

Art and Activism: Implications for Art Education in a Twenty-first Century Colony

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Abstract

The art component in the chaotic intersections of 2020 cannot be ignored. The expressive outputs of thoughts and feelings that are relevant first-person accounts in the struggle against oppression are also valuable markers that illuminate historical timelines. How reflective are these situations, and what can be derived from these moments? What do the happenings of these times mean for art educators, students, and fellow artists in one's community? This article advocates the creation of art as a viable medium to respond to felt life experiences. This article is also intended to encourage both educators and students, on their own artistic paths, to consider approaches to the subject of race made by artists connected with Bermuda - as artists who share their space and place in this 21st century colony.

Keywords: Art, activism, race, Bermuda

Introduction

The discourse of the role of art as a part of public protest actions and other revolutionary efforts to achieve societal change is a recurring one in art education. There was a resurgence with the civil unrest of the summer of 2020 when, within the stressed environment of a world-wide pandemic, simmering racial tensions exploded in the United States. Visual art tributes assisted in bringing together global support against racial oppression. As younger, wealthier, and greater numbers of people openly added their voice to the resistance of offensive and unequal treatment based on race (Buchanon, et al., 2020), universities and museums, on both sides of the Atlantic, were quickly developing interdisciplinary modules and projects that addressed art and activism (Suwito, 2020).

Certainly, artistic interest in racial themes is due to a sense of shared consciousness and existential inquiry, and it ensures both a connection with contemporary affairs and collaboration with activists. As such, this discourse is not limited by geographic location and population size. Implications of relevance is particularly applicable to art education in Bermuda.

Bermuda has a racial legacy as an active participant in the Atlantic World history of displacement, subjugation, resistance, and reform. This is prominently highlighted by economic and social disparities, with historical markers such as the publication of the slave narrative of Mary Prince (Prince, 1831), and more recently, the overwhelming participation by a cross-section of the island's population in the Black Lives Matter March.

There are not many artists with connections to Bermuda who have overtly addressed racial themes in their work. Nevertheless, individuals and instances addressing race visually to foster discussion and positive changes, can be found. Importantly, relevant considerations applicable to an ongoing refinement of culturally-responsive teaching can be extracted from the lived experience and perspectives of those artists who have explored race. The ensuing information will highlight several of these experiences and perceptions.

Shared Identities and Experience

Art education provides learning opportunities that enable students to develop their critical thinking, curiosity, resourcefulness, and collaboration skills to make necessary connections and to seek creative solutions for problems.

It engages and nurtures student minds, hearts, and abilities (Sousa & Pilecki, 2013). In ideal situations, these opportunities are meaningful experiences and lead to more than the learning of cultural heritage, the preparation for employment in creative fields, and the creation of marvelous imagery.

Art education is also a route to enable students to learn of themselves and the responsibility of participating and contributing to their society. This endeavor is made more relevant and impactful when art educators are seen to embody this interest and aspiration. As lifelong learners themselves, teachers are aware that of all that transpires in the interaction of the course of study, the attention, relatability, and trust they receive may be established solely on perceived shared identities.

Dame Jennifer Smith, in regarding her teacher, artist and art educator, Charles Lloyd Tucker, emphasized that he was normal (Osuna-Diaz, 2009, Video). As a child, she was astonished to learn that he did ordinary things and was known by her family. Furthermore, he was one who produced art and depicted realities with which she was familiar. In essence, beyond sharing her interest in art, he shared her space and place, thus becoming relatable. This briefly stated recollection reveals recognition of a life in a place and time with divisions and mores that would certainly include the racial component. It was symbolic of wider Bermuda.

While acknowledging that an impact on student's lives and learning may be realized by their physical presence alone, shared identity and artistic interest, although advantageous, is not sufficient. Art educators must be strategic and intentional - leading to student engagement (hooks, 2009). Learning is effectively achieved when the parties are communicating and there is trust in each other.

