

SEEING THE UNSEEN:
THE PERCEPTION OF BLACKNESS IN A WORLD OF WHITE

MASTER OF FINE ARTS THESIS, BOOK ARTS + PRINTMAKING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how visual perception affects the work that I create as a Black¹ artist in a defunct, post-racial² America. It addresses my resistance to any expectations placed upon me to create work that is politically charged while I acknowledge that the Black life in of itself is lived as such. I discuss my body of work as true to my experience - I use handmade paper and forged metals as metaphor for the body and its formation as a result of racialized knowledge and microaggressions (discussed later in depth). The research herein explores perceptual blindness - defined as a lack of attention - and how it colors the lens through which my work is viewed. In an effort to challenge common perceptions and defy racial bias, I create book art, prints and installation that reference *trompe l'oeil* - a French term meaning "deceive the eye".

¹ The word "Black" is capitalized in this writing when referring to people of African descent. It is understood that the standard of journalistic practice is to use a lower case "b", however, I will follow the decree of the Associated Press "that the proper names of 'nationalities, peoples, races, tribe' should be capitalized (Phillips 2015).

² The term *post-racial* denotes a theoretical period or society in which racial prejudice and discrimination no longer exist.

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INTRODUCTION

Our perceptions, completely subjective and idiosyncratic, do not simply shape the way we experience our own lives; they also color expectations, and therefore, our experiences with other people. My thesis exhibition explores the results of those experiences while also straddling the thin line between unintentionally set expectations and my transgression of those expectations. This body of work addresses interactions between myself and other people and challenges the lenses through which those interactions are experienced. It has been my experience that differing lenses translate to personal bias - particularly in the form of racism - and manifest in the form of microaggressions. Though the microaggressions I encounter may or may not be intentional by the offending party, I experience them nonetheless, based on the lens through which I navigate. They are, however naïve or innocent, still valid and I speak to them through the works that I create.

INSPIRATION FORCED

I. Microaggressions/implicit bias

As a person belonging to multiple marginalized groups - Black, female, queer, and others. - I find that my current work is a response to having been unjustly treated and/or placed under undue expectations. Though I have multiple minority statuses, I find that most expectations are directed toward my race and manifest in the form of racial microaggressions, manifesting in the form of implicit bias. The term microaggression was first coined by Harvard University psychiatrist and professor Chester M. Pierce in 1970. In 1974, he wrote:

These [racial] assaults to black dignity and black hope are incessant and cumulative. Any single one may be gross. In fact, the major vehicle for racism in this country is offenses done to blacks by whites in this sort of gratuitous never-ending way. These offenses are microaggressions. Almost all black-white racial interactions are characterized by white put-downs, done in automatic, preconscious, or unconscious fashion. These mini-disasters accumulate. It is the sum total of multiple microaggressions by whites to blacks that has pervasive effect to the stability and peace of this world. (Pierce 515)

I have experienced numerous microaggressions throughout my academic career. For example, in a critique I was told that my well-crafted and successful work was a surprise because [they] didn't expect that type of work from me. I have also surprised several faculty members simply by being smart; after my explanation of a particular concept, the resulting response was "you're smart!" These responses to what seem to be a surprise in my defying low expectations are the damaging results of microaggressions and the implicit bias that I, as a Black woman, am incapable of intelligence and/or creating successful work.

Though the term microaggression has been around for more than 40 years, it is rarely addressed, or fairly acknowledged. After Barack Obama's two successful presidential terms as President of the United States, the country has adopted the notion of a post-racial America. It is the assumption that, because the country elected its first Black president, racism must no longer exist. In fact, the contrary is true. An article published by Nick Bryant of BBC news stated that race relations had "become more polarized and tenser after President Obama's inauguration in 2009". Bryant writes:

Historians will surely be struck by what looks like an anomaly, that the Obama years gave rise to a movement called Black Lives Matter. Public opinion surveys highlight this racial restlessness. Not long after he took office in 2009, a New York Times/CBS News poll suggested two-thirds of Americans regarded race relations as generally good. In the midst of last summer's racial turbulence, that poll found there had been a complete reversal. Now 69% of Americans assessed race relations to be mostly bad. (Bryant)

Bryant correlates Obama's Blackness with the country's issues surrounding political Black unrest. The problem that Obama faced resembles situations that I have faced in my academic career - that society is unable to separate a person's skin color from the political connotation of that skin color. In other words, according to non-Black people, a Black person must be associated with all things concerning Blackness and everything that person does must be in accordance. This is another example of implicit bias. Most often, those associations have been in relation to what is broadcasted via mass media, which is known for misrepresenting the truth. On the problems of mass communication Pierce wrote,

The mass media more often than not see to it that blacks are portrayed in ways that continue to teach white superiority. Tire, unsophisticated argue how marvelous it is that blacks are now seen regularly in non-menial as well as menial roles in films and on television. Yet the way blacks are represented on these media, in general, has immeasurable importance in keeping blacks in reduced status... The black can be predicted to be less often depicted as a thinking being... All these and countless other

examples show blacks as accommodating, controlled, dependent, and, of course, not creative or original in their thought. (Pierce 512)

