Western interpretation of the other: how the perpetuation of negative stereotypes against blacks have shaped our culture

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WESTERN INTERPRETATION OF THE OTHER: HOW THE PERPETUATION OF NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES AGAINST BLACKS HAVE SHAPED OUR CULTURE

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Katrina M Andry
B.F.A Louisiana State University, 2004
December, 2010
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the history and nature of stereotypes propagated against blacks from the African Exploration to present day. Therefore by understanding the nature of these stereotypes one can better understand the consequences they’ve had on the black community and they’ve helped to maintain racism in America. This thesis further investigates the media’s role in maintaining racist attitudes towards blacks and how separating people in categories ranking from superior which consequentially breeds inferiority is advantageous to the majority rule in America. In conclusion the problem presented in this thesis has no concrete solution other than the viewer’s perspective after engaging the artwork that this thesis supports.
WESTERN INTERPRETATION OF THE OTHER: HOW STEREOTYPES AGAINST BLACKS HAVE SHAPED OUR CULTURE

The work I’m presenting for my thesis confronts the belief in known truths, or stereotypes, in our culture about black people. These stereotypes stem from a fear of the unknown, and are used as a way to define or categorize black people. The modern day impact of stereotypes against black people, that began in the 1400s, is profound. In our society, stereotypes against black people have created “superior” and “inferior” groups. My work confronts the viewer with specific stereotypes placed on blacks, and their absurdities through bold visual imagery. I also set the tone of some prints with a sound element coming through headphones next to each print.

In order to understand stereotypes we first need to define what a stereotype is. Commonly put, a stereotype is a behavioral trait you expect from someone based on that person’s appearance. Stereotyping helps us to make sense of our surroundings; it helps us (the status quo) to cope with the anxieties we constantly feel in our ever changing environments, and our inability to control the world. Stereotypes are usually associated with a [sub]culture or a group of people, rather than an individual because we see ourselves and others like us as “normal” as opposed to “other.” But what is the basis of stereotypes? Do we base them on observations that we’ve made about the culture we place them on? Do we base them on already known truths about the people we place them on? In this paper I’ll be addressing stereotypes that the western world has placed on blacks from the African Exploration till now, and how these stereotypes have shaped our culture, including how we see blacks as a group. This paper supports my works in which people in black face act out stereotypes in a way that points out that stereotype’s absurdities and also their dire consequences. It’s important for me to place non-blacks in black face (mostly white males) or watermelon face to really get across to the viewer that stereotypes are not a character trait of the people they are placed upon. It’s also important for me to show the viewer that these stereotypes are rooted in the idea that certain people are inferior because they have “violated” a societal norm; whether it’s a behavioral norm or standards of beauty, etc. In two of my prints I have transitioned from black face to watermelon face. The symbolism is the same though. I’m using watermelon face as a reference to a well-
propagated symbol that is closely associated with the happy-go-lucky, old timey, Sambo that came about around the same time the media started using black face in campaigns, television shows, films, etc to refer to black people. I’ve also included an installation piece of 48 black and white lithograph self-portraits. The installation is named *Self-portrait of a Black Woman*, and each portrait is editioned at least five times and placed on the wall in varying order. In this installation I’m giving the viewer an image over and over again to mimic the way media propagates a message/agenda. Even though the title is same for each print in the installation and the images are varied, the message is the same. This particular work is a personal reflection of how working on this exhibition has helped me to come to certain terms with the ideas I’m trying to get across in my other, more colorful works. *Self-portrait of a Black Woman* is made up of litho washes that I use to disguise my facial features when I draw. This way each portrait is not a true impression of me. The title is very important in the piece, because each portrait is a representation of a black woman and all of the social implications that come along with that title. By being in black and white, I’m implying that the issues I’m addressing are in terms of black and white; the stereotypes I address in my work is mostly (but not solely) based on skin color. I know there are other factors contributing to how we see one another that involve class, gender, background, etc, but I see them all as stemming from race one way or another. That is an issue I will address later in this paper. There’s also a short animation as part of the exhibition. The animation is a dream sequence in which characters from my prints are acting out stereotypes. At the end of the animation they die and their tombs become exes. This piece is meant to address the consequence of stereotyping. In the video the characters have babies that are sent immediately to jail. One character also cums on the white lady standing in front of the plantation house. She is immediately destroyed by this, and so is her house. The plantation is then replaced by a jail house that their babies are sent. In the video everything is destroyed. Ways of life are destroyed, babies are destroyed, and the characters are destroyed. I’m trying to show the viewer that stereotyping is destructive to society. It enables us to put up barriers between ourselves and others. It creates unwarranted fear of the other, and it attributes to the dysfunction of society. In my previous works I concentrated on the history of stereotypes. I wanted to know the exact source of the stereotypes perpetuated about black
people. I will address those sources later in this paper. Stereotyping against blacks, and their consequences, have a long history in western culture, and have effected the history of cultures worldwide through western imperialism and colonization. Certainly, stereotypes that have been implemented for so long and continue to persist affect how aspects of our society function. Stereotypes that have been maintained for so long undoubtedly affect the way we view black people, and how they see themselves. Stereotypes are so well-ingrained in our society that for the most part we no longer question why we believe them or how they came about or what purpose they serve. My artwork was created to confront the viewer with the same questions I’ve just proposed. My intention in creating this work was to ask the viewer to question if they themselves are helping to perpetuate and maintain negative stereotypes against blacks. These negative stereotypes are meant to reinforce an inferior identity of an entire group of people by maintaining white superiority. However, in order to fully understand the basis of stereotypes against blacks we have to begin by analyzing Europe’s first encounters with Africa.

