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The Adversity Pop Culture Has Posed

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The Adversity Pop Culture Has Posed

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts in Fine Arts Painting

by

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B.A. University of New Orleans, 2009

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Abstract

I am a collage artist working with multiple mediums such as paint, photography, video, audio, and performance. As a New Orleans’ native, I have a unique history that is unflattering, for my history echoes that of America’s historical misdeeds. I make sociopolitical art because I am of a historically oppressed people. I make art that celebrates my diverse culture that is a collage of Native American, African, and New Orleans’ French Creole.

Key words: Fine Arts, painting, collage art, New Orleans, Performance Art, Mardi Gras Indian, New Orleans’ Performance Artist, Cultural Appropriation, Mis-Education, Dumbin’ Down (Reflections on the Mis-education of the Negro, Dr.Jeff Menzise
Introduction

Born Darel Joseph, in mid-city New Orleans, Louisiana; I have taken the pseudonym Infinity. When I was in elementary school the Arts was removed from the public school curriculum. The mainstream urban public was then influenced solely by Popular Culture. This created the illusion that one must function within the confines of Popular Culture in attempts of making any type of art. The role of art in ancient and modern societies was a connection to the metaphysical realm and art served as documentation of the culture in which it existed. My work is about removing the glitz and glamour of Pop culture thus an attempt to create a more mentally stimulating and meaningful body of work with the use of my imagination. In many ways, I view my art as my lending my imagination to those who are unable to tap into their own. I have labeled my art as hyper-political, for I cannot resist making commentary about the socio-political agenda of those institutions that hold the seat of power in this society. I cannot properly, with unbiased eye document and/or respond to the very social structure that attempts to consume me if I am creating from within the confines of mainstream society. I must create from a reality beyond what is mainstream. More developed artists have removed themselves from those social facets to live within their own worlds. Clement Greenberg referred to this state of consciousness as Bohemia. That world must become a reality to the artist before convincing everyone else. I, the artist, allow my hand and essence to perforate through my work. The mechanical aesthetic or lack thereof must come from beneath those technical instruments commonly available in the form of mass production or the appeal of mass production. Instead of appeasing common mentalities, art should give society something new to look at and challenge cultural norms. I love to celebrate aesthetic qualities that can only be achieved by exaggerating the use of traditional art materials. I attempt to express a feeling or thought by juxtaposing material that normally is not
related. I want to make people think by communicating with the parts of the brain that has been dulled by constant and deliberate exposure of surfaced commercial imagery. I am using visual analogies to relate information stored in one part of the brain to communicate with information stored in a totally different part of the brain. In many non-Western cultures, the symbolism used to construct words, and thus their language for communicating, was based on pictorial words rather than what we are modernly accustomed to i.e., Western cultures’ use of abstract symbols such as the (letter system), therefore metaphors can be visually communicated.

I create bodies of art using multiple mediums. In essence, I am a collage artist. I make paper, paint, assemblage, photo, and video collages. During the last semester of my undergraduate career at the University of New Orleans, I was displaced due to Hurricane Katrina. While living in Houston, before I knew my displacement was permanent, I had lost all my art and art supplies; I only had a Canon EOS (film) camera as a means to create art. This led to my shooting biographical photographs and the documentation of my journey. At the time, I began to document those living in the Reliant Center and the living conditions in that stadium, and I photographed the various places we were directed for assistance. My camera kept rolling for two years as I documented events I would have never imagined I’d experience at that point in my life. Those experiences were eye-openers unlike any I had witnessed for many years since growing up in dire poverty. I was no longer Darel the artist, art student, or part time state employee for the Louisiana W.I.C. program, rather I was a displaced American African American condemned, not for my economic status, rather for my ethnic status. Some of those early photographs made their way into my paintings. Once looking at the photographs of our damaged home, I thought of my UNO professor’s paintings of pristine and well designed rooms. I thought of my photographs as a nightmarish version of those rooms. I began to make
environments for the photographs of our destroyed and twice flooded (by hurricanes Katrina and Rita) family home. In a way I was trying to will normality into such a chaotic situation. I created the collages as handheld photographs therefore each piece is between approximately four and eleven inches. This began my pursuit to find the merging point between photographs and paintings.
Infinity’s Process- Let Me Re-Introduce Myself

