Reframing, Reimagining, and Redefining: Black Masculinity in the Visual Arts

Line of Inquiry: *How have the ideas surrounding the purpose of Black art, and specifically in regards to the depiction of Black male subjects, evolved from being predominantly centered around protest, victimhood, and characterizations of aggression into the more nuanced, joyful, and aesthetically diverse representations seen in the work of contemporary Black artists?*

Extended Essay

Visual Arts

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to follow the evolution of the Black Aesthetic—specifically in regards to the representation of Black male subjects—from its origin in the Black Arts Movement (1965-1975) to the present day, investigating how Black American artists have reclaimed these depictions; transitioning them away from the narrow, inauthentic, and racially characterized images which dominated the last century, and into the powerful, celebratory, and nuanced work that defines the 'new Black Aesthetic.' This is a topic that has been heavily underresearched and underappreciated due to the unfortunate trend of demonization and victimization of Black men maintaining its hold on much of the contemporary American public and subsequently altering our perceptions of Black men as artistic subjects. Thus, in researching the history behind these misguided notions and following their evolution into the modern day, I hope to outline how past depictions have harmed the Black community and, in so doing, how we, as artists and viewers, can begin the process of unlearning the implicit, racist ideals that motivated the dehumanization of Black subjects in the first place.

To begin, I have written an in-depth summary of the history of the Black Aesthetic, buttressed by specific examples of how and why past depictions of Black masculinity have contributed to the incomplete and damaging narratives we hold today. Following this is an introduction to the long-underrepresented idea of Black joy and why nuance and celebration are essential for revitalizing Black art. Finally, I will address the progress that Black artists have made in redefining the Black Aesthetic and reframing Black male subjects by delving into the work of two exemplary modern artists whose formal and conceptual subject matter will guide future generations into a new era of representation.

Introduction

For centuries, the representation of Black male subjects in the visual arts has been fraught with false narratives and damaging stereotypes driven by systemic racism and the exclusion of Black creatives from the artistic space. Such inaccuracies have reinforced the implicit biases held by viewers and perpetuated a cycle of prejudice and violence against Black men that has yet to be rectified.

The primary reason for these flawed representations of blackness as it relates to the visual arts and other media is the direct result of the pervasive White supremacist ideologies upon which this country was built and which led to the erasure of generations of Black culture, art, and expression—from the public consciousness.

It is here that I recognize my own biases: I am approaching this topic with full awareness of my inherent privilege as a White woman and an understanding that, no matter how hard I might try, I will remain a product of this broken system. I have begun the lifelong process of unlearning a lifetime of unintentional racism, but I will never be done. I do not, and never will, claim to have a complete understanding of the experiences of Black artists nor the centuries of harm done to Black men and boys that have resulted from such an oppressive system. In researching and writing this paper, my goal has been to investigate the history of aesthetic representations surrounding Black masculinity. This process has helped me to understand the unbelievable resilience of Black artists and activists, whose work transcends stereotypes and invites viewers to celebrate the beauty and humanity of its subjects—an approach that I hope to highlight in the following pages. I am committed to doing all that I can to present the Black male experience in all its nuance and subjectivity as I do my best to provide an authentic

conclusion to the question of how the ideas surrounding the purpose of Black art, specifically in regards to the depiction of Black male subjects, evolved from being predominantly centered around protest, victimhood, and characterizations of aggression, into the more nuanced, joyful, and aesthetically diverse representations seen in the work of contemporary Black artists.

The History of Black Male Representation in the Arts

For much of recent history, Black art has been valued only to the degree that it addresses the struggles of the Black community and only so much as it serves to further the narrative that frames Black people, and specifically Black men, as commodities—or otherwise incomplete versions of themselves that fit the stereotypical lens crafted by White audiences and curators[1]. The Black Arts Movement (1960s-1970s) is thought to have been the basis for the original Black Aesthetic, which encouraged the popularization of new iconography intended to advance the goals of the concurrent Civil Rights and Black Power Movements[2]. This shift can be seen in pervasive formal qualities, such as the use of black-and-white imagery and color schemes, as well as conceptual qualities, which primarily focused on presenting an image of the ideal Black Revolutionary (i.e., Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali, and others) and tangible representations of Black political anger, such as the symbolic 'Black Power Fist'[3]—an iconic and immediately recognizable visual that remains a ubiquitous and powerful symbol of justice and resilience to this day[4].

