

F L I P

The Act of Visualizing Racism



Conversations Around The Social Justice Paintings of Ashley Milburn

FLIP

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Imagery presented were produced digitally as sketches for acrylic paintings

Cover Image: BlackFace by Ashley Milburn Computer Generated Image 2012

The Act of Visualizing Racism

by Ashley Milburn

The act of visualizing racism is a specific and intentional act to directly challenge the physiological impact of racist imagery. The act implies using art and culture as the tool for reexamination and diffusion of the visual evidence embedded in messaging within racial acts of visual injustice. Visualizing racism is a deliberate attempt to rewrite the historical body of racist imagery directed toward the dehumanization and victimization of peoples singled out simply because of the color of their skins or other differences used as an excuse to degrade a cultural identity. It is a focus of this book to visualize documented racist imagery and it is from the black perspective of the artist represented in this book. The work represents his own visual journey of understanding into the nature of racism. It is the artist's belief that his work has formed an opportunity for a dialogue around visual injustice. Accompanying the visuals by social justice artist, Ashley Milburn are reflective responses to his work with the help of cultural social justice advocates in the field of community engagement, community health and policy, and culture organizers. This book is not meant to be a how-to. It is only offering the path that one art maker of color took using his understanding of how to tell meaningful visual stories. The power in unpacking the influences of the racist images is that it directly addresses its persistent negative message. Visual advocacy approaches the issues of racism and injustice as a foundation for illustrating social justice. Within this specific focus, it addresses visual racism as a core component of racism. This approach builds imagery in an intentional act to *flip* the negative messages. It is not an attempt to *whitewash* over the impact of these images in order to let us feel better about what happened or to give white and black folk a "get out of jail free card," but rather it is meant to be an avenue for unpacking of the heart of racism and injustice buried like an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) into the black subconscious.

The artist created a concept for visualizing racism that he calls, "*Flip*." The concept of *Flip* can be seen as a contemporary rewriting of the slave visual narrative in the belief that black Americans are still beneficiaries of fine-hundred years of spiritual suppression. *Flip* acknowledges the power of the negative symbolism that feeds racism in America. It acknowledges that we can do more to counteract its influence on the visual plane. Racist imagery has plagued us for generations. It has become a part of the racial memories of both people of color as well as whites. Racist imagery is a symbiotic relationship between victim and perpetrator acted out in the visual plane. They are images that stands between us keeping our cultural identities in conflict. We have laws defending victim of racism. But, there is little attention paid to the continual generational proliferation of racist language and imagery disguised as freedom of speak issues. Those who commit racist acts feel justified in their actions. They silently assume or privately hope that the justification for their racism is rightly, and God inspired. They believe that the only recourse they have is to take retribution upon those people who they feel threaten their "whiteness." In their minds, they believe that Rodney King most have done

something so unlawful so against all that we must protect to caused a publicly distortion of the concept of “equal protection under the Law.” To the racist mind, Travon Martin represented such a threat to everything that Limmerman believed in that it was his American given obligation to protect us this threat. He believed that God compelled his actions. What else could justify this insanity? Unpacking “crazy” is difficult. Visualizing racism is even more impossible do. What we have paid little attention to is the roots of visualized racism. “Flipping” the messages of racist imagery becomes an intentional rewriting of the visual narratives of racist imagery to systematically defuses its powerful messages. The artist has titled his own response as, *Flipping*. His process uses photographic documented, evidence of racism in America as a foundation for his art making. *Flipping* the narrative is a rebuttal to this documented injustice. The process of *Flip* seeks to establish a visual social category of work that truly challenges visual racism. The artist’s use of pastels and flamboyant colors, used in the *Flip* painting narratives, in this book, uses the colors derived from the AfriCOBRA (Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists), a Chicago’s black visual arts movement began in the 60’s. AfriCOBRA used colors they called, “KoolAid” colors because it reflected the flavor of the black culture’s Afro-awareness to speak to the cultural makers within the black arts experience.



Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith are hanged in Marion, Indiana on August 7, 1930. Arkansas State University.

