

6-6-2018

That Survival Apparatus

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THAT SURVIVAL APPARATUS

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 Art

In

The School of Art

by
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B.F.A, University of Arkansas at Little Rock
August 2018

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee members Kelli Scott Kelley, Denyce Celentano, Dr. Solimar Otero, Kristine Thompson, and Scott Andresen. You have all help me grow as an artist during my time at LSU. To my family, Carlene and Roosevelt Fulton, Kimberly Bryant, my nieces, nephews, thank you for your endless support. To the amazing cohort of artist that I have had the pleasure of learning from and spending many nights in heated discussion over the three years, Eli Casiano, John Alleyne, Matthew Barton, thank you.

I dedicate this thesis to my cousin Boris Hamilton and to my grandmother Lillie Mae Bryant. Your memory has guided me along the way.

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Abstract

As a point of departure, I will be interpreting the poem “Mask” by Maya Angelou. By looking at its literal and interpretive meaning, I will explain how African diasporic fugitivity is reflected in my work. In my paper I will examine art historic and cultural indicators to explain my strategy within making. A part of this strategy uses media and imagery that is mostly familiar to me.

Part 1: Collaboration

My work examines the poem “Mask” by Maya Angelou. I was able to reflect more deeply on Dr. Angelou’s reading of “Mask” and how it was in conversation with or rather a continuation of the original poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar “We wear the Mask”.

“We Wear the Mask”¹
by Paul Laurence Dunbar

*We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.*

*Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.*

*We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!*

“The Mask”²
by Maya Angelou

*We Wear the mask that grins and lies.
It shades our cheeks and hides our eyes.
This debt we pay to human guile
With torn and bleeding hearts...
We smile and mouth the myriad subtleties.
Why should the world think otherwise
In counting all our tears and sighs.
Nay let them only see use while
We wear the mask.*

*We smile but oh my God
Our tears to thee from tortured souls arise
And we sing oh Baby doll, now we sing...
The clay is vile beneath our feet
And long the mile
But let the world think otherwise.
We wear the mask.*

*When I think about myself
I almost laugh myself to death.
My life has been one great big joke!
A dance that’s walked a song that’s spoke.
I laugh so hard HA! HA! I almos’ choke
When I think about myself.*

*Seventy years in these folks’ world
The child I works for calls me girl
I say “Ha! HA! HA! Yes ma’am!
For workings sake
I’m to proud to bend and
Too poor to break
So...I laugh! Until my stomach ache
When I think about myself.
My folks can make me split my side
I laugh so hard, HA! HA! I nearly died*

¹ Poetry Foundation. “We Wear the Mask.” POETRYFOUNDATION.org
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44203/we-wear-the-mask> (accessed Jun 2018)

² Facing History. “The Mask by Maya Angelou.” Facinghistory.org
<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/mask-maya-angelou> (accessed Jun 2018)

*The tales they tell sound just like lying
They grow the fruit but eat the rind.
Hmm huh! I laugh huh huh huh...
Until I start to cry when I think about myself
And my folks and the children.*

*My fathers sit on benches,
They're flesh count every plank,
The slats leave dents of darkness
Deep in their withered flank.
And they gnarled like broken candles,
All waxed burned profound.
They say, but sugar, it was our submission
That made your world go round.*

*There in those pleated faces
I see the auction block
The chains and slavery's coffees
The whip and lash and stock.*

*My fathers speak in voices
That shred my fact and sound
They say, but sugar, it was our submission
that made your world go round.*

*They laugh to conceal their crying,
They shuffle through their dreams
They stepped 'n fetched a country
And wrote the blues in screams.
I understand their meaning,
It could and did derive
For living on the edge of death
They kept my race alive
By wearing the mask! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha*

While creating this body of artworks, I found it important not to interpret the poem "Mask" as a literal interpretation that translates the poem to a visual space. Instead I wanted to think of the work as being in conversation with the previous poem, while also creating its own avenue for contemporary meaning. Much of this understanding came from relating characteristics of African diasporic poetry. Central to this artistic lineage is a fugitive methodology where-by things are not always understood through direct forms. They are suggestive. In the poem "Mask" there are two worlds where a smile is understood as a singular expression and another where the smile is an expression informed by personal and historical experience. The fugitive nature of the poem is the subject. In other poems, such as "new trouble man" written by Fred Moten, the fugitive nature of the poem is in the methodology by which the poem is written. The meaning of the poem is in its affect.