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[1] D'Souza, A. (2018). *Whitewalling : Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts*. Badlands Unlimited., p. 38
[2] Neal, L. (1968). LARRY NEAL: The Black Arts Movement Drama Review, Part One of Three (excerpts). In *The Making of African American Identity: Vol. III, 1917-1968*.
[3] **APPENDIX 1**
[4] Yorke-Westcott, J. (2020). "The Black Struggle and its Iconography." *Fourth Floor*.

Fig 1

Fig 2

Although a step in the right direction, this overwhelming emphasis on protest art seemed to hold that if a piece didn't serve to further these movements in some way, it didn't have a place in the public consciousness; it was this idea, combined with a lack of access to the arts sector, that held many Black artists back from uninhibited artistic expression[5]. Examples of these protest pieces include but are far from limited to: "Freedom Now" (1963) by Reginald Gammon[6]—in which a crowd of Black protestors shouting and holding signs is rendered in a stark, black-and-white, expressionist style—and the influential works of Faith Ringgold, who used cut paper to create her famous political posters which contrasted simplistic representations of Black characters in front of bright, harsh backgrounds[7]. This is not to say that these works are bad or should be condemned for any role they might have played in the unintentional limitations placed on Black artists during this time; however, it is pertinent to note

[5] Hooks, B. (1995). *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New Press., p. 6
[6] ***Fig 1* – "Freedom Now," Reginald Gammon (1963).**
[7] ***Fig 2* – "Poster design 'All Power to the People,'" Faith Ringgold (1970).**

how the all-consuming passion put forth by these political movements impacted the production and purpose of Black art.

Fig 3

Fig 4

There was a particular emphasis put on the inclusion of Black male subjects, both in the protest art discussed above and in the work of predominantly White media outlets (discussed in greater depth below); these inclusions often did more harm than good, and left little room for authentic depictions of Black masculinity, though they did so in vastly different ways. While the likeness of famous individuals was utilized in the creation of the ideal Black Revolutionary—as discussed previously—the everyday Black male subject, in most other circumstances, was rendered in an attempt to bring awareness to instances of racial violence, with countless works portraying Black men and boys as victims of lynchings, and little else. Such works were immensely compelling as the devastating imagery horrified and captivated viewers, playing a pivotal role in advancing the aforementioned movements and gaining the support of White sympathizers. Some such examples are visible in Phillip Lindsay Mason's 1968 piece "The

Deathmakers"[8], in which a bright orange border encircles two skeletal figures dressed in law-enforcement uniforms and carrying the lifeless body of a Black man between them, as well as a haunting photograph[9] featured in *The Black Photographers Annual: Volume 2* (1974), in which young photographer Ted Gray captured a man seemingly hovering in midair directly beneath a scrap of rope hanging from a broken branch—with his neck crooked to the side, the pose is immediately reminiscent of a brutal hanging.

Elsewhere, images of Black men were widely manipulated by various forms of White-dominated media outlets who made it their mission to tarnish their image in the eyes of White viewers and promote a 'fear of the Black man' that has, in many ways, persisted to this day. These publishers, artists, directors, and media-savvy politicians labeled Black men, and even young boys, as violent criminals—aggressive and out of control, particularly towards White women[10]; this horrific stereotype became widespread in part because of David W. Griffith's 1915 production *The Birth of a Nation*[11]. The film is deeply disturbing and doesn't attempt to hide its foundations in White supremacy. One scene in particular features a White woman running from a performer in Blackface, eventually ending with the woman throwing herself off a cliff to her death rather than be 'caught' by the man[12]. The various showings of this film seemed to have a strong correlation with an increase in lynchings and race riots, with counties frequently experiencing a spike in displays of racial violence that coincided with the film's arrival in that location[13]. Portrayals like this, beyond encouraging brutality against Black men in their

