, Captain America is introduced to the world by punching Hitler square in the face. It is a beautiful sight to see, created by two young Jewish American artists, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, who used their art to call for action against fascism (Fig. 1)³. Kirby and Simon had longed for America to enter into the second world war, they wanted to see the liberation of Jewish people from the toxic and murderous control of the nazi party. I have always admired how artist transform their pain into change. My work is no different; I can't turn a blind eye to the many atrocities carried out on black people across the world. A past America seemingly wants to forget and erase. The black male figure, specifically, is the body I use to turn that sorrow into resilience. The black man is my Captain America; he is my superhero. Captain America's creation served as a symbol of American strength. The comic served as propaganda against fascism and Nazi ideology, rallying American support for intervention in the war. This was a strategic use of media to shape public sentiment, demonstrating how comic books could be tools of ideological influence.

³ Katherine Aiken, "Superhero History: Using Comic Books to Teach U.S. History," *OAH Magazine of History* 24, no. 2 (2010): 41–47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25701409>.



Figure 1 Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, *Captain America Comic #1*, (1941), cover, ink, digital.

Captivated by superheroes and eager to escape into new worlds, I often searched for heroes who looked like me, I was curious to see how they were portrayed and what their creators

sought to achieve through them. However, I soon realized that Black male superheroes were rarely crafted with noble intent. In fact, no Black superhero in the Marvel Universe was created by a Black man. This raises an important question: Who speaks on behalf of Black men in comic books and film? Whose pro-social mission, if any, is being propagandized to the world? Given the long history of exploitation and fetishization, it is no surprise that the animated world has also fallen victim to misrepresentation. Instead of offering authentic depictions, it often reinforces harmful stereotypes, projecting and perpetuating an image of Black culture shaped by the biases of its creators. This is one of the main reasons I chose to focus on the black male figure as the protagonist in my paintings.

When we examine the creation of Marvel's first Black superhero, Luke Cage, we're also looking at how Western ideologies have long shaped the way Black men are represented in mainstream media. Luke Cage wasn't born from a place of culture or lived experience. He was created in 1972 by three white men: Archie Goodwin, George Tuska, and John Romita. His debut comic, *Hero for Hire #1* (Fig. 2), was released 33 years after Marvel's first comic book and emerged during the rise of the Blaxploitation era. Films like *Shaft* had shaken up the industry and saved MGM from bankruptcy by generating over \$12.5 million in profit, Blaxploitation films paved the way for Hollywood and Marvel to pursue Black audiences without centering Black voices.

Luke Cage was designed to fit a specific mold: street smart, tough, and nearly indestructible, with bulletproof skin and a hardened glare. His image aligned with the Blaxploitation aesthetic. He was strong, flashy, and profitable, but the way he was portrayed relied heavily on narrow and harmful stereotypes about Black men. The complexity of Black identity was reduced to a marketable figure. On the cover of *Hero for Hire #1*, we don't just see

a superhero. We see a spectacle. A man on display. And behind that display, a system that continues to profit from the image of Black strength without fully understanding the emotional and historical weight it carries.

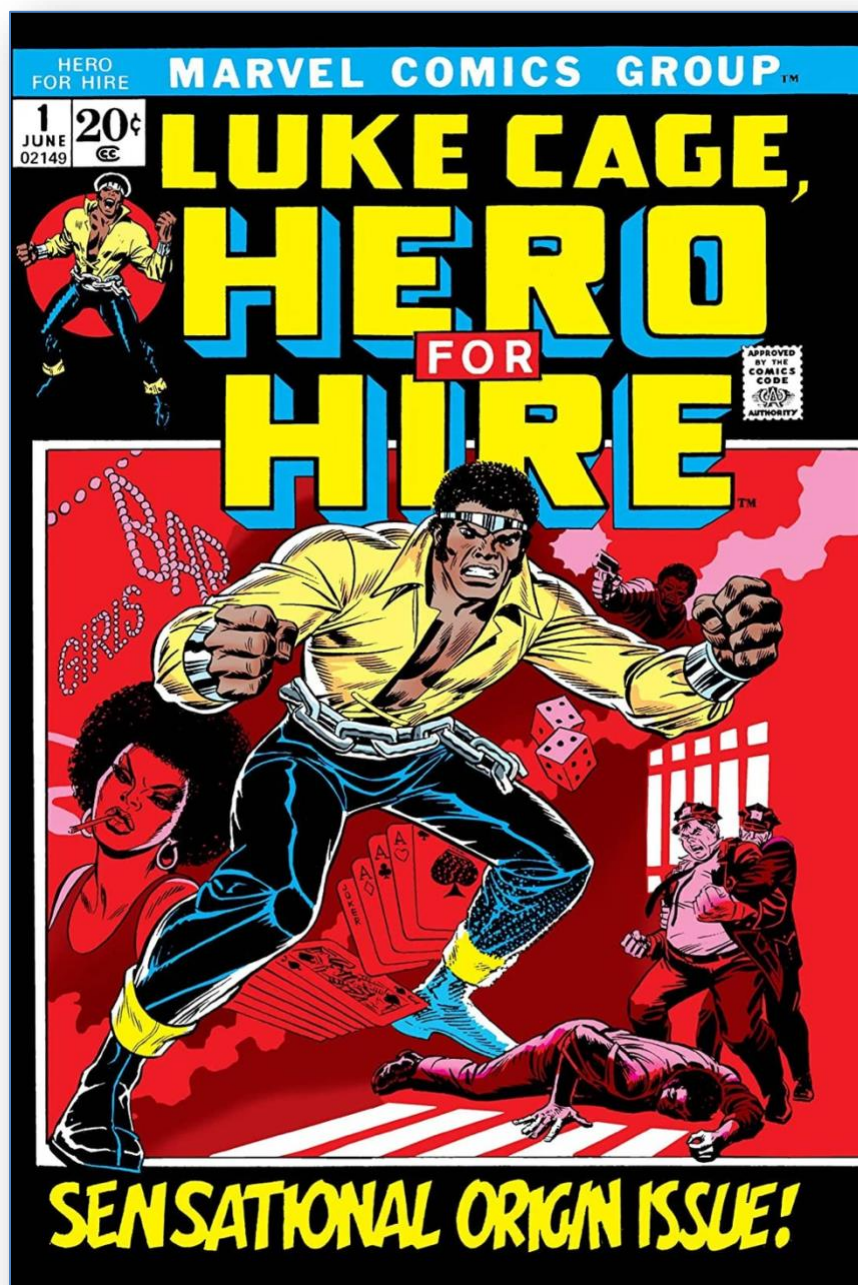


Figure 2 Archie Goodwin, George Tuska, and John Romita *Luke Cage: A Hero for Hire* #1, (1972), cover, ink, digital.

