Beyond The Fields

Terry Rodnell Lynn

University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd

Part of the Painting Commons

Recommended Citation
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/998

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
BEYOND THE FIELDS

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts Degree
The University of Mississippi

by

TERRY R. LYNN

August 2015
ABSTRACT

“An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future.”

Ta-Nehisi Coates

My work deals with the ideas of blackness and southern culture. Born in Memphis, Tennessee on the heels of the civil rights movement, I cannot help but to be shaped by the aftermath of integration and the ideals of equality. The South is more than a geographical location; it is a cultural distinction. My life has been shaped by these cultural experiences.

Inspired by family stories, my art references a lingering past and also reflects my life experiences as a black man living in the South. In Mississippi I had the opportunity to see the fields of cotton reminiscent of the stories my family often told when I was young. My granddad told of how they loaded wagons to chop cotton in the spring and pick cotton in the fall. The values of a person were based on faith, family, and work. Those ideals were constantly challenged by Jim Crow and made it difficult for blacks to realize the American dream.

I feel compelled to create art that challenges socially accepted “truths” versus fallacy. I confront contemporary social issues influenced by its legacy of white supremacy. We still inhabit a world intolerant of the unique cultural differences we all share.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife, family and the stories they told and to my living grandparents, Leon Lynn and Charles Oliver.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express my deepest appreciation to my thesis committee members—Philip Jackson for helping me to realize the potential in my work, Joshua Brinlee for challenging my work, and Sheri Fleck Rieth for encouraging me to confidently define my work.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. ii

DEDICATION .............................................................................................................................. iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ............................................................................................................... iv

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER 2: IMAGE DESCRIPTIONS ....................................................................................... 3

CHAPTER 3: INFLUENCES ....................................................................................................... 6

CHAPTER 4: MATERIALS AND PROCESSES ........................................................................ 8

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................... 10

BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................................................................................... 11

LIST OF APPENDICES ........................................................................................................... 13

    Gin ........................................................................................................................................ 15

    Blue ...................................................................................................................................... 17

    Reconstruction ..................................................................................................................... 19

    Olde English 800 .................................................................................................................. 21

    Legacy ................................................................................................................................. 23
Discarded .................................................................................................................. 25

Dream ......................................................................................................................... 27

The Annunciation ....................................................................................................... 29

Quilted ......................................................................................................................... 31

VITA .............................................................................................................................. 32
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*Beyond the Fields* is an exhibition of paintings and mixed media works about my southern experiences that have been shaped by faith, family and race. Growing up in a tightly knit family reinforced those ideals. Cotton was once the fabric of Southern Culture and life. “Cotton became the foundation for the developing textile industry in New England, spurring the industrial revolution which transformed America in the 19th century” (Bagwell, 1998). There were many stories of picking cotton told by family members. Many blacks worked the fields from slavery through Jim Crow. Jim Crow was the former practice of segregating black people in The United States. After the Emancipation many blacks moved across the country seeking freedom and the American Dream. Many of those who stayed behind in rural areas endured the cold shadow of segregation and inequality in the scorching heat of the southern fields. Today those same cotton fields are a reminder of this country’s history, particularly the legacy of slavery and sharecropping.

African Americans migrated to settle in urban cities like Memphis, Chicago, Detroit and New York. They left the cotton fields and sharecropping to seek freedom and equality. As generations left the fields they carried along traditions. African American culture has contributed to the musical, visual, and literary arts. My work relates to the African/African American oral traditions of storytelling.

Our contemporary landscape is the result of past achievements of the civil rights movement but also the reality of current disparities and the work that still needs to be done.
Under performing schools, blight, and crime are the most frequent story portrayed about the black community. My new body of work will gather materials from my community and recreate a new narrative that challenges stereotypes associated with such a one sided view about the contemporary African American experience.
CHAPTER 2: IMAGE DESCRIPTIONS

In the painting *Gin*, the subject is a rural landscape of an old cotton gin. Few colors are used to describe the building and surrounding elements. I glued torn pieces of random photographs on to the canvas to further illustrate the multi-layered history of the scene. White paint is smeared over the surface of the painting in order to emphasize areas of clarity. Black Duct tape both covers over parts and outlines other portions of the composition, in order to express fragments of time. In the collage of diverse materials of duct tape, photographs, paint and canvas, the viewer is able to form a new vision, which is stripped of the determining influence of recognizable facial characteristics.

In the painting *Blue*, I cover the subject with paint and gold tape. The viewer is confronted with a deconstructed portrait. I mask the face of the person in the painting with black paint, and in doing so, change their identity. Duct tape covers up areas and constructs a new environment. I am re-shaping the way in which the subject inhabits the environment.