Dialogue must occur. In the sharing, the effective art teacher would relate not only the experiences of other relevant artists but also their own lived experience. By incorporating into communications and presentations personal stories of facing oppressive realities based on racial treatment, the teacher should aim to be seen as an invested facilitator also facing and learning life lessons. This was an ideal hoped for by the Progressive Group in their 'Analysis of Bermuda's Social Problems' (The Progressive Group, 1958).

This role is not easy for the art teacher. Letting students know one's feelings and positions on matters is an exposure that can make one vulnerable, but can also lead to rewarding trustworthy relationships that will, in turn, build relationships and benefit both parties (Terronez, 2017). The aim is a mutual understanding that while times change, [the] struggles associated with social integration have not; art should challenge and reward the human spirit (Chapman, 1978). Felt experiences often provide strong stimulation, leading to genuine expression and personal fulfillment.

Sharon Muhammad (formerly known as Sharon Wilson) is Bermuda's most outspoken artist on the transformative role of art and art education on personal perspectives. She is an embodiment of intentional and revolutionary engagement. She acknowledges the impact of shared identities and makes opportunities to share her perspective and its influencing factors. Muhammad readily states that she came to realize the power of imagery in an amazing personal discovery when, as a young person, she noted the absence of Black people in works of art that she saw. She explains how this invisibility had a major impact on both her life and work - recently celebrated by the Bermuda Arts Council as a legacy of uplifting black identity and narratives. While she remains engaged in the personal struggle to identify herself and how she desires to be perceived, she wants her community to recognize the "social, spiritual and psychological effects which imagery has on our lives" (Muhammad, 2020). Furthermore, she seeks to enable successive generations of Black Bermudians to also produce inclusive, uplifting imagery of their humanity. Muhammad sees this production as a healing activity as she desires for them to proudly see themselves depicted in the beautiful ordinariness of their lives and not to blindly assimilate the imagery and trends of the prevailing Eurocentric standard (2020).

Included in the next generation of artists who share the passion for stories and uplifting imagery that counter prejudice and discrimination based on race within this British colony is contemporary photographer Jayde Gibbons. Posting as Queendom Heights, she too documents and inserts into the community's visual consciousness the humanity of the Black population, and Black men in particular. In her work, individuals of all ages appear in an honest reality, alone and in company, candid and posed, rugged and fashionable. She shares this space and place, making ordinary daily experiences extraordinary simply by providing an exposure of the overlooked (Queendom Heights, 2020). The isolated moments place attention on identity and allows community members to see themselves as significant in a home where many feel otherwise.

A Legitimate Response

Art educators must have their students see the use of art as a medium to express their feelings and to seek societal change as an important and legitimate response. For some artists and art critics, this focus is the actual job of the artist - to be an agent for change. Certainly, resistance and conflict have always been factors in generating art (Dewey, 1934). Furthermore, the message and content of art, as with lived experience, is not limited to the positive and pretty or to an established perspective. Imagery has been used extensively in Western art by individual artists in causes such as protesting wars, i.e. Picasso's *Guernica* (Hunter, et.al, 2005, p. 224), to artist groups protesting sexism and racism within the art world (Guerilla Girls, 2020).

Mixed media artist, Calix Smith, (also known by the moniker NOBODY) an artist with a self-proclaimed socio-political agenda, is one who is disturbed by what he sees as the lack of activism in Bermudian art. He would like to see more. He questions why there remains a resistance to addressing Bermuda's ongoing racial tensions, with artists preferring to depict paradise, in a *collective culture of avoidance*. For him, avoidance, and the fear of offending, actually serves to perpetuate the existing status quo (Smith, 2018).

Smith's perspective is an indictment. While addressing race has actually been the content and major theme in the work of many Black American artists, this has not been the case in Bermuda. Into post-segregation, life for Bermuda's Black population did not provide the luxury of fine art expression and exhibition. Furthermore, the branding of the island as a paradise offered no encouragement for public discourse on their perspectives or the oppression of racism. Regardless, these impediments no longer serve as excuses for addressing the legacy of racial oppression and contemporary prejudice and discrimination. Additionally, students must be taught that each first-person account is a visual marker of historical value that can illuminate the timelines. No one else can tell the individual student's perspective. Today's creations and commentary benefit others tomorrow (Moniz, 2009).

