Convenient Camouflage

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CONVENIENT CAMOUFLAGE

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents Patricia Springer and Edmund Alleyne, and to my aunt Brenda Alleyne.
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ABSTRACT

Major influences in my work are most notably derived from the collages of Romare Bearden, paintings done by abstract expressionists Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, and the multidisciplinary practice of Rashid Johnson. This list of artists has been my influence for the past academic year as a result of personal research, some of which was conducted at the Museum of Modern Art, the TATE Modern in London and Musée du Louvre in Paris. My aim in my artwork and in this thesis is to change the perception of Black people, specifically Black men and boys, and to challenge stereotypes of Black masculinity.
INTRODUCTION

The term “outsider artist” usually refers to creative individuals who fall under the category of societal reject, which include persons in incarceration, orphanages and persons with mental illnesses. They tend to lack any formal art training, based on the institutionalization of the historical art canon.\(^1\) Take for example Kustom Kulture, which was greatly influenced by World War II and California’s blooming automobile production scene. Von Dutch’s pinstripe and decorative, custom-made flame designs, and “Big Daddy” Roth’s custom-made Beatnik Bandit are two notable examples of works done by artists who rejected art school, but were masters of their craft.

Therefore, the outsider artist seeks to create his or her own method of artistic language, often included in the formation of a new movement, which seeks to challenge the standards of the art historical canon. In this light, I propose the concept of “Convenient Camouflage.”

The concept of Convenient Camouflage is experimental in both theory and in practice, deriving from a personal longing for creative freedom, and to create a body of work that touches on a wide range of topics—the Caribbean, the African Diaspora, Christianity, Hip-Hop, gang violence, police brutality, migration, power, institutional racism, lived experience, and social change. It is also a showcase of the complexity and contradiction of the Black artist in a positive light. This concept is by no means an answer, but rather an attempt to raise difficult questions – and to bring the human-race together to take them head on. It is my aim to create a space for experiences often ignored by the Art-historical canon.

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Hip-Hop and rap music have played a vital role in the creating process as I often listen to these genres while I work. Convenient Camouflage’s ideals are influenced by the creative and lyrical genius of Compton rapper Kendrick Lamar. From his early stage name of K-Dot, to his current self-proclaimed nickname of Kung-Fu Kenny, Lamar has received numerous accolades over the course of his musical career, including twelve Grammy Awards. In addition, in 2016, Time Magazine named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world. In a line from his track “Ab-Souls Outro,” featuring fellow TDE (Top Dawg Entertainment) rapper Ab-Soul, of his first independent album *Section.80* (2011), Lamar declares:

See a lot of y’all don’t understand Kendrick Lamar because you wonder how I could talk about money, hoes, clothes, God, and history all in the same sentence. You know what all them things have in common? Only half of the truth, if you tell it. See I spent twenty-three years on this earth searching for answers, till one day I realized I had to come up with my own.

Kendrick Lamar is never embarrassed about embracing his roots or growing up in the Projects in Compton. Lamar’s statement emphasizes the need for representation, staying true to one’s self, and transforming the narrative of the Black male. In *Bronzed Heads of Youthful Heroes* (Fig. 1) young Black boys, adolescents and adult men are depicted in a damaged state reminiscent of Greek marble sculpture.
Since the arrival of the first slave ship to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, Blacks, minorities, and African American history have notoriously been tied to a system of oppression and still today, remain misrepresented by the media and the American society at large. Blacks have been on the “outside” from the very beginning of the conceived idea of “race,” which is why the art of Black artists can be considered outsider art. Attention will now be turned to the work of prominent black painters from as early as the Harlem Renaissance to the Post-black movement.

To highlight this, Paul C. Taylor in his article entitled *Post-black, Old Black*, reveals that artists of African descent have “historically been marginalized and left
outside of the general discourse of Western art history.” According to Taylor, post-black art, refers to a generation of post-Civil Rights artists who were “in search of a language through which they could explore their artistic interests and identities.” Thus the term “post-black” was a medium created by Black artists for Black artists. They sought to force not only themselves, but also others of various backgrounds, into the world of art, while remaining equally grounded through their experiences as persons of African descent. Therefore, it can be argued that artists of the post-black art movement can also be categorized as outsider artists, due in part to race. Artists such as David Hammons, Mark Bradford, and, Rashid Johnson not only share qualities related to questions of identity and black history, but also in regard to the aesthetic and linguistic references which create a space for experiences. These of which, often are ignored by the art-historical canon. Before we analyze the works of these artists, it is imperative for one to first understand the art practice of African American artists of the Civil Rights era.