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[8] ***Fig 3* – "The Deathmakers," Phillip Lindsay Mason (1968).**
[9] ***Fig 4* – "Untitled," Ted Gray (featured in *The Black Photographers Annual: Volume 2,* 1974).**
[10] Hooks, B. (1995). *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New Press., p. 202
[11] **Fig 5 – Screen-grab by CULTURALMENTE INCORRECTO from *The Birth of a Nation*, D.W. Griffith. May 29, 2018.**
[12] Griffith, D.W. (1915). *The Birth of a Nation*. YouTube, Aug 1, 2015.
[13] Ang, D. (2022). *The Birth of a Nation: Media and Racial Hate*. Harvard University Press., p. 3

own right also functioned as a way for White people to rationalize these inhumane acts by depicting victims as 'savage' or having a predisposition for violent crime[14].

Fig 5

Although the intentions behind these trends were unquestionably different—the former sought to utilize the tragedy of racial violence disproportionately centered on Black men to capture people's attention and forward the movement for Civil Rights, while the latter was entirely focused on exploiting stereotypes and provoking fear and hatred—both played a role in the continued and widespread disregard for a holistic approach to Black masculinity; favoring narrow, incomplete narratives that either framed the Black male subject as a tragedy—a life-long victim of racial violence and oppression, or as something to be feared—a criminal, depraved and inhumane.

Not only were these depictions far from nuanced, but they almost always forwent the inclusion of one of the most essential aspects of the human experience: Joy.

[14] Staples, B. (2021). "How the White Press Wrote Off Black America." *The New York Times*.

The Forgotten Element: A Renaissance of Black Joy

The standard interpretation of the Black Aesthetic, as defined by the Black Arts Movement, that Black art was only worthy of acknowledgment so far as it addressed some sort of racialized social commentary, is one that members of the Black arts community have been grappling with for decades[15]. A holistic and celebratory approach to the Black experience, specifically that of Black men, was likely not a priority for creatives of the time for a few reasons. First, depictions of 'Black joy' were often exploited in Southern propaganda as a means of downplaying the pain inflicted on the Black community by slavery and, in later years, Jim Crow Era segregation[16], which they did by pasting cartoonishly large grins on instantly recognizable and stereotypical caricatures such as 'Jim Crow'[17] and 'Aunt Jemima' or 'Mammy'[18]. Second, due to the legacy of these problematic depictions, the Black Power Movement encouraged artists and activists to upend the public discourse by bringing the painful truth of the Black experience to light—in other words, by centering the discussion on the contentious topic of racial violence.

[15] D'Souza, A. (2018). *Whitewalling : Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts*. Badlands Unlimited., p. 38
[16] Pilgrim, D. (2000). "The Mammy Caricature." *Jim Crow Museum.* Ferris State University.
[17] ***Fig 6*** **– Cover for early edition of 'Jump Jim Crow' sheet music, date and artist unknown**
[18] ***Fig 7*** **– Aunt Jemima's Pancake Flour Box (early 20th century), artist unknown**

