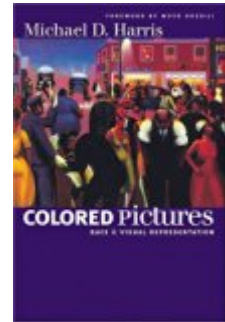


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## A “Rooted” Reading of Race in the History of Art

In *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, Michael D. Harris proposes a history of how the visual arts have been marshaled in the creation and perpetuation of a racially divided America. He argues that dynamics of access and power—traceable back to scholarly writings of such intellectuals as David Hume, John Locke, and Winkelmann—allowed for white exploitation of the black body in such a way that the positive white Self was defined in contradistinction to a negative black Other. He argues that the “racial ideas” which these images articulated spurred some early afro-centric intellectual resistance by Wilmot Blyden, W. E. B. Du Bois, and others involved in the New Negro movement.

Harris’ argument is specific to the historical period of the inception and establishment of the institution of slavery in the United States and as such, his first objective is to outline the visual strategies and propagandas employed to maintain that institution. He carefully considers the creation of racial and class difference in this early era of slavery. His discussion foregrounds the idea of image construction and control as a matter of economic well-being for the early American nation. Pertinent to his argument, Harris suggests that this was the time “when the value of popular media conscripted in the service of ideology came to be appreciated fully” (p. 24). In this section, he uses illustrations from eighteenth-century studies in human physiognomy, nineteenth-century popular images, and widely distributed newspaper illustrations to substantiate his point—that the very definition of what it meant to be a

privileged white citizen in America came to depend on the racially constructed (yet legalized) reality of the opposite disenfranchised black Other.

While the first chapter sets out the stakes involved in this image construction, the second chapter outlines the way in which images were put to use. Harris refers to early paintings and popular newspaper illustrations in outlining how physical and behavioral stereotypes were harnessed for the purpose of writing inferiority onto the black body. This transformation was also influenced by the emergence of minstrelsy, the pre- and post-Civil War fallout and widening of the class gap, socially and economically.

The specific gendered denigration of the black body is the subject of the third chapter which focuses on the construction of the Aunt Jemima and mammy fictions. Harris here introduces the works of contemporary black artists from the 1960s onwards, who attempted to redress the image damage done by previous centuries of racist representations. He mentions Jeff Donaldson, Joe Overstreet and Betye Saar. At this point, the narrative leaps forward and is situated in the mid-nineties by the end of the chapter.

Following the theme of the (mis-)represented black female body, the stereotype of the hyper-sexualized black woman is addressed next. Harris uses Manet’s *Olympia* to stage an argument for the use of the black body to imply promiscuity, positing that the presence of the African maid “is a signifier for sexuality and disease” (p. 126).

When referring to the original, Titian's *Venus d'Urbino*, the argument falls a little flat but Harris maintains the point that there is a strong connection between sexual availability/looseness and the black female body. Here, the argument once again slips in and out of the realm of popular culture to make examples of Sarah Baartman, Josephine Baker, and Grace Jones. Harris is skeptical of these women's initial agency in constructing the sexualized images that they later became known for—they played to an existing stereotype of the sexual black female and achieved success. When contemporary artists Lorna Simpson and Charnelle Holloway are introduced, Harris declares that it is they who “stand in defense of their gender against sexual depredation through visual means” (p. 147).

In the fifth chapter, Harris sets up Archibald Motley Jr. as the exemplar of an early generation of corrective color-conscious black artists. Motley's philosophy and artistic ethic is examined predominantly using Du Boisian writings on double-consciousness and black self-awareness. It is a little uncertain why Motley was specifically chosen as the focal point of this chapter but Harris reiterates that “he elevated folk and vernacular culture as subject matter, and he was committed to creating art for black folk” (p. 172). All this, even though Motley “seemed to have an ambivalent relationship with the larger African American community and felt little regard for Alain Locke's 1925 call for artists to look to their ancestral legacy” (p. 177). Equally important is the focus on Motley's mixed-race heritage, which Harris uses to set up a discussion of self-erasure and self-hate among African Americans—i.e., “the persistence of blacks' calling each other 'nigger' and other self-deprecating behavior that seem to duplicate the disdain that many whites have had for blacks” (p. 182). The author attributes this problem to a type of neurosis within the long-victimized and abused African-American population. Harris writes: “The trauma of captivity, beginning with capture in Africa, confinement during the horror of the Middle Passage, and the constant state of captivity that defined Atlantic slavery duplicate, in many ways, ... hostage conditions” (p. 186).