The inaugural cover hints at the age-old tension between empowerment and exploitation. It symbolizes the contradictory relationship between popular culture and Black identity. At first glance, the cover promotes themes of gambling, sex, crime, and police brutality, elements that frame the urban landscape as a battleground rather than a community. Luke Cage, depicted as a hyper-muscular figure, emerges from this concrete jungle as an almost mythical warrior. His physical stature becomes his defining trait, propelling him into objecthood. This is yet another example of the commodification of the black figure; his character is diminished to strength and aggression, leaving little room to explore intellect, vulnerability, or emotional depth. His very existence as a hero for hire ties his identity to a transactional role, reinforcing a stereotype of the Black man as both a tool of survival and a symbol of brute power. The cover becomes a double-edged sword: promising strength while trapping him in a rigid framework constructed by Western perceptions of blackness. The Black man's physique is a prized possession, a gift, and nothing to be modest about. But it is only one aspect of Black masculinity.

Luke Cage's ability to resist bullets may seem powerful, but it strips away a piece of his humanity, portraying him as stoic rather than whole. The chains wrapped around his waist, wrists, and head complicate the image even further. While they might be intended as symbols of strength or chains that he has broken, they are still chains. They still evoke the memory of bondage. Instead of signifying liberation, they become visual reminders of enslavement, of the historical weight black people continue to carry in America. This contradiction raises a deeper question: is Luke Cage truly free, or has he become a new kind of controlled figure? One whose strength is used to sell comics, whose story is crafted by creators outside of his lived experience.

This question is why I create. The images portrayed of the Black male body through art, film, and history don't align with my own lived experience. Nor do they reflect the multidimensional nature of Black culture. In my paintings, I place the Black figure in surreal environments that extend beyond their striking physiques, scenes drawn from my subconscious, revealing the vulnerability and emotion within my Black spirit. My figures are the masters of their worlds because I am the one who creates them. I dictate their existence, their power, and their truth.

Luke Cage, on the other hand, is not the master of his own existence. He is a projection of what the Western world imagines Blackness to be. As W. E. B. Du Bois asked, "What is it like to be a problem?" Luke Cage embodies that question. His existence is shaped by commodification, not care. He is reduced to dollar signs, stereotypes, and projections of fear. His power is not his own. His unbreakable skin and heavy chains don't symbolize true freedom; instead, they expose the tension between control and liberation. Both covers, *Captain America Comics #1* (1941) and *Hero for Hire #1* (1972), reflect the larger issue of representation in comic books. *Captain America's* cover presents a morally righteous white hero, created by writers who hold the power to shape narratives that align with dominant cultural ideals. Luke Cage's cover, also designed by white artists, reflects a version of Blackness that lacks complexity. When I visualize the figures in my painting, I see them in a multitude of dimensions, I see possibilities yet to exist, I see a complex soul, one of beauty and poise... Yet I also see the gentle soul, waiting to be released. But afraid of its own light, for its brightness may burn down the world, and make it anew. This soul houses the rage. It's delicate, not brute. This is why the figures in my painting wear their skin in every shade known to color. Black is the birth of all color, and the soul is not defined by the body; the soul defines the body. Each color represents a different part of the soul, echoing the multidimensionality of blackness and its infinite void.

This contrast between the two covers makes me feel a little uneasy. The influence of images and screens, media, and propaganda can control a whole generation, and one may start to believe the symbols being fed to them. As a young adult, seeing symbols of hate, inferiority, and stereotypical propagation made me angry beyond measure. I was eager yet hurt by the world; this made me feel as if I had to protect myself, protect my sensitive soul. I couldn't understand what I learned about world history, nor was I going to let the image of the black be associated with something inferior. When I think about how I became so black and blue, how I became stoic, I remember the body afraid. The uncertainty and helplessness. Then I remember the soul persisting, pushing me forward step by step. I decided not to fall any longer; I chose to fly and defy the very gravity that bound me to the surface of the earth. Emotion was reborn. I had once turned to comic books and cartoons to escape from my reality. But I realized that true escape is nearly impossible when the world you're escaping to is still controlled by the very forces you seek to escape. That's when I understood: the only place a Black man can truly escape to is within himself.

1.2 The Birth of Cool Pose

This realization marked the birth of my superpower. My true battle was always internal; everything in the outside world was moving pieces over which I had no control. I couldn't convince my father to be a man, nor could I punch the teeth out of my enemies' mouths, and I couldn't expect the world to see me any differently than what they had already been programmed. Once I realized the answer was within, my superpower was awakened. I understood that I held dominion over my internal world to such an extent that I could create versions of myself within it—multiple sets of consciousness, each one holding the projections

and thoughts others had imposed upon me. I could push these aside and emerge anew, crafting my own version of reality, free from external influence or control.

My work is shaped by the visual language of popular art, an art form often dismissed but rich with storytelling, symbolism, and emotion. My paintings burst with vibrant colors and dramatic poses—visual echoes of the wounds I have scraped from my heart, a release of generations of trauma and pain. Unlike Luke Cage, I am in control. I carefully arrange figures and objects in compositions that provide a glimpse into my internal dialogue, where my subconscious battles for space in my mind. Each stroke is an act of discovery, revealing an inner spiritual self that has both guided and concealed me behind artificial walls. But here, in this world of my own making, I am free. The inaugural painting in this exhibition, *In the Beginning, Black Was Void* (2025) (Fig. 3), is a prime example of my desire to rewrite and reshape the narrative of not only my existence but also that of the long history of oppression and exploitation around the black male body.



Figure 3 Joseph Mckinney, *In the Beginning, Black Was Void*, 2024, Oil, Acrylic, Gouache, canvas, 72” x 144” inches, collection of the artist.

Throughout the rich history of painting in both Western and Eastern cultures, particularly during the height of the transatlantic slave trade, the Black figure has consistently been portrayed in a position of servitude or connected to savage, murderous rhetoric used to justify crimes against humanity. During this tumultuous time, I couldn't help but wonder about what the old masters painted and what they thought of the black figure. Did artists of that era reflect on the atrocities that occurred during their lifetime? For the most part, the answer is no; in my research, I reached several conclusions. First, black people were almost nonexistent in Western art. Their depiction and place in history were largely absent. They were omitted. When they were represented, they were portrayed as slaves, servants, or fetishized objects for the consumption of the Western gaze, as seen in the two figures below (Fig. 4, Fig. 5).

