THE TIES THAT BIND
ART OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTIST

A Thesis

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By
Queen E. Brooks, B.F.A.

The Ohio State University
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Master's Examination Committee: Approved by
Robert Schwartz
Pheoris West
Charles Massey
Larry Shinemen

Advisor
Dept. of Art
DEDICATION

To the African American artists of the past, present and future and to God who made it possible.
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VITA

April 23, 1943 . . . . Born - Columbus, Ohio

1990 . . . . . . . . . B.F.A., The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

1990 - 1992 . . . . Graduate School,
Department of Art,
Painting and Drawing,
The Ohio State University,
Columbus, Ohio

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INTRODUCTION

The following pages examine the influences, the concerns, and the choices that contribute to the creation of my art. I expound on physical characteristics of my works as well as materials and techniques used to create them. Discoveries both within the art and within the artist are spoken of, as well as personal philosophies. The paper ends with a summation of final thoughts of anticipated growth and the real importance of my life as an artist.
Part I.

Concerns and Choices

My art grew out of a desire to create imagery of and for African American people. This desire was generated by several reasons: a lack of black imagery or a negative representation; a desire to create art that held meaning beyond "art for art sake" or materials and techniques; and a need to connect with art that I knew or felt represented my culture and my place in it.

As a result of these concerns, I turned to the study of African art and myths and Black American folk art. These studies were made possible by The Ohio State University's Summer Research Opportunities Program in 1988 and 1989. The results of those studies heavily influenced my painting and direction in the arts. Feeling I had found my solution to the means of creating a art that I "belonged to", I combined aspects of African culture and art with "folk like" artmaking techniques.

Once having found my means of self expression, I decided that my art would be a positive reflection of African Americans and African culture and imagery.
My work represents an appreciation of my cultural heritage, and I hope serves as a means of communication and education to those who view it.

Through my art, I am attempting to communicate with all people regardless of class, race or gender. I am trying to open the viewer's mind to appreciate or accept a perspective outside of what he or she may be accustomed to or even misinformed about. I am especially concerned with African Americans being accurately informed about African and African American art and traditions as well as their considering art a viable part of their lives.

The African American, I feel, still lacks an appreciation and knowledge of his/her cultural heritage. Because survival in terms of economics alone has always and continues to be our uppermost concern, little or no priority is given to art. As an African American and female, I understand the situation. As an artist, I attempt to make art that is "readable" (in terms of content), relative, and viewed as an element of their daily environment.

Through imagery I hope to (and often do) stimulate the viewer to comment about or question the contents of the work. The inspiration for a majority of my imagery comes from African sculpture, masks, textiles
and mythology. My images are usually abstractions of representational forms (simplified natural shapes) with details ignored or recreated (Plate 1). In Plate 1, the work "Ancestral Messenger," one reads alligator or crocodile. This is an abstracted form of a natural animal with details of the skin being of my own invention. Also, characteristic of my work is the use of line and pattern which is very evident in "Ancestral Messenger."

I employ a linear technique in the majority of my works. My use of line, which led to patterning, began initially as a technique known as "linear fill." "Linear fill" was introduced to me by art instructor, Bob Schwartz, and it consists of covering the entire surface of a drawing or painting ground with lines in a design oriented manner (Plate 2). Soon after making use of this technique, I started to refer to African traditional designs which employ the use of line. This in turn led me to the use and creation of patterning.

Pattern serves as both a decorative and/or symbolic device in African artmaking. Creating pattern is, for me, mentally relaxing as well as challenging. The use of pattern remains an effort to connect my work with the African esthetic. "Mind Tripping" (Plate 3), is a hollow core door with one side entirely covered with
pattern. It is a woodburning. A woodburning is a drawing created on wood by burning in the image with a electric burning device. After drawing the image, I burn it in with a sophisticated burning instrument with a range of temperature selections. After burning, I usually add color by painting in acrylics, water colors, or using permanent markers.

My use of wood and the creation of woodburnings are, again, a reference to the use of wood in traditional African artmaking. Woodburning represents a facsimile of low relief found in some African wood carvings. My current use of the hollow core doors are for functional purposes as well as aesthetic ones. This is in keeping with the African's ideal of the article being utilized in their daily living, with the exception of certain articles being reserved for special occasions or rituals.

I enjoy working with wood because of its rigidity, physical characteristics, and versatility. Besides burning and painting on wood, I create three dimensional assemblages that I prefer to call "wall hangings." "Sky Woman" (Plate 4) is one of several such pieces. It consists of assorted sizes of wood pieces attached to a wood backing with strips of canvas. The entire piece is painted with both acrylics and oil based paint markers.
My work is very bright. There are several reasons for this choice of color usage. One reason is that bright colors are aesthetically pleasing to me. I associate them with positive energy. Secondly, it has been my experience and observation that people of color, specifically Africans, African Americans and Native Indians, identify with bright colors. Color is a part of their lifestyles, i.e., clothing, environments, celebrations, and artmaking. Before bright colors and bold patterns became fashionable to white Americans, blacks were criticized and Africans laughed at for their "loud" clothes. "Loud" means the color announced the presence of the person before the individual could speak.

