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BLACK - \`BLAK\`

Venise L. Keys

18 Pages

My studio practice explores themes of identity derived from the basic question of Langston Hughes, What does it mean to be a Black artist? My artwork draws from memory, Black Feminist literature, along with the aesthetics of the African diaspora and the Black Arts Movement. In this essay, I reexamine childhood experiences in my mother's hair salon; beauty rituals of U.S. Black women; and the consuming male gaze in Western art to explain how these influences manifest in the artwork of Black-\`BLAK\`.

KEYWORDS: African diaspora, Black aesthetics, Black arts movement, Black feminist literature, Painting

BLACK - \`BLAK\

VENISE L. KEYS

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BLACK - \`BLAK\

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I wish to thank God for all the blessings and angels that have guided me this far.

V. L. K.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be a Black artist? This is a basic question asked by Langston Hughes, renowned poet of the Harlem Renaissance. My essay engages Hughes's question reflectively by: first, revisiting some of my influences and how they shape both the content of my work and my studio practice. Secondly, by reflecting on these influences and how they were expressed in my final show.

CHAPTER II

PERSONAL STATEMENT & INFLUENCES

My art making is rooted fiercely in memories of my family and Black hair culture. As a child growing up in Chicago, barbershops and beauty salons shaped the contours of the Black community where I lived. These places were more than just shops; they were the heart of the community—places of affirmation, support, and social life. The social interactions among Black women patronizing my mom’s salon, created a rare and wonderful life world of “othermothers”. “Othermothers can be key not only in supporting children but also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood” (Collins 194). These women-centered networks of community-based childcare extend beyond biological boundaries to include “fictive kin” (Stack 1974). In my mother’s salon, a hair appointment from one of her regulars could easily shift into a deep group discussion or a feast riddled with music and laughter. Patricia Hill Collins adds that othermothers often help to defuse the emotional intensity of relationships between bloodmothers and their daughters (Collins 204). I witnessed and received shaming in the salon from my othermothers based on internalized European beauty standards that pressure women into straightening their hair and judging one another on their skin tone. But the Black salon culture was also resistant: it provided a

space of affirmation in which the self could be redefined and respected. Self-definition speaks to the power dynamics involved in rejecting externally defined, controlling images of Black womanhood (126). Within the content of self-definition, resisting European beauty standards is an act of self-valuation and self-respect that validates Black women's power as human subjects (126).

The women in my mother's salon had traditional notions of respectable womanhood that often clashed with my individual desire to define myself; for example red nail polish was seen as a mature color and "too fast" for young Black girls. My biological mother and my othermothers collectively disapproved of my hair being cut as teenager. They thought that long and chemically processed hair would be a valuable asset for me to attract a husband. My mother and my othermothers would discipline and police my home hair rituals. When I left for college I had long hair stopping at the middle of my back, but my hair often felt like a cage. In Black culture, women who have long hair grown from the scalp are commonly seen as more desirable. My friends would remark about how precious my hair was because it was long and mine. During college, inch-by-inch, I cut my hair shorter and shorter until the chemically processed hair was gone and my natural tiny dark Afro grew in. Embracing my Afro was the first step of my understanding the social and cultural meaning of Black hair and hairstyling practices. The historical significance of both hair and hairstyling practices centers around two main themes: politics and identity (Banks 200).

When I'm out, I find myself consistently stopped by unknown Black women inquiring about my personal hair styling techniques and products. This is a common

social practice among women in Black communities. We (Black women) find comfort in these interactions, using serious conversations and humor to affirm one another's humanity, uniqueness, and right to exist (Collins 113).

Hair style choice was a way to re-define myself, giving me a feeling of power. This practice of self-definition immediately overflowed into my studio practice and my graduate studies. Learning to love my appearance is connected to (1) my attitude when styling my hair and (2) choosing the right hair products and styling techniques. Having a positive attitude in the transition of styling natural hair is important because it can take months or years to learn what products and styling techniques work best for each individual.