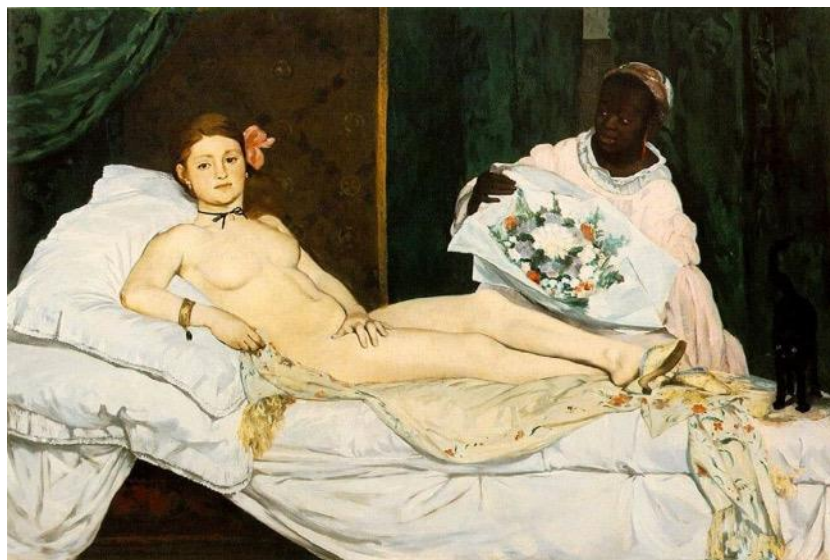


Figure 4 Édouard Mané, *Olympia*, 1865, Oil, Acrylic, Gouache, canvas, 130 x 190 cm, Musée d'Orsay.



Figure 5 Agostino Brunias, *Linen Market, Dominica*, c. 1780, oil on canvas, 19 5/8" x 27", Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection

Second, black figures portrayed in positions of power or autonomy would shatter the propaganda of white superiority. The struggle, oppression, and disfiguration of the black race fuel the system of white supremacy. Classical and Neoclassical paintings didn't just celebrate beauty, but they dictated who was considered powerful, who was worthy of admiration, and who was civilized. The way figures are posed, their posture, their gaze, and their controlled movement meticulously craft a message. Dominance. An ideology rooted in whiteness. Through these paintings, a visual hierarchy emerges, one that places white European bodies and values at the pinnacle of beauty while everyone else is rendered invisible, exoticized, or diminished.

To counter this narrative, my painting *In the Beginning, Black Was Void* utilizes the same metrics found in both cool posing, comic books, and neoclassical art. The projection of power, strength, and control has not been gifted to Black figures in Western art. I play the protagonist in my own painting and start to create a narrative crafted from the void. The notion of the void

appears several times throughout this body of work. I consider the void in my paintings to represent the place where Blackness originates; it is the vast space that houses the souls of Black people, it is the infinite possibility granted to my Black figures. The void in my work is also an entity that represents the purest form of revenge (Fig. 6). It is the pain, the hurt, and the sorrow of Blackness. It is the infinite rage housed by the cool pose.



Figure 6 Joseph Mckinney, *In the Beginning, Black Was Void*, (detail) 2024, Oil, Acrylic, Gouache, canvas, 72" x 144" inches, collection of the artist.

Cool pose is a concept, a survival mechanism, a superpower. It is the form that emerges when the soul is forced to protect itself and when sensitivity must be covered by strength. The need to define one's identity outside of the confines of a predetermined narrative is what pushed the Black male to an evolutionary state of mind. This fundamental restructuring of the psyche, this mask, this armor, this method of being, can be defined as a cool pose. Cool pose is a term

Richard G. Majors describes as a “well-developed creative art,” a “ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control.”⁴ Since the beginning of American history, Black men have faced countless injustices because of racism and discrimination. Majors, in his book *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, describes being a Black male as “being psychologically castrated, rendered impotent in the economic, political, and social arenas that whites have historically dominated.” Majors likens the concept of cool posing to a tool used by inner-city youth to cope and adapt to their environment. However, I argue that the cool pose extends far beyond this. It is the very skin Black men wear to navigate the treacherous waters of today’s society. It is an external remedy to counter the white gaze. It is a cloak. It is the ultimate superpower.

The exhibition *What Did I Do to Become So Black and Blue?* is a series of paintings that explores the protective yet self-betraying act of maintaining calmness. Through the concept of cool posing, Black Men have had to adopt superhuman personas in response to social and historical marginalization. The creation of this secret identity masks one’s emotions to maintain a state of internal peace and to thwart stereotypes of black masculinity. This fantasized tool for survival can be seen in heroic narratives throughout history, particularly in neoclassical paintings and sculptures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and in today's comic books and films. This exhibition of paintings attempts to reimagine Black masculinity in its varied dimensions, creatively illuminating how societal conditions affect overlapping identities and mental health.

⁴ Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemma of Black Manhood in America* (Simon and Schuster, 1993).

1.3 The Void

The goal for the protagonist in my work is to master the void. The void exists in many forms. It was inspired by the idea that Black people were cast out of humanity. They were meant to be forgotten and erased into nothingness. They were made to be objects, inferior to the glory of God. Yet, Black people have refused to accept this narrative of their existence. When blocked out of history, we simply create our own way, new pathways birthed from this exclusion. The visual representation of the void as black stems from one of my favorite paintings by the great Jacob Lawrence, *In the Beginning, All Was Void* (Fig. 7).



Figure 7 Jacob Lawrence, Genesis No.1, In the Beginning All was void, from Eight Studies for The Book of Genesis, 1989, Gouache on paper, 29.75" x 22" inches, SCAD Museum of Art.

This painting is the first installment of an eight-part series titled *Eight Studies for the Book of Genesis* (1989), also known as the *Genesis Creation Series*. Like the Book of Genesis in the Bible, these paintings detail God's creation of the world.

“¹In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”⁵

-Genesis 1:1-1:2

The void is visible through the four arched windows; it is immense, black, and mysterious. The arches reference classical painting, architecture, and religious iconography, grounding the work in a visual tradition of sacred storytelling. The windows provide a powerful introduction to the series, framing the beginning of time and the presence of divine energy. The painting also reflects the chaos and potential of the universe’s creation through bold, dark shapes and color blocking; a sense of movement emerges. Lawrence portrays the void not as empty or passive but as active and alive, full of tension and mystery. What I’ve come to admire most about this painting is the Black figure depicted as God—a radical and deeply affirming image that challenges traditional Western religious iconography and centers blackness at the origin of existence. The pose of the black figure is in alignment with the concept of cool pose in black men; it projects a sense of mental control and calmness through uncertainty. The figure serves as both a God and a human, both in control of and at the mercy of the void. Just as a black man disassociated from himself can be the conduit for anger, the void can consume everything in its path; out of control, it is an enemy to God. This same sense of control can be seen in how I position the figures in my paintings. Each figure in my paintings acts as the mental component of the cool pose. The figures in my work exude strength through adversity, a power keen to the flight of the black man.

⁵ <https://www.bible.com/bible/111/GEN.1.NIV>



Figure 8 Joseph Mckinney, *What Happens To a Dream Deferred?*, 2025, Oil, Acrylic, latex paint, charcoal, and fire, canvas, 60” x 85” inches, collection of the artist.