Mass communication continues to perpetuate Black people as inferior, further reinforcing implicit bias against them. However, Black and other people of color have shaped the landscape

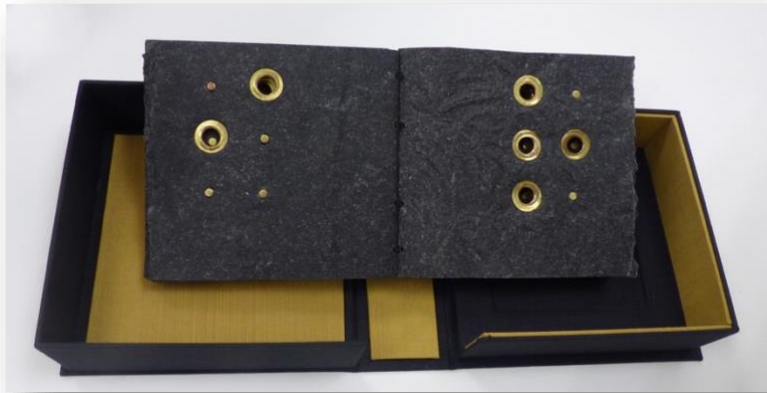


Figure 2. *If Only by Touch*, 2016. Autumn Thomas

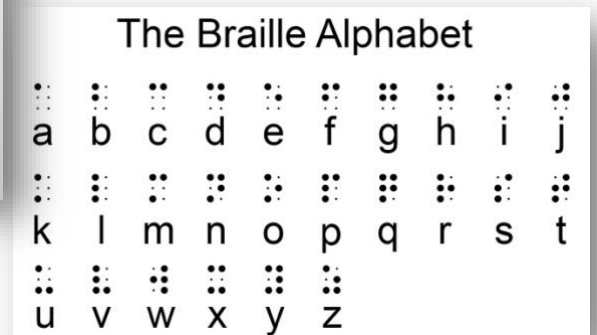


Figure 1. The Braille Alphabet

across varied mediums, positively influencing white culture, including literature, music and dance. Yet, my academic experience has shown a lack in the inclusion of a diverse range of successful artists. Further, the majority of my white faculty have failed to consider that a Black artist may think about more than that portrayed by mass communication. For example, because the history of slavery is and will continue to be a thorn in the sides of Black people in America, must my work include research of slavery? Or, because of the rampant slaying and gunning down of Black people by police officers, must the metal holes in my work be bullet holes? (Figure 1). In fact, the holes in *If Only by Touch* have nothing to do with bullets, the piece instead encourages comfort to myself and my viewer in times of loneliness and struggle. The

holes in each page are designed to represent a letter of the writing system Braille³ (Figure 2), the entire book reading *never alone*. My work is a reflection of, and an effort to dispel, implicit bias.

II. Visual Perception

In my opinion, the term *visual*, in the field of academic visual arts, has been severely undervalued. Put simply, vision refers to the state of being able to see, or, to perceive with the eyes. Further, to perceive means to become conscious of, realize or interpret. Perception, however, is not as easily defined. To understand the true nature of perception, I refer to the philosophy of epistemology, the study of the theory of knowledge (Hillerbrand). According to Greek philosopher Plato, knowledge - or reasoned true belief - is the synthesis of truth, belief and evidence (Southerland, Sinatra and Matthews). He goes on to define truth as that which reflects reality. Once a person gives authority over what is experienced as true reality, that person is said to believe in it, and evidence is that person's ability to prove her belief.

It is important to understand the nature of epistemology and the theory of knowledge as a requisite to perception, particularly in the field of visual arts. Author and psychology professor emeritus Julian Hochberg refers to visual aesthetic interest as one of three general areas of research included in social perception (Hochberg 214). He writes, "the subject matter of so much visual art is social, and because a work of art (including the popular forms, architecture, and the entertainment media), like many social relationships and events, is *perceptually rewarding*; a work of art is ostensibly looked at for its own sake, nor for some further goal." (Hochberg 214) Hochberg's research of visual art as a social perception sets the groundwork for inclusivity of

³ Braille is a system of raised dots that can be read with the fingers by people who are blind or who have low vision (American Foundation for the Blind).

perception in the field of visual arts. He goes on to describe the effects social variables have on social perception and communication,

"*Social variables* include all those effects of past experience - interest, reward, punishment, expectation, and so forth - which are most likely different for people from different social backgrounds...Social variables have been shown to influence how subjects judge physical dimensions such as the size of coins or the colors of patches of paper that are briefly presented and then have to be judged from memory."

(Hochberg 214-215)

My artistic practice is to bring attention to the theory of Hochberg's research and to challenge negative *learned perceptions* via mass communication of Black culture and artists.

