

**PERFORMING BLACKNESS
BEFORE WHITENESS**

PERFORMING BLACKNESS BEFORE WHITENESS?

Tuesday, January 20 – Tuesday, March 3, 2015

Opening Reception and Lectures: Tuesday, January 20, 7:00 – 9:00PM

Brendan Fernandes, Artist-in-Residence, February 16 - 20, 2015

Closing Reception and Lectures: Tuesday, March 3, 7:00 – 9:00PM

This exhibition examines constructions of racial identity to complicate popular rhetoric around race. The artworks interrogate oversimplifying binaries, and destabilize the often unexamined position of “whiteness.” The artists deploy visual texts in the service of asking uncomfortable questions, reflecting upon identity, and asking the viewer to consider his/her own role in building, enabling, or perpetuating stereotypes. Invited artists are Sandra Brewster, Steve Cole, Andrea Chung, Brendan Fernandes, Vanessa German, Kenyatta Hinkle, Ayanah Moor, James Seward, and Alisha Wormsley.

Curated by Darren Lee Miller, Gallery Director and Assistant Professor of Art

THE ARTISTS

Sandra Brewster is a multi-media artist creating works that engage issues of race, identity, representation and memory. Born of Guyanese parents, her current focus is African Canadians born in North America and those who arrived in North America from the Caribbean during the 1960s and 70s. In this work she visually represents a sense of time and provides a platform to tell stories of “back home.” Her ongoing series, Smiths, questions prevalent assertions about the existence of a monolithic Black Community. Sandra holds a BFA from York University. Her work has been exhibited within Canada and internationally.

Steve Cole is a Professor of Studio Art at Birmingham-Southern College, in Birmingham, Alabama. For an exhibition timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the bombing at Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church, which killed four young girls on September 15, 1963, Cole created figurines portraying the various hate groups in the country such as the Ku Klux Klan, anti-gay groups, Neo-Nazis, and more. Cole called this installation, The Hate Project. The new work he created for Performing Blackness :: Performing Whiteness is based on the project.

Andrea Chung examines the influence of colonial and post-colonial regimes. Through sculpture, video, collage, and painting, she explores migration patterns and traces how cultures have been created through the influence of multiple mother cultures and geographic conditions. By manipulating stock photographs and other images used by the tourism industry, Chung creates a new series of narratives, which she juxtaposes against the stories told by both the Colony and the Imperial power to sell romantic notions about nature and labor.

Brendan Fernandes has exhibited internationally and nationally including exhibitions at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Art and Design New York, Art in General, the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, The National Gallery of Canada, The Art Gallery of Hamilton, Brooklyn Museum, The Studio Museum in Harlem, Mass MoCA, The Andy Warhol Museum, the Art Gallery of York University, Deutsche Guggenheim, The Bergen Kunsthall, Manif d’Art: The Quebec City Biennial, The Third Guangzhou Triennial, and the Western New York Biennial through The Albright-Knox Art Gallery. His unique cultural background as a Kenyan-Indian-Canadian has confronted him with the hybrid and transitional nature of identity. He explores the thesis that

identity is not static, but enacted, and this challenges accepted ways of thinking about what it is to have an authentic self. In his newest work, Fernandes is returning to his past life as a dancer. He highlights the various meanings that the body encapsulates: it is both a kind of object, endowed with cultural meaning, viewed by others and labored on by ourselves; and, it is also our expressive active access onto the world, constitutive of subjectivity and selfhood.

Vanessa German is a self-taught multidisciplinary maker, poet, and performer born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, raised in Los Angeles, California, and represented by Pavel Zoubok Gallery in New York, NY. German was selected by the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts as the 2012 Emerging Artist of the Year. She is inspired by hand-me-down treasures and midnight prostitutes on the stroll. She is inspired by police brutality survivor, Jordan Miles, and playing music too loud. She is inspired by taking matters into your own hands, the ricochet of the transcontinental slave trade, the western coast of Africa, the east coast of the Carolinas, the east end of Pittsburgh, and random gun violence. She is inspired by the difference between racism and prejudice, Trayvon Martin, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. She is inspired by speaking in tongues, tongues

speaking in hands, and instantaneously healing by the sight of a thing.

Kenyatta A. C. Hinkle is an interdisciplinary visual artist, writer and performer who integrates cultural criticism, personal narrative and historical research to interrogate structures of power concerning race and representation, and to question how those structures influence ideas of self. Her artwork and experimental writing has been exhibited and performed at The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY, Project Row Houses in Houston, TX, and The Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, CA. Hinkle was the youngest artist to participate in the multi-generational biennial, *Made in L.A.*, 2012. She was recently listed on The Huffington Post's Black Artists: 30 Contemporary Art Makers Under 40 You Should Know. Hinkle was born and raised in Louisville, KY and currently lives and works in Los Angeles, CA.

Ayanah Moor is Associate Professor in Printmedia at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her creative tools include printmedia, performance, drawing and video. Moor's work has been featured in books *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness*, and *What is Contemporary Art?* (University of Chicago Press) She has held artist residencies at Proyecto 'ace (Buenos Aires, Argen-

tina); Auckland Print Studio (New Zealand); Vermont Studio Center, (Johnson, VT); Women's Studio Workshop, (Rosendale, NY); Blue Mountain Center, (Blue Mountain Lake, NY); and Atlantic Center for the Arts, (New Smyrna Beach, FL). Her work is currently on view in *Speaking of People: Ebony, Jet and Contemporary Art* at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Moor holds a BFA from Virginia Commonwealth University and MFA from Tyler School of Art.

James Seward was born in El Paso, Texas in 1979. He studied at the Savannah College of Art and Design, receiving his B.F.A. Seward was awarded the National Scholarship for Portraiture from The American Society of Portrait Artists. Seward was awarded an honorable mention from the director of the Cleveland Museum, Katherine Lee Reid and nationally selected jurors in the 2005 Cleveland Museum of Art's NEO Show. His painting *My Father In The Living Room of Our 10th House* was accepted into the first Boochever Portrait Competition at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. and then went on to receive the "People's Choice Award." From 2005-2013 he worked as an assistant for the world-renowned artist, Jeff Koons. Seward lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Alisha Wormsley is a multi-media artist from Pittsburgh, PA. After studying anthropology and documentary arts at UC Berkeley, she began traveling, studying and creating different forms of art. Wormsley has been a teaching artist for many cultural institutions including, The Studio Museum of Harlem, Children's Aid Society, The Romare Bearden Foundation, International Center for Photography, the August Wilson Center, and the Faith Ringgold School in Harlem. She has completed residencies and public projects in Santiago de Cuba, Project Row House in Houston, TX, and the August Wilson Center in Pittsburgh PA. She was recently featured in the Pittsburgh Biennial 2014 at the Andy Warhol Museum.

THE CURATOR

Darren Lee Miller is Assistant Professor of Photography and Gallery Director at Allegheny College in Meadville, PA. The themes to which he often returns in both his art work and his curatorial practice are power, identity, and social justice. Miller's artwork has been featured in the book *The Male Nude Now: New Visions for the 21st Century* (Universe publishing). He has held artist residencies at Blue Mountain Center, (Blue Mountain Lake, NY); Homestead AK (Willow, AK) and the Baldwin Reynolds House Museum (Meadville, PA). Miller holds a BFA from Alfred University and MFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

PERFORMING BLACKNESS BEFORE/WHITENESS?

FOREWORD

Darren Lee Miller, Curator
January 2015

What does it mean when we hear that a person of color “acts white,” or that a person who appears to be caucasian “talks like she’s black?” People who are not white are often described as ethnic or racial, while those who are caucasian are rarely described by their race. And what about people whose racial lineage is neither black nor white? Racial binaries in the United States have been constructed on the premise that one is either white or other; and yet, if the 2010 census is any indication, we are already defining ourselves in multiple categories. And this doesn’t even begin to address how people in other countries think about race, ethnicity, and identity.

