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*Nothing But Love*

Acrylic On Unstretched Canvas

My essay explores how portrait artists reflect their inner thoughts, the communities they belong to, and their different ideas and perspectives on various through their artwork.. I researched post modern artists Barkley L Hendricks, Jewel Ham and Taylor Simmons. A common theme within my research was the concept of interpretation, and the connection an artist has to their audience. Seeing what those artists were able to communicate, I felt inspired to exercise presenting themes that are present within life and putting them into my artwork. All while being intentional on what I chose to present to my viewers. All the artists mentioned incorporated references to different music artists and lyrics to explore certain feelings or narratives. This inspired me to paint the album CTRL by Sza. This album is important to how I look at growth, change, and self image. Other themes that are present within my painting are self image and perception. The other painted figures signify extensions of myself in relation to self image.

# The Individuality of Portrait Artist



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Writer's Note: *In this paper I will be exploring the ways art is able to reflect an artist's inner thoughts, feelings, physiological state and their identities in connection to the communities they belong to. In an attempt to see what factors of an artist's life impact their creative process.*

## **I . Introspection**

Introspection is described as a state of reflection in which one examines their own mental state. The general aim of introspection is to be able to form an opinion about ourselves and how we look at things. It's based on self knowledge, knowledge of our own ways of thinking, and how we view ourselves. (Hartfield 3) There are many theories having to do with the different aspects that contribute to the act of introspection. In relation to how we perceive ourselves is the inner sense theory. Inner sense theories grapple with the connection our visual exterior sensory has to our own inner perception. This concludes that a person's mental state is caused by the experiences they've had within their lifetime. Which acts as reasoning to the way they perceive the world around them. (Smithies, Stoljar 10)

## **II . Expression**

Another aspect that I think is important to acknowledge when diving deep into the reason why artists create is the concept of self expression. Self expression are acts that present one's personality, emotions, beliefs etc. (Khouja 1) Generally presenting the unique aspects of them as a person. John Hospers acknowledges the different perspectives of authors, philosophers and art critics in trying to answer what expression does for an artist. Although there are many different thoughts and opinions as to why artists create the work they do, I would like to highlight some arguments that I'd like to expand on. It's acknowledged that some people view expression

through art as an intuition or something that has to be done in order for an unknown lingering feeling or idea to be relieved. It can help in expressing subconscious feelings or ideas that the artist is unaware of up until their artwork communicates a more clear idea (Hospers 3). This list of theories can also be compiled into The expression theory. The expression theory describes the perspective that art can be used to express an artist's current thinking and experiences and emotional thinking as well as the ones of others around them. This also connects to how their environments impact them, whether that is intentionally or not (Khatchadourian 1).

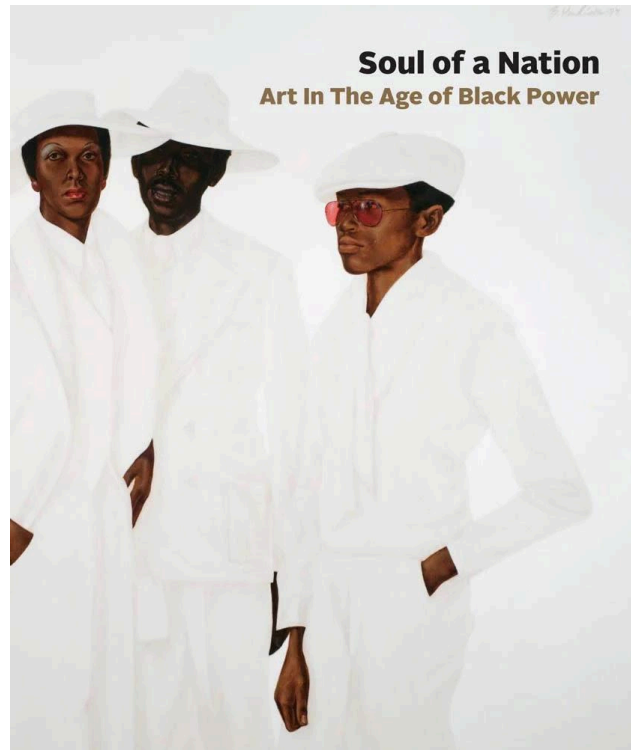
A common pushback I've encountered while researching is summarized as such. Although an artwork may be full of expression, that doesn't mean an artist was actively experiencing emotions that provoked the making of that piece (Stephen 1, Khatchadourian 2). Overall saying that expressive qualities in a work such as color, or facial expression don't necessarily have a connection to the intentions of an artist, more say the meaning (Mitias 4). Both sides advocating for and against this theory are based on generalized arguments, as theories can be. I believe that individually, the context, intentions, and awareness of how their piece may be interpreted are defining factors behind what compels an artist to make a piece. One could observe an artist's work and create theories toward the meaning of the work, and there's nothing wrong with doing so. I feel as though nothing is more authentic than an artist's own meanings, intentions, and personal accounts of why they've created something. Unless they state that the meaning is up for interpretation. This is something that is personal and different for every artist. Although that is a general statement it's focused on the individuality of the artist.