III. Perceptual blindness

My research of inattentional blindness, a term coined by Arien Mack and Irvin Rock in 1992 (Mack and Rock), has been a considerable source of inspiration. Also referred to as perceptual blindness, inattentional blindness refers to an individual's psychological failure to recognize an unexpected event or stimulus that is in otherwise clear view. Many experiments and examples have been conducted, including The Gorilla Experiment by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons (Chabris and Simons) in which a viewer is asked to closely study the details of an event in a video. Upon reflection of the events in the video, it is revealed to the viewer that, while he or she was able to recount many of the details, they failed to recognize a gorilla that walked through the scene.

Many similar experiments have been conducted based on this psychological phenomenon. My conjecture and the basis of my thesis body of work is that these failures to recognize stimulus and events that are in clear view also translate to personal bias. The job I have given myself, as artist, is to be transgressive and to create radical work. I push to create a communal lens through which many people can enter my work. The goal of my thesis oeuvre is for my work and writing to be Chabris' and Simons' proverbial invisible gorilla.

My experience in academia has an inverse relationship to The Gorilla Experiment. When I encounter a face-to-face conversation, it is my impression that I am immediately regarded by my skin color. I am not regarded as a person with unique experiences and personal anecdotes, but instead as a Black person with experiences such as those portrayed through the media, and have been expected to present the stereotypical Black experience through my art.

My work is multilayered and though often angry, I present it in a diplomatic and thought-provoking manner, however. As a Black woman studying art in the white-dominated, elitist world of academia, I am a minority. Through my work, I reject any expectations to show anger or be confrontational. For people who might view my culture through a particular lens, it can be difficult to see and understand this dichotomy.

In tandem

The combination of racial microaggressions, visual perception and perceptual blindness can result in discourse between the artist and viewer. The challenge with this body of work is to bridge the gap between society's learned visual language and the differing languages with which we all communicate. With the Black Arts Movement, a political movement by Black artists established by Amiri Baraka in 1965, a number of Black artists gained cultural recognition and

success as their work became accepted and celebrated by white mainstream. Much of the work put forth during this time was in response to the Black Power movement and during a time of racial unrest in the country. As such, much of the work exhibited anger and frustration. While the movement's goal was to achieve liberation and autonomy and to affirm the creation of Black art for Black people - up until this point, the only mainstream artists were white - it also alienated black artists. White mainstream began to accept and associate the work of those artists during the movement and Black artists' work that was not in tandem did not garner the same attention.

Though the Black Arts Movement faded in 1975, the same expectation to create work of a political nature exists. It is assumed that white mainstream accepts that Black artists are outspoken about race and inequality and that has become a palatable subject and thus, the norm. The challenge I and many other artists face is deviating from the norm.

INSPIRATION GARNERED

Materials

I am continually inspired by the act of fabrication – taking basic and raw materials and using refined techniques to assemble them into works of art. My work is as much about the process of making and manipulating materials as it is about the content. My studio practice includes my handling materials, turning them in my hands and in a sense, feeling their energy. My senses flow with the energy of the material. I try to expand my creative mind in the beginning stages of work with those techniques or forms that I am familiar with. In letting my hands manipulate the material, I am better able to create new and interesting challenges for myself and as a result, new and challenging art.

The majority of my work is about my daily feelings and my lifelong experiences - and my goal is to give life to those moments. I focus on moments to which I believe many people can relate. Instead of telling the audience what to feel, instead of defining any one affect in someone, I try to recreate feelings and to replicate those experiences in artistic form. Much of my work is filled with metaphor and coded artistic language which can be deciphered on several levels. Those who are willing to expend a little more thought about the work are rewarded with a deeper understanding of the work and of myself.

I. Handmade Paper

The exploration of papermaking has become a metaphorical building block connecting my prior influences of visual communication (graphic design) and painting. I use it as a substrate on which to print using other media but I also let it exist on its own, as a sculptural material. It can be challenging to pull a perfectly clean sheet of paper or to pull sheets consistent in weight. It can also be a challenge to manipulate the sheet's form due to its fluid nature and propensity to shrink as it dries. These and other characteristics are what make papermaking so flexible. Its possibilities run the spectrum of simple two-dimensional substrate to complex three-dimensional.

During my exploration of papermaking, I became especially fond of making paper with sisal fibers. Though the native origins of sisal is unknown, the plant can be found in many countries throughout the world; this particular work was created with fibers harvested in Kenya. Though I have never visited Kenya, processing these fibers from long, thin strands and transforming them from earth to art creates in me a feeling of propagating art directly from land associated with the history of myself. I feel innately connected to these fibers and spent the majority of my graduate studies exploring its versatility. When questioned why I work with this

particular fiber instead of something more versatile like cotton fiber, I conclude that, while cotton may be versatile, I can reconcile choosing a fiber with such a racial history over a fiber that related directly to my roots. Ultimately, I find a certain banality in limiting myself to an "easier" fiber. Cotton is admittedly well-suited to many of the techniques that interested me. However, it has also been called "arguably the single most important determinant of American history in the



Figure 3. *Hunk, and Dora*, 2006. Aimee Lee

nineteenth century...It prolonged slavery and slave-produced cotton caused the Civil War, our bloodiest conflict which came close to destroying the nation." (Dattel) I found researching lesser known sisal fibers to be an immersive enhancement to my education.