The artworks in this exhibition interrogate oversimplifying binaries, destabilize the often examined position of whiteness, and complicate other cultural constructions around race. Invited artists are Sandra Brewster, Steve Cole, Andrea Chung, Brendan Fernandes, Vanessa German, Kenyatta A. C. Hinkle,

Ayanah Moor, James Seward, and Alisha Wormsley. The artists deploy visual texts in the service of asking uncomfortable questions, reflecting upon identity, and asking the viewer to consider his/her own role in building, enabling, or perpetuating stereotypes. And while categories may be limiting, they may sometimes offer safe and inclusive spaces for those within particular groups.

The idea for this exhibition came from the *National Public Radio* series *Code Switch*, launched in April 2013 to explore “frontiers of race, culture and ethnicity.” Some of the earliest stories focused on code switching, the practice of literally changing the grammar, syntax, and style of delivery of one’s speech in order to more appropriately match the expectations of a situation or peer group. For example, one may talk and act a certain way with her friends at a nightclub, but will probably speak and behave differently during a job interview. The practice raises questions about authenticity, (self)acceptance, assimilation, and cultural legacies. In other words, code switching points to the performative, fluid nature of identity construction. This exhibition

explores the ways in which afro-diasporic, native-american, asian/pacific, and latino identities contend to construct themselves in relation to a white identity so normative and privileged that it largely remains unnamed.

All of this is a very academic way to say that while race in America is everyone’s issue, the bulk of the problem -- and the majority of the responsibility for repairing the damage -- lies with the dominant (white) culture. In the December 1, 2014 issue of *New York Magazine*, comedian Chris Rock talked with Frank Rich about white vs. black racial positionality and our cultural reluctance to talk openly about it. “I stopped playing colleges, and the reason is because they’re way too conservative. Not in their political views, but in their social views and their willingness not to offend anybody. Kids raised on a culture of ‘We’re not going to keep score in the game because we don’t want anybody to lose.’ Or just ignoring race to a fault. You can’t say ‘the black kid over there.’ No, it’s ‘the guy with the red shoes.’” And yet, for all the limitations of discourse on college campuses, with their trigger

warnings and political correctness, my colleagues and I still felt that this exhibition would contribute to ongoing conversations at Allegheny College -- and communities around the country -- about racism, heterosexism, and institutionalized privilege; a triumvirate commonly referred to by Human Resources professionals and Administrators as "climate."

This exhibition is timed to begin the day after our campus celebrates the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the show ends just a few days after the conclusion of Black History Month; but, this timing was an accidental result of a gallery calendar that allows me a significantly longer period of time at the start of every spring semester not only for the run of exhibitions (five weeks, instead of the three weeks I usually get for fall semester shows), but also for planning, curating, and conceptualizing. On the one hand, I am aware that this exhibition plays into the College's desire to be seen as an inclusive institution that is making hiring and admissions choices in order to raise its "diversity profile," and on the other hand I know that such efforts are often seen as tokenizing gestures by the very people to which they are designed to pay tribute. To put it bluntly, if February is the month when we honor the contributions of Black Americans, then what are we doing the other eleven months? We need to face the paucity of our own

good intentions to see that bringing in an African American intellectual to give a speech on the third Monday of January does not even begin to address the twin scourges of racial profiling and ghettoization that work to create a system of structural violence against people of color. One hundred fifty years after emancipation, our nation still has not effectively addressed the undemocratic effects of an economic system that was (and increasingly is, once again) predicated upon servitude, unequal access, and segregation.

In the past few months we've seen militarized police forces mount mechanized, warlike assaults against mostly peaceful protesters in cities across the nation. Store windows have been smashed and cars overturned by protesters in Oakland, California, two New York City police officers have been assassinated by a man seeking revenge for the deaths Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and Ferguson, Missouri burns in violent riots. After jurors did not indict the Ferguson PD officer who killed unarmed teenager, Michael Brown, or the NYPD officer who killed Eric Garner, we see mainstream TV news pundits proclaiming that this "isn't about race," and, "only racists talk about race." I'm going to assume some of these people operate from a place of fear. I'm going to guess they are afraid to talk about race because they may be called racists. Or worse, they worry they may inadvertently

say racist things. But what is bigotry if not a manifestation of fear of "the other?" The real problem is that so many people are unwilling to see their own racism for what it is because they have a mistaken belief that only "bad" people say and do prejudiced things. What is clear -- regardless of how forensic evidence in the Ferguson case was handled -- is that the riots in Ferguson and the protests around the nation are not just about the killing of unarmed teenager Michael Brown (and Trayvon Martin, and Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice, and Akai Gurley, and Ezell Ford, and Amadou Diallo, and...), just as the protests and revolutions through the Middle East following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi weren't just about dissatisfaction with working conditions of street vendors in Tunisia. The problems are integral parts of our cultural and economic systems.

According to the Center for American Progress, people of color account for over two thirds of the U.S. prison population, but make up less than 30% of the overall population. One out of every three black men will go to prison in his lifetime.² A report by the Department of Justice found that "blacks and Hispanics were approximately three times more likely to be searched during a traffic stop than white motorists. African Americans were twice as likely to be arrested and almost four times as likely to expe-

rience the use of force during encounters with the police.”³ As Chris Rock says in his *New York Magazine* interview, “I would love to be a 60 Minutes correspondent. I’d be in Ferguson right now. I’d do a special on race, but I’d have no black people. When we talk about race relations in America or racial progress, it’s all nonsense. There are no race relations. White people were crazy. Now they’re not as crazy. To say that black people have made progress would be to say they deserve what happened to them before. So, to say Obama is progress is saying that he’s the first black person that is qualified to be president. That’s not black progress. That’s white progress.”⁴

So then, what is Whiteness? Does a person have to be descended from caucasian Europeans to enjoy the privileges of Whiteness? For many of us, being White means that we are more likely to have gone to public schools with fully-funded budgets. It means we are more likely not only to have the means to go to college, but to have the support needed to come out the other end with a four-year degree. It means we are less likely to be stopped by the police, and when we are pulled-over we are more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt. It means that even when we are charged with crimes, we are less likely to be found guilty. And when we are found guilty, we are less likely to receive maximum penalties. It means that when our white children are playing

outside our houses with toy guns, it is very unlikely they will be shot by the police. When a black artist friend and I visit museums and galleries, I am likely to receive the first offer of a handshake, and he is likely to be mistaken for security or housekeeping staff by other museum visitors. Being white (and male), for many of us, means that we have to work half as hard for twice as much. That’s why there is no such thing as “White History Month.”

I’d like to thank Jaysa Alvarez ’15, and Soledad Caballero, PhD for helping me to think through early drafts of this essay, M. Greg Singer ’15 and Jonathan Yee ’17 for their help in doing preliminary research and conducting artist interviews, Kazi Joshua for encouraging me to move ahead with the project, and Ayanah Moor for helping me to see my own privilege, cultural blind spots, and racism. The project has been a journey of discovery and growth for me personally, and it is my sincere hope that the works in this show will spur conversations that are long overdue. *Performing Blackness :: Performing Whiteness* is part of Allegheny College’s Year of Voting Rights and Democratic Participation, which celebrates the 50th anniversary in 2015 of the Voting Rights Act and explores the state of civil rights, broadly defined, in the world today.

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Other support comes from the Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts (PPA), the regional arts funding partnership of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency. State government funding comes through an annual appropriation by Pennsylvania’s General Assembly and from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. PPA is administered in this region by the Arts Council of Erie.

