

Post Black Male: Blurring the Color Line

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THESIS

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This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Aaron Sanderson, my ever constant supporter, my father D.W. Sutherland, in honor of his investment in my education, and my daughters, Emma and Rebecca Sanderson, who lost a good portion of our time together to see this completed.

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INTRODUCTION

“Certainly, there is a much easier exhibit of images of black men: the greatest hits... [But] that wasn’t intellectually challenging. It didn’t provide the opportunity to investigate contemporary art practice.”¹

-Thelma Golden

In 1994, Thelma Golden worked as a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. During a decade marked by racially charged debate over global and national issues like Apartheid in South Africa, the beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles Police, the subsequent riots in L. A. and the O.J. Simpson verdict, Golden’s status as the Whitney’s first black curator brought attention and some controversy to the museum.

Golden had served as an advocate for the frequently unheard voices of minority artists throughout her tenure at the Whitney. As one of four curators on the board of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Golden helped to bring a vision of multiculturalism to the museum, highlighting a vision of the American artist, which stood in contrast to the mythos of the white straight male American genius, embodied by artists like Jackson Pollock in the first half of the 20th century. The majority of the artists who participated in the 1993 Biennial were minorities. Women, Blacks², Asian Americans, Latinos and Queer artists and their

viewpoints dominated the show. The result shocked and divided the critics. As the Guerilla Girls said in *Ms.* magazine, “It’s a show everyone likes to hate because it’s a comment on our times... [It] seems like this show is polarizing the aesthetes from people who see art as an expression of a certain time and a certain place.”³ In 1994’s *Black Male*, Golden once again came under public scrutiny. This time, the outcry focused on what some of the viewing public and critics found to be a lack of positive images of black men within the confines of the exhibition. Once again, the controversy echoed a greater debate in the art community.

Since the mid-1960s, the Black art community had been struggling to define what art historian Darby English calls “black representational space.”⁴ According to English, black representational space is “a society of objects, one whose members know one another and share a common language, customs, and an agreement about honoring rather than testing their limitations.”⁵ In the introduction of English’s pivotal work, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, the history of this agreement is painstakingly documented. Rooted in early 1900s--a time period during which popular images of Blackness were mainly manufactured by white hands--the black theorists and artists whose works composed the informal agreement sought to combat negative imagery of black people with a program of uplift.

In the 1960s, as the Civil Rights Movement built momentum, many black artists questioned the validity of black representational space. Those who did,

like Ralph Ellison, found themselves pitted against those who pushed this program of uplift even farther, defining black representational space as something that rejected white (Western) influence. These intentional limitations reflected a deeper political agenda that manifested in the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s. For many black artists who remembered the period prior to the abolition of Jim Crow, representations of blackness that emphasized positivity and uplift were a necessary component of Black art.⁶

Golden was representative of a growing group of thinkers and artists who believed that the forms and rules of black representational space no longer helped black artists but rather prevented them from practicing art in a way that led to innovation of form and content. Eventually, Golden would organize a series of exhibitions that highlighted many of these artists, the first of which would be the watershed exhibit *Freestyle* in 2001 for the Studio Museum of Harlem.

Golden's framing of this group of artists inside her catalog essay for *Freestyle* as "Post Black" named a shared quality that was incalculable as style, something that went beyond aesthetics. For Golden, Post Black existed inside a space which worked to broaden the context under which black artists could make artwork and through which identity and difference could be explored. As she wrote in her essay for *Freestyle*, "their work, in all its various forms, speaks to an individual freedom that is a result of this transitional moment in the quest to define ongoing changes in the evolution of African-American art and ultimately to

ongoing redefinition of blackness in contemporary culture.”⁷ Post Black was defined by Golden as a group of artists with diverse ways of working who engaged issues of race, but in a new way, and shunned the label of “Black Artist,” as it had come to be defined in the 1960s.⁸

What was solidified and named in 2001 within the *Freestyle* catalog had been fiercely argued in the in the Whitney's 2nd floor galleries in 1994. The *Black Male* exhibition was timely because these issues were being debated quite publicly within academic circles and within the media throughout the 1990s. Following the release of Spike Lee's *X*, the Walker Art Center opened their traveling *Malcolm X* exhibition. The controversy that surrounded Golden's *Black Male* mirrored the struggles that many artists endured in the mid 1990s. Artists whose work drew upon negative imagery of blackness as it had been popularly portrayed in this country's recent past --like Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles--found themselves the objects of scrutiny and protest, which critiqued not only their art but their person. Likewise, critics called into question Golden's curatorial judgment. The New York Amsterdam News' Mel Tapley offered this critique:

Except for the size of the canvases and photographs, nobody sees the black man as a monumental figure, who can love, conquer and rule. Curator Thelma Golden has certainly furnished us with plenty of material for discussion groups through the winter. If the 125th Street vendors picketed the storeowners and merchants because

the police evicted them, the 100 Black Men might consider demonstrating against art schools and art supply stores for perpetuating these recorded images.⁹

Tapley, and others, wanted Golden to focus on the predetermined message of uplift that would fight against negative stereotypes. These critiques, I argue, missed the primary focus of the exhibition.

