

“Once A Pancake, Always A Pancake”

Imitation of Life

By

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I hate that I am defined by shallow characters on screen. I hate that the token black still exists. I hate that preconceived notions attached to my pigment overshadow who I am. I hate that I have to go to a different section of the store for my hair care and it is labeled as 'ethnic'. I hate that nude high heels and underwear have no relation to my skin color. I hate that I can count the number of black people in my university classes on one hand. I hate the ignorance that fuels the belief that I will be more successful in bed than in the office. I hate being thought of as an exception. I hate that the little boy in my barbershop thought I played a sport and that was the key to attending college. I hate that a man locked his car door when I went to look at the puppy inside. I hate that big lips and butts are the new fad. I hate that I feel as if I hit the societal triple whammy in regards to my race, gender and sexuality. I hate being surrounded by people who do not understand that white privilege is alive and well. I hate that black women are not seen on a Google search for 'pretty women'. I hate explaining how I wash my hair and that I too, get sunburned. I hate that I am completely ignored at parties. I hate that when I smile at strangers they overt all eye contact. I hate when people ask me to teach them the latest hip-hop dance move. I hate that if I question someone I am seen as confrontational. I hate being the spokesperson for the black community. I hate that I worry about being labeled an angry black women. I love my big thighs. I love my round nose. I love my pitbulls and my parent's value for education. I love my white cisgendered heterosexual boyfriend. I love that my hair defies gravity. I love that black doesn't crack. I cried when I watched Viola Davis' acceptance speech for her Emmy<sup>1</sup>. I cried when I saw Kehinde Wiley's larger

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<sup>1</sup> Viola Davis, ABC Entertainment, 2015 Emmys, Video, 3:51, September 20<sup>th</sup> 2015  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXcT213XYIA>

than life paintings.<sup>2</sup> I cried when I was a girl and asked my mom when segregation ended and she replied it hasn't.

Through my project, "Once a Pancake... Always a Pancake," I reference the 1930's movie *Imitation of Life* and the trope of the mammy figure — specifically Aunt Jemima—to express my personal experience with racism and the lack of social value for black women in our society over time.<sup>3</sup> The title of my project is a quote from the film and references the lack of opportunity for black women. Once you are identified as a black woman, there is no moving forward to amount to something more because that identity is seen as lesser. My body is covered with a thick pancake batter. The goopy mix represents the historic suppression of black women and how that affects my social identity today. A preserved stack of pancakes, made from the batter, withstands the passing of time as racist beliefs are echoed into the present. It engulfs who I am and muffles my words. My words come from inside the stack, straining to remind viewers that there is an individual within the suppressing stereotypes of black women. I pose the question: "How far have we come?"

Sarah Baartman was a young woman taken from her tribe in South Africa and brought to Europe so she could be studied for her body in the early 1800s.<sup>4</sup> Sarah was toured and examined because her butt, breast and genitals were much larger than the European women she was compared to. These European women were considered to be normal and Sarah was seen as a primitive beast. She was treated as less than the

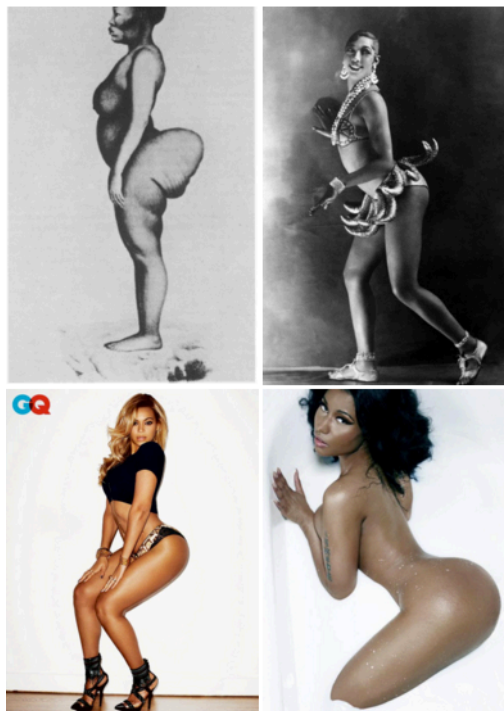
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<sup>2</sup> Kehinde Wiley, *Sleep*, 2008, oil on canvas, 132" x 300", Detroit Institute of Art