Ascension

Computer Graphic Sketch 2012

What is our response to this kind of senseless victimization? Our usual response is to turn away from the documentation. How do we restore justice? The folks in Marion benefited from the graphic developed. The photograph still goes unaddressed. This was the first image I challenged. I struggled with for some time. Using a copy of a photo documented hanging event, I created, *Ascension*. Through an accident, I eliminated the ropes. The hanging young men instantly appeared to be floating above the madness of the crowd. They were held up by an invisible force. It revealed itself to be an act of victimization. I turned the madness into a story of ascension and found the truth; there are those who need to persecute the innocence.

Souvenir photos and postcards of lynching become a lost genre of American photography when the Postmaster General finally banned such postcards from going through the mail in the mid 1920s. Small town photographers, who had made large profits from the thousands of penny postcards, were disappointed to lose a large part of their business. Though lynching photography continued, they at least stopped going through the mail. Legends of America

<http://www.legendsofamerica.com/ah-lynching9.html>



Rear View Mirror 2012

Computer Graphic

I can image that day when a businessman walks into a Shipwright's office and asks one the designers there if they could design a ship that would hold hundred of slaves with no accommodations necessary. The slave ship was designed by an artist. I find the role of artists in visualizing racism key. This painting tries to look at that one moment, as seen through the eyes of one of the slaves, as if about to look into the rearview mirror and see the artist creating his slave ship. It is my belief that the institution of America's racism was forged here at the moment of design.

The image portrayed slaves arranged on the ship's lower planking and poop deck, in accordance with the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788.^[2] The Brookes was reportedly allowed to stow 454 African slaves, by allowing a space of 6 feet (1.8 m) by 1 foot 4 inches (0.41 m) to each man; 5 feet 10 inches (1.78 m) by 1 foot 4 inches (0.41 m) to each women, and 5 feet (1.5 m) by 1 foot 2 inches (0.36 m) to each child. However, the poster's text alleges that a slave trader confessed that before the Act, the Brookes had carried as many as 609 slaves at one time.^[3]



Murder of Crows Drinking
Computer Graphic 2012

This work is subtle and layered in its message. It is full of disparities, the sizes of the drinking fountains, the compliance of the black man, and the same color of the signs. Crows are one of the worlds most intelligent animals. They fly between to two fountains mocking both the intent of segregation and the stupidity of the situation. I found a sight uncomfortable feeling in the compliance from the black figure.

The image of the segregated water fountains



In the graphic, *Ascension* (Page 5), there is the beginning of an alternative narrative immersing. Simply by removing the hangman's noose, the figures are instantly suspended in mid-air, freed from their bonds. The artist brought the dark scene of the photograph into bright daylight with pastel colors. Just what it is that we make, as social change art makers, that has the capacity to ignite social change, as a stand alone fine arts discipline, in its own right. The artwork is a stand alone method for creating a viable fine art expression steeped in the issues of reflecting intentional social justice. It seeks to follow a history illustrating issues in social change, by art makers like that stimulate a focus on these issues. It is an assumption that going through such a process developing methodologies for *Flipping* will create more than a mind-games for us. It would be hard to measure the changes in our perspective and attitudes toward injustice or racism. Confronting racism is a tremendous task to unravel or to identify just a starting point of dialogue. The actual process that the artist used in *flipping* is illustrated in how he created, *Voices,* on (pages 11). He identified the central story or buried within the documented evidence isolating major character/s, assigning emerging emotional colors relevant to support the new emerging narrative, and building toward a final fine art piece. The process is not just coloring a photograph, but a rather retelling of the pictorial elements.