As Golden wrote in *Black Male*, she "wanted to produce a project that would examine the black male as body and political icon." This meant examining a diverse range of images, positive and not, made by a diverse group of people, black and male, and not. It meant casting her nets widely, flexing her muscles broadly and refusing to limit her vision and analyses, to paraphrase Cornel West.^{10 11}

Black Male's complexity in theme and execution would lead Golden to the direction that she took her subsequent curatorial work and, ultimately, the direction where she would take the Studio Museum in Harlem. The definition of Post Black, and the root of its origins are found within the *Black Male* exhibit. *Freestyle*, while significant for the Studio Museum of Harlem and an indication of the acceptance of a new vision, was not in itself, innovative curatorial practice at the same level that *Black Male* was.

In *Freestyle*, Golden documented a trend that was occurring within contemporary art practices. *Black Male* drew from a variety of sources to create a singularly American vision of this thing called "blackness," which was specific

to the historical era she book-ended in context of the exhibit, 1968-1993, and which isolated this idea about blackness, forging a theoretical space from which to move forward in thinking about race in the context of the museum.

In the first section of this paper, I will use Golden's words from within her lectures, interviews and catalog essays to build a working definition of Post Black and demonstrate how this manifests within *Black Male*. The second section will speak to the influence of the identity of the institutions the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Studio Museum of Harlem over the respective exhibits, how they informed *Black Male* and *Freestyle* conceptually, and how Golden's move from the one institution to the other would mark a change in philosophy and vision for the Studio Museum, by placing a newfound curatorial emphasis on the complexity of blackness and black vision. I will argue that the revolutionary nature of this exhibition was due in part to the role of Golden as the curator of *Black Male*. The third section will summarize my conclusions, presenting the innovations of the *Black Male* exhibition as the nucleus of Post Black.

BLACK MALE

One of the greatest inventions of the twentieth century is the African-American Male--"invented" because black masculinity represents an amalgam of fears and projections in the American psyche which rarely conveys or contains the trope of truth about the black male's existence.¹²

-Thelma Golden, Black Male.

In a 2009 lecture at the Tate Modern about the *Status of Difference*, Golden emphasized the importance of the *Black Male* exhibition in forming her current curatorial practice. Following her work on the Biennial, Golden found that she was interested in examining what had formed the current perception of black masculinity.¹³ *Black Male* opened on November 10, 1994. With the work of 29 artists confined to one floor, and a second for *Black Male Screened*, Golden's vision was intimate in scope and purposefully edited. Logistically, the exhibition was accessible, placed on the second floor of the museum. Golden designed the exhibit to be manageably considered and interacted with.

The work came from an impressive list of artists whose practice concerned race and gender: David Hammons, Adrian Piper, Glenn Ligon, Fred Wilson, Lorna Simpson, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Barkley Hendricks, among others. From life size installations, to black and white photography, to film, to

video, to epic portrait painting, a variety of media presented a myriad of visions of this *Black Male*.

The exhibition's conceptual framework helped make the connections between disparate pieces of work. Golden explicitly stated her intent within the catalog. She listed “five signposts”¹⁴ that demarcated the boundaries of this exhibition: the transition from Civil Rights to Black Power, the rise of the Blaxploitation film, the debate over the “endangered black male,” the death of rhythm and blues and the rise of hip hop, and the power of images as icons demonstrated through the Rodney King beating video.¹⁵

These signposts reinforced the historical rootedness of the *Black Male* yet also established the icon's unfixed nature. Golden employed language like “transitions” to demonstrate both continuity and change. She pointed to an indebtedness to and awareness of the past, envisioning it as a catalyst for progress, as well as a mandate for new vision. Simultaneously, the signposts measured the distance of the present history from the past.

This progression is clear within Golden's signpost of the rise of the Blaxploitation film. Mario Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1972) contains within it elements of both the Jim Crow era stereotypical notions of hyper-sexualized violent black masculinity as well as a new way of considering the power inherent within the stereotype. The success of the Civil Rights movement in abolishing Jim Crow laws led to the sense of freedom that enabled Van Peebles to make the film and audiences to embrace it. Golden associates

this employment of negative stereotypes with the interest of artists in using new forms, which arose during this time period, and a decrease of fear on the part of artists in drawing from both positive and negative imagery.¹⁶ The transition necessitated a new manner of making.

Golden noted that the power to control images is central to the debate over positive and negative portrayals. Her question, “What kind of images subvert?”¹⁷ underscores the complexity of the issue. Inevitably, subversion requires an undermining of the current system of authority. In order to answer the question, the system one is trying to subvert must be identified.

