



A CYPHER: TAKING CONTROL

The following is an excerpt from a discussion held on March 28, with Otis students Joseph Sherman, Katherine Jarvis, DaRon Vinson, and moderated by SUNI MULLEN. Referencing Mullen's essay, PROPERLY, AMERICAN: THE GENIUS EFFECT AND "THE POSTURE OF OPENNESS" BLACK, FEMALE, AND ACADEMIC—AN EARTHQUAKE IN WHITENESS.

KATHERINE: Suni, the way the essay was written with cultural references on how frustrating it can be to convey emotion through writing really frustrating feelings, I think that's where the memes are just the perfect way to communicate something.

My own experience of white tears and white fragility was more so in the workplace, and the difference here at Otis is that we're encouraged to have diversity and have critical conversations. But then, when a woman, a black woman, expresses something that she wants to do and pushes forward, to have these conversations, to have the conflict that's required in order to get some level of understanding, it's like, "oh, my God! This is too much and then they just burst into tears.

I feel like our white counterparts really think that they're trying. It's a weird thing. I can't hold your hand through all of these things, all I can do is explain the art, or say why I find what you just said offensive. If you want to be butt-hurt about it, you know, it's a privilege to be in conversation with different types of artists. Right? Just take in as much as you can.

We all have little blind spots, things that we're getting used to in terms of showing up in the academic space. If we're coming from a point of trying to understand each other and want some level of understanding—it can become frustrating. That's why that specific crying Emoji *boohoo cracker, I don't care* face, bursting into tears at any sign of conflict is perfect. Unless



somebody is, of course, being deliberately racist.

They sometimes want to relate to things that are deep and heavy unique to being black, but this is impossible.

KATHERINE: DaRon, Suni, and I had a class together.

SUNI: That was the most I was ever in class with that many black people at Otis.

DaRon: That's a good point.


SUNI: That was so intense for me, because anytime anything came up about race, it was "what are your thoughts? What are your thoughts? What are yourrr thoughts?"

I remember your piece (Daron), and I always think back with someone asking, "why aren't white people included?"

My whole thing is: I've been invested in imaginary landscapes, and what that looks like from multiple black perspectives. I started thinking about this idea of what we would consider contemporary black surrealism like the TV series: Atlanta, or more recently, Swarm or cartoons like The Boondocks, stories where we understand things are happening that are very similar to the real world. We also understand historical context but then in there, there's power, an agency that's happening where black people can activate themselves. Specifically, black people can activate themselves where it seems like we're in a video game. And so, I think about how we have the capacity to do whatever it is that we want to do creatively and the moment we do that, if we're in spaces that are dominated by white thinking, or are in white spaces, there is a fear. There is extreme discomfort.

If in my world, I'm not imagining you all there, I think that's okay. And you know, I had a studio visit, where I thought, "you're lucky that it only exists in this landscape," through writing, through video, through painting, and not in real life, especially as it relates to vengeance, avenging, and violence. Yeah, that was such an interesting class.

DaRon: I'm still the only black person in all my classes. And it's really



frustrating, because in my painting class I did a piece about Blackface and I made them watch a three-minute scene from Spike Lee's Bamboozled. It was a compilation of a bunch of blackface performances, and then, after that, all the white people in the class sunk into themselves, and if they did give me crit, it was more about the technique and the style of painting, rather than what the content is and that's really frustrating.

When it comes to my work, it's always, "why'd you choose this style?" or "wow, this magenta looks really nice." I never get the crit I'm looking for. And I was talking to someone about this, and shared why I was mad that the class was silent, and they said, "Oh, well, your crit was their silence," and I'm like, "Okay, you know, I'll take it." But that's not what I'm looking for.

SUNI: I was struggling with that too, still kinda. But, do you ever preface your crits like, "This is what I'm looking for, and this is what I need?"

DaRon: I'll ask certain questions, but then, it'll just be me talking to the teacher, and that's not what I'm looking for.

SUNI: You know what I realized, it's the inability to look inward and take initiative for understanding the possible perpetuations of what your artwork is exploring and offering generative feedback.

DaRon: Well that, and, if I'm looking from a white person's perspective, I think I would probably be afraid to say the wrong thing. Because, for a lot of the content that I bring, as a white person I feel their margin of error is very small, so they either have to be perfect, or just not say anything.

JOSEPH: You're talking about them responding or reacting to the work and not the actual creative process of production.

DaRon: Exactly.

