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INTRODUCTION

When we are young we tend to think that we are immortal, living life for the moment and for the reality that exists in front of us. It isn't until we are allowed to grow and experience life, that we realize how certain moments in time affect how we view the world around us. I used to wonder how my life may have been different if my circumstances had been different, or if certain events hadn't occurred. I now know that everything happens for a reason, and that there is nothing in life that happens, that is not meant to be. I believe that every moment and every instance in time, even if it seems small or insignificant, whether it concerns man, animal, plant, or insect, ultimately plays an intricate part in the order of things. My experiences in life have been the inspiration for all of my works of art. I believe that life is truly a journey that is full of obstacles, that creates the experience of life, but it is what we learn from those experiences that help us continue on our journey.

One particular life lesson that I have learned during my personal experiences is to believe in myself, even when it seems that no one else does or ever will. I remember being told that I wasn't smart enough or that I would never make it college. In high school I had a guidance counselor that was the only person that encouraged me to apply to college. He told me that I was smart enough and to never let anyone tell me anything different. At that moment in time I told myself that I would succeed in anything that I put my mind to and that I would never feed into any negativity that surrounded me. I have also learned that it is
important to push forward even when things seem impossible, because even when it does not seem like it at the time, things eventually get better.

I have always had an interest in art. My childhood memories concerning art stem from my family. I remember my grandmother being a talented ceramic artist, making life size swans and doves, before she was overcome with the pain of arthritis and she could no longer do so. I also remember my uncle being a painter, creating life like portraits of family members when he was only a teenager. My mother also had artistic talent in drawing. Growing up, I had never seen my mother even pick up a pencil to draw, but I have been told by other family members that she was once an extraordinary artist, able to mirror anything that she decided to draw. I was once told by my grandmother that when my mother was a child an art teacher came to their house to express my mother’s artistic potential and to suggest that my grandmother should send her to an art school so that her artistic talent could be nurtured and flourish. My grandmother could not afford to send my mother to the school, and needed my mother’s help with the family, as my mother was the fourth of ten children. Over the years, I have seen many dreams deferred, sometimes indefinitely. I am the first one in my family to attend college; it is now up to me to fulfill these deferred dreams so they will not fizzle and die.

I decided a long time ago that no matter what I decided to pursue that I would not become a victim of my circumstances and never limit myself because of a situation that I may be in. I decided that whatever cards life dealt me, I
would play the game of life the best that I could, losing some hands and winning others. I will continue to play and learn from my mistakes along the way. I use this same approach to create my works of art. I use the world around me as my muse. This includes conversations that I have had with people over the years, places that I have traveled to, and any other situation in my life that I may be faced with. I take all the energy, feeling and emotion which I get from my experiences, and reproduce them in my work. I am very attracted to abstractions. I am also interested in art that challenges the viewer’s eye and thoughts and I try to convey these same ideas in my work. I am a strong believer in the saying that “art is in the eye of the beholder”. I am very aware that what I put into my art may not necessarily be what the viewer takes from it. I think that is what makes experiencing art interesting for the viewer and the artist.

**OBJECTIVE**

Since the beginning of my education in art I have always been interested in the way viewing art evokes certain feelings in the viewer. The way a viewer sees a work of art determines what he/she gets from the art. In my work I have always tried to convey a level of emotion. When I decided to pursue photography and graphic design, I soon discovered that the combination of these two forms allowed for endless possibilities. I am able to push my photographs further, allowing me to experiment and learn in both areas of art. My goal is to use my imagination to internalize my emotions and feelings, and
then display them artistically in my work. I believe my main body of work is an abstract visual interpretation, which reflects several feelings and emotions. My experimentation with subject matter allows me to recreate my ideas and feelings visually, after internalizing and interpreting my experiences.

During my education in art I have learned to appreciate the little things that we may see every day. The things that one often doesn't take a second look at during the hustle of one's daily routine, such as the direction that the trees blow when the seasons change, and the smell of the air when it is about to rain, or how the street lights seem to illuminate a dark alley at night and suddenly make the alley a beautiful image that you would have never seen during the daytime. During my life I have done a lot of walking and I have taken plenty of public transportation. In many instances, it is that circumstance that allows me to slow down and reflect on the small things that can often be overlooked when dealing with the fast pace of life. My overall objective is to create abstract photographs. I want to produce art that sparks an idea in the imagination of the viewer. Furthermore, as an artist in progress, I feel that one of the most important elements for me when producing art is that I believe in the art that I am creating. By this I mean that I am able to support the ideas and concepts which are expressed and represented artistically in my work.
The approach I use to create my current work involves several different elements. My current work stems from my experiences speaking with other African Americans as well as people of other cultures, and learning how their experiences have affected how they view their physical selves in a society that seems to have a secret stigma concerning the complexion of their skin. This stigma began with the institution of slavery and the idea that individuals with lighter skin are somehow better, prettier, or smarter human beings than those individuals with darker skin. This idea is obviously not true and is ridiculous, but it suggests that even though the practice of slavery in the United States is well in the past, the scars from it still run deep in the psyche of many people of color today.