W.E.B Du Bois, one of the most prominent figures of the 20th century, in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), exposed the material causes of racism and explained the effects that racism has on Black identity. He believed that at the beginning of the 20th century, that the laws and society who prevented Negroes from achieving equality in a post-slavery era would continue to pose a problem for Black identity. He argued that as a result of this, Negroes and Whites in the United States were separated by a ‘color line.’ He believed that the color line did much more than simply deny Negroes equal access to

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3 Ibid, 625
4 Ibid, 625
jobs, education and opportunity but that; it weighed so heavily on their souls that it prevented them from achieving their potential as human beings. “The veil,” a term used to describe the way in which racism made it difficult for Whites to see Negroes as true Americans, and likewise for Negroes to see themselves in any other way than how they were portrayed by Whites. His theory of a “double-consciousness,” where the Negro has two conflicting souls, is the result of wearing a veil—the split identity that Blacks feel as they attempt to be both American and African in a White society where one identity is viewed inferior to the other. Using myself as an example, I was born and raised on the island of Barbados. At the age of sixteen, I migrated to the U.S. in search of better opportunities. Today, I am now an American citizen, yet I am compelled to maintain my identity as Barbadian. Du Bois’ solution to this contradiction would be a merging of the conflicted, double selves into a better and truer self, by fulfilling the needs of my role as a Barbadian and an American. He called for White society to “lift the veil”—recognizing the equality of African Americans.

“The Civil Rights era and its aftermath challenged both the Du Boisian and the Lockeian (All men are created equal, and have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness) approaches to African American art. Similarly, Black Power not only deployed visual culture for political purposes, but also demanded that artists and audiences rethink the definition of beauty, furthermore art itself.”

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6 Ibid, 2
8 Ibid, 3
Richard Schur, Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Drury University. After studying the images of the “African-derived aesthetics” of Aaron Douglas, the “Father of African American art,” and Jacob Lawrence, Schur argues that the works of these artists failed to challenge the ideologies of white supremacy.¹⁰

Perhaps, this may be due to the fact that these artists produced history paintings, which sought to portray and document the life of the African-American in those days, as opposed to blatant promotion of the enrichment of Civil Rights or racial equality.

Aaron Douglas is well known for fusing his inspiration from biblical history with the social issues that plagued his time. *Let My People Go*, currently on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, is a prime example of such works. According to the museum’s website, Douglas’ painting depicts the biblical story of Moses being ordered by God, to lead the Israelites out of Egypt; fleeing the Pharaoh’s rule in Egypt. Similarly, the MET states that clergymen, abolitionists and politicians from the nineteenth-century through the Civil Rights era believe this biblical story to be directly associated with the oppression of African Americans.¹¹ This can be seen, particularly because the facial features of the flat, silhouetted figures in Douglas’ painting are more identifiable as Africans, as opposed to stereotypical Bible character depictions. Although he contrasts historical issues such as the Pharaoh’s reign in Egypt with the social issues of his time; it can be argued that this painting merely takes a small step toward an attitude toward black empowerment but is none the less progression.

Similarly, it can be argued that the mood of Jacob Lawrence’s paintings fall into a

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comparable category. At just the age of twenty-three, Lawrence would complete his most renowned series of paintings. In 1941 he completed sixty small tempera paintings, with included text captions on the Great Migration. The Great Migration was the multi-decade mass movement of about six million African Americans from the rural South to the urban Northeast, Midwest and West, which started around 1915 and lasted until the early 1970’s. Panel 58 from his Migration Series entitled In the North the Negro had better educational facilities is an example of a piece that stands as a landmark in the history of African American art and “a crucial example of the way in which history painting was radically re-imagined in the modern era.” Other Civil Rights era artists such as Charles White created images that also demonstrated the humanity of African Americans as a means of breaking down the barriers of segregation.

White relied on tragic modes to narrate or visualize African American experiences, to lift up the black race, and to challenge white supremacy. For example, White’s The Contribution of the Negro to American Democracy a mural he painted at Hampton University, depicts a number of prominent social reformers, abolitionists and freedom writers, some of which include Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Marian Anderson. The idea of history painting particularly depicted in the works of Douglas, Lawrence and White, emphasized the struggles of romantic heroes against a racist society.