The assumption on the part of those who argue for positive imagery of traditional black representational space is that the power to control the images is still outside of the hands of black artists and that the use of positive portrayal aids in combating the stereotypes. However, truly deconstructing the icon of *Black Male*, the process I believe Ms. Golden was engaged in, requires the examination and breakdown of as many of its stereotypes as possible.

Reduction to a type, whether positive or not, denies complexity of vision. Individual vision and complexity were hallmarks of *Black Male*, as was dealing with notions of “real and imagined” stereotypes.¹⁸ Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that *Black Male* addressed the stereotype of blackness presented within the confines of positivity.

Works like Adrian Piper’s *I Embod*y, which captured the artist’s Mythic Being persona of the 1970s, complicated notions of the Other, the stereotypical

embodiment of white fear. Piper fixed the Being as young, black and male and at the same time, inseparable from the performative aspects of these qualities. / *Embody* presented the young black male as “everything you most hate and fear.” Piper confronts the viewer from within the work, dressed up as a black man, underscoring that the fears she presents are based on a fiction, a “personality who is at the same time, not an individual,” according to Piper.¹⁹ Piper chooses to be viewed in a racialized manner in order to confront the viewer’s perceptions. Yet, she also uses the language of stereotypes to maneuver this arena: the Afro, the swagger, and the body language, the stance. The markers of this stereotype arise out of a visual language related to the Black Power movement, itself a product of image creation that drew upon the power harnessed from white fear. By exposing these fears as based on stereotypes, Piper both forces the viewer to engage with them as such and subsequently claims the power they belie. “I” embody. As Golden notes, empowerment resides within that declarative, I.²⁰

Stereotypical manifestations of the *Black Male*, like the one Piper embodies are never more than caricatures, because, as Golden writes, “There is no single black masculinity, no essential ‘subject.’”²¹ These notions of blackness are fiction because they refine vast complexity to limited notions of categorization. As English notes in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, “by thinking of black representational space historically--as a set of practices, diligently maintained over years of intense work and debate, but inadequate critical self-examination--we can better understand how blackness itself has

become 'an obstacle to going ahead' for many who take art to be a function of change."²² The *Black Male* exhibition sets those practices in plain view through its historical bracketing of this icon within post-Jim Crow America in order to begin the process of critical examination which is crucial to this moving forward.

Conceptually, Golden categorizes the work through the use of the Pan African flag as metaphor. The Pan African flag's colors historically represent the blood that unites all those of African descent (red), the black people united under its banner (black), and the fertile land of Africa (green). Within the exhibition, red is the section of the exhibition looking to subvert and engage stereotypes. She cites three areas around which these images focus: sex, crime and sports.²³ The black aspect of Golden's metaphorical space within the exhibition thematically centers on "images of or about the black male body and offers symbolic depictions of the black male psyche."²⁴ The green represents work that demonstrates the limitless manner of expressions of masculinity.

Gary Simmons' *Line Up* spans two of the three. The installation consists of eight pairs of men's brand name athletic shoes placed in front of the police line-up backdrop. Each set of shoes has been preserved in gold, akin to bronzed baby booties, rendered precious and missed, owners absent, invisible. (Fig. 1) Allusions to the loss of black men as individuals and absence through incarceration permeate the work. These are black male's shoes because they are athletic shoes because they appear in the line-up context, and because of their

absence. And even though the shoes are not the same pair eight times, they are read that way through their color and general size, until viewed up close.

This piece not only confronts the invisibility of the black male within institutions, but also indicates perceived value. The missing men are bodies, their physicality their primary asset. The poignancy of this imagery--in context of Rodney King and the concept of the endangered black male--is brought to the installation from the viewer. To construe this meaning from the work requires knowledge of certain presuppositions. These presuppositions stem from a racialized understanding of black men built into our culture. Nowhere is race inherent within the work.

Golden intentionally chooses work that overlaps these categories in order to bring an integrated view of the concepts she has delineated. Each piece of art brings to the table varied perspectives on the three areas she has outlined. Her conceptual framework challenges assumed notions regarding that could make work about race and gender and how it can be portrayed. .

Although this exhibition presents well-known forays into this dialogue of gender and race --like Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* series--there are also subtler queries into the intersection between the two. Lorna Simpson's lyrical photograph, *Gestures/ Reenactments* (1985), is one such work. (Fig. 2) The viewer's gaze is directed by the reading of the text beneath the images, which moves as if along a timeline, but is not tied sequentially. Everyday gestures, expressions of body, of black body and where they were remembered from, are

paired. Sometimes race is necessary to the understanding, sometimes not. But Simpson, through her use of the same black subject under different names, implies an Everyman who stands in for every black man, innocent but accused, finding grief, needing work. The piece is organized around the tension between intimacy of small moments and their relation to larger truths about perceptions of race. The gaze set upon the subject is distinctly female.

Black Male Screened and the *Black Male* catalog were also compiled in a similar way. John Hanhardt, the then curator of film and video at the Whitney, selected five guest curators to create programs addressing the theme, each of whom created a distinct vision from sources like MTV, Bill Cosby, Francis Ford Coppola, Spike Lee and *Shaft*, looking for icons, investigating the ways that American artists and media present the black male. Their perspectives were highlighted in the essays they wrote, enforcing the concept of the building of this exhibit from many voices.