This idea caused me to reflect on how skin complexion may play a part in how certain individuals are viewed. For example, Halle Berry is a popular actress who is bi-racial and fair-skinned but considers herself black and is well known in entertainment. Even if one is not an avid movie fan, one has probably heard her name at some point. Nia Long an equally talented African-American actress who doesn’t get the same publicity as Berry, perhaps due to her darker skin complexion. While some may argue that there are many reasons why this might be, this situation presents itself all too often in African-American communities. The questions that individuals from any culture or race should ask
themselves are: do we have a bias against people with darker skin? Do I have a bias toward certain groups? I believe the answer is yes in most cases, whether we want to believe it or not. The next question we must ask ourselves is why this should be the case, and what we as the human race should do to change this stigma. In my work I approach these issues artistically by photographing parts of the body, capturing different tonal values of skin through the shape of the body, and its positions and movement.

I try to capture the different variations in each individual skin tone. In some cases I spoke to the individuals that I photographed. Sometimes I learned information about them and their experiences which evoked ideas or feelings in my psyche, after which I developed an idea, thought, or feeling, which I gathered from the encounter or from listening to their experience. In other instances, I photographed several different textures that evoked the same feelings, and several textures that related to the institution of slavery such as, slave ships, letters from slavery, cotton fields etc.

I choose to work digitally, in a collage format using textures. I use textures as my foundation and then pieces of each image and put them on top of the texture, fitting them together, combining similar shapes and tonal values. I then adjust each panel, so that the background can be viewed at different transparencies. I decided to represent each image in the form of panels to represent the idea that through all the hardships that people of color have had to face over time that we are still secretly divided among ourselves due to the scars
of slavery. The panoramic format allows the viewer to see the piece as a whole, but also to see each panel individually. This may also allow the viewer to view the image from left to right, while seeing how each panel connects to one another.

INSPIRATION

Two artists whose work has influenced my own are Frida Kahlo and Georgia O’Keeffe. Kahlo was born in 1907 in Mexico City. She was the third daughter of Guillermo and Matilda Kahlo. During her life she had a series of physical traumas. As a young child she was stricken with polio and this illness left her with a limp. Also in 1925, Kahlo was in a serious bus accident when the bus collided with a tramcar. Kahlo suffered injuries to her pelvis and right leg. The accident left her unable to bear children. Kahlo suffered with pain all her life. She often reflected her physical and emotional despair in her paintings.

Paintings produced by Frida Kahlo have an overwhelming level of symbolism. Kahlo used her life experiences as a muse for most, if not all, of her paintings. I have always enjoyed viewing her work because of their intensity. Paintings such as *My Birth, The Broken Column, and Diego and Frida* reflect the pain of her experience. Of these, The Broken Column is perhaps my favorite, and communicates Kahlo’s pain most clearly. As a viewer I am able to see and feel her pain. When I examine Kahlo’s paintings in relation to my own work, I believe that I have a similar approach, in a sense, because Kahlo
reflected her feelings in her paintings. Where Kahlo’s concentrates on personal situations, however, my own work is more abstract. In the image titled *Abstraction of Me*, I am representing myself, in an abstract way, reflecting myself on an internal level.

Another artist that I am influenced by is Georgia O’Keeffe. Georgia O’Keeffe was born in Wisconsin on November 15, 1887 on a dairy farm. Even as a small child she was interested in art and was encouraged by her parents in the discipline. When she left high school she decided that she wanted to be an artist. In 1905 she studied art at the Art Institute of Chicago. O’Keeffe painted abstract, intense personal paintings. O’Keeffe’s paintings are bold, filled with vibrant colors. Her paintings are aesthetically beautiful. She often wanted to encapsulate the distinctive beauty of the American landscape. I was attracted to her paintings because many of them are abstract. I enjoy dissecting her paintings and creating my own interpretation of them. I like that she often painted large paintings of a small part of the subjects, making them larger than life. Some of the paintings that I am most attracted to are the *Red Canna*, *Grey line with black and yellow*, *Black Place* and *Pelvis with Moon*. O’Keeffe’s use of color and directional lines allowed her to create works of art which allow the imagination of the viewer to run wild.

Stephen Marc, Cindy Sherman and Lorna Simpson are three photographers that I viewed in relationship to my own work. Lorna Simpson was
approach to photographing. Sherman turned the camera on herself, not for the purpose of making her self the subject, but for the purpose of becoming an observer. She wanted to examine the role and representation of women in society. In my opinion the work of Cindy Sherman also shares some similarities with my work. I was most attracted to her more abstract work. I like her use of color and lighting. I also liked her experimentation with subject matter. What I most enjoy about her work is that she leaves a great deal to the imagination of the viewer. I find her images to be vibrant and intense. Some of the images that I was most attracted to were her untitled images some of which are in the book *Specimens*. When I viewed Sherman’s work in connection with my own work I see the similarities in the abstract approach, however her work seems to be more unsystematic than my own.