1. Rich, Frank. “In Conversation. Chris Rock. What’s Killing Comedy. What’s Saving America.” December 1, 2014. <http://www.vulture.com/2014/11/chris-rock-frank-rich-in-conversation.html>

2. Kerby, Sophia. “The Top 10 Most Startling Facts About People of Color and Criminal Justice in the United States.” March 13, 2012. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2012/03/13/11351/the-top-10-most-startling-facts-about-people-of-color-and-criminal-justice-in-the-united-states/>

3. American Civil Liberties Union. “Department of Justice Statistics Show Clear Pattern of Racial Profiling.” April 29, 2007. <https://www.aclu.org/racial-justice/departments-justice-statistics-show-clear-pattern-racial-profiling>

4. Rich, Frank. The whole interview is worth reading, see the link in the first footnote.

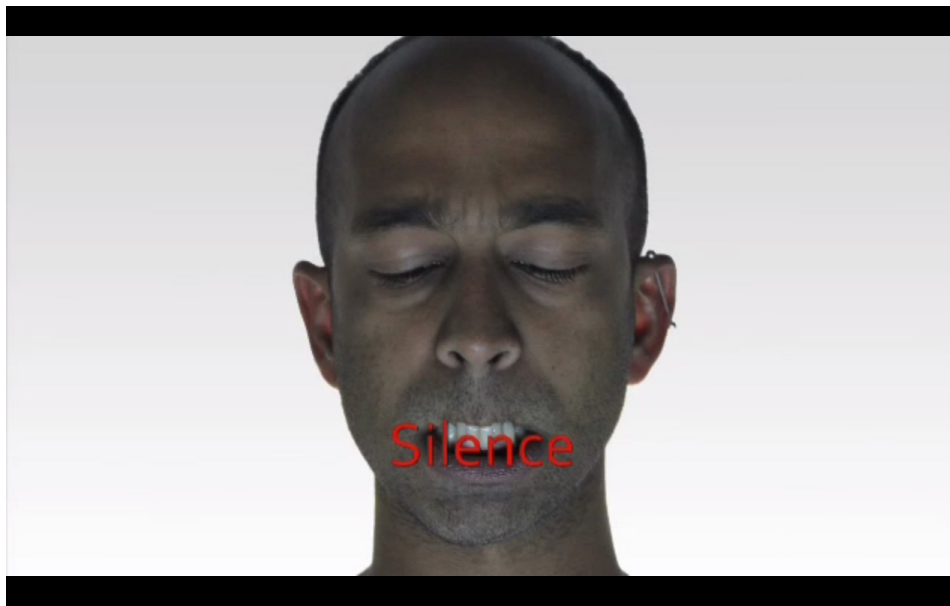


Image courtesy of the Artist

Interview with Brendan Fernandes

Darren Lee Miller (DLM): How would you describe your studio work generally? And how are your current works different from those for which you have become best known (Foe and Neo-Primitivism)?

Brendan Fernandes (BF): I would say that my studio work is process based, formed from ideas and concepts usually dealing with cultural or subcultural identity. I use my ethnic background and history as a Kenyan-born Indian who immigrated to Canada in my work. The account of my personal trajectory has a complex narrative, and in opening it up I want to tell my story but I also want to influence and affect others

who have similar migration paths. Currently I am returning to my past life as a dancer to question notions of labour via the performative gesture of moving in dance. All of my work deals with notions of hegemony and power dynamics. I am curious about the political backlash of Capitalism on our society.

DLM: Where do you look for inspiration in the newer dance work?

BF: I look at Ballet. Currently I am referencing the classical ballet company and the pyramid structure under which it operates.

DLM: What do you mean, pyramid structure? Do you mean there's a rigid social/professional hierarchy?

BF: Yes, the classical ballet company

ranks dancers. There is a hierarchy to the system. I am interested in the core des ballet dancers, the largest group in terms of numbers, but the lowest ranked in the company system. Their title translates to the "body of the ballet." These dancers most always dance in a group and at times hold positions in stillness for lengths of time, while principals seemingly move more freely and have the opportunity to dance solos. I am curious about the notion of being still and being able to move freely in the ballet system as it relates to capitalism. Both sets of dancers are working, labouring in the performative gestures they endure, but they have been given rankings. Then I question the ballet master and the audience who sit and watch. The classical ballet will have the corps de ballet, soloists and the principals. You are put into a system where you want to move up, to get to the next phase.

DLM: So those who are low on the totem pole have to remain still on stage?

BF: They have less prominent roles, and at times must remain still and in the background. I did a piece where a corps de ballet dancer from the American Ballet Theatre performed an endurance sequence from a dance where she moved with cut-outs of herself. She was competing with a version of herself. At times, the cutouts became props

and mixed into the scenery. Recall Swan Lake, where all the swans stand around the white swan as she dances

DLM: They are the flock. They move in unison, but not too much so as not to draw attention away from the soloist.

BF: They also have moments where they hold a position for a long time. It's difficult.

DLM: How do you think we might relate this to questions about labor in consumer culture?

BF: We value certain work and negate others types of labour. My work is about the ballet but is making a greater statement about society and Capitalism.

DLM: Often the most undervalued labors are the ones upon which the more esteemed jobs depend. The CEO makes six figures and the secretary may be paid hourly.

BF: I think about this from a Socialist viewpoint, positing Marxist theory. The CEO gains as the labourers work for him. Hence my query is about the ballet master who instructs and the audience who watches the labouring dancers on stage. We need to value all the labour that surrounds us.

DLM: What would you say to those

who think Marxism is a failed anachronism, that capital's triumph is self-evident in a unipolar world?

BF: Well, I don't think the world we live in is a triumph, we have so many social issues, people living in poor conditions. War, famine, disease. People don't understand Marxism because the social strategy has never been truly experienced. Humans have been too consumed with greed and power.

DLM: I think no one would disagree, but there are those who say that at least Capitalism embraces the reality of human greed, that the system requires winners and losers. Poverty is not a failure of Capitalism, but instead it is a required feature. Marxism, on the other hand, asks us to be not who we are as a species, but who we wish we were.

BF: Maybe we will never be able to reach the ideal goal, and so then what? At least Marxist theory can be a way to move and think forward. To give a sense of an imaginary. People being marginalized will at some point revolt. But I live in a very particular bubble and many will not agree with me.

DLM: So then, is it fair to say your work is a way to be optimistic?

BF: I look at the notion of the Marxist imaginary to find that place of tomorrow, to move forward in a

community of "we," where "I" is not part of the equation

DLM: Are you queering something with your work?

BF: Queer is a way for me to break definitions and allow us to exist in a common space. It is a moniker of inclusivity for me. I hope all my work is queer, but we don't need to make it a subject. It will become self evident

DLM: I like to think of undermining and redefining as a way to queer things.

BF: Yes, a new definition. One that will evolve and develop. But I have to also say that Queer is a very privileged position. Queer has become very academicized, a buzz word. I have to acknowledge that the civil right to be a homosexual is not even an option in some parts of the world, let alone to define oneself as queer. And Academia is a place of Capitalism. School is big business, especially in the USA.

This interview has been truncated to fit the format of this publication. For the full interview, please visit allegheny.edu/artgalleries



Image courtesy of the Artist

Interview with Alisha Wormsley

Darren Lee Miller (DLM): What is Afro-futurism?

AW: I think the term surfaced in the 90's by writer Mark Dery. I think because there was a resurgence of futurism coming out of surrealism from arts of the African diaspora.

DLM: I'm just going off of what I've learned by viewing your works online, but I think mainstream cultural imagination about "the future" rarely includes darker faces. Yet, when I look at your work, and videos/styling for Janelle Monae's ArchAndroid album, I can participate in the magical realist projection of futuristic blackness.

