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Illusions of “Blackness” in Contemporary Visual Culture

by

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June 2018

In partial fulfillment for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts
Lesley University College of Art and Design
Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

“Science is not enough, religion is not enough, art is not enough,
politics and economics is not enough, nor is love, nor is duty, nor is
action however disinterested, nor, however sublime, is contemplation.
Nothing short of everything will really do.”

— **Aldous Huxley**, *Island*

Abstract.

My thesis begins with a primer of the historical concept of “black(ness)” and the roots of its racialization. Intertwined throughout my discussion in Section I, I will highlight a few of my research findings and discuss some of the installation images that I created as I studied the work of contemporary artists who use lexical and literal figurative “blackness” in their work—in particular, the oeuvre of Kerry James Marshall as featured in his retrospective exhibition *Mastry*. My discourse unfolds with a brief etymological review of both the English word “black” and its precedent conceptual forms in Section II. Section III examines Marshall’s conception of invisibility in relation to figurative “blackness.” Section IV describes the use of a digital mobile device as a new means of viewing paintings through the simultaneous intersection of analog painted images and digitally mediated views of those images. After that, in Section V, I will discuss how my project operates as a complex multi-image network. I will analyze how certain aspects of the image network function together to disrupt, intervene, complicate, or redirect the assignment of racialized meaning. My *Conclusion* highlights how my project argues against the emptiness of color-based racist thinking, as evinced by the polarizing literally “black” figurative trope within American visual culture.

Introduction.

There is no such entity of humanity as a “black¹ person,” “black people,” “black race(s),” “black culture,” or the “black body” because the poly-carbonite, shrink-wrapped “racial” moniker “black” has been exuded through a complex and racist trans-cultural matrix that, at least incidentally, had its nascence in (“white”) early-European civilization.²

(*Self*) *Portrait Through The AmeriKahn Prism*³ (Fig. 1), a continuously scalable (dynamic) installation of multiple painted images, seeks to reconfigure many of the cascading representations of what has recently been termed “*the black body*.” My project, which is a complex network of *pictorial elements* (“pix/els”⁴), looks to turn the racialized

¹ In other languages, of course, other words would be used to reference “black.” The particular sonic texture of the racialized conceptual frame is not the basis of the argument. This conceptual frame denoted by *racial* “black(ness)” and “dark(ness)” go back in time for millennia beyond the tracings provided by common etymologies (see Section II). The basis of my argument is that the categorical concepts of human-skin “black(ness)” or “dark(ness),” and by logical extension the concept of human-skin “white(ness)” or “light(ness)” are abstract, racialized, hierarchical constructs that do not benefit the *majority* of humanity.

² We can see at least three historical correlations for the origin of what would become the racialist designation “black:” First, the ancient Greeks: In the *Illiad*, Homer references “black” as “a symbol and metaphor for anger, madness...and something negative....” “Pythagoreans already considered the color ‘white’ to represent a good nature and ‘black’ to represent a bad one (Hrabovsky 68).” Second, the King James Bible of 1611 utilizes many references to conceptual polarities, i.e., “light(ness) or white(ness)/good” and “dark(ness) or black(ness)/evil” (Dalal 142-146). However, these metaphysical color associations had not yet been applied whole cloth to ethnically distinguish human beings. Third, evinced through the likelihood that seminal to the systematic formulation of a polarized racial hierarchy (based on a racial “caste” system of skin coloration), beginning in Europe in the 19th century, was the translation of the *Ordinances of Manu* by the Englishman, William Jones in 1794 (Deivanayagam and Devakala). Through this text, racism based on skin color was globally codified (white was the supreme, black [brown] was inferior, abhorred) (Harris, A., Rashidi 80-89).

³ A few words about the title: ...*AmeriKahn Prism* is both reflexive and *refractive*. Self-consciousness is viewed through the West African cogito: *I think; therefore, we are*. My “self” becomes female/male, young/old, rich/poor, illuminated/enigmatic, and so on. A “kahn” is a small boat in the German language. In vernacular English, a “con” is short for “confidence trick” or “con game” (*schwindel*, or bamboozle).

⁴ Three important interrelated points are intended by the use of this construction. One: “Pix/el” indicates the plastic expression of an analog “picture element” in a three-dimensional space. This “pix/el” has an affinity with the digital images capacity for holographical fragmentation of representation (the smallest part contains the essence of the whole). Two: I emphasize that the individual paintings are critically essential elements of a larger, singular (net)work. Three: I emphasize the duality of my creative strategy: each pix/el resonates with its own semiotic and

conception of “the black body” on its proverbial head by resisting cultural accommodation to both the pictorial (figural) and the lexical literalness of this term. By visually juxtaposing painted images (some of which have been modeled from appropriated photographic references) across a variety of representational and modernist abstract forms, intercultural symbols, textual motifs, and imagined three-dimensional structures that are primarily made of paper, my project seeks to identify and categorize various racial discourses into a unified pictorial matrix in order to reveal the fallacy and the ideological nature of a racialized universe. Through the creation of a rich and variegated image structure, the “black body” can be seen for what it is: A racist artifice that was constructed in order to define people who are alleged to be of African descent in some relationship to the “white” universe (Harris, M. 220).

Through the installation’s complex topology and its interwoven network of two and three-dimensional images, my project creates an opportunity for conversation that must inevitably lead to an interrogation not only of works of visual culture, but also of scholarly, legal, popular culture, and religious or theological enterprises that make use of what I shall argue is a vague, deleterious, and pejorative lexical device, i.e., “black(ness),” whether it is construed as a figurative racial signifier, a cultural signifier, or the framework for a racialized cosmogony.⁵

My project was conceptualized as I carefully investigated, with increasingly skeptical eyes, the many representations within contemporary American visual culture

intentional potentiality (each has its own title); moreover, each pix/el form multiple semiotic linkages that are interwoven throughout the overall fabric of the unified network (see footnote 34, pg. 24).

⁵ There is no question that these racial terms (black[-ness], dark[-ness], light[-ness], white[-ness], fair[ness], etc.) and their visual corollaries are ubiquitous (perhaps especially so in the United States of America); however, they operate as reifications whose historical roots continue to invest the terms with hierarchical racist ideology.

that depict human beings with a generalized (i.e., significantly universalized) optically “black” skin pigmentation.⁶ My investigations for *(Self) Portrait Through The AmeryKahn Prism* parsed the work of Michael Ray Charles, Robert Colescott, Glen Ligon, Kerry James Marshall, Betye Saar, and Kara Walker.⁷ However, the discussion of my project that follows focuses on the work of Kerry James Marshall because of his tremendous contribution to the reception of the literally “black” figure within contemporary visual culture.

It is impossible for me to discuss my thesis project and my current studio practice without referencing aspects of sociology, speculative historicity, linguistics, cultural history, and popular culture. Some might remark that portions of my thesis have little to do with my own art practice. However, I would remind them, in the words of Kerry James Marshall:

That would be true only if you believed that art making was a completely autonomous enterprise not at all related to the historical and political dynamics that temper the desires of humankind. Western art history, the rarefied amalgamation of knowledge, power, and taste, sets the criteria by which everything within its scope is understood and valued (Molesworth 73).

So, with Marshall’s quote in mind, I ride the razor, delineating the scope of my project with the same sense of aesthetic, political and cultural urgency.

⁶ I argue that both the lexical and figurative representations of conceptually “black” skin participate in a semiotic regime that in the final analysis communicates a disenfranchising cultural-historical narrative.

⁷ Not all these artists use stereotypic or recycled racist imagery or lexuality to the same degree in their work. However, each of them uses, in various strategic configurations, human figural “black(ness)” as a racial trope to characterize people of African or (indigenous) Afmerican descent.

Section I. “Marshall’s ‘New’ Black(ness)”

Kerry James Marshall’s exhibition, entitled *Mastry*⁸, at the MET Breuer in New York during the winter of 2016, was the instigation and focal point for my visual exploration and discursive inquiry into the contemporary usage of optically “black” figuration and its lexical correlation with various racist terms for “black(ness).”⁹

Although I was tentative in my convictions regarding the positive cultural function of Marshall’s use of “black” figuration, during my first viewing of the *Mastry* exhibition, I was overtaken nevertheless with joyful emotions. It was inspiring to see the work of an Afriamerican artist featured so prominently within the rarefied echelons of Western culture. Indeed, it was clear that Marshall’s paintings proved his singular ability to create labyrinthine contemporary forms interwoven with aspects of the European art historical canon to articulate a range of cultural-, social-, and (art-)historical-commentary pertinent to the expression of a uniquely *Afriamerican* experience.

