Reconfiguring Black Womanhood: Disidentification in the Work of Mickalene Thomas and

Juliana Huxtable

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SUMMARY

An examination of a potential lineage of a queer black feminist artistic tradition as seen through the work of Mickalene Thomas and Juliana Huxtable. Both artists use aspects of exclusionary systems and dominant ideologies in order to refuse problematic representations of black womanhood. This process is what José Esteban Muñoz refers to as disidentification. Through the process of disidentification both Huxtable and Thomas reconfigure notions of black womanhood in the visual sphere.

Thomas' *Portrait of Maya #10* (2017), *Waiting on a Prime Time Star* (2017), and *Le Déjeuner Sur L'herbe Les Trois Femmes Noir #4* (2017) are works that highlight the artist's aim to insert images of black women that reflect the complexities of their womanhood in the same tradition as black feminist artists working during the late nineties. Thomas' addition to this established black feminist tradition is her attempt to insert queer black women specifically into the art historical canon.

Huxtable's work — *Untitled(Wall)* (2017), *Transsexual Empire* (2017), and *The Feminist Scam* (2017) — use conspiracy as a framework to question the construction of categories of identity. Her work draws upon problematic text and images in order to open up a dialogue about accepted societal truths about identity and how that affects knowledge production in the public sphere.

Through the examination of both artists' work alongside one another, one is able to trace and assert a lineage of a queer black feminist tradition. Generationally, from Thomas to Huxtable, there is a notable shift from a queer black womanist approach to a black radical feminist critique.

Introduction

It all started with wood paneling. In researching queer black women artists for the sake of finding a common link in representational processes I was drawn to the similar use of wood paneling in reference to the 1970s that I found in both Mickalene Thomas' and Juliana Huxtable's artwork. How interesting, I thought, that these two artists from different generations should similarly represent nostalgia for the black power era of the 70s. However, when I began to look closer, these similarities began to dissolve. Thomas is a New York based contemporary multimedia artist that references both art history and pop culture in order to investigate how ideas of womanhood are informed by visual representation.[1] An academically trained artist, Thomas received her BFA at the Pratt Institute and went on to receive her MFA at Yale University School of Art.[2] Her art education likely influenced her work through first-hand experience of the absences of black women in the art historical canon. Now, Thomas is known for her portrait of former first lady Michelle Obama and her work featuring influential artists such as Carrie Mae Weems and musician Solange Knowles. Similarly, Juliana Huxtable is a New York based multimedia visual and performance artist but she is also a writer and DJ.[3] She studied art, gender, and human rights at Bard College[4] which likely fueled her desire to address the intersectional issues of identity in terms of race, gender, and queerness in her work. Huxtable blends writing, visual art, social me-

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[1] "Mickalene Thomas: About," Mickalene Thomas, accessed May 01, 2019. https://www.mickalenethomas.com/about.

[2] "Mickalene Thomas: About."

[3] "Juliana Huxtable," Guggenheim, accessed May 01, 2019, https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/juliana-huxtable.

[4] "Juliana Huxtable."

dia, and other expressionistic methods in her artistic creations.[5] Both artists have vastly different career trajectories and methods of representation, but what became of great interest to me were the choices two academically trained artists made in their approach to reconfiguring notions of black womanhood. What does it mean that Huxtable's point of reference is social media and internet conspiracy theory while Thomas is referencing significant works in art history? How can two artists working at the same time have such vastly different approaches to the process of disidentification? I believe that the differences in approach are generational and that the shift from Thomas' approach to Huxtable's is reflective of a lineage of a new artistic tradition. By placing Thomas' and Huxtable's most recent work alongside and in conversation with one another, I seek both to assert and trace a lineage of a queer black feminist artistic tradition.

Nicole Fleetwood, in her book titled *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, defines iconicity as, "[…]the ways in which singular images or signs come to represent a whole host of historical occurrences and processes."[6] When blackness circulates through black performances, it becomes attached to particular narratives and bodies despite its ability to exceed these attachments. This attachment occurs as a result of the consumption and subsequent disposal of blackness involved in non-black viewership. Vision has historically been relied upon to maintain relations of power as visuals were utilized in order to render blackness aberrant.[7] The process of seeing race in itself is "a 'doing'" due to the fact that the visual sphere "renders racial marking" which inserts the viewer into constructed narratives that may have existed before

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[5] "Juliana Huxtable."

[6] Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Introduction," in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2.

[7] Fleetwood, 17.

them.[8] As a result of this rendering, this all-encompassing view of blackness, black people have

been left without the tools to challenge these visual technologies.[9] Instead, black artists have

been left to conceptualize these tools that may challenge and reshape visual consumption of im-

ages of black subjects. Visibility and inclusion are thought to be the most successful options for

combatting the violences of visual technologies; however, this concern for being folded into the

norm fails to recognize and challenge the systems that initially place subjects on the margins. In

the art world, visibility and inclusion have become a means to commodify marginalized identi-

ties. Inclusion establishes a façade of progressiveness while difference and marginalized posi-

tions are marketed for consumption. How can marginalized artists challenge the violence of vis-

ual technologies while simultaneously evading neoliberal understandings of inclusion?

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban

Muñoz cites the work of queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to present the notion of queer-

ness as a practice as well as a mode of survival. Muñoz builds off of the concept of queerness as

survival, claiming that the performance of queerness is a means of disidentification. Disidentifi-

cation has multiple meanings. It serves as a performative method of reformatting the self which

allows minoritarian subjects to resist oppressive conventions and norms.[10] Disidentification is a

way to challenge and reformulate a "toxic identity" shaped within the "majoritarian public

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[8] Fleetwood, 7.

[9] Fleetwood, 17.

[10] José Esteban Muñoz, "'The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Creme Davis's Terrorist Drag," in *Disidentifi-cations: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*,Vol. 2 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Min-nesota Press, 1999), 97.

sphere."[11] It is a reclamation through reconstruction. Muñoz argues that such reconstruction of identity constructs new world views in its dismantling of majoritarian ideologies as the remaining parts of these ideologies are utilized in conjunction with those newly produced in order to establish a new reality.[12] It is important to acknowledge the difference between counteridentification and disidentification. Counteridentification involves an attempt to completely go against oppressive dominant discourse while the process of disidentification involves using valuable pieces of dominant systems and/or ideologies and building off of them in order to transform. With counteridentification, one reproduces oppressive dominant discourse in the attempt to reject it.[13] One must intervene with and deconstruct dominant discourse instead of refusing it in its entirety in order to avoid reiterating the dominant ideologies they are trying to critique. Therefore, the process of disidentification means that identity construction is shifted and altered in order to create new "narratives of self" that exceed the limitations of dominant culture.[14] Contemporary artists Mickalene Thomas and Juliana Huxtable refuse and reconstruct images of blackness, particularly black womanhood, in their work through the process of disidentification.

Discussing *Chicas 2000*, one of Alina Troyana's performance pieces, José Esteban Muñoz points out a key hurdle that subaltern subjects face in the process of disidentification: the "burden of liveness." The "burden of liveness" is the majoritarian subjects' expectation of minorities to constantly perform for them as a spectacle for consumption while simultaneously

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[11] José Esteban Muñoz, "Latina Performance and Queer Worldmaking; or, *Chusmería* at the End of the Twentieth Century," in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 182. Vol. 2, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 185.

[12] Muñoz, "Latina Performance and Queer Worldmaking," 185.

[13] Muñoz, "'The White to Be Angry'," 97.

[14] Muñoz, "'The White to Be Angry'," 95.

denying minoritarian subjects access to modes of representation on a larger scale.[15] Such an expectation of subaltern entertainment is doubly placed on queer women of color because of their multiple minoritarian positions.[16] Important to note is that the temporality of the "burden of liveness" means the denial of a past and a future as it traps the minoritarian subject in a perpetual nowness. Mickalene Thomas and Juliana Huxtable both evade representing blackness as spectacle in their work. The bold patterning of Thomas' interior settings as well as the glossy and bejeweled surfaces of her work harness aspects of spectacle but in a way that highlights the two-dimensional surface or draws focus to the materiality rather than the body of her subjects. In the same vein, Huxtable's use of image and text borrows the shock value of spectacle; however, the shock value is what comes from her use of bigoted remarks and stereotypical imagery. Consequently, the artists refuse the "burden of liveness" to which their multiple marginalized positions leave them the most susceptible: Thomas as a black lesbian and Huxtable as a queer black trans woman. However, Thomas and Huxtable balance universal concerns with critiques and references specific to their respective marginalized communities.

The term post-black was coined by Thelma Golden and Glen Ligon in 2001.[17] Post-black refers to, "[...] a generation of artists who were rejecting identity categories such as black and nevertheless using black culture as a resource while redefining blackness on their own terms."[18] Unwittingly, Ligon and Golden created a term that cause many to assume that post-black is post-

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[15] Muñoz, "Latina Performance and Queer Worldmaking,"182.

[16] Muñoz, "Latina Performance and Queer Worldmaking,"182.

[17] Nana Adusei-Poku, "Post-Post-Black?" Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art, no. 38-39 (November 2016): 82.

[18] Adusei-Poku, "Post-Post-Black?", 82.

racial or marks an end to civil rights era notions of blackness.[19] Nana Adusei-Poku's "Post-Post-Black?" proposes a heterotemporal view of blackness and post-black art.[20] What Adusei-Poku is suggesting is a simultaneous existence of multiple configurations of blackness formed over time.[21] This concept of the black subject continuously being redefined and reconfigured while simultaneously acknowledging historical configurations of blackness is apparent in both Juliana Huxtable and Mickalene Thomas' art. While both artists aim to appeal to all audiences with their work, they also simultaneously focus on addressing issues related to their specific marginalized positioning — both historically and presently — and refuse dominant ideologies through careful consideration and reformatting of the black image.

Although Thomas and Huxtable attend to both universal and particular experience in their art, the way that they intervene with dominant ideology is vastly different. Thomas' intervention moves within the mindset of inclusion in the art world while Huxtable has a self-reflective stance that makes her more cautious and suspicious of that mindset. Thomas' work navigates within the frame of the art historical canon in order to reclaim and reformat the representation of black women, while Huxtable's work is critical of exclusionary systems that construct dominant ideologies within the visual sphere and renders marginalized subjects invisible.

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[19] Adusei-Poku, "Post-Post-Black?", 82.

[20] Adusei-Poku, "Post-Post-Black?", 84.

[21] Adusei-Poku, "Post-Post-Black?", 88.

__Mickalene Thomas__

Heavily influenced by contemporary black artists — especially by Carrie Mae Weems'

Kitchen Table Series (1990) — Mickalene Thomas started, in the early 2000s, to see art as a way

to express one's personal experiences.[22] In addition to such artistic influences as the work of

Weems, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and William H. Johnson, Thomas claims to be equal-

ly influenced by African art, which she references through space and color.[23] Also of note, is

Thomas' recognition of a traceable lineage in artistic representation. She notes, "Yeah, but

what's so great is that Matisse looked at Manet. And Romare Bearden looked at Matisse and

Manet. And I'm looking at all three, it's a lineage."[24] If Thomas considers her work as part of a

lineage, then can her work also be considered the start of a new artistic tradition?

Excess flesh, a term coined by Fleetwood, is a conceptual framework employed to com-

prehend the black body in relation to hyper visibility.[25] Excess flesh enactments also function as

a physical expression of visibility although it is not always a liberating one.[26] What black women

do in excess flesh enactments is engage with the gaze, but instead of trying to fix the explicit

with notions of respectability they instead seek to illustrate how dominant visual culture affects

the way a naked black woman's body is seen.[27] The enactment of excess flesh requires one to use

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[22] Sean Landers and Mickalene Thomas, "Mickalene Thomas," *BOMB*, no. 116 (Summer 2011): 32.

[23] Landers and Thomas, "Mickalene Thomas," 32-33.

[24] Landers and Thomas, "Mickalene Thomas," 34.

[25] Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Excess Flesh: Black Women Performing Hypervisibility," in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 112.

[26] Fleetwood, "Excess Flesh," 112.