I make use of multiple mediums as a means to express ideas in many different ways. I find a need to express my ideas in many different ways because I speak in such a unique language. I want to ensure that as many people as possible can understand what I am expressing. The project itself determines which medium is needed to convey my idea. The frustration of my inability to express myself outside the realm of Popular Culture was my motivation to master many mediums. It is as though I had to de-collage my thoughts and reassemble them in a manner in which my audience can relate. It is as if my collage process and the collage itself has stepped outside of the two dimensional space of the canvass and into real time three dimensional space such as sculpture, performance, and video. In many aspects, I consider myself a three dimensional canvas, thus my collage art is moving into the arenas of installation, sculpture, and performance art. My performance art is my way to critique Pop Culture making use of the very language of Pop Culture. I create collage art in attempts to appropriate the tools of Pop Culture into my work, yet my intent is to create high-end art. I am taking from Pop Culture to comment on its limitations. In the media, Popular Culture images are created by actual taught, trained, and skilled artists, but the work is not credited to the artists. On a certain level by removing the creator, the author, the subject the iconic figure represented- is in a way subconsciously credited for the art displayed. This causes these icons, those displayed in the images to be held accountable for imagery they had not created. The true artists of the imagery are never credited or accountable for the influence their work has on society. Once something enters the realm of Pop Culture it becomes an iconic representation of itself. There are genres of music. The songs, music, videos, and etc. become a prototype of how that genre of music is to be represented. This is true for each genre until another genre is created by new artists who have yet to be confined
from artist growth by being “typed cast” as a certain type artist. I play against the sameness of Pop Culture that is an intricate element of not being able to trace a piece or body of work to the creator or author. To combat this sameness, I create a unique look and aesthetic, I have incorporated actual materials that in theory don’t visually make sense to juxtapose. This is done in the Wild Style series’ Music for the Eyes. (fig 2) In this painting I juxtaposed hardcore political news events with silhouette dancing figures and I included broken cd’s and photo film amongst other things. Wild Style series is a group of works I created in the spirit of Jazz musician’s and Hip-Hop DJ’s improvising. The name and most of the influence of the Wild Series derives from Grand Master Flash’s DJ Mix record titled Wild Style. (G.M.) Flash has been a pioneer in DJ-ing since the birth of Hip-Hop. I rely solely on natural impulses as my operating process I am solely operating on with my Wild Style series. In a way, this is a way to visually see the things I am not totally aware that have influenced me. This series was created out of frustration from the more meticulous and well thought-out series, DJ Style Mixing. (fig 3) Wild Style series was manifested when I was totally wired one night, but I could not paint, for I was waiting for my oils to dry on the DJ Style Mixing painting. In the world of mass information we are affected by things so often until we are unaware the influx of information we take in daily. This Wild Style series is my way of assessing the affect the influences the influx of information has on me subconsciously. I make paint collages by using the techniques of DJ’s and Jazz musicians. My aesthetic is improvising and intentional misuse of
my materials. I mix actual artist’s paint materials, and I also mix paint processes (the way in which I physically make the piece). My collage processes expanded beyond paint materials once I was introduced to the work of Howardena Pindell, (fig 4) collage artist. Pindell uses lots of layering of an array of materials thus her paintings have become sculptural. I am process orientated as artist Betty Blayton, painter who creates a painting by layering multiple processes and creating an abstraction of color and shape. I am creating the illusion of a mechanical process by becoming the machine in which I am producing many original works of art. My process is very concise and well thought out, yet I want it to appear as a random gesture. There is an array of textures created from the paint materials, and this creates the visual esthetic of perception and space, resulting in a push and pull. A print or picture of my work lessens the visual effect. This is done as a way to sway the viewer to want to view the actual object I created opposed to a work that could have been made by anyone else. This is the opposite of commercial and pop culture’s “art” which intentionally creates dispensable works that can’t be traced back to the artists. Because everything is done with a universal populace “cookie cutter” system. Everything is done the same with the intent of creating a sameness. In the Death of the author, Roland Barthes states; “Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.”¹ Without the author there is difficulty reading a work. I am combating the removal of the artists by making work that is unique in aesthetic and plays with conceptualism vs narrative. I have actually placed my physical being in my art as I create

performance art and performance art videos; therefore I am adding the author back into my work. My collage of multiple mediums and the incorporation of my physical self is my way of blatantly reintroducing the author into my work.

**Imagination is Life- Reproduction is Death**

I find my most unique quality is the way I view the world. I am always in my own world which I describe as a Universe far beyond “this” reality (our shared reality). Everything I do is centered around these ideologies which governs my universe. I see everything anew when I am thinking in terms of calculus. I can imagine energy and how it translates into physical space by understanding the derivative process. I am mindful of Albert Einstein’s Law of Relativity, which states energy can not be destroyed or created, yet it is transferred. Imagine the possibilities when everything is energy, either potential or kinetic. These theories derive from ancient KMT (Kemet currently named Egypt by invaders). I can find elements of the Law of Relativity in the science of the chakra system, as it is the study of energy and its constant flow through the body. I began thinking about imagination in an isolated sense. Imagination is what makes it possible to propel society forward, for “without imagination, one could not get from knowledge of the past and present to justified expectations about the complex future.”

