THE LIFE AND WORKS OF ALYSSA RENEE BARBER:

TEACHING AID FOR THE STUDY OF ASSEMBLAGE OF MODERN ART

Research Paper

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Alyssa Renee Barber

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Abstract

Alyssa Renee Barber focuses on influential fine and graphic artists that have helped to affirm and develop the Black aesthetic. She uses their influence to explain each of her five digital art works presented in the senior seminar art thesis class at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia. Barber investigates why African American people are not better represented in the design field and she explains how she will be influential in her pursuits to establish herself amongst the greats. Barber dedicates this paper to her supporters.

Introduction

"Success means having the courage, the determination, and the will to become the person you believe you were meant to be."

–George Sheehan

Digital design is a term used to describe a wide variety of computer related skills, allowing work in fields such as web design, digital imaging and 3D modeling. It is the branch of graphic design that uses computers, graphics tablets, cameras and other electronic devices to capture moments and to manipulate these photos to create graphics and designs for the Web, television, print and portable electronic devices. The objective is to make aesthetic decisions to produce professional quality work that appeals to the psychology of the human brain and entices decisions. This research is dedicated to both, the exploration of the use of graphic design and digital media by African America artists, and how I use graphic design as tool to not only elicit promotion for a product line or specific company, but to express my spirit and own sense of self affirmation.

Statement of Purpose/ Proposal

The problem of major concern in this investigation is to explore and analyze the way in which African American artists have the potential to be vast contributors to the realm of digital and graphic design, and how their influence can be beneficial in making lasting impacts on American society, but they remain a minority in the field. At the same time, this paper will address ways in which I can work towards becoming one of these lasting contributors, as well as a member of the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), the professional association of design.

Sources of Data and Procedure

Facts and personal insights into this research were garnered from the following sources and individuals:

- Adobe Creative Suite Tutorials

- Discussions with Professors at Hampton University

- Monthly critiques

- Personal observations

- Class lectures

- Prominent digital design and web artists; Michael B. Platt, Maurice Woods, and Carlton Calhoun

- Nationally respected fine artists; Elizabeth Catlett, Leroy Campbell, and Faith Ringgold

Definitions and Explanation of Terms

- **Digital media collage**- a digitized artistic composition of materials and objects pasted over a surface, often with unifying lines and color, or a digital piece consisting of the assemblage of both, borrowed and diverse original work

- **Illustration**- a visualization or a depiction of a subject made by an artist, such as a drawing, sketch, painting, photograph, or other kind of image of things seen, remembered or imagined, using a graphical representation.

- **Photography**- the <u>science</u>, <u>art</u> and practice of creating durable <u>images</u> by recording <u>light</u> or other <u>electromagnetic radiation</u>, either electronically by means of an <u>image sensor</u>, or chemically by means of a light-sensitive material such as <u>photographic film</u>

- **Pop art**- art based on modern popular culture and the mass media, especially as a critical or ironic comment on traditional fine art values.

- **Pop art movement**- an artistic movement that emerged in the mid-1950s in Britain and in the late 1950s in the United States. Pop art presented a challenge to traditions of fine **art** by including imagery from popular culture such as advertising, news, etc.

- **Canon EOS Rebel T3 Digital SLR Camera with EF-S 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6 IS Lens**- camera with up to 3 shots per second and continuous shooting, nine point auto focus system, and 12MP APS-C CMOS sensor, used by researcher in this investigation

- **Adobe Creative Suite 6**- launched at a release event April 23, 2012, and released on May 7, 2012 and the last version of the Creative Suite, a series of <u>software</u>

suites of graphic design, video editing, and web development applications made or acquired by Adobe Systems. The collections consisted of various groupings of Adobe's applications (e.g., Photoshop, Acrobat, InDesign, Illustrator, After Effects) based on various technologies (e.g., PostScript, PDF, Flash) and organized by industry

- **Authenticity-** what makes an artwork convincing

- **Presence**- the aspect of an artwork that makes us take notice, that demands our attention or invites our consideration

- **Enhancement-** involves the artist's defining intent of his or her work and then redefining and sharpening its focus, adding richness and embellishment

- **Economy**- relates to the efficiency with which information is conveyed… The economy of an artwork can also be demonstrated by being satisfying on both a conceptual and an abstract level simultaneously

- **Creative Insight-** refers to the degree to which an artwork makes known or realizes that which was previously unknown... It makes the ordinary appear new and extraordinary

Review of Related Literature

- AIGA, the professional association for design, is committed to advancing design as a professional craft, strategic advantage and vital cultural force. - http://www.aiga.org/

- Graphic Icons: Visionaries Who Shaped Modern Graphic Design, written by John Clifford

