Props

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Props

A Thesis

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University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts
Painting

By
Bianca Walker

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Abstract
In their artwork Bianca Walker takes a refreshing and historically engaging approach to the act of painting. The artist reimagines photographic references of black people from the early 1900s as painted portraits using a drip method that purposefully eliminates paint brushes from their practice. Incorporating more utilitarian materials such as drop cloth and palms, the artist's relationship to the traditional act of paintings versus their current practice mirrors their current view, that they would like to be seen in conversations around black working-class people from this period.
Introduction

I am an unconventional painter of black portraiture, and received my painting education from an academic setting: Grambling State University, a historically Black university located in Ruston, Louisiana, formerly recognized as an agriculturally focused institution. Learning how to paint while being submerged in black education with a focus in fine arts influenced me to share the knowledge I gained from the institution through portraiture. During my time at Grambling, I quickly moved away from traditional portraiture in search of a method that could capture my exploration of the idea “black freedom” as I define it. In my practice, “black freedom” is defined as the capacity to move fluidly in the current state of the world while being black. Painting is fluid, capable of steady movement with the ability to act as a liquid. By eliminating a brush from my practice and incorporating the use of bottles that allow the paint to be directed while keeping its fluid quality when making contact with the canvas, I began to explore the concept of fluidity through portraiture and expanded on my own fluidity. This is important because I’ve come to realize that fluidity is one of the defining factors of freedom.

The work is an expression of freedom. Every aspect of my practice allows the materials to be as they are, from dripping paint to stop-motion animation. The focus is on the crafts’ foundations and letting materials express themselves and engaging in their own conversations, giving them freedom.

Current work references archival black imagery sourced from digital public libraries and universities. White photographers, such as Russell Lee, who gained prominence as a photographer working for the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s, was sent by the government to document the lifestyles of people deemed lesser human beings and took many of these photographs without permission. When approaching the archive I keep this in mind and make a point to reclaim the images by eliminating the names of the photographers and obscuring the faces of the people when painting.

The photographs depict working-class black people from the beginning of chattel slavery to the mid-1900s, when blackness suffered heavy exploitation. This artistic re-envisioning of history is essential to highlight black people’s skills, not explicitly focusing on the exploitation of black labor, but instead on the opportunity of these skills. To see the images in the context of the archive is to be presented with them only in the capacity of white supremacy; my work represents us in the space of freedom and
presents what our freedom could look like when there is no exploitation of these skills, but a reverence of the working class.

Fig 1. *contraband with horse*, 3'9" x 4'11", 2022., house paint on drop cloth constructed with black rope and palm.
Materials and Politics

The painting itself is the catalyst for the rest of the work. Painting is an ancient art form. Some of the oldest recorded artworks are paintings. Blacks are the oldest people. Thus, painting is a prime medium to represent blackness, specifically to represent new foundations of black existence. For instance, Sam Gilliam's drape paintings question the presence of painting and blackness one and the same (Figure 2). By releasing the canvas from stretchers I, like Gilliam, free painting from restriction. There are parallels between painting and blackness’ deep roots; our existence as people, and our innate need to see ourselves through art.

Fig 2. Sam Gilliam, *Drape Work*, 1970, Acrylic and dry pigment on canvas

Creating contemporary practice with an old medium provides ample opportunities to research how many times the medium has changed, such as how graffiti artists like Futura, Leonard Hilton McGurr, and Jean-Michel Basquiat changed contemporary art in the 1980s (Almiron pp.13-16). To see innovations like these in the same way is to study the history of contemporary blackness and find moments where the perspectives of our freedoms change.
The influence of white supremacy is ever present in contemporary art. White male artists still make up most of the collections of major U.S. museums, though black representational art is increasing in popularity. However, many of their paintings are in tune with the current ideals of painting that developed under white supremacy, which emphasize certain structures within painting. I view oil painting as the academic foundation of painting, which has roots in nature but has become an incredibly expensive medium. The representation of the black figure goes far beyond a few centuries; therefore, to properly represent ourselves, we must move away from what I perceive as current idealizations of painting. I see the blank canvas as a metaphor for freedom. Is freedom in a blank canvas if they are all the same shape, or is that only the illusion of freedom?