[27] Fleetwood, "Excess Flesh," 112.

the gaze as a means to challenge the visual gendered racial coding of black women's bodies in the dominant visual sphere and acknowledge it without promoting notions of respectability.[28] Fleetwood's concept of excess flesh is applicable to Mickalene Thomas' womanist approach to representing black women in her art. In the early 1970's, the oppression of black women within both feminist and black movements required women of color to define feminism in a way that pertains to them.[29] As a result of this need to redefine, Alice Walker created the term "womanist" which suggests, "an outrageous and audacious woman, one who loves other women, sexually or not."[30] Thomas' works serve as a reversal of the male gaze[31] as her subjects, and the artist herself, take control of the gaze. For Thomas, her work is a collaboration. The gaze is reflective of the awareness of the subject, Thomas' fascination with the concept of seeing and being seen, as well as the sitter's power and control over how they are being represented.[32] Thomas' subjects are only partially nude if not fully clothed, but this choice, although not an explicit representation of black nudity, can be seen as an excess flesh enactment rather than an engagement in respectability politics. Thomas' control over the exposure of breasts and skin acts as an acknowledgement and refusal of the hyper-sexualization of black women's naked bodies in the long artistic tradition of the black female nude. What is valuable about Thomas' practice is her aim to give her subjects agency in their representation, her choice to avoid the reproduction of the exotic

[28] Fleetwood, "Excess Flesh," 112.

[29] Kara Walker, "Artists on Artists: Mickalene Thomas," *BOMB*, no. 107 (Spring 2009): 73.

[30] Walker, "Artists on Artists," 73.

[31] Barbara Pollack, "Rhinestone Odalisques," ARTNEWS, January 2011.

[32] Landers and Thomas, "Mickalene Thomas," 36.

spectacle, and her portrayal of her subjects' "complex sexuality."[33] Therefore, Thomas seeks not only to inject herself into the art historical canon through the reclamation of the gaze, but also to refuse canonical methods of representing black women as lascivious in art.

Furthermore, Thomas' intervention into the art historical canon exemplifies Fleetwood's notion of the visible seam. The visible seam is a mode of acknowledging areas of invisibility within the visual sphere while simultaneously inserting the formerly invisible into the gap in the narrative.[34] In other words, the visible seam first requires the acknowledgement of those rendered invisible and then requires making the subaltern visible by inserting them into spaces they were previously denied. In her work Thomas acknowledges the absence of black women in the art historical canon by inserting her own representations of black women into these gaps especially through the recreation of renowned works of art with black women as their subjects. Though these concepts and the artist's refusal of stereotypical and canonical representation of black women are relevant to her entire body of work, *Portrait of Maya #10* (2017), *Waiting on A Prime-Time Star* (2017), and *Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe Trois Femme Noir #4* (2017) are especially reflective of the artist's attention to refusing dominant ideologies within the visual sphere.

Although Thomas' work does well to intervene and represent the complexities of black womanhood, it is important to remain critical of an intervention that is centered on inclusion in the art world. Thomas' approach successfully and valuably refuses historical modes of artistically representing black women by suggesting complex personhood rather than a singular way of being, but it is her desire to insert herself into the canon that limits the success of her intervention.

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[33] Kara Walker, "Artists on Artists: Mickalene Thomas," *BOMB*, no. 107 (Spring 2009): 73.

[34] Nicole R. Fleetwood,"Introduction," in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 9.

In an interview from 2011 Thomas says, "Plus, I studied; I went to art school. I entered in the canon once I decided to go to art school. I'm not just some artist working in a garage somewhere."[35] This statement as well as her desire for inclusion is reflective of the artist's valuation of the canon as a meaningful measure of value despite knowing that historically what was considered canon was a means to shut out marginalized artists. I do not point this out to attack Thomas' artistic project, as I believe her interventions to be a powerful course of action to transform the art historical canon from the inside. Rather, I point this out to illustrate how systems largely construct our view of what and who is valuable without our knowing the harm in these valuations. Typically, these valuations place heterosexual white cisgender men who have been academically at the center, placing art and artists of different identities and social positions on the fringes. Despite Thomas' interventions in the art historical canon she still upholds deeply ingrained views of an artistic hierarchy — in the attempt to render a group visible, there are still those that continue to be rendered invisible in the process.

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[35] Barbara Pollack, "Rhinestone Odalisques," ARTNEWS, January 2011.

Portrait of Maya #10 (2017)

     A woman with an afro stands before a light-colored wood panel wall adjusting the collar

of her shirt. Her shirt is a floral pattern, layered and outlined with rhinestones. Rhinestones also

delineate the separation of wood paneling and ceiling in the background while at the same time

embellishing aspects of the painted subject. On Maya, rhinestones cover shadows, her afro, her

eyes, her nails, her lips, they outline the outside of her nostrils and their interior, the fabric around her waist, the curve of her hips, and the c-shaped line of her navel. A rectangle, outlined in stones adds another layer to the image. Contained inside, nothing is embellished. There is a photograph of breasts with an image of hands touching the lapels of a shirt laid over it. The hands suggest a seductive undressing where the item of clothing is slowly peeled away. The print of this second shirt with the seemingly ghostly hands resembles the print of a wild animal. Here Thomas represents the complexity of black womanhood. The rectangular space outlined in stones acts as an x-ray. Inside of this space both the animal print and floral print shirt are visible suggesting the coexistence of carnal and tender desire. The layering of images also represents the complexities of Maya as a person. The rhinestone covered parts of her body and clothing represent the shiny presentation of her outer self, especially her rhinestone covered eyes that gaze directly at the viewer. This is how she wants to be seen. However, the x-ray-like portion of the painting illustrates the underlying sexuality and gives us an intimate glimpse at Maya's interior. It suggests that there is more beyond her shiny exterior, and even more beyond the glimpse of Maya's interior self that Thomas has revealed. Moreover, the choice to layer images not only communicates the subject's inner self but also communicates a sense of Thomas' control over how this image is consumed. Although she appears in a state of undress, Maya is still covered up with the layering of photographs. The breasts are visible but are partially concealed with the sheer layer of the animal print shirt and ghostly hands.

Waiting on A Prime-Time Star (2017)

The viewer is transported to a living room. The floor is an assemblage of wooden squares and an assortment of rugs of varying sizes and colors placed beneath and around the room's furniture. The arm chairs, the sofa, and the ottomans are upholstered with various printed fabrics in a patchwork pattern that somehow remains pleasing to the eye with its blend of cool and warm tones in bold patterns. On the arm chairs and the couch are pillows comprised of different patterned fabrics, pieced together in a similar way to the furniture's upholstery. On the coffee table sits a bowl of gold and bronze colored decorative fruit. On the table at the front of the room rests an old TV with a video playing, a sculpture of a robin and a sculpture of a golden bull resting

atop it while beneath the table lies a stack of books, photo albums and a plant. Around the room resting on the floor or on table tops are various plants in pots or vases. More books and photo albums sit on a table between two armchairs and on the table between the armchair and the couch. On the floor in front of the armchair with a patch of fur on its backing lies a pair of bronze colored metallic flats, and on the ottoman near the aforementioned arm chair lies a pair of tortoise shell framed glasses with clear yellow temples. Here, nostalgia manifests in the way the room seems familiar despite the fact that the spectator has never seen it. For me, the wood panel-ing and the side tables with lamps, books, and photo albums stir up the memory of my grandpar-ents' home in Maryland and times I spent there as a child for family get togethers. Like theirs, Thomas' living room installation evokes a sense of familial comfort and emanates a feeling of warmth and a loving embrace. Thomas seeks to stir up memory and nostalgia in the recreation of a lived-in space. The personal effects along with the abandoned accessories creates an air of a human presence soon to return. In the installation *Waiting for a Prime-Time Star* (2017), Thomas creates the feeling of a lived-in space.

On the wood paneled walls hang framed photographs, a bejeweled print, a framed ta-pestry, a framed collage and oval bejeweled paintings. Portions of the wall accent the room's wood paneling with warm yellow patterned wallpaper and one corner of tiled together mirrors. The wall paper patterns, wood paneled walls, and the mirrored corner are references to the quin-tessential 1970s interior. Thomas says that her frequent references to the 1970's are "not neces-sarily because of nostalgia but because of a recontextualizing process. I'm reinventing those ex-periences that I have no memory of."[36] Is that not another form of nostalgia? Recontextualizing

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[36] Landers and Thomas, "Mickalene Thomas," 35.

and reinventing experiences is a form of nostalgia for a time before one established memories. For example, I have no recollection of a time before 1995 despite living through the early 90s, yet part of my memory of early experiences are constructed through stories and photographs that allow me to look back fondly on the decade. The feeling of a warm and familiar domestic interior that draws upon nostalgic feeling is Thomas' attempt to create an inviting space that makes the viewer feel at home. It is an attempt to stir up the universal connection to the feelings of the living room space and its intimacies, establishing a connection between the viewer and Thomas' art.

On the left wall of the installation are one framed collage and two paintings of a woman's head, one facing front and one view of the back. The framed collage is a pieced together image comprised of photographs and textures. The woman in the image leans forward, smile on her face, a cut out of eyes placed over her own. The background of the collage consists of clipped photographs of wood panelling, some pieces in color and some in black and white. There are also images of fabrics placed in the background of this collage: one floral, and one a red knit material. The woman's hair is shiny, in an updo, and a necklace of beads is around her neck. It is unclear who this woman is, but from the title of the installation one assumes that she's an icon or star or meant to represent one. The paintings on the same wall are reminiscent of photographs in black hair salons of styles that clients get to choose from. These paintings are bedazzled and their placement above the side table lamp activates the shine creating interesting colors among the black bedazzled portions of the paintings. The styles depicted are clearly two different hairstyles where one is more elaborate in its loops of twisted hair acting almost like a crown. The style on

the left is more simple and understated and the woman's face is relaxed. The paintings seem out of place in a living room setting but still reference a particular, instead of universal, experience.

On the right wall of the installation is a framed photograph and a framed piece of a tapestry. The framed piece of tapestry is a reference to art in terms of history and traditional practices. It references textile art as a part of gendered history of craft, as well as the category of outsider art embraced by the American art world since the 1970s, which has come to include the hand making traditions of slaves from weaving to quilt making. So, the inclusion of the tapestry is another reflection of Thomas' concern with insisting upon the visibility of black people in the history of art.

A photograph on the same wall as the small portion of tapestry is titled *Afro Goddess Ex Lovers Friend* and was taken in 2006. In the photograph a black woman with an afro sits in a yellow cushioned settee with wooden arms. Her legs are crossed, her hands placed in her lap, and her gaze directly addresses the viewer. The wall behind her is a deep purple that accentuates the yellow of the couch the subject sits on. On the deep purple wall are record covers and vinyl records hung on display. Some of the record covers are obscured, one by the subject's hair and the other by the cropping of the photo. The visible album covers are Stevie Wonder's *Hotter*

Than July (1980) and Diana Ross' *Ain't No Mountain High Enough* (1970) album. Of the vinyl records on display, one title is indiscernible, one is a Donna Summer album with an unclear title, and there is a Motown album directly above the head of the subject. The choice of musical artists reflects Thomas' interest in a simultaneously universal and particular appeal. Motown music, Stevie Wonder, and Donna Summer are well known; however, Motown music was typically performed by black artists and both Stevie Wonder and Donna Summer are popular black artists that rose to fame. Thomas references music and musicians that many are familiar with while also portraying successful black artists and championing black music.

On the couch lie two pillows, partially covered by woven material depicting two birds with plants. Over the arm of the chair are two swaths of fabric. Though the layering is not as accentuated in *Afro Goddess Ex Lovers Friend* (2006) as it is in the installation, it is still present in relation to the photograph's subject. There is a plant in the left corner of the photograph, a suggestion of the rest of the interior but not central to the image. The focus is on the woman looking directly outward. In her gaze there is power, but the woman's relaxed face and positioning reflects an air of non-threatening strength and confidence. The truly valuable intervention in Thomas' work is the way she chooses to represent the simultaneous strength and softness that constitute her perception of black womanhood. While the patterned fabric, the woven fabric, the records on the wall, and the woman's large hoop earrings and afro are references to the 70s, her dress indicates that she is meant to be a contemporary goddess rather than a heroine of a 70s blaxploitation film. The representation of strength and softness is an intervention in the construction of the blaxploitation heroine who, although undeniably empowering in her strength, is denied femininity and remains sexualized and represented through the male gaze.

Two oval paintings are arranged on the installation's back wall: one an extreme closeup of abstracted items, one a basket of fruit. In the bottom-most still-life painting it is unclear what the items are that are being represented, but the wood paneling in the background is the painting's most recognizable feature. Thomas creates texture with a layer of rhinestones on the patterns and outlining the wood paneling in both paintings. The rhinestones on the surface of the fruit obscure their respective shapes so that color is the only clue that suggests what fruit is in the basket. However, it is on the back wall where two photographs best represent Thomas' refusal of the art historical canon and, consequently, the refusal of the way black women are typically represented in visual art.