I thought about the way this Western society treats its artists by putting them on a pedestal in celebration of the artist’s imagination and/or courage to express themselves beyond the confines of social complacency then in the very next turn the artists are vilified or subtly condemned for dissension. From what I’ve observed, from the 80’s until now, every time an actual artist (not entertainer or celebrity) is caught in the web of Pop Cult they are limited in many ways by Pop Cult itself. I think of Prince

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and his struggle to come from under his record label so he can push his art beyond what Pop Cult expected from him as an artist and for him to make a reasonable profit from his work. Those artists who proceed and allow their work to grow (creating something new and unique) are quickly taken out of public view. Prince has not had a major blockbuster tour since his dispute with Warner Brothers. In many ways the industry corners the market leading to great difficulty to independent artists for “there’s a lot of additional work required from an artist that goes beyond simple music creation, so much so that the comfort of a major label begins to look pretty good after a while. A great example of this is Nine Inch Nails founder Trent Reznor, who’s as savvy a social media entrepreneur as there is, and who’s now back with in the major label fold with Columbia as well. Ceding control equals more time for the things that artists love the most, which is making music.”

One moment the media is celebrating an artist or entertainer (“celebrity”) and the next moment it is criticizing them for their so-called weirdness. The Abstract Expressionists are a group of artists, who turned inward to seek inspiration for their art in a way not previously seen in Western Art.

They responded to their social environment by making art that could not be read as political propaganda or anti-political propaganda. They wanted to be neutral and free from association with the with government’s political practices, unlike artist Pablo Picasso, who was very critical of the Spanish civil war and the government. Picasso expressed his discontent for the government in, Guernica, probably Picasso's most famous and most politically powerful work. He painted this as an immediate reaction to the German Luftwaffe’s inhumane bombing of the town Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Picasso was deemed a communist by the French government, and when he wanted to leave Spain, he applied for citizenship in France.

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3 “Prince Comes Back To Warner Bros And Shows The Boundaries of DIY.” Forbes. 21, April, 2014. Web.
This citizenship was rejected for reasons explained in the police File; "Despite having set himself up in France as a so-called modern painter, allowing him to earn millions of francs and to own a chateau near Gisors, Picasso has maintained his extremist ideas and drifted towards communism."\(^4\) In essence, Jackson Pollock used techniques of what is considered “primitive art” by Western culture’s standards to step away from the historical confines of what painting was at the time. Pollock’s floor process was arguably inspired by and influenced by his working with Native American and “South American” artists. Native American process was related to nature and working with nature as a material such as dirt, sand, and mud on the ground. The floor process led to Pollock’s drip process and moving the canvas from the easel to the floor. The Abstract Expressionists wanted to create a totally new art style that could not be read in the context of art history as America was attempting to set itself apart from the other global countries of power. This was the major reason why the Abstract Expressionists did not want to make art that critiqued society i.e. government entities. Unfortunately, their art was still used as propaganda by the U.S. government. Their neutrality was expressed in the form of abstraction that made it easily manipulated for government propaganda. My art is a blatant expression of my critique of the system. Although I am an independent artist, I need sponsorship, and I have to go through the Art World to have my work shown or seen on an international and grand scale. I am doing all the artist things to ensure my body of work is not compromised by the demand of the market, but that makes it tougher for me because my work is highly charged and controversial which makes me a big risk.

Art’s Role in the Shift of Global Political Power & the Shift of Cultural Political Power

Abstract Expressionism, or The New York School of Painting, the first Avant-garde movement centered in the United States. This was a major influence and a precursor to Pop Art’s glitzy appeal. Jackson Pollock was presented as an icon in Time magazine. Pollock’s art became the international image of America, but excluded Africans and women, who were major influences in American art. Africans have been misrepresented in Pop Culture and almost have been excluded from Art history. American African Abstract Expressionists are rarely mentioned, and they are not credited as a part of the New York School of Painting although they worked as a part of this group. They are dismissed as being only a part of the Harlem Renaissance movement.

Norman Lewis, \(\text{(fig 5)}\) an Abstract Expressionist painter whose imagery was pure aesthetic; with the image removed. I can understand this, for the history of the African image is not a pretty picture. The image of the Africans (black people) is often caricatured to make them seem less than human. Also, Lewis used imagery that referenced a positive perspective of the African community. Jacob Lawrence, Abstract Expressionists painter, used vibrant colors to represent the everyday aspects of the American African community. Ed Clark is an Abstract Expressionists painter who explored the color field to make paintings that were about painting. He excluded literal imagery from his work by pushing the abstraction by use of color and contrast. Ellsworth Ausby, Abstract Expressionists painter, made paintings about color and
shape by excluding literal imagery. Charles Searles, an Abstract Expressionists painter and installation artist, used a vibrant color scheme. His work demonstrated the relation of shapes to one another and the interplay of color. His installations were a network of shapes and how they relate to one another. Al Loving is an Abstract Expressionists painter and installation artist, whose work celebrates lively colors and shapes swirling around the canvas or space. Omitting these painters from the context of art history is a disservice to painters of all ethnicities because their work explored Abstract Expressionism as effectively and uniquely as their Anglo counterparts. These artists’ have effectively influenced modern art and are among the major influences of my art.

The movement following Abstract Expressionism was Robert Rauschenberg’s rebellion against the neutrality of the Abstract Expressionists; he and other artists began to incorporate material from the outside world that affected their subconscious world. The Abstract Expressionists made art that could not be read in context to anything but itself by removing the figure, narrative, and all historical art references. These artists, unlike past art movements, turned inward to self and their unconsciousness, yet they disassociated from everything on the outside by not factoring in the viewer. This created a reality where the viewer became the author, “for it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a
prerequisite impersonality.”