Hammons was born in 1943 in Springfield, Illinois. His family later moved to Los Angeles, where he began his formal artistic training. As previously mentioned, as a student at the Otis College of Art and Design, he studied with Charles White. White's socially driven aesthetic had a strong impact on young Hammons’ perspective, as it was a time defined by social injustice, political activism, and a focus on civil rights.  

In relation to White – and Black artists previously mentioned – Hammons primarily addresses issues relevant to his identity as an African American. To this day, he often regards his art as social and political commentary: an active response to his immediate surroundings. What separates Hammons from White is his application process.

*American Costume* is one of a number of works that Hammons produced from the late 1960s through 1975. This process involved the smearing of his body, hair, and clothes with a greasy substance, such as butter. He then pressed himself onto the picture surface, very reminiscent of a performance of sorts. Subsequently, he would sprinkle the marked outline with chalk or graphite so as to clearly render the bodily impression. Hammons reproduced his own face in the image by pressing it directly onto the paper. The hair and collar were created from his thumbprints and sometimes used the residual traces of fibrous material, such as fur, to represent clothing. The end result then, consists

of a variation of textured areas, indicating hair and pieces of clothing, which help to frame the outlined facial features.\textsuperscript{17}

The title \textit{American Costume} is also essential to Hammons’ intentions and adds to the overall success of the work. In conjunction with the mark making, it adds a sense of tension. “The word ‘costume’ suggests something artificial or masked, as well as the temporary adoption of a non-quotidian or ‘exotic’ identity. The adjective ‘American,’ with its mainstream, patriotic overtones, has critical implications, as if Hammons wanted to suggest that white viewers might see this figure as somehow outside their understanding of American-ness.”\textsuperscript{18} Therefore, a work such as this, successfully, and intentionally “draws attention to the exclusion of blacks from the social privileges enjoyed by most white Americans.”\textsuperscript{19} Hammons’ rejection of the paintbrush and other traditional tools and materials associated with canonical fine art enables identification with the art object by black audiences, who can see their own social experiences reflected in his media and subject matter. Hammons no doubt paved the way for the next generation of artists, from Jean-Michael Basquiat and other African American artists, who were more concerned with shifting the tone and content of Civil Rights and Black

\textsuperscript{17} Raymond, Hernández-Durán. “American Costume, 1970 by David Hammons,” \textit{Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies, Vol. 25, No. 1}, Modern and Contemporary Art: The Lannan Collection at The Art Institute of Chicago (1999), pp. 42

\textsuperscript{18} Richard, Schur. 2007. “Post-soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Art”. \textit{African American Review} 41 (4). [Indiana State University, Saint Louis University, African American Review, African American Review (St. Louis University)]; 642

Power strategies. This was the idea behind the creation of *Sometimes I just Sit and Pray* (Fig. 2) and *All we do is run... feel like I’m on the Damn track team.* (Fig. 3)

Fig. 2
John S.E. Alleyne
*Sometimes I just Sit and Pray*
2018
Enamel, spray paint, and acrylic ink on paper, mounted on wood

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Kendrick Lamar declares himself to be neither on the inside nor the outside of the world, but in the “dead center, looking around.” This can be viewed as an analogy for the Black graffiti artist who looks to “tagging” as a means of showing ownership. The graffiti
artist tagging is a style of graffiti often done by members of street gangs, where the “tagger” predominately uses spray paint to repeat a single symbol or series of symbols to mark their territory.

Revisiting the term “post-black,” Rhelma Golden, now Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, NY claimed to have coined the term in the late 1990s. She would later explain this in detail in an exhibition catalogue for the museum’s 2001 exhibition of Freestyle. During this time, Goldman curated the exhibition, which included twenty-eight emerging artists of African American descent. She defined post-black art as a movement which includes artists who are “adamant about not being labeled ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.” Two of the artists in the Freestyle show were Mark Bradford and Rashid Johnson. For Bradford, it was at Freestyle that he made his New York debut. In Strawberry, he implemented perm endpaper scraps mostly used in hairdressing. Bradford collected these scraps in the South Central, Los Angeles beauty salon where he worked as a stylist. The work, although layered with endpaper, is in many ways reminiscent of abstract painting. Bradford is known for admitting he was never comfortable working with materials from an art supply store. Instead, he purchases his supplies from Home Depot, and considers electric sanders to be his paintbrushes.

