

Deconstructing Narratives About Artistic Mastery in Art Education

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ABSTRACT

A recurring challenge for art educators is how to include Black voices within the art curriculum. This challenge seems ever more relevant as a pandemic underlined the inequalities and injustices within our culture and society. A critical question for many White visual arts educators is: How do I, as a White educator, bring important issues of race, privilege, ideology, gender, and anti-racism into the art classroom? How can I help students to understand Whiteness as a cultural text and set about destabilizing White identity? How does one make space for an anti-racist pedagogy? One way to begin conversations about these issues is to bring the voices of Black artists into the classroom through viewing their artwork and listening to recorded accounts of their experiences. These artists have a transformational urgency in their work; they embody another artistic canon that includes ways of working that are on the cutting edge of contemporary art. The artwork and stories of Black artists are not just alternative voices, their work is shaping the future of art, culture, and society.

KEYWORDS: Contemporary Art, Black Artists, Anti-racist Pedagogy, Artistic Canon

Artists, art teachers, and scholars are re-imagining the content of art education and teaching practices (Acuff, 2020; Duncum, 2010; Gude, 2013; Rolling, 2020). Visual culture, contemporary art, digital media, cultural studies and critical race theory have invigorated the field. For example, when educators adopt a visual culture studies framework, they may emphasize how visual texts are produced and represented (Hall, 1997). Instead of focusing on abstract formal principles, teachers might emphasize understanding the historical, cultural, and political aspects of visual culture and their own social responsibility (Duncum, 2010). This is a shift from materials, techniques and objects to concepts, problems and ideas that are socially engaged (Darts, 2011). Teachers may view student artwork not so much as aesthetic objects, but as a platform for learning, inquiry, and relationship. Art becomes a kind of research text that is framed by critique, analysis, theory and documentation (Marshall & D'Amamo, 2011).

A recurring challenge for art educators is how to include Black voices within the art curriculum. This challenge seems ever more

relevant as a pandemic underlined the inequalities and injustices within our culture and society. A return to normal life is not going to be an adequate response. A critical question for many White visual arts educators is: How do I, as a White educator, bring important issues of race, privilege, ideology, gender, and anti-racism into the art classroom? How can I help students to understand Whiteness as a cultural text and set about destabilizing White identity (Wilson, 2019)? How does one make space for an anti-racist pedagogy?

One way to begin conversations about these issues is to bring the voices of Black artists into the classroom through viewing their artwork and listening to recorded accounts of their experiences. As much as possible, I let these artists speak for themselves in order to build bridges of understanding within my own students. I do this primarily through the artists' own account of their work through written interviews, critical commentary, and video documentation. The art, narratives, and the response of art critics to Black artists was one way to understand more deeply this key moment in history and to build bridges of understanding between teachers and students with both the history and experience of Black Lives. These artists can also have a transformational urgency in their work; they embody another artistic canon that includes ways of working that are on the cutting edge of contemporary art. The artwork and stories of Black artists are not just alternative voices, their work is shaping the future of art, culture, and society. I think of these as counter narratives that have a transformational potential to disrupt taken-for-granted ideas about race and culture (Kraeche, 2015; Spillane, 2015).

Background

After years teaching in public schools in the New York City metropolitan area, I moved to a large university in the Western United States. I am a White straight cisgender male art educator who is committed to critical race inquiry, both for myself and my students, I recognize the importance of understanding systemic racial inequities education and critically examining and adjusting my own teaching and research practices.