Portugal first entered Africa in 1415 to exploit the rich gold mines of West Africa. Beginning in the 1460s, the Portuguese began enslaving Africans to work the gold mines. To broaden their conquest, the Portuguese occupied small islands off the West African coast (São Tome é Príncipe and Madeira) to farm and sent African slaves to the plantations. The success rate was so high for these plantations that Africans were sought after to work on similar undertakings in the Americas. African slaves were preferred over Amerindians and immigrant Europeans because of their “unique adaptability.” As a result of this European-African contact which was once a legitimate trade of gold was replaced by the trade of slaves. Africa is a rich continent with a climate that ranges across the spectrum (desert, rainforest, tundra, etc). Many African economies were based around agriculture as opposed to Europe’s economy that was growing around the trade of goods and the production of raw materials. Therefore this “unique adaptability” was really no more than a culture of people that already knew how to farm many types of land in varied climates. The Africans ability to work with the land was used against them in the initial justification of the slave trade, as they were then seen as a culture of people who were instinctively good laborers of the land as if this was some innate ability in African people. Africa is a huge continent with a
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lot of people, so the supply of slaves seemed endless and the means the Europeans used to acquire the slaves was simple. They induced warfare between neighboring tribes and then traded the leaders of the tribes guns for people. As long as they could maintain conflict in Africa, they would never have to worry about obtaining slaves to trade. Once the Transatlantic Slave Trade was established, stereotypes against blacks were promulgated in order to justify the enslavement and horrible treatment of black people. The Europeans being as civilized and Christian as they were could not justify this horrible treatment of another human being. They therefore disassociated Africans from all qualities that are considered human and reidentified them with qualities that are considered degenerate/animalistic/childish/nonhuman. They were then able to maintain and justify the slave trade for themselves for the next 270 years (1470-1750).