JOSEPH: It's interesting when you talk about not getting the crits you want because I'm in the same boat. You're actually getting the crit I really want. I want the formal conversation. It would be really nice if I had a crit that was strictly focused on formal versus, I feel like in my crits, we'll get so deep into the cultural nuance. I want to talk about how this screen print speaks in



relation to the Warhols, the Jasper Johns, the Rauschenbergs: not that I'm trying to position myself next or centralized to whiteness necessarily, but to also understand that art history is Western white history.

So it's interesting to hear you talk about these things because I'm like man, "Those are the crits that I want" so it can help me. I don't need to situate myself necessarily with blackness. I give that up in my day to day because of who I am. But, I do need help with, and why I came to school is to understand, "How can I situate myself in the context of art history, you know what I mean. I shouldn't have to sacrifice using a representation of my representation of blackness or black imagery and the intricacies of it, to have those conversations.

I feel like, I should go in there with a portrait of Michael Jackson and in the same strength that we talk about cultural production from the black perspective or black canon, we should also be able to have the conversation around the history of printmaking and history of image production.

SUNI: Right, right.

JOSEPH: I don't think it needs to always be chauffeured off the shoulders of blackness, just because I'm representing the black image.

I wonder, do you think it's a graduate program versus undergraduate thing?

KATHERINE: It's, either having a black professor, or having somebody that gets the gravity of our perspective in the class to kind of steer the conversation. We need to gear them and get them situated in the historical context of like sundown towns [in reference to DaRon's drawing], what is the representation of this caricature of the mammy?

I had actually received an interesting take in my crit for my thesis show: I did a painting of a large body of water, and I put it next to my own face, slightly off centered a little bit lower below the water next to it. My professor goes, "DAMN! This is deep!"

SUNI: It was interesting.



KATHERINE: And then comments about the transatlantic slave trade surfaced.

SUNI: That's what I thought.

KATHERINE: Then a student asked, "Is it lazy for us to go to slavery?"

That was like an interesting question. It's like, "Do I always associate water and a black body with the slave?" And it's really hard for me to separate certain imagery, even though that piece to me means, like my ultimate fear. But also, peace, in water.

And then I talked to a different professor, and we were talking about certain images and objects that represent slavery to be our way to represent genocide. You know, you see, stripe pajamas, you're like, "holocaust!"

And if we don't say these things, then I feel like we're doing a disservice to that history. But then also, it's just like, are we limiting ourselves to that?

SUNI: I've never heard anyone necessarily pose it that way, but I will say that proximity also played a huge role- and composition. The painting of your face is off kilter to the left side, then, it's next to a large body of water. I don't think that it's lazy, maybe for other groups of people, but for black people specifically, if I'm speaking for myself, I don't think that was a lazy thought.

Sometimes, a lot of our point of exposure to history, the starting point for a lot of black Americans is enslavement. As you get older, you actually have to begin going backwards and further beyond enslavement and the enslavement of West Africans. I always think about that, so I don't know if it's necessarily lazy.

I will say, though, if you're not black, it could be perceived as lazy because people see blackness and synonymize it with slaves. My new thing is "enslavement". They were not slaves. They were human beings with families. They were mothers, you know, farmers.

SUNI: [to DaRon] I wrote in this essay, "How can I navigate the conversa-



tions back to source?" like, bring the power back into my court. I'm a huge advocate, for not only putting work in front of black people, but people who are willing to have the conversations that you want to have. That's what I ask for when it's quiet. I agitate the class.

Oftentimes, students don't want to say anything. They'll use the excuse, "Oh, I don't want to say the wrong thing". Do you not want to say the wrong thing? Or are you afraid that what you say may perpetuate something that I am opposing? Which is okay because it adds enrichment to the conversation. So, if anything, the silence is doing a disservice to how enriching this conversation could be. A lot of times, people are avoiding this conversation and avoiding that tension. But I'm a firm believer that tension needs to be rubbed out.

So, you want to have technical conversations? In my mind, I'm always thinking, like, okay, I just have to put on my bad girl hat, and just say, "that's not the conversation I want to have". And just share, "Thank you for that. I really appreciate all these things that I am now going to incorporate. I have 30 minutes left in this crit, I would now like to focus on content or, I would now like to focus on technically, what is this doing?"

Continuously, technically and content-wise like, we become better and better, which also, plays a huge role in us being better human beings. I realize as artists, if you have that desire, it'll translate to your real-world, but it also takes you taking initiative to guide that.


DaRon: That's definitely valid.

I painted this pig to discuss the pattern of police brutality. Somehow the conversation got shifted towards the abuse of actual pigs, and that conversation went on for a good 15 minutes and I was like, "Can we get back to work, we shouldn't be talking about the abuse of pigs?"

KATHERINE: She started to cry, and I was like, "are we existing right now?"

DaRon: Like, you care more about the damn pig!?