Artworks are important texts in my classroom and I want my students to have significant encounters and experiences with art. As a consequence, the idea of the artistic canon has become an important theme in my curriculum and teaching. The art canon is an educational construct that defines whose art is important enough to include in exhibitions, in the museum or in the art curriculum. It is a cultural representation of what is most valued. The canon produces and reproduces what counts as art and how art is interpreted (Guthrie & Kraeche, 2015). In addition to defining artistic conventions and ideas about aesthetics, the traditional Western art canon was and

continues to be used as a tool of cultural subordination that reinforces the superiority of the art of White people while marginalizing the art of everyone else (Leake, 2015). For example, Melanie Buffington's study of reproductions produced for the K-12 art room indicated that the overwhelming majority of 'master works', are made by White artists. (Buffington, 2019). The civilization that is defined by these masterworks is often a euphemism for cultural racism (Kendi, 2019).

One way to destabilize the perception of the neutrality and universality of Whiteness is by disrupting the canon, questioning what is included and excluded in curriculum, and deconstructing narratives of artistic mastery (Acuff, 2015; Acuff, Hiram, & Nangah, 2012; Grant, 2020). The typical canon of artists and artworks can be reconfigured to include the work of contemporary Black artists (Rolling, 2020). This is more than just expanding the curriculum, it can be a complete reshaping of the fundamental content of art education. Amelia Kraeche and David Herman said:

"Making black lives matter will require that we open ourselves up to being decentered by the voices of other people and concerns that extend beyond our own immediate needs—that is, the voices of Black people, Black artists, Black thought leaders who show us that the only way forward is to confront the legacy of antiblack racism."

The narratives of those whose voices are rarely heard can affect change by allowing students and teachers to get closer to the experiences of those whose artwork, stories, and histories have been left out of our classrooms (Kraeche & Herman, 2020). Stories can be powerful, empowering, and enlightening.

The stories that Black artists tell about their work illustrate the complexity of race, helping to demonstrate that racial categories are not neatly defined, but are social constructed and malleable. Stories are both positional and oppositional. Stories can help us understand the lives of others in ways that cultivate a sense of lived context (Guthrie & Kraeche, 2015). The grand narrative of a racist Modernism can be disrupted by counter narratives that foreground personal experience and alternative artmaking methodologies, helping students and teachers to reflect on the past through an anti-racist lens (Kendi, 2019; Leake, 2015; Salcedo, 2018). When Columbian artist Doris Salcedo discussed the construction of *Shiboleth*, a large crack in the Tate Modern, she wanted to introduce a chaotic element into the rationalism of Modernism. She described the gap between race and language as "this bottomless gap that divides humanity from inhumanity...or white from non-white." In what she calls the dark history of modernity, she said, "The word *Shiboleth* I took from Judges, it is a word that describes the dangers of crossing borders. I used the word because I wanted to refer to the experience of racism,

the experience of crossing borders” (Salcedo, 2018).

Rather than just introducing students to a broader mix of artists, I was more interested in how Black artists are reshaping and redefining artistic representation and art education. Many K-12 art teachers teach foundations courses or include foundational ideas in their curriculum. But foundations in art is a troublesome concept that often begins with the metaphor of basic building blocks and ends up being an unquestioning approach to re-representing the Western canon in some form (Barney & Graham, 2014). One way that the traditional teaching of foundations reinforces existing social and cultural structures is by giving the formal aspects of art the qualities of universal beauty or good design. There is a long tradition of trying to maintain the art room as an apolitical haven, where race and racism are not discussed (Desai & Chalmers, 2007). An apolitical classroom results in a continued emphasis on White artists and “universal” art truths like the elements and principles of art and design. The artists included below suggest other possibilities for what might be foundational in art and its education.

I describe the work of five Black artists whose artwork re-envision what is valued as artistic representation and what counts as artistic mastery. These are exemplars, chosen from many other possible examples. They were chosen because their stories illuminate important issues about race, artistic representation, and artmaking. Art can enable new representations of identity to emerge that can be both humanizing and emancipatory (Desai, 2009; Greene, 1978). For example, the Los Angeles artist Mark Bradford created a video of himself playing basketball, called *Practice*. He disrupts the viewer’s expectations by creating conditions of difficulty and struggle. He does this by wearing a huge antebellum skirt made from a Los Angeles Laker uniform. “It was about roadblocks on every level; cultural, gender, racial, regardless that they are there, it is important to continue” (Bradford, 2007). This piece upends assumptions and taken for granted signifiers of race and racial boundaries, while at the same time creating a poignant description of his own personal experience.