1.4 The Spirit

My painting, *What Happens to a Dream Deferred?* (Fig. 8) is also an example of Jacob Lawrence’s influence and a reflection of Genesis 1:2, which states, “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” In this passage, God is the Creator and the source of all things. The

Spirit of God, or Ruach Elohim, is the breath, the movement, the presence that responds to the emptiness. Through the chaos of the world starting anew, and the void unfolding in the sky, the Spirit remained calm, cool, and collected. It didn't rush or retreat. It hovered. That stillness in the midst of disorder speaks to me. I incorporated that symbolism to remind the viewer that God's Spirit is not only near but within us, even in the most tumultuous times. Over 12 million enslaved men, women, and children lost their lives during the transatlantic slave trade. With so much loss, it's easy to believe that God forgot about His children. But the image of the Spirit of God hovering over the ocean waters becomes something deeper. It becomes a quiet testimony, a whisper across generations. It tells us that God never looked away. That the Spirit was present, even then. And in the face of so much pain, grief, and silence, that presence remains. It reminds us that when the world is black and full of void, creation is the pillar that retaliates.

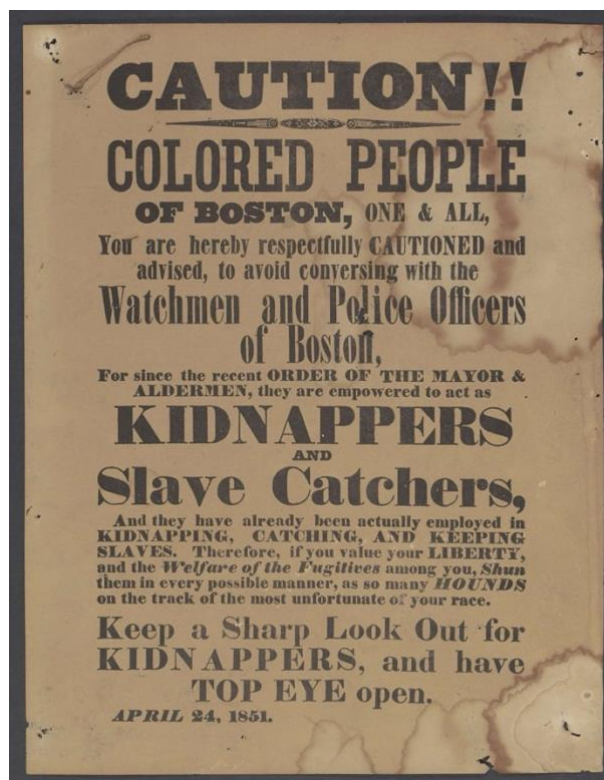


Figure 9 *Poster warning Blacks in Boston - kidnappers*, 1 p.; 30.5 x 25 cm. Boston, 1851.⁶

This poster has haunted me since I first laid eyes on it. The audacity. I thought about its message to the Black people of Boston in 1851, telling them plainly: the police are not to be trusted, that they are kidnappers and Slave catchers. It reminded of the harsh truth about the police today, and “I thought some things never change”. It angered me. I thought about the creation of the Fugitive Slave Act, the law that made freedom fragile. Even if you were born free, even if you had built a life in the North, all it took was one accusation for your body to be dragged back into bondage. And those who were carrying it out were not hiding in the shadows; they wore badges. What strikes me is how familiar that fear still feels. This isn’t just history, it’s a mirror. I thought about the fact that the formation of the state police was never neutral. It was

⁶ “Poster Warning Blacks in Boston - Kidnappers.” *NYPL Digital Collections*, digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-bbee-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99. Accessed 18 Apr. 2025.

rooted in control, in protecting property over people, in preserving the racial hierarchy. The systems rooted in racism never disappeared; they evolved. Today, it manifests in mass incarceration, stop-and-frisk policies, traffic stops that turn deadly, the relentless surveillance of our bodies, and within the "Karens." The poster reminded me that things seldom change unless the entire system is erased. I needed to see that truth take shape, so I started to burn the canvas (Fig. 10).



Figure 10 Joseph Mckinney, *What Happens To a Dream Deferred?* (detail), 2025, Oil, Acrylic, latex paint, charcoal, and fire, canvas, 60" x 85" inches, collection of the artist

The act itself became part of the work. It wasn't just about destruction; it was about release. About letting the fire speak where words couldn't. Every burn carries my rage, but also the layers of history and trauma still living inside me. It reflects the spirit that has been passed down, a reflection of the souls of my ancestors who were murdered at sea, raped, beaten, and forced into a life of servitude. The fire is proof of the pain that still lives in the present. But it's

not just about pain. Burning the canvas also speaks to transformation and rebirth. It's about clearing space, allowing something new to grow out of the ashes.

The fire, in this way, becomes the spirit of God moving across the surface of the void. It creates. It destroys. It speaks in ways language cannot. It holds both judgment and mercy, rage and grace. To me, the flame isn't just a tool; it's a kind of prayer. A way to speak to what can't be said out loud. I don't burn the canvas to forget the past, but to face it. To feel it. To let it breathe. Through the fire, I grieve what was stolen, I sit with what still hurts, and I clear a path for something new to take shape. The fire lets me honor what was lost while making room for a story that's finally my own.

2 A NEW PATH

2.1 A Black man must remain his true self while transforming into someone else.

The art of the cool pose depends on the soul maintaining ownership of itself and exercising agency over its actions. Cool Pose represents an evolution of the split identity. Examining the plight of the mental state through the Western canon, Black individuals have unconsciously adopted a split identity. This can be dangerous if left unchecked. This split identity is a survival mechanism, a response to navigating different worlds—one shaped by his own culture and history and the other by societal norms that often marginalize or misrepresent him. The concept of a split identity, a defining trait of the superhero, is also one of the most compelling and pervasive symbols used to represent the struggles and experiences of minority identities. Conceptually, split identity has deep roots in racial theory, tracing back to W.E.B. DuBois's 1903 essay, *The Souls of Black Folk*, where he introduced the ideas of the veil and double consciousness. The veil represents the social and psychological barriers that separate Black people from the dominance of Western culture. It symbolizes the lack of understanding and

recognition of Black identity by those outside the community. DuBois states that Black people are “a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world— a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.”⁷ As a result of this veil, black people as a whole have been forced to hold two sets of identities, one of the black American and that of the white American forced upon them through colonization. This double consciousness, which Dubois defines as the “sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”⁸.