During and after the infamous Transatlantic Slave Trade myths about blacks were perpetuated by the media in order to maintain white superiority. There were gross examples of stereotypes being developed during this time such as dark skin was associated with impishness, deviancy and having a higher tolerance for pain; larger buttocks were associated with lasciviousness and a tendency to engage in a life of prostitution (This belief, in particular, was used by white masters in order to justify raping black women. If black women, for their shape and skin tone, could be seen as lascivious beings who always desired men, then there was no harm in raping them because it was in their nature to always want it, to even use it to tempt white men to rape them often starting in their preteens. Black women slaves were also bred, denied the right to marry and witnessed their children being sold off. Black women had no rights over their own bodies.), larger genitalia was also associated with hypersexuality, tightly curled hair was associated with madness, and other ethnic qualities were plainly seen as unattractive or animalistic. The last of these stereotypes was perpetuated to maintain racial cleanliness. If features found mostly in West African blacks (who were the Africans that made up most of the slave population) were seen as grotesque, then it was less likely that there would be racial mixing of blacks and whites. In my prints though I don’t give my characters the ethnic qualities that are associated with black people, like darker skin, a wider bottom, and facial features that are often associated with black people. Instead the characters’ stance and attitude in the prints are substitutes for what the physical qualities they lack
symbolize. The attitude of the characters are confrontational, or childish, or selfish, or aggressive, or overtly sexual. Since the characters are masked and acting out stereotypes perpetuated against blacks, I give them the same attitude that might also be placed on black people in each instance of the individual prints. The image of a white male (figure of authority) being painted in black or watermelon face, acting out stereotypes placed on blacks also further emphasizes the history and nature of stereotypes. It is all about perception and making arbitrary associations in order to make someone seem inferior to the norm, which is the majority rule/white America. An example of this would be Fig. 1, When I Grow Up: The Ascribed Black American Dream. In this print I’m playing with the idea of what the American Dream as Martin Luther King Jr. saw it and how immigrants coming to America see it versus the expectations that America has for the different racial groups that are here (particularly black people). Based on the background of the stereotypes that I’ve listed above, one might conclude the expectations for blacks in America weren’t set very high. I feel that unfortunately this mentality has survived to present day. While today such stereotypes are focused more on class than race; it’s hard to deny that class and race in America aren’t interrelated and knotted together as a consequence of America’s treatment of blacks throughout its history. During the Victorian Era, when the slave trade ended, and Darwin’s theory of evolution was gaining tremendous scientific backing and recognition, stereotypes against black would also gain scientific backing. Post Darwin’s theory of evolution, the eugenicists movement in the west would conduct studies and develop theories about groups of people based on race and physical qualities. After the discovery of the double helix, eugenicists would begin applying genetics to some of their theories about different ethnic groups. The most well known scientists for developing theories of how physical qualities determined a person’s innate character is Francis Galton (cousin of Charles Darwin), who coined the term “eugenics.” ‘Eugenics’ literally translates from Greek into, “well-born, of good stock.” Galton cited findings from Darwin’s work to support his own research, in the 19th century. He was especially influenced by Darwin’s published works, On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favoured Races in The Struggle for Life and The Descent of Man. Darwin himself evinced the kind of hierarchical understanding of human cultures on an ascending scale
from primitive to civilized societies that was typical of Victorian anthropology. As put by Sarah Winter in her book, *Darwin’s Saussure: Biosemiotics and Race in Expression*, “For Darwin . . . it appeared reasonable to think that, just as natural selection produced Homo sapiens from animal forebears, so natural selection was the primary agent responsible for producing civilized races out of barbarity,” and thus that this general theory “did not disturb the assumption in race biology of a great [hierarchical] chain of races.”

Eugenic practices include the systematic elimination of so-called ‘undesirable’ biological traits and the use of selective breeding to ‘improve’ the characteristics of an organism or species. As stated in the previous paragraph, the basis for the practice of eugenics begins with Darwin’s theory of evolution. In simple terms, Darwin’s theory is like a pyramid, with all things leading to the end result, the civilized white man. If there is only one humankind with no distinction in race, gender, or background, then it would mean all humans are equal. It would mean that we wouldn’t rank people based on their culture and how it differs from that of western culture, with western culture being the most civil. Looking at people in this manner has created a lot of strife in how we see one another. This has created differences based on cultural behavior and so we rank that behavior as being *civil* or *savage*; and so all thing stemming from civil and savage culture are looked at in the same manner whether it’s art, religious practices, or industry. So, while Darwin was writing to justify his theory of evolution, he was also justifying racism or ethnocentricity by not approaching his subject matter ethically or from a true anthropological standpoint, without bias. But we might can see that the time period Darwin was developing his theory (the Victorian Era, 1837-1901) wouldn’t have allowed this sort of approach to be assimilated into the scientific culture. It would have been going completely against the train of thought for that time period, aside from the fact that he was developing a theory of evolution when only a naturalist approach to differences of species was acceptable. The theory of evolution was developed before the woman’s suffrage movement and well before the civil rights movement, when white men made the laws and white male superiority had to be maintained and justified. Darwin’s ‘pyramid’ theory during this time meant that he was ‘finding’ differences between races and genders, always deeming them as inferior to the white male. While Darwin
maintains that we all evolved from the same source, he sees each race/subspecies as having evolved with varying degrees of intellectual and social or moral faculties. By reading the original works of Darwin himself, direct comparisons can be made with today’s eugenic thoughts and theories to determine the connection between Darwin’s theories and today’s eugenic movements. For instance, in The Descent of Man, Chapter VII, Darwin addresses whether or not he believes that difference races are in fact different species, and what the hierarchy may be. He also classifies people from different races as civil or savage in his writings. In this chapter of The Descent of Man, Darwin is quoted as writing:

> When civilised nations come into contact with barbarians the struggle is short, except where a deadly climate gives its aid to the native race. Of the causes which lead to the victory of civilised nations, some are plain and simple, others complex and obscure. We can see that the cultivation of the land will be fatal in many ways to savages, for they cannot, or will not, change their habits. New diseases and vices have in some cases proved highly destructive; and it appears that a new disease often causes much death, until those who are most susceptible to its destructive influence are gradually weeded out; and so it may be with the evil effects from spirituous liquors, as well as with the unconquerably strong taste for them shewn by so many savages. It further appears, mysterious as is the fact, that the first meeting of distinct and separated people generates disease. Mr. Sproat, who in Vancouver Island closely attended to the subject of extinction, believed that changed habits of life, consequent on the advent of Europeans, induces much ill health. He lays, also, great stress on the apparently trifling cause that the natives become “bewildered and dull by the new life around them; they lose the motives for exertion, and get no new ones in their place.”

> … it is almost a matter of indifference whether the so-called races of man are thus designated, or are ranked as species or sub-species; but the latter term appears the more appropriate.

Now why it is not considered barbaric to conquer and disturb an otherwise peaceful and solemn nation is beyond me, but this is how Darwin describes the differences of man according to race. After studying these writings it became clearer how European contact and treatment of African nations could lead Darwin to label cultures as civil or savage. These divisions alone would justify the cruel treatment of these nations by the Europeans, as well as a reason to keep races from interbreeding. Looking at people in this very crude manner led to scientific research hoping to define why some nations are civil and some savage based upon a person’s constitution, self-awareness, and intellectual faculties…eugenic studies. To
divide people in this manner, and to stereotype them as being this way or that based upon identity or cultural differences is the basis for my work. The symbolism, the undertones, the overtones, and the attitude of my prints stem from eugenic beliefs about people’s differences and how these difference affect how a multicultural society functions. Over the years I have become personally fascinated with the reasoning behind how our modern day society functions, and how it looks across the scale, across the Mason Dixie line, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Across the board whether you live in the South or the North there’s no denying how certain laws came into being, how we divide ourselves on all levels (education, social settings, neighborhoods, etc), how we treat each other overall, and even how to look or act a certain way is considered normal and everything else abnormal with no reasoning other than it must fall within the boundaries of what is American culture (excluding behavior that is deemed harmful or violent). American culture is based on European culture. My works deals with how we view people and how we treat them based upon them having breached the societal norm of being white. How do we as a culture treat non-whites? How do we as a western culture view non-whites? Historically? Modern day? Darwin’s view and today’s view hasn’t changed all that much I think; and this is the issue my work addresses. My belief is that if you look at punitive crime measures you can see how they are racial bias. If you look at the failing public schools (which have been failing for quite some time now), you can see who that affects. If you look at how we segregate where we live and the effects thereof (neighborhood funding, neighborhood schools, which types of businesses you are surrounded with, gated communities, etc), you can see who exactly they affect. My prints address the underlying causes of why society views black people in a mostly unfavorable light and the effects thereof.