The works of Aimee Lee and Michelle Wilson have greatly contributed to my love of handmade paper. Lee created her performance installation, *Hunk, & Dora*, 2006, from handmade paper (Figure 3). This and other works by Lee were the first I saw that employed a dimensional quality to handmade paper. Her use of translucency in this piece is both alluring and ethereal.

Her ability to harness the weightiness of bricks with a lightweight material sparked in me a curiosity that I was ultimately able to satisfy in my current work. While exploring the depths to which I can push the paper I create I am ultimately exploring my own depths and limits – often times without full awareness. This process affords me the closest contact with the materials and allows me to embed myself within them.

II. Van Dyke Brown

I have found that combining handmade paper with the alternative, non-silver photographic process Van Dyke Brown can create works that relate directly to my body, as if I am recreating myself in my work. By coating paper in a light-sensitive liquid and then exposing that paper to ultraviolet-light, I create imagery on and in the fibers of the paper substrate. The images result in tones of brown. This development of brown tones relates to my skin color and



Figure 4. *Sycamore I and II* (undated). Richard Hricko

allows me to conceptually embed myself and my work into the fibers of the paper.

Combining these techniques with other printmaking techniques, for example pulp-painting and/or lithography, allows for an ethereal richness not found in an otherwise two-dimensional print. Printmaker Richard Hricko's work exudes a similar richness that I push to achieve in my work. *Sycamore I and II*, are two pieces that exhibit dimensional texture and vibrancy in two-dimensional form (Figure 4). Hricko "compose[s] each image by synthesizing a

medley of disparate visual qualities and material characteristics (natural phenomena and materials, artifacts and architecture). Intricate, subtle rendering and subdued light serve to enhance an atmospheric sense of quiet



Figure 5. *Conic (Sub)jection*, 2016 (detail). Autumn Thomas

mystery." (Hricko) I strive to create this same atmosphere using the human form in my current work. In *Conic (Sub)jection* (Figure 5), the female figure is printed via Vandyke brown, the resulting prints then oiled with pigmented linseed oil. This treatment creates in the paper a translucency giving the image vibrancy while allowing it to maintain obscurity.

III. Forged Metals.

I use non-ferrous metals - all metals with the exception of iron and steel - in my art as a metaphor for myself as well as for my concepts. In order to properly manipulate these metals,

they must be forged. They are heated to very high temperatures, oftentimes to the melting point, quenched and finally beaten or hammered. This process is repeated until the desired form is achieved. These forged metals are the metaphor for my life, and the Black body - there is a constant degradation and manipulation, exposure to the heat of racism and microaggressions but constantly made new by overcoming those struggles. And, by combining the arduous task of metal forging with the fluid, fragile nature of papermaking, I hope to achieve a symbiotic relationship between two contrasting materials. This creates an attractive tension both physically and figuratively that speaks directly to the discourse between my culture's artistic expression and the audience, and pushes to create an agreeable perception between the two.

I have found in Melvin Edwards' work with metals a similar conversation to my own. Using welded steel sourced from scrap yards, his sculptures evoke lived experiences of the African diaspora. About *Long*, 2016 (Figure 6), Edwards remarks that "[with] barbed wire, you have to be aware that it was a way to keep the cows at home. But then people



Figure 6. *Long*, 2016. Melvin Edwards

turned it into concentration camps. Before it happened with Jewish people in World War II, it happened in Namibia. Those contradictions, or contradistinctions are things that have occupied me in visual art. As a way to realize the dynamic in a situation, art or otherwise.” (Edwards)

IV. Artists' Books.

Though my graduate degree program focused on book arts and printmaking, I consider myself an interdisciplinary studio artist. I have found it difficult to limit myself to one or two techniques, instead finding inspiration in the unconventional combination of materials. Creating artists' books have allowed for me an uninhibited exploration of material.

Many people have found it difficult to accurately and succinctly define an artist's book. Where techniques like printmaking, painting or photography can all be described with materials and action, artist's books simply cannot. Johanna Drucker, author, book artist, visual theorist and cultural critic has written at length about artist books and the history of such. In *The Century of Artist's Books*, she writes:

It's easy enough to state that an artist's book is a book created as an original work of art, rather than a reproduction of a pre-existing work. And also, that it is a book which integrates the formal means of its realization and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues. But this definition only raises more questions than it answers: What is an "original" work of art? Does it have to be a unique work? Can it be an edition? A multiple? Who is the maker? Is it the artist who has the idea? Or only if she or he does all of the work involved in production -- printing, painting, binding, photography, or whatever else is involved? Or do each of these practitioners have to be taken into account, especially when there are complicated transformations involved in going from drawings to print, or photographs to inked plates, or when the binding has a structural form to it which has been designed or codified by someone other than the artist? What kinds of production means can be included in this definition -- is a Gestetner print as

valid as a means of producing art as a litho stone, a silver print, or a linoleum block?