The answer lies in who can afford the canvas and who cannot. Canvas is expensive, drop cloth is plentiful, oil is costly, and house paints are cheap. To surrender to the idea of the required expenses of painting is financially impossible for many, but this does not excuse our responsibility to participate. There is pride in choosing materials within a medium that represents its primary intentions, like the cloth’s absorbency, as opposed to priming the cloth into trying to be something else, something that is unattainable without extensive manipulation. In doing this, the materials represent the working class because they symbolize the places where they are most present and appreciated. It is easy to gather the palms I use to hang and support my paintings outside, picking them up consistently year-round, especially after storms. Drop cloth and house paint are in almost any building. They are also affordable enough to obtain in large quantities that will last months, sometimes even the entire year. The access I have to these items allows for painting at a prolific rate. There is a joy that working within resourceful means or with the environment as opposed to trying to escape it, which leads me to an abundance of opportunities to create that is not present when resources are limited or expensive. To highlight the innate qualities of painting materials instead of transforming them beyond recognition is showing my respect for them in their current state without manipulation.

My approach to the materials relates to blackness. Many of us try to “escape” blackness because of the circumstances that residents are subject to in U.S. environments where the population is majority black. There is an assumption that a black person going to college, even if it is an HBCU, and being able to afford to exist elsewhere is ideal for their survival. That escape usually requires an extensive sacrifice
of self-identity in order to satisfy the behavioral requirements of predominantly white, or white influenced, spaces. Receiving my degree at a predominantly white institution provides me a larger awareness into how white elitism affects arts within academics. It has been a constant question: how do I get the points of my artwork across without feeling like I have to explain pieces of the work to white scholars, which would create a redundancy in the work for those who already experience blackness? These spaces also encourage a sense of competition among one another which doesn't benefit the black community. When blackness acts to the fullest, the resources of our identity skills, creativity, and comradery flourish and produce. This production does not have to be predetermined by the rules of white spaces, just as ethnocentric, white idealizations of painting, the way we approach painting academically, do not predestine the work.

Fig 3. *two boys*, 5’ x 4’, 2022, house paint on drop cloth constructed with black rope and palm.

I pour house paint in bottles and drip it onto the drop cloth on the floor. This is the same thing that happens when painting a house, a blue-collar profession, so transforming that action into the art of the working class is only natural. I tie palms dipped in black paint to the drop cloth. The black paint
reinforces the twine and thus symbolically reinforces the notion that blackness will only be held together and supported by blackness. While many Black Power movements have been supported by allyship and forming groups of unity with other people of color, unfortunately even among these groups black people have to navigate respectability politics among other ethnicities in different ways. Anti-blackness is a global act, and not just secluded to the United States of America. Navigating these different forms of racism are less necessary when dealing with support from black people. This internal support pushes for more conversations within blackness as opposed to around blackness and how it relates to others.

Twine allows the cloth to keep its shape while still allowing the malleability of the cloth to act as it would if hung from a tree to dry, with the palm providing strength and support—a transition from the present thought of what it means for blackness to “hang,” making reference to and reimagining the ideology of lynching. Instead, the paintings hang in the power of creativity, a power that has pushed black freedom movements forward since the beginnings of colonialism.

The palm also represents the Great Migration. Racism forced black people to move to territories such as California from the South due to slavery. And, I see palms are ever present in both places. Many black Americans’ family histories directly resulted from this forced movement. For instance, I am an artist from California with generations of family from Louisiana beforehand.
Sometimes I add fabric to the paintings to honor the importance of collage in the foundations of contemporary black art, such as Romare Bearden’s lively city collages. Sometimes I incorporate the U.S. flag, giving homage to Faith Ringgold’s collaged flag quilts (Fig 4.). I present the flag in a way that frees blackness from American propaganda, using the flag as one of its main tools to represent a false freedom, an ideology of freedom still excluding black people through disenfranchisement.

In *The Flag is Bleeding*, Ringgold paints two white and one black figure under an American flag that appears to be leaking blood. Although all of the figures’ arms are interlocking, they are at different levels of obstruction: the white man is visible and the black man is invisible, additionally barred by the stars of the flag. The white woman falls somewhere in between. I think of the state of white supremacy, the paradoxical praising of the flag and freedom over the acknowledgment of black liberation. Suprematists still support black separation among different ethnicities, religions, and neighborhoods. Because of this glaring discrepancy in notions of freedom, the flag should be dishonored and dismembered, the same as the shackles held by the flag’s ideology.
Fig 5. *Open-air Market, Haiti, 12’ x 12’,* 2022, house paint on drop cloth constructed with black rope and palm.

In *Open-air Market, Haiti,* (Fig 5.), the dripping paint obstructs the flag and torn flag pieces add textures to the composition, allowing it to speak truth to black representation with its dismemberment. Once I completed dripping, I tied the drop cloth at the top to a raw palm. I am interested in using materials that contributed to the object as a complete artwork.