The cool pose is weakened through Du Bois' theory of double consciousness. Yes, during the 1900s, Black people were forced to live with two sets of awareness—how we see ourselves, and how the world sees us. But that was only the beginning of an evolution within the soul of Black people. We had to move beyond viewing ourselves through split lenses because in doing so, we became more fragmented, more confused. We needed to reclaim a wholeness, to come to terms with the truth of our past and still find peace in our reality. The rich spirit of God reminded us of a truth that stretched far beyond chains and suffering. It revealed a deeper knowing of who we are. I hold that understanding in my work. I exhibit the rebirth and perseverance of the Black spirit within my paintings. I created *Invictus (2025) (Fig. 11)* as a visual representation of this. *Invictus* is named after one of my favorite poems, a poem that saved my life on a few occasions. The poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley speaks to the unconquerable soul. The poem reads:

⁷ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 1903, <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/2141188.pdf>.

⁸ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 1903, <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/2141188.pdf>.

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning's of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.⁹

- William Ernest Henley

⁹ The Poetry Foundation. "Invictus," April 16, 2025. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51642/invictus>.



Figure 11 Joseph Mckinney, *Invictus*, 2025, Oil paint on canvas, 60" x 95" X 3", collection of the artist

Invictus is my way of giving Cool Pose a body. A soul. In this painting, the figure stands still in the center of chaos. The world behind him is burning. It is the world where he was born, where his emotion was found. He stands in it, facing it, allowing the heat to rise around him without losing composure. That stillness is intentional. It embodies strength and vulnerability simultaneously. This is the cool pose in practice. The ability to maintain presence under pressure and to stay composed, even when the world is trying to unravel you. It is indeed a performance, but it also serves as a survival strategy. And in that survival, there is beauty. The deep blue of his body shifts away from the traditional colors of heroism, which are so often tied to whiteness. Here, Blackness is the light, it is the divine.

The title *Invictus*, meaning “unconquered,” captures the essence of what I am striving for. This painting is not just about pain or survival. It is about transformation. The flames do not destroy him. They purify. They mark the beginning of something new. In this work, I am not just painting a body. I am painting the rebirth of spirit, the unshakable presence of a soul that has endured generations of fire and still stands tall. Cool Pose is not just a look. It is a language. And through this piece, I am letting that language speak.

2.2 Double consciousness ultimately is the black man’s kryptonite; it leads him to a fragmented sense of self

A black man born in America will inevitably encounter the steep history of slavery and generational anger. This confrontation often becomes a pivotal moment in his life, filled with frustration and confusion. He will either see himself through the lens of white hate and succumb to the idea that he’s inferior, or he will decide to debunk the white ideal of the black man. He will attempt to show that he is equal or superior. In many cases, this creates an emotional wall between his internal self and the white world, built by double consciousness. In doing so, he

becomes both the subject within and a product of white cultural ontology. There is no way for the black man to avoid the collision with double consciousness, but just as Superman avoided kryptonite, an alien mineral that could deprive the superhero of his superpower, a black man must learn to navigate and avoid the paralyzing effects of double consciousness. This requires a conscious rejection of its power to define or diminish its identity, forging a path where it is not tethered to the white gaze.

I explore themes of double consciousness throughout my work, especially in the way figures relate to one another and to the spaces they occupy. In my painting *What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?* (Fig. 12), I reflect on the tension between how we see ourselves and how the world sees us. This piece speaks to the ongoing pursuit of true consciousness — a deeper understanding of the self beyond imposed identities.



Figure 12 Joseph Mckinney, *What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?*, 2025, Oil, Acrylic, Latex, Charcoal paint on canvas, 80” x 90” X 3”, collection of the artist

Du Bois argues that overcoming double consciousness is key to reaching what he calls “true consciousness,” a self-perception not clouded by the weight of racial bias. He believed this could be achieved by merging the two identities—the Negro and the American—into one whole. He writes, “The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self... He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a

message for the world.”¹⁰ I carry that same longing, that deep desire to exist fully as both Black and American. But more than a century later, I have come to understand that simply merging those identities is not enough. Not when white supremacy still shapes the very system we are asked to fit into. To protect his spirit and survive, the Black man has had to do more than merge. He has had to rebuild. He has had to reconstruct the mind and spirit, crafting new ways of being that don't rely on acceptance from a system built to exclude him in the first place.

The painting, "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?" exists within this ecosystem. It demonstrates double consciousness through the positioning of the figures in relation to one another and to the surrounding space. This acknowledges the twoness birthed from the void. This relationship reflects the emotional and psychological push and pull of being caught between two worlds. I aimed to capture the confusion, fragmentation, and determination to keep going. In this work, I am not just referencing Du Bois's theory; I'm wrestling with it. I 'm asking what happens when the system that forced us into double consciousness still remains. What does true consciousness look like when the door is still shut? In the painting, I try to imagine that door breaking open. I begin to see a version of the self that doesn't need to merge with anything to be whole. A self that can exist on its own terms.

In many ways, Du Bois's idea of "true consciousness" has taken shape through what we now call the cool pose. It's more than a performance. It's a form of survival. A way of carrying pride and strength on the outside, even when the inside is breaking. I reference the death of Superman by tying his red cape to a stick and placing it like a grave marker. That small gesture says a lot. Superman has always been the face of Western masculinity. Untouchable. Heroic. Hiding his real self behind a clean-cut disguise. But for Black men, that duality isn't just a comic

¹⁰ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 1903, <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/2141188.pdf>.

book storyline. It's our reality. We've had to split ourselves in two just to move through the world. We hide what's soft, what's hurting, just to be seen as worthy or safe. So when I bury that cape, I'm not just burying a superhero. I'm laying to rest the false promises of that kind of masculinity. I'm grieving the pressure to perform, the weight of hiding. What remains is the raw self, stripped of costume and expectation. The cool pose becomes something deeper. It's the armor we've built, but it's also a record of the pain we've carried. It holds memory, resistance, and the will to keep standing. A black man, unaware of his power or consumed by his coolness, becomes a victim of a dissociated identity. This can be detrimental to his mental health and lead him down a path where he becomes completely detached from his original identity, his emotions, and his ability to mask his inner turmoil. Within the same breath, his coolness becomes his pathway to destruction.

3 NUDE VS NAKED

One of the most defining qualities of a superhero is their physique, a strong, muscular body that projects strength. The body is the vessel that houses our soul, allowing us to participate in the domain we call life. The body should be protected at all costs. For in the wrong hands, the soul becomes vulnerable to manipulation. This is why, in my art, the body is central to my narrative. Its presence in my art not only speaks to the perseverance of the black soul, but the well-crafted body is a testament to the resilience of my ancestors as well as my own need to control and project power. I admire God as a creator, and in a way, including the black male body in my art is also an admiration of his unsurpassable genius and keen sense of beauty.



Figure 13 Joseph Mckinney, *Creeping Buttercups*, 2023, Oil, Acrylic, Gouache, canvas, 75” x 150” inches, collection of the artist.

