Racial Violence and Resilience: Questions and Currents in African American Art

Commentary on Selected Works

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Since the Harlem Renaissance in the early twentieth century, artists have represented a history of racial violence against black women and men. Racial violence presents artists with a challenge: to represent a black man or woman as victim risks suggesting inevitability and helplessness, effectively victimizing the subject all over again. In several of the artworks here, artists draw upon faith to provide a means for resistance and redemption.

Hale Woodruff contrasts the horrors of lynching with the importance of Christian faith: in *Giddap*, a lone black man surrounded by an enraged mob of white men and women, at the moment he is about to be hanged, appears at peace with his fate because of his faith in redemption which Woodruff represents by the form of the cross defining the muscles of his chest. In *Sunday Promenade*, Woodruff places a Christian church at the focal point of a rural black community and in *By Parties Unknown*, the church where the body of a lynched black man has been left offers salvation from his assailants who, as the title suggests, will never be charged with his murder. Gertrude Abercrombie’s *Charlie Parker’s Favorite Painting* is the work of one of the many white allies who joined the interracial coalition to end lynching.

Jacob Lawrence challenges us with an alternative perspective: he represents the white abolitionist John Brown in terms of his deep Christian faith, arming former slaves to defend themselves, and steeped in the violence between proslavery militiamen and anti-slavery free-staters in the Missouri Territory. Lawrence represents the choice to take up arms and the violence that sometimes resulted as if to pose a question about Brown’s faith: given the rightness of his cause, ending slavery, did it provide justification, salvation, and forgiveness for violent acts?

Kara Walker assembles iconic images of colonization and slavery, such as a sailing ship and an encounter between European and indigenous peoples, above the graceful figure of a woman floating underwater. Is the woman a victim of the Middle Passage, an enslaved African thrown overboard by the crew of a slave ship headed for the Americas? Or does she represent the faith of the enslaved who sustained their beliefs as an act of resistance to the depredations of slavery by creating syncretic religions such as Vodou?

Renée Stout evokes these same traditions in her version of a Yoruba nkisi, titled *Ogun* after the Yoruba god of war and iron, to ask why so many “YOUNG BLACK MEN” die from gun violence. She has activated her sculpture with medicinal bundles, a chicken
foot, and photographic portraits of her father and grandfather that suggest the resilience of these men. **Willie Cole** reproduces portraits of himself that address several of these themes through a chain of representation: the physical toll of menial labor represented by the form of an iron and the pattern of the iron’s steam holes burnt into a print of his face, which he effectively redeems through the evocation of African traditions of masking and scarification.

In many of the artworks exhibited here, artists have employed portraiture to demonstrate resilience. The conventions of portraiture suggest dignity, confidence, and importance. Stout’s use of photographs implies these values and also evokes her feelings of loss for loved ones that might evoke similar feelings in the viewer. **Barkley Hendricks** and **Kehinde Wiley** both represent their subjects as stylish, suggesting ways in which fashion might serve as a means of resistance. Gordon Parks’ portraits of Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali might also suggest ways in which black Muslims stand for their faith as a means of resistance.

Finally, **Ellen Gallagher** and **Glenn Ligon** address racial violence by challenging representation itself. Gallagher made *Detective Training* by inscribing the forms of women’s hairstyles, corsets, a necklace that also resembles a noose or manacles, and a handgun. Her intermixing of fashion and violence evokes activist and scholar Angela Davis’ recollection that while on the FBI’s most-wanted list, police took her Afro hairstyle – already a political statement – as an excuse to harass black women and that, in turn, many black women wore Afros to demonstrate solidarity with her. Gallagher made this work by incising and burning the forms into paper, wielding a laser to draw by cutting. She thereby enacts the association between representation and violence.

Ligon rejects figurative representation altogether, making his prints in the form of stenciled quotations from the literature of Zora Neal Hurston and Ralph Ellison. In each print, what appears to be the faithful and accurate representation of a quotation devolves through repetition into illegibility. Ligon enacts a different form of violence: the erasure of meaning and comprehension.