Therefore the entire language of art changed. Language is as relevant as those who communicate in its terms, for “...though unable to accord language a supreme place (language being system and the aim of the movement being, romantically, a direct subversion of codes - itself moreover illusory: a code cannot be destroyed, only 'played off')...”

Artists, like Rauschenberg, took the next step by removing everything from painting including the author. “Linguistics has recently provided the destruction of the author with a valuable analytical tool by showing that the whole of the enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors.”

Pop Culture, by way of commercial imagery, has a function of setting universal cultural codes. The voices and language, outside the cultural preset definitions of those images and symbols, are pushed off into the undercurrents of society because when the writer or artist attempts to introduce a new topic there is a desire of the reader/viewer to rationalize this new language within the context of the predetermined common language. As Pop Culture’s type of art had been “woven with habits and repetitions, with stereotypes, obligatory final clauses and key-words, each constitutes an idiolect…” Customarily, the author defines language. Once the author was removed from the context of art, a new art formed one that cannot be read in reference to historical definitions, for “the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it…” The author was removed as a result of an ever-changing culture. In the African American community, it was the time of the Civil Rights Movement, which was winding down.

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5 Barthes 143
6 Barthes 144
7 Barthes 145
8 Barthes
9 Barthes
sculptures were made of rubble from the Watts riots, the same as I am making use of the so-called aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Robert Rauschenberg and Noah Purifoy took the literal and functional use of the canvas out of the language of art by way of assemblage art. Assemblage art is the practice of taking foreign objects (usually found in everyday life such as junk from the streets) and piling them together to get a cluster of information, or materials, and meanings. This now may seem as a common way to look at art, but it was relevant at time of its creation, for the artists were responding to a new influx of information. This was the beginning phase of the information communication age. There was much of information forced upon the public unlike ever before. This creates an environment of chaos and commentary about the random information that has bombarded the average person. Artists began to make commentary about social chaos. This made way for the evolution to Pop Art. The Pop Artists became a part of the chaos of Pop Culture. My reintroducing of the author has been influenced by cultural adversities especially as a direct result of Popular Culture.

History & Politics of the Collage
The collage has deep history and origins in Africa. African collage artist, Ibrahim El Salahi from Omdurman, Sudan, who has had the same impact on art as Pablo Picasso, is not given the same merit. El Salahi graduated from Slade in London in the 1950s. He lived in Britain. El Salahi became the first African artist to be recognized by Tate and received the Tate Modern retrospective. Although African, he was trained in Europe same as his European counterparts. As Picasso, El Salahi was influenced by Africa and African art. Picasso is deemed the father of Modern art; El Salahi was ignored for years, but now is deemed the father of "African" Modern art. Both were influenced by African art, as they are collage artists and painters educated and trained in the west.

"I started to write small Arabic inscriptions in the corners of my paintings, almost like postage stamps," he recalls, "and people started to come towards me. I spread the words over the canvas, and they came a bit closer. Then I began to break down the letters to find what gave them meaning, and a Pandora's box opened. Animal forms, human forms and plant forms began to emerge from these once-abstract symbols. That was when I really started working. Images just came, as though I was doing it with a spirit I didn't know I had."\(^{10}\)

"The Middle East" is KMT what is called Africa, Egypt is KMT what is called Africa, so it is contradictory to say El Salahi’s work is of "Arab" and "Middle Eastern" influence, especially when it is clearly African influenced. El Salahi won a scholarship to Slade art school in 1954. He only viewed art from the perspective of western art.

\(^{10}\) Mark Hudson. "Ibrahim el-Salahi: from Sudanese prison to Tate Modern show.” The Guardian. Art and Design. 3 July 2013. Web
history. Salahi had little concept of himself as an African artist especially because his western training. He used African images and masks that referenced the African regions whereas he was born and had lived. I had also entered into a MFA program without any conscious knowledge of my African heritage, and what my African ancestry meant to my art and me as an artist. Although Salahi, as an African, was subconsciously referencing African art, once he moved to what is considered as Africa, he began to intentionally push African aesthetic in the most modern manner. In my art, I too have been pushing an African aesthetic although I have not been to Africa. Because I am a collage artist and African, the historical influences of black artists create another element and layer to my art. I make collage art to pay homage to my ancestors with my practice of African aesthetics. Challenging Western aesthetics and challenging the Western concept of African aesthetics is a very revolutionary concept in Post-Modern Western art. The con of this revolutionary concept (act) is the risk of total alienation in the art world. My current circumstances and possible repercussions for my political views make me feel as El Salahi, as he stated in an interview with Tate for his exhibition:

"There were 10 of us in a cell, sharing a bucket that was overflowing," says Ibrahim el-Salahi.11 "The penalty for being caught with writing materials was solitary confinement. But I kept working, drawing on scraps I buried in the ground."12

This was Sudan in the 1970s and Salahi, the country's undersecretary for culture, found himself imprisoned without trial. "Terrible as it was," he says, "I learned a great deal." Yet for Salahi, that experience pales beside the principal indignity he and his fellow African artists have faced over the years: simply being ignored. "For decades African artists have been working in a vacuum," he says.