Thirdly, and of equal importance in my research, I discovered in African usage, color is used in traditions of protection as well as personal indicators of status in dress. The use of a particular color and its meaning varies from region to region within the culture.

I too use color to incorporate symbolic meanings in my works, sometimes taking those meanings from African tradition, sometimes creating my own. Currently, I use lots of blues in my works; for me it represents protection as it does to the black Georgia Sea Islanders, who use it on doors to keep away bad spirits. I further view
blue as being a color of calmness and peace. The Yoruba of Nigeria see the color as representing coolness, composure, calculated thought, control, and generosity. Those who practice Vodum in Haiti refer to blue as a color of success, protection, and an aide in causing someone's death. The use of bright colors and their symbolic meanings in my work is my connection to my people and my heritage and, in turn, their connection to me and my work.
Plate I. "Ancestral Messenger"
Plate II. "Linear Fill"
Plate III. "Mind Tripping"
Plate IV. "Sky Woman"
Part II.

Techniques and Discoveries

My art is of a very diverse nature. The works extend from paintings and drawings on paper to those on wood or glass. The sizes range from 3 x 5 inches to 4 x 8 feet. I enjoy creating wall pieces (referred to earlier in this paper) and masks as well as painting on glass and woodburning. There is a continuity in the use of the elements of color, pattern, line, as well as the African influences that identifies and stylizes my work.

My primary medium has and continues to be acrylics due to its fast drying time. Most of my art is composed of mixed media, from oil paint sticks to house enamel paints. I also incorporate the use of water based markers, permanent markers, oil pastels, chalk, and inks. I avoid the use of oil paint in tubes, because the drying time is too slow, and I am unable to tolerate the odors associated with its use.

Although I have works on canvas, I no longer prefer to work on that foundation; instead, I choose to continue
painting or burning on wood. I have and, for the present, will continue to restrict my usage of canvas to attachments for other works.

One of the most interesting discoveries I have made while working in wood is the "images" that appear within the surface. These "images" are shapes or forms that appear to represent some human like, androgynous being. I do not find them in every piece of wood, but I always look for them. I have found three images, but I have only completed two works. To me, they exhibit a very sensitive persona. Why? I'm not certain. Perhaps, it is because there is no indication of expression or facial features. They appear hooded, and although the face is blank, I get the impression they are looking down. I am unable to ignore them or create over them; so, I simply place an environment around them using the woodburning technique (Plate 5). I also add facial features which I feel suit the persona these images appear to present to me.

In Plate 5 I have added facial features and the environment surrounding the figure. The three figures I have discovered so far all appear hooded, each is of a different size, and each exhibits a different body position and location in the wood.
Currently, I am painting on glass using paint markers, graphite, and an etching acid solution. Since my earlier experiences of working in photography, I have always associated glass with art. During this period, there was an abundance and availability of many sheets of glass for framing purposes. This caused me to consider the possibility of glass as being utilized for something more than framing. However, I dismissed the idea, because I was into photography. Bonnie Biggs, a visiting glass arts instructor, rekindled the idea again. While working with her, I completed several pieces of works, including a series of five $3\frac{1}{2} \times 5$ inch and five $5 \times 7$ inch mask-like portraits for my upcoming exhibition. Each one consist of a piece of glass enclosed by an acrylic frame. Both frame and glass are brightly painted with enamel paint from paint markers. The images are female portraits, that have the appearance of masks due to their flatness (lack of modeling), patterned colors and lines. The frames are painted in a patterned triangular motif. Because of the intensity of the primary and complementary hues used, the glass paintings appear very active, both as individual works and as a group. The portraits are a reference to the painting of the human face, much like what is actually done in
non-European cultures as part of rituals, ceremonies, and religious observations.

These pieces are different from any other works I have created due to material and size. They are the smallest works I have created. Never having worked on glass, it was a new experience in terms of structuring the composition. Normally, the artist draws or paints in large areas first, adding detail last. The process was reversed in the painting of these masks. I had to be aware that whatever I wanted as detail, i.e., eyelashes, curls, even lines that represented facial features, had to be placed on the glass first, then other areas painted over those details. This was an entirely new thought process for me.