What about computer printers and xerox machines? Is a work which is made only of bound set-up sheets or other found paper a book production? (1) Or one made of blank paper? Or appropriated images? On the other hand, most people would agree to a common sense definition of what is or is not a book. But in the work of artists this obvious definition soon loses its clarity. Is a book restricted to the codex form? Does it include scrolls? Tablets? Decks of cards? A block of wood with one end painted with a title, like a conventional spine? A walk-in space of oversized panels hinged together? A metaphysical concept, disembodied, but invoked in performance or ritual? In spite of the fact that these questions address only a few aspects of an artist's book's definition, they show the immediate difficulty of trying to make a single, simple statement about what constitutes an artist's book. (Drucker)

Throughout this lengthy quote, Drucker, the contemporary authority on all things artist's books, is unable to succinctly define the form. In fact, there is not one full definition in her entire book. This inability to describe the art form compels me. I argue that there is no definition and no way to label it as a thing. The artist's book is ever evolving, limitlessly inclusive and accommodating to any and all forms and iterations. I create artist's books because they are the epitome of the way art describes life. Just as I cannot be defined and labeled simply by the color of my skin or by the gender of my being, so too should be the reception of my art.

Of the many book artists that I admire, Benjamin Elbel and Julie Chen are two to which my work relates. In *Chrysalis*, 2014 (Figure 7) , Julie Chen creates a work that is outwardly



Figure 7. *Chrysalis*, 2014. Open (left). Detail (right). Julie Chen

sculptural and unassuming, while inside containing layers of masterful technique and complex concepts. Viewing her work requires of her viewers' complete attention and focus. Rarely is her work completely understood at first glance; her concept continues to reveal itself upon multiple readings of her books. About her work, Chen writes, " I strive to present the reader/viewer with an object that challenges preconceived ideas of what a book is, while at the same time providing a deeply engaging and meaningful experience through the presentation of my own text and imagery in a purposefully structured format. Often the reader must engage in unexpected physical actions such as the unfolding or sliding of pages, the turning of a wheel, or the tilting of a box in order to fully read/view a piece. (Chen)

While Chen inspires me to create masterfully crafted, complex artist's books, Benjamin Elbel's fine bindings inspires a different level of craftsmanship. His bindings, most often completed in leather, have a quiet echo of both professionalism and reflection of influence. In

1984, 2015, Elbel recreated a design binding for the 1949 George Orwell novel of the same name (Figure 8). I am attracted to his design as a clean representation of an otherwise difficultly read novel. The binding, completed in full leather, echoes the rawness of nature as well as the human condition (in all its flaws). He writes, " The design for this binding was inspired by a wall seen

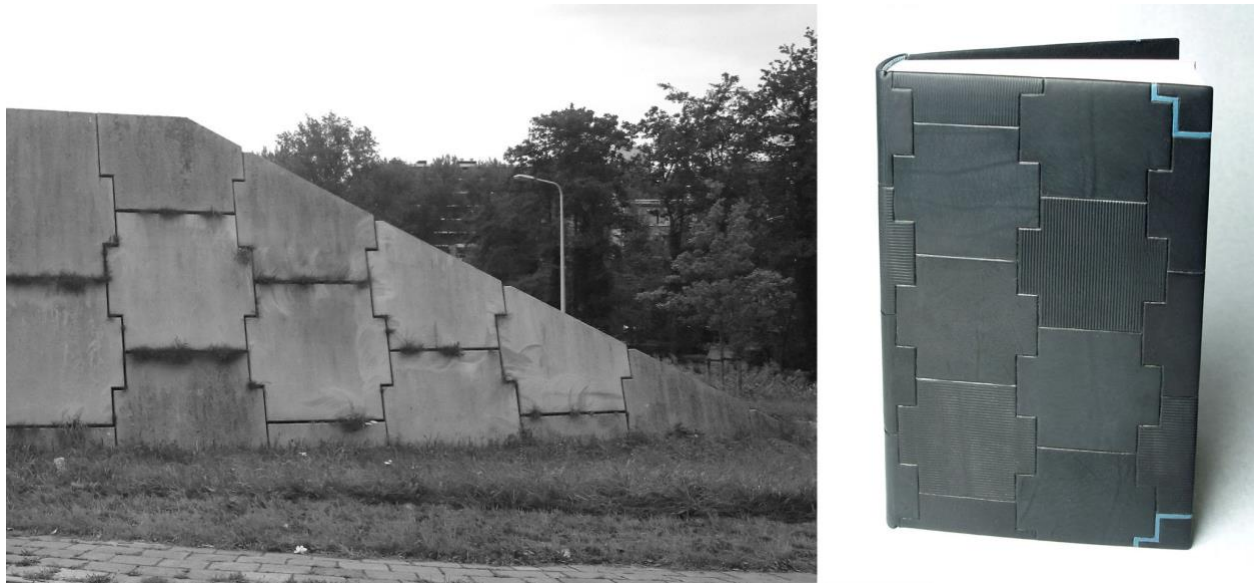


Figure 8. 1984, 2015. Benjamin Elbel and Elbel Libro Bookbinding.

on a motorway just outside Amsterdam. I wanted to do a puzzle binding and when I saw this wall I knew that its pattern would be successful at conveying a sense of the military, carceral, totalitarian state described in George Orwell's 1984." (Elbel) I hope to reflect the same sense of environment in my artist's books, while also maintaining the highest level of craftsmanship seen in fine bindings.

