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The Black Experience Within Art

My exhibition space will exclusively feature the representation of POC (People of Colour) in particular black people in historical art work starting from the 17th century and up until the 21st century. My exhibition will look at the negative representation of black people in historical art and the effects it has on the black population as well as some of the responses to inclusion in art. The show will take place in the allocated Mission Gallery space, while the show features black people and their experience my target audience will be the white community. I have chosen to keep the Mission Gallery as the location resides in a predominately white area. My aim to to educate and inform people about the black experience within art to those who are ignorant to it.

“Despite decades of postcolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and queer activism...the art world continues to exclude “other” “ (Reilly, 2018, pg.17) The art world is embedded in institutional racism caused primarily by the slave trade and its recording in historical art, . The first painting in my exhibition ‘A portrait of Marchesa Elena Grimali Catteneo’ will focus on the juxtaposition of representation between the white coloniser and black native. As seen in the image Catteneo is dressed in expensive clothing ranging from her long black gown, ruffled neck piece and hair tie. The red sleeve cuffs paired with the red umbrella connote wealth, “A galaxy of signifiers” (Barthes, 1997) As expressed by Barthe all



Figure 1

objects have sign and signifiers, this is very clear in this image. The lack of labour to hold the umbrella and instead having her slave to do it is a clear sign of wealth and power. This contrasted with the black women’s hunched posture, ragged clothing and uncomfortable look shows a clear divide in not only wealth but power. As well as this the slave is left nameless in the painting’s title leaving her to fade into history, immortalised in paint.

The next portion of the exhibition will move onto the 18th and 19th century and feature two portraits of black people varying in meaning yet displayed together as they are two pieces of art work

in Jacques-Louis David's collection found in the Louvre. The first painting "A portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belly" is an unusual representation found in the 18th century. Belly 'earnt' his freedom in his services to the French military and is shown here in a position of power. He is decorated in his military uniform and is shown to be standing. Yet his uniform is missing a medal, could his freedom be his medal, and should that need to be awarded? His body language is relaxed and calm or could be inferred as lazy, a common negative stereotype of black people. This paired with a statue



Figure 2



Figure 3

of a white man leaning over his shoulder is a clear metaphor of his white oppressor leaning uncomfortably over his shoulder despite his freedom. This juxtaposition between power and decoration still not being enough to escape the oppressor is a very conflicting idea. This painting paired with "Portrait of Madeline" painted in the 19th century and previously called "Portrait of a Negress" had its name changed due to its controversial predecessor. This act of ignorant 'wokeness' almost seems to want to shift responsibility of the verbal treatment black people faced in both the past and present. It almost seems like a form of historical erasure in order to make the oppressor seem tolerant. As a result in my exhibition the painting will be given its original name to express the injustice black people face in the English language as well as art. In the image we can see that the subject is wearing a headdress to cover her hair. This is in direct relation of the law most commonly associated with New Orleans that forced black women to cover their hair as it was seen as vulgar, immoral and not modest. In an act of defiance black women would decorate their heads with scarfs that featured bright colours and African prints to show their culture with out showing their hair. This is not evident in this image "white audiences might 'fully engage' with black lives" (Reilly, 2018, pg.102) This could have been done to show a black woman with no culture in

order to be more palatable to the white audience that view it in sacrifice to her true origin and culture. The contradiction between the need for modesty in her hair yet her breast exposed in a half nude is ironic and telling of the hyper-sexualisation of black women in western culture. Even though both images show modesty in the oppressive eyes of the western institution, the paintings were described as a “black stain” by critics when hung with other artworks featuring white subjects in the Louvre.



Figure 4



Figure 5

The next two pieces of art will bring the black experience into the present, these two artworks will be featured next to each other the first ‘Dancing in the Louvre’ and second being a moving image cut from a section of Beyoncé’s ‘Apeshit’ music video. In the moving image piece Beyoncé dances in unison with six other women all varying in skin tone and body image. Each dancer wears a nude coloured skin toned athleisure outfit to replicate the famous nude paintings found in the same era as the painting they dance in front of. This could be done to allow the women to stand nude but not to allow their oppressor to hyper-sexualise them. Standing under ‘The consecration of the Emperor Napoleon and coronation of Empress Josephine’ painting hung above them Beyoncé and her dancers face away in retaliation of Napoleon and his institution. “Napoleon’s role as one of the world’s most notorious colonizers adds another dimension of complexity to this juxtaposition.” (Lang, 2018) When rising to power Napoleon re-instated the law that allowed for slave trading and slave keeping in the french colonies despite its ban before him. Their dancing paired with the other piece will show an act of defiance in the face of a personified oppressor and the paintings witnessed before in the show. Beyoncé stands under Josephine as she is crowned to show her own strength and prowess as an entertainer as well as being a human conductor to allow her black audience to become empowered with her as shown in the joining of arms with her