With Marshall’s benchmark “black” figurative trope in mind, I returned to my studio and at once began to explore literal representations of figurative “blackness” for

⁸ The MET Breuer website describes the exhibition thusly, “The largest museum retrospective to date of the work of American artist Kerry James Marshall.... Encompassing nearly 80 works—including 72 paintings—that span the artist’s remarkable 35-year career, this major monographic exhibition reveals Mr. Marshall’s practice to be a complex and compelling one that synthesizes a wide range of pictorial traditions to *counter stereotypical representations of black people in society and reassert the place of the black figure within the canon of Western painting...*” (emphasis mine). The exhibition’s curator Ian Alteveer added, “Mr. Marshall’s work illustrates the American experience as unimaginable without *black* history and culture. Through the tropes of traditional painting—portraiture, landscape, and other narrative modes—he builds a conversation around *visibility and invisibility*. The result is a stunning body of work that is both intimate and monumental.” Note: Please read this footnote text again and replace the word “black” with the word “slave.”

⁹ I was interested in finding the origins of the “black” figurative-image signifier used by Marshall and other contemporary artists. Evidence to support my argument against the use of this word is found primarily in the historical-linguistic and social-cultural history for the racist term, “black(ness).” Thus, my project is a visual inquiry into the facticity, inseparable social linkages, and presence of a negative, racialized, and stereotypical meaning inherent in the usage of the “black(ness)” device.

incorporation into my multi-image painting/installation. The first pix/el that I created with this style, *Blackest Baby* (Fig. 2), was painted using a digital reference image culled from the internet. I choose to use this image because it was not a depiction of an actual human baby; instead, it was an image depicting a hyper-kitschy, google-eyed latex and fabric doll. The reference image signaled an idea of artificiality and an exaggerated cultural construct. I wanted to see if I could create my own depersonalized “black” figure that had the intangible vibrancy which Marshall’s figures seemed to have. As Jesse Whitehead notes, Marshall’s figurative work “...emphasizes race in order to combat the invisibility of [skin] darkness by placing extremely black figures as the focus of his work. (Whitehead 36).” What struck me most about the pix/el, *Blackest Baby*, however, was the figure’s appeal to a sense of stark otherness in its non-human exaggerated “black” skin pigmentation.¹⁰

After a second careful viewing of the *Mastry* exhibition a few weeks later, in conjunction with extensive reading of the current body of Marshall criticism, I was more convinced than ever that there was something askew with what I perceived as a generally uncritical and unproblematic acceptance of Marshall’s facile assertion of the “black” figurative trope as a positive and profound *cultural artifact*.¹¹ Few critics viewed his paintings with any appreciable degree of criticality; that is, with any degree of questioning “pushback” regarding his figurative assertion of the literally “black” Afmerican. A few popular reviews do briefly mention Marshall’s figurative style in

¹⁰ Admittedly, this may be due to my departure from the digital reference image with my slight exaggeration of the modeled forms. The sclera of the eyes is unnaturally black in both representations. Some viewers found this very unsettling.

¹¹ Marshall’s work never interrogates the history or the validity of conceptual “blackness.” Through his use of art-historical references, he glosses the historically racist referent for his principal pictorial ideas.

relation to the history of racist lexical designations and with the precedent black-color-figure racist imagery of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. Considering this, I wanted my own project to break free of the racialized visual and lexical vernacular of the past and to resonate with a more significant reference to humanity. I wanted to discover a more liberal representational vernacular for the Afromerican experience.

In the “pix/el” entitled *Ebony Refraction* (Fig. 3) I sought to indirectly emulate Marshall’s mature figurative style. My main interest was simply to create a figure with proportions and modeling that more accurately represented the human facial features as suggested by the directional quality of light. More specifically, I wanted to see if my practice of modeling a plastic image by depicting light’s interaction on the represented form (according to the laws of incidence and reflection) could be adapted to the contemporary “black” figure aesthetic.

Marshall renders all of his figures using black-paint mixtures that consist of carbon, mars (iron oxide), and bone black, respectively, in mixtures with yellow ochre, raw umber, and two shades of blue (Mason, para 12). White pigment is never used to render the forms of his “black” figures. Marshall’s “black” figures are not modeled according to the laws of incidence and reflection (Fig. 4). The forms are generalized, and to some degree, flattened. There is a certain mask-like quality to his rendering technique. By definition, Marshall’s figurative forms are *cartoons*, in that they are typically “non-realistic or semi-realistic” representations of human form. Viewed broadly, the character of the figures is not individuated. Absolute epidermal skin “blackness” as defined through Marshall’s visuality has a de-humanizing effect.¹²

¹² Does this style of *visual fabulation* succeed in undermining political invisibility and racism?

In *Ebony Refraction*, I have diverged from Marshall's technique in that I have used a warmish lead white pigment in mixtures with genuine ivory black.¹³ I have stylized this image using Marshall's signature gray filigree highlights on the forehead. I have kept the brushstrokes tentative with irregular scumbles to emulate Marshall's use of broken tonality (posterization) across the facial features. However, this pix/el approximates the modeling of the form from a single directional light source. My portrait sought to capture the likeness of a living person. This was in direct contrast to Marshall's "black" figural forms, which are generally imaginary with composite or generalized facial features.

When juxtaposed with my other more "traditionally" executed "pix/els," *Ebony Refraction* prompted me to consider specific questions about the cultural functions and the historical meanings of the categorically "black" figure. I also needed to understand more about the lexical history of the racist sign, "*black(ness)*," and consider what effect this knowledge might have on my project development.

¹³ Genuine ivory black (manufactured from genuine ivory scraps by *Kremer Pigmente* in Aichstetten, Germany) is warmer than the cool undertones of most brands of regular ivory black (bovine bone black), copper chromite black spinel, and carbon black. The pigment also has an undertone that leans towards (yellow to reddish) brown. Genuine ivory black has a bigger and irregular particle size and a higher index of refraction.

Section II. Etymology of “Black(ness)”

In the seminal 1960 publication, *The Name Negro Its Origin and Evil Use*, Richard B. Moore traces etymologically the word negro to its Spanish and Portuguese (Latin) cognate, *niger*,¹⁴ which simply means “black.”¹⁵ Additionally, Moore argues that whether it is used as an adjective or a noun, the term “black” is—

...[A] loose term which cannot be wholly separated from its racist overtones (Moore 55). . . . The term “colored” is vague, associated with false notions of “race,” and lacking any definite connection with the good earth, or with an extensive historical record, or with a significant group culture. The names “Black Man” or “Black Race” . . . are also loose, racist, color designations which have no basic, obvious or unmistakable linkage with land, history, and culture (Moore 67).

“Black,” as a fundamental racist term, means slave¹⁶ because the term itself was conceived, codified, and historically propagated through the international Trilateral-Atlantic chattel slave trade system.¹⁷ This system itself was structured and supported by

¹⁴ Many languages use this cognate: French nègre, Dutch, German, Norwegian, and Swedish *neger*, Finnish *nekeri*, Hungarian *néger*, Russian, *негр* (*neger*) extends from the same morphology (Google Translate). All these words and are racialized conceptions of *otherness* that originate with “white” Europeans.

¹⁵ Old English literature, suggest that two forms [for the English word *black*] were used interchangeably. *Blaec* means shining, pale as well as dark, black, or swarthy. *Blaec* was also used as a noun (*blaec*: ink), a verb (*blaecan*: to bleach), and as a root word for compounds (*blaec-fexed*: black hair)” (Joyce 308). Again, all these uses precede the wholesale usage of “black” or “white” to racially distinguish people, cultures, or physiognomic traits. Also note: the pronunciation for “black hair” (*blaec-fexed*) in Old English approximates the modern pronunciation for “black-faced.” (The pix/els “BLACK” and “WHITE,” discussed on page 21, visually explore this etymology.)

¹⁶ “The utilization of official (legal) terminology has typically played a role in the oppression of African and American Indian peoples. Official nomenclature illustrated a person’s legal and social status in the U.S. Various terms were used to identify persons of color (“Asiatic”) who had fallen under some form of European control and oppression (Pimienta-Bey 119). Under US law the racist terms “black” and its predecessor “negro” are synonymous. Both terms hold legal precedential status as a designation of servitude, slavery, and criminality (El Mujaddid). Unlike the term “black,” the term “negro,” in English, was initially free from an association with *slave status*; however, it later became “synonymous with enslavement” (Forbes 84).