*“new trouble man”*³

By Fred Moten

*I come up hard, baby
new edge come up new up
hard, baby nobody taught
up hard I come
up hard, baby. I come
up hard, baby new edge
yeah aiihyeah
I come up hard, baby
mo’ daddy taught up
hard, baby come up cold
baby like scratches hard, sugar
space of skin
up hard, baby come up edge
yeah aiihyeah*

*I come apart, baby
arm shoot and raise
apart rule
breaks apart, baby I come apart, baby raise
and move this way, baby
do do do do dooooooh
come come come apart
baby I come
I’m
not just in my way, baby baby come up hard ain’t
gon’ let it seat me, babe
do do do do dooooooooooh*

Moten makes aware the improvisation of African Diasporic themes by understanding the original “Trouble Man” as a collaboration where-by he is cued to continue in his own interpretation. This interpretation carries over the syncopation of the original song written by Marvin Gaye⁴. In “new trouble man” Moten’s style is brought to the poem through his own particular manipulation of words. In effect, the poems posturing of sound and rhythm is a genius homage to the original by emphasizing the ways in which things are said, as opposed to what is said. Conditioning a different type of awareness where meaning is implied through structure as well as verse.

³ Moten, Fred. “New Trouble Man.” *Arkansas*. Wafer Books (Boston), 2000

⁴ YouTube. “Marvin Gaye Trouble Man.” YouTube.com
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbHeNkqRWtl> (accessed June 2018)

Similar to Maya Angelou's appropriation of Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem and Fred Moten's emulation of Marvin Gaye's song, I am reconstituting the imagery and ideas belonging to the first source of materials and adding counter levels of meaning. These counter levels of meaning centralize collaboration and interpretation.

In the prints, the body of the main figure is a silhouette. This silhouette is the white of the paper (Figure 1). The mouth is emphasized to allude to the poem "Mask". By using the poem and the original photography, my work creates a different context than the originals (Figure 1, Figure 2). This context thinks of the "Mask" and relates it to the imagery.



Figure 1. *Ha*. Lithograph. 2018. 10"x15".

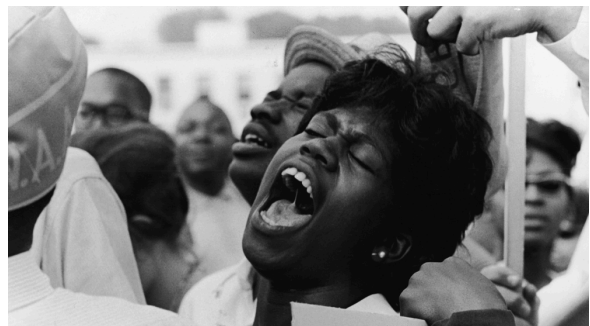


Figure 2. March on Washington in August 1963 [Express Newspapers/Getty Images/File]

The work is also seen in relation to the other paintings and prints in the show. In view of one another, the images translate different levels of emotion. When these images are seen together the range of expressions is more noticeable because they are placed near one another. This then becomes another form of collaboration that the images take on in the space

Part 2 The Fugitive disposition of Diaspora

Holding your counsel, not allowing people to know what you were really thinking. That permitted, for many, many families many, many, community, permitted survival. Take it one level deeper — and when we're thinking about the numinous, when we're thinking about the sacred, it always asks us to move more deeply, to head towards the depths — when one considers the deeper histories, where those of us who emerge from the social death of slavery, from that ontological precarity of slavery, there's also the fact that silence is not just our inheritance, but it's also a methodology....the racial regime of the West means that, for those of us of African descent, that being able to use secrecy, being able to use silence, was an important counterstrategy - Junot Diaz⁵

Much of my artwork places more, if not equal, importance on what you are not seeing as much as what you are seeing. These decisions came from a protective sensibility that placed the work in conversation with historical references within the African diasporic community. How these communities have navigated around and within public thought have provided a wealth of interest in how I wanted to create and display my work.

Call and response, for example, describes a musical structure where by enslaved people would sing to communicate information over large areas such as a field. These call and response songs were coded so that groups outside the enslaved community did not know their meaning. There are countless examples such as this that led me to think about the work that I was making in relation to how diasporic subjects have always been created. Meaning is not always explored using illustrative terms that translate ideas that are linear and easily accessed within the imagery. Instead, I was much more interested in how examples such as call and response could suggest a layered meaning. This came from choosing sources from different archives that were old and new and formulating different strategies that related to the poem. Because they were made differently the imagery registers in different ways throughout the gallery space.

In the works on canvas, I thought about the act of *décollage* as a means of liberating the images from their previous form and how they could be over looked in a gallery space in relation to the white space

⁵ Tippet, Krista. "Radical Hope Is Our Best Weapon" Interview with Junot Díaz. *On Being*, September 14, 2017

surrounding them (Figure 5). They act as a foil for the other black and white imagery. Not necessarily bound by the square format, the acrobatic arrangement of the fragmented images relates a weightlessness that is implied by the idea of cut magazine images. Understanding each image as an image within the painting allows for a mobility that refers to the subject of African diaspora, which is open ended. The ideas behind why they are or what they are isn't clear, but what is clear is their agency to exist and be whatever they want.



