



THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART



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SPECIAL FEATURE

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Titus Kaphar, Installation view of *The Vesper Project* at Friedman Benda, 2013.

Front Cover: Titus Kaphar, Installation view of *The Vesper Project* at Friedman Benda, 2013.

Errata — IRAAA v.25 no. 1, page 46: The image of the Walters Art Museum's 'River Scene' is by Beauford Delaney, not Robert Duncanson (1868).

For more information about the *IRAAA*, and to order: <http://museum.hamptonu.edu/store/>

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FADE TO BLACK

An Interview with Jefferson Pinder

Jefferson Pinder is a Chicago based video/performance artist, who seeks to find black identity through the most dynamic circumstances. His experimental videos and films feature performances that reference music videos and physical theatre. Pinder's work provides personal and social commentary in accessible and familiar format. Inspired by soundtracks, Pinder utilizes hypnotic popular music and surreal performances to underscore themes dealing with Afro-Futurism, physical endurance and blackness. Pinder currently teaches in the Contemporary Practices department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I interviewed him via email in the summer of 2014. The conversation below has been edited for this publication.

JORDANA MOORE SAGGESE

Jordana Moore Saggese: *It has been more than forty-five years since the American painter Raymond Saunders declared his position against those who placed the burden of politics on black expression. Saunders, alongside many other black artists, chose to pursue abstraction as a way out of figuration and the explicitly social functions of art as a way to explore their own subjectivity. I would like to know whether you ever felt the pressure of this binary. Did you ever feel you had to choose between the social and the individual appeal of art in your own practice? Has this changed over time?*

Jefferson Pinder: I think about this all of the time. All African-Americans are confronted with the decision about how much should race factor into their work. We are confronted by our blackness every day, in one way or another. It kills me when people ask me why I work the way I do, or when folks ask "why do you only make videos with only black people?" I believe that there is a real lack of knowledge about the complexity of the issues of race in America.

Romare Bearden wrote about it, Alain Locke and DuBois wrote about it, Glenn Ligon and Thelma Golden had their hand at wrestling with this subject. But the truth remains that black artists can only achieve this freedom when our society moves to a point where race is not a factor in everyday life. When race is the first term of identification when you're pulled over on the street or interviewing for a job, why would it be any different when your artwork is on view?

JMS: *So are you saying that the racial politics are unavoidable? Do you think that Saunders was perhaps too idealistic?*

JP: I like Raymond Saunders, but I feel both arguments have already been present in the African-American canon. I'll stand

on this side. My work is about blackness, and through this, I hope that it will be about humanity as well. This is the soul of what takes place in my videos. I passionately believe that we need artists of all disciplines to be out there doing work, but I will go as far as to say that we don't live in a post racial society. We can't separate race from our work.

JMS: *I agree with you. From one perspective, scholars have considered the entire concept of a post-racial society another strategy toward hegemony and white privilege — to maintain power under the guise of equality.*

JP: I'll go as far as to say that white artists are entitled certain freedoms — pure abstract painting is one of them, no questions asked. But if a black painter creates abstract work, folks are always trying to connect it with their race! No insult to the amazing black artists that are working that way, but often they are contextualized as black artists that are working that way. Have you noticed?

JMS: *Yes! It seems that any work by black artists is always already about race. A lot of ink has been spilled over the term "post black" — first presented by Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon in their collaborative introduction to the 2001 exhibition Freestyle. Their stated intention was to recognize the complexity of black experience and to expand the possibilities for black expression. Do you think this term is useful for thinking about African-American art today?*

JP: Believe it or not, I think the term Post-Black was a phase. Everyone has a take on it, but it has yet to be clearly defined. I see it as an earnest attempt to expand or continue the conversation that was established many years prior. I can't give post-black that much validity. I can attempt to explain what

it sounds like, but I think the conversation would be painfully similar to the one had by DuBois and Locke (but their exchange had more vigor).

JMS: Well, your take on the post-black is particularly interesting to me, since I first encountered your work in 2006 at the Studio Museum's Frequency exhibition [the second in the series after Flow]. Do you think that "post-black" is a useful construct for your own work?

JP: I've been very pleased that no one has referred to me as a 'post-black' artist in a while. But I don't fault the term, as it created a fascination that fueled my career early on. It also made a group of us easier to identify as we were emerging. But I don't believe many folks identify themselves as such. Right now, "post-black" seems about as outdated as a 2008 Obama "Hope" t-shirt.

JMS: So then, how might an African American artist in this political climate navigate such unsteady terrain? How does one make work that transcends the "Negro Artist Dilemma?"