Mark Bradford

Mark Bradford makes work out of paper that is layered, sanded, power washed, collaged, and décollaged. His work has many connections to specific places, communities, signage, current events, politics, visual culture, and the contexts of postmodern art. His large paintings are made from a process of collage construction and deconstruction that reflects improvisation, layering and an awareness of the politics of representation. His artistic skills include how use a power washer and hand sander. His artistic practice includes reading the visual culture in the neighborhood, gathering paper signage the

streets and critically examining the history of communities.

He describes his process as:

My practice is décollage and collage at the same time. Décollage: I take it away; collage: I immediately add it right back. It’s almost like a rhythm. I’m a builder and a demolisher. I put up so I can tear down. I’m a speculator and a developer. In archaeological terms, I excavate and I build at the same time. (Bradford, 2018)

His method provides insight into postmodern approaches to artmaking and his artistic heritage:

My art practice goes back to my childhood, but it’s not an art background. It’s a making background. I’ve always been a creator. My mother was a creator; my grandmother was a creator. They were seamstresses. There were always scraps of everything around. There were always two or three or four projects going on at the same time...I never knew what the postmodern condition was before I went to art school. I never knew about Michel Foucault, bell hooks, Cornel West, or Henry Louis Gates, Jr. But even though I had never read those types of writings, I lived with people who were living those types of lives. (Bradford, 2018)

What is foundational to Mark Bradford’s social abstractions is an understanding that materials are embedded with cultural associations, and artistic representations have layered overlapping meanings with political subtexts (Art21).

Kerry James Marshall

You can’t be born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955 and grow up in South Central [Los Angeles] near the Black Panthers headquarters, and not feel like you’ve got some kind of social responsibility. You can’t move to Watts in 1963 and not speak about it. That determined a lot of where my work was going to go. (Marshall 2016)

Kerry James Marshall uses the conventions of Western art and art history to create his own ideas about representation. He questions the canon through traditional form of painting, using the conventions of landscape, portrait, and historical tableau. When Marshall called his retrospective exhibition *Mastery*, he made reference to his own skill in mastering and remixing a wide range of skills, techniques, compositions, and concepts gathered from the history of painting. However, his work takes the conventions of Western artmaking in new directions as he revises how African Americans are depicted in painting. His work reminds us that painting take place within

a history and system of cultural conventions, which are never politically or culturally neutral. Marshall deconstructs ideas about skills, mastery, and representations of the human form in Western artistic traditions.

Narratives of Mastery in Education and Art

The 'Old Masters' of the Renaissance are often used as exemplars of drawing skills using the human figure. A small drawing of Michelangelo or Raphael can be the anchor for an entire museum exhibit. Art teachers often include experiences with traditional drawing techniques and conventions of representation such as perspective. It is important to question the affordances and cultural contexts of drawing skills associated with these practices. Traditional ideas about artistic mastery can be problematic. As Kerry James Marshall points out,

We take it for granted that the people who make the best stuff are all European [. . .]. At some point, you become acutely aware of your absence in the whole historical timeline that develops this narrative of mastery. (Marshall, 2016)

For Marshall, traditional skills and conventions of representation are part of an existing system that aspiring artists enter into, a set of cultural practices that artists work within or work against. Rather than rejecting the system, which largely excluded both women and people of color, Marshall chose to engage with these conventions of artistry at the highest level. He explains:

And so if we go back to why this idea of mastery is important, it's precisely because if you want to get in the game you've got to play it at the level that the people who are playing it at the highest level are playing it at. And the only way you can do that, really, is to know what they know, be able to do what they do, and then figure out how to put all of those things together and synthesize them in such a way that you can project your ideal into the world, so that it has an equal chance of assuming the preferred position as any of the other things that were already out there. That's how you do it. (Marshall 2014)

