The Black Imprint of Beauty

Jamesha Hairston
Virginia Commonwealth University

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The Black Imprint of Beauty

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Jamesha Hairston
Bachelor of Arts, Lynchburg College, Lynchburg, Virginia, 2005

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Artist Statement

I am inspired by historical images that depict the struggle and triumph of African American women. As I think about myself as an artist, and a woman of color, I am reminded of the rich visual heritage of my culture. However, I am perplexed with the representations in the media of hair and skin care, and social issues of urban black women. The negative, idealized, and stereotypical images are not a true representation of each individual African American woman. My response to these images incorporates a study of self-characterization, personal experiences, racial distortions, and black female iconography. In my prints, I portray a combination of traditional and contemporary African symbols and contemporary images of African American women. The printmaking process allows me to layer in images and symbols that reveal a connection of past and present imagery. The ability to layer and produce multiple prints allows me to develop a series of works with a variety of cultural symbols and messages.
The Black Imprint of Beauty

Introduction

I grew up as the daughter of two teachers. Teaching was the career path I envisioned where I could work in my field of interest and earn a living. As teachers, my parents knew about the importance of education and supported my pursuit of art. So, it was fitting to become an art teacher. As I began my teaching career, I wanted to give young students an option through art to communicate and express their ideas. When I was young I was a soft spoken and timid child. I came to realize, through my art, that I could express myself without words. This is what I wanted to help my students to understand about art. While I continued to give to my students, I missed that same understanding of making art for myself. I was missing the professional and personal growth that helped me express myself as a child.

Being an art teacher can often make being an artist difficult. After three years into my teaching career, I felt my personal growth as an artist was suffering. At that point, I decided to pursue a higher level of education that would challenge my skills as an artist. I applied and was accepted into the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I then began my pursuit of balancing the act of being a teacher, student, and artist.

Personal Aesthetics

In my artwork, I emphasize the images and figures of black women which are variously portrayed in the media and society. I look for the array of different physical aspects based on the shade of their skin, hair, facial features, or issues of beauty within the African American community. I also explore the experiences of black women through portraits. She is a muse for
my art work. This beauty that I see is a personal expression of how I view myself as a black woman. For me, portrayling these images through the printmaking process adds immediacy to my message of enlightening, inspiring, or communicating the personal beauty I see. The process of printmaking allows me to make one unique print of an image or make multiple images that can be altered.

I did not want to approach my prints just to explore the media. I wanted a cohesive subject matter. After flipping through an Essence magazine, I noticed some beauty images of black women and urban portraits depicting issues that black women face. I decided that this was an issue that I could relate to and explore in my work. I approached my imagery by looking at portraits that provoke questions about the women pictured in terms of her reality or experience. I sought to present these images in different ways, working back into the image and changing the portrait. Each time I changed the imagery it resulted in another view of the women, indicating their multi-faceted experiences.

**Influences**

The legacy of numerous African American artists has provided inspiration and motivation to artists like myself. These artists have paved the way for the expression of Black Art, art about experiences and views in the black community. When referring or looking to these artists, I was influenced by the expressionistic approach to subject matter, the social themes, and the techniques in the art. I found a strong connection to the work of the black female artist Elizabeth Catlett (1915-). Her prints contain a representation of images of strong black women and their experiences.

Catlett worked with wood, paint, and linoleum but it is her work in linoleum that is the
most influential to my work. For instance, in Catlett’s *The Negro Woman* linocut series (1946-1947) she depicts the politics of race and gender, according to black women, through her imagery of the struggles with slavery and discrimination. In *I Am the Negro Woman* (1946) she uses high contrast black ink on white paper. This piece depicts a figure of a young woman, looking to her right. The young woman is standing over a podium which holds a Bible. She is pointing a finger towards the sky. In this print, Catlett notes the influence of religion in the black community. The woman is depicted with an expressionistic face, enduring the everyday life as an African American woman. In another image, *The Sharecropper* (1952), she illustrates the image of endurance in the guise of a field worker during the days of slavery. The expression of this woman communicates the heroism of black women despite the difficult circumstances she faces. It displays a portrait of strength and dignity in her experience. The addition of brown pigment to the face of the woman literally demonstrates a visual image of a *colored* woman.

