For Ambivalent Black Figures

By Thulile Gamedze | Peer Reviewed

Black figures have appeared for almost as long as Black 'figures' have been. The speculative proposition of this piece is that not all Black figures today are equal before the violence of the contemporary art marketplace. Numerous practices involving Black figuration go unrecognised commercially, remaining "in the dark," less comprehensible, although potentially offering possibility beyond the static of this new aesthetic status-quo. I propose that marketable Black figures are those that visually (whether or not rhetorically) adhere to sustained taxonomies of the neoliberal world; figures rooted in the mantra of representation 'mattering.' Engaging Garth Erasmus' State of Emergency series (1985 - 1989), and Randolph Hartzenberg's Map of the Neighbourhood series (1996 - 2004), the text studies less profitable practices of Black figuration, concerned with matter/s other than representation. Moved beyond the disturbing identity erotica of neoliberal post-apartheid South Africa, both practitioners, rejecting mainstreamed taxonomies, are continually invested in the body inasmuch as it operates as a vessel for forms of opened (and I argue Black Conscious) political, philosophical, spiritual, and social life. Their figures may be 'furtive' or on the move - they appear with ambivalence, opacity, and do not present themselves as knowable. If not free, they remain un-captured, unpredictable.

Prelude: A note on ambivalence

Ambivalence is 'the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something,' a state into which flux and morphability are hardwired. Ambivalence could be said to be committed to occupying a number of realities at once, even when these realities throw each other off, and even when this throwing-off makes every reality equally untenable. In my best reading, ambivalence is a suspiciously open state – (and this next bit is crucial) – *where the necessity for openness in orientation is rooted in stable resistance to what we might call 'the current conditions'*.[1] To me or for us (if you want), ambivalence can be recognised for its resonance with queer politics: anarchic and unresolved, as well as disinterested in, or even *failing* neo-liberal aspirations and applications of success.[2] Because ambivalence is certain only of what it rejects, its main occupations are in listening for, to, and with other options.[3]

Given the recursively colonial conditions of ownership and 'taste' that shape the life of the contemporary 'art world', art's analysis and production demand, at the very least, ambivalence.[4]

(This text arises from, seeks, and produces, ambivalence.)

Context: fraudulent images

'Art,' as a result of its relation to excessive wealth and its history of patronage, has long been entangled and implicated within, parallel to, or as a benefactor of various forms of exploitative horror.[5] Today, the art world subtends monopoly capital, the 'washer' of blood spilt by nefarious neo-liberal operations – military, prison, pharmaceutical, and immigration industrial complexes, as well as forces of apartheid, settler colonialism, and gentrification. The central irony of this nasty enterprise is that it is often through funded art practices that nuanced forms of 'speaking back', 'self-representing', and 'counter-narrating' are given space and time. Such practices may routinely aesthetically undermine the politics of the resources and institutions that circulate and display them, whilst themselves being *structurally* undermined by the politics of the resources and institutions that they circulate in. In other words, representational 'counter-narratives' produced under these conditions are doomed to enacting varying levels of political fraudulence.

I want to be clear that this fraudulent status-quo is not unique to the aesthetic practices of the art marketplace, and is broadly descriptive of the central contradictions in representation under neo-liberalism. In art, we could think about the 2014 Sydney Biennale Boycott by artists, who refused to participate given that the funding from the 'Transfield Foundation' came at the hands of its running offshore detention sites for asylum seekers that were inhumane, dangerous, and in violation of International Civil and Political human rights.[6] We could think of disturbing phenomena like 'Rainbow Capitalism', the commercialisation of aesthetics of the LGBTQIA+ community, at fundamental odds with queer positions that have historically put lives on the line in rejecting 'business as usual's' reproduction of capitalism and its inherent patriarchy. We could think of 'greenwashing' and apartheid Israel's forests; advertised as a selflessly 'environmentally conscious' project but, in fact, a deeply unsettling one, whereby trees are planted onto stolen Palestinian land.[7] Locally, we could think of the countless Mandela statues littered around South Africa that somehow fail to be read as an indictment of the new dispensation's failure, and themselves instead function strangely – a seeming replacement for equitable material life? We exist, in other words, in an odd scenario in which we know and understand the fraudulence of these kinds of images, yet are somehow able to cognitively dissociate, accepting them as an appropriate replacement for our own realities.