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- Envisioning Blackness in American Graphic Design, written by Maurice Woods

- International Review of African American Art

- Real Role Models: Successful African Americans Beyond Pop Culture written by Joah Spearman

How I Answered the Question

In today's society, the African American people remain vastly underemployed in a multitude of artistic fields, including graphic design, digital media, architecture and interior design. The proposed question is why is this the case? According to an article in the Huffington Post written by Jessica Cumberbatch Anderson (2012):

> "The reasons remain somewhat elusive as the issue continues to bedevil magazines and trade shows, design firms and baccalaureate arts programs. Some experts blame a pipeline effect that stems from underfunded art programs at the high school level. Others say it's a case of black designers simply not being invited to the table. What most insiders agree on, however, is that diversity in design makes for a much richer experience, both for the design community and for the consuming public.

African American artists are known for being *committed to representing the Black experience on levels that cannot be reached by racial counterparts. The works of many Black artists speak of, and affirm the humanity and beauty of African American people and culture. So again, why are more of these artists not exposed to the professional world in areas that they do promising work in? A few affirmed digital artists include Michael B. Platt, Maurice Woods, and Carlton Calhoun.*

*Michael B. Platt i*s a 2007 recipient of the prestigious Franz and Virginia Bader Fund Grant. He has long been known as a printmaker, but now prefers the more encompassing designation of "imagemaker." Platt's artwork has recently turned to a mixture of digital imagery and book art. This art combines the use of image and poetry fragments, allowing the viewer glimpses of our selves. "Platt continues to create artwork that is centered upon figurative explorations of life's survivors, the marginalized, the referencing history and circumstance in the rites, rituals and expressions of our human condition" (mplattstudio.com). Platt's digital media collection was showcased in the Hampton University Museum in Hampton, Virginia in 2014. He states that

> "For the past three years my imagery has centered on ritual and the
> 'transformation of the human spirit that occurs when it confronts imagined
> or actual events and circumstances.' Most recently, using digitally manipulated
> female figures to manifest such transformations in my prints, as well as the
> artist books and broadsides done in collaboration with poet Carol Beane, I have
> addressed issues of slavery, Hurricane Katrina, waiting, and searching for home."

Maurice woods was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. Although he was no star student, Woods was granted an opportunity to attend the University of Washington on a basketball scholarship. Maurice credits Tony Gable with inspiring him to design in college. Gable is both, a jazz musician and a designer whose work spans Malcolm X to Microsoft. "I actually went out of my way to find him and get to know

him. It's no secret—there aren't many blacks in design. But at the time he was one of them. I was able to relate," states Woods.

Maurice Woods free-lanced throughout his undergraduate career, and he began to consider graduate schools. In graduate school Woods found his footing, and his master's thesis, *Envisioning Blackness in American Graphic Design*, was a groundbreaking work that addressed the difficult question: Is there a design aesthetic that belongs to African Americans? He also created the Inneract Project which searches to facilitate design mentoring for kids from troubled neighborhoods. Woods explains that

> *"There are a lot of great designers out there but very few who understand how important and powerful design really is. Design powers the world. Our world relies on it to help us live productive lives… I don't actually want to be remembered for the work I did for a company, organization or institution. I would like to be remembered for how I used my influence or skills to help nurture young folks into responsible, educated adults. I get more out of that than any project I have ever done or will ever do… We must bring design to the community, and you will see more minority representation without having to have a special program set aside. The design community should probably have more of a presence with youth at a younger age."*

In the same manner, I was influenced by Carlton Calhoun, the Principal and Senior Consultant for his website and business, HireCarltonCalhoun.Com. He is an educator, trainer, consultant, entrepreneur, PhD. student and freelance web developer with diverse background. Since the start up of his business in 2001, Calhoun has provided

web, print, branding and consulting solutions to individuals and businesses of all sizes, ranging from individuals & start-ups to Fortune 100 companies. His business is significant to this investigation because his entire firm of web designers and developers is made up of African American people. The company prides itself on **"African American web designers, African American logo designers and African American SEO specialists.** We are the **Premier African American web design, graphic design and SEO provider."**

In reality, African American people, as a whole, are not prominent innovators in artistic fields because, for the most part, they are not invited to the table. African American people take pride in their work and in their culture, and it is celebrated amongst them selves. In some instances, Black artists are held to the same standard of excellence as White artists. Thanks to the contributions of creative geniuses such as Faith Ringgold, Elizabeth Catlett, and Leroy Campbell, our works are gaining national coverage and respect from races that have felt superior to our own for many years.

