

BLACK SELF

Notes for a conversation

By Ashraf Jamal

When asked to convene a colloquium about something that, for me, defines the art world during this on-going pandemic, I thought of the obvious – revisionism in the West, and the stratospheric obsession/fetishization of the black body. Why, I wondered, is black portraiture ‘a thing’? And why, of all people, was Amoako Bofo the most sought-after black portraitist in 2020? Why, at this historical moment, should the art world reclassify its driving concerns, rethink curation, staffing, education, and access? Because black art is the new frontier? Because of a seismic ethical shift, generated by the slaughter of blacks in America? Because the spectre of imperialism persists?

All of the above is relevant, but a deeper question and doubt persists: What constitutes blackness? Is it a category? Must it be championed reactively,

progressively, conceived as a defining principle? Or is it not, rather, a cognitive limit: something which – despite the very real yet excessive claim to substance, ‘I AM SOMEBODY’ – refuses or escapes the declarative? Both Achille Mbembe and Frantz Fanon have noted a *zone of indistinction*, a terra incognita, a void, as an inextricable dimension of black being. This sensation or intuition is pervasive – it cannot be ignored in a humanist bid to reclaim black substance.

In 1980, Kerry James Marshall painted a self-portrait titled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*. The painting is schematic – other than the white V of a vest, leering white teeth, and the whites of the eyes, the painting is black on black. The effect is crude, caricatural, obscenely vacant. ‘One of the things I was trying to do was embody in a picture the concept that Ralph Ellison had laid out in his

novel *Invisible Man*,' says Marshall. 'He describes the condition of invisibility as it relates to Black people in America – this condition of being seen and not seen simultaneously.'

Marshall's portrait, and the concern it addresses, was the trigger and inspiration for a colloquium that I convened at Nirox and Columba in November 2021, as well as the accompanying publication, co-edited with Sven Christian. Titled 'BLACK SELF,' it includes a series of papers, initially delivered as talks, by Vusumzi Nkomo, Phumzile Twala, Hlonipha Mokoena, Thembinkosi Goniwe, Heather Hart, Bernard Akoi-Jackson, Nkgopoleng Moloi, Thulile Gamedze, Stacy Hardy, and Phokeng Setai. The overarching drive was to breach the divide between the void and selfhood, conditions mutually exclusive yet inextricable. Our concern: the interplay of visibility and invisibility – how and why a black person is seen by others, how black people see themselves. Much has been written on the matter, and much of it has been misunderstood, consciously or otherwise, in the bid to secure a predictive or essentialist construction of black identity. However, as Ellison's famous opening paragraph begins, 'I am an invisible man...I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me... That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.'

This observation, made in 1952, remains searingly significant today, not only because of ongoing inequality, the persistent invisibility of the black body within a controlling white optic, but because of the urgent interest in black art today – black lives, black bodies, black portraiture. What are we looking at when we look at black portraits? My android, attuned to my obsessions, never ceases to direct me to the latest revisionist exercise to foreground blackness, once redacted, erased from history. Is this cultural phenomenon symptomatic of the age – the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, the critical urgency for a new perception of humanity – or is it a symptom of an age-old struggle for selfhood, in a world in which black life – the black self – remains superfluous, inexistent, beyond humane cognition? It is not surprising that

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Marshall chose to paint his self-portrait in variations of black, a colour – rather than a non-colour – which articulates the precarity of black presence and self-presence. As Theaster Gates notes, 'If Blackness has something to do with the absence of light, does Black art mean that sometimes I'm making when no one's looking? For the most part, that has been the truth of our lives.'

And now, in a historical moment when black portraiture is being spectacularised? When it is avidly sought after and monetised? When, as though for the first time, the black body is being seen? What now? How do we address this objectification and fetishization of the black body? As for the artists of Black America and the African diaspora who are being celebrated – what do their works tell us of this moment? As for artists of the African continent? Do they exist only once they've developed a Western interface? What of indigenous thought? Is there such a thing? Is indigeneity not a variant of essentialism – an imperial, secular, and religious project, designed to globally imprint whiteness as the imprimatur of existence and being, and blackness as beyond the pale?

Is the sovereignty of whiteness in decline? Is hybridity the new norm? If so, where does this place blackness? If eugenics was always profoundly corrupt, surely any other rationale for parsing humanity according to some genetic or biocultural inheritance is equally so? Sticking with blackness, to what extent is it over-

exposed and poorly understood? How opportunistic, how authentic, is this moment of black portraiture in the art world, and can it be separated from a broader cultural life? Is the trade in black bodies durable? Can one consider black portraiture a genre? If blackness is the thing, how does it express its substantiveness, its meaningfulness? How is blackness *seen*? What of the light, denied the black body?

'Until we own the light, I'm not happy,' Theaster Gates resumes. 'Until we're in our own houses of exhibition, of discovery, of research – until we've figured out our way to be masters of the world, then I'd rather work in the darkness...My fear is that we're being trained and conditioned to only make when there's a light. And that makes us co-dependent on a thing we don't control. Are you willing to make in the absence of light?'

This historical moment is a complex one, especially so regarding the Black Self and its representation in art. What I ask of you, the reader, is to continue to reflect on darkness and light, the void and its imagined inverse, the black body as a thing, an idea, a dreaming tool, a possibility, and a reality. What of the veracity or continued inexistence of black being? What is the purpose of portraiture, traditionally the province of the wealthy and powerful, now in the public domain? What happens when one looks upon a black body in an art museum today? What do we see? Ourselves? An unbreachable Other? A fretwork of guilt and conscience? A liberation?

There are many artists one can turn to, amongst them Zanele Muholi, Amoako Boafo, Nelson Makamo, Titus Kaphar, Kerry James Marshall, Kehinde Wiley, Amy Sherald, Billie Zangewa, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, to name a few. What happens when one encounters one of these celebrated artists? I'd venture that our experiences are very different. This is because there is no such thing as 'Black Art', or rather, no essential category as such. In a book which never ceases to astonish me, Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), the author reminds us that 'the word "Black" refers first and foremost to a phantasmagoria... The process of transforming people of African origin into Blacks, that is, into bodies of extraction and subjects of race, largely obeys the triple logic of ossification, poisoning, and calcification. Not only is the Black Man the prototype of a poisoned, burnt subject. He is a being whose life is made of ashes.'

Is black portraiture a pile of bones, a heap of ashes? Is the project poisoned at its core? Or am I being too bleak on God's day? Then again, this is an op-ed; one is expected to think aloud, and I was asked to reflect upon what is exercising me. Certainly, I'm drawn to the profound tenderness of Yiadom Boakye's paintings, sceptical of Amy Sherald's fantasy that a greyscale amounts to some relative neutrality, moved to the core by the deepest black which Marshall uses to colour his bodies, averse to the pop and populist artifice deployed by Wiley, magnetically caught up in the deconstructed rigging of Muholi's self-portraits, in love with Zangewa's private pleasures, exposed to the world.

You, dear reader, will have a very different view. At this critical moment, I ask only that you are exacting in your analyses of the cultural phenomenon dubbed Black Portraiture. There is much that must be thought and written in our collective and singular attempts to grasp the significance and nature of the Black Self today. What are we to make of dealerships across Africa and the Western world? Are we in the midst of a new slave trade, or are we witnessing a fundamental, epistemological shift in insight and reception? How opportunistic are the changes we see about us, how real? Whatever one chooses to focus on, remember that one's focus is caught in a greater complex. You may wish to challenge the spotlight fixed upon Black Portraiture, withdraw into the night-world of a voided black identity, or, like the Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, you may choose to 'play in the dark.'