The other essays included within the catalog are not meant to reiterate Golden's viewpoint but rather to engage the exhibition subject matter critically from varying points and perspectives. Again, the list is impressive: bell hooks, Kobena Mercer, Isaac Julien, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Maurice Berger contributed text within the exhibition information room. This inclusive practice underscores Golden's curatorial structure and serves as the expression of the final tenet of Post Black, the lack of interest in serving as a spokesperson for all black Americans, or, as Golden expressed to *The Gothamist*:

"I am not a spokesperson for the black community, I am a spokesperson for me and the ideas that I might be interested in. And while sometimes those ideas might line up with other people's ideas and perhaps I can speak for a collective sense of thinking, I by no means stand as the spokesperson for what every black person thinks about contemporary art or contemporary ideas or anything people might imagine I do."²⁵

Golden's *Black Male* takes pains not to speak as a black consensus, not viewing the Black Male as existing inside this realm of black representational space, but beyond its boundaries and therefore, spilling into an integrated understanding, and producing a thorough retrospective of this American icon, *Black Male*.

This manner of execution was possible because it fit the mission of the institution of the Whitney as an historical institution that highlights the work of living American artists. The theoretical base that it helped Ms. Golden to build, would take her to the Studio Museum and lead to a revised vision for this Black Art institution.

INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITIES

"I think on paper the differences between the museums seems perhaps striking, big/small, rich/not-so rich, but actually the museums are relatively the same. They were both founded as a response to a real and perceived level of exclusion in the art world²⁶."

-Thelma Golden

The Whitney Museum of American Art began with a refusal. When its founder, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney attempted to donate her collection of close to 500 works of living American artists to the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, in New York, they turned it down. Ms. Whitney, whose passion for the modern art movement and whose recognition of the importance of the American artistic narrative were the driving force behind her collection, decided to open her own museum, imbuing it with her distinct vision: to present and support the work of living American artists.²⁷

Since opening the doors to its 8th Avenue location in 1931, the Whitney has remained faithful to the mission of its founder. The Whitney Biennial serves every two years as the capstone event for this mission, highlighting important work of the current contemporary American art market, as well as setting trends. According to its mission statement, "the Whitney's permanent collection, and its identity, like the history of American art itself, will never be fixed and final but

always in the making."²⁸ The statement goes on to cite three principles of operation: first, a commitment to curatorial practices grounded in "aesthetic, artistic and theoretical standards,"²⁹ second, a vision of an inclusive and diverse American nation that can also share an identity and culture, third, innovation in programs, curation and education. This mission statement was adopted in February of 1993, during Golden's tenure there.³⁰

The parallels between the Whitney Museum's mission and the structure of the *Black Male* exhibition are striking. Both are grounded in history, with an appreciation of its evolving unfixed nature; both are invested in a diverse inclusive understanding of American culture; and both highlight innovative work, artistically and curatorially. The Whitney's investment in contemporary American art trends, no doubt guided the adoption of the 1993 draft of the mission statement as a reflection of the museum's growing commitment to diversity of the 1990s. This would translate to the acquisition of three of the works appearing in *Black Male* to the permanent collection.³¹ Gary Simmons' *Line Up*, Tim Rollins & K.O.S.' *By Any Means Necessary: Nightmare*, and Fred Wilson's *Guarded View*, 1991 are all part of the Whitney's permanent collection.

Black Male took place at the Whitney's current location on Madison Avenue and 75th Street in New York. The space is a quintessential white cube, designed by Marcel Breuer. It is urban, rich and thriving. The Breuer building is the Whitney's third main location since its inception, and as of this writing, ground has just broken on a new location designed by Renzo Piano.³² The blank slate

of the white cube allows an almost limitless variance of American narratives to play out on the Whitney's walls and floors. Even with its specialized national vision, it does not intrude upon the curator or artist who directs the narrative. To a certain degree, the multivalent view of America allows the American narrative itself to play out as a white cube. If America can contain all ideas possible, then an inclusive museum space is one that fades into the background. As Golden said, in speaking about creating exhibitions, "Architecturally, the Whitney is the epitome in some ways of a modernist white box space. For a long time I fantasized about that space and imagined every exhibition I made needed that kind of space to make sense."³³

An exhibition like *Black Male* required the white cube space, or at the very least, one which isolated the work from exterior narratives. Brian O'Doherty wrote:

We have now reached a point where we see not the art but the space first...An image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of 20th-century art. And it clarifies itself through a process of historical inevitability usually attached to the art it contains...as modernism gets older, context becomes content. In a peculiar reversal, the object introduced into the gallery "frames" the gallery and its laws.³⁴

Here, O'Doherty writes about how the white cube space operates; that it has a history that invariably becomes part of the content.