In the largest photo on the installation's back wall, a black woman with a platinum blonde afro and large hoop earrings sits on a couch with her legs open. Draped across her lap is another black woman with straight black hair streaked with burgundy, one leg up with her heeled foot resting on the couch while her other foot rests on the ground. The fingertips of one of her red-nailed hands touches the fingertips of the woman with the blonde afro while her other forearm and hand rest on the floor near a bouquet of flowers with their stem wrapped in black and white fabric. The upright woman grabs the glistening thigh of the woman laid across her lap as she gazes off into the unseen distance. There is an air of sexuality in this photograph. The sexual aura of the photograph radiates in the physical relationship of the black women in the image as well as the elements of the setting. On the floor is a patched rug of various wild animal prints, some repeated in the lampshades on the left and the pillows on the couch. The animal prints are also repeated in the woman with the blonde afro's clothing: she wears a blouse with cheetahs repeated across it, the black and white pattern of her skirt mimics a zebra print, and on her feet snake skin shoes. In contrast are the swaths of fabric on the couch, one of a warm yellow flower pattern and the other of pinks and purples whose shapes resemble wild birds. While the mix of patterns is a reference to the over the top, now thought tacky, style of 70s interiors, it is also representative of desire between these two women. There is the intensity of their sexual chemistry represented by the animal print, the one hand gripping the oiled thigh, the skirted legs spread apart in a sexual but non-vulgar fashion, and the women's glossy and brightly colored lips. Yet, there is also a soft

side to the desire and sensuality in the photograph. It is represented by the fallen bouquet, the swath of yellow and orange flower pattern fabric, and the tenderness in the touching of finger-tips, the downcast gaze, the lustful yet gentle grip of the thigh. Once again, Thomas' choice of representation serves as a valuable intervention in her reference to the dimensionality of black womanhood that has been historically denied.

Blackness has been associated with strong sexual desire since the twelfth century, and by the eighteenth century became a general symbol of sexual deviance.[37] This association developed further as, in the nineteenth century, images of black women in proximity of white women were meant to suggest a similarity in their deviant sexuality.[38] The study and post-mortem dissection of Saartjie Baartman, commonly known as the Hottentot Venus, was used to support the pseudoscientific ideology of black women's "'primitive' sexual appetite" by noting the difference in anatomy, where the voluptuous figure was deemed a marker of sexual lasciviousness.[39] As a result, the black female nude historically presents a hypersexualized image of the black woman as "primitive" seductress.

Yet, Thomas' image of two black women communicates the marriage of tenderness and lust, and femininity and strength. Thomas also evades the potential sexualization of the subjects by keeping them fully clothed instead choosing to suggest sensuality through touch and the exposure of shiny limbs. Although one woman is laid across another's lap her gaze is directed at the onlooker: she owns her sexuality and she is in a place of power despite her positioning.

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[37] Sander Gilman, "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality," in *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot"*, by Carla Williams, edited by Deborah Willis (Temple University Press, 2010), 16.

[38] Gilman, "The Hottentot and the Prostitute," 16.

[39] Gilman, "The Hottentot and the Prostitute," 17.

Additionally, Thomas' concern with inserting herself into the art historical canon is apparent and adds another layer to the interpretation of the relationship between the two women. The subjects' pose is a direct reference to Michelangelo's *Pietá* (1498-99). Though their position differs slightly from the Renaissance sculpture, the woman with the blonde afro is a stand in for Mary, while the woman draped across her lap is Jesus Christ. The swaths of fabric on the couch

then become stand-ins for Mary's clothing and the skirt of the woman in repose becomes a reference to the fabric around Christ's waist. Though the high shine of limbs in Thomas' photograph is a choice to shift a religious image into a sexual one, it also functions as a reference to light hitting marble in the flawless shine of the black women's legs. The shift in gaze also establishes the image as Thomas' interpretation, as instead of looking down in sadness, Afro Mary is gazing off into the distance wistfully. Furthermore, the woman laying across her lap is not at all a reflection of the deceased Christ in *Pietá*. Her outward gaze and positioning brings life and agency where originally there was death. It is possible to see art historical references or references to other works of art where there are none, but Thomas extinguishes that sense of doubt by making visible the record cover of the *Jesus Christ Superstar* soundtrack in the background. The intent is apparent as it sticks out from a stack of records propped up against the wall of the room. With the added context of Michelangelo's *Pietá* the woman's snakeskin shoes serve as a biblical reference to devilish temptation which reiterates the coexistence of the wild and innocent as the woman wearing them is a stand in for the Virgin Mary. Thomas transforms the Renaissance sculpture of an emotional religious moment into a sensual and powerful portrayal of the complexities of a black sapphic relationship and black womanhood. Her reference to Michelangelo's sculpture *Pietá* critiques the placing of white men as genius artists by insisting that she, a black lesbian woman, take that same place. Beyond placing herself as the genius artist, Thomas does well to challenge stereotypical representations of black women by placing two black women as stand-ins for Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. In doing so, Thomas once again accounts for the complexity of black womanhood by suggesting the figures' virtue. Their attraction toward and desire for

one another is then not an indication of a lack of morality but is rather an indication of their desire as an aspect of their humanity.

The photograph next to the oval paintings, titled *Madame Mama Bush* (2006), also represents the complexities of black womanhood while simultaneously inserting black women into art history. In the photograph, a woman reclines on a couch, one arm raised behind her head. Her

eyes are closed and her red robe lays open to reveal her breasts and her underlying corset. The woman's expression is one of pleasure indicated by the upturn in the corner of her red lipsticked mouth. Her nails are painted red and in her hand a bouquet of flowers held together with striped fabric. Underneath her head and left shoulder are animal print pillows and under her body a woven floral fabric. Thrown over the back of the couch just above her feet is a zebra print fabric that is strewn in a way that suggests it is a discarded item of clothing. The floor is also a patchwork collection of animal print rugs and fabrics, patterns that are repeated in the pillows and the discarded item of clothing on the couch. In the arm chair on the right is a swatch of fabric printed with orange leaves and on the floor a pile of fabric that has a warm colored leaf pattern as well. To the left of the image is a record cover on display and the title is illustrated smoke that forms "Ross." The viewer is presented with one of Diana Ross' albums on vinyl though the album title is indiscernible. The layering of flowers and animal print once again exhibits Thomas' unique account of the complexity of black womanhood where lustful desire coexists with sentimentality and strength commingles with softness.

While Thomas presents a unique representation of black womanhood in this work, the subject's pose is nevertheless reminiscent of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Cleopatra* (1610-12). In Gentileschi's painting, an oddly pale version of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra reclines with her eyes closed on her bed atop rumpled bedclothes with a snake resting in her hand and partially wrapped around her wrist. On her face is the same look of pleasure indicated by the upturned corners of her mouth that is represented in Thomas' *Madame Mama Bush*. The deep red of *Cleopatra*'s bedclothes and background is reflected in the red nails and lingerie of the subject in *Madame Mama Bush*. If Thomas is referencing Artemisia Gentileschi's *Cleopatra* it is an attempt to recreate an image of Cleopatra that has not been whitewashed. In other words, by reading *Madame Mama Bush* in reference to Gentileschi's work I believe *Madame Mama Bush* illus-

trates an attempt to take control of the representation of the African queen and present her in a

way that illustrates both her blackness and the complexity of her womanhood. Instead of clutch-

ing a snake, Thomas' subject clutches a bouquet of flowers that reaches down to the floor.

Though Thomas decides to leave the breasts exposed, she makes a conscious decision to cover

parts of the subject. This covering once again is an attempt to evade a sexualizing gaze, especial-

ly when the subject's eyes are closed. Despite the photograph's mirroring of *Cleopatra* in the

subject's pose, it is also possible that *Madame Mama Bush* is a reference to Ingres' *Grand Odal-*

isque (1814). When the photograph is read in that way, it takes on a new interpretation in the

context of Thomas' project. She would be once again shifting herself into the position of artist

genius instead of a white man while simultaneously taking control of the male gaze. The subtlety

of the artistic reference in *Madame Mama Bush* is what creates interest, yet, regardless of her

reference, Thomas' work still portrays the complexities of black womanhood. It is only the way

her intervention is read that changes in the consideration of Thomas' possible art historical refer-

ences. In either case, the photograph can be seen as an example of an excess flesh enactment,

where Thomas presents a mostly nude figure in a way that does not deny the subject's sexuality

and remains aware of how the black female nude is consumed. There is a sensuality to the image

but the exposure of her breasts has more to do with the subject being in a state of undress, rather

than a sexual invitation. Due to the fact that the setting is an interior space, the viewer instead

feels as though they have intruded on a private moment.

  Although Thomas indubitably presents powerful images of black womanhood and in do-

ing so makes a valuable intervention in the art historical canon, what do her choices of reference

mean in relation to the strength of her intervention? Is inserting black women and complex rep-

resentations of black womanhood enough? Thomas importantly critiques the whiteness and maleness of the art historical canon both by inserting herself as artist genius and by inserting images of black women where they previously did not exist. She relies on western traditional modes of representation for the sake of her recontexualizing project, which suggests the value of some of its aspects. Thomas' desire to borrow from and work within the art historical canon is a process of disidenfication in that she mines the valuable aspects of western tradition and transforms its useful parts into something that challenges dominant notions of black womanhood. Despite the undeniable value of Thomas' intervention, it still falls slightly short of being fully transformative. Inserting oneself and a particular group into the canon is not enough because it does not fix the violences of exclusion but rather re-frames it. That is to say, Thomas' intervention is unwittingly guilty of reproducing the canonical exclusion she seeks to remedy.

Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe Les Trois Femme Noir #4 (2017*)*

Three black women sit in an interior garden directly engaging the viewer with their forward gaze. One woman sits with one leg outstretched and resting on a patchwork pillow or cushion while the other leg is bent. Also under her outstretched leg is a leopard printed fabric, the only animal print in the room. She sports a large afro with patches of different colors and a bright purple ruffled dress with a printed jacket over it. In her outstretched hand is a flower and a braid is draped over her arm though it is unclear where it comes from. The opposite hand that is resting

in her lap is placed atop a large bouquet of flowers that fan outward. The second woman in the

foreground sits with legs bent, one hand gently resting under her chin while the other rests on her

knee. Gently placed on the woman's resting hand is a large yellow blossom. The blossom rests

there in a way that suggests it sprouted from between her fingers. Long coarse curly hair flows

from her head onto the ground beside her and rests among the flowers. In this dark mane of hair

are three blossoms. She wears a white romper or dress belted around the waist and covered with

glittering gold stars. Then there is the woman in the background. She is the focal point of this

collage. Unlike the other women in the collage, her face is the only one left in color. The other

women's faces are displayed in black and white photos layered on top of the colorful one. The

woman in the background does have portions of herself layered in a black and white image, but

as her gaze is forward and her face is the only one in full color the eye is immediately drawn to-

ward her. On her head is a collection of looped and multicolored thick braids. Hanging from her

ears are large golden hoops with a chain dangling from each of them. She wears a bright and

bold floral patterned halter neck dress, another item that draws one's attention directly to her.

Hybridity is a form of complex identity and, along with queerness, acts as a space of pro-

ductivity in which the recognition and negotiation of the "fragmentary nature" of identity

occurs.[40] The collaging of photographic images to represent the subjects of Thomas' *Le Déjeuner*

Sur L'Herbe Les Trois Femme Noir #4 is representative of the fragmentary nature of identity.

Placing sharp edged cut outs of black and white images of the subjects over the original color

image indicates a difference between the outer and inner self. The collaged image is indeed made

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[40] José Esteban Muñoz, "The Autoethnographic Performance: Reading Richard Fung's Queer Hybridity,"
in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Vol. 2 (Minneapolis, MN: Univer-
sity of Minnesota Press, 1999), 79.

up of representations of the same person that are slightly different from one another. Thomas claims that her work is not primarily about the black experience but instead is mainly about, "the idea of covering up, of dress up and makeup — of amplifying how we see ourselves."[41] Thus, the layering of multiple representations of the same person in different ways illustrates how one presents a different version of themselves to the world while only revealing their true selves to a few or no one at all. The woman in the background is Thomas' long-term partner, Raquel Chevremont; therefore, it is likely that the reason she is the only one without a black and white image of her face layered atop the color image is because inner self has been revealed to the artist. Chevremont's un-collaged face is representative of Thomas' familiarity with her subject. Be that as it may, part of Chevremont's body is layered with black and white cut outs which still communicates the fragmentary nature of identity and suggests the obscuring or toning down of the self in one's day-to-day life. In the background, wood paneling is visible in the spaces be-tween hanging plants and masses of leaves both purple and green. To the left are multiple pat-terns displayed in color and layered with images of their black and white counterparts. Layered on top of that is a golden triangle with a smattering of light blue. This material is also present at the rightmost edge of the collage. Before the women lay various flowers, grapes, fern leaves, and grasses. There is a feeling of untamed growth that arises from the plants in the background over-taking images hung on the wood paneled wall. All that is visible is the frame or, in the case of the image to the right, glimpses of the subject that indicate something is being obscured.