KATHERINE: They were talking about the rights of pigs, and we were



talking about human beings.

SUNI: They pulled a John Pig, a John Wick.

laughs

JOSEPH: This is a working thought: I think the silence in those spaces is a certain internal destabilization that is happening with those audiences. They're in this space where critical thought and dialogue are supposed to happen. They're being triggered by our work and by artists to have a conversation, but the conversation is in direct competition to the things they have been taught.

So, even if a person may come into the classroom and say, "I know I'm not that. I know I'm not racist. I got black friends." I think the pressure, especially if you're white or European, the pressure of the things you have been indoctrinated with; societally, by your family, your grandparents, your ancestors, is still so pervasive and strong, that in those moments where they're triggered by the artwork to have these conversations internally, there's an attempt to maneuver through that with "I don't wanna say anything, I don't want to be insensitive, or I don't know what to say".

We're all grown here and we're all paying for our education, and we've all made a decision to be professionals.

There have been times where I have to be like, "FAM! Give it up today. Give up today."

This conversation makes me think about this idea of "audience". And audiences in relation to our work. Suni, we talk a lot about Arthur Jafa, you know, and a lot of his thinking. There's this article where he was talking about this idea of the imagined community. I think there's something beautiful in that because I think that's what we have to do with our audience too.

JOSEPH: You know, we may walk into a space, we may get the chance to do a show; a two-person show, a one-person show and I may think my audience doesn't even exist, or I'm purely thinking about John Coltrane. And obviously Coltrane won't be there. The power that we have to create this



imagined audience, where the things that we're looking for and the things that we're searching for, the things that we're curious about are not necessarily dependent on living and breathing people. Especially, in, we know what this space is: this is Western art history which equals white history.

I think a lot of us are trying to figure out how we want to maneuver, and I think in thinking about how we want to maneuver, it's important for us to remember our agency can also be applied to being like, "Yeah, I know who my audience is. Period."

Crit is an academic responsibility and on top! of that I know you're not gonna give it up, how I need it. So, I'm not going to waste anyone's time, and if you have comments on it, cool, if not cool.

KATHERINE: Suni and I had a conversation last semester when I did my masturbation picture.


SUNI: I really enjoyed those works.

KATHERINE: That crit taught me I need to say, "this is the type of crit I want". I like the ability to speak. But I also like the ability to wrap things up because we get to a point where you get "critique fatigue".

SUNI: It becomes super tangential.

It becomes one of those things where everybody has their feet in cement and somebody was just like, "Okay, run the race" and then, everyone starts sludging. And then there's a couple people who are just like, Okay, I'm actually not gonna sludge. I'm gonna first, take my feet out of this concrete because I've been given the tools to do it, and then I'm gonna sprint. And then everybody else is like looking, and they're like, "Oh, I'm too tired to do that."

I understand, everybody is in a different place in their growth. But, I think it's imperative to take control, because it's parallel to life. If you don't take control on a micro level in critique, you're probably not doing that in real life. You have to literally sit in the driver's seat. I always imagine myself with a public audience or in a public auditorium and what, I'm not going to critically think while 500 people are looking at me? Are you fucking kidding me?



Like that doesn't make any sense. I have to challenge myself to be incredibly receptive to opposition towards things that I have believed for a long time, while also retaining the integrity of my thoughts as well.

I feel like it's important to sit and talk about your work and sometimes wrap it up and guide those conversations. I also think it's important if there are other black students in the classroom, and I just peep stuff, I'm gonna interject. Especially if I see that they don't have the spirit yet to take control. I will be that vessel for them. Because I feel like it will perhaps rub off on them, or maybe they just need to see an example, "Oh! I can speak up," "Oh! I can say this in class," "Oh! I can have these thoughts," and I feel like, even if I don't agree with those thoughts, I want the other black people in the class to feel 110% confident in the ideas they're thinking about. Especially when we're paying to explore ideas.

A lot of students feel like they have the power to "dead in" black ideas and that is very frustrating for me.

SUNI: [to Katherine] Those paintings I enjoyed because 1. There's not a lot of black women on campus, 2. There's not a lot of black women painters on campus, and 3. It's interesting to see what other black women are thinking about visually and what comes of that: painting yourself, and then hearing you talk about coming from a religious background and having to explore yourself, and what those stages look like over a period of time historically. You paint in a way that's a part of the tradition of history painting.

So? Who am I to say "you shouldn't be doing that, like?"

I feel like it is my duty and my belief in the infinite possibility of blackness, to explore those possibilities, and where that takes us, because you could be opening up an entirely new portal that we haven't seen. Each and every one of us. So, I think it's up to us to nurture that.