¹⁷ “The Portuguese were the first to enslave Afrikans and they were the first to call them Negroes. When the Spanish became involved in the slave trade, they also used the word Negro to designate Afrikan [slaves]. Negro is an adjective which means *Black* in Portuguese and Spanish. But, since 1444 and the beginning of the [trilateral Atlantic] slave trade, the adjective Negro became a noun and the *legitimate* name of a newly enslaved people. Both the Portuguese and Spanish languages were derived from Latin which have their roots in Classical Greece. In most European languages, the word for black

ideological “white” supremacy. In this regard, “Black(ness)” as a distinguishing sign can never be an empowering lexical or pictorial device. And why should it be? Since racism still exists, “Black(ness),” as a racist *sign*, can never be liberated from its corrupt connotations with both historical slavery and historical “white” aversion to people ascribed or described with “black(ness).”

Both lexical and literal figurative “Black(ness)” are operands of hierarchical racism, which functions as “white supremacy.” Any work of art, whether it be a work of visual culture, literature, or a theatrical performance, which attempts to use these racist devices through (re)appropriation, (re)contextualization, or inversion of its semiotic encodation¹⁸ is unavoidably fraught with the negatively charged intercultural connotations and denotations of the historically established racist terms. You cannot get away from it. No matter how ubiquitous the racist term “black(ness)” appears to be, it has never lost its deeper functionality as the colonizer’s descriptive term for the colonized.¹⁹

In the face of the disquieting ubiquity of the racist term, “black(ness),” I revisited the pix/el that was formerly entitled, *Blackest Baby*. The image was overly invested with a kitsch demeanor. Because many spectators observed both a kitsch

was typically associated with aspects of death. The word *death* is derived from the Greek word **necro**, which means dead, and is [morphologically] similar, in sound and meaning, to the word **negro**. Throughout European history, the words *necro* and *negro* were commonly used to reference the physical, spiritual or mental death of a person, place or thing (Nantambu 1).”

¹⁸ An *encodation* is an operand of a racialized socio-cultural cue.

¹⁹ I could not find a single, peer-reviewed, account or historical records concerning a civilization, nation, group, or tribe that has ever explicitly self-appointed, or self-designated the nation, its people, or its culture as representatively “black.” However, there are a few scholars who believe the ancient Sumerians so appointed themselves, citing an obscure expression, “sa-gig-ga,” which purportedly means “the black-headed ones.” Although, there is more than anecdotal evidence to suggest that the ancient Sumerian where a melanochroous people (people with dark-brown skin), there is little reliable evidence to support the claim that this ancient expression, “sa-gig-ga,” was a *self-reference* to Sumerian *skin* coloration as a mark of their unique “black” identity (cf. Rashidi 69).

modality and an oddly politicized “black(ness)” operating in the image, it was frequently misinterpreted as being a parody of the racist baby *Sambo* image. I wanted to see if I could complicate the image and keep the essence of the doll-portrait while subtracting the static kitsch factor. By cropping the original pix/el and focusing on the figure’s head, the image becomes more ambiguous and even more strange. The figure is no more a body, but an ambiguous identity trapped within a small frame; it cannot move. The title for the new pix/el is *Scarborough Field* (Fig. 5a). I was thinking in terms of a translational model in which this pix/el could function as a reification of the concept of “black boxes” taken from the field of engineering. These black boxes are conceptual (“phantasm”), not physical; they have no substance; they are empty; they cannot be opened. As Ralph Glanville states, “Its function is to allow the creation of an explanation of some observed behavior ... about which we are uncertain. It is the invention of the observer (Glanville 154).” This, I thought, is exactly how racist thinking worked/works; the social dominator’s view is projected onto other group-cultures and suffuses them until the hegemonic view is the only view. So, I constructed a conceptual black box out of balsawood, black sand, polyvinyl acetate distemper, and enamel paint, putting bars made of aluminum tubing in place to effectively restrain the categorical “image of blackness” from escaping, changing. The minuscule (carved balsawood) black chair within the box represents a certain “x-factor;” it could be an unknown history (historicity), or a misidentified memory. It represents some aspect of a sequestered identity, I suppose.²⁰ This pix/el also speaks to a certain kind of miscuing within a staged performance that leads to misdirected meaning or incomprehension.

²⁰ The spectator views the digitally inverted image as a “white” figure trapped within a black-walled, white-hot, metallic prison (Fig. 5b).

Section III. “Blackness” in the Dark

Despite Marshall’s “...determination to mark the historical absence of black bodies in the Western canon of painting and his emphatic, programmatic insertion of blackness into the field of art... (Molesworth 59),” his paintings and the discourses about the paintings do not sufficiently inculcate, establish, and implement an effective counter racist morphology that is readily apprehensible by a diverse American audience.²¹ This assertion can perhaps best be supported by a critical look at Marshall’s earliest foray with the literally “black” figure.

Sometime around 1978, Marshall read *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison’s *magnum opus*, which was the catalyst for Marshall’s first series of “black” figure paintings. Marshall said, Ellison’s “description...of the condition of invisibility literally changed everything for me. What I was reading there, the notion of being and not-being, the simultaneity of presence and absence, was exactly what I had been trying to get at in my artwork” (Roelstraete 22).

Mastry features a series of five foundational paintings, created during the 1980s, that undergird Marshall’s oeuvre. In each of these paintings, the contours of a single “black” figure is barely distinguishable, except for the pronounced glare from “Sambo-esque” eyes and the stereotypic grinning teeth against a black or dark gray background. Marshall’s singular breakthrough image, the first painting in this series, is

²¹ “[S]cholars on both the left and the right have argued that because racial terms rely on the false idea of race and are tied to injurious conceptions of human worth, rejecting the entire concept provides the best mechanism for eradication racism (Lopez 175).” Marshall’s figurative work exaggerates to the extreme stereotypical epidermal “blackness.” The “*otherness*” (in relation to the so-called “white” or “non-black” audience) of the “black subject” is emphasized. Thus, through Marshall’s emphasis of cartoonish figural “blackness,” the racist hierarchy is further established, not disrupted. As for the Afriamerican audience—I would categorize our ideational state regarding this figure of “black(ness)” as one of existential *bad faith*, or quandary.

entitled *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* (Fig. 6). For Marshall, “...[this painting] was also ‘a way to reclaim *that image of blackness* so that it wasn’t negatively valued but achieves an undeniable majesty” (emphasis mine) (Molesworth 25).

The problem with Marshall’s proposition is fourfold. First, he never clearly expresses exactly—What (and When) was ‘*that image of blackness?*’ Of course, we can easily surmise from his statement that the alleged “lost image” is hidden within the stereotypical image of the past, the categorical representations of human-figural “blackness” that were first seen in the images of the black-faced minstrel, Sambo, and other racist images. Second, it is not unreasonable to see Marshall’s early paintings as indirect quotations of the demeaning “black-faced” minstrelsy of the American Sambo character of the 19th century.²² A priori, the essentialist category of pictorial “blackness” is posited as a necessary feature for expression of Afroamerican identity. Literal figurative “Black(ness)” is automatically considered to be a conceptually valid proxy for representation of all “non-white, non-Asian, non-Indian Americans.” This ascription of epidermal “blackness” to melaninated peoples of North America has its roots in the formation of racist ideas of *difference*. The “black” other is invisible by reason of this difference. Third, it is through the wholesale acceptance of Marshall’s metonymic “black” figure paintings as a representation of the so-called “African-American” or

²² Presentation of these early Marshall paintings mediated by rhetoric about his intention to create and exhibit “black” figuration that would make the *invisibility* of “black” Americans visible is not convincing (cf. Rowel, Whitehead). The images never break free from the static representation and appeal to the racist ascriptions of inferiority and otherness to the people of phenotypic African descent or nativity. Specious declarations about Marshall’s knowledge and use of renaissance egg-tempera portraiture techniques do not obviate the capacity of the images to stereotype-casting (cf. Alteveer, Molesworth 25).

American “People of Color” that we are confronted with an oddly ironic proposition in which racist “Anglo-American” visual forms of the 18th, 19th, and early 20th century, such as the aforementioned black-faced minstrel characters, Sambo, Coon and the like, receive a kind of validation—an axiological-historical pass, if you will. If the racist images of the past are not fundamentally immoral because of their inhuman, unrealistic, and exaggerated depiction of human beings as optically “black,” then, in which ways were the images racist at all? Lastly, neither Marshall’s paintings nor his discussions about his paintings critically explore the nature of the relationship of “blackness” to “invisibility.”