Eugenic studies became very popular in America at the turn of the 20th century and was thought of as a true science. Eugenicists mostly focused on how different physical qualities could lead to clues about a person’s aptitude, tendency to violent behavior, tolerance to pain and if they were sexually discriminate. Most of what they determined their findings on was skin color, followed by the overall shape of someone’s body (usually associated with an ethnicity), and finally facial features (also associated with a person’s ethnicity). True modern-day eugenicists (though they now go under the name, social biologists)
have done numerous studies linking race with someone’s ability to learn and retain information, and linking race to an inclination to crime or violent behavior. Today the word that is now associated with the Nazi sterilization and genocide program of the 1930s and 40s is cleverly disguised as the term ‘genetic engineering.’ Though the practice of genetic engineering (or genetic genocide) is less focused on race than its predecessor, it is still used to weed out undesirable traits in an unborn child; and media portrayals of what is desirable is based on a discriminatory western standard of beauty and ideals that have for so long demonized and mocked the physical qualities most often found in blacks. Genetic Inferiority: 

Darwin’s Theory of White Superiority and Black Unintelligence (Fig. 4) focuses specifically on the eugenic ideas found in the book The Bell Curve by Richard J. Hernstein and Charles Murray, and also on Darwin’s theory of the evolution of race and sex found in his book The Descent of Man. In The Bell Curve it’s argued that gaps in IQ test scores between whites, blacks, and latinos may be something that is beyond those groups control. They argue that intelligence (based on IQ test scores) is genetically determined by race. It’s worth noting that the modern day IQ test was developed in 1912 by Stanford professor, Lewis Terman who based the test structure on Galton’s theory of ‘genetic superiority.’ This is yet another example of how a well propagated message such as Galton’s theory of racial superiority influenced something that has become standard in our society like measuring aptitude with an IQ test. In Galton’s book Hereditary Genius he devotes a chapter to race, and is quoted as saying:

…the negro race is by no means wholly deficient in men capable of becoming good factors, thriving merchants, and otherwise considerably raised above the average of whites—that is to say, it can not unfrequently supply men corresponding to our class C, or even D. It will be recollected that C implies a selection of 1 in 16, or somewhat more than the natural abilities possessed by average foremen of common juries, and that D is as I in 64—a degree of ability that is sure to make a man successful in life. In short, classes E and F of the negro may roughly be considered as the equivalent of our C and D—a result which again points to the conclusion, that the average intellectual standard of the negro race is some two grades below our own.

All types of media have been and are continually used to propagate messages and spread ideas across nations. Historically and presently this is how it’s been done; from broadsides to newspapers to
blogs. These are all mediums used to broadcast ideas. The media serves to reinforce ideas that we are constantly being bombarded with by them, the media. It’s like a catchy song stuck on repeat in the broken tape deck; after a while you’re able to recite all of the words, the song doesn’t seem offensive now that you’ve been exposed to it over and over, it becomes a part of your persona in a way. For example, most Westerners believe communism is wrong, Africa is violent, Arabs are terrorists, Irishmen drink too much, Asians are naturally smarter, and Canadians are friendly. Where did these stereotypes come from and why do we expect this behavior from these cultural groups? Most of them come from how these different groups have been portrayed time and time again in advertising campaigns or through the national news media as part of an initiative to push an agenda that would’ve received resistance otherwise. Though there are many avenues the media uses to circulate news, most people receive information about the world around them via their local news sources (local television news/newspaper). Most cities have more than one local news station and in order for each of those stations to remain competitive and on the air, they must sell ad space during their running. In order to sell ad space, they have to get you to watch their news over their competitors’ news. There are a few things local news media use in order to make that happen. In order to conjure interest in their stories over their competitors, they have to sell you stories that are more exciting, interesting and gripping, and this is where the crime aspect of the news comes in I think. Crime is sensational, personal, tragic, emotional, and far removed from the 9-5 white-collar worker watching the 6 o’clock news. In our local news media it is propagated that crime has a color, crime is violent, and crime can strike at any time. So, if we already know what the perpetrator is most likely to resemble (young to middle aged black man), we can avoid crime. Statistically, most homicides are committed by whites and most petty/nonviolent crimes are committed by minorities per US capita. But a study conducted in the late 1990s showed that during the crime segment of the news when no perpetrator is shown and the unwitting participants in the study were asked if they could recall the race of the offender, 70% of people recalled the offender as black. This further qualifies my belief that we are conditioned by the media to associate violent crime with black people. In my most colorful prints with the quilt pattern behind them I’m using bold catchy colors, varying qualities of line, subtle symbolism, with
titles that explain the pieces and a sound element that set their tone. I feel that my own use of bold graphic and color will catch the viewer’s attention in the same way news stations use graphics…it makes it sensational. But then the viewer puts on the headset, and hears my voice with words that set the tone of each piece in a manner that reflects that of an inner voice and an extreme viewpoint. These headsets reflect the extremely bias point of view I think the news media gives us. I’m hoping by using the same tactics as the media and placing them in an art setting where people tend to be more self-reflecting and self-aware will perhaps open the viewer to see how these same tactics are used by the people they gather information from. I’m not asking the viewer to change their source of information, and that we all listen to NPR or whatever. Rather I’m challenging them to sift through the information that is handed to them; to recognize any biases, and to be more informative about the person/station that is broadcasting this information. It would be the same as me telling you that for sure I knew midgets were became that way as a result of being exposed to toxic chemicals while in the womb. Midgetism is a mutation brought on by industrialization and the pollution produced thereof. Wouldn’t you want to know the source of my information, what research I’ve done, what other ideas I have, etc? The more information you have the better you can evaluate the information you are handed I think.