Marshall's refashioning of mastery is one way to respond to the question: How might traditional art practices be meaningful or relevant within the context of culture and societies that are reexamining their histories of colonialism, oppression and racism? Images of the human body in both art and popular visual culture often reflect troubling and problematic issues of intimacy, power, beauty, agency, stereotypes, compliance and the artist's gaze (Blessing, 2015). In Mastry, Marshall's reference to technical mastery in the title

of his exhibition is made credible through his own technical skills as well as in his poignant depictions of Black lives, which are mostly absent in the history of art (Art 21: Kerry James Marshall).

However, art education scholar Joni Boyd Acuff has suggested that the use of the word *mastery* in art and education should be abandoned altogether because of its connotations or connections to slavery:

The concept of the 'old masters,' which art teachers refer to when discussing Western canonical artists, is problematic and loaded with violent, oppressive historical memories for some groups of people. For example, as a Black woman in the US, when I hear the word 'master,' regardless of context, I immediately think about European White men who enslaved, tortured, raped, and sold African people like material goods hundreds of years ago [. . .]. The word 'master' furthers a hierarchy of power that educators should no longer want to support in a future art curriculum. (Acuff, 2020, p. 13)

When we bring Kerry James Marshall into our classroom through his artwork and his own reflections about being a Black artist, the history of art begins to look very different. His work challenges and disrupts the traditional canon, while at the same time, making reference to the artists and artistry of the canon. Kerry James Marshall speaks the language of painting, but with an eye that is critically aware of who has been left out of the history of painting.

Kara Walker

Skill within traditional artistic conventions of drawing the human form is often associated with accomplished artistry and is a prerequisite for many artists, illustrators and animators. Contemporary artists can provide alternative narratives and methodologies that disrupt conventional and uncritical approaches to representing the human form (art21.org/artist/kara-walker). Like Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker references historical narratives in her use of the human form in much of her work (Kara Walker Studio). She explains:

Before I even started working with a narrative that circled around representations of blackness, representations of race, racial history, minstrelsy, and everything that I wanted to investigate, I was making work that was painterly and about the body and the metaphorical qualities of the body. So, I always think about this work and think about images that require the viewer to confront the unsettling history and ongoing tensions of race relations in the United States. The images resonate with racial stereotypes that are perpetuated and questioned today, asking viewers to consider

their position in relationship to a brutal history. (Walker, 2016)

Her work addresses ways that history is represented and understood (Desai & Hamlin, 2010). Kara Walker's silhouettes reflect traditional drawing skills that are subverted in order to disrupt artistic conventions of drawing mastery. Using the simple graphic style of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century silhouette, she creates highly charged and provocative images that work within existing, dominant conventions of representations, but at the same time unsettles and disrupts these conventions. Her work makes a graphic representation of troubling histories which, in the past, have been hidden or obscured.

Outsider Artist or a Beacon for Contemporary Art Making?

I often see teachers referring to universal notions of artmaking such as the elements and principles of art and design. Many K-12 schools have foundations courses, as do college art programs. A common theme is that the fundamentals must be understood or mastered before students can go on in their artistic endeavors; that they must learn the rules before they can break the rules. In spite of Olivia Gude's encouragement to look beyond these principles and the projects encoded with them, they remain strong themes in K-12 education (Gude, 2004, 2007, 2013).

Perhaps new kinds of foundations, a revisioning the artistic canon, and an altogether new measure of art is needed. For example, a teacher might ask; What foundational methods are evident in the work Mark Bradford, Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker, Rosie Lee Tompkins, or the Gee Bend Quilters? The art critic Roberta Smith recently appraised the quilts of Rosie Lee Tompkins as a new measure of what should be valued in contemporary art. She described Tompkins, a black, relatively obscure, deeply religious, rural quilter, not as an outsider artist, but as a beacon for contemporary artmaking (Smith, 2020).