AW: Exactly. And Wangetchi Mutu, Sun Ra... In 2008, Lisa Harris and I started a series of cross disciplinary works and a collective called Studio Enertia. Those works all play with concepts of time, that everything that happened past, present, and future are all happening at the same time. For instance, how the history of ancient Egypt seems so far in the future. We have perceptions of time based on memory. You can see some of our works on this reel - <https://vimeo.com/81726435>

DLM: Then I think it's appropriate that you're often working with time-based media like video, where digital media make it even more possible to create collages that allow for the visual simultaneity of different times within one frame. It seems

like you're able to up-end linear notions of time moving in just one direction. The link to the video you just shared, "Slaves/Indians," happening in various locations offers the viewer at least a little space for empathy with rootlessness. This is something so many of us take for granted -- our ethnic or cultural identity, even when hybridized. It's so common for a white person to say something like, "I'm half German and half Italian," even if she is 3 or more generations removed from the ancestors who immigrated here.

AW: I have been very inspired by Zora Neale Hurston, and a book she wrote called *Sanctified Church*. She did field work in churches post-emancipation in the south where she found that in elevated spiritual consciousness, when people started "speaking in tongues" they were actually using African dialects.

DLM: So maybe the strong ties to the church in many African American communities is a way to access those roots again?

AW: Well, more. We all have the ability to speak African dialects if we push the bounds of our consciousness. It's that our memory holds all of human existence. And we also have the ability to speak the languages that exist in the future. As for *Slaves and Indians*, that began

while I was teaching at the MOMA. They had a retrospective of some of Yoko Ono's work, and on the mezzanine there was a microphone set up. Standing alone. I never saw anyone speak on it. It was art to be interacted with, but no one did. So I began to think about what it means to have this platform in a place of conforming. A big white cube of squares (frames), a place where the art is boxed. So I talked to Lisa about it and we came up with the phrase, "Slaves and Indians. I wish I had roots, I wish I had roots."

DLM: Concepts of time play a vital role in your work, from the tracing of genealogy to speculations of the future. How do you think oppressed cultures from the past affect our ideas about the future? And not just the oppressed cultures, but also the imperialistic cultures.

AW: Cultures are constantly forming and evolving, like a kaleidoscope or a machine. We are always trying to figure out the best way for it to work. We try to solve problems around survival and anticipate what could happen. It's the same with oppression/imperialism. We keep disturbing and adapting. I hope we aim to adapt to a place where we protect our souls.

DLM: Is having legacies, a history, genealogy, and background that one can look back on an important commodity to have these days? And

I wonder what kinds of new cultural identities are being formed now that will be meaningful in the future?

AW: But if everything is happening at the same time, then we are those oppressed cultures AND the imperialists. That legacy will always be in our memory as will our projects for a better future. We are always adapting and creating rituals and cultures. Look at Mormons or Kwanzaa.

DLM: I read that too fast and for a moment pictured Mormons doing Kwanzaa.

AW: I mean one cultural identity might be fading, but it transforms into something else. I think about Mormons having Kwanzaa all the time.

DLM: That's where surrealism comes into your work.

AW: Mormons will have Kwanzaa.

DLM: This is fantasy anthropology.

AW: Mormons are branching out and somewhere there is an African American family in the southwest who are Mormons having a Kwanzaa celebration. My degrees are in anthropology and I love science fiction, always have. I combine my favorite things and make stuff.

AW: So, back to Zora!

DLM: Speaking-in-tongues-Zora?

AW: If after 300 years of violence, broken, the way you break a horse for generations, if even after that a human being still has the ability to remember their ancestral language that's amazing! And what if that memory isn't of the past but the future?

DLM: Documentation is just as important as the history it records. How are you creating new histories with your art? Future histories? Do you consider documentation to be an art form as well?

AW: I do. I am working on a video piece around a series of works I made, "there are black people in the future" artifacts. I went around Homewood (Pittsburgh) and collected items and encased them in resin.

DLM: So, you're creating a kind of taxonomy? A cache of scientific specimens?

AW: Artifacts. Proof to me that if they existed in the past, they will always exist.

This interview has been truncated to fit the format of this publication. For the full interview, please visit allegheny.edu/artgalleries



Image courtesy of the Artist

Interview with Andrea Chung

Darren Lee Miller (DLM): How does your own identity come into your work? How has it been constructed over your lifetime?

Andrea Chung (AC): My identity has always been a part of the work. I spent a month in Jamaica this summer and it was the longest I've ever been there. It was such a relief to not have to worry about my skin. Nobody asked me about "Chung." I wasn't asked to show my ID when I paid with a debit card. It wasn't until I was leaving and I was in the Montego Bay airport where you literally walk through an enormous replica of Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville restaurant did I realize I was the minority in the airport. It was filled with sun burnt white people with braids in their hair or some other stereotypical tourist accoutrement.

DLM: How does ignorance about certain relationships to past cultures affect the way people perceive these

cultures today? Is it important that people be aware of these relationships? Does it matter if people have no experience with Caribbean history when they view your work? Is accessibility even an issue for you?

AC: I want my work to be accessible but I don't want the work to be too didactic, which it sometimes is. It's hard though because you want the ideas to be conveyed when you're speaking about cultural things. I don't want to get it wrong, especially if I'm talking about a culture that's not my own. I want to pay respect to the culture.

DLM: I know what you mean. I was tentative about curating this show.

AC: I don't think you need to know all the history of the Caribbean to get the work, but I think people need to work a little harder. Sometimes people look at the work and only think of slavery and that's not even what my work is about; or, they can't understand how I would have the last name Chung, but my work clearly talks about migration.

DLM: When I saw your "Come Back to Jamaica" video, I thought about class, white privilege, "white-washing" difficult truths. The cut-outs were like redactions.

AC: I am very interested in labor, and my labor. I will never do one of those videos again, but it was part of the work. 905 hand cut frames, and that was after slowing down the video.

DLM: Imagine how different that would have been if you'd employed a team of Jamaicans to do that for you, and if you paid them whatever is the minimum wage there.

AC: It would be a different kind of piece.

DLM: Why are you interested in post-colonial countries, especially those in the Caribbean? Does your own identity as a Caribbean American play into your interest?

AC: It started off as me investigating who my grandparents were, why they were in Jamaica, trying to do some genealogy, and it became a larger investigation.

DLM: Can you describe how you did some of the research that led you to create your works?

AC: My grandmother used to walk around selling foods in Coronation

Market, Kingston. She eventually died getting her second leg amputated due to diabetic gangrene. That became my first sculpture. I cast my leg out of sugar as a way to give it back to her. It brings up sugar, the history of sugar, and it opens things up to a larger discussion.

AC: Then I started looking at other places that shared that history and that's how I ended up in Mauritius.

DLM: Colonialism. Capitalism. It's surprising to me how much of that bloody history revolves around sugar, spices, and food.

AC: I always joke that food must have been HORRIBLE in Europe.

DLM: Like you, I've always wondered how it was that things had gotten so bad in Europe. I grow most of the food I need in my front yard. What were they missing?

AC: Your front yard doesn't look the same as it did 500 years ago. We've re-imagined what our lands look like. And there's no need to wonder. Look at the way things are here in the USA with the chase for oil and fracking. It was the same thing in Europe back then. They dismantled their forests, depleted their resources, and had to go other places for things.

DLM: Yes, landscape is an idea. Nature is a man made concept.

And we are profligate. I'm reading Simon Schama's book right now, *Landscape and Memory*. The chase after commodities is what Imperialism is about. Food seems to play a large role in your works. Do you think food makes your works more accessible to people?