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[41] Pollack, "Rhinestone Odalisques."

From the title of the collage and the subjects' positioning it is clear that Thomas is referencing Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862-63). In her choice to transform Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe,* Thomas' perception of the complexity of black womanhood is further emphasized. The visible seam, again, is a term used to describe an intervention that allows for addressing the erasure of black people from a narrative and inserting blackness into dominant visual structures. In other words, the visible seam is an intervention that shifts dominant stereotypical assumptions made in the visual consumption of black art. In Manet's painting, two fully-clothed men sit relaxing on the grass with a nude woman who is the only figure addressing the onlooker. In the background a woman in her underclothes stands in a river holding up her skirts and disturbing the water with her hand. The subjects in Manet's painting are lounging in the forest, but what communicates the sexual nature of the scene is the overturned basket of fruit with its con-

tents spilling out over the nude woman's discarded dress. Additionally, the woman in the background in a state of undress indicates sexual relations with the men in the painting, that presumably have yet to occur. The closeness of the subjects' bodies in the foreground also indicates an intimate relationship between them. What viewers found controversial at the time Manet displayed *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, was the agency of the nude woman that went against the traditional portrayal of the white female nude. Her gaze indicates a lack of passivity that was uncommon and frowned upon. *Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe Les Trois Femme Noir #4* (2017) switches out the male subjects in the original and replaces them with black women whose eyes meet the viewer's with equal strength as the gaze of the nude woman in the original. Thomas is aware of the importance of the gaze in Manet's painting and repeats it three-fold in her collage. The choice to reclaim the gaze is what makes Thomas' intervention so powerful. The outward gaze of all three of her subjects bestows each of them with a radiating confident power that communicates a quiet strength commingling with softness. The fourth figure in Manet's painting is eliminated in Thomas' translation as she replaces the forest background with her signature patterned and wood paneled interior. How she translates Manet's painting serves as recognition of both a historical and contemporary absence in the art historical canon and seeks to remedy it. Additionally, Thomas draws on the sexual nature of Manet's painting but tones it down. She chooses to clothe the women to communicate the sensual through the partial exposure of skin rather than full nudity. Thomas seeks to evade the sexualization of her subjects, but what remains is the intimate closeness of bodies and the piercing gaze that bestows an aura of sensuality to the collage more subtle than the Manet original.

Additionally, *Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe Les Trois Femme Noir #4* illustrates the complexity of black womanhood, but in a different way from Thomas' previously discussed works. Though Thomas incorporates animal print into the collage, it is only a small amount in the foreground beneath the woman on the right and is not repeated elsewhere. The plants represented in the collage communicate the same concept of the coexistence of lust and tenderness, of carnal and emotional desire. Brightly colored flowers and leaves overtake the interior where the women sit. In the foreground grass and flowers cover the ground obscuring what may be underneath. The plants cover most of the wood-paneled walls including items that are hung on them. That, paired with the cascading coarse curls of one of the women communicates a sense of wild growth. It is uncontrollable but accepted rather than feared. The growth does not threaten to overtake the subjects but rather embraces them, and they it. This mutual embrace is communicated by the foremost women holding and wearing flowers. The blossoms of the bouquet and in the foreground of the collage create a sense of romance. Though the room is overrun with plants the takeover is one of beauty. Therefore, the wildness and untamable growth of the plants paired with the beauty of the blossoms indicates the coexistence of lustful and romantic energy with regard to sexuality. Although sensuality is represented in a different manner in this collage than her aforementioned works, Thomas' view of black womanhood is still the same. Her representational choices do not seek to desexualize her subjects, but rather affirm the subject's ownership of their sexuality while implying the complexities of black womanhood that have been previously denied.

It is also possible that the closeness between the women in the collage mimics the same sexual closeness of the subjects in Manet's painting. The way the two women's legs are nearly entwined in the collage indicates an intimacy that goes beyond friendship. The placement of a

flower in or on the outstretched hand could also be a euphemistic reference to genitalia. However, because this is only true of the two women in the foreground, it may suggest a sexual relationship only between them and that the third woman in the image is removed from it. The distancing from the other two figures is also a choice that Manet makes in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, where the man next to the reclining woman looks off into the distance, addressing neither her nor the man speaking to him. The distancing of the third woman is likely an attempt to recreate a feeling of simultaneous closeness and separateness that one experiences when viewing Manet's original, but it is once again possible that Thomas made this choice because she is photographing her partner. That is not to say that Thomas intends to erase Chevremont's sexuality as a claim of ownership, but rather that her positioning as the focal point of the collage indicates both Thomas' control of the gaze and an intimacy between artist and subject. Thomas wants us to see what she sees and feel what she feels by placing Chevremont at the center of this seemingly mythical interior garden.

Thomas' choice to reference Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* rather than *Olympia* (1862-63) is an interesting one. Manet's *Olympia* caused similar controversy in its time for the unwavering gaze of the nude female subject, similarly denying passivity by addressing the viewer. In this painting, Manet presents the subject's black female servant. Clothed in a white dress she holds out what appears to be a bouquet as she looks towards her nude mistress. In the 19th century, the inclusion of a black female subject alongside a white female subject was thought to represent shared lasciviousness.[42] Therefore, in Manet's *Olympia* the black servant's proximity to the nude white woman is meant to reflect the sexual deviance of both subjects. It is interesting, then, that Thomas chooses to avoid this painting in her recontextualizing project. As both Manet's *Olympia* and *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* are thought to be created around the same time, why did Thomas choose to critique one over the other?

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[42] Gilman, "The Hottentot and the Prostitute," 20.

In her choice to transform Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* over *Olympia*, Thomas is continuing a black feminist artistic tradition started in the late 90s that also established the visible seam. She is not the first to insert black subjects into Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Artist Renée Cox intervened in the art historical canon by recreating her own version of Manet's original, titled *Cousins at Pussy Pond* (2001). In Cox's version, the artist positions herself as the bold woman in the foreground, nude and directly engaging the viewer. There are two partially nude black men holding spears and wearing cloths around their waists. As in Manet's original, none of the subjects in the photograph address one another in their gaze. Cox intervenes in the canon by transforming *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* into an image of blackness. The highlights on the exposed

muscular chests of the men in Cox's work shift attention to their bodies rather than Cox's high-lighted shoulder. Cox uses light to draw the eye to the men's bodies rather than hers presumably to avoid the sexualization of her naked body. Their nudity is not sexual, normalized by the exposure of every subjects' skin. Thomas takes her interpretation of Manet's painting and her intervention even further in *Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe Les Trois Femme Noir #4.* She decides to forego the depiction of men altogether to create a more powerful intervention than Cox's *Cousins at Pussy Pond* achieves. While Cox's aim is to insert black black men and women into the canon, Thomas desires to attend to the contemporary invisibility of black women specifically. It is likely that Thomas chose to recreate Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* over *Olympia* in order to build on previous artistic interventions and attend to the gaps she feels still exist.

__Juliana Huxtable__

Juliana Huxtable's last name was given to her by members of the queer art collective, House of LaDosha.[43] The name was adopted from the *Cosby Show*, as the collective thought it encapsulated her desire to "experience, in her trans body, the kind of black normality that the Huxtable family portrayed in the 80s."[44] Huxtable's career started on the internet. The artist says of her beginnings, "I had no resources, so self documentation became a way for me to express who I was and what I was dealing with, and have an immediate conversation with other people who, even if they weren't trans, were at least queer."[45] Eventually, Huxtable found a way to express herself and her voice off of social media website, Tumblr, as her artistic practice evolved.[46] During her time at college Huxtable abandoned her study of art, later picking it up once again outside of an academic institution.[47] She credits her departure from studying art as the reason she feels free to "express things in the form that's most immediate to the ideas."[48] Across interviews and artist talks, Huxtable expresses an overall reluctance to fit within the confines of artistic categories. Her desire seems to be to remain as ambiguous as her art. In a 2016 interview with Nicholas Goodly, Huxtable claims, "The career tracks of 'poet' or 'artist' don't really make sense

[43] Antwaun Sargent, "Artist Juliana Huxtable's Bold, Defiant Vision," Vice, March 25, 2015, accessed May 16, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/exmjkp/artist-juliana-huxtables-journey-from-scene-queen-to-trans-art-star-456.

[44] Sargent, "Artist Juliana Huxtable's Bold, Defiant Vision."

[45] Brooke Powers and Juliana Huxtable, "'Struggle Is What Creates Beauty' - a Conversation with Juliana Huxtable," i-D, July 05, 2017, accessed May 16, 2019, https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/xwddk7/struggle-is-what-creates-beauty-a-conversation-with-juliana-huxtable.

[46] Powers and Huxtable, "'Struggle Is What Creates Beauty'."

[47] Powers and Huxtable, "'Struggle Is What Creates Beauty'."

[48] Powers and Huxtable, "'Struggle Is What Creates Beauty'."

to someone like me who creates from and in conversation with the fringes of productive society."[49] Despite her obvious reluctance to participate in the art world or within the confines of a specific field, Huxtable's rise to fame means participation in these categories nevertheless. Although she remains critical of what constitutes an artist or a poet, her reluctance and resistance to being defined is cast aside as she moves from the fringes into the art world's view.

In the contemporary art context, when one's work is seen as only political, it is received in a derogatory manner and considered too simplistic.[50] Art that is labeled political is believed to be strictly personal and only representative of a particular experience. Often, art by black artists is written off as being only about blackness which, unwittingly or purposefully, casts the work as a reiteration of neoliberal identity politics rather than an intervention. Huey Copeland's "Bye Bye Black Girl: Lorna Simpson's Figurative Retreat" offers a history of such a tendency around Lorna Simpson's work, chronicling interpretations of an earlier work, *Guarded Conditions* (1989), that focus solely on how her work relates to black women's suffering.[51] Copeland's point is not that these interpretations are wrong, but that Simpson's work should not only be seen as a reflection of gendered racial injustices.[52] Copeland argues that *Guarded Conditions* addresses both the particular and the universal in its combination of image and text, where the work can be read as both a testament to how people in general navigate the world as well as a testament to the

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[49] Juliana Huxtable, "Q&A With Visionary Artist Juliana Huxtable," interview by Nicholas Goodly, Wussy Magazine, February 9, 2016, https://www.wussymag.com/all/2016/2/4/qa-with-juliana-huxtable.

[50] Che Gossett and Juliana Huxtable, "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited byTourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 50.

[51] Huey Copeland, "Bye Bye Black Girl: Lorna Simpson's Figurative Retreat." *Art Journal*, no. 62 (2005): 63.

[52] Copeland, "Bye Bye Black Girl," 63.

specific ways black women must navigate the world. Similar to Copeland, my concern regarding judgements of marginalized artists' art to be solely about their life experiences is that it not only prohibits the consideration of the complexity of the art and the artist's choices and standpoint but also fails to recognize that *all* art is shaped — intentionally or subconsciously — by the artist's life experience. So while all art is an expression of the artist's experience, it cannot be the only accepted lens through which one interprets the work. Juliana Huxtable's work does indeed draw upon her experiences as a black trans woman, but her art can also be read as a reference to universal experiences and feelings such as distrust of governing powers and the fear and paranoia that goes along with it.

In Huxtable's work done for the 2017 exhibition "A Split During Laughter at the Rally", she draws on, "the delirium of online conspiracy theories, trolling, rampant intersectionality, and the viral production of post-truth [in order to] map the productive chaos of contemporary identity politics."[53] Rather than explicitly stating or representing her stance in the work, she instead uses text and image to provoke the viewer to question dominant ways of thinking. Huxtable claims that she thinks of her practice as a way to condition, "[...]a productive space for thinking and processing, so you're getting spontaneous fragments and they're settling in different ways."[54] For the exhibit, Huxtable was influenced by the work and style of Emory Douglas, a black artist that created posters for the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s and 1970s.[55] She made paintings

[53] Reena Spaulings Fine Art, "Juliana Huxtable: A Split During Laughter at the Rally," News release, Reena Spaulings Fine Art.

[54] Juliana Huxtable, "Juliana Huxtable," Interview by Alex Fialho, ARTFORUM, May 9, 2017.