Rosie Lee Tompkins

In June 2020, Roberta Smith, an art critic for the New York Times, made a remarkable statement about the artwork of Rosie Lee Tompkins, which she described as an exemplar of one of the country's premier visual traditions: African-American improvisational quilt-making. She said that Tompkins work was "one of the century's major artistic accomplishments, giving quilt-making a radical new articulation and emotional urgency. I felt I had been given a new standard against which to measure contemporary art."

Roberta Smith's commentary was unusual because Rosie Lee

Tompkins was an outsider to mainstream Modern and Contemporary Art discourse. She was Black. She was a woman. She was a devout Christian. At first, Smith placed Tompkins in the category of outsider artist, the place where contemporary art critics allow for the untutored, mystically inclined or religious artist. The outsider artist is someone whose work deviates from the canon because of their lack of training, they are outsiders to the dominant culture of the artworld.

The critic then changed her mind: "But on reflection, the term "self-taught" or "outsider" does not fit quilters. Rosie Lee Tompkins... was her mother's apprentice in a kind atelier, a small town full of female friends and relatives who were quilters." The important point is that Rosie Lee Tompkins, like other African American quilters was part of a rich, but largely ignored, artistic tradition (New York Times).

Smith describes her work as exhibiting; "extraordinary skill and idiosyncratic abandon that creates a new sense of the possibilities of the hand, visual wit and beauty in any medium." What is foundational for Rosie Lee Tompkins? Perhaps it is improvisation, collaboration, collage, juxtaposition, color, and biblical text. Like Mark Bradford, she grew up in a culture of making, not school art making (Efland, 1976) but a community of family and friends who made things. Her work also includes a poignant connection to her religious community.

Sanford Biggers

For the artist Sanford Biggers, artistic content comes from a deep consciousness of injustice in America. He works with antique quilts along with other media, which he calls "material storytelling," a form that is evident in the African American quilting tradition. His work is a catalyst for new understanding about Buddhism, American violence, and art history. According to art critic Siddhartha Mitter, Biggers was influenced by the exhibit of Gee's Bend quilters at the Whitney Museum. In these quilts, he saw new futures for painting: "There was color, modulation, rhythm, and all these compositional things," he said. "But seeing them in these beautiful textile works made by a woman's hands, it was touching on sculpture, touching on the body, touching on politics." He often works by subtraction, cutting sections from quilts, a process that is both improvisational and meditative (<http://sanfordbiggers.com/>). "To create two things with red, white and blue, and then take something from it, is the gesture," he said. "Working through the idea of the demise of our democracy" (Mitter, 2020).

Conclusion

This commentary began as a description of how teachers and their

students might gain deeper understanding of contemporary art and Black Lives. Many art teachers teach art foundations courses, where formalist versions of universal beauty such as the elements and principles of art are used as the building blocks of artistry (Gude, 2007). These courses often include traditional artmaking conventions such as observational drawing that make reference to a certain kind of artistic mastery and a canon of artists. However, the traditional artistic canon can be limiting and even oppressive by virtue of the artists who are excluded. In the work of Black artists Rosie Lee Tompkins, Mark Bradford, Kara Walker, Sanford Biggers, and Kerry James Marshall other foundational approaches emerge, along with stories about race, culture, and artmaking. Methods such as improvisation, reconfiguring text and using popular visual culture, cultural storytelling, and bricolage emerged as fundamental ways to create meaning and keys to understanding important issues of equity, race, and Black Lives.

The work of these artists can help students to understand Whiteness as a cultural text and destabilize White identity. Reshaping the canon may build bridges of understanding between students, teachers, and the Black artists who have often been left out of art classes. These artists have a transformational urgency in their work that embodies other ways of working that are on the cutting edge of contemporary art, helping students and teachers to think about the past and future of art in entirely new ways.

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