If you want your work to have a global impact you must take big risks. If you want a global audience you must go through the Western art world. It may be modern African Art, but it had to be accepted by the Western art word ("The Art World") to be accepted on the continent of what

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11 Hudson
12 Hudson
is called Africa. It is modern art, yet it was criticized by the Western Art world for being non-traditional "African" art. As though the West ever truly viewed "traditional African art" as worthy of Western respect. So if these artists did not break the barrier by bringing "African" art into the modern, "African" art would have continued to be subsided. My art process is an expression of breaking aesthetic barriers. (fig 11)

The connections in the political plight between El Salahi and Picasso are striking. They both were deemed as government threats. El Salahi was imprisoned in Sudan in the midst of a government regime takeover of outside forces. El Salahi was released without trial and was extradited from Sudan to Europe. Picasso who feared he’d be extradited from Spain filed for citizenship to France but it was rejected because he was under French government watch. The alleged government reports (from BBC news reports) explain why this was so.

Infinity the Political Artist

I make political art because I am a descendant of P.O.W’s. (prisoners of war), political plantation prisoners of the United States of America, the West. My ancestors were imprisoned on this stolen soil for over 400 years; I inherited the effects, the affects, and the political and social ills of what is labeled chattel slavery. Slavery may have ended but our imprisonment has never ended for there were no efforts to correct the mental abuse imposed to turn an African into a slave for; “a person trained and mis-educated into believing themselves unworthy of respect and opportunity is dealt a death sentence; a curse that will reach beyond the current generation deep
into the future of their bloodline.”13 Through psychological abuse coupled with physical abuse the Western culture has created an altered mental state for the African in the West. This altered mental state is a severe form of mentacide which is the traumatic affects of slavery/imprisonment of the African. Acts such as violently forcing the African to not speak our native language and the introduction of a foreign language that was confusing to the first Africans forced into imprisonment in the west are forms of mentacide. This forced introduction of a new language that was never properly taught to the masses of Africans in The United States of America is proof of intentional confusion inflicted upon the minds of Africans. This type of mis-education, method of educating with the intent to teach falsehood, was proven in the 1990’s when Californian schools introduced the allotment to recognize Ebonics (Ebony phonics, black words) as a valid language created over the years by Africans who spoke a language which differs from traditional English. In other words, after almost 500 years in a country opposed to our will, Africans still cannot comprehend the English language. As stated in Death of The Author, once the language is removed the author is dead. Another method of control of the African mind was forcing Africans to not engage in our native cultural traditions and forcing Africans to follow a Western version of Christianity thus vilifying Voudon at the same time. It is documented that White preachers taught chattel slavery was the will of God. As quoted from the controversial movie, Goodbye Uncle Tom, a graphic documentary depiction of chattel slavery in the U.S.; in the opening scene a Slave Massa (prison warden) states; "God is white and as long as God is white we shall prevail over all other races. God is white and as long as God is white we shall prevail over all other races. God is white and as long as God is white we shall prevail over all other races." As I proved in my lecture, The African Holocaust- Mentacide, this is the very

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reason why Ptolemy and the Papacy created Serapis. Serapis is the first Anglo deity created for the sole purpose of gaining control over African minds in ancient KMT what is now called Egypt. This is no secret, for this is documented at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. This is the origins of White Jesus and White Supremacy.

“Goodbye Uncle Tom is a 1971 Italian film...

Addio Zio Tom (Goodbye Uncle Tom) is a pseudo-documentary in which the filmmaker’s detail, the racist ideology and degrading conditions faced by Africans under slavery. Because of the use of published documents and materials from the public record, with actors playing the role of the historical figures, the film labels itself a documentary, and portrays slave life as a non-stop orgy of violence, rape and torture committed by whites against their black slaves.

The Directors’ cut of Addio Zio Tom draws parallels between the horrors and slavery and the rise of the Black Power Movement, represented by Eldridge Cleaver, LeRoi Jones, Stokely Carmichael, and a few others.”

This led way to my generation, a small group of street Souljas (seventies babies), who were born during the Black Power Movement or shortly after; those born in dire poverty as victims of The System of Oppression and forced to engage in criminal activities to avoid starving to death, literally. We, mostly Alpha type personalities, were, and continue to be, targeted by the educational system, the judicial system, the prison system, and the system of institutional racism. We are called RBG’s (Revolutionary but Gangsta). This is a spinoff of the Pan-African

ideologies, and we proudly wave the Pan-African flag, created/coded by Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Jr. to represent Red (the blood that unites all people of Black African ancestry and shed for liberation), Black (black people whose existence as a nation, though not a nation-state, is affirmed by the existence of the flag), and Green (the abundant natural wealth of Africa.) This is our RBG flag we proudly wave. A history of the Pan-African flag:

The flag was created in 1920 by members of UNIA in response to the enormously popular 1900 coon song "Every Race Has a Flag but the Coon," which has been cited as one of the three coon songs that "firmly established the term coon in the American vocabulary". A 1921 report appearing in Africa Times and Orient Review, for which Marcus Garvey previously worked, quoted Garvey regarding the importance of the flag:

‘Show me the race or the nation without a flag, and I will show you a race of people without any pride.’