Elizabeth Catlett Mora was an African American artist who specialized in the art forms of printmaking and sculpting. She was born on April 15, 1915, in Washington, D.C. Catlett studied art at Howard University, where her fields of study included drawing, printmaking and design. Because Howard did not have a sculpting major, Ms. Catlett changed her major to painting. She was influenced to paint by James A. Porter, the first scholar to provide a systematic, critical analysis of African-American artists and their works of art. In 1935 She went to work as a high school teacher in North Carolina, but due to the low teaching salaries provided to black teachers, Ms. Catlett quit her teaching job after only two years. Elizabeth Catlett received her BS cum laude from the

university. "In 1940 Catlett became the first student to receive an M.F.A. in sculpture at the University of Iowa School of Art and Art History. She then studied ceramics at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1941, lithography at the Art Students League of New York in 1942–1943, and with an influential sculptor named Ossip Zadkine in New York in 1944 (Wikipedia)." Catlett was influenced by Grant Wood, an American landscape painter, who encouraged his students at the University of Iowa School of Art and History to work with those subjects that they were most familiar and comfortable with. This, ultimately, is what convinced Elizabeth Catlett to direct the focus of her works to African American people. Catlett is best known for the black, expressionistic sculptures and prints she produced during the 1960s and 1970s, which are seen as politically charged. Later on, Catlett moved to New York and was a part of the Harlem Renaissance, an African American cultural movement of the 1920s. In 1946, Catlett received a Rosenwald Fund Fellowship that allowed her to travel to Esmeralda, Mexico to study at the Escuela de Pintura y Escultura. She studied wood-carving and the art of ceramic sculpting. In 1947, Catlett married Francisco Mora, a Mexican artist, and she made Mexico her permanent and final home. The two raised a family of expressionists. While in Mexico, Ms. Catlett worked with People's Graphic Arts Workshop. This was a group of printmakers who dedicated their artistic spirits to contribute and promote social change. In 1958, Catlett went on to become the first female sculpture professor as well as head of the sculpture department at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, School of Fine Arts, San Carlos, in Mexico City, When Catlett retired in 1975, she continued making art in the Mexican community. She passed away on April 2, 2012 at the age of 96 years old. The message that Elizabeth Catlett attempts to convey has been recorded in ways that are

easily received by the viewers of her works. Catlett's details show precision and passion for her specific art forms, and she promotes social justice.

Faith Ringgold developed "black light," a palette of darker colors to hopefully establish a more black aesthetic. She was a part of the Art Workers Coalition, whose demonstrations led to the first two African Americans being appointed to The Museum of Modern Art's (MoMa) Board of Trustees in 1971.

Mrs. Ringgold got to where she is by forming the proper alliances and joining organizations that were filled with people who possessed similar interests and goals. She did not give up when she received a no, and she fought for what she believed in. Ringgold did not let societal norms sway her from accomplishing what she set out to do, and she aspired to be like those who influenced her, and even better.

I aspire to be like Mrs. Faith Ringgold. Her theories and ideas have served as influences for art and she is a staple for African American women artists in the United States and globally. One day, I hope to exhibit in some of the museums that she has been showed in. She gives me faith. She comes from New York just as I do, and she lived in a time in which, Blacks were not able to do what we can now. There is no reason why I cannot be equally successful unless I do not try.

The United States was built on the blood, sweat and tears of the African people, and our culture has influenced and can be found within all forms of artistic works. By establishing ourselves and working towards offering our talents on more global scales, African American people can become vast contributors to the digital media and design field, as well as architectural and interior design. Our numbers are increasing, and we must allow the essence of authenticity do what it is supposed to do. Our artistic passions

are centered in something greater than ourselves, and to become notable, we must continue to use these passions to make positive changes.

In my own case, I plan on using my work and my spirit to promote positivity on a global scale. Social change for not just Blacks, but other races also, is necessary to create an equal playing field worldwide. It is important that the youth are trained to develop senses of global awareness early in life so they can grow up understanding the sensitivities of other cultures. I will also dedicate myself to using the influential elements of the rich, African culture of my ancestral roots, to teach people around the world that Black is Beautiful, Powerful, and Pure. I want to show the people of my own race that we do not have to be subjected, nor do we have to continue to subject ourselves because we are taught, by other races that we, as a people, are weak, inferior, and worthless.

By establishing myself as a socially conscious digital designer, opportunities and blessings will come to me as I continue to let the light of my innate creative potential shine for all to see. I will put positive energy into the universe.

My Works

Creativity is a broad realm, which mixes intuition with intelligence. Each person's level of creativity is unique to that individual, and the way in which we all express our creative minds is different as well.