My painting, *Creeping Buttercups* (Fig. 13), explores the beauty, complexity, and weight associated with the black body in Western art. In this painting, the nude black figure is at the center of the field, surrounded by a field of *Ranunculus repens*. Otherwise, none as creeping buttercups, an invasive species native to Europe and Invasive in over 40 countries. This plant is extremely aggressive and toxic to grazing animals. They also reduce the potassium levels in the soil, killing and reducing the nutrients of native plants. The fresh plant is also toxic to grazing animals, potentially causing symptoms such as excessive salivation, skin irritation, blisters, abdominal pain, inflammation, diarrhea, and even death.¹¹ The invasive plants are a potent metaphor for the enduring legacy of European colonization. Just as invasive species reshape and disrupt ecosystems, colonialism has permanently damaged cultures, lives, and histories.

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Juxtaposed against the black male body, some plants become voyeurs to the toxic rhetoric surrounding the body, and others grab and pull at it in hopes of returning it to the soil, where it may sit on top, spreading its deep roots through the body's carcass.

Something interesting happened when a local gallery owner and curator viewed this painting in my studio. I explained to him and another professor the meaning and symbolism behind it. I went into detail about the mountains and how they symbolized Dr. Martin Luther King's last declaration, and how the presence of the black body was deeply rooted in history, and blah blah blah. I think it went in one ear and out the other. After I finished, my professor beautifully suggested that the painting be shown in the curator's gallery, and he replied, "Oh no, we don't show nudes at our gallery, but he does have a nice penis." Although stunned by his comment, I kept my cool. He then asked about a painting directly across from it titled *It Was All A Dream* (Fig. 14) and asked me to bring it to his gallery; then he went to another painting and asked for that one as well. I don't know if this moment reflected more of who he was as a viewer or who I was as its creator, but I learned two things. The first is that a painting should speak on its own merits, and second, I'm sensitive about my shit. I had spent all summer on that piece, perfecting it to redeem my spot at the university, and in a few minutes, the painting was reduced to a penis.



Figure 14 Joseph Mckinney, *It Was All A Dream*, 2022, Oil, Acrylic, canvas, 48” x 54” inches, collection of the artist.

Ironically, the painting *It Was All A Dream* (2022) was part of a collection where I attempted to reduce and commercialize the black figure. I had this grand idea that if I took the concept of race out of a figure, I could speak to more people and commercialize my ideals. I painted black bodies grey and adorned them with red and blue lines, mimicking notebook paper. I named the figures “Paper People.” They personified human hopes and dreams; they were blank pages, a pathway to write one’s destiny. They also reflected what I thought would sell: blank, racially ambiguous figures. This painting was influenced by surrealist genius Salvador Dali’s *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937). In which Dali paints the Greek myth of Narcissus, the story of a man renowned for his extraordinary beauty. Many fell deeply in love with him, but he

rejected all who approached him because he could not love in return. Nemesis, the goddess of retribution, sought to punish him for his arrogance and cruelty after being denied his love. Nemesis lured Narcissus to a clear, still pool of water, where he caught sight of his reflection for the first time. Unaware that it was merely an image, Narcissus, unaware of his own gaze, became entranced and engulfed. He fell in love with his own reflection, desperately attempting to touch or hold it. Overwhelmed by this impossible yearning, he withered away, consumed by longing and sorrow.



Figure 15 Salvador Dali, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, 1937, Oil paint on canvas, 820 mm” x 1092mm X 85 mm, collection of Tate Modern

In *It Was All a Dream* (2022), I use Narcissus's story as a metaphor for the toxic relationship between the black man, his physical and internal self, and the self-imposed by the Western gaze. This unattainable pursuit of oneself through the eyes of another, this double

consciousness, describes how black people must navigate the conflict between their own sense of identity and the perception imposed by a racially biased society. For Black men, this often means contending with stereotypes that portray them as hyper-masculine, hypersexualized, or subhuman. I created this painting because I caught myself falling victim to the imposed views of the West. The views that the black body couldn't stand on its own merit within high art and that a black artist had to use some form of abstraction to represent the black figure. Growing up, I didn't go to many museums, and when I did, I almost never saw the representation of the black figure. This fueled my belief that the black figure was inferior in high art. In the painting *It Was All a Dream*, one figure stands tall in a rage as it attempts to kill itself, and the other figure is crawling away from itself. A murder is taking place. I symbolically murdered the fractured part of my identity that believed blackness had to be invisible to be visible. I never got a chance to explain the meaning of this painting to the curator, nor did I drop any paintings off at his gallery, whether intentional or unintentional; his words that day and his objectification of the body sparked me to take a more deliberate approach to normalizing the nude black male body.

For hundreds of years, from east to west, north to south, the black body has been stolen, exploited, and both physically and symbolically castrated. Its narrative has been at the mercy of the murderous appetites of white supremacy. Bell Hooks, in her essay *Feminism Inside: Toward a Body, Politic* states that “The black body has always received attention within the framework of white supremacy, as racist/sexist iconography has been deployed to perpetuate notions of innate biological inferiority” within the same token she states that “every movement for black liberation in this society, whether reformist or radical, has had to formulate a counter-hegemonic

discourse of the body to effectively resist white supremacy”¹². Although I agree with this statement and believe this was a necessary counteractive strategy for the time, continuing to hold this strategy is the epitome of Dubois’s theory of double consciousness, and it is part of the reason blackness will continue to be attacked as long as we continue to defend it through the eyes of the Western gaze.

Comparing blackness to stark white Western ideologies creates a space for black people to forget to appreciate the raw beauty of the black body, and more so, it is a smack in the face of God to diminish one’s beauty to fit the needs of others. Thinking in this manner, looking at oneself through the eyes of another, allows one to drift apart from who they were designed to be. Blackness is multidimensional and should only be defined by black people through a black cultural lens.

Many publications, films, and the balls of history itself have alluded to the fact that black people were beasts, rapists, and “bodies out of control,” anything to perpetuate a false sense of inferiority¹³. As a people, we have spent so much time trying to counteract this narrative that I truly believe we have internalized it. In my paintings, I purposely depict the black male body nude to celebrate its natural beauty, free from the restrictive and often harmful Western gaze that seeks to sexualize and dehumanize. Depicting black men as nude in many Western art forms, as well as within certain black counter-narratives, is often viewed as a form of sexualization and exploitation. Black scholars frequently argue that any portrayal of the black body in its natural

¹² Thelma, Golden, Henry Louis Gates, Elizabeth Alexander, Robert Arneson, Jean Michel Basquiat, and Nayland Blake *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American, 1994* Art. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA28368256>

¹³ Mango, Christina. 2001. “Art on My Mind.” *Art Therapy* 18 (4): 216–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2001.10129538>.

state risks being seen as inherently sexual, contributing to and amplifying the fetishization and commodification of the black body.