Black Male required the context of that history to naturalize its narrative, as it presented work that was very different than the modernist aesthetic and subverted the accepted narrative. The exhibition was invested in deconstructing black representational space and its relation to black male as icon. It presented perceptions of race and gender where the end goal was not necessarily prescribing a set of ideals, but rather examining how race and gender could operate in the context of the white cube.

In the process, the exhibition *Black Male* became historical content through its presentation. Like the events spanning timeline included within the exhibit, which documented American Black History and Civil Rights through 1967, the exhibit imbued another layer of meaning upon those white walls. As a result, the identity of the Whitney as an institution committed to diversity--as it professed to be within its mission statement--was naturalized through *Black Male's* display and the complexity of America's present as well as the variance of its past was acknowledged. The Whitney and *Black Male* were in agreement of purpose in this. Both the institution and its exhibition chose the historical and the multivalent as part of their narrative. Both empowered the other to realize their vision.

The examination of history as multivalent was an influential aspect of not only the curatorial viewpoint of *Black Male*, but of the work inside the exhibition. This is clearly evident in Glenn Ligon's text works, the *Profile* and *Jokes* series. In the *Profile* series, the monochromatic color scheme operates as a

representative of the binary of black and white. The smudged and blurred quality of the stenciled words reference newspaper, calling into question the supposed objectivity of the press through the haze of the picture the text literally creates. Ligon stenciled the letters, removing any sense of handwriting, machinating the process and referring to print. The work is built. Layers of thick oil stick applied and redrawn, heavy, convoluted, repress the voice of the text, which often operates as a prescribed formula through its application. As the text accumulates, it thickens, disintegrating, mixing and becoming grey. In Ligon's work, the words are never the black and white extreme, but complex signs with shifting meaning.

The words and the representation of the individual they describe are called into question. The stories of these young men, accused of the brutal rape and beating of the Central Park jogger, are not simple as suggested by the *New York Times* article from which Ligon draws the text. As Golden writes, "they are neither inherently evil, nor in the *Times*' simplistic sense, good boys gone astray."³⁵ The words construct a meaning filled with contradictions, and reexamine the stereotypes they are drawn from.

In 2008, Ligon spoke at the Tate about the historical aspect of much of his text work. He described himself as literal. His first idea was to get the texts read. Initially, he began with phrases taken from black writers and thinkers like James Baldwin and Nora Thurston Zeale.³⁶

The sole initial goal was to render visible the words of many black thinkers and authors in the greater public sphere of contemporary art. The layers of meaning came out in the process of making. For Ligon, the process was two-fold.³⁷ First, the ideas within the text and their authors were rendered with personal importance through his appropriation; simultaneously, they were problematized through their construction, words woven into myth through work. The texts are worn, as hand-me-downs, made valuable through the remembering of those who had previously worn them, and performed as paintings by Ligon, but never completely belonging to him. They are sometimes uncomfortable to wear and to read.

Ligon began to investigate other sources of text that dealt with race, as in the *Profile* series, and his *Notes in the Margin of a Black Book*, in which Ligon worked through his complicated reaction to the photographs in Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*. In the *Jokes* series, Ligon solidifies moments from the stand-up routines of Richard Pryor, the controversial black comedian. Pryor unflinchingly examined race and sexuality. The paintings were physically difficult to read; the text was small and required the viewer to approach them in an intimate space in order to ascertain what was said.

On *Cocaine (Pimps)*, yellow-orange text was superimposed on a red-orange background, enhancing this illegibility. When the viewer accessed the text, the ideas would be activated, and the viewer became part of the performance of the words. The viewer was forced to read what Pryor would

speaking, which was more difficult than listening to Pryor onstage or on video.

Removed from the context of the stand-up routine and placed within the contemporary art museum's white cube, the viewer had to not only confront the text of the joke but also decide what to publicly do with it. The viewer was forced to confront what the joke meant hanging in the wind by itself without situational support. How should the viewer respond to:

Niggers be holding them dicks too..

White people go " Why you guys hold
your things?"

Say "You done took everything else
motherfucker."³⁸

Ligon related a story of a docent at the Whitney who led patrons on tours through the *Black Male* exhibition. The docent did not want to read the jokes, because he didn't want to say some of the words that the jokes contained. Inevitably, when they would come to the part of the tour where they confronted Ligon's work, someone would ask the docent to read the joke. The docent would continue to talk about the work, and try to ignore or assuage the requests, but due to the intimate nature of the read and the size of the groups in the tour, the request to read would become more insistent. During the particular instance relayed by Ligon in his talk, the crowd pushed past the docent to read the joke. When they realized what it said, the crowd became agitated. One member of the crowd, when asked if he didn't appreciate Richard Pryor's stand-up, related that

yes, he did, but Richard Pryor in his living room is one thing, and on the wall at the Whitney is another.³⁹⁴⁰