### **III. Portraiture**

When referring to portraiture it's common for people to think of the many great painters of the renaissance era. Although none of the artists that I cover have any relation to this time period, and are very much considered contemporary. My goals are to highlight and learn about the artists that are inspiring to me and my artistic journey. As I observe these works, I want to know the stories behind the work, the artist perspectives, and their creative processes. Through this I hope to gain insight on the ways others think about our humanness. Within my research it has been important to seek out identifiable aspects of using subjects in portraiture. Cynthia Freeland provides a list of five theories on the goals an artist can have while painting their subjects, and what presenting them to an audience represents. She states the purpose is to show one's uniqueness, to accurately present one's physical appearance, to act as proof of existence, to present information on the model's personality and/ or attitude, and to capture a subject's overall essence (Freeland 4-7). Within my deep dive into the artist that I have yet to cover, may the aspects listed above act as a reference as I look into whether or not those concepts show up within the artist works described below.

### **IV. Barkley L Hendricks ( 1945 - 2017 )**

My first introduction to Barkley L. Hendricks was on the cover of a book. The brown shaded figures in his painting are complemented by their all white clothing and background in a way I've never seen before. Their faces having so much value and pigment to be complemented by a flat background (Hendricks). This work was featured on the cover of *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*. A book which has excited me with each turn of a page.



Hendricks. *What's Going On?* 1974. Kavi Gupta,

<https://kaviguptaedititions.com/products/soul-of-a-nation>

Barkley L Hendricks is a postmodern realist painter whose work consists of primarily black subjects. Born on April 16, 1945 Hendricks credits his hometown of Philadelphia for its creative influence. Throughout 1963 to 1967 Hendricks attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. In 1966 he was awarded the William E Crosson scholarship which enabled him to travel to various countries in Europe where he observed and was inspired by 15-16 century renaissance paintings, something I feel is apparent within his work (“Barkley L. Hendricks”)

While researching about Hendricks it was common to see him talk about the politicization around his work. It is also important to note the era his most known works were made in, which was the 60's and 70's. This was a very impactful time for Black Americans because of the Civil Rights and Black power movement. It was an impactful time for the black

identity and black consciousness (Elujoba). But the narratives interpreted about Hendricks' work aren't exactly formed from the clearest of symbolism.

For instance the painting “Lawdy Mama”, painted in 1969 depicts a young black woman with an afro looking forward towards viewers (Hendricks).

Hendricks states his frustrations with interpretations of this work. While taking into account the political context of the afro for black Americans at the time this painting was made, making a



Hendricks, Barkley. *Lawdy Mama*. 1969. *The Frick Collection*

<https://www.frick.org/exhibitions/hendricks/1>

the political statement wasn't a point of focus for the artist. He states “there are always reactions to that piece from people who thought they knew something about art, thinking it was Angela

Davis, or someone like that. No. I did it because it was my cousin.” This statement from the artist provides a personal context to a piece that is often misinterpreted (Pedro).

Another example of this is with Hendricks painting “What's going on,” which references a song released in 1971 by Marvin Gaye by the same title (Gaye). A song that takes on great context of its timing, the song referencing the Vietnam War, racism and conflicts observed to be impacting the black community. It's a song that calls for mediation and reconciliation (Moon, Russell). But the correlation to this song and the painting isn't the political aspects of it. Hendricks was drawn to the intro, filled with scattered greetings from unknown voices before the instruments are presented (Whitley Godfrey 195) These voices are in an unknown place, making it subjective for the listener to decide where they are. This can be connected to the white in the background surrounding the figures, placing them in a non-existent setting. Hendricks states his painting connection to the song as such. “... my approach to the composition is based on that clustering of voices, familiar and convivial perhaps on a street, or at a houseparty” (Whitley Godfrey 195).

These interpretations of the artist's work focus on a rather important point. “I wasn't ever interested in speaking for all black folk. Much of what I was trying to do with my work was to be as good a painter as I could be. As Black artists we've been denied some of the depth of descriptive analysis.” This quote specifically raises the question of when the art of a black artist is political. If it is viewed as such does it make that true for the artwork” (Whitley Godfrey 195).