My personal and political understandings of Black hair is also informed by reading I've done on West African societies in the early fifteenth century, where hair was an integral part of their complex language system. Hairstyling among West African groups indicated a person's martial status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth, and rank within the community; therefore the hairdresser was regarded most trustworthy in society (Byrd 2001). This knowledge is exciting to me because it helps further explain the origins of cultural policing of Black hair in America.

The African diaspora is an important influence on the painting, drawing, and assemblage artworks in Black-\`BLAK\`. Painting is an organic process, it performs like a call and response relationship of putting paint on the canvas and taking time to sit, watch, and wait for a solution to appear. Origins of call and response are found in vocal and instrumental expressions in African musical rituals, to the Black churches of America

when the preacher asks the congregation to say Amen. Sitting and watching is critical to my painting process because I typically don't have a full plan ready to be executed before beginning any artwork. I find more excitement in art making when I can set up studio problems without immediately knowing what to do next. When I get to a point of frustration or a mental block from working through the unknown, I switch to a different project or a different medium like drawing, hand stitching, or assembling found objects into an abstract composition.

The use of shape, line, and color in *Black-`BLAK`* is also heavily influenced by the work of Jacob Lawrence. Lawrence's Great Migration Series is especially inspiring to my painting practice because he masterfully documented the real experiences of Black people using a visual language of simplified shapes participating in both figurative and abstract painting. For example, *Panel No. 31* shows Lawrence towing the line between abstraction and representation. By arranging flat rectangles of ivory, brown, and black with primary colors the series evokes an enclosed wall of an urban city. Lawrence organizes abstraction into other paintings, like *Panel No. 7*, depicting rows of bountiful green crops in soil as an entry to a dialogue about the thousands of African Americans who stayed in the South to advance the race and maintain their means of income through agriculture. I used these direct inspirations from Jacob Lawrence in painting *The Chair*. This image features a hairstylist figure standing behind a seated and draped figure in a salon interior. The image source for *The Chair* was highly naturalistic so I had to re-draw the stylist and client many times to achieve sleek lines and full shapes reminiscent of Lawrence's dynamic cartoon-like figures.

I was first interested in abstraction because the process of painting non-representational subjects helped me cope with my life drama. The moving shapes and gestures of color in my own paintings developed my voice into a range of my own self-expression and empowerment through self-definition (Collins 111). This range of my voice includes color as a politic when any shade or tints of red, black, and green surfaces as reference to the Pan-African flag. I enjoy using my imagination in the studio, asking myself what kind of paintings would I make during the 1960s and 1970s? As a contemporary artist, I am seeking new possibilities of re-presenting Black aesthetics from a Black feminist standpoint. My color palettes tend to be warm and have high intensity according to the visual criteria of Black artists publishing and distributing visual art during the Black Arts Movement. I especially like to experience these colors in nature from daily observations of the sky; admiring cloudy sunsets with infinite combinations of blue, violet, red, orange, and yellow light.

The nude Black female body is an important element in my artwork because she pushes against the history of white female nudes in Western art. The white heterosexual, postcolonial male gaze especially implicates the history of painting. Here the audience's gaze is voyeuristic: it peers lasciviously at the erotic subject. Some examples of the white male gaze pervade Western painting include Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1911), depicting five prostitutes at a brothel in Barcelona; Édouard Manet's *Olympia*, (1865) depicting a white nude prostitute laying in bed with her Black female servant bringing flowers to her bedside; and Auguste Dominique Ingres (1814) *Grande Odalisque*, noted for its elongated and non-anatomical body proportions. These works

represent female bodies as objects to be visually consumed; they are without agency.