The black woman still faces a double distinction of both race and gender discrimination. I depicted the contemporary woman by using myself and my experiences. Like Catlett, I am concerned with the present-day issues of race and gender. Catlett’s prints provided a strong reference for my printmaking. I took modern images of African American women and expressed their experiences of contemporary struggles and issues. I presented these images through portraiture and figurative narratives. I used similar approaches in presenting the figures formally through mark making and compositional techniques. Like Catlett, I use linocut printmaking. Unlike Catlett, I explored the use of contemporary water-soluble media in my prints. I also incorporated different color grounds and worked back into my prints to heighten details and define areas. Looking at Catlett’s work has served as a basis for me to explore a subject matter and further my techniques in printmaking. Her prints related to the message, technique, and
imagery I used in my work.

My process of relief block printmaking was also influenced by the local, contemporary artist, Dennis Winston. Although his prints are woodcuts, they presented a similar visual quality and subject matter I sought to express in my art. Winston uses black and white woodcut prints to present the everyday lives of rural and urban African Americans. These experiences are illustrated by carving away wood to create a bold and direct approach to lines and details. His woodcut entitled *Womanhood* (2009) deals with the role of black women in society. A black woman is pictured in this print wearing a head wrap. The woman is in front of a field of crops with a dark sky in the background. This print symbolizes the struggles and difficulties with the heritage of slavery and working in the fields. The black woman is seen as a matriarch in the African American culture who was vital in overcoming “the darkness” of working in the fields (D.Winston, personal communication, March 21, 2011). In the background among the rows of crops is an African pick symbol. This symbol represents the African word *duafe*, or wooden comb, which symbolizes beauty and feminine qualities. Winston’s use of traditional African symbols adds a historical reference to the African American experience presented in his prints.

Another print by Winston was very influential to the relief block printing method that I practice. In *Aidas’ Spring Hat* (2008), Winston takes the woodcut to greater level of detail. The print is a portrait of his niece in a flowery spring hat (personal communication, March 21, 2011). It reminds me of growing up in the Baptist Church attending Easter Sunday service. The lines of the brim of the spring hat are horizontal and curvilinear in comparison to the vertical and thicker line he used in depicting the girl’s braids. Distinct details are given to facial features like the nose and mouth, noting broad and thick African American facial characteristics. Looking at this print challenged me to cut my linoleum with the same intricate details of positive and negative
During my MIS-IAR degree studies, I had an apprenticeship in Dennis Winston’s studio. The days I spent working and learning in his studio was practical and constructive. Being surrounded by Winston’s prints was inspiring and motivated me to create new prints. During this time in his studio, I created *Beads and Braids* (Appendix, 1). This print was inspired by my childhood routine of getting my hair braided with beads. Traditions and cultural ways are a staple in any community. This cultural hair tradition has now been passed onto my niece. When I think of this print I think of braiding my niece’s hair and putting beads on the ends. In *Beads and Braids*, I took on the challenge of illustrating the texture of braided hair. Making the cuts and lines into the easy cut rubber block material, to imply hair was intricate. I made these lines by switching blades and varying the line direction and length. The technique of changing the line quality continues to develop as I progress in making my prints.

**Painterly Prints**

When I began the MIS-IAR Program I considered myself a painter, and chose that as one of my concentrations along with printmaking. However, I soon began to concentrate on printmaking because of the painterly qualities involved in some of its processes and techniques. Therefore, I was able to combine my interest and skills in painting with printmaking. I worked with various monotype printmaking techniques using water-soluble media, the printing press, and baren. I chose to use monotype printmaking because it produced a singular and unique image. This process can be painterly and is similar to painting on a canvas. My process transformed from painting to printmaking by using watercolors on a nonporous surface. Instead of painting directly onto paper or canvas, I applied paint onto a clear Plexiglas. The paint was
then transferred to paper by applying pressure from a baren. The painting’s brushstrokes transformed into impressions of paint onto the paper. The outcome of the process resulted in a print that created a one of a kind painterly imprint.