The distinction between being nude and naked is an important puzzle piece. In Western art, the nude often implies a sense of artistic idealization and freedom, suggesting a body is celebrated and admired for its form. In contrast, being naked is akin to being vulnerable and exposed; it is linked to objectification and the loss of agency. In this exhibition, I ask the question, “Can a black man be nude in a culture that imagines him as naked?”¹⁴ Since a body does not become sexualized until wandering eyes look upon it. I want to reclaim the term nude for the black body, strip the narrative away from the fetishized, and move it toward a recognition of beauty and dignity.

Robert Mapplethorpe, a pioneer in black and white photography, published *The Black Book*, an excellent example of one of the many ways the black male body has been objectified and consumed by the desires of white men, women, and culture. This book is also one of the reasons I have decided to take back control of the black nude within my own work. Mapplethorpe’s work, at times, is outstanding and a beautiful source of inspiration. His carefully crafted images speak to his higher understanding of intersectionality and other social structures; they also speak for his love of all things natural, and at times, his works bring to light the sexual energy housed in all of humanity. This energy at the time seemed to be controversial and forbidden. I wholeheartedly agree it takes an artist like Mapplethorpe to produce work that tests the boundaries of what exists and expands the conversation on what is high art, but at whose expense? While his art undeniably contributes to expanding the definition of high art, it raises ethical concerns about representation and its impact on the black community. While his work

¹⁴ Tamari Kitossa, *I Can the Black Man Be Nude in a Culture That Imagines Him as Naked?* 2021, In *University of Alberta Press eBooks*, 1–58. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781772125559-005>.

provokes necessary conversations, it can also exploit or commodify the subjects depicted, especially when they belong to vulnerable communities. It's important to consider who benefits from the art, the conversations it generates, and whether those represented have agency and a voice in that dialogue. Some of his images perpetuate the abuse and misuse of the black body, once again placing it under a microscope to be consumed by the Western gaze; it's no different than the countless postcards shipped around America during the era of Jim Crow, immortalizing the black death and commodifying the black body (Fig. 16). It's no different than artist Dana Shultz's attempt through her painting *Open Casket* (2016), which turned Emmitt Till's mutilated face into a spectacle yet again (Fig. 17). Even after death, the black body is still a subject for consumption. The question remains: whose right is it to display black bodies, and why does it always seem the black body is a mercy of the white world?



Figure 16 *Charred corpse of William Stanley suspended from utility pole, Temple Texas (1915)*, Gelatin Silver print, real photo postcard, 5 ½ X 3 ½ “ (Front)



Figure 17 Dana Shultz, *Open Casket*, 2016, Oil paint on canvas, 39in × 53in, New York

4 THE JOURNEY TO BLACK AND BLUE

“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.”¹⁵

-Zora Neale Hurston

¹⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, *How It Feels to Be Colored Me*, 1928, <http://moodyap.pbworks.com/f/hurston.ColoredMe.pdf>.

During the last three years, I have experienced a rollercoaster of emotions as I faced the harsh realities of life. A close friend of mine was murdered, my aunt passed away from a stroke, and significant friendships ended. Throughout this process, I witnessed the political climate turn harsh and wage war on racial identity, history, and moral standards. As a result, I embarked on a deep dive into the history of Black people worldwide, which fueled my anger with the knowledge I gained. I read many stories of violence and crimes against humanity—stories that have been buried or told—that are vital and important for understanding the generational trauma passed down to Black people.

Overwhelmed by this all, I allowed myself to slip into a dark place in my mind that I hoped would be void of emotion. I wanted to run from the world's pain, a world that lacked love and compassion. Just like the conception of Luke Cage, I realized I had become the embodiment of the American ideal of a black man. I was stoic and emotionally immune. I was trapped inside of the double consciousness, and therefore, my cool pose was shattered. Revealing my emotions and my heart to me once again. This place made me very critical of the world around me, infuriated by this feeling of being trapped inside of a world that wasn't my own. I had realized that for years I had been hiding my emotions; I wasn't allowing myself to feel. I explore what this feels like in the painting *As Light As A Feather* (Fig 18.)



Figure 18 Joseph Mckinney, *As Light as A Feather*, 2025, Oil, Acrylic, Latex, charcoal, and Gouache on canvas, 60" x 82" x 3", collection of the artist

The paintings in the exhibition, *What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue?* depict this long journey toward harmony, a journey that is far from linear. Each work speaks to the resilience of the spirit, the quiet endurance that carries us through, and the small but profound moments of self-discovery along the way. These pieces don't offer easy answers. Instead, they sit in the tension between survival and surrender, between pride and pain. They explore the cool pose not just as a symbol of strength, but as a layered expression of what it means to be Black and seen. At times, the cool pose feels like a superpower—a necessary shield against a world that refuses to see our full humanity. Other times, it reveals itself as a broken tool, one that forces us to

perform strength even when we're hurting. My paintings trace the emotional and spiritual cost of maintaining that pose through these contradictions. This work is about reckoning with that complexity and finding new ways to exist beyond Western impressions.



Figure 19 Joseph Mckinney, *Mustaaaard!*, 2025, Oil, Acrylic, Latex, Spray Paint, on canvas, 65” x 90” X 3”, collection of the artist



Figure 20 Joseph McKinney, *Surrender to Your Good Thoughts* 2025, Oil, Acrylic, Latex, oil stick, and Gouache on canvas, 60" x 82" x 3", collection of the artist