Within this process, the artist tackles his or her own ability to emphasize with the victim, to have the ability to separate the injustice out from the event and to use what is found to begin to rewrite the narrative. It may be totally subjective with each person "seeing" what they are able to. But, isn't this the point? We, each, have to deal with how each of us understands what racism is. For the artist, it comes down to it's all just a series of personal encounters. It may be for something seen as trivial. Flipping can not solve the problems of racism. It can begin a process for understanding the roots of it. It's easily understood what is going on in the photograph. On the surface, a young woman is passing through a crowd of racist white angry faces (fig 1). What isn't easily observed is a focus upon the inner strength shown by the young woman. We may fail to empathize with her because of our distaste for the event and the focus on the angry crowd. Our attention and first response would be to do something about the situation; to make it a universal response about racism in America rather than glean insight and understanding from the victim's point of view. What the artist saw was the power of the negative force expressed on the face of the white woman just behind the young woman. The contrast of energies between the two is overwhelming (fig 2, 3). This became the central message for rewriting the narrative. As simplistic as it may be, the process works. In figures (3,4), the artist narrowed in on the emotional themes developed to refine the story visual narrative into a fine art representation.

With my experience exploring the concepts for Flip, it was natural to expand the limits of the concepts. The works included in the Social Justice Gallery (Page 24) begins to explore the art of creating negative social injustice images. To do so, I had to enter the world of the racist art maker. In the graphic, *My black will not burn off* (Page 29). It was a shock for me to get the message that I was following in the footsteps of the racist art maker. These are artists whose passions for racist ideology are reinforced by their connections to racist media outlets and other propaganda avenues that creates the powerful tools they use. We have not

Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4



Fig 5



created an equally effective image making system to counteract this mechanism.

The Hauntings of Rosa Parks

Computer Graphics 2012

This is a reverse flip. Instead of fight a negative icon of black people created the white racist, I've created a negative white symbol of racism. Ms. Rosa Parks is followed by a demon. The painting has religious relationships to the biblical suffering of Saints. The effect is to focus empathy for the innocent. It begins to depower the negative icon. Justice rides the bus.



*Flipped 2012
Computer Graphic*

This is a reverse flip that transfers the impact of the situation to solicit empathy for the victim. This is an iconic piece that keeps a lot of the negative, but tries to reverse the effect by making the police white and the protestors black. Again, the use of the murder of crows, here, give a sense of order and freedom as counter-point to the work's theme.



Flag Dance

Computer Graphic 2012

There is a hope that one day America will be devalued at its own racism.



White Noise
Computer Graphic 2012

There is a zone of silence that I think every black person feels when traversing through White America. For myself, I feel some of what this young woman is feeling. I created her zone of peace for her and emphasized the loud noise around her as white background noise. I wanted the viewer to hear this.



ChristHose 2012
Computer Graphic

The power of institutions to dehumanize us is overwhelming and is magnified by individual acts of racism.



Rodney King On the Day of His Death At The Bottom of The Pool 2012

Computer Graphics

This portrait of Rodney King. It is trying to get at what I feel, he most have felt as a man, as a black man victimized by the system and carrying the guilt of the riots in LA in his name that killed 58 people as I think about him lying at the bottom of the swimming pool that he made.



Artist 's Fine Arts Social Justice Gallery

Artist ' s Statement

The art work in this gallery departs a little from the work presented earlier. I wanted to explore just how far the premise set forth in visualizing racism goes. The work represents my views and interests as an art maker. The work has a different element of protest and anger creeping into it. I think that it' s a natural release of emotions having gone through the themes present in the book. Some of that anger is with myself as I look not only at visualizing racism, but in a self-reflection as a black man in America. I must admit I 've allowed myself to circles around issues of how black folk experience such dehumanization both positively and negatively to explore black-on-black hatred and the wasting of our young black womanhood as Baby-Mommas.

I do need to be careful in releasing pent-up frustrations and anger, here. It' s not the place for it. The intent of the book is to set out a pathway for broadening discussions around racism directed toward black folks and issues of social injustice. The Gallery will, specifically, address the historical proliferation racist icons used in the commercial media realm. This stuff is well known to us all. It 's in every conversation we have between whites and blacks. They form the basement of our conversation.

BlackFace

Computer Graphic 2012

One of the most difficult Flipping I 've had was with the black Face image. This is the first somewhat successful confrontational image. But, it seems more of a wrestling with how strong an image it is. It makes one the "Step 'n Fetch " in all of us..