While these portraits are a reference to face painting, they also allude to my interest in the body as being a "ground" for painting on. These images may be a continuation of an earlier experience in body painting. On that particular occasion I painted the entire body of a female model.
Plate V. "Serenity"
Part III.
The Folk Art Connection

In the recent past, my art has been described as being folk art and I have been labeled a folk artist. I do not consider myself a folk artist nor see my work as being folk art. I do admit to being influenced by my studies of the tradition and my brief, but personal, relationship with Mr. Elijah Pierce, a wonderful man and a renowned folk art wood carver.

When I speak or write of folk art, I am referring to a tradition of black artist who worked in isolation from each other and are known only in their communities. These "inspired" men and women have no formal artistic training, nor are they concerned with the formal use of elements that are a part of the artmaking process. They created art work from the materials most convenient to them and usually a part of their daily environment. Many of their works evolved out of found materials while some are the results of "craft" oriented, family or cultural traditions, i.e., basket and quilt making. Other works are created as a result of expertise with
tools and materials such as pottery and wood carving.

The traditional folk artists began their art careers late in life and not as an occupation to pursue for profit. My studies revealed that most black folk artists considered their art as a "calling from God," something they were "told to do." They saw their art as a message from God, through them, to others.

I feel a spiritual and stylistic kinship to the tradition of black folk art and the men and women who are a part of it. I too feel and acknowledge my talent as a God given gift to be shared with others. Like them, I too am inspired by dreams and my imagination. There are several works I attribute to God's spirit working through me. But, unlike the black folk artist, I claim no personal conversations, communications or visits.

My work has the appearance of folk art because it is flat, lacking linear perspective and the illusion of a light source. The work utilizes pattern, mixed media, a limited range of colors, predominately the primary hues, and it is usually narrative.

I choose to create art in this manner because I am not interested in duplicating reality by rendering realistic figures or giving the illusion of "three
dimensional properties to a figure or object." I am concerned with creating a work that has its own reality.

The black folk artist identified closely with his/her culture, ancestry, and community. My research showed that these artists were extremely knowledgeable about African customs, symbols, and artmaking processes. This was so because many were slaves or the children of former slaves and were familiar with the oral traditions of Africa and African American life experiences. The folk artist and myself each incorporates that acquired knowledge into our work.

"Ancestral Messenger" (see Plate 1) is a work indicative of folk art imagery as well as my utilization of color, line, and pattern. The image represents a crocodile/alligator, which according to some tribal African beliefs, is a messenger sent from the ancestors. The ancestors are believed to live in an underwater world after death. The yellow circle which encloses a yellow dot centered between the animal's jaws represents life. The mouth of the crocodile/alligator is open, but it is not clear whether the red forms (sea life) are entering or exiting. The color blue in this painting represents both sky and water, as well as being symbolic of peace and calmness. The animal presents no threat with his
large opened mouth. The green represents land. Trees, water, movement, and the leaves on which the crocodile/alligator is resting, is depicted by use of pattern. The black and white pattern around the painting further acts to visually activate the composition. The crocodile/alligator image is one that the folk artist has traditionally painted. They too are familiar with its symbolic use.

It is my personal feeling that those who refer to my work as folk art are not knowledgeable enough about the tradition and that they have made superficial judgments, based on a lack of information. I think this assumption is due to a failure to understand the "black esthetic," out of which I work.
Part IV
The "Black Esthetic"

"In the history of American art, the contributions made by people of African descent have been significant but little understood or appreciated."¹ Out of this lack of understanding and appreciation, a movement grew among African American artist during the early 1920s that began as the Harlem Renaissance and continues today as the "black esthetic." African American artist of that period set about creating portrayals of themselves and their lives in America to combat the stereotypes fostered by their white counterparts.

Black writer and philosopher, Alain Locke encouraged African American artist in Harlem "to take pride in their African ancestral arts" and urged them "to look to Africa for substance and inspiration." They were "to preserve, enhance, and promote their own cultural heritage," without abandoning their "Americanism."² This is the "black esthetic" and the art and philosophy I adhere to in creating my artworks. It is more than representation of black imagery. It is living, experiencing, and
accepting one's "Africanism" and "Americanism." It requires self-reliance, self-respect, and self-pride, regardless of non-acceptance and misunderstanding. I see the "black esthetic" as promoting cultural pluralism and further enriching all Americans.

"In Taking Time To..." (Plate 6), the "black esthetic" is reflected in the use of bright primary colors, strong use of pattern and image of an African vessel, seen as a picture in the background. The female subject in the painting exhibits an unusually large white face, similar to the large heads of African sculpture. The woman has black features; large nose, eyes, and the top lip appears thicker than that of a white female. The face, like much of the composition is patterned by line, shapes, and color. Her face is meant to appear heavily "made up" as with eye shadow, lash, and cheek made up. The color white represents a mask many black females wear in a society unappreciative of their "blackness" and gender. This mask is both concealing, inhibiting, and weary. It requires a great deal of time, energy, and pain. The woman in the painting doesn't appear happy, nor are any tears seen, she confronts the viewer as if the act of smelling the flowers are an absolutely necessary one. She is on her knees with
a hand on the table, perhaps the viewer is asked to ponder her physical state of being as to why she has taken this position.