Fig 6

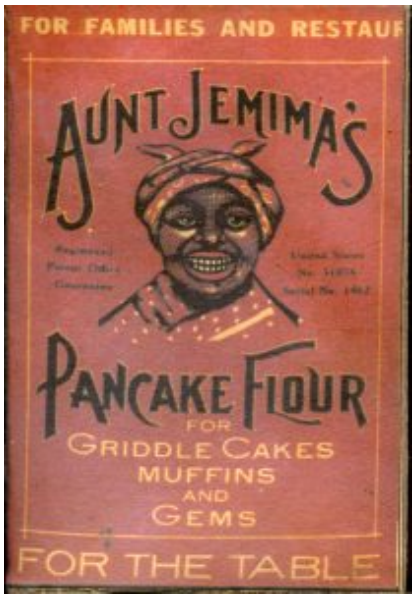

Fig 7

That being said, there have been Black creatives throughout recent history who have taken it upon themselves to fight these oversimplified narratives and bring nuance and humanity back into the Black male subject. In 1972, Beuford Smith wrote: "I think where the black artist should go is to show the other side for a change. We never see a guy's old lady or his mother or his grandmother just walking down the street on a Sunday afternoon. We never see these kinds of things in photographs..."[19]. This statement would become the founding vision for *The Black Photographers Annual*—the most prominent platform for Black photographers in the 1970s. Hundreds of examples of this novel approach to blackness are housed in its pages, including the work of Herb Randall, who is known for his touching, candid portraits—in "Harlem, New York" (1960s)[20], a young boy makes faces at the camera and plays with his friends on the street—as well as Dawoud Bey, who took it upon himself to document the everyday lives of working-class Black men in the traditional style of street photography—as seen in "Deas

[19] Smith, B. (1972). "A Rap on Photography." *Black Creation*, vol. 3., p. 9

[20] ***Fig 8*** **– "Harlem, New York," Herb Randall (1960s).**

McNeil, the Barber" (1976)[21] and "A Boy in front of Loew's 125th Street Movie Theatre" (1976)[22]. Unfortunately, the work of these extraordinary artists, and so many more, have often gone unnoticed by the public, most likely because they frame their subjects against the backdrop of their everyday lives, lives that are not what one might think of as cinematic or even worthy of these artists' creative energy. However, these men's work as barbers or businessmen and the roles they play in their loved ones' lives as fathers, sons, and brothers make them immortal examples of what it means to be a Black man in America. These seemingly mundane demonstrations of joy, sadness, stress, and love imbue them with humanity and ignite empathy and familiarity in the viewer.

Fig 8

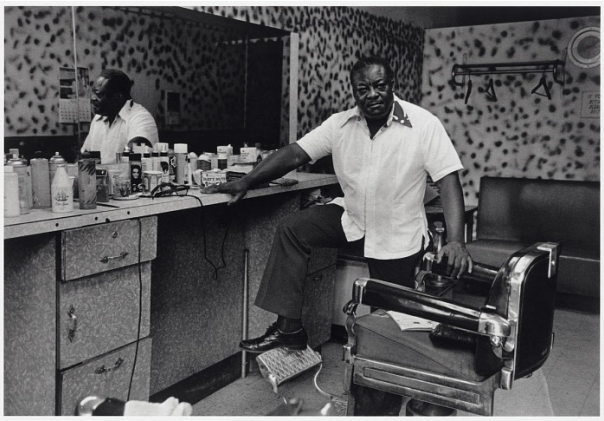

Fig 9

In the last decade, contemporary artists have begun building on these foundations to construct a new version of the Black Aesthetic, which brings nuance and celebration to the forefront of the conversation. In 1976, James Baldwin, beloved author and activist, penned the introductory essay for Volume 3 of *The Black Photographers Annual*; an abridged version of his closing line reads as follows: "We have been through the fire, and we know it, and we have been tempered by it... Nothing lasts forever, not even our suffering, and we have everything to

[21] ***Fig 9*** **– "Deas McNeil, the Barber," Dawoud Bey (1976, printed 1979).**
[22] ***Fig 10*** **– "A Boy in front of Loew's 125th Street Movie Theatre," Dawoud Bey (1976, printed 1979).**

celebrate: ourselves"[23]. Since then, Black artists from every corner of the United States have begun the difficult work of 'decolonizing their mind'[24] and bringing joy, love, and hope back into the arts and, thus, into the world at large.

