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Recommended Citation

Walker, Harriet. "A Feminist Study of African American Art in New Orleans: Considerations of Aesthetics, Art History and Art Criticism." *Marilyn Zurmuehlin Working Papers in Art Education* 14 (1997): 30-35.

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A Feminist Study of African American Art in New Orleans: Considerations of Aesthetics, Art History and Art Criticism

Harriet Walker

Feminist art scholars have exposed the political nature of art world process and the ways gender influences what is meant by art, who are considered artists, what is studied as the history of art, the standards applied to works of art, the meaning art has for viewers, and the way individuals are visually represented (Brand & Korsmeyer, 1995; Broude & Garrard 1982; Duncan, 1982; Parker & Pollock, 1981; Pollock, 1988; Raven, Langer, & Frueh, 1988). Ways of thinking about art also reflect a racially designated position in American society where makers, viewers, and patrons of fine art are expected to be White, and African American artists and their artistic production and meaning have generally been excluded from the dominant cultural dialogue. "The position of Black artists, men and women, past and present, in all cultural and class diversity of their communities and countries needs to be documented and analyzed" (Pollock, 1988, p. 15). When African American artists are included in the study of art, however, they are often added to the study of "great" artists and fine art that excludes many people who have contributed to American visual culture, and their art is usually considered in relation to accepted universal standards of greatness, ignoring African American social and aesthetic values.

The work of feminists in the areas of aesthetics, art history, and art criticism provides possibilities for restructuring the study of African American art. Modernist theories of aesthetic objectivity have been challenged by postmodern scholars who recognize that knowledge is constructed in and through relationships among individuals and social structures. Feminists have submitted that the art of women is an expression of, and receives its meaning from, women's experiences, cultural traditions, and social restrictions (Wolff, 1990). A social relationship to power different from White experiences has also contributed to the way African Americans perceive reality and this perception also influences how art is defined and produced. A feminist approach to the study of art was adopted for this research in order to contribute to an understanding of (a) how racially-defined social position and cultural values and beliefs influence African American aesthetic values, (b) the history and development of African American artistic production within a specific region, and (c) the way personal experiences have influenced the artistic expression of several contemporary African American artists. Investigations in the areas of aesthetics, art history, and art criticism were conducted using historical analysis and qualitative methods of research.

Art, as a visual expression of culture, reflects the worldview of its makers, viewers, and patrons. Exploring the values that are expressed in works of art allows aesthetic discussions to include the plural worldviews and social positions from which art is made and viewed. The aesthetic discussion of this study focuses on the values that have influenced the historic development of African American cultural production. The African American worldview was shaped by the

cultural retentions of African ethnic groups; the segregation of African American communities; individual circumstances such as gender, class, caste, region, etc.; and dominant White American values and social power which were assimilated, resisted, and changed (Mintz & Price, 1972). Historically, African American aesthetic values have been inseparable from the ideological struggles for self-determination (nationalism) and assimilation (integration). For example, although there is little record of slave material culture, the quilts of ex-slave, Harriet Powers are examples of the blending of African and European American ideas into a unique African American cultural form. The quilt, a form of layered textiles that originated in cold European climates, was appliquéd using the abstract style of figures from Dahomey and the symbolic function of African textiles, Christian stories from the Bible, and Kongo religious symbols. Powers' quilts functioned as the visual counterpart for the oral transmission of biblical and historic events, and as social commentary on the lives and suffering of slaves as well as the expected fate of slave owners. African American fine artists have also worked in Western traditions, adopting European American styles and standards while communicating their unique concerns. The aesthetic priorities of these artists has shifted between seeking acceptance as part of the mainstream fine art establishment and setting distinct cultural boundaries, as exemplified by the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movements. The ideologies of integration and nationalism form a basis for understanding the function of African American art and its relationship to political agendas and racial identity.

Western aesthetic priorities have determined what is considered the history of art. To merely add some Black artists to the canon, however, does not explain the social, political, and economic context of African American cultural production. This study concentrates on the history of the particular region of New Orleans, Louisiana in order to understand ways of knowing the world and producing art that are socially, historically, and geographically relative and to discern how race defined the artistic roles available to African Americans.

Racial classification as "Black" or "free person of color" were devalued social positions that limited the artistic production of people of African descent in Antebellum New Orleans, and both class and gender oppressions were intensified due to racial designations. Some slaves were able to work in the mechanical arts, but most were needed as field hands and domestic workers. Slaves had no inheritance or material possessions and the labor of slavery from sunrise to sunset allowed little time for artistic practices. Additionally, women in bondage labored for their owners and performed domestic chores for their families. When these women were able to obtain the material for quilts (sometimes from the left-over thread and bits of cotton they managed to keep after long hours of work), they often had to spend their precious nights quilting. We can never know the creative yearnings that were unfulfilled by people held in bondage.

Free Black men in Antebellum New Orleans were often artisans who had earned their freedom by working as hired-out builders, blacksmiths, or carpenters. These people had the economic disadvantage of having to purchase themselves and their families. Women in bondage were often purchased as

"fancy girls" or for their ability to bear children. They were needed for domestic chores and were usually not hired out and, thus, usually were confined to the plantation or home in which they worked. These factors limited the possibility for women to purchase themselves and further restricted any possibility of supporting themselves as artisans.

A few free men of color, but no known free women of color, were fine artists in New Orleans. The unique culture of New Orleans, its opera houses and funerary portraits and sculpture, and the popularity of French art styles contributed to the achievement of the free artists of color, some of whom studied in Paris. Although well-respected as artists, few of these men were economically successful. During a period when White American artists visited New Orleans on a seasonal basis and traveled to other parts of the country painting portraits and landscapes, these artists were limited to working in New Orleans due to the increasing racial animosity toward free Blacks preceding the Civil War. Race also limited the personal lives of these free artists. For example, Eugene Warburg moved to Europe due to racial tensions in New Orleans and Florville Foy was only able to marry his White mistress during Reconstruction when miscegenation laws were briefly repealed (Brady, 1995).