In the context of democratic South Africa – which has largely been defined through its deepened identification with, and violent reproduction of, our inherited apartheid and colonial racial schema – the art marketplace is a particularly bizarre arena of exchange. Contemporary practices of Black portraiture or figuration are the hot product of this fraudulent zone, often representing Black autonomy or agency that is ultimately undermined by the conditions of its fetishized consumption and predominantly white-owned economy.

I might add that, in many cases, the work is not only

undermined by its 'world', but by its own dealings with Black bodies. Of particular interest herein are seeming parallels between Black portraiture trends, and the algorithmic manipulation of platforms like Instagram, which shape 'desire' through surveillance, and either the repression or promotion of content. These methods of policing consistently produce more and more identity categories that become defined by perfected and much-circulated archetypes: Black 'excellence' is visually signalled via middle class-ness, nuclear family-ness, and uncritical participation in capitalism; Black queerness is visually signalled via fixations on the flesh body, its fashioning and its hyper-visibilised transition states; Black joy is visually signalled through middle class 'leisuring' activity and the disappearance of the Black worker, who in fact pays for others' middle-class leisure using her largely joyless labour time. These processes of aesthetic flattening result in the collapse of everything, or *everyone*, into product and brand. Accompanied often by sweet nothings like 'representation matters', such images, more and more frequently mirrored in contemporary painting and photography, fail to acknowledge that their trendiness functions to quell, and thus to stall, actions informed by the reality of sadness, violence, and humiliation defining modern relations of race.[8]

These algorithmic traps tend to repress less legible expressions of Black and queer people interested in forms of presence, existence, relation, and internality, rather than in the aestheticized *performances* of existence. In this text, I occupy myself in work – and worlds – that sidestep singular visual investment in the body as body only, as flesh, and look to expressions of presence even as these attempts are doomed to obscurity and inevitable illegibility. I consider forgotten work, forgotten worlds, canonically neglected work – that is, committed work, layered work, ambivalent work, and ambivalent worlds. I engage *the ambivalent Black figure:* the obscured, abstracted, ambiguous, scary, running Black figure, who both arrives to and disappears from view, and whose relation to the world of the body is fundamentally unstable. For its simultaneous openness and secure rejection of the world as it is, I love ambivalence. It is not an antidote to the neo-liberal capture of the art world – instead, it is an elusive ethic, where 'slipperiness', of both aesthetic work and dealings with the 'art world' is a strategy enabling constant movement, thus the resisting of seductive new taxonomies of art discourse.

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I arrived at Randolph Hartzenberg and Garth Erasmus through my part-time research work with Africa South Art Initiative (ASAI) – a small, highly generative world of necessary ambivalence (around the state of Southern African art discourses), intergenerational interactivity through writing, and intentional efforts to engage with artists whose work is neglected by mainstream history. These considerations of their practices and lives are attended by the exchange of a number of warm and detailed emails with both Randy and Garth.

Body: Hartzenberg's distillation

Hartzenberg's figures leave everything to the imagination. They are diagrammed outlines with tubes connecting heart to ear, heart to mouth. They are anonymous tumbling faces caught in a network of arrows, empty profiles in symbolic fields of dust and salt and exile. Hartzenberg's figures give almost nothing, so occupied they are in being present amongst staircases that lead nowhere, darkened squares of somethings painted over, empty cubes, empty houses, words scratched sharply into once-wet surfaces, chaos of excavation and buildings, and chaos of loss. Hartzenberg's figures float balefully in tragedy and trauma, spun upside-down and still spinning (they are objects, maybe), in a seemingly perpetually re-ordering practice, whose looping character delves into deeper readings with each new render.