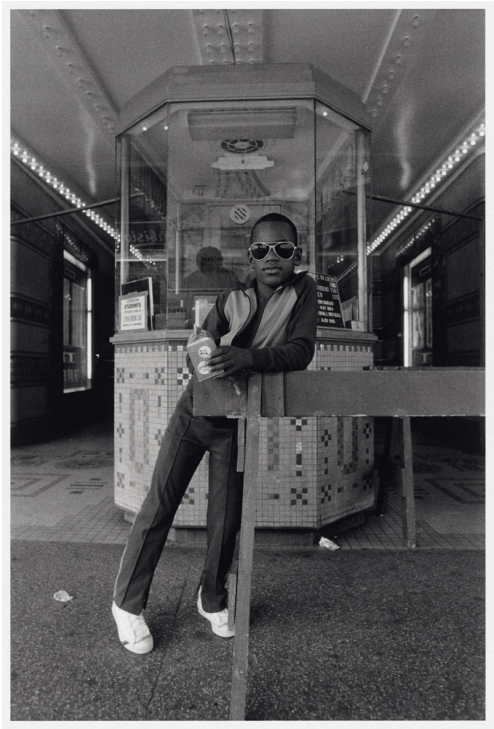

Fig 10

Changing the Narrative: Contemporary Artists Braylen Dion and Tawny Chatmon on Reframing Black Masculinity

To cover every astonishing work done by Black Artists since the turn of the century would be an impossible feat; however, in order to give voice to young, presently active artists, the following portion of this paper will focus on the work of two in particular: Braylen Dion and Tawny Chatmon. These prolific artists produce powerful, timeless work; their modern interpretations of the Black American experience simultaneously complement each other while

[23] James Baldwin, "Introduction." *The Black Photographers Annual*.
[24] Hooks, B. (1995). *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New Press., p. 4

also presenting two very different approaches to the same fundamental goal: redefining Black masculinity and giving voice to thousands of untold stories.

Braylen Dion

I first discovered the work of Braylen Dion in *As We See It: Artists Redefining Black Identity*, a compilation by Aida Amoako that aims to share the work of 30 up-and-coming Black photographers. Dion is a 22-year-old photographer, videographer, and director; his subjects run the gamut of Black America, shooting everyone from his childhood friends and family to icons of Black pop culture such as Lil Yachty and Rick Ross[25]. His photographs are known for their soft, dream-like lighting and color palettes and for staging his models in nostalgic and natural settings. Through his desire to expand how Black men are viewed, he often approaches his work with one or more of the following themes in mind: relatability, reverence, and innocence.

[25] *Meet the Artist: Braylen Dion*. (2023). Framebridge Black Artists Print Shop.

Fig 11

This first approach, relatability, can be seen in his photographs of Lil Yachty[26], the famous black rapper and singer-songwriter, taken in May 2021. The photographs are deeply personal, as Dion maintains a closeness to his subject. He also surrounds the rapper—known in part for his bright red hair and vibrant fashion—with an uncharacteristic, neutral palette. There is also a noticeable juxtaposition between the soft, subdued elements seen in the central figure and the geometric, linear composition of the background; as the subtle yet dynamic brick pattern guides the viewer's eyes further back into the scene, it feels as though there should be sounds of distant laughter radiating off of the image—a boisterous outdoor get-together just beyond the edge of the frame. Through these compositional techniques, Dion creates a nostalgic, warm, and approachable scene, as though this legendary musician could just as easily be the viewer's

[26] ***Fig 11 – Dion, B. (2021). Untitled [digital photography]***

neighbor or childhood friend. His subjects are also frequently captured with wide, contagious smiles or even in the middle of laughter, which directly addresses the themes of joy, vulnerability, and comfort rarely included in representations of Black masculinity.

Fig 12

Other collections demonstrate Dion's command of light to create a striking atmosphere and imbue his subjects with a divine quality; his collaboration with Najee Fareed[27]—author, poet, playwright, and editor-in-chief of Tribe Magazine[28]—greatly exemplifies this. In the photographs, Fareed dawns a colorful, patterned blouse which, along with his golden jewelry, seems to emanate a radiant, angelic glow; Dion achieves this by placing him in direct, natural light, allowing everything else to fall into the dark background. Further, the slight haziness of the image seems to blur the boundaries between softness and power, addressing the nuance

[27] ***Fig 12 – Dion, B. (2020). Untitled [digital photography]***
[28] *TRIBE MAG*. (2023). TRIBE MAG.