*Reconstruction* is a contemporary portrait of an African American male that is collaged with an image of the civil war confederate general, Nathan Bedford Forest, which stands ominously as a symbol of both confederate pride and historic racism. The flag looming above embodies a history of white supremacy. Before the civil war the country was divided and black people were treated as property. Today many inequalities still exist in education, policing, housing and employment. Using a collage that is torn I shift perceptions by combining contradictory images.
Generalizations and stereotypes about African Americans have evolved within American society dating back to the colonial years. In *Olde English 800*, I create a painting using a 40 ounce malt liquor label to represent a stereotype of the black community. Olde English 800, an American brand of malt liquor, is incorporated within a collage of photographs, paint and drawings of an abstract landscape. Areas are painted in shades of burnt sienna to reflect a bloodstained history. Dark clouds loom in the sky to relate to the feeling of bleakness. Grey paint drips covers areas of the painting while revealing others. Gestural lines lead the eye throughout the painting to emphasize the immediacy and mood of the painting. An Olde English malt liquor bottle label towers on the horizon like a water tower or billboard. Contrasting recognizable images with unidentifiable pictures I created a collage that challenges stereotypes and associations.

In *Legacy*, I have painted over a historical photograph of the an iconic building from the campus of Ole Miss. Being one the oldest building on The University of Mississippi campus, the Lyceum represents Mississippi’s past. Using a photograph from the antebellum period, I create a historical narrative. Black strokes of paint ripple across the sky. Blue paint drips like blood across the canvas like the University Greys during the battle at Gettysburg. (Pickett’s Charge)

In *Discarded*, a candy wrapper, cigarette packaging, beer bottle labels, and discarded lottery tickets cover the canvas like litter from a city street. Menthol cigarettes and malt liquor have come to signify the stereotypes of a predominately poor and often black community. I use these discarded materials as a metaphor for blackness. Strips of gold, silver and brown paper become part of an urban abstraction. Green Newport cigarette packaging is collaged throughout
the painting, like green areas on a city map and areas of blackness are surrounded by areas of the color beige.

In *Dream* a white picket fence is a symbol for achieving the American Dream. I contrast the photograph of a suburban house against a sharecroppers shack which stands for the disparity between the have’s and have not’s. A black cloud floats above. Blue duct tape is collaged across the composition to represent freedom.

*The Annunciation* is a painting of a young girl who envisions a better life. The background of this painting is collaged from a photograph of a cotton field. An image of a young black girl floats above the background like an angel. In the biblical painting *The Annunciation* by Fra Angelico, the angel Gabriel visits Mary with a vision. In my version of this biblical theme the subject in the painting has a vision of a brighter future. The torn background is covered in bold black brush marks. Light blue is used in this painting as a symbol of the Virgin Mary and purity.

The painting *Quilted* is a link to the quilts my grandmother and great-grandmother created. Collaging scraps and images that create a narrative is like the tradition of quilting from my ancestors. After the Civil War, many African American women worked in households as domestics. Quilts were made for everyday use out of necessity. Scraps, discarded clothing, and feed sacks, were the materials used. I use quilt patterns throughout this painting to reinterpret my family’s narrative. Quilt design patterns were associated with directing slaves to freedom. I am creating colorful abstractions honoring my family’s heritage.
CHAPTER 3: INFLUENCES

The quilts made by my grandmother and great-grandmother are the greatest inspirations in my work. Those older artworks connect my work to the past generations of my family. Faith Ringgold is an African American artist who is best known for her story quilts. Ringgold combines art and craft to create inspirational narratives about racial and sexual inequality.

The artist Romare Bearden’s use of the collage has been another influence in my work as well. I am inspired by his ability to draw upon his personal experiences to create works that reflect the wider African American experience. The tradition of cutting and pasting photographs and scraps of paper is similar to the African American tradition of storytelling though quilts.

The artist Kara Walker’s use of cut out paper to describe the brutality of the antebellum south has also influenced my style. Her cutouts are direct and easily recognizable. In my work I create layers with a variety of materials and approaches. I focus on cutting duct tape and paper in a manner similar to the way in which Kara Walker worked, but I collaged these elements back into my paintings to create layers of complexity. In describing her work, Kara Walker defines it as common, and historically associated with craft.

I was really searching for a format to sort of encapsulate, to simplify complicated things...And some of it spoke to me as: ‘it's a medium...historically, it's a craft...and it's very middle-class.’ It spoke to me in the same way that the minstrel show does...it's middle class white people rendering themselves black, making themselves somewhat invisible, or taking on an alternate identity because of the anonymity ... and because the shadow also speaks about so much of our psyche. You
can play out different roles when you're rendered black, or halfway invisible (Walker, 1999).

