REFLECTIONS ON COLORISM

ART AS THE ALTERNATIVE MIRROR

Curated by Dr. Sarah L. Webb

CAB Art Gallery
Feb. 28 - April 5, 2019

Artwork by: Camille Hoffman, Consort, 2014
VISITING

Exhibition
February 28 - April 5, 2019

Curated by
Dr. Sarah L. Webb
sarah@colorismhealing.org

Opening Reception
February 28, 2019
5:30 - 7:00 p.m.

Opening Hours
Monday - Thursday
10.00 a.m. - 4.00 p.m.
Friday 12:00 - 4:00 p.m.

CAB Art Gallery
UNCW
Cultural Arts Building
5270 Randall Dr
Wilmington, NC,
28403-5911

910-962-3031
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Artwork by: Steven M. Cozart, The Lalenja Harrington Statement, 2019
Reflections on Colorism: Art as the Alternative Mirror

TEXT BY DR. SARAH L. WEBB

Reflections on Colorism investigates the history and trajectory of colorism, bias based on skin tone, hair texture, and other racialized features within and across races—through documentary and speculative works of art. This exhibit juxtaposes traditional, mainstream attitudes about complexion and other racialized features with imaginings of new narratives and alternative visions. This exhibit is curated by Dr. Sarah L. Webb, creator of Colorism Healing, and Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Illinois Springfield.

For nearly a decade, Dr. Webb has pursued ongoing work in public advocacy, creative writing, and academic scholarship on the international phenomenon of colorism. Her curation of Reflections on Colorism investigates her theory on healing and resistance. Here, she posits that colorism is a warped mirror image problem. A mirror is anything we refer to, consciously or not, for feedback about ourselves. A mirror is warped to the extent that it disempowers or disenfranchises those reflected in it. Speculative mirrors expose the distortion of warped mirrors by revealing positive or subversive alternatives. Speculative mirrors help us conceive of theories that resist harmful ideology. Newly aware of the distortion of warped mirrors and newly equipped with the tool of speculative mirrors, we may choose to engage in self-reflection—the process of composing one’s own affective and empowering or tactical self-concept. Projecting one's self-reflection to a public can spark speculation or serve as a speculative mirror for others, perpetuating the healing process or resistance movement.

Dr. Webb will discuss historical and contemporary imagery that has constituted colorism's warped mirror and articulate how the exhibited artworks serve as speculative mirrors that offer alternative avenues of self-perception.

Reflections on Colorism is the most recent project of Colorism Healing, an international initiative started by Dr. Webb in 2013. Colorism Healing’s flagship project has been the writing contest and anthologies of poetry and prose. Because colorism is a form of degradation steeped in visual perception, engagement with visual art has been a necessary and fruitful evolution in the overall mission. In this current iteration of her work, Dr. Webb begins the process of scrutinizing the parallels and intersections of text and image.

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As far back as I can remember, people are always asking me, "Which one of your parents is White?"
But I’m Black, White, Native American, and Mexican. So when people ask, the answer is "Both and neither", because both of my parents are mixed.

In second grade, I was bullied pretty heavily. It was very malicious, and people actually started commenting on my race, calling me a mutt.
I never looked at my background as a negative thing before that point. It was just part of me. People had questions, I would answer the questions, and that was it. But when people started to adopt that insult is when I just wanted to be anything else. Completely one race. I didn’t want that label.
STEVEN M. COZART
Artist’s Statement: The Pass/Fail Series

Working as both a visual artist and documentarian, I interview family members, friends, and acquaintances about their experiences of race, skin tone, hair texture, and masculinity in relation to other African Americans. Titled Pass/Fail, the series of drawings, paintings and other images that result from these conversations refers to the historical practice, in African American communities, of colorism, comparing a brown paper bag to skin tone in determining admission or exclusion in social circles. In fact, these comparisons can be based upon several factors, including hair, gender roles, and other myths and fallacies prevalent in the community in addition to skin tone.

I recall stories that my mother, who happens to be an extremely fair African-American woman with freckles (there are not-too distant Native Americans and Caucasians in her bloodline) shared with me in which she had to defend herself from other African-Americans who targeted her simply because of her skin tone, comparing her skin to a paper bag as a means to exclude her because she was the lightest amongst her peers. Usually, the test was used to exclude those who were darker than the bag. This is of interest to me because of the irony of the situation. The history of the African-American in this country is a dark, inhumane one that has its roots within the same type of ignorance. Why, then, would it be repeated within the same community that suffered it? Is this the oldest example of the Stockholm Syndrome, or the embodiment of the term ‘slavery hangover’?