AC: Yes, definitely. It's sensual in a way. You can seduce people into a space with the smell of food. In my earlier sculptures, it was the smell that really attracted the viewers. You could smell the work before you saw it. It made people hungry.

DLM: Since we're talking about Colonialism and sustenance, I want to shift gears a little to segue to your project, "Catchin Babies, Colonizing Black Bodies." How is that going?

AC: I've collaborated with Dr. Alicia Bonaparte on this project. Her work is about black midwives of the American south, particularly in the Carolinas. Bonaparte discusses the persecution and prosecution of black midwives and touches on how they functioned in the south in both pre and post slavery. Midwives also functioned as healers, and were a necessity because people in rural areas couldn't get to a doctor. Some of the white doctors who trained with the black midwives later went on to establish gynecological practices based on that training, and then tried to get the nanny/granny midwives banned from practicing.

It was really interesting research, so we decided to do a project researching Jamaican midwives.

DLM: Is this leading to a studio project for you?

AC: We are doing a comparative study where we interview midwives, the people who knew them, and some of the people delivered by midwives. I just received a residency in San Diego where I will have a studio for 3 months, and we will be making work based on that research. My grandmother was a registered midwife in Trinidad, so I might work with her image.

This interview has been truncated to fit the format of this publication. For the full interview, please visit allegheny.edu/artgalleries

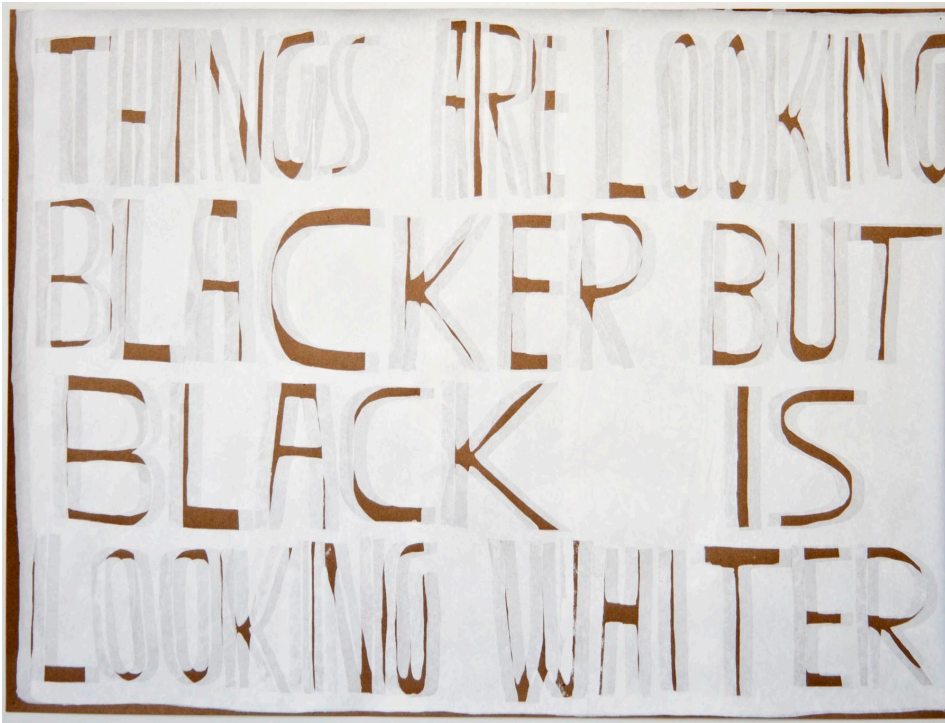


Image courtesy of the Artist

Interview with Ayanah Moor

Jonathan Yee (JY): How would you describe the work that you do?

Ayanah Moor (AM): I'll say what interests me... I'm interested in familiar gestures. I like work that features different points of access whether I'm working with drawing, print media, performance or video.

JY: You have stated before that you're very much interested in pop culture, especially hip hop culture, and how that affects our lives. Could you describe why you have an interest in hip hop?

AM: Hip hop is the culture of my generation. But when I use the language of hip hop, what I imagine, what I feel is radically different than the corporate rap product popularized today. What I grew up hearing and seeing, and in some ways was participating in, barely resembles what is distributed and sold to the world right now.

JY: It sounds like hip hop is a big part of the cultural histories that you seem to invoke in your work. Are there any other legacies (cultural, racial, or even personal) that come into play within your work?

AM: Part of what I remember

about hip hop in the 80s and early 90s was the participation of women, girls who were mc's in particular. A feature of much of my work recently has been the display of voice. I am interested in text as a way of sharing voice... I am very intrigued by the complexity of words right now. The way words look, the viewers' quiet reading, how words index time. There's also that quality in the text in which the viewer/reader makes assumptions about authorship. I rarely represent words I've authored, I'm curious about the ways the viewer makes sense of words like, "I" or "we" or "us" just as I am with the words, "white" or "black" for example.

JY: The last words in particular tend to make some viewers uncomfortable, since race isn't really a common discourse anymore, at least in everyday life. It seems as though people ignore race now and pretend it doesn't exist. Why do you think people are discomfited by the idea of race, and do you try to make it so that any viewer can engage your work in a racial context?

AM: Today the word "race" largely functions to mark anyone who is not white. Why is that? Everyone has a stake in the way race functions. For some there is an automatic expectation that readings of "race" means addressing blackness. I am interested in the viewer identifying race as whiteness as well.

Readings of victimization are popular, but what about interrogating power? Right now my heart is heavy with the crisis in Ferguson, Missouri, where there's protesting about the killing of an unarmed teen by police. If there's discomfort about readings of race in artwork or any work in America, it is grounded in a history of oppression and power, where white bodies are more valuable than black bodies.

JY: You've stated in the past a reluctance to be included in shows that deal exclusively with racial themes. What was it about *Performing Blackness* or *Performing Whiteness* that attracted you to it?

AM: Again, it is popular to interrogate blackness. Words like "mainstream" and even "America" are often code for "white." It's more common for us to name everybody else except white people. What I appreciate is that this show isn't called, "Performing Blackness" and starring all black artists. I value that the show includes, "Performing Whiteness," and the content that affords. Black people should not be expected to do all the work of interrogating race. Racially themed shows that I've been critical of very often hide whiteness and protect white viewers from participating in the dialogue or the work. That is a form of power and privilege. I am interested in calling that out when I see it.



Image courtesy of the Artist

Interview with James Seward

Jonathan Yee (JY): Please describe the type of work you do as an artist.

James Seward: I am working on a series called *Weeping and Wailing*. This body of work investigates the act of crying. Crying is one of the most common expressions of human emotion, a form of communication that precedes language. Tears are universal but painfully individual, they express our most intimate and authentic emotions and yet they are unique to humans in that we are the only species that produce tears of sorrow or joy.

JS: This series depicts the unconscious pain that lies beneath the

surface of everyday experience. My subjects, painted in tightly cropped environments with minimal narrative background show their sadness, sorrow, anxiety, anger, or fear. At times the subject is iconic, taken from film, pop culture, or world history. In this case the viewer can identify and give context to the piece. At other times the subject is anonymous so the viewer is left to his or her own interpretation and reflection.

Darren Lee Miller: The crying Indian reminds me of the old forest service ads on TV from the 70s and 80s, telling us not to litter and not to start forest fires. Is the image based on those ads?

JS: Yes, it is inspired from the public service ads, the commercial with the crying Indian was broadcast on the first Earth Day. The actor's name was Iron Eyes Cody.

DLM: One of the things that strikes me as strange in hindsight about that ad campaign, is how it traded on the trope of the Native American as “noble savage” and “wise earth steward.” In terms of race, how do we work against stereotypes, especially those that are mistakenly seen as positive? For example, the stereotype that every Asian American is a violin prodigy and the class valedictorian?