THESIS WORK

Conic Periapsis

I recently watched *Hidden Figures*, the movie directed by Theodore Melfi and adapted from the novel written by Margot Lee Shetterly. Actress Taraji P. Henson plays Katherine Johnson, a NASA research mathematician in the 1950s. In the movie, there is a scene in which Johnson's character talks about her mathematical diagram *conic periapsis* (Figure 9). I became immediately attracted to the form and began to research its meaning. Admittedly, I continue to find ways in which this form applies to me - I am, after all, not a NASA mathematician like Johnson, but the more I study the form the more I notice its semblance to the work that I create. Briefly, conic periapsis is the smallest radial distance of an ellipse, as measured from a particular orbiting point. For example, we know that the Earth revolves (the rotation creating the shape of an ellipse) around the sun (the orbiting point) and affords four seasons of the year. In summer, we get the longest day of the year - when Earth is furthest from the sun. In winter, we have the shortest day of the year, when Earth is closest to the sun. This shortest day of the year is the periapsis. The term conic refers to a

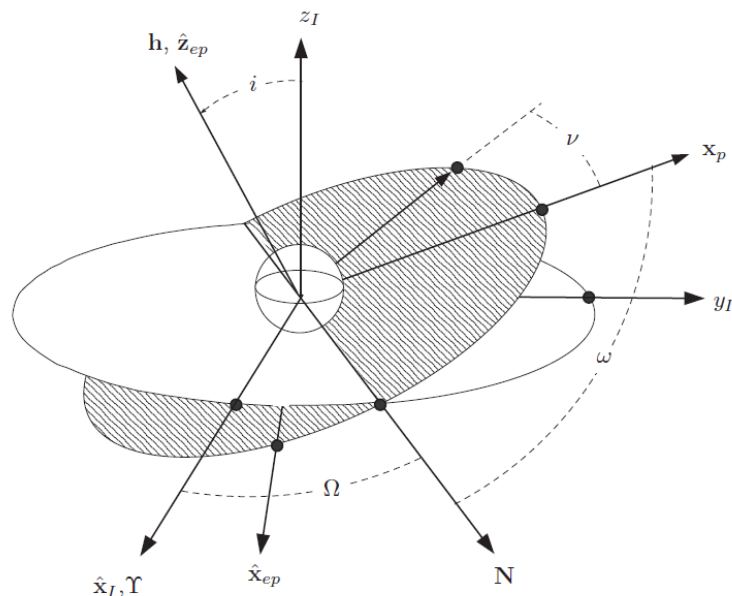


Figure 9. Conic periapsis.

cone shape having been sliced through the center, the resulting plane creating an ellipse.

Orbital (Ob)jection

My thesis exhibition is centered around the conic periapsis form, which by definition is centered around an orbiting object. The object in orbit represents myself and the many ways I navigate the world in hopes of reaching my true self. It also represents the world, and I become the object rotating the world, still, hoping to reach my true self. I consider these two explorations of self to be anamorphic: each producing, relating to, or marked by intentional distortion (as by unequal magnification along perpendicular axes) of an image. (Merriam-Webster) That image is of myself.

The result of this exploration and the central theme of my work is an anamorphic wall installation (Figure 10). The image is painted on three intersecting walls of the gallery space but can only be viewed correctly by the viewer from the correct

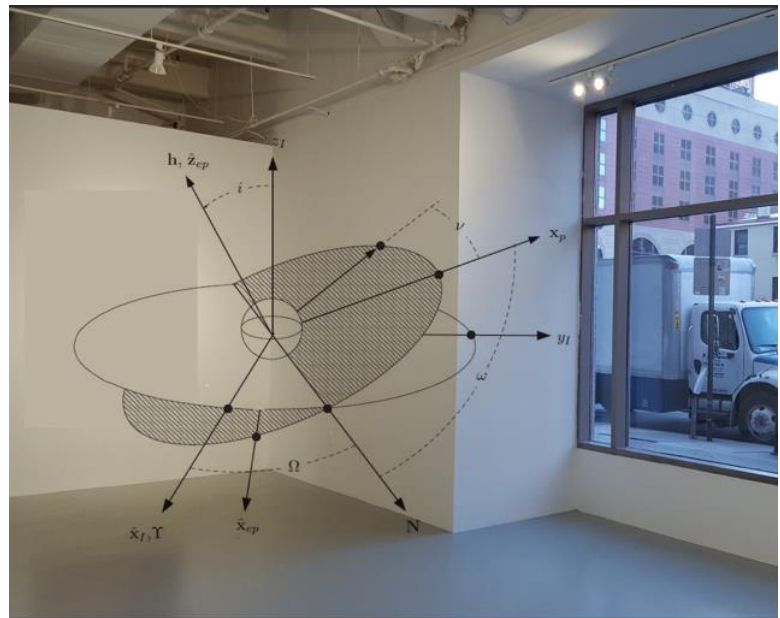


Figure 10. *Orbital (Ob)jection*, 2017. Autumn Thomas

perspective. In the Rosenwald-Wolf gallery space, the correct viewpoint is directly in front of the pillar at the entrance to the gallery.