My work with Black female body is meant to challenge this consumptive gaze. I want to reposition nudity as an erotic source of power and a source of self-definition. My nude Black female subjects resist consumption: they have sexual agency, they return the gaze without shame. In two of my canvases I wanted to present a positive depiction of a tattooed Black woman that asserted self-expression and power through sexuality. As Collins remarks: “For Black women, ceding control over self-definitions of Black women’s sexualities upholds multiple oppressions. This is because all systems of oppression rely on harnessing the power of the erotic. In contrast, when self-defined by Black women ourselves, Black women’s sexualities can become an important place of resistance” (2009, 138).

My paintings *Pink, Honey, & Tatted* and *Neo-Soul Save My Soul* centralize the Black female body in an environment of abstract shapes and lines. In *Pink, Honey, & Tatted*, the figure’s flat magenta Afro drapes from the top edge of the painting, with the body rendered in luscious gold and brown hues. The source image of *Pink, Honey, & Tatted* came from *King* magazine (a publication for men) and this particular photograph intrigued me because her skin was under a glowing red light, accentuating the contours her body. The subject of *Neo-Soul Save My Soul* is a nude Black woman wearing a headscarf, seated mid-center of the canvas; directly gazing at the viewer with one hand raised making a fist. Here, the figure does not engage the male gaze: her eye contact directly confronts the audience, rather than participating as a voyeuristic subject. This fist is one three symbols in the painting that reference what Angela Davis calls the long black

tradition; the other symbols include a slave ship diagram in the top right corner and the abstracted cotton flowers in the foreground of the painting. The ship and cotton flowers are symbols of America's slave history, which contrasts the playful color and resting political gesture of the Black Power fist. The woman in the middle holds up her fist as a call to action and symbol of strength to the Black community.

I am deeply influenced by beauty rituals of U.S. Black women because these acts of self-care become crucial parts of our identity. "Identity is not the goal but rather the point of departure in the process of self-definition. In this process, Black women journey toward an understanding of how our personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class" (125). I think of the social practices around Black women's hair care as a source for knowledge. Combing hair is a chance for mothers to pass information to daughters, and it allows Black women control over the presentation of their appearance. The watercolor paintings of *Me & My Sista* demonstrate these sources of power depicting pairs of Black girls playing outside, a still life of beauty implements for Black hair, and a seated nude Black woman styling her hair. The outcome of painting these pairs of Black girls revealed a mirroring of my relationship with my older sister, Valencia. Throughout adolescence, Valencia and I endured tough times with othermothers and our biological mother by sharing humor and validating one another's experiences through respect.

I also make intimately sized assemblages from repurposed, secondhand objects as an attempt to validate the experiences of others through their discarded possessions. Assemblage is important in my studio practice because it informs the compositions

of two-dimensional drawings and paintings. During the 1950s and 1960s artists like Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, and Robert Rauschenberg brought assemblage to the United States. At this time U.S. Blacks were also participating in this critique of race, class, and humanity through the composition of manufactured materials. These Black artists re-appropriated advertisements and figurines relating to controlling images, like Betye Saar's reappropriation of Aunt Jemima. One example influencing my assemblages is Melvin Edwards's small abstract steel sculptures, called *Lynch Fragments*. His objects respond to the turmoil during the civil rights movement through Edwards's use of welding steel bolts, hammers, nails, chains, scissors, and gears to evoke multiple impulses, ideas, contexts and cultures in the African diaspora.

The hair assemblages in Black-`BLAK\ combine beauty materials with paper bags, cardboard, and found scraps to signify the feminine Black body without depicting brown skin or the figure. My assemblages also function to utilize personal miscellaneous items that would otherwise accumulate without any use. I search thrift stores for the perfect wooden frame, wicker domestic object, or paper bag to attach smaller items onto. This process excites my imagination to use and adorn domestic objects that have discarded. After selecting a base, I carefully select hair extensions using this criterion: must be purchased from an independent beauty supply store, must be cheap, have a eye-catching curl pattern, vibrant color, and a shiny texture. The hair extensions dictate the activity and color palette of the arranged smaller materials like buttons, hair beads, jewelry beads, yarn, thread, or bottle caps. My assemblages are not intended to camouflage the materials, but rather to re-appropriate them as precious or keepsakes.