He sends me a string of emails, patiently working through my multiple curiosities, which, in this moment,

are enquiries into the ways that bodies or their parts arrive amongst the seemingly obscure set of objects and materials that root his multimodal practice. (The images in his flat work are the objects of his sculptural work and are the props of his performance work.) Salt, dust, the *Oresteia* Greek tragedy, 'exile', suitcases and staircases, connective pipes, stones: 'An integration of a number of interconnected elements conceptually, materially and contextually...' (Hartzenberg, 2021, personal email correspondence). His emails layer on top of one another in a series of subject lines, 'Thoughts in the margins of time,' then 'continuations,' then 'recurring images,' and then 'more thoughts.' The lines read kind of like poetry. Each message opens for and to the next, reminding me of his characteristically re-re-re-re-painted canvases, whose seemingly resolved top surfaces still hold and implicate the heaviness of the aesthetic histories they cover (the *Ground Left Behind* series has, for instance, been ongoing since 2015, with each work a palimpsest, or a pile of past iterations.)

In the series, *No.8* is one of the only works depicting the 'figure' (if we would choose to define this through the literal representation of a body). A set of two small anonymous faces in profile, seemingly tumbling leftward, appear amongst the mild greyscale chaos in the lower right plane of the canvas. I imagine them now paused, stilled for this moment, but ready to keep it moving whenever we'd choose to exit the scene and allow them to re-commence. The tumbling faces are ambiguously elaborated through the addition of the words '*STONE'* and '*SALT,'* which hang above them in a kind of absurdist labelling system. Their bodies are intentionally negated, 'displaced within the context of South African social, historical, political terrain' (Hartzenberg, 2021, personal email correspondence). Elsewhere, we see arrows without clear direction, a floorplan, a black cube housed inside a transparent one, and the words '*NAILS,' 'BREAD,' 'DUST,'* and '*A-... Silent... Throughout,'* all rendered in the haphazard, diagrammatic style which moves through Randy's practice.

'I work towards a *distillation* of imagery...' (Hartzenberg, 2021, personal email correspondence)

Body: Erasmus and trauma

Erasmus's figures move or are moved. They are running stick people rendered quickly in spray paint, or pools of dried ink on pages warped by their former wetness. They are conglomerations of greasy smoke, vaguely rendered, loosely drawn improvisations with medium; 'ghosts,' he says (Erasmus, 2021, personal email correspondence). Garth describes the figures in his work as primarily his 'own personal ghosts,' who have arrived as a result of trauma. Garth understands that trauma is something that goes far beyond the body, affecting our 'deep emotional and spiritual condition.' Violence is inflicted through the invocation of body taxonomies, like gender or sexual orientation or race, but its deeply gratuitous and dissonant nature – the trauma it passes on and expands – cannot be comprehended through the same invocations. In other words, our bodies and their type-castes, read in imperial or colonial or apartheid or neo-liberal terms, do not indicate the trauma itself, but that trauma lives inside. Erasmus's figures or ghosts are in fear, in song, fleeing, or making sound. One special figure, appearing in the *Mantis Praise* series, is horizontal, at rest; this is another kind of presence, symbolic of the artist's late father, a figure of familial spiritual gatekeeping and guidance (Erasmus, 2021, personal email correspondence).

Erasmus is himself regularly in song, the maker and player of Khoisan instruments, whose sounds collapse time, beckoning ancestral histories into the present, and moving us away and away and away etc, from the identificatory options that constitute legible South African life (options which are always in hot pursuit.) Erasmus, full of music and of sound, is himself the Black figure of his practice too – the Black portrait, even as he resists an aesthetics which over-identifies with the body as surface.

In images of both Erasmus' and Hartzenberg's much varying works, we encounter figures in a hurry, figures *en route*, or figures otherwise occupied. While they appear, and although we may look at them, they avoid giving themselves over to us in the space of display, and are often more pressingly involved with and motivated by the sometimes absurd, sometimes colourful, sometimes chaotic fields in which they live. When they sleep, they dream of spaces we cannot see, when they tumble, we are unsure of exactly where they are going, when they yell, we do not quite know what they are saying – when they are there, we do not know how long they are staying. They do not stand still, are not strategically posed, and do not gaze

straight at us with perfect skin, performing their own presence. These figures are living!