Here, Harris segues into a chapter about the effectiveness of re-appropriated and inverted racial stereotypes within the work of contemporary black artists. Harris criticizes the use of these icons, suggesting that the “inversion or recycling of derogatory images carries an implicit bargain with the mainstream art establishment and the white world that the artist will implicate himself or herself in the imagery” (p. 199). Harris revives the de-

bate concerning the efficacy of the works of Michael Ray Charles and Kara Walker, but adds the name of Jean-Michel Basquiat to theirs as examples of artists whose “work locates them deeply within white racial perceptions of blackness” (p. 197). The author suggests that like Basquiat, Michael Ray Charles “attempts to play a stereotypical role in the context of white power” (p. 204). He insists that the objective is not to pass judgment on these artists but instead, to raise a cautionary note regarding the larger social implications of the response garnered and expectations satisfied by their works. Ultimately, Harris argues that because of the previous context of these images, there is no possibility that they can be inverted and any attempt to do so will fall short.

In the final chapter and coda, Harris introduces artists who work in an idiom which is embedded in black culture and emphasizes a racial and ethnic identity and heritage. Here, his own philosophies are revealed: “Because art is rooted in cultural and epistemological assumptions, I see the abandonment of an ethnic frame as moving the artist into a frame that, by its seeming invisibility, closely resembles the way naturalized whiteness functions” (pp. 248-249). Harris follows through with this statement by challenging the viability of an egalitarian globalization in the face of racial reality.

Harris' *Colored Pictures* is an important achievement in encouraging scholarly awareness about the depiction of minorities in contemporary art history. He does a commendable job of tracing the complex historiography of the subject matter in the United States. Another valuable aspect of this text is the author's discussion of the works of mentioned artists. In his text, Harris writes with two voices, as an art historian and as an art critic: in the first position, he provides a contextualizing historical background for the development of contemporary African-American art and in the second, he discusses the efficacy of the work of the included artists. Harris' text emphasizes the work of African-American artists, who occupy a positionality “rooted” positively in their legacies as both former American slaves and as Africans.

The text offers a refreshingly broad range of artists from the last century; however, this diversity is surprising and uneven at times. For instance, Harris devotes four pages of prose and images to the Atlanta artist Charnelle Holloway, but gives Faith Ringgold only a one-sentence mention in a section dedicated to Betye Saar. While Holloway is certainly an interesting and appropriate fit for the text and it is obviously impossible to name all those who should be named, the failure to expand on

the contribution of such a prominent artist as Faith Ringgold is disappointing.

Though Harris does present a calculated synthesis of previous scholarship, it must be noted that he has a tendency towards essentializing statements and arguments. Save for the interchangeable use of the terms “northerner” and “abolitionist” (p. 54) and other small, nagging slips, the early half of the book is perceptively constructed. The tendency only becomes apparent later in the text when the author begins to raise issues that are much too complex and far-reaching for the scope of his main thesis. For instance, he proposes to “explain the persistence of color-consciousness among African Americans, the persistence of blacks calling each other ‘nigger,’ and other self-deprecating behaviors that seem to duplicate the disdain that many whites have had for blacks” (p. 182). Because of the way in which it is phrased, this is not an inquiry that can be investigated impartially. It is not asked with a mind towards objective research and discussion; it is asked with a subjective response already in mind.

Further, arguments in the text are often stripped down to a black-versus-white demarcation. For example, Harris argues that the patrons of the works of black artists like Kara Walker, Michael Ray Charles, and Jean-Michel Basquiat are predominantly white dealers when, in fact, these artists have a broad range of patrons and supporters. For one, although Kara Walker’s work has been subjected to a great deal of negative attention, it is important to clarify that her work has been well received in many quarters, not the least of them, African-American. Recently in July 2003, a solo exhibition of Kara Walker’s work was announced by the Studio Museum of Harlem: “The Studio Museum in Harlem is thrilled to announce an installation by Kara Walker, one of the most important African-American artists working today.”[1] In essence, the (generational) debate on the use value of stereotypical images in contemporary art has been hashed out more eloquently than I could do here, in arenas such as the *International Review of African-American Art*. [2] And while the problem of race in the United States is a very real one, it is often and unfortunately oversimplified into an issue of black vs. white—a characterization which undermines much of the wonderful historic framing provided in early chapters as well as many of the arguments made at later points. In another instance, the author suggests that Basquiat was considered a great black artist largely because he allowed himself to be commodified by the white art world: “Basquiat may have been helped in his self-destruction by ‘the threat