However, according to Bill (Mussy) Ming, artists must be allowed to self-classify. Artists must determine their own interests and focus of their work. This sculptor and mixed-media artist, stresses that while he is a Black artist, his art is not limited to however being a Black artist may be defined. For him, artists must choose their own labels and not accept categorization and the expectations that accompany it. His art is informed and shaped by his upbringing on-island but also by his African heritage and the influence of life in the U.K. His interest is in healing and honesty and a desire to be frank about the human experience (Ming, 2013).

Art students, while encouraged to have passion and meaning in their work, must be made aware that when choosing to create activist work, these works are legitimate responses no matter how they are received. As artists address felt prejudice and discrimination, in turn they run the risk of offending. Their differing perspectives can bring controversy and result in pushback and difficult choices to be made. However, art is no crime and it is every artist's responsibility to make art that is meaningful (Neshat, 2010).

Manuel Palacio, an outspoken resident artist who addressed racial tensions often and who had never shied away

from controversial content, temporarily chose to turn away from his oeuvre to other subject matter. He produced a body of work that intentionally pandered to commercialism. Entitled, *Bermuda Point of View*, this exhibition was an unabashedly commercial venture featuring Impressionist landscapes “with paint spread like icing” and an iconic display that would be the “best show in Bermuda” (Hill, 2011). The exhibition met with mixed reviews. Palacio returned to his passion, initiating conversations on race and other social themes, and for some, his work continued to offend.

While there are many artists who have left the island for employment and education opportunities and who have benefitted from the effect on perspective that only distance can provide, for popular ceramicist and sculptor, Carlos Dowling, who depended on his art for his living, the decision to leave his home country was one he felt he was forced to make. After the installation of his large commissioned bronze sculpture, *Sally Bassett, Pregnant with the Spirit of Liberty* in 2008 (Hill, 2009), pending works were cancelled and no further commissions were received. In a conversation with Dowling, this change came as a surprise to him. He considers his sculpture, incidentally, Bermuda’s first memorial to a slave, as the one which he is most proud of in his artistic career. Dowling simply says, “The phone stopped ringing” (Dowling, 2009). As a matter of survival, Dowling left Bermuda, eventually settling in Virginia.

Freedom for Experimentation

Despite the low numbers of artists who have addressed race overtly in this community, those who have and continue to do so employ a variety of media and with the full range of possibilities between representation and abstraction. Art educators must encourage student experimentation with a wide variety of approaches, materials and media as well.

During the *Black Lives Matter March*, June 7, 2020, in Bermuda (Bell, 2020), photographer Meredith Andrews (peacefulartprotest, 2020) captured the image of one adult black male standing with a raised clenched fist against a clear blue sky. The iconic image, reminiscent of civil rights protest imagery from the United States in the 1960s, is a bold powerful statement. Andrews’ use of a photographic representation of the symbolic gesture is immediately a strong and clear salute to both human rights and Black power and is a faithful documentation of an event. Incidentally, the image was later reproduced as a mural in the city of Hamilton.

Hodgson (1989) in a review of the works of artist Charles Lloyd Tucker reveals that, although he is known for his representational work, he experimented much with a wide variety of modernist techniques and media. One will also observe that he relied on distorted and exaggerated forms in his sculptures and with his famous painting *Storm in a Teacup*. In this painting, gently curling and rising steam became dancing, unrestrained people of colour, eclipsing the teacup from which they emerged. With this coded imagery, Tucker responded mockingly to a dismissive statement by a prominent member of the oligarchy, while referencing the 1959 Theatre Boycott.