His process typically starts with a stretched canvas and builds up its surface with ten to fifteen layers of paper. These scraps are retrieved poster paper from billboards and advertisements, newsprint, reproductions, photographs, and printed texts that reflect the social context of his immediate surroundings. In between each layer, a coat of clear

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shellac is then applied. After reaching a certain density, he attacks the thick layers of paper with power sanders and other tools.

An example of this can be seen in *Kryptonite*, as the shaving exposes earlier layers, flashes of color, and unexpected juxtapositions. For this, he is often described as “an archeologist where as he works; he is constantly rediscovering the past.”

During the time of *Freestyle*, Rashid Johnson was twenty-four and had displayed three large-format portraits which were hand-brushed with mineral pigments of a homeless man, whom he had met in Chicago. Since then, many art critics view this as the pivotal moment that accelerated his career. According to Laura Hoptman, curator of the 2014 exhibition *Forever Now*, Johnson would later begin to create installations that would combine Afro-centric artifacts from his childhood, such as Shea butter and black soap. For example, *After Medium* is one of his works that involves the branding of wooden floors with the impression of a gun’s crosshairs.

It is here that Johnson borrows “imagery used by 1980s rap group Public Enemy, playing on the language of geometric abstraction and formalism’s presumed objectivity, while at the same time reinforcing the gun sight’s politically charged reference to both slave branding in the antebellum South and gun violence in urban America.”

For his *Cosmic Slop* series, Johnson employed a rich mixture of black soap and wax and poured it into a rectangular support, later inscribing it with a stick. Black soap was a typical, personal hygiene item used in his childhood household. Black soap, sometimes called African soap, is made from the ash of harvested plants and tree bark such as

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plantain, cocoa pods, palm tree leaves, and shea tree bark. It is generally used for clearing dark spots, eczema, razor bumps and eliminating blemishes. Johnson’s mark-making is reminiscent of the gestural markings of Cy Twombly. Inscribed with this dense mark-making, “Johnson merges the modernist tradition of the black monochrome with the cultural resonances of its unconventional materials.”

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The artworks included in my thesis exhibition attempt to bring the language of the streets to fine art. It is an exploration, examination, and embracement of the power and presence of Black masculinity, in a country that alternatively marginalizes fetishes and vilifies countless lives. The process of silk screening, tearing, cutting, pasting, scribbling, and “tagging” are meant to enact a sense of complexity, resulting in an uncanny familiarity that at its best feels appropriate in the process of creating. In addition, themes such as the Caribbean, African Diaspora, Christianity, Hip-Hop, and urban street culture reflect my creative process, and by proxy, reflect my lived experience.

Abstraction of image and surface is an attempt to de-stress stereotypes of the Black male. The images of the Black men and boys depicted in my work are derived from a series of photographs, which were taken inside local barbershops as hair was being cut. When being sat in a barber’s chair and wrapped in the barber’s cloth, you are cocooned in it; almost in a baby-like state, returning to one’s earliest self. There is a man, inches away from your neck with a blade. The barbershop is a place of delicacy, gentleness, a place of absolute trust— it is no wonder why men open up and express themselves. For Black men especially, it can be a place of counseling. Black men need some form of counseling, and it is my firm belief that my art can be used as a form of therapy not only for Black men and minorities, but all peoples.

In my work, I incorporate spray paint and repeating collage elements for their expressionist qualities. .... *And I’m Afraid that I have No Fear* (Fig. 4) is an example of this. Within this artwork, images of eyes and disfigured faces are repeatedly juxtaposed
in shapes resembling a cloud of smoke to emphasize a state of shock and agitation.

Stenciled spray paint and oil stick were applied to indicate an explosive quality.

Fig. 4
John S.E. Alleyne

.... And I'm Afraid that I have No Fear

2018

Enamel, spray paint, oil stick, and acrylic ink on paper, mounted on wood.

72 x 48in.
Tearing apart areas around the eyes, nose and face were emphasized so as to recreate the damaged body parts of Greek marble sculpture found in art historical books and numerous museums around the world. This act of tearing is meant to add a sense of complexity by not only describing the potential state of mind of the contemporary Black male, but to also compare him to the magnificence of Greek marble sculpture. I consider it my social responsibility as an artist to create works of art that are not solely aesthetically pleasing, nor for self-expression or self-therapy, nor to transform the conversation of the Black body but to contribute to the advancement of the human race.
CONCLUSION

In my opinion, although traditionally outsider artists tend to lack a formal education in the arts and are often mentally ill, it can be argued that post-black artists such as David Hammons, Mark Bradford and Rashid Johnson can be placed in the category of outsider. This is due primarily in part to their race. Because of this, I too could fall in the same category.