Chris Ofili is another artist who has had a strong stylistic influence on my work. Ofili, was born in England, but creates art that reflects his Nigerian roots. His social commentary and politically charged earlier works, like “The Holy Virgin Mary” and “Afrodizzia,” merged a historical dialogue with contemporary urban influences. Ofili has created a reputation for creating paintings that reference blackness, mythology, African culture, femaleness, and virility. He uses images from afros, cultural icons, glitter, elephant dung and beads. Colorful beads are historically important in many African cultures, including Nigeria, and a symbol of spirituality is one example. His May 2015 retrospective at the New Museum in New York City included a variety of images from the whimsical to the Afrocentric. Images specific to African culture were linked to his body of work by his use of elephant dung and African beads.

Rather than beads I use duct tape to connect and relate to the everyday. Interested in the meaning objects and practices have in traditional society, I use duct tape and latex paint to communicate the idea of craftsmanship. As Chris Ofili deals with the varied meanings materials can communicate, I too use familiar materials to create new narratives that speak to current social issues. Chris Ofili told an interviewer in 2010, “A lot of black art that came before was set up to critique the system. I thought that was boring . . . I wanted to be sincere and outrageous and friendly and rude and experimental and conventional” (Tomkins, 2015).
CHAPTER 4: MATERIALS AND PROCESSES

I use tools and materials that are not necessarily used for artistic motives but utilitarian purposes. Non-traditional materials like duct tape, newspaper, putty knives, and craft paper are readily available to me and are as useful as traditional materials, such as oil paint and canvas. This sensibility to the working man’s tools is a connection to my grandfather, who was a brick mason, and my father who is a builder. I am interested in the idea that the materials can create beauty or ugliness. I am interested in the way people interact. Portions of the canvas are left unfinished to let the immediacy of the process to be revealed.

“the overarching narrative describing the black man is very narrow and very stereotypical” (Basu, 2015). In my work I use tar to reference the historical derogatory connotations associated with blackness. The term tar baby for example has had a long history of linking blackness to negativity. "The tar baby is a widespread character in African folklore upon which gum, wax or other sticky materials were used to entrap a person." (Coates). Conceptually, I use tar to cover over a surface to conceal a subject or surround a figure, to then employ large brushes, even brooms and a mop, to move the paint, representing the action of tilling or hoeing.

I apply gold paint and glitter in my paintings to challenge notions of value and worthiness, as well as the emphasis of material wealth in contemporary culture. For example, gold necklaces symbolize the gaudiness of hip hop culture, but also link Americas’ society to European hierarchy and colonialism. I tear paper and allow paint to drip to relate to the
aggressive stereotype associated with the Black male. Black paint drips, likewise, it creates a sense of immediacy.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

My latest body of work reflects my personal experiences and those from past generations. My work reflects a range of ideas, including sociopolitical, identity, and history.

The work is more than just nostalgic. I am creating art that communicates the way we interact in an effort to expose truth and dispel fallacy, challenging cultural stereotypes to create an open dialogue about our surroundings.

Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) said, “The negro, in winning rights for himself, produces substantial benefits for the nation. Eventually the civil-rights movement will have contributed infinitely more to the nation than the eradication of racial injustice. It will have enlarged the concept of brotherhood to a vision of total interrelatedness.”

I believe my work expresses the ideas of humanity that we all share.


http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1221764,00.html


Tomkis, Calvin. (2015, October 6) Into the Unknown, Chris Ofili returns to New York with a major retrospective. *The New Yorker*. 


LIST OF APPENDICES
APPENDIX A: GIN
APPENDIX B: BLUE
Blue
APPENDIX C: RECONSTRUCTION
Reconstruction
APPENDIX 4: OLDE ENGLISH 800
Olde English 800
APPENDIX 5: LEGACY
Legacy
APPENDIX 6: DISCARDED
Discarded
Dream
APPENDIX 8: THE ANNUNCIATION
APPENDIX 9: QUILTED
Quilted
VITA

Terry Lynn was born in Memphis, Tennessee, and grew up in Arlington, Tennessee. He began creating art at an early age. His mother, a Head Start teacher, always had plenty of arts and crafts supplies around the house. His twin brother and he were encouraged to be imaginative, so they would spend hours making their own creations with construction paper, glue, markers, and crayons. Terry’s dad was an architectural draftsman, so he naturally became fascinated with the drafting table, drawing pencils, renderings, rulers and tools of the trade. Remembering the handmade quilts of his grandmother and great-grandmother connected him to a rich creative legacy.

Terry Lynn received his BFA from The University of Memphis and is currently pursuing his MFA degree with an emphasis in painting from The University of Mississippi. He has exhibited extensively. Exhibitions include David Lusk Gallery, Memphis, TN., Brooks Museum of Art, Dixon Art Gallery, Bayou Art Gallery, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY, and the U.S. Embassy in Damascus, Syria.