The water-based monoprint *Victorian Profile* (Appendix, 2) focuses on a profile view of a black woman wearing a collared, ruffled turtleneck. In making this print, I drew an image on a Plexiglas plate with watercolor markers, water-soluble oil pastel, and crayons. This point of the printmaking process is filled with anticipation. Although I painted and drew the image onto the Plexiglas, there were still some unknown outcomes due to the printing process. The next steps involved placing damp paper and the Plexiglas painting on the press and aligning the edges and borders. With my work covered by the press’ blankets, I adjusted the pressure of the press. I started turning the press’ handle and felt the pressure of the roll going over the plate. When pulling the print, I took a peek of a corner to check if the right amount of pressure was used or if I needed to roll again for more pigment and a darker impression. The press proved to be very vital to this printmaking process. Using the press to add pressure transformed the *Victorian Profile’s* Plexiglas painting into a print with textural marks and imprints.

Monoprints are important in my printmaking because of the altered image I can make after the original print. After printing *Victorian Profile*, the residual image left on the Plexiglas led me to make *Victorian Profile 2* (Appendix, 3). Before printing this image, I added black watercolor marker to the plate to redefine areas of the portrait. The layer of watercolor paint left on the Plexiglas’ surface still provided a contrast of brushstrokes and marks. The residual image, or ghost print, was a little lighter but still provided enough paint and ink to transfer an image. By making a second print, I was able to bring attention to different areas of the image. This time, I focused on outlines and marks that suggested or accented facial features such as the eyes, hair,
and mouth. I repeated this process to create different versions of the image. Pulling ghost prints of my images also allowed creative changes and additions in pencil or charcoal. Reworking the image between and after impressions resulted in the creation of artist’s proofs and prints using printmaking, painting, and drawing media.

At this point, I continued to experiment with paper and media. The monotype Black Laugh (Appendix, 4) was printed on black paper. Instead of relying on black media, this time I used grey and white tones in contrast to the dark black paper. This contrast allowed for the brushstroke and marks from the water-soluble materials to be readily apparent, which allowed me to explore a variety of paper grounds in my work. Another print, Black Laugh on White (Appendix, 5), was pulled from the same plate after the addition of paint, marks, and brushstrokes to emphasize different areas of the figure. I made more versions of this image using a range of media and highlighting different aspects of the woman. By the end of this series of prints, I had combined and used watercolor paint, markers, and water-soluble oil pastels to further perfect and discover my use of this printing technique. The addition of more media to my printmaking created a new method for me, which I now consider mixed media of painting and printmaking.

**Relief Block Printing**

My interest in making prints was partially inspired by relief printmaking techniques. Like a responsible teacher and artist, I was concerned about tools, materials, and safety. Traditionally, relief printing requires linoleum. I found that using real linoleum would be costly, difficult to handle, and potentially hazardous because the need for sharp tools. Instead of linoleum, I used the easy cut Soft-Kut which needed less pressure to cut and allowed for use of
both sides of the material, making it economical and efficient. In addition, it was easier to handle and more substantial than linoleum. The versatility of the material allowed it to be cut by blades, scissors, or X-acto knives.

After drawing in pencil or permanent marker on the material, I picked which blade would cut the right quality line. Facing the blade away from my body and fingers, I followed the drawn lines to create my image. The cutter glided into the material. The process is compared to cutting soft butter with a knife. Controlling the pressure and speed of cutting allowed for a variety of cuts, marks, and lines. After making the outline of my image, I would switch blades to add details and attention to certain areas. When caught up with the cutting process, it was easy to cut into the wrong areas. Planning and sketching my images helped to distinguish which area will be covered in ink or shown as paper. Using a permanent marker or pencil to color in areas helped me determine which areas or lines needed to be cut. Cutting the material has become a cathartic process for me.

One of my first attempts with this method was *Hot Comb* (Appendix, 6). When I think of beauty and black women, hair is a characteristic that is used to measure beauty. Another cultural hair process I went through as a child was the use of a hot comb to straighten hair. The little girl in the print reminded me of leaning my head to the side in fear of getting burned by the comb. Today, this hair process is a testament to the extent black females will go to be defined as having good hair and beauty. The cuts and lines in this print emphasize the hair. I wanted to highlight the difference between the straight hair and the natural hair (Appendix, 7). A fine blade was used to create straight lines of hair. The same blade was used to create the natural hair, but instead of straight lines I created curvy lines. These lines where created by moving and rocking the blade. Grooming and maintaining hair is a true defining characteristic of being a black
woman.