<sup>3</sup> *Imitation of Life*, dir, John M. Stahl, 1934 Universal Pictures

<sup>4</sup> "Sara "Saartjie" Baartman," accessed September 2015 <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/sara-saartjie-baartman>

Europeans and stigmatized for her natural body because it did not align with the European views of what a woman should look like. Through this time in the 19th century, many different scientists drew exaggerated depictions of her body. By studying Sarah's past, we can see how the normalization of one thing can stigmatize another. It is also interesting to see how the sexualize body of the black female is still echoed today. Images of Nicki Minaj and her large derrière barley dressed in the tropical forest plays into fetishize ideas of black female sexuality creating an exotic and erotic picture for popular media. With this comparison I laid pictures of Sarah, Nicki Minaj, Josephine Baker, and Beyoncé that show similarities in posture with poked out bottoms and arched backs. I do not mean to say that Nicki Minaj does not have the right to show off her assets, but it should be noted that by doing so she plays into a very long line of the exotic sexualization of black women's bodies.



Comparing Black Female Bodies

Gigi Gigaba wrote an essay on the sexuality of black women and how they are often seen as uncontrollable deviant sex partners, playing into the ideas of blacks being a primitive race and having less ability to demonstrate civilized behavior.<sup>5</sup> Though this theory dates back hundreds of years, I am interested in highlighting how it still exist today. The quote " Once a pancake, always a pancake." not only shows the lack of social value for blacks but also the common placement of blacks being servants that care for white people and possibly creates the best pancake recipe there is like Aunt Jemima. Though these examples are very extreme it is important to understand the history of black people in American society in order to fully understand the modern day treatment of black women.

When I first read the quote from *Imitation Of Life*, I was astonished to how much it still resonates with me years after it was said. In some situations I still feel like no matter how hard I try and no matter how much I succeed, I will always be at least one step behind because the color of my skin and my sex. I want to challenge these labels that drag me down, I want to speak out against the deeply rooted racism that is the backbone of this country.

Devon Troy Strother is a young artist who challenges the black label. He pushes to drop race labels in order to normalize people. This argument is often seen when people go against the label of African-American and push for American. Labels come with the recognition that you are different in some way. You are not seen as the norm. This

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<sup>5</sup> Gigaba, Gugu. "YOUNG BLACK WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF SEXUALITY." Master's thesis, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 2012.

difference justifies the beliefs that non-normative people are lesser. In a vice article titled: *Artist Devon Travis Strother doesn't want to talk about being black*, Devon is compared to black artist, Kara Walker.<sup>6</sup> I think this comparison is interesting because Devon is pushing to void this label while Kara Walker is known for her work that pushes people to see the difference in blacks. Whether it is her depiction of black history or a statement made in a lecture, Kara pushes for an intellectual discussion about difficult topics.

Kara focuses on slave labor in the value of black people in our culture. She emphasizes that the amount of work does not reflect the amount of social value a person can have. The size of her work and graphic content help her make bold gestures to draw in the audience. Her work has a very loud voice that is unforgiving and brutally honest. I admire the tone of her work and her unapologetic demeanor. Another artist that focuses on the topic of slavery and black history in America is Adrian Frank's.

Adrian alters the environment of well-known symbols such as the way slaves are depicted on a slave ship as small black figures. He forces viewers to question both the subject and the content. In his piece entitled *Keep Em In Line*, Adrian composes images of popular shoes in the black community, Air Jordans. From afar the shoes look normal but with a closer gaze, viewers can see that they are made up of small people that represent slaves. He comments on societies current mentality towards consumerism, entrapment, and labor law issues from 1st to 3rd world communities.<sup>7</sup> This depiction takes something familiar and turns on its head. I feel like this work is very successful because it really

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<sup>6</sup> Sokol, Zach. "Artist Devin Troy Strother Doesn't Want to Talk About Being Black | VICE | United States." VICE. January 12, 2015. Accessed October 15, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Frank, Adrian. "Keep'em In Line." Adrian Franks. Accessed November 10, 2015.

makes people quizzical towards their own unquestioned views. I think work like this remains with the viewer long after they leave the gallery setting. Another artist who plays with the juxtaposition of subject matter and environment is Kehinde Wiley.