Figure 21 Gallery View 1

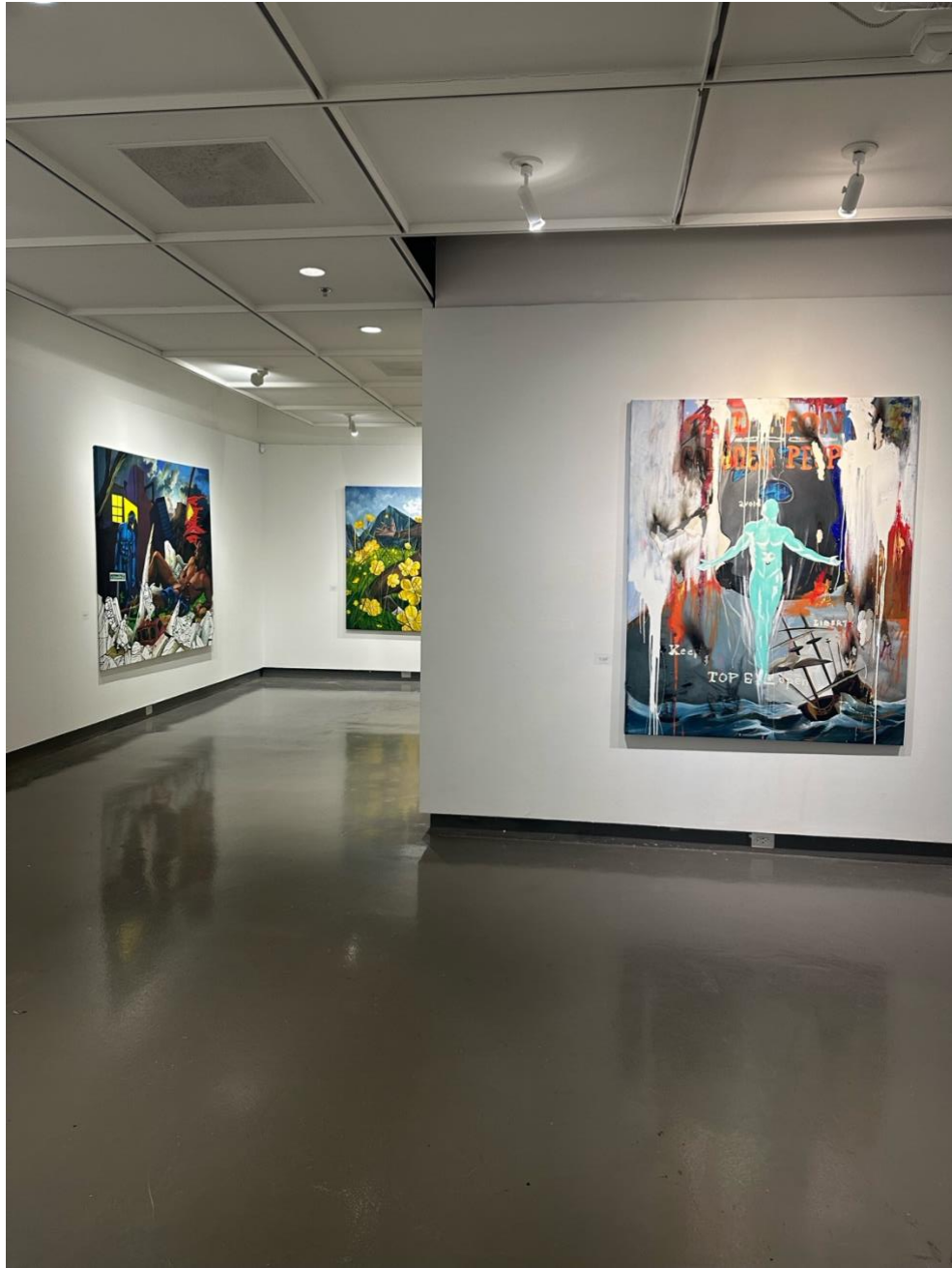


Figure 22 Gallery View 2



Figure 23 Joseph Mckinney, *Untitled*, 2025, woodcut, 24" x 36" x .5", collection of the artist



Figure 24 Figure 24. Joseph Mckinney, *Untitled #2*, 2025, woodcut, 24" x 36" x .5", collection of the artist

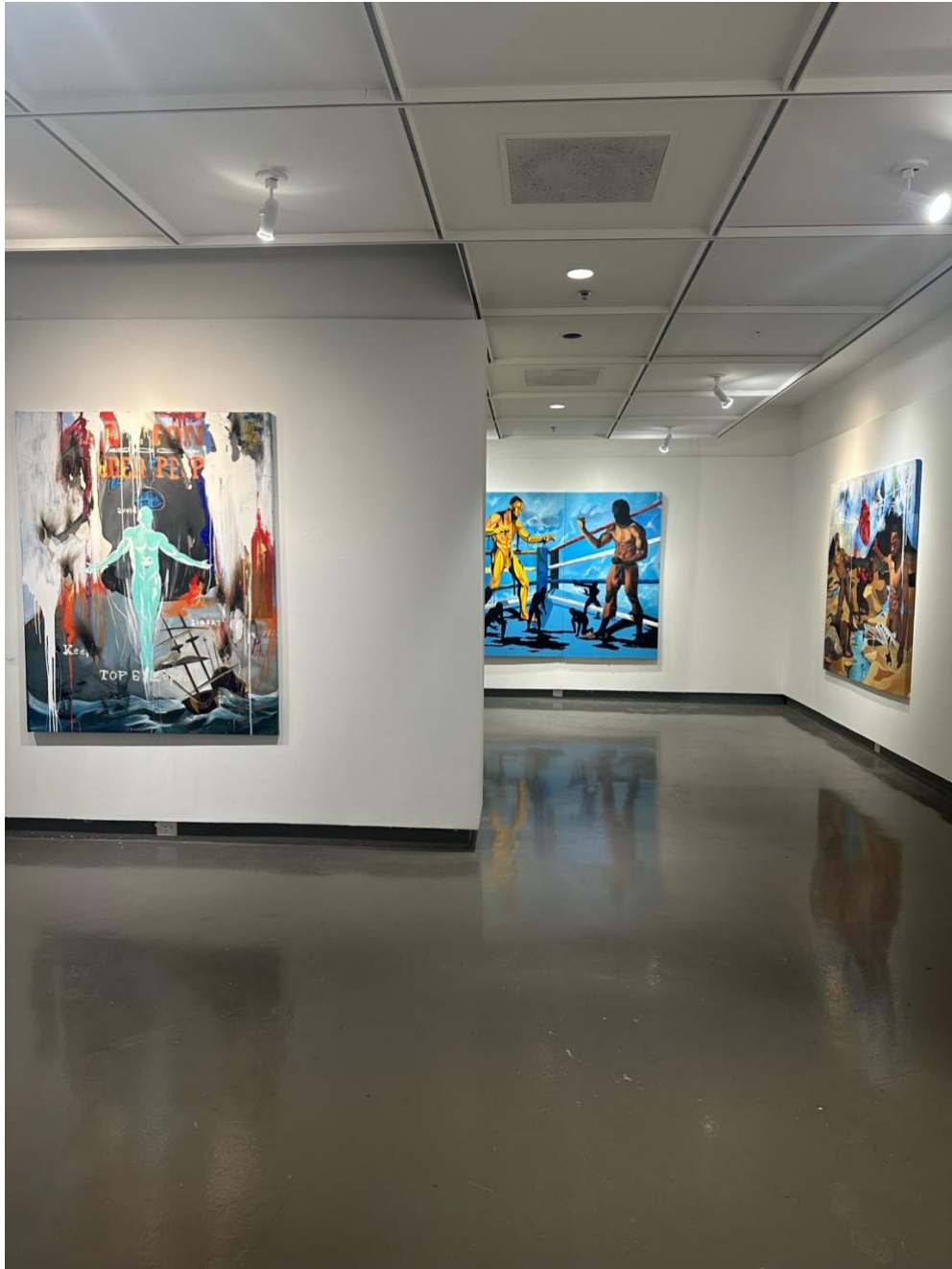


Figure 25 Gallery View 3

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