

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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How to Embed a Shout: A New Generation of Black Artists Contends with Abstraction

By Seph Rodney

A new wave of black abstract artists are exploring ways to push the language of abstraction and still retaining their cultural specificity. And they're not doing it alone.



Tariku Shiferaw's studio in Bushwick (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

I'm in Tariku Shiferaw's studio because of a conversation about black masculinity. We met several months ago at a dinner event, Elia Alba's Supper Club, held at the 8th Floor gallery where we collectively — several artists, historians, curators — chewed over how we now deal with each other as black men and how we might improve our relationships. Shiferaw is a 34-year-old artist originally from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, who earned his MFA degree from Parsons School of Design. He invited me to his studio in Bushwick to check out his work, and then we ran into each other again, randomly at an opening a few weeks later, thereby reminding me of our scheduled meeting. After I place my backpack down, I take out my notebook and pen, but don't write yet. I take stock of how orderly Shiferaw has placed the work he wants to show me. There is rigor apparent just in that

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choice. I start mentally listing the obvious aspects of his paintings which hang on the two walls nearest the entrance, at eye level: first of all, the “canvas” isn’t canvas; it’s clear plastic that’s stretched taut over wood frames, acrylic paint thinly applied in inch-wide, horizontal bars that are ruler straight and evenly spaced, but with jagged ends, the palette a matte black or a darker royal blue. The paintings are big squares, perhaps two feet by two feet. This is some hard-hearted abstraction — giving me no narrative, hardly any painterly flourishes, and no reference to anything from life that I recognize, not even symbolically. I want to mention Pierre Soulages, who is now a very old French modernist painter, but his work was much more texture and uses reflective and non-reflective blacks against each other, and his paintings tend to be grand flights of ego. Shiferaw’s work is so much quieter, tightly held, reserved. Shiferaw offers me a beer; we sit facing each other and then get into it.

He tells me that many of these are destined to be in a show at Anthony Philip Fine Art, under the title *One of These Black Boys*. Shiferaw has given all the paintings titles that refer to hip-hop culture, using popular song titles like: “That Black Boy Fly” (Kendrick Lamar), “The Blacker the Berry” (Tupac), “War” (Bob Marley), and “If I Ruled The World” (Nas ft. Lauryn Hill). I ask him to tell me where the titles come from, and he mentions an incident that occurred when he was an undergraduate at USC. It’s not a story I want to hear — because I’ve heard it so often and I have my own lived versions of the story. He tells me he visited a friend, a fellow student who is white, at her parents’ house in Westwood. When the mother and father arrived and saw she and Shiferaw hanging out in the kitchen, he says they responded to his presence in a distinctly unfriendly way. He felt they wanted him to know that he was not welcome in their house. While listening I realize that the strategy he’s employing — using an obstinately formalist language of almost geometric abstraction, while signaling to his audience that the maker is black, that is, ethnically and politically black — is something I had seen other artists do. These artists, all black, born both in the US and outside of it, have taken up a rigorously unemotional aesthetic to spirit in a set of politics not typically or historically related with this aesthetic. I recall seeing something similar in uptown Manhattan.

In the winter of 2016, at Jack Tilton gallery, Tomashi Jackson had showed several mixed media pieces in her *The Subliminal is Now* exhibition. Jackson’s work is far more materially and visually complex than Shiferaw’s. She uses gauze, canvas, paper, cotton, wood, and other elements to make colorful mixed media assemblages that look like sculptures intentionally migrating towards the wall, or paintings wanting to come down to engage the solidity of the ground. For example, her “Dajerria All Alone (Bolling v Sharpe (District of Columbia))(McKinney Pool Party)” (2016) consists of a wood pole resting on pins in the wall, holding up a large, red cotton cloth with a main decoratively abstract pattern in darker tones. The red cloth has other colorful patterns and pictures scattered across its surface, including painted geometric patterns, glued-on photographic images of black people, and stitched-on envelopes of folded canvas containing objects hidden in black bags. *The Subliminal is Now* also contained video collages, framed photographic prints, and framed textile pieces. Jackson tells me that the photographs are sourced from the NAACP’s Legal Defense and Educational Fund,

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which contains a trove of visual documentation NAACP lawyers used to prosecute their cases, arguing that school segregation was inherently illegal.

Jackson, who was born in Houston, Texas in 1980, has an aesthetic far more magpie and effulgent than Shiferaw's, but the most salient aspects of the work for me is its use of an abstract, formalist vocabulary where geometric objects and images consistently appear (along with a good deal of experimentation with materials and textures). What else the two have in common is the use of provocative titles, such as her "The School House Rock (Brown, et. al. v Board of Education of Topeka) (Bolling v Sharpe (District of Columbia))" (2016). By referring to landmark court cases which addressed issues of civil rights and racial segregation, Jackson explicitly evokes the socio-political history of protest and struggle on the part of black people (and other people of color) in the US. At first seeing them, I wondered whether Jackson was just identifying herself to the viewer with her use of images of black people engaged in protest or being confronted by police. More than that, says Rujeko Hockley, an assistant curator of contemporary art at the Whitney Museum, she is "embedding an affiliation and embedding a politics." This sounds absolutely right to me, so I ask her to say more.