Keep Em In Line

Kehinde is a painter who samples well-known historic fine art of important people and places modern-day people of color within the unfamiliar environment. With the same pose and quality of work, Wiley questions the lack of black people as subjects in art and tells the once ignored story of blacks in our formal history. Wiley states, "I want to see people who look and feel as I do."<sup>8</sup> By making this type of work, Wiley counters the stigmatized and harmful depictions of black people we often face by showing them at the same level as successful white people. We too often see negative stereotypes reinforced. We passively let media engraver brains with the belief that people of color amount to less,

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<sup>8</sup> Wiley, Kehinde. "Kehinde Wiley Studio." Kehinde Wiley Studio. Accessed March 2015.

deserve less and have much less value compared to their white counterparts. This conditioning starts at a young age and affects us so deeply we sometimes do not realize it. I think the key to reversing some of this harmful education instilled in us from the day we were born, is to call it out. Let it be known that this is wrong. I want people to see how their actions and negative words laced with racism tarnish the lives and experiences of many.

The creator of ABC and Me flashcards, Leilani Brooks also sees the lack of normalized black people in the formal education of children.<sup>9</sup> If children have only been taught that to be a successful black person you must be great at sports or be a powerhouse musician then how do we expect them to strive for something else? Leilani Brooks made flashcards that show successful black people as politicians, entrepreneurs, inventors and even the average grade school child. This form of rewriting what children are taught helps shift the perspective. It also supports the theory that representation matters for children. These different artists help me brainstorm different ways to challenge the norm and think about how to approach my audience.

As I continued working, I was suggested to look at an artist whose work my project related to. I researched Wilmer Wilson IV who is known for his performance pieces where he covers his body in common daily objects.<sup>10</sup> I also visited the Detroit Institute of Art Museum and saw the 30 American exhibitions. This exhibition was amazing and being able to see work of African Americans was very encouraging.

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<sup>9</sup> Brooks, Leilani. "Abc Flashcards (African American History)." *Abc Flashcards (African American History)*. 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, Wilmer, Iv. "WILMER WILSON IV." *WILMER WILSON IV*. Accessed February 25, 2016.



My brainstorming and research led to a list of conceptual ideas base on sexuality and race. By the end of the first few weeks I had an idea of what I wanted my project to be about. I strived to question the hypersexuality of black women in media. I came across a theory called the Invisible Middle. The Invisible Middle was coined by Pepper Miller after a study was done to see how black women felt about the ways they are represented in the media.<sup>11</sup> Most women from the survey stated that they feel a lack of representation of the normalized black woman. There are often depictions of the successful starlet and this is opposed to the no-good welfare wife. It seems that black people in media are used as puppets to reinforce negative beliefs. Black women want to see a normalized girl-next-door instead of the token friend. There are a few examples of black family sitcoms but many more images of black criminals. By shifting the depiction of black female characters on screen, we can alter the way real black women are seen in society. I also read a book by Tamara Harris that helped me justify my anger.<sup>12</sup> Harris also questions the way black women are depicted in media by showing similarities in people through their aspirations outside of race. She uses her rage as a tool to empower her message. During this process I felt that I was biting off quite a large pieces in my attempts to conceptualize this problem but my drive to not sit and watch as someone else poorly defines me pushes me through long days in my studio.

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<sup>11</sup> Thompson, Krissah. "Essence: Black Women Still Poorly Depicted in Media." Washington Post. October 10, 2013. Accessed October 21, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Harris, Tamara Winfrey. *The Sisters Are Alright: Changing the Broken Narrative of Black Women in America*. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2015.

As studio sessions continued I was advised to spend a day creating without self-critique. I was also given this instruction without notice and did not have time to prepare materials or ideas. I dove and went to the wood studio grabbed some scrap wood and begin painting images of different famous black woman and thinking about how I can alter an image and change one's perception. I did a lot of thinking about the similarity of images from the past and how it is echoed in today's media. I had a critique on the work I made during this time and received feedback that recognized my puzzle like forms that focus on the construction and deconstruction of an image. I thought about how this can drastically alter and identity. I was then assigned to pursue and work out my different ideas by applying my thoughts to a physical form. I struggled a bit with this assignment because I did not have solid ideas and I still wanted to put time into research.