The goal of this piece is to remind the viewer that perspective is subjective. By creating a gallery space that forces the viewer to navigate distorted views until a clear view is discovered, I hope the space to be a constant reminder that multiple perspectives are available. This search for multiple perspectives can then be found throughout the entire exhibit.

Orbital (Sub)jection

Orbital (Sub)jection is an installation that hopes to challenge common perceptions and open dialogue about the Black, female body. It presents the viewer with two images, each viewable from a different point of view, taking inspiration from lenticular image printing (technology that allows for the illusion of depth and the ability to change as the image is viewed from different angles). In this installation, image one presents as an obscure image of a female body. Image two is a diagram inspired by African-American physicist and mathematician Katherine Johnson.

Orbital (Sub)jection is designed to fit in the window facing Broad Street at the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery at The University of the Arts in Anderson Hall. Supported by the University's College of Art Media and Design Dean's Venture Fund Grant, the piece measures 68 inches wide by 60 inches tall. Image one is comprised of handmade paper printed with the alternative photographic technique Van Dyke Brown. This image is of an obscured female body, printed on thin, fragile yet strong, handmade paper and created in rich tones of brown and speaks to the fragile yet durable nature of the Black female body. Its large scale alludes to the feeling of always being on display - as a Black person and as an often objectified woman. Image two is etched and inked into copper, the metal referring to the structure and strength of womanhood. The mathematical diagram itched into the copper references Johnson's work with NASA and implies the ability to orbit between self-reflection and externally set expectations. Each image is then split into eight strips (respectively), and hung from the gallery ceiling, alternating between paper and copper. The alternating of strips allows for the lenticular illusion.

Designed as public art, this piece is multifaceted and hopes to reach multiple audiences (Figure 11). In today's political climate, I find it important for Black women to see themselves reflected in large-scale positive image. By coupling an obscure Black body with a complex mathematical figure, I hope to, in the least, provoke positive discussion about what the two have in common.

Conversely, this piece asks non-Black viewers to challenge preconceived notions about the Black body. It has been my experience as a Black woman in academia that I am immediately perceived as a Black person and those perceptions often carry limited expectations. This public work challenges those immediate perceptions by presenting a different, intriguing point of view.



Figure 11. *Orbital (Sub)jection*, 2017. Autumn Thomas

Undermined, I & II

Having concluded that I had no viable recourse against microaggressions I use my frustration as a source of inspiration. *Under Mined, 2016* and *Undermined, 2017* are artist's



Figure 12. *Undermined, 2017* (detail). Autumn Thomas

books whose titles present a double-entendre. The more obvious meaning is a literal response to low expectation put upon me. The less obvious meaning comes after separating the title into two words - under mined - and speaks to my having felt underappreciated as a highly capable artist and human being.

The book is bound with two leather covers and has an exposed sewing, which reveals its structure (Figure 12). Referred to as its spine in artistic terms, it is the most vulnerable part of a book, as it is vital in holding the item together. The binding displays its vulnerability while also inviting its viewer into its contents. The entirety of the pages, referred to as the book or text

block, shows a gradient of page colors when viewed from either edge of the book, beginning with white and transitioning through shades of brown to black (Figure 13).

This contrast of white and black has a long tradition of representing good and evil, respectively, in Eastern and Western cultures throughout the world. In the Bible, it is written that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth. The Earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was over the face of the



Figure 13. *Undermined*, 2017 (detail). Autumn Thomas

waters." (Gen. 1:1-2 [ESV]) Here, it can be surmised that because darkness was over the face of the deep and God was over the face of the waters, the deep and the waters are therefore separate and God is only over one: the waters. The Bible continues, "God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness." (Gen. 1:3-4 [ESV]) In these first words, of the most studied and revered writing, we understand the antiquity of the *light versus dark* and *good vs. evil* debate. If we rely on the writings of the Bible, we are to understand that light and dark are separated and that light is good. That leaves darkness in question, and it has for ages. My work acknowledges and challenges this idea in the form of an artist's book.