Finally, the palm is representative of the religious overtones of chattel slavery and the church, specifically the Catholic church’s part in colonialism. This is similar to sculptors like Bettye Saar, who used her environment to create an incredible visual language steeped in black environment (Saar). The Papal Bull *Inter Caetera,* issued in 1493 by Pope Alexander VI, granted Spain the right to lands that were
previously “discovered” by Christopher Columbus. The actions allowed many to participate in slavery within “the New World” with the backing of their religion, making it morally acceptable to displace and own people captured in Africa and those native to the Americas. This responsibility has never garnered consequences for the Catholic Church. The materials themselves have meaning, and they are the subject as much as the vehicle of representation.
Subject Matter, Research, and History

The subjects of the paintings are black people. Every Black figure comes from a digitized photograph that is available through the internet. Black art has a history of advocating for preserving our lives and images, especially in places where blackness has had a heavy influence such as the art collections of HBCUs like Spellman University. This preservation of history through the documentation of black art such as photographs, sculpture, painting etc. is largely due to the attempt of a scholar John Hope Franklin to view collections at the State Department Archives in North Carolina in 1963. He describes his efforts being delayed due to the fact that he was the first black person to seek out the facilities and the architecture of the building didn’t afford him access to be able to view the collections. Black art historians are very aware of the barriers that have been placed around Black people accessing our own history through government archiving and have been calling to black people to go through our family albums and consider preservation options.

Influential artists and curators such as Theaster Gates and Thelma Golden have been strong advocates and contributors to the idea of the global black archive, any digitized and shared images of black life, and the importance of accessibility to images and knowledge of ourselves in all capacities. This sharing of images requires the vulnerability of blackness to encounter weighted subjects; however, they are necessary for mapping our freedoms of today and how to capitalize on our experiences to move forward.

My mapping of history became important in my investigation of the idea of freedom. I asked myself, hat does that freedom look like for blackness? In a residency via Kasini House in New Orleans, I learned how artists can search these archives and incorporate these histories into their visual practice. Artists such as Benny Andrews and Bearden were able to depict these kinds of histories through representations of narratives that described their personal experiences (Bearden). Our experiences may differ, but the responsibility of representing varieties blackness and freedom falls to makers of contemporary black art.
Fig 6. *intelligent contraband*, 5' x 2', 2022, house paint on drop cloth constructed with black rope and palm.

My research began with images of blackness from a time when we typically feel the most ashamed after chattel slavery ended in 1863, and Black people were integrating into American society. From the ending of slavery through the early 1900s, the Black worker and the ideals around how black people were viewed to participate in labor within the Americas was incredibly complex, and encountered friction with the ideals of work under white supremacy. The term “intelligent contraband” (Fig 6.), for example, describes a person who is deemed smart. However, the term contraband limits their access to freedoms in the United States as they are considered an “illegal” escapee of war. The images of sharecroppers, nurses, and other exploited people were heavy to analyze. In many of them, the people
look somewhat disgruntled in their clothing and home environments. However, taking a closer look at the images and diving into some of their oral histories allowed me to see these people not as victims but as people with skills that whiteness exploited, which is not too far from where we are under current capitalism.

One particular image available via the Library of Congress digital archive led me to the images original collection, the Federal Writers’ Project slave narratives collection. When speaking of their experiences, some of them did not even mention being a slave. I have chosen to represent two of these subjects in the painting Bill and Ellen in Hondo (Fig 7.) The ex-slaves in Hondo spoke of the skills and crafts that they were proud of, skills that made them people and not just resources of another. Those skills were theirs. To look at this period a cruel exploitation of talented people gives strength to our present worries about exploitation and the illusion of freedom fed to us through propaganda. When we look at these people, we can see ourselves not just as we were but as we are in the present. The takeaway from researching images of this period allowed me to accept the joy that we can have in our skills and the ways we perform labor when the focus of resources is our own and not as something to be taken.