Other Bermudian artists have also found the use of partially abstracted forms to be advantageous in communicating messages on racial issues. Sculptor Chesley Trott’s use of minimal detail in his bronze sculpture *When Voices Rise* (Trott, 2009) successfully and artistically references picketing activists. Robert Bassett’s loose abstraction in his paintings gave him the artistic freedom to portray his Black subjects as expressive and memorable beings (Hardy, 2015). Calix Smith’s boldly contoured and distorted figures, at times with text, strategic layering, and juxtapositions, make provocative imagery. His installations and paintings, often in search of African roots, challenge audiences to confront uncomfortable realities, to ask questions, and to leave the space with an intention of finding answers for themselves (Simmons, 2015).

Lewis (1998), a pioneer black abstractionist (and little known by many locals as having Bermudian parentage) was

a representational painter before moving towards full abstraction. Initially, he painted figuratively to portray the struggle for existence his Harlem community shared. Increasingly, he came to see this style as *a waste of time* and not meeting his desire of benefitting his community. Abstraction brought for him self-discovery and the belief that the drive to capture personal feelings and emotions leads one away from literal depictions of troubled conditions. Remarkably, his later work, with pure abstractions including splashes of color and rhythmic markings, continued to evoke the daily activity of the Black community and reveal his social interest. He remained an ardent activist for Black equality and inclusion but he chose to participate in activism with his presence rather than in his art - notably, founding schools and galleries for Black artists and demonstrating against injustices - even picketing alone on occasion.

Contemporary mixed-media artist Hassell (2020) works predominantly with collage on paper. To this she adds painted elements and found materials. Her works, mostly figurative, are imaginative, colourful and textured compositions that often display fashionable, poised, and self-assured young Black females. Thus, Hassell's art is at once experimental and also a confident, overt celebration of life as a young Black female. As a part of her latest exhibition, *I Am Because You Are*, she includes mixed-media portraits in which she has reimagined the identities of enslaved Bermudians. With a postcolonial gaze, she depicts individuals not with the slave label but as persons of means with comfortable lives. Her emphasis on Black identity came into focus during her studies abroad. She says, "In Bermuda, I was very much unaware of what my blackness meant in the world because Bermuda is predominantly Black" (Hassell, 2020). Her comment is reminiscent of that by Robert Barritt who years earlier stated, "When you are here you are in it and part of it, and it is hard to get an objective view of what's going on" (Moniz, 2009).

Conclusion

What information can be extracted from the lived experience and perspectives of artists connected with Bermuda who have already explored racial themes? The following qualitative points summarize relevant observations and considerations. These will assist art educators as they take advantage of intersections, such as the present intersection of race, education, and art, to refine their pedagogical approach to this discourse:

- Teachers must recognize the need for intentionality, to have students value and appreciate their own point of view. As artists not of European descent entered the art-world locally, some of their work revealed new interests and points of view including visual responses to non-representation, misrepresentation, and unfair treatment based on race.
- Teachers must be aware that the presence and work of home-grown artists and art educators can be seen as inspirational for those who perceive a shared identity with them.
- Teachers should be willing to be relational and vulnerable, sharing their own lived experiences, feelings and position as invested facilitators also facing and learning life lessons.
- Art is a first-person expression. It provides critical communication that has value for both present and future audiences.
- There are artists who believe that overt activist art is lacking and needed. There is also pushback by some artists to labels such as Black artist and to accompanying expectations that their work is to represent a culture of the racially oppressed, mostly producing expressions of affectedness.
- Artists must be comfortable in their perspective and choices of art directions and themes, staying true to their inspiration and passion. Despite unfavourable reception at times, artists who have addressed racial themes in their work achieved personal satisfaction and fulfillment in doing so and have not expressed

regret. Teachers must encourage both honest heart-felt expression and involvement in activism beyond their visual statements.

- Sameness kills. Students must be encouraged to experiment with a variety of approaches, media, and materials to best convey their unique statements.
- The future looks brighter for activist art. Emerging artists who choose to address the legacy of race in Bermuda in their work are receiving rave reviews and overwhelming support. This reception by prominent cultural institutions and wider audiences exposes a growing interest in art that serves as a fresh voice, exploring difficult subjects and seeking social change.

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