

Marcello Pope

Applying Color Theory to *Blackness* in Form, Figure, and Abstraction

Thesis Statement for MFA Final Review

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Through my paintings I'm investigating what it means to act, look and be black. My work revolves around narratives that reflect nostalgia and black culture. I want viewers to make connections to portraits and houses as if they know the figures and structures personally—the goal is to apply elements of abstraction, form, and color to provide a range of beauty packaged in blackness. The paintings serve as repositories, representing people I've learned from and by some small measure pay tribute to the diversity found within African Americans. Expanding upon the things commonly found in African American communities, the work has moved into the spatial development of black communities throughout the country. By painting houses and buildings in predominantly black neighborhoods, I'm able to explore structures and invite wonder into both public and private spaces. Titles for my work are inspired by colloquialisms and speak to the diversity among black people from the cuisine of the Geechee people in South Carolina to the creole infused slang of those in New Orleans Ninth Ward. This allows the work to be shared by communities often overlooked and unwelcomed in traditional exhibition spaces. The work is meant to be reflective and celebratory. I use iconography as a way of reclaiming past stereotypes to challenge monolithic tropes about blackness. There is a connection to memory that requires color, objects, and figures to take center stage on the canvas.

On the Move/Claiming Space

I'm in the process of researching *redlining* and the Great Migration from the 1920s to 1970s as source material. My interest primarily involves spatial development in African American neighborhoods. The change of direction in my work was prompted by contemplating ways in which black people occupy space in private settings and communities. I consider the *black housing* series an extension of my portraits and abstract paintings. As I develop the series, I plan on introducing new mediums and growing the artworks in scale with diptychs and triptychs.

By emphasizing architectural structures, including housing, civic buildings, storefronts, and places of worship, I intend to highlight the historical factors, culture, and people who reside in these neighborhoods.

The Great Migration is considered one of the most significant demographic events in U.S. history; it was a time when thousands of African Americans decided to move from the South to the North in search of better opportunities.¹ The migration had short-and-long-term consequences for individual blacks, the black community, and American society.² One of the long-term effects of the Great Migration was the introduction of *redlining*, which consisted of red lines on a map that indicated to banks and the real estate industry which neighborhoods would be less likely to receive home loans. During the Civil Rights movement, to combat the racial and housing discriminatory practices perpetuated by *redlining* the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was developed. One of the negative effects of *redlining* on African American neighborhoods resulted in economic ramifications that still apply today; as a systemic barrier, *redlining* broadened the wealth gap and deepened concerns of access and equity for those marginalized by its implementation. When painting, I consider the countless number of African Americans who occupied the houses and buildings in the communities impacted by redlining.

At the beginning of my process, I might research a commercial map of a particular city or blueprints of house plans, then compile pictures from that period as well as contemplate how color might describe the neighborhood. I have applied acrylic, colored pencils, and house paint to construct the reductive architectural forms, but as the series grows I foresee maps, mark-

¹ Stewart E. Tolnay, "The African American "Great Migration" and Beyond," *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003): 209. www.jstor.org/stable/30036966.

² Stewart E. Tolnay, "The African American "Great Migration" and Beyond", 209.

making, and collage finding its way onto the canvas. Although the homes are regional, each structure is immersed in large volumes of flat color and allow for the viewer's imagination to fill the canvas. The houses are particular to specific neighborhoods like *Nola* (fig. 5), which is a painting of a home nestled in the 5th ward neighborhood of New Orleans. The home references French architecture with multiple doors on the front façade rendered in vibrant yellow and green colors found during the celebration of Mardi Gras. Ultimately, with the *black housing* series, I want to offer ideas of home, community, pride, and fellowship.

Nostalgia and Memory

Memories play an important role in my work. Unpacking memories requires an investigation of the senses. During this process of memory and discovery, a sequence of fascinating events emerge; I think back to people moving in rhythm and becoming poetry in motion. The smells and sights from my childhood reemerge to aid in my creative process. When choosing materials, I pick colors that recall music in fancy cars, the sounds of laughter at family reunions and soul food in grandma's kitchen. I want to transport viewers into a space filled with joy, exploration, and insight.

There are elements of artificiality and playfulness found in my paintings that activate iconography and objects, which introduce key details to support the overall narrative. Compositionally, the work is organized in a grid-like format to give balance. Through paintings, I strive to recognize not only the physical spaces but also identify the signs and symbols that categorize African American culture. For example, the term "Jays" references Michael Jordan shoes and shoe culture prevalent in black communities around the country. I draw from memory how language can become coded speech spoken universally amongst African Americans. There

are some colloquialisms that transcend generations while others are more specific. I think of how the term “it’s a black thing” can be used to describe speech as well as objects, and how language for many black people in America has re-contextualized into a pseudo-dialect within African American Vernacular English known as Ebonics. Additionally, my titles connect directly to language and speech shared amongst black people. The goal is to allow creative expression to transcend from the body to the canvas.