Undermined, II opens to white pages, with white endpapers and flyleaves. The title and dedication pages are also on white paper, printed by blind debossing. Entering into the content of

the book via clean, white pages, there is an assumed gentleness of the story. As the viewer encounters the first pages of text, it is realized that the text is barely legible and can only be read from certain angles and with particular reflections of light. At the beginning of the story in the work, I am forcing the viewer to make a

decision; the viewer can take effort in reading the text or turn the pages in hopes of finding some text that is easier to read. By forcing the viewer to make decisions to read or not to read, I

continue to challenge initial impressions in



Figure 14. *Undermined, 2017* (detail). Autumn Thomas

search of broader meaning. Once the reader turns through the white pages into the brown pages, the text becomes easier to read, however sections of the story become illegible; some pages are printed in reverse in the lighter tan pages; the darker brown pages have sections missing. In the last sections of dark brown pages, the printed text looks degraded and lines are missing (Figure 14). Certain words become apparent; these words are the heart of the story and are only available to the viewer who has chosen to look beyond the immediate perception, or to take a chance to get to know the object beyond the implicit biases it presents.

This section of the book, however, is only the midpoint. Once the viewer turns into the black pages, the story is presented in its entirety, but there is the hint of metal showing through the page. As more pages are turned, more metal is revealed to show that the metal has been burned into the book. The metal, a recurring material in this oeuvre, is the figurative culmination of challenge and heartache that has all collected in the center of my being, personally and socially.

CONCLUSION

I entered this body of work, intent upon achieving catharsis, just as many other artists do. In 1937, author Richard Wright argued "'that Negro writers' had a responsibility to stand shoulder to shoulder with Negro workers in mood and outlook. Art and politics were two coequals, and entirely complementary,



Figure 15. *Come Out, Series*, 2015 (detail). Glen Ligon

sides of an endless struggle to 'function within [one's] race as a purposeful agent.'" (Cunningham, *Can Black Art Ever Escape the Politics of Race?*) If I am to create honest art, whether in the nature of self reflection or of activism, catharses come only when my purpose has been fulfilled. As of today, it has not.

Many artists follow Wright's thinking, in that art should be political, and their work reflects that ideal. Glen Ligon's work is one successful example. His work is loud and direct, and explores race, sexuality and identity, as seen in his *Come Out*, 2015 installation series (figure 15). I hoped to create work that was more abstract in concept, and richer in technique. Wangechi Mutu's *A Shady Promise*, 2008 (figure 16),

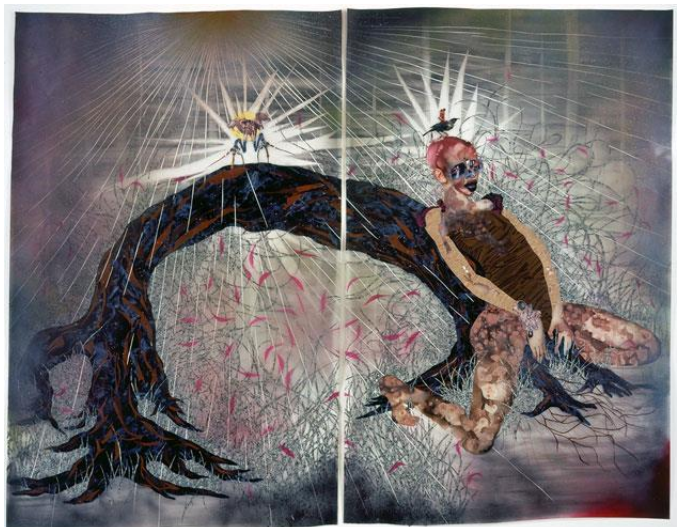


Figure 16. *A Shady Promise*, 2008. Wangechi Mutu

embodies all the lure and voyage I hope my work to reveal. With abstraction and Afrofuturism, Mutu uses collage to unique and original works about science and historical fiction, fantasy, Afrocentrism, and magic, all in an alluring and magical aesthetic. Like Ligon, and other artists of color, her work still navigates the effects of culture. However, she uses magic, figuratively and metaphorically to lure her viewer. I strive for the same affect.

I have come to understand through my studies that there can be no catharses found in systems of oppression and repression, both of which will remain in the presence of microaggressions and implicit biases. Completing my thesis body of work has helped me to realize that there is no escaping the affect that my skin color has on my work and on the response to my work. As Black Arts Movement founder Amiri Baraka wrote, “The attempt to divide art and politics is a bourgeois which says good poetry, art, cannot be political, but since everything is ... political, even an artist or work that claims not to have any politics is making a political statement by that act.” (Baraka) By challenging the stereotypical norms that Black artists must make political Black art, I am, in fact, making a political statement. Within my study of book arts and printmaking, I have found several vehicles on which I can express the dual natures of myself. For now, my work exists as abstract experience - it defines my vulnerabilities and my durability. My audience is invited to ride those vehicles and to experience a new perspective. My goal for my thesis work, and ultimately for my artistic career, is to bring further awareness to microaggressions that affect Black artists and people of color. By artistically recreating those experiences, I hope to be an influence just as I am influenced. While my struggles as a Black artist have, and will continue, to define and push my work, I continue to strive to overcome those struggles for the good of my soul and the good of society.

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