Artist, David Hammons had a gallery exhibition in the 1970's where he created and displayed many Pan-African type flags. The exhibition was a type of Pan-African themed flag although the body of work is titled "African American" flag. Hammons, a political artist, was actively involved in the Black Power movement.

**Infinity’s Critique on the critique of Art**

Art can't make an impact when the artists are afraid to express their personal voices. I am not like others who have become "politically correct" when critiquing art. I have heard/read art defined in two categories, effective and ineffective- good and bad. That is by far too subjective for me, and it gives no indication of which is which, other than what individuals like and don't like. This confuses me, for one has to be in a certain arena (Fine Arts) to be considered a serious artist.

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Serious in the global/national scheme of things therefore there is more to factor in than the subjective element of good and bad. Many who say they are artists are not included in the grand scheme of things; they are not factored in (most is ineffective and/or bad art). There is what is considered high-end art (Fine Arts) and low-end art (folk art). Popular Culture, as a system, serves not the function of art due to the lack of creativity, lack of uniqueness, and its populous function in society; I call it anti-art (not in a manner DaDa was considered anti-art). The art world doesn't acknowledge Popular Culture as an upper echelon of art; the thought of Popular Culture as a sophisticated art form is a myth amongst those not exposed to “The Art World”. Art should make people think in ways that challenges, social norms, not exploit those shallow social commonalities. There are levels of art, and I have no interest in art considered so-called art for art's sake, which I find to be nonsense. All art is political. All art says something if intended by the artist or not. Artists may choose to make what they consider apolitical art, but that does not mean their art is not political.

**Infinity’s Political Art**

There is a huge difference in knowing you must pay a cost of engaging The System and that of being for sale as in selling out thus compromising one’s integrity for reward. We all pay a price and sometimes that price is the consequences of negative reinforcement for not being for sale. That is a tremendous cost for those who choose to stand by one’s convictions, for there are sure repercussions for such decisions. One has to give up or pass up certain rewards to stand by their convictions. There is not much reward in criticism of Politics and Popular Culture via mass media. The function of the media is to reinforce FEAR by presenting, False Evidence to Appear
as Real (True). They play on the mind by using certain types of "selling techniques" to make people feel insecure, helpless, self-conscious, and scared. It seems as if The Powers That Be want people to view the world as a big scary place. This is certainly an attack on the (lower) chakras and a psychic attack on the mind. This is a highly affective tool of White Supremacy which functions by creating an illusion of power. This illusion of power is a means to trick the masses into giving up their power to The System. This is done with lies and falsehoods the system has created and imbedded into culture thus creating an alternate reality. The alternate reality inflicts confusion (a vehicle for the emotion fear) into the minds of the masses. I respond to the tactics of the media by creating two ongoing series of video, paper photo, and digital photo collages. These series are titled Political Entertainment and Broadcast New-zzz. Broadcast New-zzz (a collection of paper photo collages, 2012) is a play on the word broadcast for I am attempting to fill the role of a news anchor. I play on the word (news) new-zzz as a commentary of how people are mentally asleep when it comes to facts that are manipulated through the mainstream media. This has led me down a course of political art that I find impossible to steer away from. Everything I create is from the perspective of an American African who grew up in the south within the confines of an impoverished and unhealthy environment. I create paper and digital collage art in attempt to appropriate the tools of Pop Culture into my work. My paper, digital, and video collages are my proverbial soapbox. My collages are my commentary on news events that are either misrepresented or excluded from the mainstream news media. My paper, digital, and movie collage topics are Assata Shakur, Blood Diamonds, Occupy Wall Street, Occupy the Hood, Popular Culture, and politics. Political
Entertainment (video/digital photo collage 2013) is a series that expresses my thoughts on the fusion of modern day politics and entertainment. This is an era when the American media waters down global news unlike ever before, yet other countries show great despair when documenting the atrocities caused upon the world by the U.S. government. I also make political paintings such as the painting, For Assata Shakur, Turnpike and Fence (collage painting 2011-DJ Style Mixing series) (fig 16) is a commentary on systematic structures where things we see and interact with daily serve as a duel function such as barrier and protection or the illusion thereof. A fence and a highway system have the same function which is to maintain a physical control yet give the allusion of a type of protection. This piece is also a response to the American African political prisoners in the U.S. and those forced into exile. I am paying homage to those who have sacrificed by paying ultimate costs for combatting the system. My revolutionary stance on politics and mass media are the veins that run through all my art.