CHAPTER III

STUDIO PRACTICE

My studio practice is a calling to the ancestry of Black American artists who used collage, assemblage, and painting to represent the ongoing moods and attitudes within the Africa diaspora. When moving between worlds of home and studio, I often fix my eyes on the sky to contemplate its brilliance and how it witnessed a volatile America. Partly cloudy sunsets are translated into luscious strokes of paint. That era will always be unfamiliar to parts of my life experience, yet it is closely situated between my heart and spirit of being a maker. Each artwork becomes an exploration in this liminal position of being a contemporary Black woman in America.

The influences outlined above drive both the content of my art and my studio practices. When I work in my studio I read or visually engage two or three books simultaneously: usually a book about Black hair, a general art book (contemporary or historical), and another book on Black feminist literature or Black studies. One book I consistently draw from is my mother's *Milady Cosmetology* textbook. It was the text she turned to again and again as a teenager and later as a cosmetology student. As a child this book captured my attention over and over. I was drawn to it and spent hours flipping through the hundreds of line illustrations to demonstrate various procedures

and information about the maintenance of hair, skin, and nails. The images are clearly meant to be aesthetically pleasing and not only instructional. The textbook illustrations are predominantly elegant line drawings of the body as it relates to methodical beauty procedures.

Other visual references present throughout the exhibition come from commercial printed photographs, which act as resistance to the controlling power of images for U.S. Black women. Each project begins with looking in my personal archive of portraiture: ranging from classic American pin-up art, African textiles of the Ewe and Ashanti groups, hairstyling textbooks; or magazines like *King* (men's magazine on women, hip-hop, and R&B), *Inked* (tattoo culture publication), *Urban Ink* (tattoo culture publication coming from urban communities), *InStyle* or *Cosmopolitan* (women's fashion magazine). After I have chosen printed images to work from, I openly look outside my studio for whatever additional materials or inspiration are needed.

The doodles of *Personal Is Political And My Hair Is A Politic* is an example of how this cosmetology textbook influenced my artistic style of drawing. I appropriated an illustration of a hairpin securing a lock of hair around a perm roller directly from the Milady textbook. The majority of the women illustrated in the textbook look Eurocentric so my doodles assert my own identity using Black female nudes. This is an attempt to write over the overrepresentation of European images of Black women. The graphite drawing on the top left uses fast paced lines to depict a nude Black woman sitting a table with her arms extended upward. This image refers to the kitchen as a continuous place of beautification for Black girls and women, among the other sites of identity for U.S. Black

women.

My doodling and color sensibility is also inspired by AfriCobra (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) This artist collective consists of Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, Jae Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Gerald who founded the organization during 1968 in my hometown; the South Side of Chicago. The group developed a shared visual language deriving from the African diaspora (hence 'Afri' in the name). Their aesthetic criteria intends to project the moods, attitudes, and sensibilities of African Americans independent of the technical and aesthetic strictures of Euro-centric modalities (n.pag). For example, the warm and high intense colors of their work were thought of as "Kool-Aid colors" because most Black folks were drinking Kool-Aid. This subtle aesthetic decision pulls from cultural observations within a shared Black experience. Since their establishment, AfriCobra continuously presents direct and positive images of Black self-identity with recognizable subject matter, that identifies problems and offer solutions, and must educate and instruct. AfriCobra's aesthetic ethics and visual language inspires the outcome of my doodles in the *Personal is Political And My Hair Is A Politic*. The stylization of Black women's hair and bodies with colored text in my doodles evoke both AfriCobra's aesthetic philosophy and Patricia Hill Collins's power of self-definition. Collins's account of the power of self-definition drives my content and subject matter in *Personal Is Political And My Hair Is A Politic* to promote positive attitudes and language under the framework of black hair politics.

Line has become something important in my paintings. Placing canvases on the floor is a new method to reinforce a sense of drawing illustrated through oil paint.