[55] Huxtable, "Juliana Huxtable."

based on Douglas' style, took photos of them, and overlaid text on the images.[56] Much like

Mickalene Thomas, the wood panelling in the background of her prints was a conscious choice

to relate back to the 70s: a form of nostalgia for a time in which the artist did not live, rather than

lost memories. However, Huxtable's project does more in her refusal of dominant ideological

structures as she draws upon unconventional sources. The artist states, "I'm interested in con-

spiracy as a way of thinking through forming community and its slippages — as a productive

strategy for coalition building that might speak more directly to the conditions we're in than the

Democratic Party for instance."[57] Her art as well as her beliefs remain critical in the hopes of

transforming mainstream understandings of progress.

Huxtable has in the past used images of her body in her work such as those that appeared

in the 2015 Triennial at the New Museum titled *Surround Audience*.[58] Her work, *Untitled in the

Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm)* (2015) displays her painted body on a two-dimensional landscape. A

flat beige rectangle takes up a quarter of the frame, while the remainder is dominated by a flat

teal with a large white circle in the upper right corner. The print has a simplified representation

of land and sky, while the artist's body is completely three dimensional. The teal painted on her

body is close to that of the sky, possibly linking her to the concept of space and the cosmos. She

is sitting on her feet, legs spread open but facing away from the viewer. Her eyes are cast

downward and large neon yellow cornrows start at the crown of her head and fall down onto her

naked buttocks. Her hand is placed atop her thigh in a way that communicates a balancing on

the two-dimensional landscape beneath her. The same bright yellow of her hair is repeated in the

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[56] Huxtable, "Juliana Huxtable."

[57] Huxtable, "Juliana Huxtable."

[58] "Juliana Huxtable | Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm) (2015)," Artsy.

makeup on her face that highlights her eyes, nose, cheeks, and upper lip. The terrain is unfamiliar and somehow the unnaturally teal skin seems to be Huxtable's natural tone in this work. The print communicates an otherworldly beauty. She has also, in the development of her project, created text-based works like *Untitled (Destroying the Flesh)* (2015) which locates social formations and the formation of the self in the present day through the virtual and the trappings of binaries and boundaries in adolescent becoming. In this thesis, I choose to only include images of Huxtable's most recent work rather than visually tracing its progression for two reasons: (1) Huxtable's inclusion of text and image to reformat representations of black womanhood in her recent work is comparable to the same reformatting undertaken in Mickalene Thomas' work and suggests a lineage of representation among queer black women artists and (2) I wish to respect the fact that Huxtable has expressed discomfort and anxiety about the way that images of her body are consumed and thus do not wish to show them. In an interview done for *SSENSE*, Huxtable says, "For [*A Split During Laughter at the Rally*], I used the lips [in the video] because I was tired of using myself, having myself be the center of everything, and so for the first show I was like, 'I don't want to trap myself in a situation where it continues to be about fetishizing me and my body."[59] Furthermore, it is in the marriage of abstracted image and text in her most recent work for *A Split During Laughter at the Rally*, that Huxtable is able to successfully challenge the art historical canon as a structure to a greater extent in her reconfiguration of notions of black womanhood.

Transsexual Empire (2017), *The Feminist Scam* (2017), and *Untitled (Wall)* (2017) best exemplify Huxtable's approach to critical examination of dominant structures and beliefs: in

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[59] Juliana Huxtable,"Juliana Huxtable's Conspiracy Logic," Interview by Solomon Chase, SSENSE.

keeping with a postmodern deconstructive tradition, she allows the viewer to pick apart the im-

ages and text before them. In conversation with artist Wu Tsang, Fred Moten states that he sees

blackness as a ritual practice and tries to think of transness in the same way. Tsang agrees with

Moten's statement saying that she sees identity itself as a daily ritual practice where one must put

themselves together.[60] Moten then links Tsang's notion of identity as putting oneself together to

Muñoz's concept of disidentification, adding that identity is the practice of putting oneself to-

gether by taking oneself apart each day.[61] *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics*

of Visibility is a critical trans studies anthology that interrogates the viability of trans visibility

through increased mainstream representation. The "trap door" mentioned in the title of this an-

thology, has a double meaning in the context of trans visibility. On the one hand the "trap door"

refers to opportunities for visibility presently being offered to trans people, but these opportuni-

ties or opened doors are also traps in that they are only accommodating to trans bodies and cul-

ture as long as they can be forced to fit into a norm.[62] On the other hand, a "trap door" can be an

escape, a door leading to a secret passage that can transport you "someplace else, often some-

place as yet unknown."[63] Therefore, the "trap door" can be an opportunity for visibility that

comes with the cost of being forced to adhere to norms while it can also be an opportunity to flee

the confines of visibility. Huxtable and her contemporaries, such as Wu Tsang are included

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[60] Fred Moten and Wu Tsang, "All Terror, All Beauty," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 347.

[61] Moten and Tsang, "All Terror, All Beauty," 347.

[62] Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, "Known Unknowns: An Introduction to *Trap Door,*" in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility,* edited byTourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), xxiii.

[63] Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, "Known Unknowns: An Introduction to *Trap Door,*" xxiii.

throughout this anthology. In fact, Tsang and Huxtable are of the same generation, are both interested in blending poetry and art, and are both queer trans people of color.[64] Although their art differs in their approach and their specific artistic aims, both Tsang and Huxtable question identity[65] in a way that suggests a generational shift in contemporary art — one that challenges the formation of identity categories rather than focusing on visibility.

Huxtable uniquely draws on conspiracy theories to hold beliefs under a magnifying glass, and she invites the onlooker to engage with rather than dismiss these ideologies —often viewed in mainstream representation as irrational or willfully fantastical— and try to understand their source. Through the questioning and consideration Huxtable's assembled problematic quotes and images, the viewer is able to construct new truths in opposition to what is placed before them. Internet-based discussions of conspiracy theories (such as the existence of the Illuminati) have universal appeal for both those aware of power imbalances that characterize the world today as well as those entertained by seemingly outlandish theories; however, Huxtable's work also attends to specific issues of power imbalances as they affect certain groups in her focus on conspiracy theories founded in ideologies that are harmful to trans people, black trans people, black people, black lesbians, and black women. Huxtable's focus on conspiracy theory serves as a rumination on how these theories function. Conspiracy theories set out to expose or debunk tactics that have shaped what people believe to be true which can be a valuable tool in exposing the construction of dominant ideology in the visual sphere. Huxtable's examination of conspiracy

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[64] Alex Greenberger, "Take Me Apart: Wu Tsang's Art Questions Everything We Think We Know About Identity," ARTnews, April 18, 2019, accessed May 16, 2019, http://www.artnews.com/2019/03/26/wu-tsang/.

[65] Greenberger, "Take Me Apart."

theory and theorists is a process of disidentification as she utilizes problematic images and text in

a way that allows the viewer to question exclusionary structures.
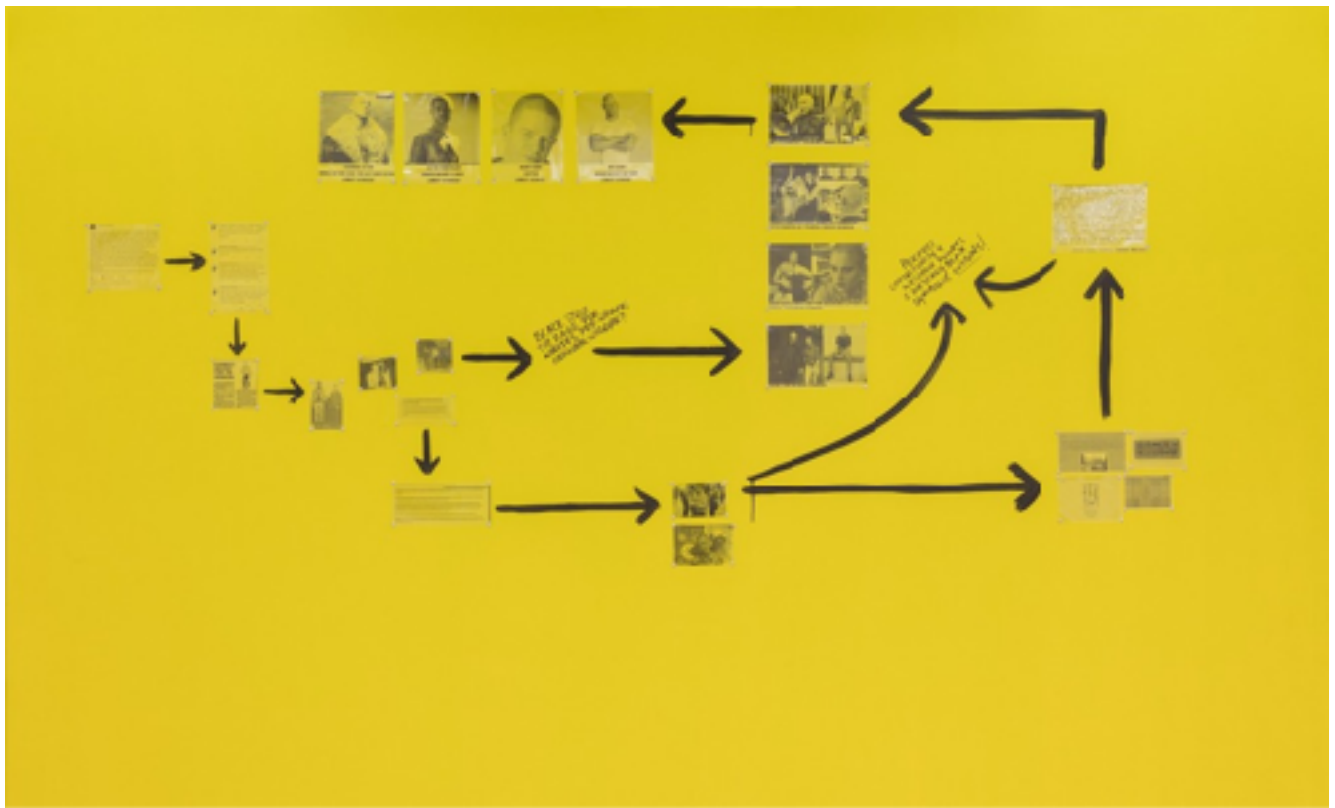
Untitled(Wall) (2017)

To provide a better understanding of Huxtable's flow chart pictured above, I will dive into a detailed description as well as an analysis of each of its elements. On a bright yellow wall a flow chart is laid out. Black and white transparencies are linked with painted bold black arrows. The flow chart starts with the artist's facebook post, typed in all caps, that serves as a warning for women of color. She describes how she "hooked up" with a white man who turned out to be a white supremacist, and she warns other women of color to watch out because the skinhead look may be more than an aesthetic. The arrow leading from Huxtable's facebook post

points to a screenshot of posts from a twitter feed. User Rhonda Grimes(@liberatedhoney)

tweets the following:

> i mean i guess it kind of make sense yall would want to fuck them too … i guess you
> could think of it as narcissism 🤣 😂 🤔
> they been hijacked their shit straight from us
> where u think skinhead culture come from??? yall need to know your history…we all in
> the information age it dont make no sense 2b ignorant
> 😂 🙄 all of y'all out here fuckin with pink ppl r late 2 realize white supremacists want 2
> smash blacks…their whole "white" culture stolen.

Jack Halberstam investigates the sexual interest in the Nazi aesthetic in "Homosexuality

and Fascism," investigating the tendency to believe that one must separate imagery from political

ideology for the sake of enjoyment.[66] In the chapter, Halberstam argues that we can accept erotic

desire attached to a problematic aesthetic, but we must also be ready to face what that means in

its connection to a political ideology.[67] While Halberstam seeks to connect the homosexuality

and fascism through the Nazi aesthetic, the social media transparencies included in the flow

chart communicates Huxtable's aim to trace the development of skinhead fashion and how it

connects to black culture and history. Then, the arrow points to an article clipping titled "BLUE-

BEAT'S GREATEST FANS — THE SKINHEADS." The contents of the article beyond the

headline are indiscernible from the photographs of the wall. Next, the arrow points towards a

cluster of images: one of a black man and a white man with shaved heads and similar outfits, an-

other of a black man in sunglasses clasping hands with a white man with a shaved head who are

both smiling, and another of a black boy with white men and a white boy all similarly dressed.

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[66] Jack Halberstam, "Homosexuality and Facism," in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 153.

[67] Halberstam, "Homosexuality and Facism," 171.