Golden tells a similar story of a woman who approached her at the *Black Male* show, expressing her disappointment at the kinds of images of blackness presented at the exhibition. The woman cited the work of prominent black artist Robert Colescott's *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (1975) as containing the kind of images of the black male that black people had been fighting against for centuries. The woman did not see the critique of the portrayal of blackness that Colescott exacted or the complexity of the image's history, only the negative stereotypes that it drew upon.⁴¹

Colescott's painting satirized the famous Emmanuel Leutze painting, *George Washington Crosses the Delaware*, which commemorated Washington's famed actions during December of 1776. (Fig. 3) Colescott subverts the image, inserting overtly racial stereotypes for the military figures on the ship, and renaming it after George Washington Carver, the black scientist and agriculturist. The work highlighted the discrepancy between the historical portrayal of white and black Americans in the arts and in textbooks. It operated as a critique of the past narrative of the museum and of American culture in general. By subverting the image in a critical fashion, Colescott strived to engage the viewer in debate about not only the inequality of images in American culture, but also the

inaccuracy of these heroic epic paintings, rather than merely legitimizing the epic narrative by requesting a stake for the black voice within it.

Both the Ligon and Golden stories illustrate that the greatest obstacle for *Black Male* was the predetermined ideas the general viewing public held about what type of imagery was appropriate for the museum context and for the Whitney in particular. The viewers bring with them ideas about art, naturalized by the white cube: that the artwork that fills museums is an elevated order of imagery aesthetically and conceptually. This is established through the isolation of the art object for consideration and encouraged by the contemplative quiet of the gallery atmosphere. The often times difficult imagery disquieted those who expected and desired heroic portrayals of black men. The viewer who came looking for a manifestation of black representational space within the white cube of the Whitney would not find it. *Black Male* was an exhibition about race and gender that did not privilege black audiences. This was one of the primary differences between *Black Male* and *Freestyle*. *Freestyle* was an exhibition about artists who did not privilege black audiences in the context of a site built specifically for the black community.

Golden has written that one of the major challenges of a space like the Studio Museum of Harlem is that the neighborhood is always a consideration.

She says:

Every exhibition I make at the Studio Museum is site-sensitive. It is very hard to work here in the middle of 125th St, with all the

attention being paid to Harlem these days and not to imagine this part of the city as part of the life of the museum, publicly as well as aesthetically. I think of not just the audience that we have, but I think about the way in which this museum symbolizes so many things. That never happened to me when I worked at the Whitney. I saw the site as an independent one, one that was universal in a way, in that many things could happen on those walls but they never necessarily had a relationship to what was going on outside. Whereas here, I always think that the line between outside and inside is very very thin.⁴²

The Studio Museum of Harlem was founded at the beginning of *Black Male's* timeline in 1968. William T. Williams was one of the artists who helped to found the museum as a place that would subsidize the work of black artists and provide a space to exhibit their work. Williams and Mel Edwards worked together to convert an empty loft above a Kentucky Fried Chicken into a community museum for black artists, securing backing from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and hosting the first exhibition in 1969, entitled *X to the Fourth Power*, which featured the work of Edwards and Williams and two other artists.⁴³

Ed Spriggs became its first director in 1971. During his tenure, the Studio Museum introduced its sponsorship program, funding three artists of African descent every year since. Many of the artists who hung in either *Black Male* or *Freestyle* got their start at the Studio Museum: Lyle Ashton Harris, David

Hammons and Allison Saar to name a few. Under the directorship of Mary Campbell, the Studio Museum began its publishing program and a connoisseurship program entitled, "The Fine Art of Collecting," which educated and encouraged patrons to collect Black Art.⁴⁴

When Golden took the helm of the Studio Museum of Harlem in 2000, it came as a surprise to many in the art world who viewed Golden as the natural choice to spearhead the curation of the 2001 Whitney Biennial. Golden's move stemmed from an interest in engaging the theoretical space, which she built in the context of *Black Male* and began to witness permeating the work of young contemporary black artists, simultaneously. Golden wanted to expand the theoretical space under which the work of black artists could be viewed and discussed. The challenge of addressing these dynamics in the context of a historically traditional "Black Art" institution like the Studio Museum was a natural step for Golden. Reframing the conversation about black representational space within the Studio Museum--an institution cradled in the birthplace of the Harlem Renaissance and forged during the reign of the Black Arts Movement--would be a significant step towards this expansion. The problem of how to create a similar theoretical framework to that of *Black Male* within the Studio Museum found its solution in a logical place: within the art.

