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Documentary Photography and Visual Activism

Word Count: 1841

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Ways of Thinking ADAD 4018

De-construct the meaning of an artwork in relation to one of the following topics: the politics of representation, **race or violence.**



Bill Traylor, Untitled (Figures, Construction)

Bill Traylor lived a long life before he was known as an artist, this long life was largely a life of suffering and struggle. As a black man in a slavery driven United States, he witnessed and experienced more racism, violence and suffering than most could imagine. It was that racism, violence and suffering that shaped the art we saw in his older years and what was so powerfully expressed in *Untitled (Figures, Construction)* . In the essay below I will discuss and analyze how violence and racism shaped the work of *Bill Traylor* and more specifically the work *Untitled (Figures, Construction)*. I will do this analysis using semiotics, mediation, historical context, perceived intentions of the work, and visual elements of the work such as, line, color, shape, and form.

Born into an enslaved family in 1854 *Bill Traylor* lived and worked as a farmhand on a rural plantation in Alabama until 1899. He would marry twice and have fifteen children whilst living on this plantation. In 1928 he relocated to Montgomery- this came after his second marriage ended and most of his children had moved to other parts of the United States. After moving to Montgomery he began working in a shoe factory. But after some time working at the factory he began to develop rheumatism and could no longer work. With no work options left and no family to support him he was soon homeless. Moving into a shack behind a funeral home he then spent his days on the streets in Montgomery. It was at this time, in his mid eighties, that he began painting. When looking at *Untitled (Figures, Construction)* I feel a sense of chaos, which to me comes from *Traylor's* use of shapes and forms in the painting. Each figure has its own expressions which he displays through different shapes in the eyes, arms, and head. When you look at the eyes they feel as if they are all watching you; The eyes are making sure that you are seeing the suffering they are enduring. I believe he did this to bring the viewer into his world and to show the world the true suffering of African-Americans in

the mid eighteen hundreds. Furthermore, *Traylor* makes all the figures the same height, the same body frame, and gives them the same eyes. I believe this was his attempt to show the rigidity of life as a slave and show the forced uniformity of their lives. Their souls were taken from them, their freedom was taken-they lived their entire lives in the confines of what another man deemed was fair. This, in turn, would have made the slaves feel trapped in structure and would have made it hard to express themselves. I believe that this was *Traylor's* semiotic depiction of daily life as a slave in this time.

As you can see, *Untitled (Figures, Construction)* is put in the top corner of the canvas. To me this positioning is a semiotic depiction of *Bill Traylor* living his life in the margins of society-a place where he was put since he was born. As he was coming of age the civil war was beginning and tensions were rising in rural Alabama. As the war began fear that the slaves may rebel led plantation owners to move their slaves to more rural parts of Alabama and to protect their investments. As such, he would have been moved frequently and wondered why, but at this time, slaves often had such little access to the outside world he may not have been aware why they were being moved. This constant movement at a young age, without knowing why or where he was going, probably confused him-the destabilizing effects of constant movement might be why he put *Untitled (Figures, Construction)* in the margins of the page and why he put the characters in the top left corners of the canvas, just barely fitting on the page-just barely fitting into the world around them. Even though all slaves were technically made free in 1865, in rural Alabama very few slaves may have known about it until much later. The fact he grew up in this environment of not knowing whether he was free or a slave might have added to his decision to place the work in the margins of the page. In a way,

this positioning could be a way to symbolize the uneasiness of not knowing where you really stand within a culture.

