

Late last year I had the chance to see an exhibit **30 Americans** at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville TN. While this might be late in the game in terms of criticism, there are a few things that should be pointed out in relationship to the exhibit and its reviews. The show had some rich historical roots that were neglected in the commentary.



One critic spoke of a piece by **Hank Willis Thomas "Priceless"**¹. *"For me, this piece is about the ways we flip the dial or turn the newspaper page and ignore the cycle of violence in the same way that we tune out the barrage of advertising around us."*²

Having read a lot about race and class in the United States, I feel this piece is about far more than numbness to violence or advertising. The items listed such as 9mm pistol, which surprisingly only cost \$80, especially since \$400 alone were spent on a gold chain. The suit for the funeral only cost \$250. I read a statement about the economic choices that some black men make to afford a \$400 gold chain. The means of obtaining violent instruments is much cheaper a 9mm for only \$80. The problem with the gang violence is the level of complicity the state shares in creating the prison industrial complex which houses mostly black and Hispanic men.

I believe there is some irony in the chain representing the most expensive thing that money can buy because the gold chains that tend to be thought of as representing hip/hop and the black urban culture. Think Mr. T and **Run DMC**.³

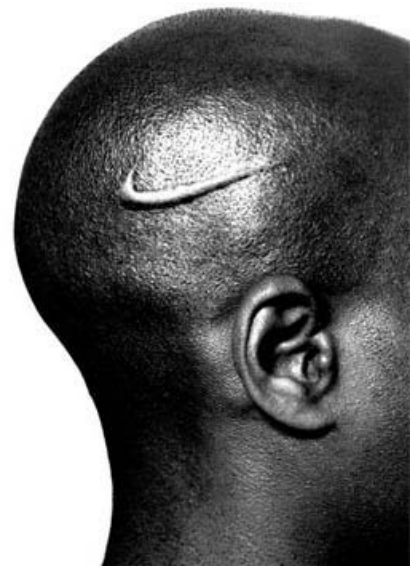




It also represents a piece of some of black America's ancestors. The West African cultural objects coming from Ghana became popular motifs for art and design. Ghanaian Chiefs have been wearing enormous amounts of gold for many generations. 4

I believe that there is possibly a reference also to the chains that enslaved people were forced to wear by Europeans are similar to the chains that gang culture promoted and represented their obsession with money.

Another piece by Thomas "Branded Head, 2003"⁵ also evokes memories of enslavement and the relationship between the growth of the Triangular Atlantic trade of enslaved people and the continued enslavement of young black men into the capitalist industrial military prison complex. Branding was once used on black enslaved people in the United States to show who "owned" them, branding yourself with corporate logos which celebrate another industry (college and professional sports) in which young black men are routinely exploited for the pleasure for the majority of white ticket holders.



A sculpture by **Shinique Smith**, one of the more abstract works in the show, is also a poetic requiem. (shown right 6) It is a bundle of discarded black clothes, tightly bound up, hung from the ceiling and lit dramatically from below. This ball of old shirts, bags and scarves, a tight compression of things that seems like it could spring apart, is resonant with the idea of bondage. Look carefully and you will see the faces of dead artists, including a memorial Tupac tee, tucked into the mix.⁷ Smith was inspired by an article about the shipment of massive bales of American clothes to impoverished African countries, one of the ways culture is exported and a reversal of the slave trade routes. The work is also about our wasteful sensibilities, the ways we toss off the things and celebrities we're bored with. ⁸



A head appears to be hanging by its dreaded head, wearing a bead and possibly with a dread or a rope hanging down. The sense of violence in palpable especially considering the silhouette is a severed head and the history of Tupac Shakur son of former Black Panther Afeni Shakur, step-nephew and godson of black panther activist and current fugitive Assata Shakur. Tupac for all the critiques of his music grew up surrounded by strong and active women who were members of the Black Panthers and people who argued that the capitalist system in the United States is still operated with blacks as the enslaved workers who are disproportionately represented in prisons and low wage dead end jobs.

The title of the piece. "a bull, a rose, a tempest"



You might be saying to yourself, given my previous posts, yet but what does this have to do with **Fanon**. Clearly the relationship between Organizations like the Black Panthers and in turn young black musicians were influenced directly and sometimes indirectly by Fanon's second most examined book. **Wretched of the Earth**. Fanon ties colonial violence directly to Western desires for consumer goods, capital markets. He see this as a problem affecting black people worldwide and ties his thinking with **Marxists** criticism of the enslavement of physical bodies and spirits, not in literal chains but chains of capital impoverishment. Fanon also critiques **the colonial process** which robbed Africans who were colonized but not stolen to be sold as slaves, of their heritage and culture, in ways similar to the erosion of the memory of African cultures for enslaved blacks and their ancestors. It is important that the histories which might be brought to bear upon art created by black artists who are labeled American still point to a larger **Diaspora** and can be linked back to the colonial process which seems to have shifted tactics rather than abandoned the need for hegemony of world cultures and economies. Perhaps none of these artists have read Fanon or know much about the Black Panther movement or Marx for that matter. It is important to point out the heritage of intellectual thought which can be traced in these images. Heritage, which is largely unexplored. Even **Dubois** recognized the importance of art in his 1926 essay "**Criteria of Negro Art**"¹⁰ in which he stresses the importance for art to be used for propaganda to uplift the Negro. That Negro artists, should work to be recognized as fine artists and as representatives of the possibility for Negroes to be equal to the white man of means and education. The exhibit seeks to show that black artists are equal to white artists (who still tend to command higher prices at auction and to have more gallery and museum support). Interestingly it does so directly in the title. 30 American artists is certainly a show by American artists, but it is also an exhibit of black American artists. The average museum visitor would probably have not heard any of the names unless they were avid art lovers, and so one might take a while before realizing the artists were all black. By not placing the exhibit under racial categories directly the curator allows for the possibility for some people to unwittingly appreciate fine art made by contemporary black artists. At the same time, it gives the artists the choice of how much of themselves to represent as black artists for whatever reasons they choose