The power of our freedom lies in those skills and the love we have for them because they are our communities’ foundations. Many people who came out of slavery in in the early 1900s built “freedom towns” or “free black communities.” Thriving communities were ravished and left empty because of the fear of the power that black labor supporting black people gave to white supremacists, such as the Red Summer in 1919 where black communities in Chicago, Illinois, Washington, D.C., and other places of the country were ravished by their white counterparts. The idea of the Black working class sustaining themselves parallel to white workers as opposed to under them caused these race riots throughout the entire U.S. Black self-sustainability through labor resists exploitation. Therefore, our true freedom lies in our skills and love for labor which is why representing the working class in joy and pride, rejecting white supremacy, is vital to the idea of black freedom.
Fig 7. *bill and ellen in hondo*, 3'11" x 4', 2022, house paint on drop cloth constructed with black rope and palm.
Animations and Full Circle

The image of the black body under white supremacy is crafted and mass-produced to influence the idea of blackness across the globe. This idea supports notions of stupidity, hypersexuality, and violence from movies that built Hollywood movies. The film Birth of a Nation (1915) was responsible for the revival of the Klu Klux Klan in North America; Blaxploitation films in the 70s, such as Shaft (1973-4) and Foxy Brown (1974), portray images of us as pimps and prostitutes. These movies are deemed important as they gave many black actors and actresses opportunities they would've otherwise not received, but there is a complexity to what this “representation” means and how it affects the artist vs. the audience. There are more recent films such as Watermelon Woman (1996) that explore this gray area of exploitation vs. opportunity. Throughout the film, a video clerk takes an interest in films that feature black actresses from the 1930s and 1940s, trying to investigate their lives beyond their portrayal and explore the complexities they would have faced being artists in a time that black people were considered to not be of a certain value. The woman the clerk searches for in the film is deemed only as “The Watermelon Woman.” Her true name is left out of the film.

The relationship of blackness can also be seen through animations such as Disney’s “Song of the South” (1946), famously known for the Tar Baby character, regarded as one of the most controversial characters in film. This depiction of blackness is irresponsible and misrepresents slaves as happy. However, many African Americans regard it and its folk tales as the first time they had seen themselves in any animated representation. I use animation to address this legacy of representation while still paying reverence to the working class.

My stop motion consists of characters and scenes built from the paintings’ leftover material, making them the same as the paintings in materiality.
Fig 8. *cook*, 2022, stop-motion constructed of ripped paper, found fabric, drop cloth, and paint.

I make my own “films” with a stop-animation process. I shoot animations that depict acts of labor, like *cook* (Fig 8.), from above, just as I approach the paintings from above. I individually photograph each character and movement. The back-end work I perform on the animation only places the frames on top of each other to form the image. The stop-motions depict loops of labor, such as picking fruit and tending a field. These actions may be seen as somewhat mundane, but are foundational to our survival as humans, and therefore, integral to the act of black freedom.

There has been an increasing romanticization of labor in current culture that stems from 19th century depictions of the working class. However, my films do not romanticize labor. Instead, they serve as portals as to what black labor could become if the people performing the tasks are respected. To find joy in these acts of labor is to allow ourselves to take responsibility for our environment and use the resources of that environment to cater to black communities, and there is great sense of pride in self-sustainability. The performance of labor without exploitation of black skills is where freedom can exist for black people. Black people can rely on true freedom that makes room for respect for the tasks and people that shape communities because, with shaping, freedom of black communities can come to fruition.
Conclusion

Through painting and animation, I invite audiences to participate in a celebration of Black labor. After researching public digital archives I viscerally drip house paints and rip fabric to create both physically painted and animated portraits of black labor, referencing the images I've observed of the early 1900s. By reimagining and presenting these images of the black working class, I encourage the recognition and honoring of these laborers for their humanity and skills. “Props”, the thesis exhibition, took place on St.Claude Avenue, a well-known arts section of New Orleans. It's also a working class neighborhood. Seeing those outside of the arts come and view the exhibition and relate through the materiality of the work and the references to labor through titles such as “Field Hand” and “Dominoes” gave me pride in knowing that I captured the working class through fine art in a way that actually speaks to us without needing an extensive explanation of the art.
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Artist Statement

My current work investigates freedoms of blackness and how those freedoms may look in the future. The paintings are portraits of workers and laborers that insinuate a joy in existence rather than focusing on their exploitations. I include animation to show an active, kinetic environment where the consistency of work is vibrant and provides a positive and joyful sense of being together. These media explore, through their materiality, a narrative of freedom that lies in our labor. The lack of manipulation of the material represents space where blackness is allowed to exist without the exploitation of others.
VITA

Walker was born in Berkeley, California and received a B.A. from Grambling State University in 2020. They currently live in New Orleans, and their work has been featured in the publication *New American Paintings*. Walker has exhibited their work at venues including the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, the New Orleans African American Museum, Spillman Blackwell Gallery, and Ashé Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans, LA, and Band of Vices and Thinkspace Projects in Los Angeles, CA. Walker’s work has been featured in solo shows in New Orleans at Antenna and the Front, and—concurrently with “Props” at the UNO St. Claude Gallery—at the Galleria T293 in Rome, Italy.