that is so often lost in those attempting to portray Black male subjects in art and literature. Additionally, the composition is heavily reminiscent of the religious paintings popularized during the Renaissance (14th-17th centuries), specifically those depicting Christian angels and other Biblical figures. In *As We See It*, author and curator Aida Amoako writes of Dion's approach: "The apotheosis of the young Black man as an angel seems to overturn the narrative of young Black men being 'no angels'"[29]. In this way, Dion and his subjects are a contemporary reinterpretation of how the Renaissance artists saw themselves and their angels: as divine messengers, signifying that times are, once again, changing[30]—a subtle acknowledgment of the recent strides taken in redefining the Black Aesthetic. And further, it demonstrates Black artists' fight against the continued demonization of Black men that has plagued mainstream media for generations.

[29] Amoako, A. (2023). *As We See It: Artists Redefining Black Identity*. Laurence King Publishing., p. 46
[30] *Angels of the Renaissance*. (2023). Google Arts & Culture.

Fig 13

Dion's short film, "life of eli"[31], created in 2018, follows his nephew, Elijah, through an average day; the four-minute video compiles clips of the boy playing basketball, swimming, singing, and laughing, separated by intimate close-ups of family, friends, and neighbors[32]. Dion creates a unique tone by juxtaposing this imagery with the song that accompanies it: Kendrick Lamar's "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst," from his 2012 album "good kid, m.A.A.d city." The track is arguably one of Lamar's most vulnerable, as he sings from the perspective of his childhood friend who died in his arms, asking the young rapper to tell his story[33]. A stand-out section of the video consists of footage from what looks to be an evening soccer practice, a barrage of gunshots momentarily drowning out the soft instrumental bridge. This scene communicates to the viewer the unspoken fear of racial violence that young Black boys, such as Eli, experience every day. However, despite addressing these harsh realities, Dion's short film

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[31] ***Fig 13 – Dion, B. (2018). Screen-grab from life of eli, courtesy of the artist [digital video]***

[32] Dion, B. (2018, June 10). *life of eli*. Youtube.

[33] Quan, T. (2021, February 28). *Sing About Me / I'm Dying of Thirst*. Medium.

still manages to present an atmosphere of joy, love, and childhood innocence, combating the inescapable portrayals of young boys solely as victims of violence. Dion's film ensures that the real stories—the joy, the tears, the celebrations, the *childhoods*—of our Black youth will no longer remain untold.

Tawny Chatmon

Tawny Chatmon is another photography-based artist whose work draws many of its thematic elements from the new Black Aesthetic, specifically regarding placing Black subjects in positions of power and reverence. She, like Dion, draws her inspiration from her models, utilizing their varied skin tones and styles to tell stunning, emotional stories. However, Chatmon's work is unquestionably unique, thanks to her innovative, multi-layered approach: after taking her photographs, she adorns them with glass, paper, semi-precious stones, and 24-karat gold leaf, transforming her subjects into nothing less than royalty[34]. She is also known for her impressive collections of antique gold frames—many of which used to hang on the walls of Southern plantations—and her deeply symbolic process of removing the old works and repositioning Black bodies within them[35].

[34] Chatmon, T. (2021). *About*. Tawny Chatmon.
[35] World Gold Council. (2022). Reframing History with Artist, Tawny Chatmon: The Golden Thread. In *Youtube*.

Fig 14

In her collection, *If I'm No Longer Here, I Wanted You to Know*... (2020-21), Chatmon presents Black subjects of all ages—their clothes, hair, and surroundings carefully embellished with gemstones and intricate patterns. This piece, entitled *Bridgetower Frieze / Brotherhood* (2020)[36], represents a demographic that isn't as often portrayed in Chatmon's work—which consists mainly of portraits of young children. The choice to include a piece of three Black men, particularly in a collection with such a significant emphasis on future generations, speaks to the time period in which the piece was created. In her artist statement, Chatmon cites the protests that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically those speaking out against the frequent murders of unarmed Black men by law enforcement, as one of the central inspirations