JP: I feel like I'm getting it done with my work. I ask the questions that spark conversations about issues that I feel will forward understanding of blackness. I'm very pragmatic. At the heart of my practice is a serious investigation of formal issues as well as race. Making videos is like wrestling with technical demons. Is the sound correct? Is the light natural enough? Does the editing make sense? I feel that this is my fight and I'm getting better at it. Coming at video making from an artist/theatre training is a struggle and it mirrors the social struggles that are represented as well. The work is full of tension.

Like any artist, I make strong pieces — and ones that I don't care to share. I hope to level that out. But I am confident that I am confronting the issues directly. Do I wish I could make



Jefferson Pinder, *Ben-Hur*, 2012. Still from Performance at Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

different work that is purely formal? Do I wish I could shake free of this conversation? I certainly do. I wish I could have ultimate freedoms in my work. If I could allow myself to do that, then maybe I could stop beating people over the head with subjects and histories that they should know about.

I don't have the privilege of whiteness to allow me to walk away from the truth I know or to ignore the realities that I experience in my life.

People need a pill and if I have to shove it down their throats — so be it. I don't give a damn if folks call it art. I'm of the Duboisian theory that art is propaganda. I'm a 'race man' and that has to be a part of the conversation with my work.

JMS: *I agree with you. When I am teaching I am always struck by the continued relevance of Langston Hughes's 1926 essay, The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain, which I often assign to students in my modern survey courses. At one point he says: "An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose." Have you read it?*

JP: Yes. I have similarly used it for teaching. I relate to these arguments. Call me old-fashioned, but I think these conversations are still relevant. Of course, there are more complexities associated with the subject, but Hughes clearly articulates truths. So many of my students want to be freed up of this obligation to race and I understand why! But I am so amazed at how little they know about the struggles of the past and how it is relevant in contemporary conversations.

JMS: *You mentioned that you think some of your works are better than others at addressing the critical issues. Can you give an example?*

JP: Sure, my piece *Ben-Hur* from 2012 is one of my strongest performances to date. Perhaps it's the combination of formality with brute force. I think it conjures so many ideas when I see it. It takes place in the neoclassical confines of one of the oldest museums in the country. Six black men literally work themselves to exhaustion on rowing machines set about five feet high. The work starts off beautiful and choreographed but moves toward a deeply intense competition of who will be the last one rowing. The rowers are wearing work clothes so that you know it's not exercise.

The intense drudgery references labor as museum visitors have their wine and watch these men struggle with their task and their bodies. I can watch the documentation repeatedly.

JMS: *I love that piece as well. For me it also brings up strong associations of masculinity — its connection with ideas of physical strength. I think this goes back to the work of someone like Thomas Eakins as well, whose rowing paintings not only represent the physical labor of sport but also the ideological labor involved in crafting and maintaining gender norms in American culture.*

I think that Ben-Hur also raises questions about the visual rhetoric of black bodies laboring. I would argue that in American culture nonwhite bodies have been haunted by this specter of physicality. For African-Americans in particular, the mythology of physical superiority provided justification for their enslavement. There is something really beautiful about seeing that exhaustion; it is almost as if their failure to keep rowing is also a failure to maintain that myth.

JP: You are on to something about Eakins, Jordana. I'm a big admirer of his work and judging from his relationship with Henry O. Tanner, I always considered him to be progressive. In regards to his rowers, I didn't reference the action directly in *Ben-Hur*. I think it is a great comparison though. If anything, I think those paintings always looked a little too leisurely for me though. For me, physical exertion with the black body has always had layers of significance. We carry a history and our bodies show it.

Eakins painted a work titled *The Dancing Lesson* — for me this may be a better example of where I am going with my work. In the rough painting you see this young boy who looks slightly dazed-but purely focused on the action of dancing. In the background is a poised older man who is intensely watching as the boy is almost in a trance. And not to forget the banjo player that is hunched over his instrument as he drives the tempo of the action. That's what I'm talking about.

And I agree with your sentiment about failure. In the moment of this painting, the boy cannot fail — he must dance. Eakins captures the moment. In some way, I am driving to do the same with my work. I like it that viewers reference the action to middle passage slave ships! It's absurd. But I love that viewers make the connection between intense physicality and the transatlantic journey. There is nothing abstract about that.

JMS: But beyond a history of American painting, by titling the piece *Ben-Hur*, this piece also creates references for me to American cinema.

JP: Yes, for sure. The title makes you think about the romantic historical epics that had become a representation of history to American viewers. My thought was to create an interventionist interpretation of a classic. I think you know what I mean... Charlton Heston a slave? I can't help but to think they used predominately white bodies in the galley scene of the movie to keep the conversation from referencing American slavery or the aftermath.