In the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, I transitioned through childhood to adulthood. Through cinema, sitcoms, fashion and other aspects of media during this period I witnessed a rise in black aesthetics. The reclaiming of Afrocentric ideas and ownership of agency brought about fresh perspectives in entertainment and helped to formulate an aesthetic marketed to urban dwellers. For example, in the 90s, *Do the Right Thing* and *A Different World* built narratives that were a part of mainstream America as well as incorporated a unique vernacular, mannerisms, and visual representations of blackness. With clever and insightful perspectives popular shows like HBO’s *Insecure* and NBC’s *Black-ish* continue to display a black aesthetic similar to sitcoms and cinema from the ‘90s. The black aesthetic I wish to capture is filled with diversity and layered with complexities that connect to history as well as promote promise and new opportunities in the future. Today these shows contribute to the dialogue happening in black living rooms throughout America and provide an abundance of material to work from. The application of color to certain facial features confront racist caricatures of the past while recreating a new identity and celebration of blackness in contemporary art. Here is where I am continuing discourse about black aesthetics and challenging what it means to look, act and talk black.

My work focuses on how black culture has been seen as separate, yet simultaneously exists as an integral part of popular culture. The existence of the new America we have come to know wouldn't exist without the presence of black bodies. Despite dehumanizing and oppressive conditions, black people have reimagined their African heritage and have produced through assimilation a multitude of blackness used to promote Americana. Historically, black culture has brought about trends and posed questions regarding value, authenticity and belonging. It is in this space of intersectionality that I find iconographic material and utilize the tools of semiotics to reclaim the black figure through abstraction. Also, by increasing the scale of my portraiture viewers are encouraged to become more intimate with the figures. The enlarged heads are meant to take up exhibition space by imposing their presence on viewers. I am essentially reinterpreting new meaning to black subjectivity in regard to characteristics for celebration and study. I feel the size and scale of my portraits place a grandeur and intrinsic value on the black figure not often found in the canon of art history. The colossal heads appear regal and command a response. Gone are the days of asking for acceptance in the physical form, my work demands attention and owns its space from an authoritative position. What I want to leave as an impression on the viewer is the presence of a black figure, black narratives and black perspectives devoid of the need for white validation or accreditation in the art gambit. For example, Julie McGhee in her article on "The Evolution of a Black Aesthetic, 1920-1950," *David C. Driskell and Race, Ethics, and Aesthetics*, reveals why black artists after the 1950s felt a need to recognize their existence and influence in the arts and amongst black culture, "artistic practices and artists excluded from the entrenched canon were expected to demonstrate aesthetic viability, maturity, and legitimacy. Mechanisms for doing this included noting omissions, documenting historicity of practice and

practitioners, establishing difference, and calling into question the discourse of exclusion.”³

McGhee’s comments speak to why past black artist collectives like the Black Arts Movement and AfriCOBRA were formed. Black artists then and now find it necessary to use their platforms to address in theory and practice the necessity of black exhibition and black aesthetics. My work serves as a platform for black exhibition and continues the legacy of past artists who challenged racist tropes.

Black Colloquialism Defined

Some titles of my work are based on colloquialisms, they act as clues and inside jokes for those in the know. At the beginning of my creative process, I think of how colloquialisms function in the black community. When it comes to black colloquialisms they can function as pejorative banter spoken in public to old adages passed down as cautionary tales. For example, the barbershop was a place I would hear stories told—a communal safe space and economic institution where you could simply be black. Even today, going to barbershops exist as a rite of passage for many black fathers and young boys. I created a painting titled *Barbershop Talk* (fig. 1) to depict some of the quintessential objects and expressions you might observe inside a typical black barbershop, including such items as buzzing clippers, hair on the floor, a sweeping broom, the smell of rubbing alcohol, and pomade grease, etc. I want my titles to suggest and recall certain sensory experiences. By utilizing colloquialisms as a conduit to discovering and identifying distinct occurrences from an autobiographical standpoint the work becomes more

³ Julie L. McGee, ““The Evolution of a Black Aesthetic, 1920–1950”: David C. Driskell and Race, Ethics, and Aesthetics,” *Callaloo* 31, no. 4 (2008): 2, doi:10.1353/cal.0.0241.

personal. This is where my Southern roots and travels throughout the country intersect and create entry points for those in African American communities to see themselves.