Of *Map in the Neighbourhood*, Hartzenberg explains that 'the works reflect...an internal state. A map of the internal neighbourhood.' In the series of monoprints with collage, he repeats the anonymous figure in profile, who finds themselves floating above a familiar 'distillation' of elements – the dust and the salt, maths equations, body parts, and always *Oresteia*... an ancient narrative of terror, trauma and suffering under violent warfare and unthinkable collective grief, which, for Randy, had urgent parallels with the violence of South African apartheid, (and after) (Hartzenberg, 2021, personal email correspondence).

Garth's *Xnau* is another internal map. The blue facial imprint – blueprint? – of Erasmus's thirteenth *Xnau* figure is on its way out, or on its way in. Arms are raised high in a moment of seemingly bloodied intensity. Eyes are empty. The disembodied imprint, hanging above its more visceral twin, creates a presence x2. The central figure's occupation is intense – fleeing? bleeding? astral-projecting?

Du Boisian double consciousness offers a route in considering the pain of bloody splitting that *Xnau 13*'s figure is subject to. I ask Garth about the 'twinning' or the double presence, which I notice in a number of his works in the series. Appropriately, there is more than one answer. His first response is an articulation of the work's existence beyond his own 'intellectual control': that the images themselves constitute a kind of uninhibited material response to 'the peculiarities and characteristics of the medium' (Erasmus, 2021, personal email correspondence). In this case, the peculiarities of the medium are liquid, with figures and faces being subject to the motion and wetness of water, loosening from the page, even tearing in some cases, and then settling and drying differently, with puddled pigments, but, I think, a sustained sense of motion, instability. In this improvised mode of making, where medium and the hands or the body consent to one another's agency, the produced image itself enacts a further openness, an orientation to the world that notes its meaning as changeable, as changing, in accordance with the irregular conditions of the world around it. When images' claims are difficult to grasp neatly, are dealing in contradiction, in motion, and in the mushiness of what's unnameable about *being*, they are less easily appropriated by the spaces in which they act. They are slippery, and always already halfway out the door.

A Conclusion: For Ambivalent Black Figures

Blackness, if understood through South African Black Consciousness, would seem to necessitate the production of aesthetics which are disruptive to (or reject) the central taxonomic force that creates the exploitation frameworks of art institutions. Blackness finds its position in refusal of the fundamental violence of racial capital – its responsibility is in the recognition of this system's production of relations of violence and oppression, understanding that racism and class are produced by, and produce, patriarchy, ableist world views, messed up beauty standards, and so on. This political refusal – *systematic* in its nature – makes way for an opening, an insistence that Blackness as 'identity' not be articulated with any fixity, even as its base of solidarity stands (see Gamedze, 2021).

For Erasmus, the underlying motion of such an approach to identity unfolds: 'The body represents the soul as an outer/physical manifestation of an inner world. But in another ironic sense, the condition of the emotional/inner state is influenced by the outside and the environmental...' I find an echo with Biko, as he talks of the loss of the 'black man' under apartheid as the 'loss of his personality,' that the conditions of oppression erode the personality – the soul! – and that restoration is only possible through Black self-reliance, materially, psychologically, and spiritually (Biko, 1978).

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In their visual articulation, we already know that Garth's figures are often ghostly or accompanied by ghosts, lost personalities perhaps? At times, they are bodied, but herein, are just separated body parts, dismembered, violated. Hartzenberg too reflects these states of body detachment. Both practitioners speak of histories of trauma. I think that through their strategic and poetic and varied withhold of fixed bodies, both offer us openings to the other, less knowable realms of being that resist our gaze.

Representation through systems of colonial identification (which continually recur in new language, with consistently refreshed liberal vigour) and through colonial 'worlds' of circulation and display, are not sufficient in relaying the textures of our experience. Fraudulent images expand the cognitive dissonance – the metaphysical dissonance – that defines marginalised experiences of this world. Motion, flux, and all that is unseeable in the body, is much in excess of, even if consistently pressed and shut down by colonial and new taxonomies of the algorithm.