With less than a week until critique day, I stayed in the studio for a few nights and squeezed in research while brainstorming. After comparing so many images of sexualized black women from over time, I thought about the non-sexualized woman. I thought about the mammy figure and how it seemed that this character is very successful in what she does (which is serving the white family). Most of the mammy figures pride lies in the ability she has to care for others. I thought about the modern vision of a successful person and had the idea to alter it with the mammy character. I replaced the face of Katy Perry on the cover of Forbes Magazine, which is often graced with white men, with Aunt Jemima. Jemima's the spokesperson and logo for the successful pancake and syrup brand and emulates many qualities of the racist mammy stereotypes.

I really enjoyed this juxtaposition of the servant being such a successful person that they are depicted as an ideal businessperson.



Forbes Magazine

My next experiment included altering popular images of women of color physically by placing them on a three-dimensional puzzle . I picked images that showed the drastic difference between the stereotypical successful entertainer and the welfare wife. The theory of Invisible Middle helped me think about the lack or representation of the average black woman. We learn a lot from media and even if we are aware that all media is not correct it still alters our perceptions of different types of people based on their race, gender and class.



Cube

With ideas about the invisible middle rattling in my head, I took the phrase literal and began altering family photos. This was the first time I placed personal images into my project. I wanted to avoid this in the beginning of my project because I did not want to focus on my personal story. I omitted myself from photos. I realized that it would be very difficult for me to explore something so close to me without including my personal experiences.

With so many thoughts about altering black women in media and who makes these existing images, my next experiment involved tracing my body onto a large brown piece of paper and staining that brown with white paint. I froze acrylic paint into cubes and attach them to the figure. As time elapsed the white paint and covered the brown paper creating an irreversible stain on the image. This creation got good feedback in my critique. I think that it was a good balance between literal expression, which I tend to lean towards and an abstraction of my deeper concept around race. The size and motion of dripping painting definitely captured the audience's attention and help lead them to question the meaning of the piece.

The final experiment I did was referenced most in my project today. As I thought about the brown figure being stained with white paint, I had the urge to apply this to my own body. I poured white paint onto my bare skin and projected images onto my body. I composed a video of clips. The clips showed black women in media ranging in time but not in character. The video reiterated my point about the lack of normalized black women in media by showing specific examples of stereotypical depictions. With this experiment, the feedback I received questioned how the paint is to be applied, what the deeper meaning of the paints was and the evolution of the black woman in media in time. I was questioned why I felt the need to project images onto my nude body and how being nude would create a wall between my audience and my concept. I did not really like this because I did not see my nudity as a distraction but a representation of my pure self-identity and my vulnerability. From this I really had to dig deep into what I wanted to talk about and accept the change of path my project had taken to being more personal than I expected. After my December review, I was advised to record a personal narrative to anchor my concept.



White Paint on Dark Figure

Ultimately, as I continued to revise and record my narrative, I found the tone I wanted to present to my audience—but as this developed I felt that it was moving further from my original idea of focusing on how black women are represented in media. I spoke with visiting artist Gwynneth van Laven and she suggested that I rethink what I want to really say because I had now spread myself very thin across a wide range of problems under the overwhelming umbrella of negative stereotypes for black women. It was not until writing the outline for this essay that I got my idea for my final project. I was looking back at my past research and project development when I came across one of my slides in the presentation for my December review. The top of it said “Once a pancake... always a pancake.” I thought maybe instead of white paint and projections of women in media maybe I should use Aunt Jemima pancake mix to cover myself and focus more on my individual voice. My narrative was shaping to be about my own experiences as I turned my focus to myself. I had accepted that this project was my time to work on something that I care about but also valuable time to push myself to create something for myself. I probably will not have this opportunity again. With so much uninterrupted personal development through making I now value each studio so much more.

After I decided I wanted to work with pancakes, I researched artists who work with preserving food and found Steph Mantis, who encases pizza in resin.<sup>13</sup> The resin, along with other chemicals coats the pizza and preserves it in a hard clear case. I figured that pancakes aren't too different from pizza and I should try out her method.

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<sup>13</sup> Mantis, Steph. "Forever Pizza - Steph Mantis." Forever Pizza - Steph Mantis. 2012. Accessed February 20, 2016.

I decided to cook the pancakes and figure out how to preserve them for the gallery. The preservation would conceptually translate as how little things have change in the realm of social value and opportunity for black women.