It is worth noting again that the "black esthetic" does not refer solely to the imagery in works of art, but it does represent a way of thinking and the means for expression of those thoughts. The "black esthetic" promotes the "black experience" of our culture here in America, as well as that of our African heritage.


2. Ibid., p. 60.
Plate VI. "Taking Time To . . ."
Part V.

"The Other Self"

As it has been well noted, my art is influenced by both African and Black Folk art and develops out of an esthetic addressing the black life experience. Yet, I recognize that I have been just as influenced by my exposure to art of traditional European sources. As a result, I sometimes create works that are entirely different from what is normally viewed or exhibited. The works that are produced have no cultural meanings attached; line, form, and color are expressive of emotions without reference to subject matter. The colors are less intense and without symbolic meanings. Paint, and not line becomes the main element; the work is still abstract but more non-objective.

When I first became aware of my desire to paint in this manner, three thoughts came to mind. The first was that I would have to abandon my current style of painting, which I am not yet ready to do. Secondly, I tried unsuccessfully to merge the two methods of painting. And thirdly, I thought about ignoring this
"other self" altogether.

What I have come to realize is that all sources for inspiration and creativity are valid. My inspirations reach back to Africa, but much has come by way of many great European artists and movements. The first artist that I knew of and admired was Picasso. So before I ever looked to Africa, I saw "Africa" through Picasso's work and imagination. He became the reason I wanted to be an artist.

I have come to appreciate the artists and movements that have come out of the European tradition and our present Western art culture. Each of those movements contributed to the artistic expression and freedom that I am able to enjoy as an artist today. Even for a philosophy I strongly believe in, the "black esthetic", I will not allow myself to compromise my creativity or freedom of expression. I expect to do more works as my "other self" which I believe to be Abstract Expressionism. In any case, I am still growing, and whether or not a particular style develops in this work will take time. It is my ultimate desire to combine the methods, but it must develop in its own time and manner.
Part VI.
Final Thoughts - A Summation

While looking with anticipation to the future, I see the development of my art not only in the direction of style, but in usage of materials as well. I plan to create paintings on linoleum, which I have already started to work towards. For this work, I make a "linocut" which would normally be used for printing, and I paint the surface, making it the work of art (Plates 6 & 7).

Art keeps my life meaningful and focused, but people, individually and collectively, are my number one priority. Art is my main means of communication with people of all backgrounds, ages, and gender. Through art, I can speak with strangers and make friends. I can encourage, instruct, and provide visual stimulation and pleasure to those who are receptive. It would be of little satisfaction if I were unable to share my work and my life with others.

Since I believe my art is God given and to be shared in a positive manner, it is difficult for me to create
imagery that is not visually pleasing or reflects the negativeness I and others have experienced. I believe this occurs because my artmaking destroys the anger and frustration as I work, so that what begins in a negative state terminates in a positive piece. I have also tried not dealing with certain subject matter, for example, the recent 1992 Los Angeles riots, but the subject evolved out of a work that had nothing initially to do with that incident. What started out in my mind as being a landscape and "seascape" painting, evolved into a portrait of a black face, gender not expressed, with several tears flowing down the cheeks. Below the face is a city enveloped in flames. The painting remains unfinished. The unfinished painting is gold, red, and green. I allow my art to determine its own development. My work, regardless of its content, continues to be bright.

Without the prayers, moral, and financial support of the people in my life and community, I seriously doubt if I would be able to experience the joy that being an artist has brought me. Besides having met, known and been influenced by Mr. Pierce, artist Barbara Chavous was the individual that had the most personal impact on me as an artist and on my art.

It was she more than anyone else who voiced a belief
in my artistic abilities, even before I realized them. She allowed me to spend many hours with her in her studios, observing and conversing. Through her I was introduced to the Columbus Art Community, and through her I learned to value all living things and people of all races and backgrounds. Only recently, have I come to see her influence in my artistic endeavors. She worked in wood, building sculptures and painting marks and patterns on them. Colors have always held symbolic meaning for her also. She remains one of my best friends and mentors.

My forthcoming exhibitions are both entitled, "The Ties That Bind." This title is a metaphor for the "connectiveness" I feel that "binds" me to a artistic past, both African and European. It is a show of works that refer to a connection to people, cultures and concerns. It is my remembrance of times, places and events past, visions of the future, and gratitude for the present and those who share it with me.
Plate VII. "Another Universal Journey"
BIBLIOGRAPHY