JS: I agree. I have studied Native

American history for several years, and there are cases of pollution and environmental destruction well before European contact. And yet the myth continues, just as in race, stereotypes are just oversimplified ideas that are projected onto selected groups of people. I bring those projections into question by turning them into exaggerated imagery.

DLM: And then there is the depiction of sadness, to which we all can relate.

JS: Suffering is beyond race and ethnicity. It ties us together.

Jonathan Yee (JY): I'm also curious about your super-slick surfaces. It's almost like your paintings don't tell us they are paintings. What is the surface they're painted on? Does your work in Jeff Koons' studio inform your stylistic and material choices? Can you talk a little about the processes and materials, and let us know if your choices about medium relate to the themes in the works?

JS: I currently paint on dibond which is a composite made of 2 strong sheets of aluminum with a thermoplastic core. It's a great substrate to work on because it provides flexibility, durability, and it is extremely light and strong. You have to prepare the polymer surface with a specific primer before painting. There is not much tooth on the sur-

face which allows the paint to glow. The pigments can remain more saturated than painting on canvas or linen. The slickness is a result of working for Koons. I worked in his studio for 8 years and it definitely changed the way I painted. Jeff never liked any type of brush work, he did not want any trace of the human hand. I am currently trying to loosen up my painting process in this series. When the pieces are seen in person, the brushwork is more apparent.

JY: Would you say that portraiture is your favorite art form? What is it that interests you?

JS: As a child I would watch my uncle paint portraits for commissions. I was captivated by the whole process. He told me that the figure was the most difficult thing to paint, and I agree.

JY: Is there a reason you like doing hyper-realistic portraits even though photography more or less eliminated the need for realistic paintings over a century ago?

JS: My cousin is also a portrait painter so I guess it runs in the family. Portraiture provides a trifold relationship between me and the subject and the viewer. It provides a template for a story that I wish to communicate; however, it is not my favorite art form.

JY: Could you expand on this trifold relationship within portraits and explain how your own identity comes into play?

JS: The viewer must engage with the subject. On a subtle level there is already a relationship that is created with the portrait. It is a natural process because we as individuals relate to and communicate with other individuals. Within this relationship, there are narratives that come into play, stories inherent in the subjects. So it is through the subject that a relationship is created with me, the artist. The portrait acts as a messenger. The trick and challenge is in the subtlety. Leaving enough space for the viewer to explore.

JY: What is it about *Performing Blackness::Performing Whiteness* that made you want to participate?

JS: I think race and ethnicity are important issues in America. We live under the myth that we all have equal opportunities in life, including access to good healthcare and education. This exhibition is an exciting opportunity to inquire into what race means today, how far we as a society have gone in evolving past certain prejudices, and how far we have yet to go.



Image courtesy of the Artist
and Jenkins Johnson Gallery

Interview with Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle

Darren Lee Miller (DLM): Race and exoticized bodies are not part of common discourse, especially in white America. It seems as though the majority now ignores race and pretends racial problems no longer exist, even in light of Trayvon Martin and Ferguson. Why do you think that is? I don't know how these things are talked about (or swept under the rug) in Europe.

Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle (KACH): I think that it is a complicated hyper-visibility and hyper-invisibility that black bodies negotiate in relationship to white America and the construction of whiteness. In Europe I was hypervisible because

it was homogeneously white and I stood out like a sore thumb, but I was also hyper-invisible because in such a homogenous environment my presence did not count. I was merely a prop to project desires onto. It didn't feel as if I were human. Even so called "white people" have to abide by certain parameters to uphold their "whiteness." It is essentially a haunting and violent performance of identity that chains the Other and the one defining the Other in a vicious cycle of doing and undoing that strips our collective humanity. In America, racial prejudice is the foundation of our whole economic standing, and within the mixture of our bloodlines. It's a deep dark history that people deny because we feel that our history is based upon the dichotomy of good and evil. There is so much guilt wrapped up in the

white American consciousness that citizens of this country will not allow people to face the facts that African-Americans/Black people are still not being treated like human beings. I did a show called *Kneegrow in the New World* during grad school at CalArts in which I was dealing with language and how the black body has been historically labeled. Upon the main wall of the gallery I made the word perform, starting with tiny nnnnn(s) that then became gigantic NNNNN(s), ending with the tiny letters, igger. During critique, a white student felt like he could be absolved from the presence of the word in the gallery screaming at him. He looked condescendingly at me while pointing at the wall and said, "I don't use that word." I pointed to the wall and said to him, "Just because you do not use 'that word' does not mean that you are a good white person and incapable of being racist. There are so many ways to call someone a Nigger without even saying it." Growing up in Louisville, KY I learned that a smile could mean, "Nigger, get the fuck out of here." I found his fear of the word, and his well-intentioned desire to police my use of the word on my own terms, was disturbing to both of us.

DLM: For some, race can be a sensitive and almost taboo subject to talk about, as we both noted above. How does your work seek to engage viewers to start think-

ing within the framework of race? Specifically black femaleness? Could you describe your concept of historical resin? How it affects the black female body?

KACH: I remember someone saying that my work had no entry point to it when I did the installation for the *Kneegrow in the New World*. My response was that there was a door to the gallery, you walk in and out of it. Many people were terrified of the show, but some people felt comfortable in the space reciting my text drawings as monologues. Some people of color were thankful that I chose to speak about the subject matter. I loved the polarities and complexities of the reactions and welcomed all of it. I work with photographs people are used to seeing of beautiful half naked African women. I draw on top of them and cover the bodies, give them weapons or make them almost grotesque. The viewer's gaze is met by the eyes of the women, so the gaze is taken back. When I started researching the photographs, I noticed that the women were placed into the same poses as women from hip hop magazines such as *Vibe* and *XXL*. I began placing the historical and contemporary images side by side, and then I noticed that some contemporary images were more blatantly exoticizing racial body types. The major resin that I speak of is my body being a site/marker of prostitution, because within cer-

tain geographies these stereotypes informed by slavery, hegemony, and colonialism have withstood centuries of social change. The old and new images paint a portrait of the black female body as ready, available, hypersexed and willing to give the viewer what ever he or she wants. Now that I think about it a huge component of the Spain trip was that not only did the men think I was a prostitute, but on four different occasions men pulled out their penises and began masturbating in front of me! If this isn't historical resin I am not sure what is. When I complained to the teachers on the trip, they did not believe me. One white male teacher asked me what was I wearing, insinuating that it was somehow my fault. I was stepping into history and nothing had changed. Once when I was up at 4am in the hostel, traumatized by the situation, a Spanish man came up to the window and began banging on the glass while masturbating. At this point I felt as if I was Saartjie Baartman in a cage, like an animal for the amusement of European audiences. This was indeed the Historical Present, and some deep dark craziness.

DLM: You describe the *Kentifrica Project* as an effort to combine your histories of Kentucky and Africa, and spreading the ethnographic culture to others through collaboration and participation. Could you describe your idea of Kentifrica

to us? Why bring together these two different cultures (colonial-era depictions of bodies and images of women in popular hip-hop magazines) under one project? And does appropriation become an issue?

KACH: This body of work started as an investigation to find the missing gaps concerning my personal ancestry. My ancestors hail from parts of West Africa and Kentucky. I began to merge these identities into one existence in which prior definitions became blurred. Through my continued research, a platform to engage with the construction of culture, history and display began to emerge. I am taking on the role of griot, anthropologist, writer, archivist, poet, journalist, and museum director. Throughout the years the project has become bigger than my auto-ethnographic investigation to include complex layers and intersections of collective imagining. The project is about creating one's own archives and terms of engagement for who they are how they want to be represented, instead of letting the victors of history create those terms for us. The ethnographic photography series called *The Uninvited* is a separate body of work, but shares various threads in relationship to defining the undefined, archival practices, and myth-making.