JMS: *I am also interested to the extent in which you extend these themes of labor to other non-white bodies in your work. The American legacy of exploiting brown bodies for economic profit certainly persists. Can you talk about your work Devil's Instrument (also known as Air Bending), which you made shortly after Ben-Hur?*

JP: For *Devil's Instrument* I tried to work with Latino laborers in San Francisco. I shot it near your stomping grounds in Marin County while at Headlands. I titled it *The Devil's Instrument*



Fogbending (2012), Study for 'The Devil's Instrument' Headlands Center for the Arts



Thoroughbred (2014), Endurance performance at Sector 2337, Chicago

because of a term that wealthy Californians call leafblowers, because of the noise they make.

I thought to myself, “if they call this the Devil’s instrument, what does that say about the Mexican laborers that operate them?” So, I made a stylized piece about the day laborers and the futurist look of their lawn tools.

JMS: *And what were the results?*

JP: The piece was okay, but I felt there was something missing. I also realized that the language and cultural barriers seemed to be too high of a hurdle for me to overcome to make an honest piece. So I don’t share the work. I think it was a valiant attempt, but I had to come to terms with the fact some work falls flat, and that’s human. I’ll probably keep that one tucked away for a little while.

JMS: *Nevertheless, I have seen a few photographs of Devil’s Instrument, and when I look at them I notice how you seem to have created a hybrid of man and machine. The machine does not necessarily replace the man, but instead a new organism emerges, one in which the function of each part is in some way dependent on the existence of the other. Is there a larger metaphor there that interests you?*

JP: I enjoyed researching how freely Californians expressed their disdain for these leaf-blowing machines without thinking about the individuals that use them everyday. It made me think about how Ralph Ellison refers to invisibility in his novel *The Invisible Man*. When reading about the laborers that use blowers, I found that many described how they enjoyed the power they had in the suburbs to make noise and to establish their presence. I think this is great! While cutting your grass and blowing away the clippings those laborers are also establishing a undeniable ethnic presence in the neighborhood. Have you looked at leaf blowers? They have almost a space age, jet-pack, futurist aesthetic. So yes — in reference to *The Devil’s Instrument*, there are certainly relevant connections and metaphors about the connectivity between the worker and the tools they use.



JMS: *Do you anticipate making other works that deal with subjects beyond the black or African American body? What are you working on the studio now?*

JP: Yeah, I’m branching out in a few different ways now. I just finished a project working with Somali Americans in Minneapolis. The piece is titled *Relay* and it portrays a team of everyday people

Funknik (2014), wood, tin, steel, speakers, Audio: Altered Funk Standards

pushing themselves physically, individually (and as a larger group) to move forward. There was a silent outdoor projection of this in June and now I’m finishing the project for an exhibition at York College in the fall.

I am also making a variety of objects. I just finished a residency at Yaddo [in Sarasota Springs, New York] where I quilted street lines. You know the ones that construction workers lay down prior to painting?

JMS: *I think so. The reflective tape?*

JP: It is a tape like material, and I have managed to get quite a bit of it. It is weathered and worn, strong and slightly reflective. I started sewing them together in a relatively new formal exploration of what I call “delinquent lines.”

You know, Jordana, I am also thinking about creating physical work about whiteness. I was in Utah not too long ago presenting my videos at big school out there. There were so few blacks around and that I found my presence a force. One of the students referred to me as a “colored artist” and another gently asked me why there wasn’t a channel for whites like BET? It was a reminder that there are so many people in this country that are living in a bit of alternate time warp! In a place like Utah I imagine that there may be fewer conversations about difference, because there is none! So my plan is to create work in places where there a black presence may not exist. I don’t know if or how I will use white bodies, but working out in Utah, there might not be any other choice, and that could be an interesting challenge. At the same time, it turns my stomach a bit. That’s just the reality of it. The white body is ubiquitous in contemporary art.

JMS: *Well, I can’t wait to see what you come up with.*

Since this entire issue is dedicated to emerging African American artists, I have to ask: Which artists are you looking at right now?

JP: I admire Tony Lewis (if we can dare to call him ‘emerging’). He’s getting it done. His graphite work has the poetry that I think gives levity to your first question. He has a marvelous way at indirectly getting into a conversation about blackness. I respect that. I can learn from that. He’s also a positive and hard working artist and I can’t wait to see how he moves forward after his 2014 Whitney Biennial exhibition.

I also dig Wilmer Wilson and chukwumaa. They are creating some inspired work in Philadelphia in Terry Adkins’ wake. I love how they are completely interdisciplinary and are fearless with their stylizations. Both of them are young (mid-twenties) but have a great sense of purpose in their work. Both have a grasp of what has come before and are moving forward — with determination and without restrictions.

Jordana Moore Saggese is Associate Professor and Chair of Visual Studies at California College of the Arts. Her first book, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art*, was published by the University of California Press in 2014.