Ellison gives us his definition of “invisibility” in the prologue to *Invisible Man*:

“[M]y invisibility [is not] exactly a matter of a *bio-chemical accident to my epidermis*. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of **their**²³ *inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality*” (all emphasis mine) (Ellison 3).

Ellison informs us that the epidermal pigment melanin is not the activating source of his invisibility. He states clearly that the cause of his invisibility is in “their inner eyes”—the soul, the heart, the super-conscious, whatever you wish to call it. Ellison seems to indicate that it is at the moment of the perceptual ascription of racial “blackness” to a segment of humanity that the spiritual disease of racial invisibility is manifested. Thus, according to Ellison, the disease is in the “inner eyes” of the (“racially-white”) seer, not in the skin of the seen (the “non-white” person). Neither expression of the problem of hierarchical racism, nor apprehension of a solution to that problem, can rely on the depiction of any “non-white” people as literally “black.”

²³ “*Their*” refers to humans who describe themselves as politically, racially, ethnically, or phenotypically “white.”

For my project, I wanted to find a visual way to critique political invisibility, “being and not being,” and socio-cultural “presence and absence” while simultaneously forming a commentary upon identity politics of difference without taking wholesale recourse to the illusionary, racist, literally “black” figurative trope. It was through the intersection of the digitally inverted views provided by the mobile device juxtaposed with the color-inverted and non-color-inverted painted pixels that I discovered a visual dialectic that dynamically expressed the multifaceted operation of post-contemporary racial polarization without using the problematical trope of literal epidermal “black(ness).”

Section IV. Pix/el Inversion (and Subversion)²⁴

Viewing an *analog* painting with the aid of a mobile *digital*-media device is explicitly a new way of encountering and extending a painting's semantic potential by challenging the conventional notion of how we (traditionally) experience or view a "painting."

The (physical) painted color-inverted pix/els also serve as an interference to the "straight-reading" of the traditionally modeled pix/els (the positives) (Fig. 7). The spectator is encouraged to pause and question the nature of the semiotic gap between the "positive" pix/els (that mimic the normal ocular view) and the "negative" or color-inverted pix/els. *Representational uncertainty* is aroused from this phenomenological gap. I think of this as the *invisibility factor*.

By using a double inversion,²⁵ the distinction between these two modalities, analog/digital, is effectively blurred.²⁶ Through the operation of a lexical and visual reversal, the installation, digitally converted on the mobile device's *live-view* screen, functions together with the installation's painted images on the gallery wall. What the

²⁴ Traditionally painted representational images that are rendered with inverted colors function as both discrete inverted images and conceptual abstractions simultaneously.

²⁵ Depending on the configuration of the installation space, one or two pedestal-mounted **iPads** provide a glimpse of the digitally inverted view for spectators who do not have an inverting enabled device (Fig. 8). An info-card instructs spectators to use their digital devices for an augmented, inverted, view of the installation. Note that it is not required that the spectator use an image inverting digital device to apprehend the principal dynamics of this project. However, viewing the pix/els through the mediation of a digital device gives visual presence to many other vectors of meaning that are implied within the viewer's unmediated, normal, ocular experience of the installation. Many (but not all) well-known brands of mobile devices can be set to invert colors (e.g., **iPhone/iPad**: Settings → General → Accessibility → Accessibility Shortcut → Invert Colors; **Samsung Galaxy S5**, **Note 4**: Settings → Accessibility → Direct Access [on] → Negative Colors; **Android**: Settings → Accessibility → Inverted Rendering; **Google Pixel, Pixel XL**: Arrow icon [^] → Settings → Accessibility → Color inversion [on]). There are also downloadable apps that will enable the inversion feature on some devices.

²⁶ Again, this suggest a deconstruction of this (alleged) binary opposite (which also hints at the conceptual deconstruction of the "black/white" racial binary concept (see discussion on p. 23).

spectator sees before them is a simultaneous analog/digital visual interface (a hyperactive visual network). This (duel) interface is not mechanically reproducible.²⁷ This signals a potential instantaneous change in both the formal aspects of representation and in perception (reception). Furthermore, it prompts the spectator to question the role that all visual media has in our conception of every aspect of “race and difference.”

As previously stated, this invisibility factor can be perceived as an event horizon of sorts. A conceptual point similar to the *moment* where the sky meets the sea. It is an intangible point signaling a new reality. The point where “analog” plastic imagery becomes “digital” and vice versa. A mode of representation is augmented, converted, and subverted.

²⁷ The moment the event is “photographed,” the event horizon of the visual interface is stabilized, terminated. This interface is vitalized by the spectator’s fully engaged consciousness. It emphasizes the complete “face-to-face” encounter with a work of art.

Section V. Towards an Anti-Racist Aesthetic

The interdisciplinary artist, *par excellence*, Martin Kippenberger has been credited with identifying the most important problem to be addressed in contemporary painting. In an interview of 1990-91 Kippenberger states: “Simply to hang a painting on the wall and say that it’s art is dreadful. The whole network is important! (Koether 316).” In an essay entitled, *Painting Beside Itself*, David Joselit observes in Kippenberger’s statement, a summary manifesto of sorts that declares painting’s liberation from the limitation of the imaginary space within its frame. The painting should no longer be defined as a (single) two-dimensional surface, with a property of geometric exteriority that ends at the event horizon of the frame with the galleries wall (or other “non-painting” surface). For Joselit, Kippenberger’s statement indicates that everything is potentially embraced within the scope of the painting as a network system—a visualized relational system (Joselit 125).

As a relational image network, *(Self) Portrait Through the Amerykahn Prism* is activated by and linked by the spectator. The installation of this unified network of images (pix/els) does not obtain its principal structure from geometric exteriority, but through the perceptual event horizon that is created as the spectator physically moves while surveying the pix/els network (their eyes moving from one image to the next, or from one image cluster to the next). There are multiple dialogical correspondences between pix/els that engage and prompt the viewer to look further, to make comparisons, to make connections/disconnections, and to make judgments about various aspects of the images and the spectator’s own responses to them. Thus, this visual exploration is informed by an abstracted *cinematographic* apparatus that is activated by the spectator’s

participation in order to implement the coding and un-coding of sequences of images mediated over time by the spectator's volition.

To illustrate the passages above, let's analyze two sets of the inverted pix/els that are separated from one another by approximately a distance that is half the width of the entire *AmeryKahn Prism* installation. The first is an inverted-color portrait, *Rue Lincoln*, which is situated adjacent to a textual relief that is entirely painted white, but lexically it reads: BLACK (Fig. 9a). The second is an inverted black and white double-portrait, *William (Billy) Thomas as "Buckwheat" with Doll*, which is situated adjacent to a textual relief that is entirely painted black, but lexically it reads: WHITE (Fig. 10a). A semiotic frame, which is a duality, is formed by these two sets of opposites: one is actual, the other is virtual. The first iteration of the semiotic frame is activated by the spectator's recognition of a possible association between these two sets of painted images. Ideational waves begin to move through the spectator's consciousness as their gaze moves between the color-inverted paintings (pix/els) and the other non-color-inverted pix/els. The lexical conundrum implied by the contradictory color field of the respective pix/els, "BLACK" and "WHITE," creates a visual event that signals a breakdown of semiotic comprehension or cultural utility, which signifies a need for re-representation or redefinition of the terms (Desiderio 60).²⁸ The second iteration of the semiotic frame is viewed digitally, through the usage of electronic technology—with the aid of the

²⁸ Desiderio calls this break with the normal "sequentialized" pictorial disclosure "emblematic" because a sign within the frame of the work breaks with the *sequence* of normal comprehension. With the emblematic, there is a presumption that the isolated sign is the locus of [new] condensed cultural information (Desiderio 60). With these two sets of pix/els, I am also seeking to disrupt Desiderio's argument concerning *technical narrativity* as being a proposition that the pictorial space is *either* sequentialized or emblematic, not both. *AmeryKahn Prism* whirls dynamically with both aspects of Desiderian sequelization and emblemization.

spectator's mobile device (Figure 9b, 10b). The pix/els within the virtual image on the mobile device are digitally color-inverted; what was once conceived as inverted (negative) is now positive ("normalized"), and vice versa. The text "BLACK" appears colored black; the text "WHITE" appears colored white. Thus, the image inversion functions as an expression of a kind of "double-consciousness."²⁹ The point of this is twofold: First, the effects of a *racialized economy* upon Afmerican consciousness is illustrated as a *terminal negation*;³⁰ second, the double inversion acts as a disruption to the association of literal figurative "blackness" with political invisibility.³¹ It is to call into question the spectator's perceptions and participation in the racialized economy. Again, the operation of these pictorial associations can occur at various levels of the spectator's consciousness.