After making portraits in the monoprinting technique, I now wanted to create a portrait using this Soft-Kut material. Both the work of Catlett and Winston were influential in understanding the process of relief block printmaking, and I pursued working with larger portraits. In *Church Crown* (Appendix, 8) I focused on the matriarchal black woman in the church. The print pictures a church mother. Women in the Baptist churches I grew up in played an important role in the church and black family religion. I can remember ladies wearing their fancy hats and sitting on the pews in church. Creating this print, challenged me to produce different cuts and lines to render texture and design of the church hat. A variety of cuts and lines were used to create the details on the hat. This print also involved cutting away circles instead of just lines. To do this, I would rotate the blade as far as my hand would allow. I would then stop and rotate the Soft-Kut material to continue the round cut. This method was something that I had to practice in order to have more dimension to my prints.

**Ethnic Views**

The theme in my work is constantly influenced by personal experiences and issues in urban media. My art is about the representation, symbols, and image of African American women. Over time the imagery of black women has portrayed a culture rich in symbols of triumph and struggle. I am constantly reminded of the cultural codes and issues faced by women of color in the media and my environment. This began my interests in past symbols and imagery of African American women and their connection to the present image of today’s black woman. The culture and legacy of African American women affords many visual expressions. With my monotypes and prints, I explored the countless health and beauty images in portraits of black
women. Printmaking’s unique reproduction aspect and ability to produce multiple images allowed for the manipulation and inclusion of my study of cultural symbols, marks, lines, and texture. My understanding of black women’s image and representation is personal. I am defined by society as a representation of this image. However, this image cannot be represented by one woman. Whereas, women of color represent a variety of women, my prints in turn reflect a variety of images and experiences, whether they are painterly or relief prints.

Conclusion

My prints express a personal growth as a woman, artist, student, and teacher. I understand that my art will become stagnant if I do not continue to learn and practice my skills. The MIS-IAR Program has given me the opportunity to balance my life as an artist and teacher. I found a way to combine my interest in painting with a new discovery of printmaking techniques. My experience in both painting and printmaking has transferred into my studio and classroom. I have discovered new processes in printmaking with an emphasis in painting and a mixture of media. The introduction of water-soluble materials has opened another outlet to experiment and express. In this program, I also learned to study and use the influence of contemporary African American artists and local printmakers. Through my prints, I have learned how to focus on expressing my ideas and my personal experience. I only hope the processes, techniques, and ideas learned from this experience continue to grow as I balance my life as a teacher and artist, and I discover the beauty of imprints.
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Winston, Dennis R., Interview by author, Richmond, Virginia, 21 March 2011.
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Jamesha Hairston

EDUCATION:
2011 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.
2005 Bachelor of Arts, Lynchburg College, Lynchburg, Virginia

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:
2008-Present Art Teacher, Laurel Meadow Elementary, Hanover County, Ashland, Virginia
2010-Present Resource Team Leader, Laurel Meadow Elementary, Hanover County, Ashland, Virginia
2011 Cooperating Teacher, VCU School of Art Education, Hanover County, Richmond, Virginia
2006-2008 Art Teacher, Pole Green and Cool Spring Elementary, Hanover County, Ashland, Virginia

RELATED EXPERIENCE:
2010 Volunteer Art Teacher, St. Paul’s Baptist Church: VOV (Voices of Vision) Kids Zone, Henrico, Virginia
2009-2010 Art Curriculum Committee, Hanover County, Hanover, Virginia
2009-2010 Gifted and Talented Art Committee, Hanover County, Hanover, Virginia

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:
2006-Present National Art Education Association/Virginia Art Education Association
2006-Present National Education Association/Virginia Education Association

EXHIBITIONS:
2011 Black Expressions and Impressions, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at Pine Camp Arts Center, Richmond, Virginia.
2011 Annual Educator Artist Faculty Show, Hanover County School Board Office, Ashland, Virginia
2010 Annual Educator Artist Faculty Show, Hanover County School Board Office, Ashland, Virginia
EXHIBITIONS (continued):

2008  
*MIS Graduate Mural Painting Exhibition*, Windemere Art Gallery, Mechanicsville, Virginia

2005  
*Senior Thesis Exhibition*, Dillard Gallery, Lynchburg, Virginia