African Art vs Western Aesthetic

It is not easy being an American African artist. David Hammons has been quoted to have said that the art world is quick to critique instead of trying to understand. This concept causes difficulty for me as an artist because I speak a different language than most. Through the propaganda of Popular Culture’s stereotypes of Africans in America (black people) most misread my work. There is the confusion between what I think of as aesthetic and what others, I’ve encountered think of as aesthetic. There is confusion that aesthetics means beauty. Some think of
beauty as physical attractiveness; some consider beauty to be in the refinement of one’s innermost self. The inner most self is a person's deeply felt psychological and emotional nature. The physical appeal of Pop Culture is a product of a society that has been separated from the metaphysical, those internal dynamics of self and self-perception. “The image belongs to the world of form, through which we move with our bodies, thoughts, and senses. Reality is the world of the movements of the Spirit, and we live in that too, but without knowing it;”\(^{16}\) in this passage the author describes the neglect of the metaphysical aspect of our everyday lives. This neglect causes us to focus on the outward superficial physical aspects of life. It is the aspect of choosing which reality to exist. Focusing on image can be misleading, for things with physical properties can change from one state of being to another very quickly. There are many layers of existence, and to focus on the initial layer (the first reaction to what is seen on the surface) will never give a total understanding of what is comprised within something. Unless introduced to Fine Arts- the art hierarchy, people won’t know about the true world of art global exchange. This is my concern about academic art; academic art is a part of the system of art hierarchy. There must be a middle ground with all arts and art communities. For those not trained in academic art, many are stuck in a mediocre state of technique negating development of the expression and message in the body of work that is the very voice the world will engage. Most never consider their audience. So, not only are they not studied in technique because they are not a part of this hierarchy, no one expresses to these artists the importance of global representation. Due to the lack of exposure to art or higher education many American African artists are stuck in a realm of solely aesthetics thus there is no statement to be read for nothing is being said; this is so because there are very few American Africans who are fortunate enough to study in academia or have

exposure to the world of high-end art. I understand one must be learned, studied, taught, and trained in some type of artistic environment or culture. My lack of the study of art, my unique language, and my aesthetic derives from African Art opposed to Western Art. My work was off putting for many or most my first year in graduate school, for I received critique about how my work looked and quite a few attempted to make or sway me to “clean up my work” as to clean up my aesthetic opposed to “tightening up my process. I want my audience to feel (emotion) opposed to see (physical). Many times when I received feedback it was to go into the opposite direction of what I intended. The interesting aspect of that type of feedback I received in opposition to my work is they were inadvertently admitting I was successful. This was the point when I realized the problem was not aesthetics rather a great visual language barrier, for as an African (American African) artist my process is about what type of energy I put into my work. This energy translates into emotion or thought opposed to relaying a visual idea (Western aesthetics).

**Infinity Combats Social Limitations and Cultural Appropriation**

I create bodies of work as to comment on cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is the theft (remake or barely change) and marketing of another’s culture. Cultural Appropriation is the claim of fame for Picasso who made a career by recreating masks he had encountered from Africa, but in all fairness, he used his own processes as well. I make the assertion that the origins of Western art culture is influenced greatly by the appropriation on African art as; “during the early 1900s, the aesthetics of traditional African sculpture became a powerful influence among European artists who formed an avant-garde in the development of modern art. In France, Henri
Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and their School of Paris friends blended the highly stylized treatment of the human figure in African sculptures with painting styles derived from the post-Impressionist works of Cézanne and Gauguin. The resulting pictorial flatness, vivid color palette, and fragmented Cubist shapes helped to define early modernism. While these artists knew nothing of the original meaning and function of the West and Central African sculptures they encountered, they instantly recognized the spiritual aspect of the composition and adapted these qualities to their own efforts to move beyond the naturalism that had defined Western art since the Renaissance.”

Currently, there is a great battle against cultural appropriation that is currently happening in New Orleans with World Wide known Black Indian/Mardi Gras Indian Artists. Mardi Gras Indian/Black Indian artists are of the greatest of craftsmen and craftswomen. When Mardi Gras Indians/Black Indians are displayed or presented in galleries and other art spaces, as Performance Artists, or if Mardi Gras Indian suits (I call sculptures) are displayed as a part of a curated gallery show, the artists themselves are never truly cited the same as I or my peers. It is as if presenting the Mardi Gras Indians/Black Indians and their suits as an example of a type of art, or the nature of “what is” a Mardi Gras Indian Suit opposed to giving the artists their personal exhibit. It is as if the curators are showing the Black Indians themselves rather than curating with mutual respect for the artists. As the Mardi Gras Indian/Black Indian culture is popularized, there is a response by the art society to type cast what is a Mardi Indian and Mardi Gras Indian performance art. This is the origin of showing a lack of respect for Black Indians. One Mardi Gras Indian/Black Indian, Wade’s, of the tribe/gang Young (Wild) Cheyenne, image was appropriated by a photographer and sold at the very same Jazz Fest Wade was a staged performer. The sad part