There are other pix/els that express "double consciousness." In *Suspension of Disbelief* (Fig. 11a), an absolutely black-colored egg³² has been suspended over a golden

²⁹ "Double-consciousness," a term originated by W. E. B. Du Bois, is a state in which "...there is no true self-consciousness, [but instead the Afmerican's reflection] is seen through the revelation of another world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...." [paraphrase] (Dubois 8-9, 136). Frantz Fanon also elucidated the concept in his essay, *Black Skins, White Mask*.

³⁰ A *racialized economy* is everything—the experiential sum—across which the subtlest of racialized behaviors are internalized, transacted, and normalized. A racialized economy consists of nine interrelated areas of human activity: Economics, Education, Entertainment, Labor, Law, Politics, Religion, Sex, War/Counter-War (see, Neely Fuller, Jr.). Racist behavior (affects and effects) in one area likewise reflect in all other areas. Double consciousness and terminal negation are related terms. *Terminal negation* expresses the full extent of a continuous unresolved consciousness-loop of which one key element is the lack of agreement for the origins and identities of the so-called "black, negro, colored, African-American, etc." peoples of North America. This looping-consciousness has become inured to a dramatic historico-psycho-spiritual state of "ever-learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth."

³¹ This is exactly opposite what Marshall's work, and the critical frame around his work, claims to do.

³² The symbolic "black" egg has been coated with the proprietary *Stuart Semple Black 2.0* paint, which is touted as the "the most pigmented, flattest, mattest, blackest-black acrylic paint in the world." Objects painted with this black color (under the appropriate lighting conditions) lose the materiality of their unique internal contours; their (inner) forms can no longer be distinguished through the *laws of incidence and reflection*. The black painted surface absorbs most of the incident light falling upon it. Thus, in the case of objects with a continuous, unmodulated surface, such as an egg, the object

circular disk, reminiscent of a solar disk, or a primordial circle of fire. A meniscus or parabolic form, which is also yellow-gold in color, emerges from the fiery sun disk, bisecting the black egg form, as it is suspended over the symbolically molten surface—either drawing it down, or pushing it away—it is ambiguous. The “black” object is shown as a form subdued by a kind of invisibility and ambiguity. Indeterminacy propagated by the blackness of the form makes it impossible to know whether the object is a one-dimensional, flattened object, or a three-dimensional, volumetric object. When this pix/el is viewed on the mobile device with the colors inverted, the formerly black egg becomes a glowing white-hot form that is suspended over a turbulent, boiling blue-sea (Fig. 11b). One of the key functions of this image transformation / transaction is to illustrate the manner in which racialized categorizations operate as destabilizing constructs. *Suspension of Disbelief* illustrates the dysfunctionality inherent in the “black-white”³³ racial polarity. As I conceived and assembled this pix/el, I had two guiding thoughts: first, I wanted to create a disruption to undermine the binary opposition, “black/white” (race). In other words, I wanted this pix/el to function through the agency of a *conceptual deconstruction*. My second guiding thought was taken from Frantz Fanon’s concluding commentary in his book, *Black Skins, White Mask*:

The black man is not. No more than the white man. Both have to move away from the inhuman voices of their respective ancestors so that a genuine communication can be born. Before embarking on a positive voice, freedom needs to make an effort at disalienation.... It is through self-consciousness and renunciation, through a permanent tension of his freedom, that man can create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world (Fanon 206).

seemingly disappears, at least in terms of its legibility as a three-dimensional object. *The contours that make identity and individuation possible disappears.*

³³ This includes all racialized color-pigment designations for humans.

Suspension of Disbelief is also part of a (connected) cycle of pix/els that use the motif of an object contained inside a circular form, which is enclosed and bounded by the square of the pix/el frame (or a graphic square). This motif is used in the pix/els entitled, *Balak-Kahn, Dis-Remembering, Aperture, Ne Pas Tomber! (Do Not Fall!), Ne Pas Plonger (No Diving)* (Fig. 12). Again, with this cycle, my intention is to encourage or prompt a cascade of thoughts (racialized or not) within the viewer. My utilization of the “square” and the “circle” pedigree motif serve to subtly arouse associations with “male” and “female,” another kind of binary opposition, which will hopefully create other vectors of semiotic associations in the spectator’s mind.

(Self) Portrait Through the Amerykahn Prism functions as a complex relational network that has the capacity to resonate in multiple semiotic directions at the same time. Multiple levels of consciousness are prompted through *imágenes*:³⁴ preconscious, conscious, and subconscious can reveal cascading relations to one another and function simultaneously.

³⁴ *Imágenes* is a neologism. It is a description of polysemous perceptual events within a unified multi-image field. These events arouse a cascade of pictorial relations that appeal to other (apparently) unrelated abstract relations to resolve semiotic uncertainty within the perceptual field. Contradictions remain open, but they are refracted, their edges become smoothed over through semiotic drift. Within the installation, three elements characterize the relationship of *imágenes* to *polysemy*: (1) the multiple senses for any particular lexical/pictorial unit is reflexive; (2) these multiple senses enable a *network* affiliation between discrete perceptual events; (3) “in all of such link[ed] [perceptual events] there is cognitive asymmetry in that the understanding of each derivative sense is aided by knowledge of the sense from which it is derived” ([1, 2, and 3] Fillmore and Atkins 99-100). Within the *AmeryKahn Prism* installation, one particular example of these operations can be seen in the lexical/pictorial forms for “*mask*.” There is the sense of *mask* as a physical artifact of cultural and artistic expression (such as the pix/els depicting the Nigerian and Gabonese mask)—this sense gives way to the related sense of both the *masking* and *unmasking* of identity through the implied semiotic uncertainty suggested by the pix/els that mimetically represent of the human face. Then, there is the sense of *mask* expressed within the pix/el “ShapeShifter” (Fig. 13) in which the painted and drawn text of the poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” is nearly entirely effaced, that is masked, by a painted static pattern. There is also the idea of sequestered, effaced, or masked identity (or knowledge) that is suggested by the intermedia surfaces of the black-mirrors and the virtual inverted images (pix/els) seen on the screen of the digital media device.

VI. Conclusions.

It's not the name that you call me, but what I answer to...

My MFA Thesis project has unfolded as a visual dialectic that seeks to engage and counter the proposition that literal figural “black(ness)” is a legitimate, useful, or liberating representation of the alleged descendants of African phenotypic or Afmerican ancestry. In the creation of each component pix/el for the installation, I have endeavored to communicate three specific ideas: first, the beauty and phenotypic variety of Afmerican and African peoples; second, to interfere with racist associations by bringing the false “black skin, white skin” dichotomy into full-conscious view; and, third, to assert “visibility” against “cultural invisibility” by rendering Afmericans with subtle color gradations and with a variety of symbolic forms. The core idea behind this project is a declaration that there is no such human group as a monolithic “black” people. The descendants of the original melanochroous (African) peoples who spread across the earth to populate every land mass, possessed an infinite array of phenotypic traits and ethnographic affinities. Post-contemporary art should embrace this. This is the only rational way to make political and cultural invisibility disappear.

Through my use of various technical approaches such as “realistic” representations of light on the human form, abstraction, certain relational operations, and technology mediated optical reversals to disrupt stereotypic word associations, my project invites the viewer to critically engage their own thoughts as well as with one another as they look beyond racialized typologies.

To conceptualize Afmerican people with (universally) literally “black” skin is anti-human, racist, and counter-productive to the abolition of racial prejudice expressed through “white supremacy.”