Another example of how the media promotes negative stereotypes against blacks would be their misuse of information the leads us to associate black women with welfare dependency, while no one has suggested that mothers taking advantage of similar programs suffer from ‘dependency’ (Most of the women on welfare are white, but there is a larger number, proportionate to the black population, of black women on welfare). There is no reason to treat families in similar situations in differing ways. The reason we have negative feelings towards welfare reform and indifferent feelings towards similar programs is because of how closely we associate it with black women, and how black women are seen in our society; especially impoverished black women or black women on welfare I think. As mentioned earlier black women have been classified throughout history…as the lustful woman, ugly, hypersexual, a breeding machine, whose only cares revolve around herself and her sexual escapades. These well-ingrained ideas we have about black women are still manifested today. So there’s no wonder the general public associates
welfare payments to single mothers with the mythical black “welfare queen” who deliberately becomes pregnant in order to increase the amount of her monthly check. The welfare queen represents laziness, chicanery and economic burden all wrapped up in one powerful image (see Fig. 5). These stereotypes held against black women also make her seem like an unfit mother. The idea that black women are unfit mothers is supported with programs like Planned Parenthood (founded in 1916) brought about by Margaret Sanger. Today it’s commonly thought that Planned Parenthood was a triumph of the Woman’s Suffrage Movement, but it originally began as a program put into inner city neighborhoods as a way to curb to black reproduction. Sanger who used eugenic rhetoric in order to get funding for her program is even quoted as saying, “More children from the fit and less from the unfit—that is the chief issue of birth control.” The result of how the public feels towards “welfare queens” has been that some states mandate that welfare recipients undergo voluntary sterilization in order to receive further welfare benefits (It’s worth noting that Louisiana Representative, John LaBruzzo is trying to mandate voluntary sterilization for all welfare recipients). These same requirements are not for families receiving other forms of government assistance.

Further evidence that black women are stereotyped as not being fit for motherhood was apparent in the media coverage and outrage over ‘crack babies’ at the onset of Ronald Reagan’s War on Drugs campaign. Soon-to-be black mothers were routinely tested for crack in hospitals prior to giving birth. If crack was detected, they could serve up to 10 years in jail and most definitely their children were taken away from them. The media soon began to blame black mothers for bringing these ‘crack babies’ into the world. It was felt they would no doubt be a burden on society and would never be able to reach their full potential. [Later studies on children whose mothers did crack during their pregnancy showed that these children were in no way deficient.] The media cried out for the public to feel sad for these babies. The public in return wanted something done about this seeming crack epidemic among black women. They wanted punishment for these women who were putting their babies at risk, and punishment (not treatment or rehabilitation) did come for those mothers who tested positive for crack. Crack is a street drug done most commonly by the inner city poor. Crack is a derivative of cocaine, which is a drug often associated
with the wealthy. There are women who do heroine, pot, drink alcohol, and smoke cigarettes during their pregnancies; all of which put their babies in similar or greater risk (especially smoking), and there was little or no testing for these substances in pregnant women, and consequently no punishment, at least none as severe as that for the ‘crack mama.’ Thus a time when it may have seemed the media was crying out to protect the babies of these ‘crack mamas’ they were really propagating a message that punished black women for having children. If drug testing of all kinds were run on all women, then there would be no doubt this mandate was looking out for the best interests of all unborn babies. In my print (Fig. 6) *The Unfit Mommy and Her Spawn Will Wreck Your Comfortable Suburban Existence* I speak to the discriminatory associations propagated about black mothers. This image portrays the stereotype of a young teenage mother whose unborn will surely put the children of the pretty, well-kept white mother at risk (whether violently, financially, etc). Whether it’s because the black mother is a crack whore, a teenager, or selfish she is surely to have babies that will only be a burden and a menace to society. The stereotypes developed against black mothers are embodied in this print.