From this group of images is another bold arrow pointing to "BLACK STYLE THE RAGE FOR WHITES. PRE-WIGGER/ORIGINAL WIGGER?" Underneath the three aforementioned images is a square of text reading: "'THE WHOLE SCENE WAS INFLUENCED BY BLACK CULTURE -the haircut, the length of our trousers, the walk, some of the talk and, of course, the music, much of it copied from Rude Boy style. Black and white generally got on, we intermingled and if there was trouble it was usually about a woman.' From Nigel Mann, original Skinhead[quote taken from Paolo Hewitt's book, *The Soul Stylists*]." Leading away from the quote is another black arrow that points downward to a screenshot from a Tumblr where the images and quote were taken from, it reads:

> In the eighties there were mod, skinhead and rudeboy revivals. Rudeboy and skinhead revivalists began listening to 2Tone, a fusion of ska and punk. Many of these bands were multiracial and explicitly anti-racist. The most famous 2Tone bands were The Specials, The Selecter and Madness. Skinheads also had their own version of punk rock called Oi! But poverty and unemployment created tension in communities. It didn't help that new reggae was getting increasingly about Rastafarianism and black power. This alienated white skinhead fans, who quite understandably, didn't like being called 'white devils'. Unfortunately, the skinhead's hard, macho image started to attrition the National Front and the British Movement. Racists put on brass and big boots and called themselves skinheads without knowing the roots of their adopted subculture. Kids were shouting 'sieg heil!' And saluting diagonally, unaware of the irony*. There was less emphasis on style - racist skinheads tended to wear t-shirts displaying British Movement and National Front logos instead of smart button downs - and they distanced themselves from the subculture's black influences by listening to white power rock bands. News of attacks on Asians, black people and other minorities spread and soon the media blamed skinheads, whether they were actually responsible or not. So, there you are. There's a lot more to say, but that you can do your own research (Paolo Hewitt's book, The Soul Stylists has some interviews with original mods and skinheads) and besides, I'm not some kind of skinhead expert or a historian. I will continue to update this post as I gather more information, links and pictures, so it may get re-posted from time to time.

At this point in the flow chart, Huxtable is already making an intervention in typical research practice. She draws upon sources like Twitter, Tumblr, and popular culture references —

sources deemed "low" in the context of history — and legitimizes them by locating these ideas

and threading them together with evidence from reputable sources like newspaper articles and

encyclopedias. Huxtable's use of uncommon sources places value on these types of sources

which are typically disregarded. Halberstam, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, discusses illegibility as

a way to evade, "[…] the political manipulation to which all university fields and disciplines are

subject."[68] By avoiding visibility and legibility one can refuse to participate in the reiteration of

notions of "practical forms of knowledge."[69] Illegibility can also mean employing the use of

"knowledge from below", or knowledge that has been typically delegitimized, in order to pro-

mote continuous transformation in ways of thinking, knowing, and theorizing.[70] Although

Huxtable engages with "practical forms of knowledge" in her reference to historical sources, she

also utilizes "knowledge from below" by referencing delegitimized sources such as Tumblr and

Twitter. She uses social media to first, pinpoint the moment of curiosity that sparks this flow

chart and to, second, begin to track the origins of skinhead style. This choice, though unconven-

tional, is both an attempt to highlight how social media is a common source of information as

well as an attempt to link the flow chart to the interest in conspiracy theories that birthed the ex-

hibit. Conspiracy theories have grown and been shared through the development of the internet

and passed along through social media. These resources are also responsible for inciting the cu-

riosity and the inevitable fear that swirl around in the minds of conspiracy theorists. Huxtable

provokes one to reconsider the seeds of fact that exist in sources as unreliable as social media

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[68] Jack Halberstam, "Low Theory," in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 10.

[69] Halberstam, "Low Theory," 10.

[70] Halberstam, "Low Theory," 11.

and in turn transforms one's thinking by suggesting that truths can be found at the root of seem-

ingly outlandish conspiracy theories disseminated through the internet. Conspiracy theories are

disregarded but are often partially rooted in fact. In the execution of *Untitled(Wall)*, Huxtable

sets out to represent the value of exploring ideas that at first seem preposterous in order to find

the truth within them.

A thick black arrow points from the Tumblr screenshot towards images of Neo-nazis. One

image captures a white supremacist rally with a shirtless nazi in sunglasses at the center of the

image, and the other image is of a smirking shirtless white supremacist getting his head shaved

by a smiling Neo-nazi in front of a flag with the nazi swastika in the center, the third reich eagle, and an iron cross. From these images point two arrows. One arrow points towards four transparencies of people, patterns and symbols. One of these transparencies is a photograph of three women sitting. Above the image of the three women it says "Africa" and although the rest of the text is not entirely discernible in photographs of the work, from what is clear is that it discusses the presence of the swastika in Ghana and the Ashanti Empire.[71] Huxtable is, once again, attempting to link a Neo-Nazi aesthetic to black culture. Another image is of swastikas some connected and some alongside one another. White dots are inside of these swastikas and the way the shadows are in the black and white image they appear to be carved into something. Perhaps they are the carvings found in temples that are discussed in the text above the image of three African women. The image beneath the photograph of the swastikas is a collection of patterns of dots, squares, and lines. Next to the image of patterns is a small outlined box that contains symbols. The text beneath the image is indiscernible from the photograph of the work but from the text above the word"swastika" stands out. It is likely that this image includes an explanation of the development of the swastika from other common symbols used across Africa. The other arrow coming from the images of Neo-nazis curves upwards towards the phrase "PERFECT OPPORTUNITY 4 WESTERN POWERS 2 DESTROY BLACK SYMBOLIC ORIGINS!" Huxtable is linking the swastika to African cultures which becomes perplexing in the face of white supremacy. It adds a layer to the interesting connection of white supremacy and blackness that was evident in Huxtable's original Facebook warning. The artist presents these images in a way that al-

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[71] This is meant to be an addition to, not a denial of, the Swastika's origin in Hindu art and culture in South Asia.

lows the viewer to digest how a white supremacist group glorifies a symbol that has origins not

only in India but also in Africa.
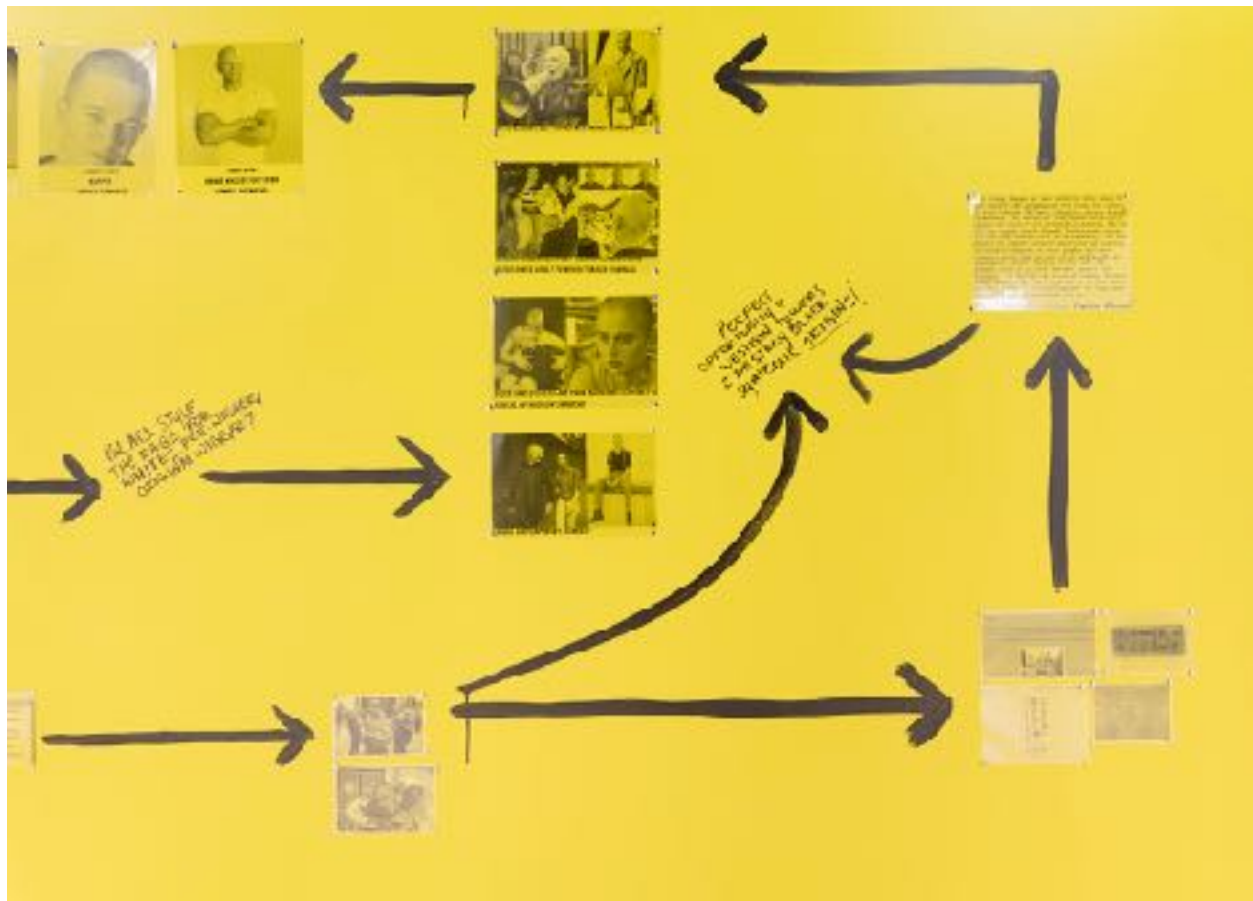
Another bold black arrow moves the eye from the words "BLACK STYLE THE RAGE

FOR WHITES. PRE-WIGGER/ORIGINAL WIGGER?" towards labeled images. Here the text

makes Huxtable's connection apparent: black fashion becoming a trend adopted by white skin-

heads and also represented in aspects of popular culture. The image labeled "CASUAL CON-

TEMPORARY SKINHEAD" depicts a skinhead sitting on a wall with a can in his hands ad-

dressing the viewer and a skinhead couple walking down the street. The couple in the photograph

might be English skinheads as in England thin red suspenders are indicative of skinheads that are

not Neo-nazis. Above that is another image labeled "QUEER HAIRLESSNESS AND PUNK

MACHISMO FLIPPANCY AS RADICAL ANTAGONISM SKINHEAD." The photograph

shows two white skinhead men kissing, one reclining in the other man's lap and an image of a

woman with a shaved head wearing a white ribbed tank top. The woman with the shaved head is

actress Robin Tunney as the character Debra in the 90's movie titled *Empire Records*. The next

set of images is labeled "GABBER/HARDSTYLE/POST-HARDSTYLE DERIVATIVE RAVER

DANCE AS ALT TO MOSH/TRASH SKINHEAD" and shows a group of men posing for a pho-

to —some with heads shaved— next to a close-up of a hairstyle mostly shaved with a strip of

hair twisted at the back. Above the two images in this photo collage is a strip of three square pho-

tos of men with shaved heads. Another set of photographs labeled "ART/FASHION POST-VI-

VIAN WESTWOOD SKINHEAD" its arranged above the aforementioned photo collage. One

image is of fashion designer Vivian Westwood yelling into a bullhorn with a shaved head and

one woman behind her raising her arm. Further back in the crowd is a police officer only dis-

cernible from the view of the hat behind Westwood's head. Placed alongside the image of the

protesting fashion designer is a fashion spread of a man with a shaved head wearing patchwork

plaid presumably designer items. By placing these images in line with one another, Huxtable

seeks to connect the cooptation of black culture with the mainstreaming of the skinhead aesthet-

ic. She illustrates the adoption of the aesthetic in popular culture, predominantly white alternative cultures and styles, and in high fashion.

From the four images of symbols, African women, and patterns an arrow points to a quote printed on transparency. It reads:

> Two things happen at once with the white man: he must destroy the malignancies that found his culture, his very identity. He must, therefore, destroy himself to maintain his fantastical 'enlightened subjectivity' against the truth of his pathological madness. But he will not simply attack himself, brothers and sisters, like the body attacks autoimmunity. He will project the impulse outward and utilize the symbols, the essential elements of other peoples and their cultures, ingest them as part of his sick world and subsequently destroy them as if they were the primary cause of his evils. We must protect our language, our symbols of ancestral culture, however distant we may be from it, because it is these weary ties that prevent us from falling into the deep abyss so many of our ancestors were lost to. - Imhotep Shakur Solomon, Timbuktu Warriors

With this quote, Huxtable is presenting an idea of the destruction of black culture in the context of Neo-nazism. However, she is not making an outright statement but instead provides quotes in relation to images to imply their connections. The viewer is left to draw their own conclusions, but the focus remains on black culture specifically while simultaneously evoking the universal experience of falling into an internet rabbit hole. Here we see the thread of the artist's thoughts and research akin to a late night google search that has one trapped in an hours long game of search engine investigation.