As revealed in interviews with my subjects, today that brown paper bag system, while almost never used literally, is still prevalent in the community in its ideals. Using brown paper bags as both a surface for drawing and a base color shade, I record these accounts of skin tone as a complicated issue and experience—different for each individual. The resulting images are a mixture of several mediums (acrylics, charcoal, pastel, photocopy transfer, and collage) on a variety of supports, including wooden panels, traditional artist’s papers, and especially atop paper bags, as homage to the “Paper Bag” test that my mother endured as a youth and, as I have discovered through conversation, is still being used as a means of exclusion in some social circles today.

The goal of the work is to begin a conversation about why these things are so prevalent within the African-American community, given the community’s history in the United States.
RACHEL JONES

Enlightened, 2017

Artist's Statement:

"I'm not just painting the individual. I'm painting about the individual."

Rachel Jones works in oils, watercolors, charcoal and acrylics. Selective realism and various layering techniques are often utilized to create narrative portraiture.

Lone females are often depicted in her work. Jones says, "My aim is not to tell a story from beginning to end, but to have observers immerse themselves in a moment." She often focuses on the non-traditional beauty the French describe as 'jolie-laide'. "I like the fact that despite less than perfect features there is beauty. I'm drawn to the quirky, the odd, the not so perfect. The imperfections individualizes us."
RACHEL JONES

Regenerate, 2016

silver leaf and oil on wood panel
5 x 7 in.

Artist's Statement Continued

Having lived in Central America, South America, and United Kingdom, Rachel Jones is a native of South Carolina and has been an active part of the local art scene for over 20 years. In addition to being collected locally and internationally, she also teaches workshops and teaches privately. Jones has received several awards by the community for her works and artistic endeavors, has had the privilege of receiving a grant from the South Carolina Arts Commission, and an ArtFields participant.

Having recently finished a solo show in Charleston, SC, she is now focusing on producing new works and teaching.
ALICIA MCDANIEL

These Veins are Scars, 2018
digital film
06 minutes, 35 seconds

About the work:

As an alternative to the utilization of brown paper bags many people of color had to present their wrists for the Vein test. One would pass if blue and purple veins were visible on the surface of their skin. This video overlays the veins and hands of a diverse group of people of color, many whom are friends and family of mine.
ASHLEY JONES
Stop Putting Me In A Box, 2014

charcoal, chalk, and ink on cardboard
30 cardboard boxes, 8 in., 10 in, 12 in., 16 in.
ASHLEY JONES

Artist's Statement:

I am interested in questions of identity, mainly ones related to the experiences of Black women. Through my art, my overall aim is to make incisive and poignant works that critiques all forms of sexism, classism, discrimination and oppression. Presently, my work explores colorism and identity among women in the African-American community. My intent is to give a visual narrative on how black women of different hues have unique experiences based on their skin tone, facial features and hair texture, and the way these experiences influence how they feel about themselves, and how they interact with each other. As with any socially driven content base art, I am mindful of the challenge of not caricaturing and/or stereotyping the moment, but rather capture it in all its glory and its faults. My goal is not to just merely capture the image, but to breathe life into the topic once more.

The Stop Putting Me In A Box installation is in reference to how society attempts to force people to conform or adapt to fit in. In this installation, the work is exploring how African-American women are forced to conform to European beauty standards. This action has a profound lifelong effect on Black women as it relates to self-esteem and self-worth. Each box in this installation has a charcoal and chalk portrait drawing of a different African-American woman, and her accompanying quote and/or personal narrative about her experience with colorism and her physical appearance.

The 30 cardboard boxes in this installation are four different sizes, 8x8x8; 10x10x10; 12x12x12; and 16x16x16, and is displayed stacked on two wooden pallets. Each wooden pallet holds 15 boxes, stacked and displayed in a manner to encourage the audience to walk around and interact with them. These different size boxes represent the ages of each woman, and how much emotional and psychological baggage each woman has boxed up about her physical appearance. In this installation, there are boxes that are open, and boxes that are closed. The inside of the boxes that are open, have stacks of brown paper bags that have negative terms and phrases printed on them to show the viewer how much the individual woman has been affected by how society and her environment has put her in a box regarding her looks.
ASHLEY ADAMS
Mixed Stella: Kiana Kinechelow
X Frank Stella, 2017

giclee print, 1/10
30 x 40 in.