It was in the eighteen seventies after the civil war ended when sharecropping began in the United States. Sharecropping was a form of farming where families would rent land from plantation owners and would work the land in order to pay their rent. What would typically happen in this system is that the renter of the land would fall into debt to the land owners almost immediately. The renters would then be stuck on the land until the so-called “debt” was repaid. This debt would have been nearly impossible to repay because the renters of the land never saw a profit from their work. This system of sharecropping was seen all over the United States after slaves were freed. This was an attempt to continue to have a source of free labor, thus creating a new form of slavery. This is the situation Traylor would have found most likely himself in. I believe you can see *Traylor's* attempt to mediate this sharecropping ‘world’ around him in *Untitled (Figures, Construction)*. When looking at *Untitled (Figures, Construction)* you can see a dog in the bottom of the work and the depiction of dogs is a common theme in his work. I believe his depiction of dogs in this piece is a semiotic for his relationship with the sharecropping, racism and violence. He depicts them with big teeth always watching and waiting for him in the corner as if to depict that racism is always there waiting for you no matter what you do or no matter how hard you work-you never receive fair pay because of the color of your skin.

Furthermore, *Traylor* lived in a time where Black people in the United States were treated worse than animals. He grew up seeing African Americans, lynched, beat, and in chains for no reason other than the color of their skin. This treatment of African Americans would have had an extreme effect on how he saw the world and himself in

the world. He, like many other African Americans at the time, would have been afraid and found it extremely difficult to share his thoughts or express himself out of fear he may be killed or separated from his family. The first thing I see in *Untitled (Figures, Construction)* is this fear depicted by the chaotic scene within and surrounding the house. I can see what look like are two slave drivers in the bottom of the painting attacking a slave who may have stopped working. This was probably a scene that had been burned into his memory. He would have lived in perpetual fear of being attacked for needing a break and I believe you can see that fear in this painting. You can also see the frantic movement of the people up and down the roof as one slave looks like he is about to fall off; To me what I see in this is an attempt to illustrate the balance that the slaves had to maintain between their mental health and their work. As we know in today's societies our mental well being is heavily based on the people we are surrounded by and our employers. Being constantly surrounded by people who tell you you are bad, you are wrong, and you are the wrong color would have had a huge effect on how he saw himself as well as the world around him and to me is why he depicts so much fear within this painting.

Untitled (Figures, Construction) is defined by its unique style. I believe this distinctive style comes from *Traylors* inability to read or write. Not being able to do these things would have dramatically changed the way he perceived and mediated the world around him. Living in a time and place where television and radio were not readily accessible, his only way of learning would have been through his personal experiences and stories: what he saw, and what he heard. To me that is what makes the work so powerful. Further, the lack of classical training for painting is what makes it so creative, and the materials that were used were probably from what he could find and

freely acquire. There are no rules in his work, the raw yet exact strokes, the detail in the textures, all of it speaks to the fact he had no manicured ability to paint, but simply the need to express how he mediated the world around him. Moreover when I see *Untitled (Figures, Construction)* I see what I hear when I listen to the blues from this time period. The simple yet utterly complex rhythms and lyrics that depict the suffering and violence of this time period are parallel to the simple yet refined strokes that you see in *Untitled (Figures, Construction)*. In both *Traylors* work and the blues of this time there's one key similarity, the mediation of the world around them through art. The racial violence is what shaped the art that came from the south of the United States at this time, and it's that same racial violence that makes the mediation of this horrible time period so powerful. You can see and hear that there is so much these oppressed people want to say and express while looking or listening to their work. No matter what medium, materials or obstacles they faced they were still able to create some of the most powerful pieces of art that shaped all the art we look at today.

Hochschule Luzern states “the “Act of Artistic Mediation” involves the insertion of art and the artists' voice into the larger cultural dialogue for the purpose of mediating or intervening in the forces of social and political events”. To me *Traylors* work embodies this idea-that he was shaped by the racial violence and suffering that surrounded him throughout his whole life. *Bill Traylor* is someone who lived and died with little to no material items and lived a life filled with more racism and violence than most people today could even imagine. He was raised a slave, spent his life on a plantation, and lived his final years as a homeless man. It was this life that moved him to create such moving work in his later years. He as an eighty year old man felt the need to mediate the world around him, to say something about the African-American

experience, and to make sure that the suffering of millions wasn't forgotten anytime soon. Through *Untitled (Figures, Construction)*, *Bill Traylor* brings you into his world and reflects the racism and violence felt by generations of the past and present.

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