There are further points of interests with historical backing that support the meat of my artwork that I want to touch on. Stereotypes of blacks associated with crime, motherhood, and welfare that I have just explained are demonstrated in three of my large scale pieces, *Crime has a Color* (Fig. 2), *Welfare Queen* (Fig. 5), and *The Unfit Mommy and Her Spawn Will Wreck Your Comfortable Suburban Existence* (Fig. 6). The intent of these pieces and the others presented during my MFA show is to challenge the viewer’s beliefs they have about the world around them. I’m asking the viewer to examine why he/she has taken certain things to be known truths, without questioning the origins of these beliefs, especially if they are derogatory towards an entire group of people. I’m questioning the viewer about their own interests or stakes in maintenance of white superiority, or put not so offensively, black inferiority. It did not end with the Woman’s Suffrage Movement. It did not end with the Civil Rights Movement, and it certainly has not ended even with the election a black president. Imperialism is all America knows and it is in white America’s best interests to keep it that way, since they are the majority and they have power, money, etc. You can only stay on top by keeping others down. But why focus on
staying on top when the means used to get and stay there are rooted in evil? My feeling is that most people don’t even realize that they are willingly a part of a system whose goal is to maintain a superiority culture in America that is perpetuated and sustained by the media. Even well-meaning, highly educated people with liberal views fall prey to the messages the media has deep-seated in our culture from America’s inception onward. Some small modern day examples of this would be white flight movements all across America, living in gated communities in the middle of nowhere, sending your children to ‘safer’ private schools, etc. All of these things are born out of the unqualified fear of the “other.” These messages have worked so well, that it’s not just white people that fall victim to them, but all people, including black people. Black people themselves often act in a way that helps to reinforce white superiority. Take for instance, something small like most black women permanently straightening their hair; highly educated and/or wealthy black men marrying white women as a way to validate their new socioeconomic status; sending their own children to private school for fear of the influence of blacks with a lower socioeconomic status than themselves. I don’t think black people do these things out of self-hatred, rather they follow suit as a means to fit in. If they can associate themselves more closely with the majority rule, then they feel that maybe they will be seen in a more favorable light; they will have softened the things that associate blacks with negative stereotypes and therefore not be demonized for being black.

At this time I can’t offer any real solutions to the problem of racism, which is stereotyping people based on their skin color. Stereotyping people negatively is racist. Even some ‘positive’ stereotypes are racist, such as all blacks can sing. This ‘positive’ stereotype stems from the dawn of cinema and the myth of the blissfully ignorant, happy-go-lucky black person who is good at entertaining us with a song and dance. I’m not suggesting that all ‘positive’ qualities associated with black people are rooted in ignorance and negativity, but I am asking you to question the root of your beliefs when it comes to the treatment of and stereotypes against blacks in America. I guess all in all, that is the only solution I’m comfortable with offering in my effort to diminish the use of negative stereotypes against blacks. I know that I’m relying very heavily on the viewer to change the way they see things. My hope with this approach is that if and
when people begin to see things for what they really are, then together they will demand changes to discriminatory policies; taking in consideration the well-being of everyone in America. Things can only start looking up when we all start opening our eyes and facing an ugly truth that we can no longer live with or deny.


VITA

Katrina Andry received her bachelor’s degree in graphic design from Louisiana State University in 2004. Directly afterwards she lived and worked in New Orleans as a freelance designer until Hurricane Katrina devastated the city which forced her to move to Tampa, Florida for work. After soaking up much needed sun and time, she decided to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in printmaking. Once accepted into the program at Louisiana State University she braved herself for the humidity and climate to which she would once again have to become accustomed.