Randolph Hartzenberg and Garth Erasmus's figures do not pretend to capture enveloping, or revised versions of 'the Black body'. Instead, they avoid representation, offering work consumed by trouble, conflict, and the unsolvable equations of be-ing in the horror of coloniality-modernity's accumulation and loss. Hartzenberg's figures are rolling in space, are incomplete, Erasmus's are buried, ghosted, disembodied — they are all opaque, and certainly not free, but continue, somehow, to be un-captured and unpredictable. They are ambivalent Black figures, and while they don't have the answers, they do keep things moving.

Notes

1. During the weekend of the 'Black Self' colloquium at Nirox, my friend Phokeng mentioned Patricia Hayes' book *Ambivalent* (2019) in response to my presentation. Whilst the notion of 'ambivalence' for me seemed to possess an organic relation with the style of my enquiry, I was interested in this particular mobilisation of it due to the shared proximity of our concerns and locations. The framing of this collection draws from photographer Santu Mofokeng's claim that his work is informed by ambivalence, that 'he is gesturing toward these planes of the conscious/unconscious and, indeed, the polyvalent work that photography does.' In this way, an ambivalent orientation is restitutive, 'returning' ambiguity and instability to the reading of images, and in their case, understanding photography as only one *part of* broader social, administrative and narrative operations, which do not always seem to make complete, neat sense.

2. Halberstam thinks of queer failure as a disruption to heteronormative notions of success, which have been imagined through a white supremacist and patriarchal world view, and strengthened through the increased fascism and wealth gaps created in the period of neo-liberalism. A 'failed' queerness in this way, is a position moving away from desire for respectability, assimilation, adherence – a politics beyond sexual orientation: 'While liberal histories build triumphant political narratives with progressive stories of improvement and success, radical histories must contend with a less tidy past, one that passes on legacies of failure and loneliness as the consequences of homophobia and racism and xenophobia' (2011: 98).

3. In the introduction to *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (2010), Walter Mignolo says: 'Master paradigms are just but options dressed with universal clothes.' His observation here is rooted in the idea that *decolonial options* need to be sure to locate their approaches in understandings of coloniality that delegitimize the 'normalisation' of imperial desire in the shaping of the modern world.

4. (If not their destructive overhaul.)

5. Art here is not used as a generalised term enveloping broader understandings of cultural and aesthetic practices taking place everywhere. Rather, I invoke the (less interesting) 'art': a discipline and product of the western world, whose exhibition, patronage, epistemic, and taste conventions have largely been accepted and assimilated into the (art) world at large.

6. See Butt and O'Reilly (2017) for reflections on this boycott, and considerations of boycott as a

crucial claim of autonomy under the precarious conditions of art practice in neo-liberalism.

7. There is a myriad of resources on this horrific practice. See, for instance: Holm, 2012.

8. A trend in Black portraiture herein seems to be in the novelty of paint's application to scenic depictions of contemporary middle-class social life; renderings of young conventionally attractive Black people having a good time. Nkgopoleng Moloi's review (2021) of the exhibition *Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt,* curated by Anelisa Mangcu and Jana Terblanche, shown at Johannesburg's 'art mall' – Keyes – critiques the group show, a large collection of contemporary works of Black portraiture from emerging artists, as impeded by a level of curatorial irresponsibility, as a result of its 'limitations in adequately challenging or stretching what is often the problematic portrayal of Black imagery that is not aware of itself or aware of its consumption.' I fully agree and would suggest that, in parallel, Black artists take some responsibility too, in considering the ways that representation for its own sake may end up consenting to a rigged epistemological framework that is structured through hierarchies of bodies, and mediated – and in these spaces, *owned* – by the white gaze. This comment arrives in response to both production of images and the conditions of these images' exhibition – artists should take seriously the cognitive dissonance created by the limits of the art world and find ways to explore and expand their practices through insisting on also showing in contexts of care and reciprocal intellectual work.

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