Transparent and opaque gestures of color overlap one another in a flattened depth of field falling apart and coming back together. Some subjects, like a hair salon interior, are not meant to be readily available to the viewer as color is being used to reconfigure the composition into something non-objective. For example, the organization of one painting is a scene of a hairstylist working on a client, but the treatment of paint obscures how readily available this iconic symbol can be seen. The purpose of this isn't to create a game of hide and seek with the viewer, but it certainly adds to the experience of viewing my painting when the structure slowly reveals itself underneath seemingly non-objective color. This sense of depth is also manipulated by values and intensities of thick or thin strokes of paint. I see line conveying multiple functions throughout the exhibition; elegantly articulating hair coils, slow or fast paced movements of color, or expressing psychological states.

CHAPTER IV
REFLECTIONS ON BLACK - \`BLAK\`

Art has always been my survival tool, whether it was to escape feelings of neglect and loneliness or making friends by drawing popular cartoon characters. As an adult I am still searching for comfort, only now I am conducting my search from within the spirit of my culture through academic research. This exhibition carries an enthusiasm for the Black subject while exploring the self through the vehicles of color, abstraction, the figure, mixed media, and language.

Seeing all of my work on the walls of Transpace gave me a chance to critically revisit my experiences here at Illinois State University and to think about future directions for my work. Here are a few of my reflections.

I learned that it isn't enough to produce art that I like, it is more important to foster a conversation among my artworks as a collection. I enjoyed taking the risk of displaying my drawings, paintings, and mixed media projects to the dominant audience of the Illinois State University community. It was a validating experience to see guests sit in front of the paintings and not notice the figures embedded within; this opens the possibility to use camouflaged text to subliminally enter the content of forthcoming paintings, much like in the aesthetic tradition of AfriCobra.

I also see potential to further develop the reoccurring female figure with arms stretched upward. Throughout Black-\`BLAK\, this figure appears in the *The Hair; A Daily Practice; Personal Is Political And My Hair Is A Politic; Me & My Sista; Pink, Honey, & Tatted; Untitled*, and *A Love-Hate*. The hair of these figures is typically rendered in scribble lines that visually gesture “Afro.” This particular figure comes from my own experiences with wearing natural hairstyles and loathing the amount of energy and time required to maintain my hair. The gesture takes on multiple meanings depending on the figure’s context. I feel this is an important trope in my work and I feel as if I want to push, mold and experiment with this figure in my future work.

The purpose of this experimentation directly relates to the question I mentioned previously: “What does it mean to be a Black artist?” For me, as a black woman, it is not enough to adopt well-known cultural symbols and similar tropes. Embracing personal day-to-day actions through thoughtful reflection is vital, and should be woven into a practice that acknowledges the history in which it is participating. In Langston Hughes’ essay, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, he asked this question about what it means to be a Black artist among the black community. Hughes was speaking both to and about lower and middle class blacks—about their positions in society and how they perform those positions. A black woman might go see a white woman perform in concert, but not go to see a black jazz singer. A black poet might want to be seen as an American poet and not a black poet. Hughes posits that by engaging in these actions and by self-identifying in certain ways, these people are rejecting their heritage and cultural values. In my work, this class distinction is more specific among Black women. *The*

Chair and Me & My Sista are an example of middle class Black women who can afford a professional hair appointment, and the lower class Black women who maintain their own hair at home. Although I agree with Hughes' basic premise, I believe it is important to note that the expression of one's heritage is not cookie-cutter. Black artists have been expanding the definition and importance of their cultural heritages since the Harlem Renaissance and even before. My point is this: although the use of Black symbols is warranted under certain contexts, they are problematic when they are used generically in artworks because of their lack of specificity. So what might a black artist use in place of these conventions? I think that the spirit of intention might not correlate with the source of inspiration. The contents of a Black artist should include a local network of visual modalities that can contribute to the larger context of the African diaspora.

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