Figures



*Figure 1- Self Portrait Through the AmeryKahn Prism (296 x 43 inches) (May 2018)
(See next page for fold-out page view.)*



Figure 2 – Blackest Baby (version 1), 2016

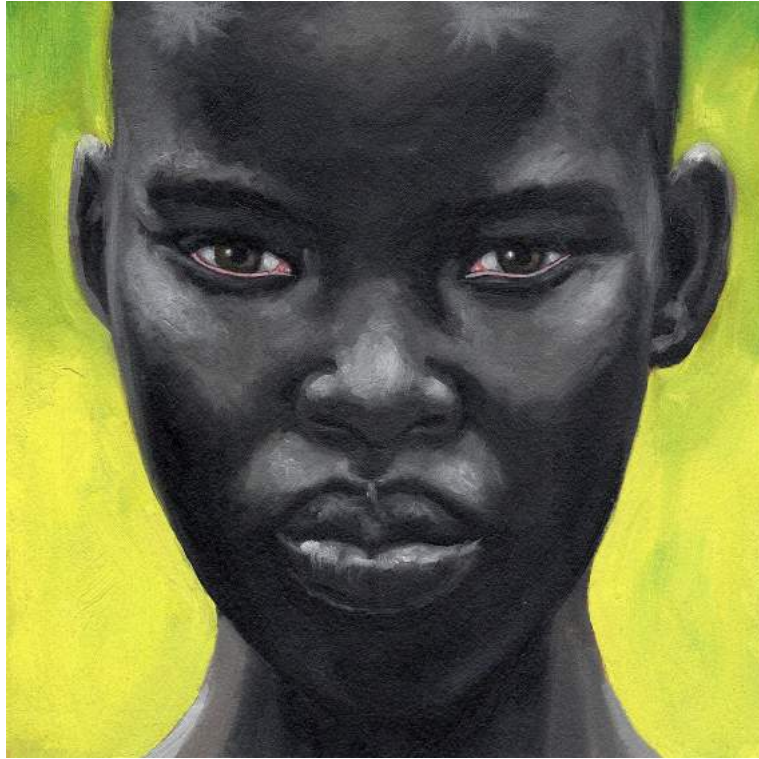


Figure 3 – Ebony Refraction, 2017



Figure 4 –Untitled (Gallery) [detail] (2016) acrylic on PVC panel, 60 ½ x 48 ½ in., by Kerry James Marshall.



Figure 5a – Scarborough Field (l.) (formerly entitled “Blackest Baby”) (2017)
Fig. 5b – Scarborough Field (r.) digitally inverted

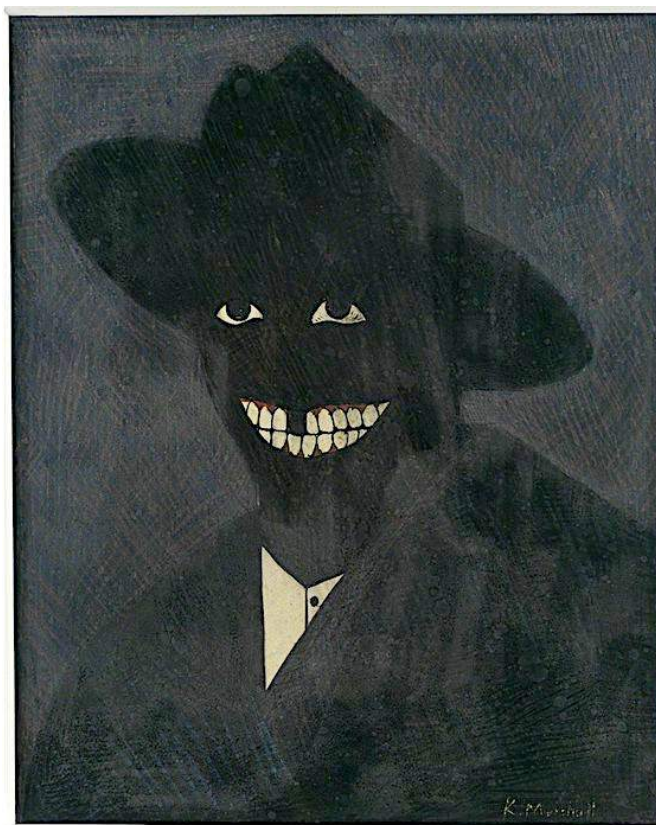


Figure 6 – Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self (1980) by Kerry James Marshall

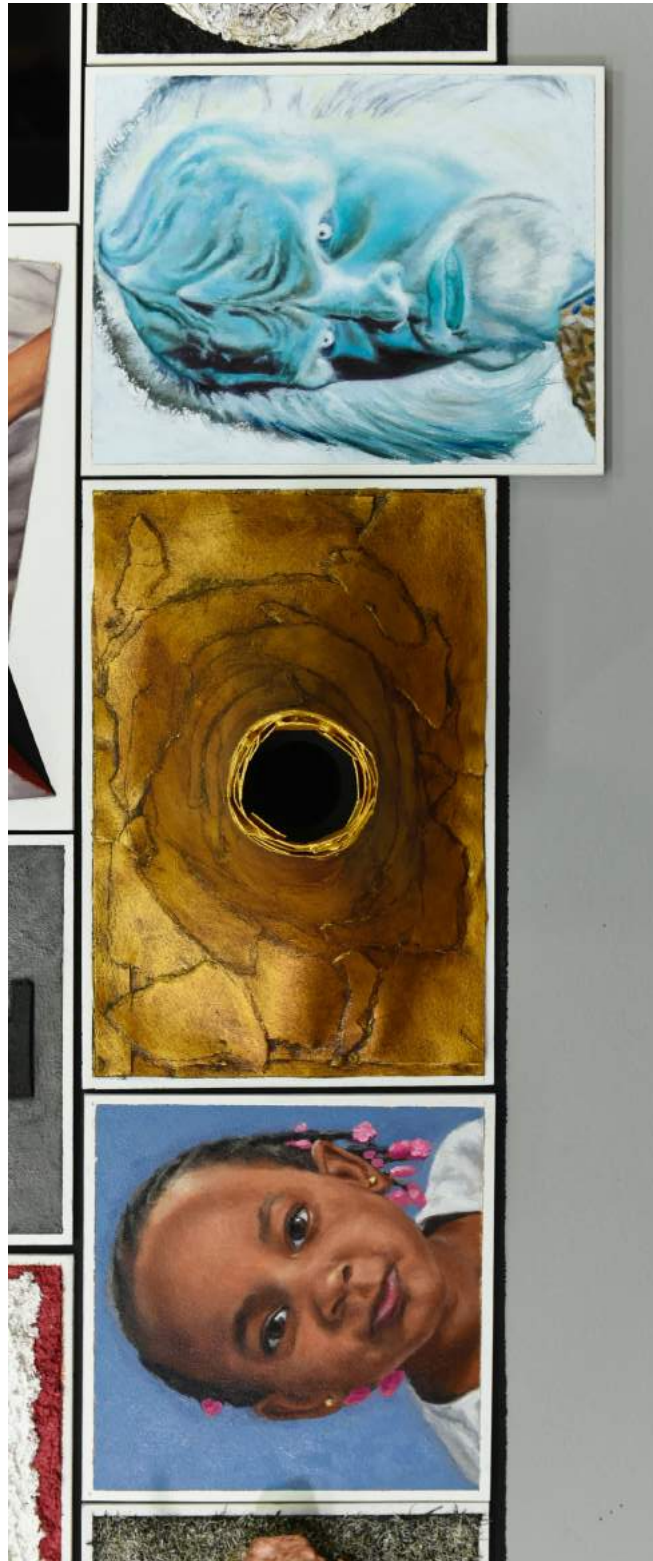


Figure 7 – Detail featuring, “Jayleigh (2016),” “Event Horizon (2017),”
and the color-inverted “WORF” (2018)”