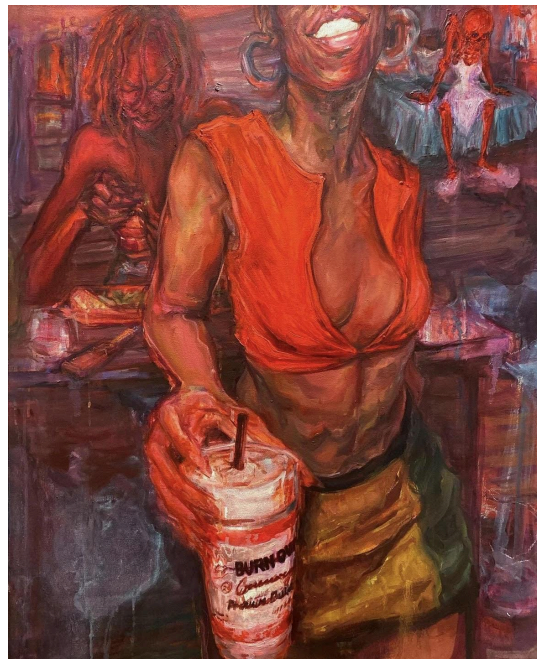
In the works referenced above things that the artist admired or thought about were pulled into his work yet had a different set of connotations. Although Hendricks wasn't shy of making political statements within his work, these interpretations put a focus on the concept of intent of an artist vs. a viewer's perception.



There were also times in Hendricks' work where directly wanted to capture the essence of a person he painted. He was also a photographer, becoming closer to photography students rather than other painters while he attended Yale university. The photographs he took of people were sometimes used as references for some of his paintings. With strangers and people he knew he would photograph them in ways that were appealing to him. Although he was trained very diligently in observing his subjects, sometimes painting them without them being present (Whitley Godfrey 195). His photography brought in another aspect. Photography exercised him being able to capture the essence of a subject in a specific moment. As this would contribute to his work as a portrait painter and photographer (Lubow).

#### **V. Contemporary Artist: Jewel Ham**

Jewel Ham wasn't a name I was familiar with up until a few weeks ago, even though I've seen her work countless times on different platforms such as Instagram, or pinterest. Her work mainly presents everyday scenes of black femmes, who she portrays in signature neon pinks, purples, oranges, and reds. A piece that caught my attention is "burnout (it's lit)" (Ham). Not only did it impress me with its vibrant colors and technique, but I was interested in the subtle symbolism within it. On the upper right corner is a figure that resembles a painting by Annie Lee called "Blue Monday" (Lee).



Ham, Jewel. "Burn Out Its Lit", 2024. *Instagram*

<https://www.instagram.com/whateverjewel/p/C5INVNVgBNu/>



Lee, Annie. "Blue Monday", 1985. *Black Art Depot*

<https://www.blackartdepot.com/collections/annie-lee-art>

[-gallery/products/blue-monday-by-annie-lee](#)

Made in 1985, "Blue Monday " is a painting that depicts a faceless woman, sitting up slumped in bed in a nightgown. This work was inspired by Lee's feelings towards her current job at the time (Justabrown girl Network). It's a depiction of her exhaustion and daily persistence which many can relate to. This painting is quite popular within black households, and is known for its relatability among black women (Artforum). One correlation between this piece and black women is that this can be a visual representation of tiredness when navigating the two defining factors of their identities. Combating both aspects of womanhood and expectations of that in society , and racial aspects that impact many different sections of their lives. Although I have described these separately, in the case of thinking about the identity of black women they are inseparable and intertwining. Another connection to the work can be attributed to the complex societal expectations of black women regarding the expression of their struggles and complexities (Kilpatrick).

In connection to this, there is a big focus within Jewels work on mental health. Which he openly states has a great effect on her, but feels as though exploring mental health for herself and her audience is important especially as a black woman. She takes note of how there is not a great area of focus or attention on black women and their mental health. "It's not really large and in charge for us to feel those things. It's not as excusable, it's not seen as "valid" for us to really feel all those feelings." With expressing her own experiences and feelings within her work her viewers are "being invited in or confronted" by the work (Brandon Lee). There is a level of

vulnerability that makes a statement and tries to communicate a sense of gratification in feeling the emotions she also feels.

Although the narrative of internal struggle is something Jewel commonly addresses, she also often depicts moments of black women in reflection, celebration, and communion. (HA) Her paintings are filled with people a part of her community, people that have great significance to her life and credits her work as being an appreciation of them. (Youtube- Metropolitan) Not only do these works capture the personalities of the subjects but also their attitudes, which are used to tell a story which is something she hasn't been shy of (Marks).