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about this is the photographer matted the photograph and signed it as if that was the art opposed to Wade’s suit and essence (image) being the real art. I combatted this social inclination to steer New Orleans art towards sameness by my using cultural elements of Black Indian performance art, African dance, and modern day twerk (Bounce) culture which began in New Orleans when I was a teenager. I along with dancer Ifáseyi Bamígbàlà - Yorùbá Priestess and Mardi Gras Indian, Spy Boy Rickie of the Yellow Pocahontas Mardi Gras Indian tribe/gang used our energy in spirit of Congo Square drum circle and allowed each person to play off and improvise on what the other was doing. Therefore, we demonstrated the performance art that occurs before it becomes stereotyped by those seeking to retain the services of New Orleans’ Performance Artists as entertainment. I am taking a stand thus making a statement as an American African, an artist, and a New Orleans’ Performance artist. We are creators and we are amongst the greatest in any art society; we are of the ancestry of those who created art well before western culture separated the arts. This separation of the arts serves as a means of maintaining a network of ethnic domination, of one group of people over another, within The System of White Supremacy, thus creating a hierarchy of art. This system blocks any artists from taking advantage and equal stake at having their voice heard on a massive global level. This is a breeding ground for appropriation for a lot of artists’ voices, who don’t have access to the high end art society, are filtered through the voices of others. This filter serves as a watering down and ethnic bleaching of the true intent of the original author’s voice. The artists who re-present the art of another culture is able to do so with great ease for they have a voice in the global art network. I have an opportunity to use all these unique elements of my life as I can treat materials from real life, my life such as Robert Rauschenberg and Noah Purifoy made use of rubble and debris from everyday living to express the cultural climate of their day. My goal is to create the ultimate collage that is myself by using
the rubble and debris from my tattered history. Hip-Hop culture is solely an American Urban, American African invention, and it has been used as a commercial marketing tool to globally introduce new fads and profit The System of non-Africans. Thus, this is the total exploitation of Africans in America who continue to live in dire poverty and suffer from the social affects/effects of dire poverty. The revenue from these marketing entities is rarely invested into the American African community who consume these products at an alarming rate. There are no attempts to invest in the advancement of the American African community; yet in turn, there is the use of negative imagery of the American African community (cultural appropriation) to sell products that are traditionally socially and culturally undesirable. I am driven by Pop culture’s attempt to manipulate my talents before I was aware of the hierarchy in the art world or that an art world even existed. It is my desire to reciprocate the non-favor by asserting my live, Hip-Hop, African, style and intense energetic nature in the realm of Fine Arts.

In attempts to stay away from the grips of artistic manipulation, myself and others have been driven Underground. The Underground serves as a safe haven for artists who challenge the status quo, a necessity for political Hip-Hop poets/rappers and artists such as myself. Since slavery, the underground has been a safe haven and a forced social exile for the African in America who bucks against the unjust and oppressive system. I am politically driven in my artistic expression. I address current issues about the political confines of society. I address the plight of my community that has been controlled by the system, which has caused many self-inflicted restraints. I realized I had something viable and unique within Pop Culture. Instead of allowing Pop Culture to control me, I found an avenue to bypass Pop Culture: Fine Arts. I think almost at all times: I ask why and how, quite often. I read a lot of autobiographical and sociological literature (most often not assigned readings of educational institutions) of current
and preceding African scholars. I am actively involved, first hand communication, with the elders and youth in my community. It is very viable, I must admit imperative, to be able to critique my community without apprehensions deduced from the fears of others as I lash out against the social, commercial, and economic exploitation of my community. Exploring beyond Pop Culture, I have found a gray area between Pop Culture and Fine Arts. I am making art with the appeal and energy of Pop Culture, yet demonstrating the necessity of my personal voice and my unique aesthetics in the world of high-end art. I am bringing something fresh and unique, my culture and myself, to the world of Fine Arts. When an entire African culture is limited to predetermined confines, such as Pop culture, it limits the cultural advancement of the entire society. How many Jean-Michel Basquiat’s, Miles Davis’s, Lodewijk van Beethoven’s, and Pablo Picasso’s have been detoured from artistic advancement by thinking they were limited to the devices and system of Pop culture?

"It is interesting how the natural gifts of children are no longer systematically honed and enhanced through practice, but instead, taken for granted and assumed to be fully developed. This attitude betrays a bit of laziness as well as a point of arrogance when it comes to the African American. The pride of arrogance is what rationalizes the lack of desire for further training; however, it is also the seed of insecurity that promotes the false bravado and confidence associated with such a position. Hence, the majority of wannabes end up stifled in an immature expression of what is potentially an example of masterful craftsmanship"[18]

One must be mindful that a great percent of these social limitations are a result of complacent conditioning. This lack of development is the reason why Pop Culture can so easily influence people into settling for the mainstream boundaries.

[18] Menzise 75
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Vita

The author was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. She obtained her Bachelor’s degree in Art from The University of New Orleans in 2009; she joined the University of New Orleans fine arts graduate program to pursue a Master’s of Fine Arts.