This interview has been truncated to fit the format of this publication. For the full interview, please visit allegheny.edu/artgalleries



Image courtesy of the Artist

Interview with Sandra Brewster

M. Greg Singer (MGS): I was wondering if you could start by describing the type of work that you do.

Sandra Brewster (SB): I am really focussed on folks from the Caribbean who came here during the 1960s and 70s. Many people came here through various movements as well as on their own because of conditions “back home.” My family is from Guyana and came here because of economic conditions there. Like many, they felt a need to leave their country and settle some place where their lives could be pos-

itively influenced – so they could begin again with a better quality of living for themselves, as well as for any children they would have. These children are my generation, so I’m interested in these groups of people and how this North American society has influenced their relationships with environment, and each other.

SB: Allowing this theme to influence my work, I create charcoal based drawings, mixed media work, and I use any other media that I feel would best execute what I’m attempting to convey. For example, a few years ago I created a video in which I interviewed a series of senior Caribbean folks, requesting

them to share stories that describe their first experiences in Canada, while comparing the environment to that of their home country. I chose to do a video as it captured the emotional connection these folks still have with the concept of “back home,” and I felt it was important to show them settled in a space they’ve created for themselves here -- which in most cases is a living room. Also, I am currently working on a series of animations that are playfully expressing some of this, and other topics, while using a recurring theme in my work called “Smith.” *The Smiths* has a playful quality about it that I believe translates into animation well. This series is made up of afro-wearing characters, the area of the face replaced with image transfers of the Smith pages of the phone book. Their bodies are simply rendered shapes that appear to float.

MGS: Why choose the name, Smith?

SB: It started out as a playful creative activity, then turned into a way of expressing specific concerns that communities are focussed on. I use it to narrate stories based on truth and fantasy, and recently represented *Smiths* in large panel grids with transferred images of actual people who challenge mainstream representation. The idea is to represent the diversity that we find within communities. The series began with

an awareness that on a mass scale this was not being seen – that there is a notion of monolithic communities.

SB: Smith was chosen as a name because of the space it takes up in the North American phone directory, its mainstream use to represent anyone and no one, a label that takes up space yet is simultaneously invisible.

MGS: What sort of reactions to the work have you received?

SB: People react in different ways. Some are attracted simply by the aesthetics, others relate to the afro which is considered a “cool” symbol for Black folks - harkening back to the civil rights movement and retro-fashion. People say they relate to the idea of being seen as a number or type and not as an individual, and because the work is not executed in a representational way, I think folks are intrigued by it. The reactions would also depend on the context of the piece.

SB: In my series *Strip* I used *The Smiths* as representatives of the community. This series of drawings was a collaboration with a spoken word artist named Joseph Daly. I asked him to write an imaginative poem influenced by the gun violence happening in Toronto during a period that was termed “year of the gun.” Each drawing represented a line of the poem. *The Smiths* at

times were witnesses to a shooting, other times they were folks who had done wrong, and they also represented lovers kissing in a crystal ball representing hope. Because of the context of this work, people were quite moved as we all were looking for ways to express our concerns for what was happening in the community, young men being killed, people being left behind. We continue to search for reasons why this occurs.

SB: I attended Alice Yard, a residency in Trinidad during the winter of 2013 and transformed *The Smiths* into *The Mohammeds*, the name that takes up the largest section of the phone directory there. Among the works created were a mural and aluminum figures that I called, *Mohammeds*. Folks thought it was funny, and they were intrigued by its representation and execution. For many, the afros reminded them of turbans, and the common name of many of the Indian people who were brought as workers to Trinidad referred to a historical presence. I wouldn't say that this was my initial intention. I was looking for ways to allow a different location to influence my work. The work was also a comment on Carnival – using *The Mohammeds* in a wall installation representing Carnival dwellers encountering then encircling a transferred image of a bikini wearing Carnival player. I was expressing the sign that parts of Carnival do not represent, the artistic performative

engagement that was once fostered. The aluminum pieces, called, *Mohammed Stands* were situated throughout the residency grounds, and like a procession they traveled toward the wall installation.

MGS: I think it's interesting that these pieces can have different meanings for different people like that, separate from the original intent, and that people can sympathize with them in that way.

SB: Yeah, *The Smiths* traveled. It felt cool. When I got there I decided to just start working on what I knew, and I was just sketching *The Smiths* in grids when it occurred to me that it would make sense to change the name according to the location. I would love to have that experience again in another place without being so literal. I think the folks who see *The Smiths* and *The Mohammeds* are represented in them. They are meant to be us.

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Image courtesy of the Artist

Interview with Steve Cole

M. Greg Singer (MGS): How would you describe the type of work you are currently doing.

Steve Cole (SC): My latest work is small figurines made from Hydrocal, (a form of fortified plaster). The work revolves around the 939 hate groups in the U.S. as defined by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

MGS: Yes, *The Hate Project*. Why seek to show attention to these harmful groups?

SC: To quote Martin Luther King, Jr., “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that.” These groups still exist. A visual illustration of the problem can impress an audience with the problems of intolerance and the dangers of being silent.

MGS: How did you decide upon the materials?

SC: For the Hate Project, I wanted to visually map the headquarters of the hate groups on a map of the United States so that viewers could see what was in their own backyard. Since there were over 1,000 they needed to be fairly small, around 8”-12”. I had never cast before and doing something new is always exciting, and cast white plaster figures on a bed of black coal slag seemed beautiful. Regardless of message, you want the viewers enticed to an experience. Then they can begin to interpret the message and respond.

MGS: What sorts of reactions to the work have you received?

SC: Most people are overwhelmed by the numbers and the fact that many of these groups are so close in proximity to them. Many assumed that these groups had died off, but the percentage of hate groups has increased by some 56% since the year 2000.

MGS: Do you in any way relate this

project to your previous work, such as “Believe” and “The Hate Mandala?” Do your personal experiences or geographical location inform these works?

SC: “Believe” was using only the literal interpretation of the Bible. Everything from this very extreme view, be it science or another religion, was false and therefore there was justification for intolerance against gays and many others. The “Hate Mandala” followed an exhibition in our gallery by Buddhist Lama Deshek, who created a beautiful mandala meant to symbolize the perfected form of qualities such as compassion and wisdom, and to promote harmony in the world. My “Hate Mandala” served to remind us that while harmony and peace can grow with the smallest of actions by the compassionate, so may hate if left unchallenged and unchecked.

MGS: What about this show, *Performing Blackness::Performing Whiteness*, made you want to be a part of it? What kind of voice do you hope to bring to the conversation?

SC: I have seen the work of the other artists in the exhibition and I am honored to be included. My work is about tolerance and compassion. My hope is that viewers will see that while gains have been made, there is still much to be done.



Image courtesy of the Artist and Pavel Zoubok Gallery

Interview with Vanessa German

Darren Lee Miller (DLM): Other people who have seen your older work might know you more as a performer than a maker of objects. That's what comes up when I do an online search for you. How do you think about your work as a performance artist as being related to, and also maybe being different from the work you make as a visual artist?

Vanessa German (VG): I am scripting most of the work that I perform, and I am mining the language for those performances from the language that I've encountered on

the street. Literally on the street in the neighborhood around me, but I also think of it as mining my soul. There's a way I write where I think about opening a doorway at the center of my chest that goes into my soul, and I let my soul speak. I literally will write the words that my soul says to write. And I write for lots of different reasons. Sometimes I write really, really personal work, and I write it because I need it to get me through something. Or sometimes I write a work that has a purpose more for the audience than for myself. Sometimes I'm performing kinds of spells. So, there are similarities in that and the work that I create sculpturally, because some of it is of course very personal, and some of it is created for both the audience and me.