dancers. This is then echoed with the outstretched hands of the matching art piece showing embrace and power in one another. I want the music video scene to be on loop with the music audio replaced with a low ringing sound that adds to its repetitiveness. This loop will be used as a metaphor for the constant struggle and loop that many black people feel as they are raised in a society that isn't built to support them.

In the last section of the exhibition I will display an art work from a series of images created by

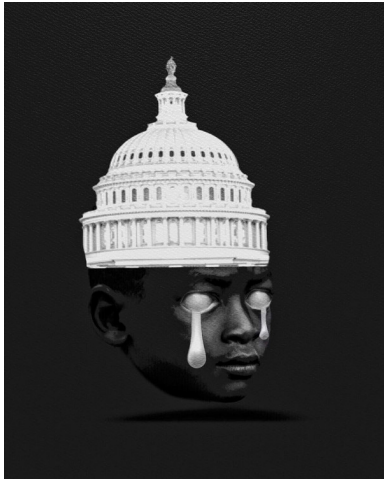


Figure 6

Kendrio La’Pierre who is a prominent artist in the afro-surrealism art movement in the 21st century. “Although the object features fractured subjectivities, severed bodies, and disassembled buildings, Bearden draws nonetheless from our common iconographic scape” (Francis, 2013, pg.95) It seems that the iconographic landscape of a black artist is different to that of a white artist. This is shown in afro-surrealism that focuses on the black experience in society. In this image the metaphor is clear but

I have chosen to include it due to its link with “Portrait of a Negress”.

The subject’s head covering is the institution, the oppressor is sitting on top of the head of oppressed. A simple yet powerful metaphor that culminates the exhibition into one image. Black people has been left out of art history or misrepresented so poorly that the need for their own art movement that represented them in a meaningful and truthful way was needed. I have placed this image separate from the rest of the images in my floor plan to allow for complete concentration on this image and its themes. Not only does the image express the oppression of the institution but also expresses it in the genre the image finds itself in. This image transcends through its primary meaning and represents every piece of art work found in the exhibition before hand. The dark surroundings portray the white house as a beacon of hope as its bright white walls shine yet its true intention is the opposite. The tears falling down the subjects cheek represent the overpowering weight of the institution’s oppression on young black lives and physiological repercussions it has on its victims.

In conclusion, the black community has been misrepresented through centuries of art and history and are still being misrepresented in the present day. My hope for this exhibition would be to

educate and stress the racist implications that this misrepresentation has on black people and the internal racism white people hold without realising. Institutional racism installs a set of ideological reasonings in the white mind that allows white people to become passive in the face of oppression. This exhibition was created to challenge that.

Bibliography

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Lang, C.(2018). Art History Experts Explain the Meaning of the Art in Beyoncé and Jay Z's 'Apeshit' Video. The Times, June 19th. Available at <https://time.com/5315275/art-references-meaning-beyonce-jay-z-apeshit-louvre-music-video/> (Accessed 5th May 2020)
Francis, T.(2013). The No-Theory Chant of Afrosurrealism. USA, Indiana University Press.

Figures

- Figure 1- "Portrait of Marchesa Elena Grimali Cattaneo", Anthony Van Dyke. 1600s
- Figure 2- "Portrait of Citizen Jean-Baptiste Belly", Anne-Louis Girodet de Raussey-Trioson. 1700s
- Figure 3- "Portrait of Madeline" (Portrait of a Negress), Marie-Gullemine Benoist. 1800s
- Figure 4- "Dancing in the Louvre", Faith Ringgold. 1991
- Figure 5- A Scene from "Apeshit", Beyoncé & Jay-Z. 2018
- Figure 6- Poetry/ Prose , Kendrio La’Pierre. 2014