Referring to the visual strategies employed by both Shiferaw and Jackson, Hockley tells me: "I read these gestures as ways to engage questions of equity, justice, race-related questions, but also embed them, embed them in the sense of, you don't know what you're buying." I also mention Adam Pendleton, a 34-year-old artist, born in Virginia, whose *Becoming Imperceptible* exhibition was recently mounted at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) Cleveland. His practice draws on the legacy of non-symbolic abstraction in making the series of works he terms "Black Dada," which in the MOCA show included large paintings of silkscreen ink on canvas, such as "Black Dada/Column (A/A)" (2015). That particular work is all colored black, but segmented into distinct fields by a precisely ruled stripe of more reflective pigment running through the two panels placed together. The work is reminiscent of Barnett Newman, and Pendleton consciously visually references older artists in the traditions of abstract painting and sculpture, such as Sol Lewitt and Carl Andre. The show also included several films that contain fragmented biographies and texts from key figures in the Civil Rights Movement, floor-based abstract ceramic sculptures, and a large vinyl wall work, with a title that, as with Shiferaw and Jackson, further signals his politics, "Black Lives Matter #3 (wall work)" (2015). Among black artists working now, Pendleton stands out as one who explicitly aims to examine the history of blackness in the US.

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Installation view, *Adam Pendleton: Becoming Imperceptible* (photo: Jerry Birchfield ©MOCA Cleveland 2017)

For Hockley, this remixing of a formal artistic language with political engagement importantly makes “a kind of claim through the work, for the suitability of the work in combination with the aesthetic of abstraction and material and technical experimentation.” This suitability lies in a couple facts: one cultural, and another which is historical. Adrienne Edwards, curator at Performa, the Walker Art Center, and a scholar who has written a good deal about Pendleton’s work, professes: “Blackness is the original abstraction; people are living abstractions, meaning [they are] made up, conjured.” Yes. I have to agree. For others, this sign of dark skin might symbolize anything and its opposite: strength, weakness, triumph, and debacle, membership or exile. The racial imaginary conditions all of us raised under its auspices to project onto black people one’s fears or desires, so that it becomes difficult to be *seen* as a human being rather than a space for projection. Lowery Stokes Sims, a curator and former director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, adds the historical fact: “If you take the track that abstraction came out of African art, then we are just claiming our birthright.”

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Yet why is this generation of black artists (these artists are all under 40) staking their claim to that birthright now and in these particular ways? Both Adrienne Edwards and Valerie Mercer, curator and head of the GM Center for African American Art at the Detroit Institute of Arts, agree with me that a, “confidence in this sense of promiscuity,” as Edwards puts it, does have a generational cast. These artists’ outlooks have to do with when they were born and the circumstances of their coming of age. Edwards says, “A lot of these [artists] growing up in the 80s, coming to consciousness around racial violence that really appeared on a national scale for the first time around the Rodney King moment.” In 1991, King was beaten savagely by four Los Angeles police officers, and a bystander’s film of the incident was seen worldwide. Then, the subsequent trial and acquittal of the police officers involved sparked an uprising and riots that lasted for five days and caused the death of more than 50 people.

That systematic physical and legally sanctioned brutalization of that black man’s body was understood as a symbolic devaluation of him. The King beating, along with a multitude of similar subsequent incidents circulate the idea that officers of the state (and by extension the state itself) won’t allow themselves to be accountable for the bodies of black people. The burgeoning movement, particularly evident in urban areas, to film police officers carrying out their duties, especially when confronting people of color has much to do with holding police to account and taking responsibility for each other. Mercer confirms that this generation “want to be responsible.” She continues, “I know

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young artists who say to me that they abhor the notion that their work would not be relevant or not connect with what's going on in the world.”

Shiferaw's experience *was* a kind of violence — the soft, stage whispered brutality telling him that he did not belong there and was not welcome because of the sign of his color. Decades ago Pierre Bourdieu made a similar observation regarding socioeconomic class and its intersection with the art museum. He termed the ways in which the poor and working class were made to feel that they did not belong in the museum “symbolic violence” to explain why the museum continues to be a primarily middle-class space. With his paintings of black bars rendered as elements within a cultural score Shiferaw asserts he does indeed belong here, in this tradition, though as Edwards says, “Abstraction has always been perceived as not at hand for artists interested in blackness.” His paintings are hushed, but they are rooted in a shout.

Sims reminds me that this perception also came from within the black community as well, noting that Stanley Whitney had observed in conversation with her that “the assumption was that if you were doing abstraction, you were copping out, doing mainstream art, and that you couldn't possibly be relevant or committed.” It is widely known that artists of Sims' generation (she was born in 1949) felt these pressures. The often repeated story summarizing this state of things is Howardena Pindell, who in the mid-1960s showed her work to the then director of the Studio Museum. At the time, her work consisted of tiny paper dots collaged onto cut-and-quilted canvases. She was told, “Go downtown and show with the white boys.”