I went and bought a few boxes of Aunt Jemima pancake mix and whipped up the batter. In an empty studio I undressed and covered myself in the batter. With the help of photographer and friend, Allie Chase, I was able to document this process. I then collected all the raw pancakes and took them back to my house to cook. The cooking process was defiantly that— a process. I mixed preservatives into the batter and cooked them at a low temperature for twice the recommend time. I then baked them in the oven to help rid them of moisture. After they cooled, I applied weight to flatten them into hard disc. As day turned to night as my stack grew. To keep the stack from toppling or leaning I dug holes into each pancake and impaled them on wooden dowels. I then had a firm 18 inch stack of pancakes that I could turn flip and transport without it falling apart. Next step was to cover the mass in resin. I did not want to create a casing for the stack so I decided to apply the resin like paint instead of pouring it into a mold. Three coats of resin and two weeks of time proved to be enough to keep the pancakes from molding or deteriorating. After the resin completely hardened, I flipped the stack and carved out a hole for the speaker. A worry was that the pancakes would completely distort the narrative and make is inauditable but by facing the speaker down towards the opening and propping the tower, the sound is clear.



Batter Up

Weeks went by as I rerecorded my narrative and video. I composed a piece that engulfs a huge part of my personal identity and emotions and put them on a display for the public view. As the opening got closer, I got more nervous. I was worried about the audience's reaction and worried that all my effort would not accomplished my set goals. With less than a week left before the exhibition opening, my pancake tower had fallen and shattered and my video would not export, my nerves are pretty shot. Now that I am reflecting on this time, I imagine myself being in *GO!* mode. I worked up until what felt like the last possible minute.



"Once A Pancake, Always A Pancake"



On the night of the opening I was very overwhelmed. It felt surreal to see my piece in a gallery. The environment was too loud for people to hear my narrative but I still feel that the piece was an overall success. I often found myself gawking at people who were looking at my work. I saw that people noticed the stack of pancakes immediately and stop to read my statement, "From the Aunt Jemimas to the Jezebels, popular use of these characters and those alike have concealed my identity as a black woman, leaving a figure preserved through our American history. The lack of social value and opportunity has held me to be seen as no more than a modern mammy."<sup>14</sup> People soon made their way up to me and expressed their appreciation for my project. I was pleased that people were touched by my work and humbled that they gave me some of their attention and time to express my experiences.



"Once A Pancake, Always A Pancake"

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<sup>14</sup> Parker, Jadzia. "Once A Pancake, Always A Pancake" - Imitation of Life. 2016. Slusser Gallery, University of Michigan.

As this 8 month long project comes to its end, I reflect on where I began. I knew I wanted to talk about race and gender while asking my audience to connect with an identity that may not fit their own. I pushed back pretty hard at the idea of including personal stories but in the end that is what made my project so strong and what made me so passionate. This concept is not something that just sprung up when IP began, I have done multiple projects in the past that focus on race but I do feel that this project helped me learn the most about myself because a lot of time was spent thinking instead of creating.

A goal I started off with was to educate people. I found my topics interesting and I wanted to say something about them. I began with studying the sexualized black women from different time periods. I've been comparing my findings to show how past-radicalized ideas are still relevant today. I did not want to ironically support the stereotype of angry black woman and I worried that my words would be shrugged off as just another rant. I did not want this to be a cry for help. I did not want to have a pity party. I wanted people to understand that there is a lack of social value for people who look like me and see how this harms my personal identity and those alike.

I realized that the best way I could educate my audience was to focus on my own experiences because it is what I know the most about. By allowing myself to be vulnerable, I journeyed from a state of generalized anger to exploring my personal experiences with racism and sexism. I know this isn't the end of my exploration of race and gender because it engulfs most of my thoughts. As I continue on towards graduation I wonder if I

will have the time to think so deeply about this topic. I still question how other black women feel in our society and wonder if there is someone who has a completely different experience as me.

I got into The University of Michigan with an essay about how I did not want to be labeled as “great black student” because I felt that the black label held me back. I felt that it was unneeded and created a space for people to view me a lesser. I am finishing my undergrad with a lot more experience being labeled as black because here there are few of us on campus. I pushed myself to learn about identity through self-discovery and I reveal life stories centered on my unapologetic blackness to educate others. I would say my integrative project was a success and allowed me to develop as a person as well as artist!

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