From the transparency of the quote, a second arrow curves downward to the phrase "PERFECT OPPORTUNITY 4 WESTERN POWERS 2 DESTROY BLACK SYMBOLIC ORIGINS!" The quote on the destruction of black culture is connected to the same phrase the images of Neo-Nazis are. Huxtable's association of these aspects of the flow chart communicate a relationship between the two. When considering the quote with the images and the bold all-

capitals phrase, one begins to see it as an articulation of the destructive power of white suprema-

cy as well as a call for black people to protect their ancestral culture. Another bold black arrow

points upwards to the set of four images labeled with skinhead types present in popular culture.

Then a bold black arrow dripping at its end points from the image of protesting Vivian Westwood

towards images of four men with shaved heads. The image of Mr. Clean is labeled "MR CLEAN

BRAND MASCOT/GAY ICON LOWKEY SKINHEAD." The image next to that of Mark

Wahlberg in the 90s is labeled "MARKY MARK RAPPER LOWKEY SKINHEAD." Next to the

image of Mark Wahlberg is photo of Justin Timberlake and beneath it says "JUSTIN TIMBER-

LAKE SINGER/BUSINESS MOGUL LOWKEY SKINHEAD." And the last image of famous

white men with shaved heads is captioned "CHANNING TATUM MODEL/ACTOR/SAVE THE

LAST DANCE EXTRA LOWKEY SKINHEAD." This is the end of the flow chart. Huxtable's

thoughts have led the viewer further towards images of well-known white men she labels

"lowkey skinheads." Outside of the context of the flow chart, these labels seem humorous. Yet,

Huxtable's flow chart has lead the viewer on a harrowing journey of knowledge accumulation

that leaves them with the same level of suspicion as apparent in her all-capitals labeling of the

famous figures. Throughout this piece she is tracing a lineage of the adoption of the skinhead

aesthetic into the mainstream. In connecting aspects of black culture and black ancestral culture

to the development of a Neo-nazi aesthetic, Huxtable points out the perplexing nature of white

supremacist appropriation of the culture of a group its members deem racially inferior. She addi-

tionally uses images and text to underscore the falseness of the white supremacist belief in cul-

tural purity by pointing out that Neo-nazis have stolen aspects of black culture. Also, the collec-

tion and connection of these groupings of words and images is illustrative of how the fascination

with the skinhead aesthetic has become so divorced from its development into a white su-

premacist movement. The connections she makes allows the viewer to realize how one can

mindlessly consume images and participate in fashion without thinking of its origins. It is reflec-

tive of a mindless ingestion of trends and aesthetics without knowing their history.
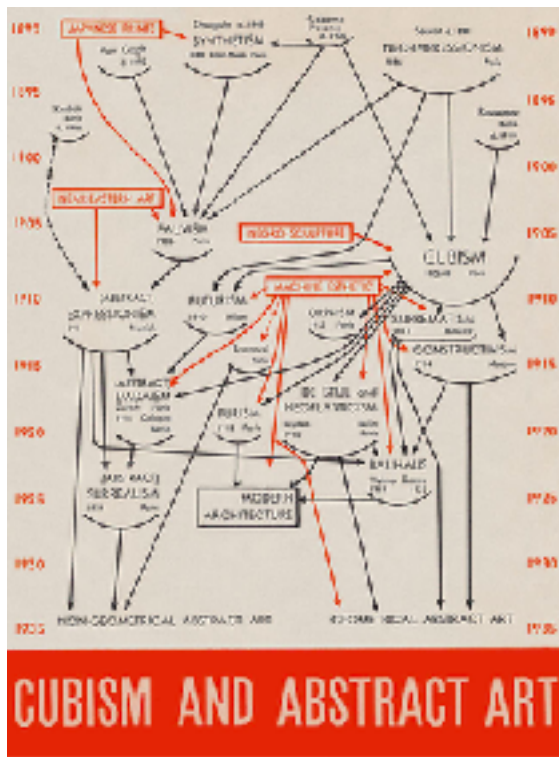
Although Huxtable expresses a desire for artistic ambiguity, *Untitled(Wall)* is still located in the avant-garde art historical canon. Huxtable's flow chart is reminiscent of two historical examples of artistic diagrams: Alfred H. Barr Jr.'s charting of modern art (1936) and Guy DeBord's *The Naked City* (1957). Barr's chart traces the evolution of modern art, mapping the "historical development, currents, and crosscurrents of modern art."[72] Similarly, Huxtable charts the same movements and connections, but instead they are the movements in her logic in her online investigation. Yet, despite the connections being made based on the artist's logic rather than a time-

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[72] "Hand-drawn Chart Illustrating the Development of Modern Art, C. 1936 | MoMA," The Museum of Modern Art, accessed May 17, 2019, https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/archives-highlights-02-1936.

line, both charts illustrate the development of an idea. However, it is in the situationist diagram, *The Naked City*, that one can see even more parallels between Huxtable's contemporary work and the history of the avant-garde. *The Naked City* is made up of cut outs of a map of Paris that are linked with red arrows.[73] The shape of the arrows are meant to mimic the spontaneous turn of the body and communicate a disinterest in meaningful connection.[74] The diagram's organization is meant to construe a narrative rather than function as a tool of "universal knowledge."[75] In a sense, Huxtable's *Untitled(Wall)* functions in the same way. It starts out with her personal anecdote and ultimately becomes a narrative of the appropriation of black culture and heritage in the construction of the skinhead aesthetic, veering away from common knowledge. Although Huxtable similarly constructs a narrative in her flow chart, it is based upon the artist's logic which cannot be said for DeBord's *The Naked City*. DeBord's diagram is meant to avoid any logical connection between each of its parts as their spatial relationships and original orientation are altered.[76] Although Huxtable's project is not to transform works of art in the same vein as Thomas, her use of the diagram could be considered the creation of a visible seam. Her intervention is not about the image of the body in this case, but rather about Huxtable creating space for a queer black trans woman in a movement dominated by white men.

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[73] Thomas F. McDonough, "Situationist Space," *October* 67 (Winter 1994): 60.

[74] McDonough, "Situationist Space," 60.

[75] McDonough, "Situationist Space," 61.

[76] McDonough, "Situationist Space," 64.

Transsexual Empire (2017)

Secured to a shining metal wall with magnets reminiscent of political buttons, a print

reads: TRANSSEXUAL Empire!!! The print itself mimics a poster hung on a wood paneled

wall. At the top of the print in white are the words "NUMBER OF SWEDISH CHILDREN

WANTING TO CHANGE GENDER DOUBLES EACH YEAR." In its original display, the magnets surrounding *Transsexual Empire* were an addition to the piece's message. Though some of the buttons' phrases are indiscernible from photographs of the exhibit, some readable ones are "TERF WARS" in the Star Wars typeface, "DEFEAT THE GENITAL FETISHISTS!!!", and "REAL WOMAN FOR SALE RENT OR TRADE." TERF stands for Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist and is used to refer to self-proclaimed radical feminists that invalidate trans women and exclude them from any conversations in the movement. The TERF WARS button is thus a reference to trans women and people battling TERFs and their disseminated transphobic rhetoric in their everyday lives. This narrative goes along with the button that reads "DEFEAT THE GENITAL FETISHISTS!!!" By genital fetishists Huxtable means those that are concerned with trans people's genitalia. She is also likely referring to those that claim attraction to certain genitalia rather than gender in order to avoid stating they would not be romantically or sexually involved with a trans person. The link between the two is the shared gender essentialism of both groups, typically as a result of transphobia, that Huxtable desires to extinguish. While some of the button magnets have impactful phrases, some simply have small images on them. One has an upside down rainbow inverted triangle with merged gender symbols and a paw print in the center, another has a simple image of a syringe on a blue background, and another has a black equal sign with a slash through it on a light green background but turned on its side. The images on these magnets relate to a queer trans identity specifically, trans identity in general, and also communicates an obvious issue of inequality. The central image of the print is a large breasted woman wearing a choker with her legs spread open revealing an erect penis, her hand gesturing or fixing her choker. Texture is added to the skin by the sponging of blue paint evident in the

repetition of overlapping blue textured squares. Partially obscuring the woman's penis is another woman. She is a white silhouette with her buttocks high in the air, her ankle crossed over her calf, and her gaze a suggestion of eyes directly addressing the viewer. Both women are in sexually suggestive positions that invite the eye but neither are meant to be consumed as spectacle. Huxtable chooses to leave the face of the spread-legged woman out of the image while the face of the white silhouetted woman is an abstract suggestion of facial features. In these choices Huxtable refuses to participate in subjecting trans women to sexualization and fetishization in her work instead abstractly painting women as a universal stand-in.

In a talk with Che Gossett, Huxtable mentions her anxiety surrounding the mainstream consumption of transness. Imbricated in the consumption of trans bodies in the dominant visual sphere is the coexistence of repulsion, sexualization, and fetishization. The trans body is accepted when consumed as spectacle, sexualized as fetish, but is still not accepted as normative. Violence certainly plays a role in the contemporary moment of trans visibility as trans people that are included in mainstream media are those that pass as cisgender.[77] Trans visibility, "[…] is premised on invisibility."[78] By bringing some into view, others are rendered invisible and illegitimate; therefore, trans visibility can reinforce oppression. Additionally, the contemporary presence of transgender people in mainstream media is relevant to Nicole Fleetwood's discussion of abjection in relation to the visual sphere. Fleetwood draws on Karen Shimakawa's definition of abjection but places it in the context of black culture, defining it as, "[…] an understanding of the black subject of dominant discourse as familiar and domestic to the body politic, but also aber-

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[77] Gossett and Huxtable, "Existing in the World," 42.

[78] Che Gossett, "Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 183.

rant."[79] In other words, the black subject is folded into aspects of dominant culture and consumption but although a part of popular culture is still seen as repulsive. The same can be said for popular transgender figures and goes doubly for popular black trans figures like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock. Although society appears to be embracing transgender people, especially black trans women, the fact that trans people are still viewed as aberrant is apparent in not only the attitudes Huxtable presents in *Transsexual Empire* but also in the devastating number of black trans women that have been murdered. In 2018, twenty-eight trans people were murdered in the United States, twenty-seven of which were trans women.[80] Of the twenty-seven trans people murdered in 2018, twenty-six were women of color.[81] This number may not account for all of the murders of trans women as some go unreported and victims are typically misgendered in the media.[82] Despite the increased visibility of trans women of color, trans visibility as it stands is not enough to prevent violence. Moreover, images of well-known transgender people are typically used to police trans people by suggesting that the ultimate goal is to be able to pass in the world.[83] Thus abjection in relation to trans people also means the celebration of those able to pass and repulsion towards trans people who cannot or do not wish to do so.

On the left of *Transsexual Empire* in blue text are words stacked on top of each other that read "HETEROSEXUAL! HOMOSEXUAL! NOW PANSEXUAL!!!" The white text at the bot-

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[79] Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Her Own Spook: Colorism, Vision, and the Dark Female Body," in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 91.

[80] Jen Christensen,"Killings of Transgender People in the US Saw Another High Year," CNN, January 17, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/16/health/transgender-deaths-2018/index.html.

[81] Christensen, "Killings of Transgender People in the US Saw Another High Year."

[82] Christensen, "Killings of Transgender People in the US Saw Another High Year."

[83] Gossett and Huxtable, "Existing in the World," 42.

tom of the image reads: EFFEMINAZATION IS THE ONLY PROCESS, THE LAST DESPER-

ATE ATTEMPT, THAT SURVIVAL ORIENTED AFRIKAN MALES CAN STRIKE BACK

AGAINST THE ENEMY WITHOUT ATTACKING THE REAL SOURCE OF THEIR FEARS

ABOUT THEIR OWN MANHOOD. The inclusion of the text in all capital letters is reminiscent

of a twitter rant now commonly associated with musician and public figure Kanye West. All cap-

ital letters online communicates a shout. This shout is thought of less as the powerful voice of an

activist and more as the sound of an unhinged person on the other side of the computer, frantical-

ly smashing the keys of their keyboard. When one considers these words with those the top of

the print, also in white and in all capital letters, it is apparent that Huxtable is confronting notions

of transness that have been developed out of fear. She is addressing a denial of the legitimacy of

not only trans identities but also trans bodies that refuse the norm. She is calling attention to the

fact that trans identities are deemed invalid out of fear rooted in deeply ingrained notions of

normative sex and gender.[84] With the all-caps text and an abundance of exclamation points,

Huxtable invites the viewer to consider the cause of cisgender panic surrounding transgender

people: the destruction of long-held mainstream notions of gender and sexuality.