In the period between Pindell's rejection and now, several black artists have risen to prominence by resolutely working with the black figure, shifting it from the margins of culture. Kerry James Marshall, Fred Wilson, Kara Walker, Kehinde Wiley, Mickalene Thomas, Chris Ofili, and Jordan Casteel have all championed the black body, reinserting it into the art histories from which it had been excised. Jackson tells me that this work “let's us be physically alive in a world that is constantly trying to disappear us.” For this gift, she says she is glad to be among a “generational cohort that I love and respect.” At the same time she acknowledges, “What I see in the market is a desire for black figuration, blunt and blatant figuration.” This mode of presentation does make the black body visible and esteemed. However, Shiferaw, Jackson, and Pendleton have taken a divergent, strategic approach in which, as Jackson tells me, the body is implicit, but these artists carefully calibrate how and under what conditions it is seen. It is not for ready consumption. This body will not provide sustenance for appetites desiring the exotic, the sumptuous ethnic flesh that in the larger culture is as much longed for as it is held in contempt.

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Other artists have that work aligns with this wave, including Paul Anthony Smith, a 29-year-old artist born in Jamaica but raised in Miami, whose photo-based works, shown at ZieherSmith gallery utilized images of black people in a parade underneath a scrim of pointillist geometric patterns, and they derive their titles from classic jazz albums. Though he was born in 1965, Hurvin Anderson falls within this group as well. His exhibition at Michael Werner last winter stunned me with how smoothly he slips between delicately rendered organic shapes, geometric abstraction, and images of civil rights leaders.

For all these makers there is a poise in using this most formal of formalist aesthetics to slip in a set of politics under the cover of a bulletproof abstraction. They find rewards smuggling in their own bodies under the sign of a practice that renders these bodies more valuable, more sophisticated, and present in unanticipated ways.

However, these artists have not operated in a vacuum. I think of this development of a kind of insistently woke abstraction as situated on three legs: the artists, the financial markets, and the infrastructure of criticism. The question is how these strategies used by Shiferaw, Jackson, and Pendleton have come to public notice and serious consideration. The indications are that the financial market has *not* significantly changed

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in the last generation. According to Michael Chisolm, an art historian, art appraiser, and consultant who has been tracking the market for decades now, it “has been more receptive to artists of color for quite some time.”

“It is a different day from the ’60s and ’70s,” he states. Since that era, “the market has been widening for people of color,” and “now it is helping them and welcoming them.” By “market” Chisolm primarily means the auction market, and he cites the remarkable prices garnered by artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Mark Bradford, and Kehinde Wiley. However, he goes on to assert that the expansion of a critical infrastructure to support artists’ experimentation, to make their work comprehensible to collectors, dealers, and curators, to establish the lineages within which they are operating, is pivotal.

Chisolm says, “There has to be literature; that’s almost more important than a market. It means it is respected and received by the field.” He tells me how scholarly work has this impact: “I know many collectors who follow the literature very closely and are influenced by it, by critics, and that helps build the market.” What has also recently changed, according to Chisolm, is that there are many more critics writing about art, thus the criticism is much more varied and, in his words, “user friendly.” I myself found several prominent scholarly voices who have spent the requisite time studying and writing and considering the work of artists of color to create and sustain this infrastructure. Sims, Mercer, Edwards, and Hockley are key figures in it. And there are more. I reached out to Kellie Jones, a MacArthur fellow and historian and curator of contemporary art that issues from the African Diaspora, to gain her input for this piece. She wasn’t able to speak to me, but did suggest four other curators and art historians (one of whom is Hockley) that she thought would be able to address this topic. Thus my own experience writing this piece has connected me to a network of writers and thinkers who help to convey these (implicit) black bodies across the thresholds of market valuation while also identifying their incommensurable cultural and aesthetic worth.

Shiferaw says that he feels he has a community and thus can have “a conversation with artists, curators, and directors and writers, a conversation that is deep and helpful.” Jackson tells me that she first encountered new ways to think about the historic role of abstraction during her undergraduate tenure at Cooper Union, where several artist teachers, including Walid Raad, Dore Ashton, and Doug Ashford, showed her that artists could be part of critical, public political theory.

“They are the ones who brought these radical notions that caring about the world could and actually was embedded in the history of Color Field painting and abstract processes,” she explains. These teachers who provided a critical framework for Jackson, impelled her to move beyond the established orthodox oppositions between abstraction and a lived set of politics. They urged her to see that what Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman set out to do had parallels with Ana Mendieta and Eva Hesse. Yet doubt persists. “I’m still not sure where I fit in,” Jackson admits. But she is surrounded by fellow artists Shiferaw, Smith, Anderson, and Pendleton, and writers, curators, and historians who will help her carve out this space and give it its proper name.

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