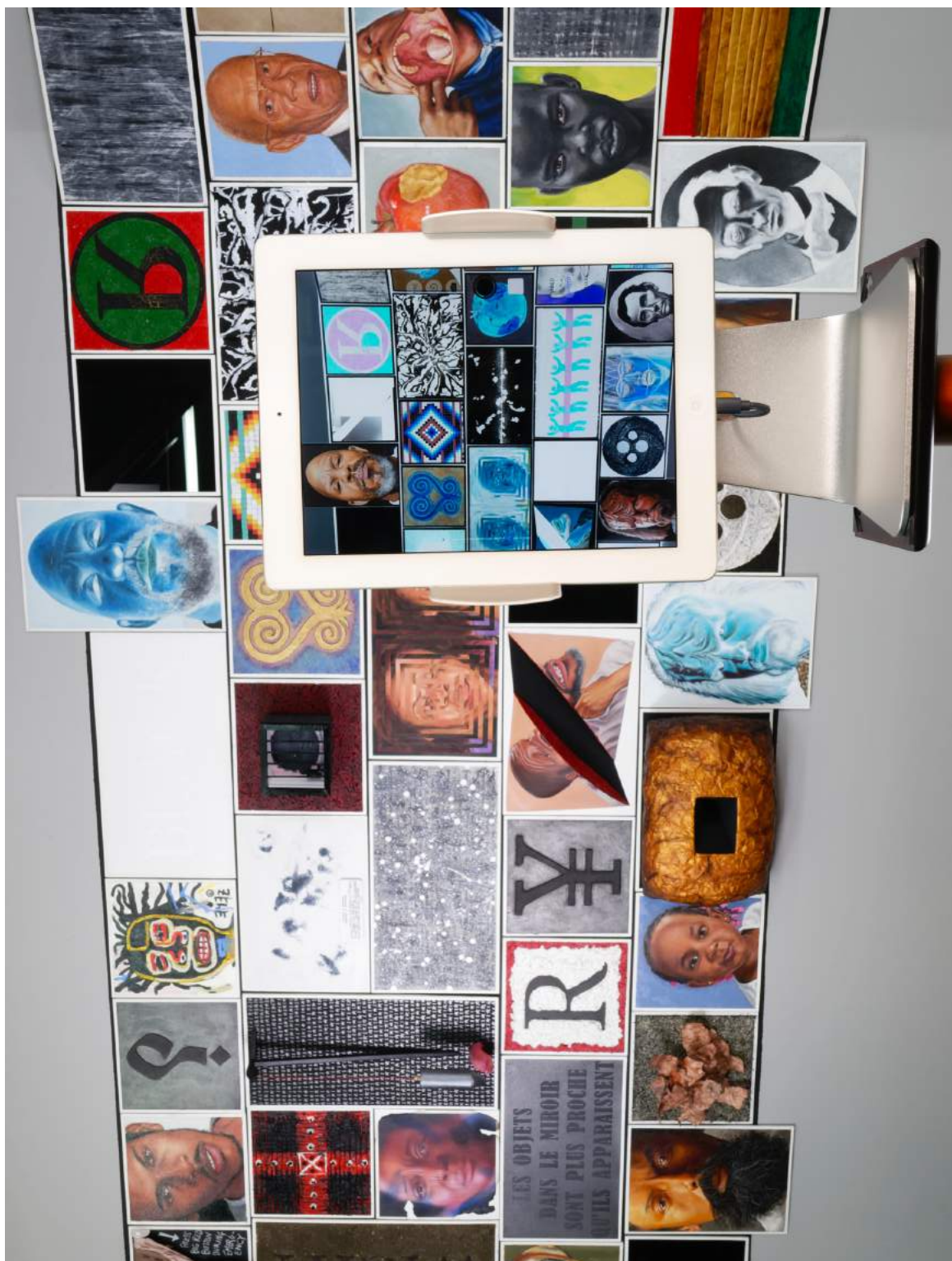


Figure 8 – Installation set-up detail featuring a pedestal-mounted iPad™ that has been set to digitally invert colors. (This view illustrates the in-studio set-up as of 11 May 2018.)

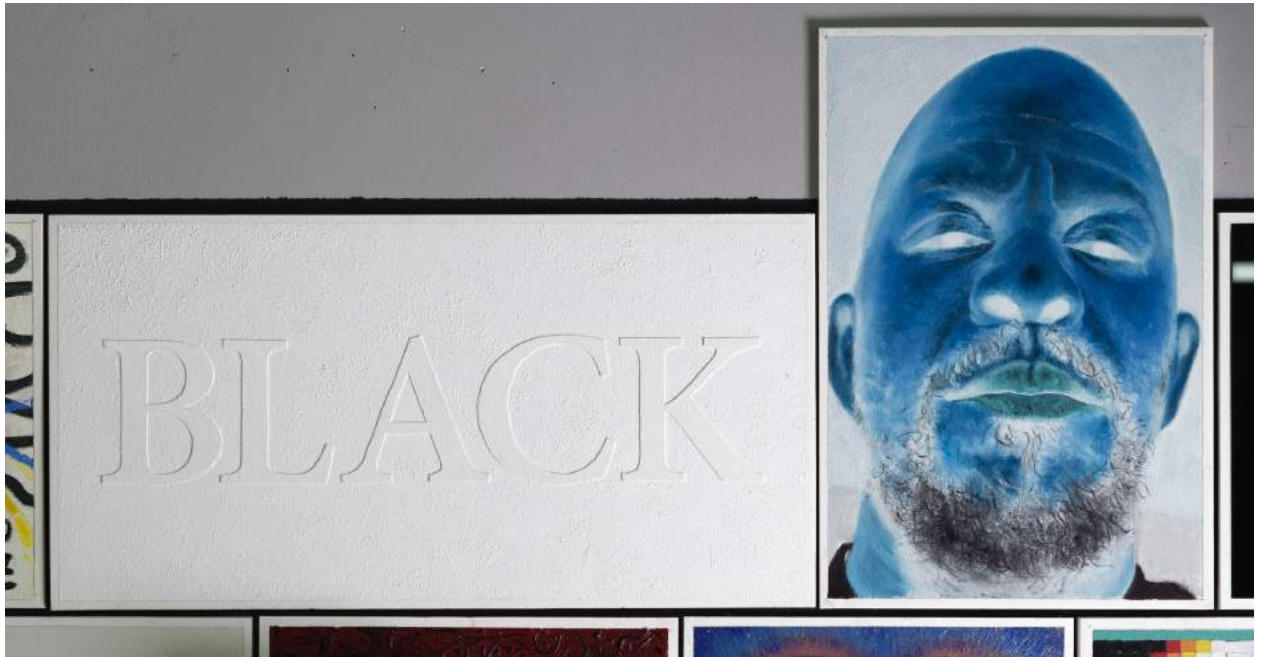


Figure 9a – BLACK / Rue Lincoln (2017)

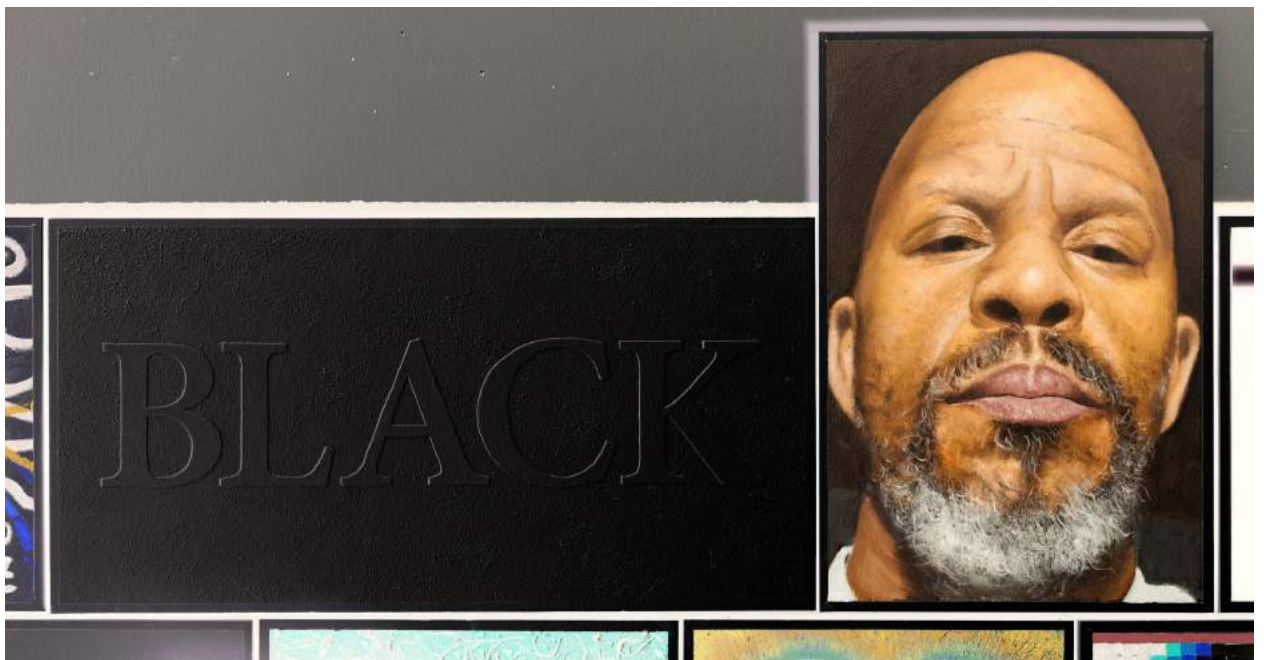


Figure 9b – BLACK / Rue Lincoln (digitally inverted)