Figure 3. *Ascension (install)*. Watercolor and absorbent ground on canvas. 2018.

The aesthetic look of these pieces shared a kinship to the *décollage* art movement in Europe during the 1960. The *décollage* artists used ripped pieces of posters to make art. These rips were left to be seen when collaged onto another surface (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Mimmo Rotella. *With a Smile*. Printed Paper on Canvas. 1962.

The act of tearing reflected the transgression of the artists⁶. In my work I am using painting and using a large area of whitespace instead of newspapers and posters. The kinship for me came with what the act of tearing could mean as a measure to activate the secondary context the images would be placed in. The materiality of the magazine clippings transmits a liberated quality to the image. Similar to décollage artist Mimmo Rotella, the act of removal brought about for me the feeling of the time “to tear posters down from the wall was the sole compensation, the only means of protest against society that had lost its appetite for change and transformation”⁷.

⁶ Tate Modern. “Mimmo Rotella: With a Smile 1962.” TATE.org
<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rotella-with-a-smile-t12854> (accessed April 2018)

⁷ Tate Modern. “Mimmo Rotella: With a Smile 1962.” TATE.org
<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rotella-with-a-smile-t12854> (accessed April 2018)

Part 3: Not a Part of the Archive

I am reminded how liberation, joy and pain are experiential. They are not necessarily belonging to the archive, but still are a part of the archive. They are fugitive because in their resistance to be pinned down, their meaning is altered. It is in their in-between-ness that one understands the ephemeral sense of the existence of liberation, joy, and pain. In the essay “Fugitive from a Chain Store” on the work of Ellen Gallagher, Robin D. G. Kelley explains how black children on the South side of Chicago defaced books that had samba characters in them⁸. The act was fugitive because of the quickness to which they defaced the books and left no trace of whom altered the text. Kelley compares this act to Ellen Gallagher’s use of complex sensorial signifiers to inform us of the complexity of information the artist is putting forth in her work.

“Her wig ladies are fugitives, conscripts from another time and place liberated from the old musty, yellowed “race” magazines of the past”....”In much of her previous work, for example, she draws/paints/builds on penmanship paper-it will darken with time.”-Robin D. G. Kelley⁹

Gallagher’s alterations make us aware of how these images exist in the archive.

Gallagher’s use of repetition and altered elements transform hidden attributes of the original photograph into a more pointed aesthetic that makes one aware of the suggestive racial schema of these images, transforming them and creating new meaning (Figure 7)¹⁰.

⁸ Kelley, Robin D.G.. “Fugitive from a Chain Store.” *Preserve*. Des Moines Art Center, 2001

⁹ Kelley, Robin D.G.. “Fugitive from a Chain Store.” *Preserve*. Des Moines Art Center, 2001

¹⁰ Kelley, Robin D.G.. “Fugitive from a Chain Store.” *Preserve*. Des Moines Art Center, 2001



Figure 5. Ellen Gallagher. *Coral Cities*. Watercolor. 2007.

In my piece “Black Radical Nerd” I am placing the fictional images of Steve Urkel, Darryl Walker (Blankman), and Geordi La Forge from Star Trek into books either written or about non-fictional African-American leaders such as Malcolm X., Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Dr. W.E.B Dubois (Figure 8). The commentary of the two images together brings to light the radical nature these images possessed for me as a child growing up in the nineties. This piece relates to the poem in two ways. I have emphasized the smile or the mouth in the work and secondly the humor within the piece hides the radical nature to which these images have shaped the landscape of how the black male image is seen on television or even more importantly, how black males see themselves. Smile or humor acts as a mask for a multifaceted narrative to be applied. This narrative implies that there is some connection due to the placement of the two seemingly disparate images and materials, but the title and the framing of the books suggest a conversation that allows for the two to speak to one another. Through their juxtaposition may appear to be a radical gesture, in my own personal archive they are a part of the same conversation.



Figure 6. *Black Radica Nerd*. Graphite and Found Books. 2018.