My first piece in this year's senior exit gallery is entitled The Adventures of Wolverine. This is an 18" x 24" digitally illustrated collage, created through the use of Adobe Photoshop CS6. This specific artwork is a symbolic reference to New York City, somewhere familiar to me, as I am originally from New York. I placed my illustration of Wolverine in New York to juxtapose the ideas of Marvel Comics. Wolverine (Logan)

was born a mutant in a small town in Canada, who exiled himself in a small mining

community after accidentally harming somebody during a catastrophic event. Logan
"became a valuable and admirable figure amongst the small community of miners due to

his hard work and strong ethics, earning him the respect of his peers" (Marvel Universe

Wiki, 2015).

   The creative insight conveyed within this artwork comes from the application of

bright bursts of color, influenced by the pop art movement that was driven by one of my

favorite artist, Andy Warhol. These bursts of color portray the bright, city lights of "the

city that never sleeps."

   My second piece is entitled *Fire and Ice.* This piece is also an 18" x 24" digital

collage that was created in Adobe Photoshop CS6. The foremost image is a picture of

myself taken on my iPhone 5s, also known as a "selfie." Within the picture, the viewer is

able to see the Mendhi design that travels from my wrist, up to the top of my fingers. My

face has been manipulated to convey textures of ice flowing through my blood stream,

causing me to look cold. Contrasting this idea is the fire that extends from my face and

head, in a way, melting the ice. My face has a red-orange tint, which causes me to look

warm. The artwork is a representation of the struggles that each individual faces in life,

and the difficult decisions that we are forced to make on a daily basis. This work is a

great portrayal of economy because it satisfies the viewer on both a conceptual and an

abstract level, simultaneously.

   Fire and Ice creates intense colors in a realm, which suggests universal emptiness

through the use of negative space. This ultimately pushes the entire collage to the

foreground, causing the piece to look three-dimensional. This idea can be explained by

referencing a quote by Greg Henry. Henry stated. "As an artist, I have always been interested in life and death, in the workings of the environment and its support of those things that are tangible and those that aren't…"

My third piece in the show is entitled *Another Perspective (AP)*. AP is an 18" x 24" black and white photograph taken with a Canon EOS Rebel T3 Digital SLR Camera with EF-S 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6 IS Lens. I bought this camera as a Christmas gift to myself after receiving straight A's during my first collegiate semester. Aaron Peters, the creative mind behind the AP Clothing Brand hired me to complete a photo shoot for him and his product line. At the time, I had nowhere to shoot professionally, so I set up my first photography studio in Aaron's dining room. I had one hanging light, white walls and a white sheet. Although it was not much to work with, the pictures possessed a proficient quality. *Another Perspective* is one of the products of my first home shoot, and it portrays enhancement. AP is a representation of the potential of young African Americans to become wealthy entrepreneurs. To me, wealth is not measured in money, but in love, respect, and success.

This photograph is special because the use of light in this picture works to create a balance of emotion and restraint. Aaron Peters is wearing and promoting his own self-named clothing brand. It is a powerful moment for him as it is for me, and that is conveyed through the sparkling in his eyes. These elements relate the human mind to desire and yearning.

My fourth piece is entitled *Freshman Chronicles*. This piece is a 24" x 18" digitally rendered collage. To create this artwork, there were two main elements; a photograph of myself, capturing a photograph, and a photograph that I took. Using Adobe

systems, I cut myself out of my original setting and placed myself within the picture that I had captured a few months before. I manipulated the lighting to make the two pictures correlate with each other as realistically as possible. This creates authenticity.

Freshman Chronicles creates an element of wonder due to the image of me, hiding behind bushes to capture a moment out on the water. The viewer is forced to wonder what it is that I am trying to remember forever. The image blurs out as it proceeds into the background, leaving the viewer with the ability to create an idea of what is happening within the photograph for them self.

My final piece is a promotional design for the Hampton University Summer Session Office. The two-sided booklet design incorporates basic color and shapes. Inside the diamond shapes that float from the top of the booklet are pictures that represent the Hampton experience. The images show diversity in all aspects. The front side of the booklet has presence. "Hampton University" spans across the composition, forcing your eye to follow the words, which reach towards the pictures. The backside of the booklet is completely balanced and unified.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my investigation explored and analyzed the way in which African American artists have the potential to be vast contributors to the realm of digital and graphic design. I realized that their influence can be beneficial in making lasting impacts on American society, but they remain a minority in the field because they celebrate success amongst the communities of our people. Our communities have been fractured, and it is important that we encourage the youth to develop themselves in ways that will

positively affect the community and society as a whole. In doing this however, we need to expand our efforts globally, to affirm our race amongst the professional elite within the field. We are just as, if not more, capable and our subject matters are diverse and cultured. Art is therapeutic, and the innate creative potential that I possess as an artist will be used to encourage social change on a global level. I am a conscious artist, related to the conscious lyricist who explains and values the beauty of the African American people, their culture and overall Black aesthetic.

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