Figure 10a – William (Billy) Thomas as “Buckwheat” with Doll / WHITE (2017)



Figure 10b - William (Billy) Thomas as “Buckwheat” with a Doll / WHITE (2017) (digitally inverted)

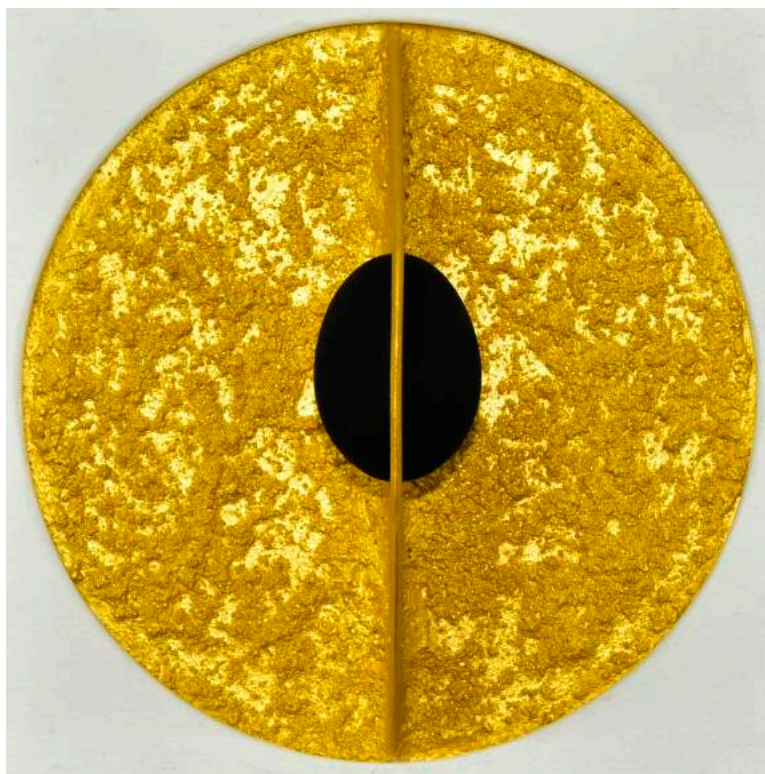


Figure 11a – Suspension of Disbelief (2017) (above)

Figure 11b – Suspension of Disbelief (2017) (digitally inverted) (below)

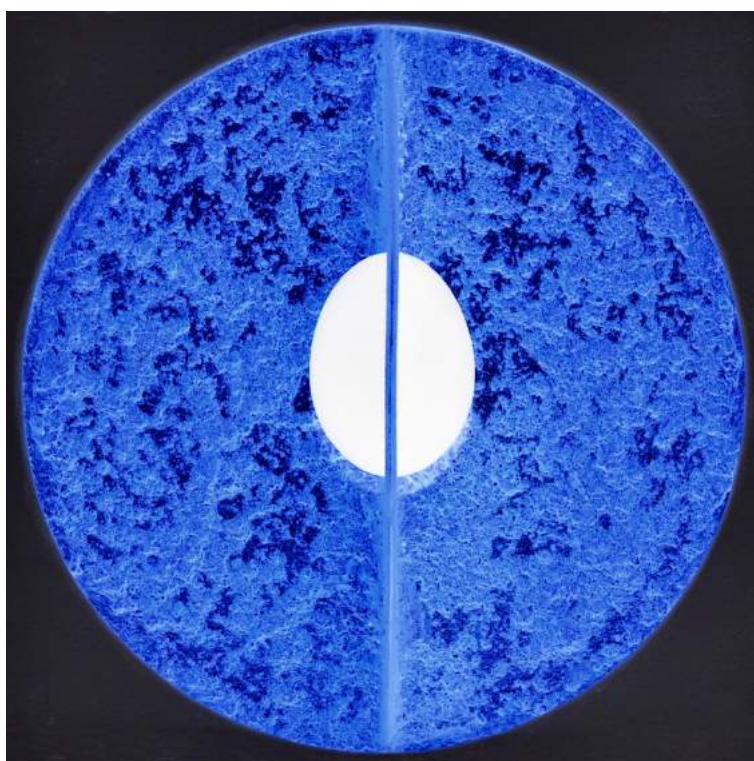




Figure 12 – (left to right) Balak-Kahn , *Dis-Remembering, Aperture, Ne Pas Tomber! (No Falling!)* (2017),
Ne Pas Plonger! (No Diving!) (2018)

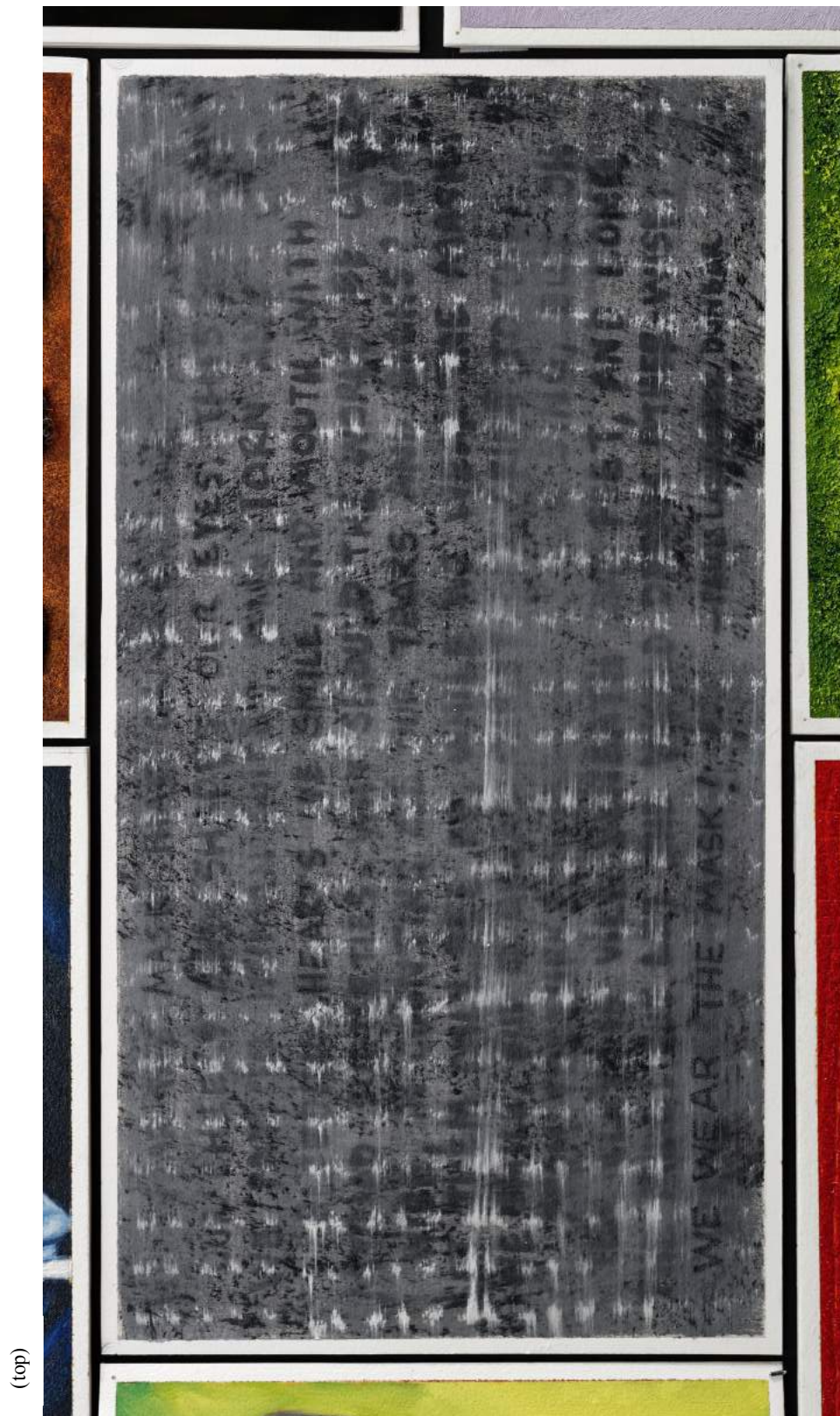


Figure 13 – ShapeShifter (2017)

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