The last artist I want to discuss has been getting a lot of attention lately. Kehinde Wiley.
"Wiley constructs elaborate large scale richly colored oil paintings of black male subjects. His work is often tied to hip-hop aesthetics and the way in which his work reclaims the black man's dignity. What is missing here, as is often the case with commentary of black artists is the linkages between Wiley's work and Western African culture. For example his **Equestrian Portrait of the Court-Duke Olivares, 2005**¹¹



The colors and patterns reflect west African textile patterns and colors. Like those found in a man's cloth of the Asante peoples,¹² and Adrinkra symbol stamped textile.¹³





A second piece in the show. Sleep, 2008, undoubtedly plays upon classical European depictions of Christ in his mother's arms known as Pieta. While there are other inspirations present, there is also a commentary being made on perceptions of race. The historical figure of Jesus would have looked more like the man above¹⁴ than the standard western depiction is seen below¹⁵. What is striking is the neglect of this connection in reviews¹⁶. "Wiley's massive 11-by-25-foot painting from 2008, "Sleep," shows a languorous, homoerotic black male semi-nude body against a field of gilt-accented flowers. It is ostensibly an attempt to inject heroic black figures into traditional European fine art figure painting.¹⁷ "

He is not just injecting "heroic black figures" into European paintings he is, especially with a painting like sleep, correcting the Eurocentric approach to the construction of an Anglo/European identity of Christ as Anglo/European, which the historical figure clearly was not of Anglo/European ancestry. One critic of his work asked "Identity politics in art seemed to have had a good run in the past decades. With Wiley's exclusive focus on the power structures of black men, was that conversation still relevant today?¹⁸ " Given the fact that the reviews of Wiley's work miss some vital historical connection which speaks to the still problematic acceptance of black artists in the Anglo/European dominated art markets, galleries, and museums. And also the problem of a lack of historical awareness of the connections between Africana arts and black American arts. (See my post-Amiri Baraka Dead).

It is quite ironic that some transatlantic connections remain lost in the effort to present a show which directly engages race while critics and sometimes viewers seem to miss the finer details. This not necessarily because those viewing the exhibition have something against black people, but bears witness to the continued lack of historically grounded knowledge of Africa, Africans, or black Americans. This is paradoxical in that the attempt to give voice to the black American experience is lost on the larger public. I believe that these artists and several more in the exhibit are directly engaging in a dismantling of the negative identities assigned in social/political/economic discourses concerning what it means to be black in America. In this sense they are working to deconstruct the white mythology that has haunted the experience of black people for centuries, yet remain trapped by the need to express their voice to Anglo/Europeans. The day I visited the exhibit there were no black people in the galleries except for those working as security guards for the exhibit. I think the stories these artists tell are important and remind me that the work I do to try to show alternative realities of the history of race in America, which lead to more nuanced and informed ideas about identity and politics and culture.

1 <http://www.nyartbeat.com/nyablog/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/willisthomas04.jpg>
2 <http://www.jsonline.com/entertainment/topstories/213330291.html#ixzz2qW6lh72g>
3 <http://fashionbombdaily.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/run-dmc-gold-rope-chains.gif>
4 Ghanaian Chiefs. <http://ghana-guesthouse.com/ghana.htm>
5 <http://wuum.com/post/30-americans-showcases-black-artists-experiences> Hank Willis Thomas' "Branded Head, 2003" is on display at the "30 Americans" exhibit at the Milwaukee Art Museum.
6 http://www.rfc.museum/index.php?option=com_phocagallery&view=category&id=26:shinique-smith Shinique Smith, a bull, a rose, a tempest, 2007, Fabric and found objects, Dimensions variable
7 <http://www.jsonline.com/entertainment/topstories/213330291.html#ixzz2qW6xRz1z>
8 <http://www.jsonline.com/entertainment/topstories/213330291.html#ixzz2qW6xRz1z>
9 my photoshopped version of this piece as a silhouette. from the above photo.
10 The Crisis, Vol. 32, October 1926: pp. 290-297
11 Kehinde Wiley <http://rfc.museum/component/phocagallery/category/33-kehinde-wiley> Kehinde, Equestrian Portrait of the Court-Duke Olivares, 2005, Oil on canvas, 108 x 108 in. (274.3 x 274.3 cm) framed
12 Ghana, c. 1960. Photo: E. G. Schempf - <http://www.csudhnews.com/2011/08/wrapped-in-pride-sept-7-oct-18/>
13 *ibid*
14 <http://rfc.museum/component/phocagallery/category/33-kehinde-wiley> Kehinde Wiley, Sleep, 2008, Oil on canvas, 132 x 300 in. (335.3 x 762 cm)
15 <http://www.cdpaintings.com/annibale-carracci/pieta-by-annibale-carracci>
16 <http://www.artslant.com/ny/articles/show/3345>:
http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2011/09/30_americans_review_what_is_black_art.1.html
17 <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/41567/30-americans-at-the-corcoran-gallery-has-little-to-say>
18 <http://www.spreadartculture.com/ON-THE-WORLD-S-STAGE-A-CHAT-WITH-KEHINDE-WILEY>