[36] ***Fig 14 – Chatmon, T. (2020). Bridgetower Frieze / Brotherhood [mixed media]***

behind the collection[37], something that is clearly visible in this piece. Not only has the photograph been taken from a perspective where the viewer is looking up at the men—each of whom maintains a powerful stance and unwavering gaze, reinforcing a sense of pride and prestige, but there is also a subtle suggestion of affection between the three men—their arms carefully intertwined—which adds a layer of vulnerability and softness to the otherwise commanding scene. Further, her use of white and gold in this composition communicates an angelic status—much like Dion did in his photograph of Fareed—while the blacks and browns create a dynamic contrast that seems to embody their fight against demonization. In a country where such subjects are most often portrayed as either violent criminals or the victims of injustice, Chatmon's work presents these men in a completely different light; in addressing the pervasive misrepresentations of Black masculinity, her composition reframes its subjects as proud, stunning figures, worthy of the viewer's respect and adoration.

[37] Chatmon, T. (2021). "If I'm No Longer Here I Wanted You to Know…" *Artist Statement*. Tawny Chatmon.

Fig 15

He's Got the Whole World in His Hands (2020)[38] is another piece from the same collection; however, this time, Chatmon leans heavily into the feelings of vulnerability, intimacy, and protection that encapsulate the realities of Black fatherhood. The composition is undeniably reminiscent of the work of Gustav Klimt, an Austrian painter active during the late 1800s and early 1900s[39]. Klimt is probably most famous for his painting entitled "The Kiss"[40] which depicts an intimate embrace between a man and a woman surrounded by intricate patterns of radiant gold leaf[41], a description which could just as easily encapsulate Chatmon's

[38] ***Fig 15 – Chatmon, T. (2020). He's Got the Whole World in His Hands [mixed media]***
[39] Chatmon, T. (2021). *If I'm No Longer Here I Wanted You to Know... Artist Statement*. Tawny Chatmon.
[40] **APPENDIX 2**
[41] du Plessis, A. (2021, February 23). *The Kiss Gustav Klimt – An Analysis of Klimt's Painting, "The Kiss."* Art in Context.

piece, though she replaces the Eurocentric couple in Klimt's scene with a Black couple and their two young children. Thematically, this scene, much like "The Kiss," is an undeniable celebration of familial and romantic love[42]. The title also conveys its message: 'He's got the whole world in his hands' is often used to refer to God or some higher being; however, in this case, the 'He' most likely refers to the father figure. In this way, Chatmon seamlessly merges the two, subtly encouraging the viewer to interpret this scene with a religious undertone and returning to the recurring motif of reverence and spirituality. It is excruciatingly commonplace for masculinity to be closely associated with a dominating, dispassionate ideal; thus, depictions such as this one, which feature scenes of Black fatherhood with love and vulnerability at the forefront, are essential for promoting this new definition of masculinity.

[42] du Plessis, A. (2021, February 23). *The Kiss Gustav Klimt – An Analysis of Klimt's Painting, "The Kiss."* Art in Context.

Fig 16

In Your Hoodie or Your White Tee (2020)[43] is, in many ways, the piece that best demonstrates Chatmon's intentions in creating this collection. As the viewer makes eye contact with the teenage subject, it is impossible not to be reminded of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed 17-year-old who was murdered in 2012. The unassuming gray hoodie that Martin was wearing the night he was shot quickly became a symbol for the burgeoning youth-led movement against the racial profiling of Black men and boys[44]. The hoodie that Chatmon's subject is wearing is a near replica, alluding to the horrifying truth that what happened to Trayvon could just as easily have happened to any of the millions of Black boys who look like him. In taking this theme one

[43] ***Fig 16 – Chatmon, T. (2020). In Your Hoodie or Your White Tee [mixed media]***
[44] Roig-Franzia, M. (2022, March 17). What became of Trayvon Martin's hoodie? *Washington Post*.