The Black artist is complex, and in some cases a contradiction, because Black people are complex. Whether using one’s own body as an application tool, or scrapped billboard paper from urban environments, or domestic items such as black soap and wax, these artists have redefined the notion of history painting, to facilitate a deeper conversation with viewers. Black viewers in particular can identify with the materials used and are given the opportunity to see their own social experiences reflected in the artwork and subject matter.

For clarification, first and foremost, I am a man. I am a Black man. I am not to be confused with being African American, because this is a social construct based upon a slave culture in the United States. Culturally, I identify as Barbadian-American, because I was born and grew up in Barbados, but I now live in the United States as a citizen of the U.S. Being an immigrant, it is imperative to my survival that I understand myself, and the place I currently live in. It is also my duty to understand how American society views someone who looks like me. Undoubtedly I am not confined to society’s limitations. Millennials are redefining the very notion of what it means to be Black. Rashid Johnson is a prime example. In an interview with The New York Times titled “Complexity and Contradiction: Black Artists,” Johnson states he does not want to have to participate in
the conversation (of Blackness) and he does not necessarily want to be removed from it to be embraced or considered an artist. To reiterate, I am complex and a contradiction because I am a Barbadian living in the United States. Therefore I must understand the place and context in which I live in.

However, it is my firm belief that an artist should personally, never box him or herself in. As I embark on the road to becoming a professional artist, art school has taught me the importance of critiques and studio visits. Most importantly, to let the critics say what they want. This philosophy enabled me to create They say that Heaven’s real . . . analyze my demise, I’d say I’m Super Anxious. (Fig. 5)
Fig. 5
John S.E. Alleyne
*They say that Heaven’s real . . . analyze my demise, I’d say I’m Super Anxious.*
2018
Enamel, spray paint, oil stick, and acrylic ink on paper, mounted on wood.
72 x 48in.
The world does not determine who I am as a person. Likewise, the art world does not determine who I am as an artist. I am a man and an artist. I am Black man; therefore I am also a Black artist. However, I am rooted in my Blackness, but not confined to it.

This philosophy is the workforce behind my creative process. Realistically, Convenient Camouflage incorporates some of the ideals of Post-Black, such as being rooted in Blackness, but having the right to not be directed by it. Convenient Camouflage is complex and contradictory in nature as it also embraces all ethnicities.

Convenient Camouflage is a method used to talk about lived experience.

It is a way to talk about the present and future, while simultaneously referencing the past.

It is rooted in, but not limited to identity, race, or gender.

It is complex.

It is a contradiction.

It is unapologetic.

It is repetitious.

It is a double-consciousness.

It is a protest.

It is non-violent.

It is a celebration.

It is not exclusive.

It is a critique.

It attempts to address fear, Christianity, and politics.

It is a visual and spoken language.

Emphasis is placed on ethnic hairstyles.
It is a process of creating, placing emphasis on experimentation.

It is surface, texture, and pattern.

It is an aesthetic, a style-- a means to explore the mundane.

It mirrors street culture and the urban landscape.

It is abstract, due in part, because all art is abstract.

It is the result of the effects of migration.

It is an exploration of what it means to feel displaced.

It is solidarity.

It is a coming of age.

It is emancipation from mental slavery.

It is derived from the Caribbean.

It is derived from the African diaspora.

It is a child of Hip-Hop, and a product of art history.

Convenient Camouflage is now.
REFERENCES


VITA

John Alleyne, born on the island Barbados, migrated to Brooklyn, NY at the age of sixteen. It was a major culture shock as he became greatly influenced by Hip-Hop culture, specifically street fashion and Graffiti. This transition greatly influenced his current paintings. In 2014 John received his BFA in Digital design from SUNY Potsdam in New York, and worked as a membership assistant at the Museum of Modern Art in New York before entering the Department of Studio Art at Louisiana State University. Upon completion of his Master’s, he will participate in the prestigious Ox-Bow Artist Residency in Saugatuck, Michigan.