Out of the three photographic artists that I viewed, I would have to say that I was the most inspired by Stephen Marc. Marc is a photographer and also currently Professor of Art at Arizona State University’s Herberger College of Fine Arts. Marc is most acknowledged for his influential photographic montages and composites. His images merge pictures of his family, historic photographs and images from his own extensive photographic work. The themes expressed in all his images are an attempt to tell his personal
story and the story of the African American culture. When viewing Marc’s images I was captivated by his visual approach and the symbolism. Marc uses narratives that come from the African and African American community to create photographic collages that, in some way, tell a story to the viewer. The visual elements that Marc uses in his images correspond to one another in all instances. Many of Marc's images are untitled, leaving room for the viewer to think, question and explore. When I viewed his work in relationship to my own, I see that our objectives are based on our cultural experiences, however his work is more visually complicated because of the way he pieces together his images. We are both trying to create a level of emotion in the viewer, but Marc’s work is about the narrative as well as the visual content. My work is more about the visual, leaving the narrative to the imagination of the viewer. We also have a similar approach, because in some cases we both work in the same panoramic format. I think that Marc’s use of this format of allows the viewer to move visually through every image.

WORK

Although my work stems from the ideas and concepts in relation to the scars left from the institution of slavery in America, it is about more than that. My work is more about self-examination and appreciation. I take a concept that
has been associated with negative connotations and objectifying it. I turn it into something to be looked at, and appreciated for its beauty, simplicity or intensity.

*How to Carry a Tree* I and II were inspired by an image of a man who had been a former slave who had a scar on his back that was so horrific that it looked as if it was a tree literally growing from his back. The phrase "I have a tree on my back" was commonly used by slaves and former slaves to describe the severity of their scars from being abused as a slave. I took this image and altered it, and used it as texture underneath the initial image of skin that I had. I allowed very a little of the texture to show through the layered images of skin. I chose to create these two images in this way because I wanted the viewer to have to look deeper at the image, showing that these scars exist even if they are not seen at first glance. I believe this is a reflection of some people of color today, because these scars often run so deep that many don't even realize how this institution has affected their psyche and how they view their physical selves. They also do not realize how it affects the way they react to or accept other people of color.

*One Drop Rule* was inspired by a rule was created during the time of slavery in America. The rule basically stated that a person with as little as one drop of black blood in their heritage was to be considered black. A more modified definition of this allows it to be used to describe races other than African American; however this rule does not exist outside of the Untied States. It
initially was a rule created to segregate the blacks from whites during the time of slavery and to make sure there was not apparent mixing between the two races. The One-drop rule can also compare to the Apartheid Legislation that happened in South Africa beginning in the mid 1800's.

When I created this work of art I thought of it as though I was looking at this concept from the inside out. I tried to picture the process of the formation of all of these so-called drops that are supposed to be a compilation of one person, but one is allegedly supposed to determine who we are. It's a theory that does not seem to make any sense. I wondered if I could see this one drop, and if so what would it look like and would it really be that easy to find? I believe that it would not be so easy to find, and it shouldn't even matter. I tried to reproduce this concept as I saw it in my imagination.

When I created the image *Variation* I wanted to reflect the variety of different skin tones that is a representation of African and African American skin. I wanted to combine all of these skin complexions and show how they all can connect to one another. I did not use any other textures; I just used images of different skin tones and complexion. I wanted this image to have simplicity while also using repetition as a way of giving the eye of the viewer something to hold on to.

The image *Silence* is about personal and individual connections that people have to one another. I wanted this image to also be simple, but to have some mystery as well. I wanted this image to have a simple beauty, which helps
connect each panel together. I decided to arrange this image in a way that would help the viewer find a relationship between each panel. I did this because I want to pull the viewer closer, so that the closer a viewer gets to the image, the more recognizable the subject becomes.

In addition to my main body of work I also worked on a group of images in which the subject matter was the subway. Since I am from the DC Metropolitan area, I have first hand experience using public transportation on a daily basis. I decided that I wanted to capture the experience of riding the subway, while using the same approach that I used when I used skin as my subject. I wanted these four images to also be abstract, but I wanted each image to give the viewer a small glimpse into the monotony of riding the subway daily. *Lost in Limbo* is about that middle area between where one begins and where one ends, and how sometimes one can get lost in the confusion of life and forget to appreciate the little the things that exist around us.

**CONCLUSION**

It is important to me that my work has substance, which comes from the level of internal energy within me. However, I want to examine and investigate different subject matter in the future. I will continue to explore different means of using color, line, shape, subject and presentation. My work reflects my attraction to abstract art. I plan to use my future experiences and work as a learning tool. That will also be the inspiration for my work in the future. I hope
that in the future, I will be able to continue creating works of art that are meaningful not only to me but also to my viewers.

In conclusion, I consider myself an artist in progress. I am well aware that there is still much more out there for me to learn and my education will not end with receiving an MFA, but I am just grateful that I have this opportunity to express myself artistically. Thinking back, I would have never have imagined that I would be where I am today. It may not seem like much to a non-artist, but I realize now that it would have been so easy for me to take a different route in life. I am just thankful to be in a place in my life where I am able to express myself artistically. I am hopeful that wherever I end up on my professional journey, that I will still have the means and the creative outlets to express myself through art.
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Images

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