

black

In her book *Playing In The Dark* Toni Morrison states, "It was not that this slave population had a distinctive color; it was that this color "meant" something"(Morrison 49). What does that something mean? As Africans were brought to the Americas they became black people, Africans existed long before black people. Black is more than a reference to the skin color of the Africans; it is a system of ideas that are used to define the Africans and their descendents in America, but today the latter, is all too often overlooked. In an interview for his exhibition *Black Like Me* Fred Wilson says, " the color black is really not anybody's skin tone. It's become a way to view the world, and a way to view the world in terms of color"(Wilson 12). Growing up in America, this way of seeing or thinking is ingrained in us from childhood, without our knowing. It is seemingly silent and invisible, but the ideas about black control so much of how we live our. In this work, I want to make this system visible.

I am using traditional photography as a way to visualize black. This is much more than a medium choice, photography has shaped much of my approach to the subject. The technical and historical aspect of photography gives me a place to begin. As black first started to transform in my mind from just a racial identity into more complex ideas, it first became darkness. As I began to see it, black was when it is so dark that there is no difference between when you open or close your eyes; with photography I would be able to capture this black,

itself. I began to see black as the void, deep and consuming; this black is that which we do not understand, not unlike the *black hole* in science, therefore what we fear, hence the connection between black and the unpleasant. Think of your willingness to enter into a dark room filled black, the uneasiness in your stomach. That is what gives words like *black heart* or *black death* their meaning. In language, when you attached black to a word, it not only can describe physical features, but also can be a mark of the unsettling. What happens when black is attached to a people? More importantly what happened to the people attached to this darkness.

Historically black people have struggled against the injustices of this country since they arrived. Many of the first black people in this country were brought as slaves and endured, as slaves, for two hundred years until they were freed by the 13th Amendment (to put it all too simply). This was just one of many obstacles to face black people in America. Despite all the tragedies that have befallen on them, the black population in America has significantly contributed to the advance of America and American culture. Because of the difficult history and the prejudices that still exist in America black people (and other minorities) live as Americans but differently from the majority. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "We who are dark can see America in a way white Americans cannot"(Shelby intro).

Growing up a predominately black city, I spent most of my life unaware of my being black. With my mother, a Creole woman and my father, of both African and Native American ancestry, I am of a fare complexion. Black to me was the

color in the crayon box or dirt, I had no concept of black as a racial identity, let alone my own racial identity. My mother told me a story about when I was younger and she told me I was black, I replied “no, I’m not, look” presenting her my palm. As I grew older and met more people of different background I started to realize that my experiences were different, but it was not until I got to college did I understand what it meant to be black.

Glenn Ligon quotes Zora Neale Hurston’s *How It Feels To be Colored Like Me* in a painting it reads “I feel most colored against a sharp white background” and nothing could be closer to the truth (Hurston). At the University of Michigan with an incoming class of 3,774 Caucasian students to 350 African American students (UMAA freshman profile via 2005), I made my racial discovery. Throughout my four years in college I found myself in several classroom discussions defending what I felt was my life. In my very first semester, I took a history course that focused on 1950’s America, and every class felt as though I had to speak for those not present. I remember when we covered the topic of White Flight, a large migration of whites away from urban centers in the 1950’s. I was awestruck by my classmates rational that White Flight was not racially motivated due to the fact that there were financial issues tied to the whites’ decision to leave the cities, and that they in the same situation may have made the same decision. In class, in conversations, I found out more about what made me not just different but what made me black.

So what does it mean? Black? In this work I am hoping to unfold all the layers of black until it is all there laid out for us to see. My first attempt to visually understanding black was to understand it and its' opposition, white. Black and white play an interesting game in that, though opposed to each other, they are in fact defined by this opposition, white is white because it is not black. In the same text Morrison writes, "An Africanist character is used to limn out and enforce the invention and implications of whiteness" (Morrison 52). For the subjects of my first two images, I choose Salt and Pepper and Milk and Chocolate, chosen for their obvious inherent oppositions and yet, cooperation. The objects are centered and shot on a white background with relatively little shadow. My original intention was to present the subjects as objectively as possible, presenting the viewer with a clear, dumb way to view black and white as a binary. Though simple and obvious, it is important to make this statement for three reasons the first, this gives us a place to start. The second because it is the simple that is often overlooked, but the simple is just as much apart of this issue as any complicated piece lastly, because I spent much of life fooled into believing in a 'color-blind' world; but this is not the case, for as the photographs clearly present, even in black and white there is still a clear difference between that which is white and that which is black. But it came to my attention that the background, being white, could not be unbiased. As it were, these first images deal with the phenomena that occur in both Hurston's quote and my personal experiences mentioned

earlier. These images present us with the unequal binary of white and black in America, the unequal binary that shaped so much of what it means to be black.