Golden frequently cites the artist as being the primary source of inspiration for her curatorial practice. She credits Glenn Ligon as her co-author of the phrase "Post Black." She watches the art as its ideas fester within her. As she

says, "that obsession makes it possible for me to go from an idea, like a tiny germ of an idea, into a full blown exhibition, because I can't let it go. So I might think, gosh, why am I so bothered by hyper, figurative realistic images of black people? It will be something I think about and not let go of. It will stay with me until it realizes, and in many cases, those realizations are exhibitions."⁴⁵

Freestyle would find its inspiration there. Like *Black Male*, it mirrored the mission of the museum whose space it occupied. In the Studio Museum's case, this meant highlighting the work of black artists. Golden reframed the ideas that were the focal point of *Black Male* and expressed an interest in what she viewed as:

...work that refers to multiple histories of contemporary art and culture--both non-Western and that of the Western Modernist tradition. [These artists] influences are rich and varied. They are both post-Basquiat and post-Biggie. They embrace the dichotomies of high and low, inside and outside, tradition and innovation with great ease and facility. Like the generations before them, they resist narrow definition. Most importantly, their work, in all its various forms, speaks to an individual freedom that is the result of a transitional moment in the quest to define the ongoing changes in the evolution in African-American art and ultimately, to ongoing redefinition of blackness in contemporary culture.⁴⁶

This passage from Golden's "Post..." essay in *Freestyle* echoes the language and ideas of her "My Brother" essay from *Black Male*. The importance of these artists is their varied influences, their multivalent view of history and possibility. Golden contextualizes the work inside the tradition of Black Art by citing the same transition she writes about in "My Brother," but also grounds it within the greater context of non-Western and Western traditions, expanding the focus to a global one. Golden argued that Post Black artists were heirs to the traditions that the Studio Museum and the Black Art community had helped to build, but that this new generation found within those institutions innovation which inspired the character of their artistic practice as well. Elsewhere in the essay, Golden cites Hammons, Colescott and Piper as being specifically influential in this regard.⁴⁷

By citing this generation's predecessors, Golden pays homage to the rich history of Black Art and its institutions, like the Studio Museum. By writing about this time period--the 1990s-- as a time of transition, she ushers in a new era to the Studio Museum, acknowledging its legacy and asking, "After all this, what's next?"⁴⁸

For the Studio Museum, it would be a more global outlook and a broader notion of its place within the community of Harlem, which itself was changing and gentrifying. The groundbreaking success of *Freestyle* would be followed by *Frequency*, which would revisit some of the themes of its predecessor and reinforce the new direction of the institution, a direction that would not have come to fruition without the theoretical work done within the context of *Black Male*.

CONCLUSIONS

*I always think about the relationship or the dialogue between shows.*⁴⁹

-Thelma Golden

The influence of the *Black Male* exhibition on Golden's curatorial practice, the Studio Museum of Harlem and the consolidation of Post Black theory are evident. In examining what has happened in art since the exhibition's opening, its influence becomes clear. Even English's text, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, which has become the essential publication on the topic and is quoted within this paper, bears the influence of its theoretical framework.

The principle tenets of Post Black were, as outlined by Golden within *Freestyle*: diverse ways of working, a new manner of engagement of race, the refusal of the label of "Black Artist" or "Black representative," innovation of form, and multivalent emphasis of history. All appeared within *Black Male*. This establishes *Black Male* as the site of origin of Post Black theory.

The influence of the Whitney's inclusive vision of American art and the focus it brought to the *Black Male* exhibition are woven into Post Black, refining its vision in a way not possible under the mission of the Studio Museum of Harlem. Post Black could be named and adopted under its banner but had to be born outside of it by the nature of its framework. The *Black Male* exhibition then became the next signpost, a marker of a new ground.

In the years that have passed since Post Black's inception, many artists included within the parameters of the movement have expressed unease at being defined in this way. Paradoxically, this mirrors the tenets of the movement. Many art critics and historians have come use the term "post black" as one aesthetically based, which has altered its meaning in some ways, turning it into a descriptive adjective which addresses formal conventions in a way Golden never intended for the term. This has created a need within the art community to move beyond the boundaries of Post Black in order to progress. Events like the University of Chicago's "Post Black: There and Back Again" have broached the subject of how to move forward from this point in history.

Post Black has also been adopted by other disciplines in an effort to identify similar mindsets within those traditions. The term has taken on a life of its own. Evidence of its influence can be seen within the emerging black political leadership, most prominently, in the person of President Barack Obama, whose ability to transcend the boundaries of race united the country under his campaign of hope, and quietly broke the ranks of the Black Caucus. It also can be seen in the governing style of people like Newark, New Jersey Mayor Cory Booker. Their leadership carries the legacy of the Civil Rights movement beyond the borders of the Mall in Washington into the White House.

The expanded use of the term separates it from the source of its meaning by diluting its connection to its original intent through its multiple forms. It becomes important to define "Post Black" as it was used initially. To bracket it

historically, within the events that conspired to create it, and therefore move into a space, where we, like Golden before us, can look to the art, and say, what next?

¹ Patti, Nicholas. "Thelma Golden." Answers.com. Web. 2 February 2012.