Most patrons of the arts were probably White or free people of color in Antebellum New Orleans. Rather than expressing African American interests (as was seen in some of the work of African American artists Edward Bannister and Edmonia Lewis during the period of the Civil War), the art of these free men of color reflected the unique culture, the needs, and the concerns of people of mixed Black and White racial ancestry who belonged to the Latin-based Creole culture of New Orleans.

White supremacy, virulent racial hatred, and a social movement toward legal segregation following Reconstruction meant that artistic opportunities for all African Americans in New Orleans were scarce. Racial divisions between Black and White intensified when Louisiana laws defined anyone with a drop of African blood as Black and then restricted Black social, political, and educational rights. Resources were needed for political struggles and many African Americans are remembered today for their literary contribution to Black newspapers rather than the visual arts. As Creole and American Blacks began to socialize and play music together around the turn of the century, jazz, a particularly New Orleans type of music, also began to blossom in the honky tonks of Storyville.

Interviews indicate that race continues to have an influence on both the lives and the work of contemporary African American artists in New Orleans. In order to develop an approach to art criticism that explores African American perspectives, five artists who are well-respected in New Orleans were interviewed. The purpose of the interviews was to establish the basis for a dialogue that includes the voices of artists who are often silenced in the larger art world.

The artists who were interviewed were born between the years of 1940 and 1967 and their lives have spanned a time of great change in race relations in New Orleans. Previous racial interactions had been determined by the system of

slavery, and then by social, economic, and political exclusion through Jim Crow laws. In each case, ways were devised to devalue and dehumanize African American lives in order to exploit their labor. Today the traditional African American community in New Orleans is facing upheavals due to the resegregation of schools, loss of jobs, and the growth of large segregated communities.

Although "blackness" is an oppressive condition for African Americans, these artists, their families, teachers, and communities demonstrate how people explore the limits of their social position and refashion that position. All of the artists grew up and were socialized mainly in African American environments. They received messages about their worth and capabilities, the importance of life, the spiritual nature of the universe, and their responsibility to the community that are ingrained in the messages their art conveys. All of the artists responded to the customs of White society, to dehumanize and stereotype African Americans, by working to instill those positive messages they themselves had received in African American young people and in the community in general.

Although all of the artists work as teachers, teaching is more than a way to earn a living until their art is recognized, it is how they define themselves and their art. All of the artists are committed to their art but not as a way to be a star, to earn a lot of money, or to be in art books; rather, they feel it is important that African Americans see them as people who have achieved so they will be able to see that they, too, are capable. The artists hold up a mirror to the Black community so people take note of the values, the struggles, and the survival, and recognize their own strength, beauty, and spirituality. Additionally, the work of these artists speaks to viewers about the sacrifices, the dignity and courage of African American people whose labor has built the foundation of this country, with a hope that they will learn to think and act morally and with respect toward all people.

Racial identity can be seen through this study as an issue that is both personal and political. The individual conflict between striving for acceptance within a society that devalues people with African ancestors or rejecting dominant White cultural values mirrors the African American political agendas of integration or nationalism and the aesthetic struggles for mainstream acceptance or separate Black artistic values. This is a particularly relevant issue in New Orleans where racial identity is often ambiguous and African retentions are integral to New Orleans' unique cultural milieu. Adjacent to the issue of identity is the representation of African Americans and the concern of artists and political leaders for both images that portray the humanity of African American people and the recognition of African American artistic achievement.

Culture, identity, and notions of racially-designated place within society play a conscious and unconscious role in both the production and interpretation of art (Powell, 1995). Hoard (1990) found that the cultural cues of a particular visual aesthetic in African American abstract art were evident to the Black participants in her study, implying a continuum of African American cultural values expressed in artistic form. It was not the intent of this study to determine whether or not an African American style of art exists, but rather to understand the ways in which artistic production and the meanings of art are structured by racial positions

in society. Race has historically limited African American access to opportunities for artistic development. The very production of art has been a story of struggle and achievement for African Americans because the economic struggle has been so great for so many African American people. Race has also structured the meanings of art. Artists, connected to the masses of African American people, have expressed economic concerns, such as labor and land ownership, as well as African American spiritual values and religious beliefs, political protest, connection to the African and American past, and the achievements and humanity of African American people.

The aesthetic, art historical, and art criticism information in this study indicate that racial designation of the artist may not be apparent by either style or subject matter, but that it often structures the way art functions as a means of expressing cultural values and beliefs. African American art has been a way of expressing both political and personal struggles, of affirming Black intellectual and artistic ability, of defining the beauty and strength of African American people, and of professing the value of African American history, culture, and artistic production in spite of the social limitations imposed on African Americans.

An analysis of the personal, social, political, and aesthetic issues raised by this study of African American art can be a way for students to confront the contradictions in social institutions that are based on racial identity. Curricula based on this study can be presented in ways that relate to students' lives. Teachers may, for example, ask students to compare the content of this study to contemporary ideologies, current social attitudes, the writings of contemporary African American political and cultural leaders and the experiences and work of contemporary artists who are working in their regions. Issues of identity, representation, the transmission of cultural values, spirituality, and racial struggle can provide themes that reach across grade levels and subject areas. The study of art can then inspire students to explore the political dimensions of art, to recognize social contradictions, and to contribute to an inclusive cultural dialogue.

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