Along with color, contextual storytelling, and expression these paintings manifest a certain essence. While doing so she makes references to objects, lyrics, and phrases that are important to these moments and to black and or/ pop culture. For instance a painting called, “ and did” (Ham, And Did) which is a woman drinking from a bottle labeled “Haters Tears”. Which is a reference to a Megan Thee Stallion song “God's Favorite”.(Megan Thee Stallion). Which has the lines “My favorite drink my haters tears, it calls for celebration” (“Megan Thee Stallion – God’s Favorite”; Marks) The various things alluded to in her work have a certain significance to Jewel personally, and to the viewer if they also understand the context behind them or shall have an individual connection to them (Jr.).With signifying factors Jewel is able to form an audience that doesn't just find her work appealing but they are aware of the similar thoughts, feelings, humor, and experiences they share with this artist. Although Jewel at times doesn't explicitly state the meanings of the references in her work, the goals of the objects are to act as symbols

## VI. Taylor Simmons

My introduction to Taylor Simmons was through a painting I stumbled across on Instagram called “Jessica at 3:00” (Simmons). This painting depicts a man sitting down on the subway with his bicycle in front of him with a hoodie on. This figure seemed very familiar to me, as someone who takes the train daily in the city of Boston. This is a depiction of an everyday man, someone who doesn’t draw a lot of attention. I became interested in the mind of the artist that thought to portray such an ordinary figure.



Simmons, Taylor “*Jessica at 3:00*”, 2024. Instagram

<https://helenaanrather.com/exhibition/limbo-living-is-my-best-option/>

Brooklyn based painter Taylor Simmons' work consists of black subjects, interesting ranges of color, and various types of brush strokes that push into abstraction. One thing that I found unique is the artist's interest in archetypes. The man in “Jessica at 3:00 “ is an archetype

best described as “unc,” “uncle,” or “bossman,” [which] is a social archetype known to Black people across continents; aging, known to the neighborhood, friendly and familial, yet not paternal” (Verheijden).

Taylor’s observations of archetypes can be attributed to his interest in looking at archive images, which he uses as references often in his work (McKeon). He’s drawn to images that take place in the 80s, 90’s, the south, and atlanta. While looking at these images he acknowledges the lack of records or documentation in certain communities. Which contributes to his emphasis to record recurring archetypes in the images he sees and to create “mythos around them” (Klingelfuss).

In connection to his interest of the south, Taylor was born and raised in Atlanta, which he credits as being an important place as his work is often centered around his childhood. Diving into themes associated with a younger version of himself is an introspective act for Taylor. He describes it as a “psychonautic thing”. “I’m delving into my own psyche to figure out what I’m thinking about.” He states that things he experienced and enjoyed during his childhood were sometimes overlooked and that art is a way to treasure those moments (Klingelfuss).

What I also found interesting is the artist's creative process which has quite a range of intentions and practices. Sometimes approaching his canvas unsure what the end product will be, Taylor tries to let the art speak for itself. Analyzing his paintings when they're done to explore what is being communicated. When Taylor’s work is more based on intentionality, he has specific ideas or images that inspire feelings to be expressed.(RB) When it comes to portraiture, he tries to capture the unique aspects of a person, or the “little things” about them, which is important to how he intends the viewers to interpret the work (McKeon; Klingelfuss).

Similarly to the artist stated above, Taylor also makes references to pop culture moments and songs, things that are specific to the artist and black culture (Verheijden). Knowledge of these references act as a guild into his thought process. Taylor is an avid lover of hip hop and jazz, this love is displayed in the titles of pieces. Such as a painting called “Umi Says 3:20” (Simmons, Umi Says 3:20), which makes reference to a song by hip hop artist Most Def (Mos Def). ”In “Jessica at 3:00 “ He references the song “Jessica” by Herbie Hancock at the timestamp 3:00 (Herbie Hancock). This is a smooth jazz song that has an unsettling demeanor lingering through it that tells a complex story. This is intended to be a “score” for the subject and leads to more questions about him. “What’s the scene? Who’s this person? What are they listening to?” (Verheijden).

## **VII . Conclusion**

In conclusion art is able to reflect what an artist admires, or wants to communicate whether this is a conscious or subconscious decision. Vulnerability plays an important role when an artist chooses to reference things that are specific to their personal taste or interest, as it can be interpreted differently from how an artist intends.. While an artist's work can reflect their thoughts and emotions this is not the case every time, as the same for introspective within the creative process. Portraiture can be used to communicate a message or can just simply capture a certain aura that someone carries with them.

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