step further, the immaculately rendered designs pull the figure out of the background, giving him form and ensuring his pain cannot be ignored. At the same time, the minuscule golden ferns that climb up the boy's body—which mimic the look of stitches, and the flowers, depicted in red jewel tones—which evoke an image of bullet holes, demonstrate the jarring juxtaposition between beauty and tragedy, growth and pain. Thus, through her signature gold adornments, Chatmon transforms the outfit of her subject from the gray hoodie and beige pants now synonymous with unimaginable tragedy into a powerful work of art that simultaneously acknowledges its past and expresses hope for the future. In her exhibition statement, curator Myrtis Bedolla expresses her admiration for the piece and its message: "that black boys, regardless of the clothes they wear, are human beings whose lives should be respected, preserved, and valued by society"[45].

Conclusion

What so many depictions of Black masculinity have failed to provide is the proper nuance and subjectivity necessary for the authentic representation of Black men, and, as such, denying them the right to be seen in their full humanity. This lack of accurate representation is harmful in the sense that it creates false narratives surrounding Black masculinity, which has caused unimaginable damage to Black men and boys' self-perceptions, along with perpetuating the racist stereotypes and assumptions implicitly held by White artists and their audience.

In her essay, "Representing the Black Male Body," renowned author and art critic Bell Hooks includes a quote from Lyle Ashton Harris, who wrote: "I see myself involved in a project

[45] Bedolla, M. (2021). *If I'm No Longer Here I Wanted You to Know... Exhibition Statement*. Tawny Chatmon.

of resuscitation—giving life back to the black male body"[46], suggesting that creating a future in which Black men are aesthetically valued for their authenticity will be less about redefining Black masculinity from the ground up, but rather a matter of rediscovering what has been indefensibly forgotten. Her essay goes on to discuss what it will take to secure this future: the reality being that no matter how much artists resolve to embrace the positive aspects of Black masculinity in their work, the harm done by centuries of misrepresentation will continue to dominate the narrative unless we, as artists and viewers, decide to fight back; to actively seek out these creators and welcome Black stories for what they are: celebrations of what it means to be truly human[47].

[46] Harris, L. (1995). *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. Bell Hooks. New Press., p. 212
[47] Hooks, B. (1995). *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New Press., p. 212

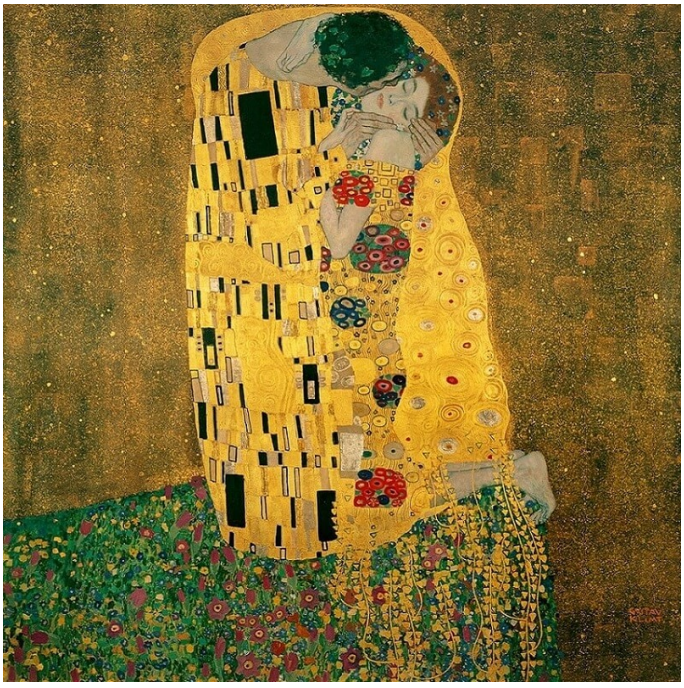
Table of Figures

Appendices

Appendix 1 – *Black Power Fist*

Artist unknown, date unknown. *Black Power Fist*, courtesy of Adobe Stock.

Appendix 2 – *The Kiss* by Gustav Klimt



Klimt, G. (1907-1908). *The Kiss* [oil and gold leaf on canvas]

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