Some social commentators have stated that blackface provided an outlet for whites' fear of the unknown and the unfamiliar, and a socially acceptable way of expressing their feelings and fears about race and control. Writes Eric Lott in Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, "The black mask offered a way to play with the collective fears of a degraded and threatening—and male—Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them."

AskDefine.com

<http://blackface.askdefine.com/>



My Black Will Not Burn Off

Computer Graphic 2012

This was disturbing to do. It wasn't until I place Lady Liberty over the Koon face and eliminated the bottom of her face that I understood the power in dehumanizing a person through an image. What merged was a symbol of American with smiling Koon lips. What I discovered was that it isn't just the negative image that is important, but, its distribution into popular culture that makes the image effective. I've entered the world of the racist art maker.



The American Theory of Evolution

Computer Graphic 2012

It wasn't until after I had finished this piece that it occurred to me that the watermelon theme of the work was really dealing with the Afro Freedom Colors, (Black red and green) of the 60' s . The assignment of racist icons to black folks are ridicules. Again and again, I come back to the fact that these icons are, indeed, meaningless in themselves.

It 's the institution of American racism (The symbol of Lady Liberty in my work) that is uses them to maintains a false sense of superiority.



God Speaks To Zimmerman
Computer Graphic 2012

One of the strengths of racist imagery is its immediacy of distribution and timely content. I revised Zimmerman's image to one that looked like a turn of the century racist image.

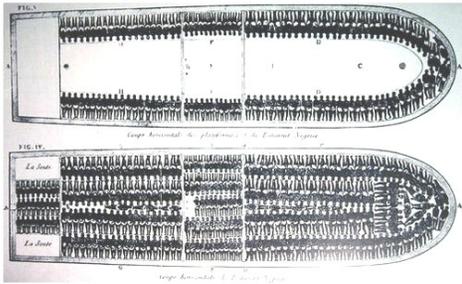
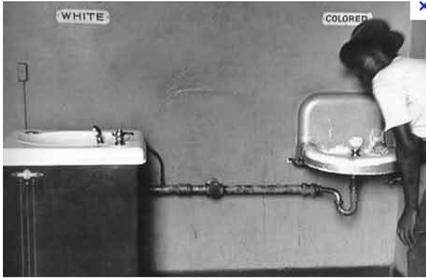


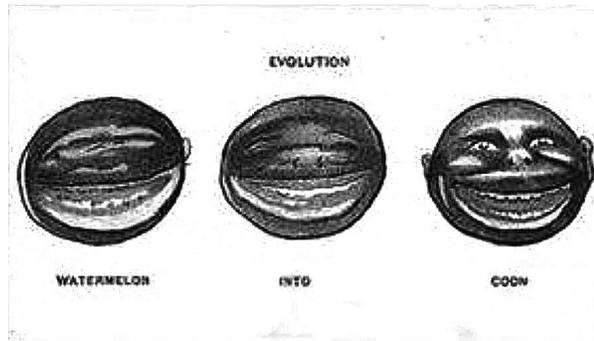
My Father's Dreams 2012

We carry with us a legacy and history of our families. Some of us can recall stories that are slave based—some positive, some sorrowful. We try to view our future through this veil; like finding ones way in a dense night fog.



Image Reference Catalog







Ashley Milburn was born on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 1945. He received a B.F.A. in art education and printmaking from the Tyler School of Temple University in 1968. He holds a Masters in Education with a focus in Multiple Intelligences (MI) from The University of Rio Grande (2003) and a Master's in Community Arts from the Maryland Institute College of Art (2007). In 2007, Ashley received an Open Society Institute (OSI) Fellowship to continue his community arts work in West Baltimore, Maryland using art and culture as a tool for community engagement. Ashley considers himself a Contemporary Vernacular Artist and he continues his work in creating cultural imagery derived from the black experience in America. Ashley is a member of Alternate Roots. More of his work can be seen on his gallery links:

<http://www.wix.com/ashleyisart/west-baltimore-remembrancesremembrances> ,

http://members.tripod.com/ashley_milburn0/contemporaryvernacularart20002005