Kiana Kinechelow’s skin tone palette is applied to the famous Cipango (1972) lithograph work by Frank Stella. Kiana identifies herself as: Filipino, East Asian, Native American, African American, and White.
Composition II in Red, Blue and Yellow (1930) features the skin tone palette of Gabriela Yates. She is Central American. Her mother is from Guatemala and her father is from Belize.

giclee print, 1/10, 30 x 40 in.

Artist's Statement:

“If I were a different color, would you accept me?”
Instances of questioning if you belong in a certain ethnic or racial group because of your skin tone is an everlasting confusing battle for mixed race people. Entering into a space where you don’t belong is a recurring theme in their experience. However, in order to create dialogue there must be a disruption. Breaking into the high-brow art sphere of post-war fine art and creating these new mash up artworks featuring mixed race women, expands Colorism into a whole new spectrum. These appropriated pieces serve to interrupt the mainstream conventions. Access into this world parallels the everyday struggle of acceptance that light skin and dark skin people face in their own communities. Will these skin tones be celebrated as widely as the Red Blue Green series from Ellsworth Kelly? I intentionally chose the three dominating males in this era (Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, and Piet Mondrian) who used primary and secondary colors for their paintings, to interject skin tones into this environment. Would MoMa or The de Young museum allow these revised compositions based solely on the painter or the aesthetic value of the piece? How receptive would the audience be and would they even care?
OWENS DANIELS

Bag Lady, 2016

giclee print, 1/1
48 x 36 in.
OSWEN DANIHEL

Artist's Statement:
Project: Brown Paper Bag

I use photography as a means to communicate and express my interpretation of the world around me, for as an artist I want my work to be a voice that can be trusted to speak to the issues of the day.

On that note the goal of my camera is to open unexplored spaces between the subject matter and myself, a world of interesting people, experiences and life's little stories that the viewer, subject and I can share.

My choice of subject matter (People) comes from a place of intuition and is fueled by an impetuous desire to partake in the stories of interesting people and how their lives have unfolded, for photographs embodied with symbolism has the power to evoke memories and suggest a sense of place & time.

Brown Paper Bag: Is my latest and expanding project depicting African American culture masked within the value of worth based on skin tones. This work deals with everyday people and their struggle with self-acceptance and societal valves. It provides a save ? space for the viewer and subject to challenge one another's perceptions about Race, Class and Power and many other fears we find hidden in perception of light skinned vs and dark-skinned Negros smart, beautiful, acceptable abused as we gazed at the images we find ourselves reflected back in the eyes of the Brown Girl, Father Son and Glamour of I believe that "Light is Right and Black step back.

I was inspired to found this enterprise through exposure to a combination of issues in the media and how they manipulated our culture, thereby I will continue to expand upon this project for I believe my perception gives me voice to articulate and reflect the issues in the faces of the people with creativity, passion, vision and diversity.
OWENS DANIELS

Family Ties, 2016

giclee print, 1/1
30 x 40 in.
STEPHANIE JONES

Mulatto Fast Tanning Lotion, 2018

vinyl, PVC plastic bottles, foam board, editions 1-10/24
6.5 in.
Revolution, 2016

Cotton, thread, yarn, and polyester filling
36 x 6 in.

Artist's Statement

I grew up at the intersection of my Jamaican and Black American identities. My work seeks to empower melanin efficient people by unpacking the social and psychological impacts of colorism. Colorism is the privileging of lighter skin over those with darker skin; regarding deeper pigmentation as inferior. In the U.S., where people of color are a minority (for now), white dominant culture regards Black skin as inferior. We are, however, a global majority. My work aims to put viewers in experiential situations that engage with racial and skin color discrimination by co-opting personal and public spaces in participatory installations. In my work, I embrace moments of discomfort to visually entice viewers into contemplative discourse. Like a light turned on in a dark room, I intend for my installations to take viewers from empathy to civic action; suggesting alternative perspectives and leaving room for viewers to insert themselves into the work by way of personal narrative and/or interaction.
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Stop Putting Me In A Box
2014

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