From here, I attempt to move from the binary to more difficult relationships of black and white. In the next images, using the same format, I marginalize black even more, but black is still the subject of the images. The first thing that came to mind was the One Drop rule, the American idea that anyone with any trace of African blood is black. Thus, I made a white image with one drop of black, one drop of darkness. At the point the black has entered the image it has changed significantly, just as the “one drop” rule predicted, but it does not reinforce the idea that the black destroys what ever it enters, if anything it enhances. The next image I made was with no black objects, I only included the text “NEGRO” backwards to create a type of mental darkness, to get the viewer to project black onto the white image. How much of our definition of black depends on the actual color and how much does it depend on our own prejudice. The last image, presents the black that resides inside each of us; in my research I had come across a few definitions that described black as the void that existed inside the mouth. After much thought, the idea that darkness resided in all of us was a very powerful one.

The second body of this work is an attempt to get even closer to black. A series of dark images, that are the opposite of the first series, in these images black is the only subject. Motivated by works like *Praise of Shadow* by Jun Ichiro Tanizaki, and the poem *Into The Darkness* by the Detroit poet Blair. Which

approach black unlike western thought, here black becomes a vast multidimensional substance, as opposed to the familiar idea of black as simply a negative. The image's subject matter is black, the content is black, and the color is of course black. In the poem *Into the Darkness* Blair says, "I want to be diamond dusted, carbon creased, black as the inner most core of the earth, dark as a math class blackboard". For this series, I am reaching for the blackest, richest black, the images needed to be this black, I needed to be this black.

My first challenge was figuring the technical aspect to make the images possible. Believe it or not, I found making black images to be close to impossible. Tanizaki writes about how photography and other visual technology are not suitable for anyone but the original inventors of photography, "These machines are the inventions of Westerners, and are, as we might expect, well suited to the Western arts" (Tanizaki). As a minority, photography is not my own as I found out when attempting to make black images. After much discussion about the 'latent' prejudices of traditional photography, I was eventually led to the work of Roy DeCarava, who in his work reinvented the tonal range of traditional photography to suit his subjects, black people. Using a different set of rules and a tonal range closer to DeCarava's I made my first black image, of my hands.

My hands painted as dark as tar, clinch together to form a type of bridge every inch of my hands were black, my fingernails and my palms. My reasoning behind this pose was to answer a question I had, "If black is the shadow, can a shadow cast its' own shadow?" My hands are attempting to hold on to or display

darkness. The shoot for this image took about 45 minutes, which is relatively a short period of time. I sat with my back to the camera, my friend operated the camera with my instruction, I joined my hand together and held them above my head. For the first round of shoots, I was fine but as time went on the simple gesture became increasingly painful, the blood flowed away from my hands, my hands lock on to each other and were seeming being held together by an invisible force, my arms and shoulders ached from holding my hands so high. At the end of the shoot, I was surprised by the physicality of the shoot, it was as if the physicality was implicit in this black. In the resulting image conveyed both the beauty but also the pain of the black figure.

After figuring out the technical end, I struggled in how to use it. I attempted to return to objects as the subject of my images, but every attempt failed to work on the same level as the first image. So I returned to the figure, myself, painting my face black and photographing my head as if it were a physiognomic study; I pulled at my mouth with a hook as a pseudoscientific act, hoping to show the actual intensions of the exploration that the black body endured, by scientist for the camera. From here the work remained a physical act, and a type of performance. The camera became the audience in the performances, the resulting images themselves were technically unlike any I had made or seen before. But I believe that they belong to the same archive of images, as Joseph T. Zealy's daguerreotypes of slaves, which he used as proof, of this theory that blacks were inferior people. Where my body was painted black, I emerged and

slipped into the dark background, where my body was not painted my fair complexion was a stark contrast to the rest of the image dark image. This difference between the dark of my painted self and my actual self is so close to the questions that started this work.

The next images I made became even more physical. The next two images were made in the same time period, the first image is the only image that I did not paint my body, it is of my face seeming to fight out of darkness, struggling for air, representing a type of birth from black. In the next image I painted my entire torso and my feet; I reenacted the pose of the victims of lynching. Because of the physicality of the images I started to look into images of the black body, many of which were evidence of physical violence, one of which were of lynching. By jumping and hanging my head, having the camera catch me at the highest point of my jump, I could reinvision lynching victims, who are often thought as hanging as floating. This difference is very important, I was not only interested in reenacting but also transforming. This image representing a type of death from black, these two images are a place of two opposing views of black, and yet they gel together seamlessly.

The last image I made was a simple visual from the conversation I had with my mother as a child, that I spoke of earlier, where in which I presented her my palm. The palm, regardless of race, is a fair complexion; any person making the argument that they were not black could present their palm as proof. For this image I again painted my entire hand, and presented my palm, black. When I

started this second body of work I wanted to be blacker than any person, this was simply proof of that transformation.

In my first attempts to write about this work I wrote,

“As I pull back the folds of black, I hope I am getting closer to a truth. The truth is not a solution to social issues, rather I hope that it will help me to see race in a more honest way. If the work I make gives the viewer this truth, then it is successful.”

I don't know if is a truth that I have found; rather I think have started to see the role of black in a different way. And as for the viewer, I hope the work helps them see, deeper into the darkness.

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