Artist Edgar Arceneaux alludes to a similar idea of memory being an archive that creates a contradictory outcome when confronted outside of the self. In an on-going installation “Drawings of Removal” Arceneaux draws and redraws on the gallery walls (Figure 9, 9b). Throughout the course of the exhibit the work is being made and reconfigured. It is not clear when or where the work begins and ends. This alludes to Arceneaux’s father’s memory of his hometown in Galveston Texas. After Arceneaux’s father had been away for forty years, he decided to go back with his father to Galveston. As they explored Galveston their trip became a physical manifestation of how well his father could remember a place and if he could think of things as they really were. Having to come to terms with emotions that come when interacting with a past (the home his father grew up in) with his son (Edgar Arceneaux) as an embodiment of the present was unsettling to come to terms with. The act of drawing for Arceneaux becomes an active engagement of the indeterminacy of the trip he took with his father. This idea is not only explored within the imagery that Arceneaux is putting forth, but also in the engagement he has with making and displaying his work. It brings to light the limitation that drawing may have when confined to the imagery alone. Meaning can be enhanced and activated by process when images are counter poised to another material or action.



Figure 7. Edgar Arceneaux. *Drawings of Removal*. Installation. 2003-Present



Figure 7b. Edgar Arceneaux. *Drawings of Removal*. Installation. 2003-Present

Arceneaux's ability to be comfortable with the indeterminacy of his subject and memory as a problematic archive, were similar to things I was confronting in my performance "Laugh a lot". This performance had multiple parts: handmade invitations, edited video, and me as the performer performing.



Figure 8. Invitations to Performance “Laugh a Lot”. Computer Printed on Watercolor Paper, whiteout and tracing paper. 2018.

The invitations that I handed out depicted a collage of my grandfather (Figure 8). The top half of his face is hidden with excerpts of the poem “Mask” showing where his face would be. I am thinking of his face as being reflected in my own face. As I handout invitations to participants they are exposed to this archive. While at the performance participants watched a video in which Maya Angelou’s mouth is the only thing showing (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Image still from video “Maya: teach us to laugh”

In the video, advice is given by Maya for a future daughter she might have. She then states “You may encounter many defeats but you must never be defeated. Ever! In fact, it might even be necessary even to confront defeat. It might be necessary to get over it. All the way through it and go on. I would teach her to laugh a lot. Laugh a lot. At the silliest things. And be very, very serious. I’d teach her to love life. I bet you that”¹¹.



Figure 10. Image still from performance “Laugh a Lot”

I then walk into the room and set a timer. I laugh for an hour. During the performance my body changes (Figure 10). There is an ebb and flow to the laugh that also changes. Because of the long nature of the laugh, the audience is uncertain of when I am laughing in joy or laughing in pain. The importance of

¹¹ Bill Moyers. “A Conversation with Maya Angelou.” BillMoyers.com
<https://billmoyers.com/content/conversation-maya-angelou/> (accessed June 2018)

inclusivity and intimacy in the setting of this performance, speaks to the depths of bringing about dense and uncomfortable emotions. The inclusive nature allows for such feelings to surface. The overall aesthetic of the setup was another nod to the idea of fugitivity, with one lamp lit, facing downward at the timer. The room was very dark and had an interrogation like quality.

Conclusion

What does it mean for the smile to be a survival apparatus? Or more importantly what does that look like? As I visualize these things in relation to black ontologies a lot of images come to mind. I think of the photography of the civil rights movement. I hear the sounds of the marchers. I think of the time they spent combing their hair. I think of the clothes that they laid on the sofa, in preparation for the next day. As I reflect on the meaning of these images that we all are familiar with, I'm intrigued by my mind's ability to imagine a back story. I conjure up locals that are triggered by the gesture, the attitude, the mood. It's all there..... I think of the efforts of the parents that could not march, because they had to go to work. Their support came in the form of exercising a blind faith to be optimistic when there was nothing more that could be done and being stern when you could have done better. This support said "love you" when you walked out the door. And your face took in that phrase and it gave back in the form of a genuine smile. There is a complexity to such marginalized expressions, which is so humble, you don't even know it's there..... I go deeper. What sounds do I hear? What songs do they sing? In the spirit of the African American negro spiritual "Hold On" I think of the words "keep your hand on the plow, hold on." These verses being passed on through the enslaved people that continued to recite them. The song's message is archived in the voices, the bodies and minds of those individuals that survived. So, when it came to searching for the smile as a survival apparatus, I searched for imagery that was most immediate to my own ontology. I needed not to look any further than my own face to see these archives. I needed not to look any further than the media that surrounded me. I needed the ability to see the significance of seemingly insignificant expressions. That is what this project is suggesting the viewer to ponder.

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Vita

Justin Tyler Bryant received his B.F.A in Studio Art from University of Arkansas at Little Rock in 2012. After graduating from University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Bryant played an active role in the arts community of Little Rock working as an instructor and mentor. In 2015 he moved to Baton Rouge Louisiana to study drawing and painting at Louisiana State University.