Colloquialisms are a binding factor in language especially amongst those submerged in black culture. Nuanced expressions of everyday language and speech provide guidance and identity. For example, the word “pig” was used frequently by members of the Black Panther Party during the 1970s to describe police officers as filthy and corrupt. “Pig” has transitioned into “po-po” in more current times. With the influence of hip-hop culture, “po-po” still remains a common phrase used in the black community to alert others in the surrounding vicinity of police presence. Speech has a way of evolving in black culture as both positive and negative components tied to black vernacular.

I borrow from informal speech and phrases, the kind heard during domino games and on street corners, phrases such as *chop-it-up* and *red drink*. The speech referenced in my work reaches beyond regional accents, there are distinct expressions used in African American Vernacular English which add to the richness and complexity of linguistics applied in black communities. Certain phrases and language help to create sound and imagery in spaces frequently drowned out by misconceptions. Deric Greene and Felicia Walker speak to the linguistic patterns and practices that have created a counter language or oppositional way of speaking for African Americans. Code-switching as described by Greene and Walker is Black English for individuals having been reared in African American cultural environments, African Americans developed the ability to code-switch in order to manage in a society in which they

were the racial minority.⁴ Within white space, the “white voice” describes a black person who is able to code-switch. This ability to code-switch as a survival tactic and tool to assimilate implies how layered vernaculars exist within black culture. Therefore, extracting colloquialisms from the linguistic speech patterns of African American Vernacular English gives the work not only a presence of blackness in meaning but a metaphorical voice of blackness.

Black Figure in Abstraction

I’m inspired by the ability to tell stories through bodies. Portraits are created to represent people I have envisioned existing in places of nostalgia. I think back to people who filled church functions and school dances. These people become characters in a story and my job is to embrace their facial features as elements of blackness to be celebrated and valued. My portraits graphically highlight lips, noses and ears in artificial colors as an ode to pop art. I’m hoping to create my own Afro-pop style of art. One great example of color application is seen in the paintings *Junebug* (fig. 2) and *Earl* (fig. 3). The radiant colors replace past sentiments concerning racial depictions and negative stereotypes of black features. I apply saturated colors to the face to highlight certain facial characteristics. The initial sketch onto the canvas focuses on forms and contours of a person’s face. As I begin to paint I think of how light embraces the face and the hues needed to create depth as well as emotion. I’m constantly engaged with the balance between abstraction and color. I employ a careful process of selection to produce and reinforce meaning, as with the color green used to signify grass as a background color in *Not Invited to the*

⁴ Deric M. Greene and Felicia R. Walker, “Recommendations to Public Speaking Instructors for the Negotiation of Code-Switching Practices among Black English-Speaking African American Students,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 73, no. 4 (2004): 436.

BBQ (fig. 4) and hair products in *Barbershop Talk*. Color theory is a strategy I implement in my paintings, especially in my portraits, the color of objects and figures dictate composition.

Another aspect of importance is the application of flesh tones. With each portrait the blending of skin color emphasizes colorism, considering how pejorative comments within black culture like “he so black he blue”, “high yella” and “she is a redbone” provide color-based colloquialisms that speak to color theory as well as stereotypical descriptions. Zoe Whitley, American co-curator of international art at the Tate Museum, wrote in an essay about Charles White’s handling of skin through sepia tones, “Charles White imbued figures in his compositions with a similar dignity to Bearden’s yet, with a distinct emphasis on heroism. Where Bearden’s collages and Projections conceived a unified Black experience from discrete elements.”⁵ I want to create black figures much like Charles White under the guise of what Zoe Whitley sees as “the social realist gravitas of archetypal depictions: workers, nurturers, leaders, and protectors, sometimes as groups or couples but often as totemic solitary figures.”⁶ Charles White speaks to his intent and responsibility as a black artist expressing the black figure, where paint is more than a medium, “paint is the only weapon I have with which to fight what I resent. If I could write I would write about it. If I could talk I would talk about it. Since I paint, I must paint about it.”⁷ By celebrating and reclaiming skin color, facial characteristics, and the black body as a valued presence, my practice challenges racially charged depictions of the black figure throughout art history. The black figure becomes more than a symbol of servitude or entertainment instead he/she is a source of pride.

⁵ Mark Godfrey et al., *Soul of Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (2017), 204.

⁶ Godfrey, 204.

⁷ Ibid, 204.