that once the [white] audience tired of the novelty, they would move on to other, newer things,’ a premonition that proved correct. Because his success was partially predicated on being Other, it was insubstantial” (p. 195). Further; “the conflict between Basquiat’s artistic aspirations and success and his ‘colored’ cultural and familial foundations created a tortured relationship that destroyed him” (p. 256). In fact, Basquiat was considered a successful postmodern and anti-establishment artist up until his death by a heroin overdose in 1988. And though it has been suggested that the pressure of constantly producing work and the death of his mentor Andy Warhol one year prior may have contributed to Basquiat’s death, to my knowledge, there has never been anything to suggest that his race and success jointly led to his demise. According to Sharon Patton, Basquiat was concerned with issues of race, as he was with human rights, environmental issues and capitalism, but these concerns are neither particular to him, nor directly implicated in his death.[3]

Concerning Michael Ray Charles: “If we accept the premise that black stereotypes are based in white fantasy, and projected onto blacks, then we can argue that Charles is playing with and complicating history and images rooted in non-black culture. He is documenting an outside *perception* of the black experience, not the experience itself” (p. 194). Although this is a noteworthy grievance, the opposite side of the argument is not at all quashed by the statement. Because these images are the result of an “outside *perception* of the black experience” does not mean that their influence on black identity today has been insignificant. Though they originated in “white fantasy,” these images are now as rooted in black culture as they are in “non-black culture.” As such, they should not and cannot be left out of the art which interrogates the black experience in America. To label these images as taboo and unmentionable portions of art history does a disservice to artists who would attempt to redress and, perhaps, exorcise them.

In an underlying argument, the author seems to suggest that the irreverent un-rootedness of the postmodern (and sometimes) “post-black” mindset is inappropriate to African-American visual arts (p. 215). Invoking the other side of this old debate, I will only reiterate that arguments such as this seem to paint contemporary black artists into a corner; if they do not work a certain way, acknowledging their blackness and race accordingly, they risk being considered sellouts by the history that follows them.[4]

Interestingly, Harris spares Archibald Motley Jr.

much of the criticism that he levels at these younger artists. According to the author's own information, there are aspects of Motley's life that suggest a racially ambivalent artist. However, the text plays down these indicators and focuses instead on the ways in which his work reflected the black experience. Noticeably in this section, the author also abstains from the obvious use of Frantz Fanon to deconstruct Motley's understanding of himself as a mixed-race "black" artist.[5] Instead, he insists that "Motley's color consciousness—which should not be overly criticized but utilized as a means of gaining insight into his era—does not undermine his courage as an artist. He explored Negro subject matter at a time when Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor* were two of the few notable genre paintings by Negro artists with Negro subjects" (p.173). But why should notable works by black artists of this era be limited to genre paintings when artists like Winold Reiss, Jacob Lawrence, Augusta Savage, Aaron Douglas, Laura Wheeler Waring and William H. Johnson were producing equally important and pertinent works?

Ultimately, the text privileges those artists whose work deviates from the stereotypical imagery of earlier times and who propose new, positive representations of African Americans. While the text begins fairly objectively, it becomes apparent in later chapters that the author has a very strong professional and personal stake in the argument being made; that is, advocating that the black artist be a socially and racially conscious worker. To this point, Harris is much more admiring with his review of early pre-nineties artists, but develops a more critical eye and voice in his discussion of more recent

artists. He questions the efficacy of their work, critiques the validity of their ideology and faults their connection (or lack thereof) to their roots as artists of African descent. Ultimately, the author's own vision of these roots is slightly romanticized (pp. 245-246). His afro-centric voice may be colored by his own philosophies as an artist and member of the socially conscious AfriCobra (p. 216). One assumes that the author's affiliation with this group informs the "we," "us," and "our" that he uses repeatedly, when speaking about the black community. This suggests an exclusionary mindset, denying the possibility of any mediation and reinforces his own inclusion in this collective simply by fact of his blackness. But is this progress?

#### Notes

[1]. Quoted without permission from [http://www.studiomuseum.org/pr/kwalker\\_pr.html](http://www.studiomuseum.org/pr/kwalker_pr.html).

[2]. Kara Walker, "Kara Walker's response," *The International review of African American art* 15 (2): pp. 48-49; "Stereotypes Subverted? Or for Sale?" Special issue, *The International review of African American art* 14 (3): pp. 2-16.

[3]. Sharon Patton, *African American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 238-239.

[4]. Kelefeh Sanneh, "The debate continues: much ado," *The International review of African American art* 15 (2): pp. 44-47.

[5]. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

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