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[84] Here I use normative sex to refer to the dominant association of specific anatomy and genetic makeup
in the social construction of male and female as biological categories.

The Feminist Scam (2017)

On a metal wall magnets surround and support a print of a poster on a wood paneled wall.

The central image of the print is that of a white hand grasping a leash clipped to the collar of a

black silhouetted woman. This silhouette, based on the depiction of hair and the large posterior,

is meant to be representative of a stereotypical image of a black woman. The leashed black

woman has on heels and, on her knees, brandishes her clawed hands and bares her teeth towards a black silhouetted image of a man. From the depiction of his hair, the viewer is meant to assume that this is a black man. He wears white pants and there are motion lines around the feet and legs that suggest he is quivering in fear. The black woman is painted as an aggressor, a wild and vicious beast to be tamed. Huxtable's engagement in the process of disidentification is evident in the way the utilizes a stereotypical and racist image of a black woman. The silhouetted black woman is a threat to everyone and, in this case, especially the black man before her. In *Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists*, feminist scholar Sara Ahmed notes that, "Some bodies are assumed to be the origin of bad feeling, as getting in the way of the good feelings of others."[85] This tendency to label certain bodies as the source of negativity results in oppressed people being pressured to constantly show signs of happiness. For black women, speaking out of anger can serve as a refusal of the requirement to be perpetually pleasant as well as a means for black women to embrace their placement as the source of tension.[86] Therefore, Huxtable's reclamation of the stereotypical image serves as a critique of the construction of black womanhood on the foundation of rage. The tension of the leash as it rests in the disembodied white hand is representative of the tension the black woman's body creates. The leash is a representation of both the tendency of people to attempt to police black women's anger and the outside forces that construct the image of the Angry Black Woman.

In addition, the collared black woman whose leash is held by a white hand can be read as a representation of black existence in the liminal space between freedom and liberation. In

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[85] Sara Ahmed, "Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists," *Race Ethnicity and Education*12, no. 1 (March 2009): 48.

[86] Ahmed, "Embodying Diversity," 49.

"Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility", Che Gossett draws on Sora Han's discussion of "blackness as nonperformance."[87] Han conceptualizes blackness as a performative that rejects performances of "freedom and unfreedom" which rely upon the absence of a clear distinction between slavery and freedom, historically.[88] In other words, blackness is a performance that occupies the liminal space between freedom and unfreedom. Certainly, the aspects of freedom afforded to black subjects is contingent upon other subject positions such as class and gender. As black subjects have occupied the space between freedom and unfreedom historically, Huxtable illustrates the same type of unoriented existence that relates to both the historical and contemporary confines black women face. The silhouetted image of the aggressive black woman also suggests the legacy of slavery and how, in the contemporary moment, there are still limitations imposed on supposedly free black bodies. The similarity between the silhouetted stereotypical image of the black woman in this work and Kara Walker's body of work also highlights the legacy of slavery in the contemporary moment. Huxtable was likely influenced by Walker's *A Subtlety* (2014) that was shown in the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn, New York.[89] In this exhibit, as well as in her body of work, Kara Walker uses stereotypical images of enslaved black people and alters them in order to construct a new narrative that points out the violences of slavery. However, instead of the all-white stereotypical image of the black woman on her knees as a servile version of the sphinx, Huxtable instead goes for the traditional Walker-style black silhouette in her representation of black female aggression. In *The Feminist Scam*, the silhouetted image of the

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87 Gossett, "Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility," 187.

88 Gossett, "Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility," 187.

89 "Kara Walker's 'A Subtlety'," Creative Time, accessed May 16, 2019, http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/.

black woman's body is central to the action of the work because it is her body that these narratives are forced upon.

The background of the print's central image is pink and after extended looking one can see that this is a depiction of a chest and torso, the small blue-lined images meant to be tattoos. The tattoos on the background torso read as follows: "THUG LIF" where the E is partially obscured and the I is altered to resemble something else, presumably a bullet, "50 NIGGAZ" at the center of the torso near the chest resting in the outline of an AK-47, and on the left pec a line drawing of Nefertiti's bust with "2DIE4" under it. Towards the top of the print is hot pink text that says "GO TO A NBA WOMENS BASKETBALL GAME, CHECK OUT BLACK HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS BASKETBALL GAMES, GO TO A COLLEGE GIRLS BASKETBALL GAME AND ITS SWARMING WITH DYKES AND BULLDYKES, LOOKING FOR FRESH MEAT. LIKE I SAID I STOPPED MY DAUGHTER FROM PLAYING ORGANIZED BASKETBALL IN THE 9TH GRADE BECAUSE 2 OF HER CHILDHOOD FRIENDS WERE TURNED OUT BY DYKE IN MIDDLE SCHOOL BEFORE THEY EVEN GOT TO HIGH SCHOOL." In this instance, when associated with the silhouettes, the all capital letters is representative of anger and the aforementioned evocation of the chaotic sound of fingertips frantically pounding against keys. Upon deeper reflection, the hot pink text in combination with the image of the ferocious black woman that must be kept on a tight leash communicates how black lesbians are doubly seen as a threat to men. The notion that a lesbian could "turn" a heterosexual girl, is a problematic notion that not only presents sexuality as a choice but also produces the narrative of the predatory lesbian. Although this notion is not exclusive to black lesbians, the fear of women or girls being "turned out" is rooted in seeing lesbians as a threat to men and masculinity.

Printed in large yellow typeface underneath the central image is "THE FEMINIST

SCAM." Beneath those words, also in yellow is "INTERSECTIONALITY, COINTELPRO,

FEMALE MASCULINITY AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE AFRIKAN FAMILY." These

words paired with the imagery reiterates the idea of the black woman as a threat to black men

and, in particular, black masculinity. It is also reflective of intersectionality's integration into

mainstream feminism. The term intersectionality is often utilized while many mainstream femi-

nists continue to view black women as aggressors. Sara Ahmed claims that diversity politics is

employed to create the "right" image, which only changes the perception of things rather than

changing things as they are.[90] Thus, while mainstream feminists are familiar with the concept of

intersectionality, enacting it actually requires an unlearning of internalized gendered racial narra-

tives that have been accepted as truths. Through the marriage of text and image Huxtable does

well to illustrate how black women are often seen as perpetually angry aggressors not only out-

side of the community (the disembodied white hand gripping the leash) but also within it (the

black man quaking before her). Image and text work together to place the destructive stereotypes

of Angry/Aggressive Black Woman and Predatory Lesbian before the viewer. What one is to gain

is a sense of and critical distance from the fear and paranoia that drive the reproduction of the

historical narrative of black female masculinity.

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[90] Ahmed, "Embodying Diversity," 45.

Towards a Queer Black Feminist Artistic Tradition

In her work, Mickalene Thomas addresses universal experiences in her nostalgic reference to the 1970s and her attention to the fragmentary and layered nature of one's identity. Moreover, Thomas' insistence upon inserting herself as well as black women into the art historical canon highlights the exclusive nature of western tradition. Thomas' construction of the visible seam in her reinterpretation of well-known works of art is done in a way that accounts for the complexities of black womanhood which have not been previously afforded. She creates a new image of black women in art — one of the black lesbian artist as genius and one of the black woman as a multi-dimensional human being. Although Thomas establishes a valuable interrogation of the art historical canon in her translation of works by Michelangelo, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Manet, her reliance upon western tradition in her project makes it impossible for the artist to fully separate herself from the historical exclusions she seeks to address. Thomas' method of insuring inclusion and proper representation is one that fails to acknowledge her participation in the exclusionary practices she desires to combat. Yet, Thomas' attachment to working within the art historical canon is a process of disidentification. She weaponizes the tools of an exclusionary system in order to insist upon black women's visibility. Still, this intervention falls slightly short as the visibility of some relies upon the invisibility of others.

Juliana Huxtable claims to want no part in the art historical canon, but is she truly removed from it? Similar to Thomas' work, there is a universal appeal in Huxtable's reference to the 1970s in the wood paneling included in the background of _The Feminist Scam_ and _Transsexual Empire_. Be that as it may, throughout the works previously discussed, the main universal ap-

peal lies in Huxtable's references to internet conspiracy theories. She is both concerned with the fear and paranoia embedded in conspiracy theories and how that fear and paranoia can be weaponized in a way that affects black people of various marginalized identities (black women, black trans people, black lesbians, etc.). Huxtable's concern is emphasized in the way she marries abstract representations of bodies with text to allow the viewer to dissect and reflect upon the role of visual consumption in the formation of knowledge. The construction of what we consider to be true comes as a result of how we process information presented through the images we see and the things we read. Instead of focusing on who is missing from the art historical canon, Huxtable chooses to focus on what role dominant ideologies play in knowledge production. Huxtable's aforementioned works also attend to how social structures dictate our understanding of the world and how any rupture in or distrust of said structure can create fear and paranoia. Despite this, Huxtable's critique of exclusionary systems, while arguably more sufficient in its intervention than Thomas' project, still does not completely remove her from her success in the art world. Perhaps it is Thomas' long-established career that makes her accepting of her inevitable participation in an exclusionary system, but Huxtable is cognizant and resistant to involvement in the system despite its inescapability. It is likely Huxtable's existence on the fringes as a queer black trans woman that is responsible for her avoidance of categories and desire for ambiguity, but it is her current rise to art stardom that has begun too push her from the fringes to the center.

Important to note is that both Thomas and Huxtable are interested in referencing the body but in different ways. Thomas seeks to control the narrative of black women's bodies through her attention to the gaze and the representation of nudity in her work. The subtle peeks of skin paired with the subjects' outward gazes and the exposed breasts with downcast or soft rather than sen-

sual eyes allow for a denial of the hypersexualization. While Thomas' approach is about reclama-

tion, Huxtable takes a different route in abstracting the bodies in work like *The Feminist*

Scam(2017) and *Transsexual Empire*(2017). Her refusal of any representation of a specific black

woman's body, namely her own, is a method of denying access to bodies that men have often felt

entitled to. By abstracting the body, Huxtable controls the image of black women in a different

way, making it less about the body and more about abstract concepts that are compiled to instruct

dominant views of what it means to be a black woman. On its own, however, the abstracted body

as it is portrayed would be interpreted as a statement on the representation of women's bodies. It

is the text that brings another element to the interpretation of Huxtable's assemblages. Text and

image together strengthen Huxtable's project of challenging systemic constructions of black

womanhood.

In comparing the work of these artists alongside one another I have begun to trace and

establish a lineage of black queer feminist artistic tradition. Thomas' work builds off of an exist-

ing black feminist tradition of creating the visible seam, but the implication of sapphic romance

in her work adds another layer to the possibilities of the representation of black womanhood.

Additionally, she works within the art historical canon as a means to transform it, but in doing so

inevitably falls into the trap of visibility which renders others invisible in the wake of her inter-

vention. Huxtable builds off of Thomas' interrogation of the art historical canon by critiquing it

with the assemblage of text and image that highlights the faults of an exclusionary system's in-

fluence on the construction of dominant ideologies. Huxtable finds value in the examination of

conspiracy theory, employing its harmful messages in order to mine their transformative power.

She uses these harmful ideas to provoke the viewer to question how exclusionary systems inform

the construction of truths and to value conspiracy theories for their ability to expose the falseness of dominant ideologies. In Huxtable's work we are able to see a critique of one canon within the art world alongside a valuation of avant-garde traditions evident in her reference to the political poster and diagrammatic art. Her work also presents a proposed shift in the valuation of knowledge by using "low" forms of knowledge that are backed up by historical fact. The two projects are representative of a progression in a black queer transformation of the art historical canon that critiques the existing system while also creating space for marginalized subjects through thought-provoking representations that allow the viewer to challenge dominant ideologies. Thomas inserts black womanhood, female sexuality, and queer relationships in the canon while Huxtable moves forward by attempting to insert not only black womanhood and queerness, but also transness and "low" forms of knowledge. Thomas builds upon a womanist approach in visual representation, focusing on portraying complex personhood that simultaneously does not deny female sexuality. Huxtable's aim is more in line with an intersectional feminism that finds flaws in the system and uses conspiracy theory as a valuable framework for deconstructing it. The shift in representation from Thomas to Huxtable is a transition from a queer womanist perspective to a black radical feminist critique.

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