In addition, iconography is a key element of my work, as my forms and compositions are influenced by both abstract expressionism and black folk-art. Charles White during an oral history interview with Betty Hoag had this to say regarding the black figure through symbolism and the universality of the black aesthetic:

Exactly, what I want is so that when I say dignity and I say truth and I say beauty, these are universal kinds of things that all men aspire to, within all men. So that I'm addressing myself for people I relate to. Sometimes it may be difficult for white people to quite see it in these universal terms. I mean, I can understand, say, if somebody saw it purely and they do, I get the sense that they sometimes don't always see it because somebody's always asking me, "Why don't you paint whites? You don't paint anything other than Negroes," which indicates a certain lack of understanding and perceptiveness about this. But the point is that I've had, as a Negro in America, I've related to images that had broader symbolic meanings, in spite of the fact that the image might be white.⁸

W.J.T. Mitchell in his book *What do Pictures Want* addresses the "double consciousness" we have toward images stemming from, "a deep and abiding feature of human responses to representation."⁹ My portraits bring to life color beyond superficial prejudices and stereotypical exaggerations of facial features represented as caricature. Mitchell also comments on the idea of *colorline*, "Color cannot be delineated or touched, we suppose; it only appears to the eye—and not to all eyes, or to all eyes in the same way. It is, at best, a kind of "vital sign" that expresses the desire for life, as when we say "Look, the color is returning to her cheeks," or paint the face of a corpse to make it look lifelike or paint the face of the living to transform identity."¹⁰ By taking blues, purples and reds as undertones for skin color, or painting the eyelids a bright color to accentuate a particular mood, I am recognizing a sense of presence and diversity found within

⁸ Charles W. White, "Oral history interview with Charles W. White," by Betty Hoag, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, last modified May 26, 2005, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-charles-w-white-11484#transcript>.

⁹ William J. Thomas Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 8.

¹⁰ Mitchell, 308.

black people. I want to color in between the lines a new understanding of blackness when applied to the black aesthetic, one of vitality steeped in humanity and dignity.

I initially use magazines, social media or notice people in passing as inspiration for a portrait. Typeface, graphic designs, social media ads, clothing and the barrage of visual stimuli one might encounter walking down a city street keep my head on a swivel. My work in the past has included haikus and poetry as textual clues to uncover messages about the things going on around me, in the city or culturally. Language has always played a major role in my aesthetic. Typically, I draw several iterations before sketching onto the canvas. Sometimes I write words and phrases detailing elements and characteristics of the figure as a way to build character development. I jot down ideas of his or her physical appearance, colors they might wear and how they might sound. For example, my portrait of *Leon* is a complimentary painting to *Barbershop Talk*. *Leon* appears somewhat jovial and in the process of laughing, he has been painted with similar colors from the *Barbershop Talk* painting to convey a common thread. *Leon* is a fictional figure who could assimilate into any predominantly black barbershop, his facial gesture and alertness to the happenings within the barbershop make him appear relatable as well as believable. But in terms of the broader context of black culture, *Leon* is a man who gets his hair cut at a barbershop, therefore, he metaphorically symbolizes a commonality in American culture with men who get their haircut.

Stylistically my portraits are heavily influenced by the likes of Kerry James Marshall, Alex Katz, Charles White, and Elizabeth Catlett. Alex Katz's work incorporates graphic flatness, boldness of color, and a singular presence—all qualities I have come to value within my own paintings. Elements of flatness in my paintings allow me to push stories beyond the canvas, for the narrative to flow into another piece—suggesting possibilities regarding what could happen

next. The challenge of making referential art simple is also something I take from Katz. You will not find much spatial depth in my abstract paintings, instead, I aim for texture and shape. In paintings like *Jungle Music* and *Can I Get A Witness* impasto provide texture and movement for the eye to scan the paintings' surface. The intent is to make the paint as immediate and topical as possible. I'm not looking for depth so much as identifying and highlighting form. As noted by Katz regarding his own paintings, "they're traditional because all painting belongs to the paintings before them, and they're modernistic because they're responsive to the immediate."¹¹ This statement rings true for me as I seek to communicate memory and narrative. Elizabeth Catlett's ability to work within various mediums detailing the figure much like that of Charles White reinforces form with abstraction and a sense of realism. The aim is to present the archetype of black portraiture as dignified, regal, and self-assured. My hope is to convey a similar message with my artistic practice, to instill a sense of pride and leave behind a legacy of visual documentation.

Cultural Continuum

I paint for the same reason that I write: to engage with current discourse concerning black aesthetics in popular culture. My paintings are depictions of real stories about real people; I see myself as a "visual journalist" reporting varying perspectives on black culture. Through my works, I pose the following question to the viewer, "How might these words and images challenge cultural sensibilities in terms of black culture as status quo?" I'm reporting how black people live and express themselves in an authentic and familial way. The work is vivid in color,

¹¹ Sam Hunter and Alex Katz, *Alex Katz* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 26.

regal in presentation, and a testament to the magnificent beauty found in black people and the spaces they occupy.



Fig. 5 *Nola*, acrylic & house paint on canvas, 48 x60" inches, 2020

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