There are power figures that I create sculpturally, and I am creating them much like I create a performance, which is like an accumulated language. Every object, every symbol is its own word or phrase, so the accumulation of them together, sculpturally, is literally one performance work. The two modes are posing different questions for future making to happen. It's about juxtaposing ideas and things to allow the different conversations to happen in the future, because a lot of the work that I'm creating is made to it look as though it's already old, but it's not. It might be three or four months old, but I make it look like it's a lot older. If the object were

an artifact from 200 years ago, if it looks like it's really old, then what does that mean for the conversation we have about this precious, black thing right now? And what does that mean about conversations for the future? It is about time travel, literally. In 200 years, what will they say about this object that looks like it's four hundred years old? And what does that mean for the reality of people whose likeness is represented by the object? What does that mean for people who conserve objects?

DLM: Two other artists in this show are working with future histories, and creative ways to think about our place in time. Can you talk a little bit more about history, or the future?

VG: Another kind of visual tradition, like a visual legacy that I am consciously working inside of is purely instinctive, because there is so little that I know about my family story. I dated a girl who could trace her family back to some Dutch kings and queens, like they had family crests and all this stuff, and it was something that she could speak about with certainty. I don't have that, so a lot of times when I'm working visually, I actually think of the soul as technology. I make it a point to think about the technology of the soul the same way we think about the technology of the iPhone, which is, like, "We're still learning,

there are still obvious places that we can go.” So, literally, when I think about opening the door in my soul and letting what is most instinctive and innate come out free of judgment, without any kind of expectation, I let the eye in the hand of my soul lead me places because there is such a legacy of wisdom within my human body and brain, and within our DNA. I don’t necessarily need to know what those things are called to know that they’re present, or to even allow them to come out. So what happens is, I open the hand and the eye in the door of my soul and let that which is innately possible be as unconfined as possible. And then sharing the work with historians and other people who expect certain things, and asking, Where have you seen this type of work before? Where have you experienced these things? And then there are things that I’ve learned that I still count on, that I’m still learning about. Like the tradition of power figures, the tradition of makers in communities who make objects and experiences. The idea that there are people within your community who contribute intimately to your psychological, spiritual, and physical well being. Tapping into a legacy that is far older than history, finding all those different ideas and connecting them with the fact that most of the captives who were slaves in America came from only two places. And one of those two places was the

place that had a tradition of using materials the way black folk healers use them, even though they were working from instinct, not historical knowledge. So that’s the way that these things reveal themselves through that which is innate.

DLM: One of the things I find so interesting about the tragic legacy of slavery and colonialism is that there is a chance that you could also be related to your ex-girlfriend’s royal European family line. There’s just no way to know.

VG: For me that’s a really beautiful truth. I can hear connections between the songs that the slaves were singing in Louisiana and Mississippi and traditional Irish songs.

DLM: They do sound similar.

VG: I love the celebration of that connection.

DLM: But I don’t look at your work and think it’s earnestly celebratory. Your power figure series makes use of derogatory images of people of color while also using found objects and imbuing them with this kind of magical power that you were just talking about. Do you think that these are contradictory images of oppression and empowerment, or do you think that we are oversimplifying by making it a kind of binary like that?

VG: There’s a book about how Aunt Jemima and Uncle Moe came to be derogatory, because there was a time when we believed they weren’t. Here’s this image. Here are these shapes. Over time they’ve had different meanings. The reality for me is that there are black skinned people with large asses, large lips, flat noses, and incredibly kinky hair. I don’t call images of “those people” derogatory. They’re living their lives. They’re my neighbors. They’re me. We represent ourselves. I think we’re beautiful. It was really a matter of marketers who were making decisions about these images and saying, “This is how we will keep these people in their place,” and there were books written about it. So, the reality is I know people who look a certain way. The problem is other people representing us. I don’t think we’re ugly. I don’t think that we’re too black to be good. I don’t think anything like that. I’m confronting the mind and mechanism of a society that would take that which is natural and would twist and tangle it and so that some images become derogatory and debased. And that is what is happening to the actual humans who are represented. I’m honoring the lives of those who fight against prejudice. You know, you have black PhD’s graduating from Harvard, and then you have white supremacists trying to undermine the humanity of black people. It’s a process of reclamation, deep prayer, deep future building,

and reclaiming the forms, words, and shapes. I reclaim images. It's not a matter of redefining things. I am a black woman of size, of certain nose-ness and kinky hair-ness, but I'm also doing it for the white people who I love and care about, but who have been tricked or poisoned into believing that some types of people are worth less than others, or that some of us are less beautiful, less powerful, less artistic, all sorts of less. It's a process of restorative justice.

DLM: I love the term "future making" that you've used a few times, and also this idea of reclamation. When viewers are looking at your work, what would you say is the main question you want them to ask themselves?

VG: I wish I could say that I cared. I can tell you the questions they ask me, or that they ask the gallery. Is this an African-American artist? Black people who see my work ask, Why are the figures sooo black? Why aren't some of them coffee colored? Or more like caramel?

DLM: Do these questions piss you off?

VG: None of them do because I understand where it comes from. I really do. For most black people, we come up in a world where everything you start judging, from the time language is coming to you, is

about your skin color. I see it with kids on the street now. It's 2014 and there's a biracial president, but it's like, "You're darker than so and so. Stay out of the sun because you'll get dark and nobody'll wanna deal with you." I totally get it when a 35 year old black woman asks, "Why are they so black?" It's because the pervasive thoroughness of the lie of racism is totally wound in all of our systems.

DLM: Are there other questions that surprise you?

VG: Is the artist angry?

DLM: To me they seem more like artifacts rather than conveyors of anger, but some of the pieces do confront the viewer in a really bold way. Similar to traditional spiritual dolls, your power figures have an essence like there's some kind of spirit in them. This is getting back to some of the things you talked about earlier. Do you think of yourself as performing some of the functions that we would associate with a medicine woman, and do you think that that is different from your role as an artist?

VG: I think language is coming to play in your question. I stopped calling myself an artist years ago. I think that there's a spirit in my work, I feel like there's a spirit I come into contact with, you know, all the time. When I'm working in

my studio, when I say that I open up the doors of my soul and use the hands and eyes of my soul, that's partially about trust and partially about not denigrating the things that happen inside of my studio that I don't have the language for. I don't have to know everything. I work in the space between knowing and not knowing.

DLM: What interested you in this exhibition? What made you want to be in it?

VG: Well, since you first talked to me about it two years ago after my *Emerging Artist of the Year* exhibition at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, there has been an evolution. And I think one of the things that interested me about it is just you as a human being having this idea and sticking with your idea, but also you've allowed it to grow. It shows that your curatorial process is open, like how we make art. Also, I've enjoyed seeing how the language has evolved for the exhibition. My mother died two weeks ago and she was really light skinned. I think about how she lived another reality of her own blackness, looking so white, looking like she could pass. Performing Whiteness for some Black people is just called passing.

This interview has been truncated to fit the format of this publication. For the full interview, please visit allegheny.edu/artgalleries



ALLEGHENY COLLEGE



Doane Hall of Art
Box 23, 520 North Main Street
Meadville, PA 16335-3902

ph: 814.332.4365
fax: 814.332.6238

www.alleggheny.edu/artgalleries

Tuesday, January 20 – Tuesday, March 3, 2015

Opening Reception and Lectures: Tuesday, January 20, 7:00 – 9:00PM

Brendan Fernandes, Artist-in-Residence, February 16 - 20, 2015

Closing Reception and Lectures: Tuesday, March 3, 7:00 – 9:00PM



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