² For many people, the terms African American and Black have come to be loaded terms, which vary in meaning based upon their context. In order to be clear, for this paper, I will use the term Black, instead of African American. I do this because, there is some disagreement about who is to be included in the term African American, and how it should be defined, and because this paper deals with questions of race, not ethnicity. Because Golden addresses blackness, in *Black Male*, and Darby English refers to black representational space and black skinned artists, it seems important to be consistent with these terms, as they have described them. The exception will be when I am quoting from a source, in which case, I will remain faithful to the original text.

³ Ms., May/June 1993. pg. 80.

⁴ In the introduction of "How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness," English contextualizes this debate over the contemporary art practice of African Americans within history, arguing that a new generation of artists, who grew up after the abolition of Jim Crow, view the idea of black representational space as one that as he writes, "Cannot exist outside of politics."

⁵ Darby English. *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA. 2007. pg. 10.

⁶ In the second half of the 1990s, Bettye Saar would protest Kara Walker's MacArthur Genius Award, over similar issues.

⁷ Thelma Golden, "Post..." *Freestyle*. Studio Museum of Harlem: New York, NY. 2000. pg. 15.

⁸ Here, I use the term "Black Artist" as a referent to an artist who operates within English's system of black representational space. Consequently, this term is also associated with the type of imagery associated with the Black Arts Movement, who advocated not only the use of images of uplift, but discouraged image making that grew out of white traditions.

⁹ Tapley, Mel. New York Voice Inc./Harlem USA. January 19, 1994. pg. 17.

¹⁰ Cornel West. "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1990.

¹¹ The West essay this quote is drawn from would heavily influence Golden. Much later, in a lecture at the Tate on the Status of Difference, she would cite it as the basis for her curatorial practice.

¹² Thelma Golden. "My Brother." *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. Whitney Museum of American Art: New York, NY. 1994. pg. 19.

¹³ Thelma Golden. Tate Museum. 2009. "The Status of Difference."

¹⁴ Golden, *Black Male*, pp. 20-23.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. pg. 25.

¹⁷ Ibid. pg. 23.

¹⁸ Ibid. pg. 25.

¹⁹ Adrian Piper. *Out of Order, Out of Sight*. Graphic Composition, Inc. USA. 1996. pp. 108-109.

²⁰ Golden, *Black Male*, pg. 26.

²¹ Ibid. pg. 25.

²² English, pg. 30.

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- ²³ Golden, *Black Male*, pg. 26.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Mindy Bond. "Thelma Golden, Curator." Gothamist.com. Web. 27 April 2005. Retrieved on 2 February 2012.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ The Whitney, "About," The Whitney Museum of American Art. Web. 2 February 2012.
- ²⁸ The Whitney museum of American Art, "Mission Statement," Volunteer Match, Web. 2 February 2012
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ The actual number may be higher. Two of the works listed as being a part of the exhibition, according to documents in the Whitney archives: Narratives, by Glenn Ligon, and Shiny #1 by Nayland Blake, are not listed or referenced anywhere in the catalog. The catalog however, has asterisked the list to the publication date, October 3, 1994
- ³² The Whitney.
- ³³ Bond.
- ³⁴ Brian O'Doherty. "Inside the White cube: Notes on the Gallery Space: Part 1." Society of Control.com. Web. 1976. 2 February 2012.
- ³⁵ Golden, pg. 27.
- ³⁶ Glenn Ligon. Tate Museum. "Glenn Ligon." 2009.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Richard Meyer "[Light it up, or how Glenn Ligon got over](#)". ArtForum. FindArticles.com. 05 Oct 2011.
- ³⁹ Ligon.
- ⁴⁰ Recently, in an Artforum article about his work, Ligon was quoted about why he had returned to this work after having stopped making Pryor paintings, specifically due to this incident at the Whitney, he said: "So why have I returned to Pryor after all these years? Perhaps it is that Pryor is funny again. Not that he wasn't funny back in the seventies, it's just that all his militancy, his rage at social and economic injustice, his breaking down of sexual taboos seems amusing now, almost quaint. The jokes don't scare me anymore because the world they promised to bring seems even farther away than it did then. As Pryor says, 'Remember the Revolution brother? It's over. Lasted six months.' When I listen to Pryor records now, I laugh and am a little sad--nostalgic for my fear, I guess."
- ⁴¹ Golden, Tate.
- ⁴² Bond.
- ⁴³ Dawoud Bey. "What's Going On?" Dawoudbeysblog.blogspot.com. Web. 2 June 2008. Accessed 2 February 2012.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Bond.
- ⁴⁶ Golden, *Freestyle*. pg. 19.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid. pg. 18.
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LIST OF FIGURES



Fig. 1. Gary Simmons, *Line Up* (detail). Gold plated sneakers and acrylic on wood. Black felt interior. Variable dimensions. 1991. Photograph by Elizabeth Sanderson.



Fig. 3. Robert Colescott. *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: A Page from an American History Textbook*. 1975. Acrylic on canvas. 84 x 108". Photograph by Larry Qualls. Retrieved from: Artstor. 03.12.2012.
<http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=%2FTxTdD4gJDAnIS4ld1N7R3soV3QofVJ8>