Strange Liberty

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Mirror-Making

I had to create mirrors in spaces where I didn't see myself. I always knew I was different from my peers regarding my clothes and my family's customs. I always had to work harder and be more aware of how I present myself. Growing up Black in an all-white school, I learned quickly that I had more responsibility and expectations. This was the start of a long spiral of lost identity and confusion of my self-purpose. It worsened after the traumatic and sudden loss of my father at the age of 15. I began to think differently and navigate the world from a new perspective. These racial and personal challenges compelled me to understand more of myself on a deeper level. I use these experiences as the key theme of my work, shifting from trauma to joy while reclaiming the narrative. I focus on portraying Black joy, strength, and success instead of reinforcing painful or stereotypical narratives. I use a vibrant and illustrative creative style to present difficult themes in a more approachable way. I also incorporate other personal history, such as the color blue and childhood reflections, into my creations to make them more personal to the viewers. My goal is to create a space for conversations that break down barriers surrounding race, trauma, and identity. While normalizing vulnerability and encouraging those to learn more about Black history.

Joy as Resistance

Normally, Black art is seen as graphic and traumatic. In society, it's normalized to ignore these issues and treat them as "taboo", justifying ignorance. This leaves problems unresolved and continues the generational trauma in an endless cycle. For instance, *"Welcome To The Fairyhood"* is a deception of an urban neighborhood reimagined in a child's mind in a fairytale setting, or mimics a playset. Since these neighborhoods are predominantly Black, the stereotypes of stealing, gangs, gun violence, and drugs are projected onto Black people, especially from urban cities. This was used to justify police brutality and hate crimes. That allows people to have a predetermined, biased perception of an urban neighborhood and the kind of people who live there. Through this work, I want to show how I viewed my hometown, Mount Vernon, as a kid. My main goal is to find liberation from dark history or personal experiences. Like my other piece, *"Sweet Revolution"* is about creating liberation out of your struggles. Instead of falling in line and staying in harsh conditions, use it as a reason to fight for change. Black people weren't allowed to eat vanilla ice cream unless it was July 4th. This was just one of many examples that Black people

aren't a part of "American freedom" or "We The People". Even though it was not a legal law, this unspoken rule was a twisted reminder of who had the power and control and who had to "obey" to have access to the "specialties". Out of this inconvenience, butter pecan was created in protest against the power control. This was essential to the civil rights movement, as many sit-ins occurred at ice cream parlors.

Holding Space

When it comes to talking about racial issues in my work, I want to bring people together to feel open to discussing racism. Going to predominantly white schools my whole life, conversations about racism were always uncomfortable, as it felt like my duty to educate my peers. Especially when in most of the classes, I was the only black person. It was even more tiring when I had to educate staff. It was to a point where I was in meetings with staff and other students, discussing a change in the curriculum. Generally, the art world is mostly white spaces, and taking up these spaces forces white people to have these conversations and educate themselves. I want to flip the script and bring a new perspective to these subject matters. Such as encouraging Black people to find pride in our dark history. I would like for people to feel accepted and heal from unresolved traumatic experiences, as well as normalize these discussions. Allowing people to open up to having these conversations will make it easier for people to share their stories and

for others to ask questions and learn. Comfort will make people feel less judged and ashamed, particularly when addressing sexual trauma. As hard as it is to be vulnerable, as it is to say “me too”, being the first to speak can inspire other people to become leaders as well.

Storytelling through Sculpture

Through this ongoing journey and discoveries, I grew closer to my inner child and adult self while building a connection between the two. It also became a question of why sharing these stories was important beyond just using them as a coping mechanism. I asked myself, “What were the correlations between myself and my work? What was the connection between me and this color?” and so on. The idea of connection was a constant theme that became an important relationship between me and my work. The denial of the traumatic death of my father allowed me to ignore my PTSD as a disguise for coping. This left me disconnected from reality and mentally trapped me as a scared and broken teen in everlasting confusion. “*Where’s The Ducks?*” is about the confusing time of dealing with the passing of my father. Trying to

understand death, while having the reality check that anything can happen to anyone, and life is not fair. It was inspired by the novel, "*Catcher in the Rye,"* which I read in school before the passing of my father. In one chapter, the main character asked a taxi driver where the ducks go in the winter. This had significance to me because it was a conversation about dealing with the death of a loved one and where we go when we die. It was the start of questioning myself and my purpose in life. Throughout my work, I spent time questioning my affection for blue, youth, and the significance of my Blackness. And how can I use storytelling to share them through my creations? The color blue was the connection. It created familiarity and grounded me. This allowed me to have closure and move forward in life. It brought all my different evolutions together into one. For instance, my piece *"PTSD & Me"* focuses on my accomplishments and journey of battling my PTSD after losing my dad. Through this experience, I had to learn how to advocate for my mental health and take on the responsibility my dad had in my life. It also brought me much closer to my mom and sisters as we had to look out for each other. The biggest lesson was learning that I had

more control over my life than I thought, and time can always heal, instead of channeling or focusing on negative memories. It was also a reminder of how I got through this hard time. At the time of creating, I was battling PTSD from a 3-year-long abusive relationship that turned into nonstop harassment after the relationship had ended. This experience being much different from the other, I still reminded myself that having support and mental strength gives me control over my PTSD and situation. As painful and stressful as it was living through it, nothing is ever permanent and will pass over time.

Material Practice

I discovered my love for cartoons and child-like aesthetics when working with polymer clay. Especially through my interest in miniatures and dolls, and working with vibrant colors in a very “cartoonish” style. Artists like Hebru Brantley, Shampoooty, and Andy Adamson closely relate to my work conceptually and/or visually. They all have very illustrative and vibrant styles while having a twist of retelling the opposite stories of familiar objects. Shampoooty makes work centering around adult themes but mimicking them through children's toys. It’s a funny and strange twist to display serious adult themes like the death penalty and drug use. Hebru Brantley

focuses on childhood and nostalgia, specifically for Black kids. He also uses the theme of putting Black kids in a position of power where they're typically not seen. Andy Adamson uses a fun play on symbolism to tell a story. This is seen throughout my work's three 3 main focal points: identity, storytelling, and personal trauma. I talk about identity because it's a way to process and understand my character on multiple levels. Identity is so important to an artist, especially their work. Without their identity, they would lose the importance of storytelling/meaning to their work. I postulate that storytelling is the most important aspect of an artwork. It provides a motive and purpose to the concept beyond just the visuals. Everything has a story, even if it doesn't have an impactful meaning. This is a way for me to accept my trauma and work through it healthily. These personal topics can range from racial issues and sexual trauma to mental health. Given as an example,

"Cake 4 Ur Ice Cream" is a piece about sexualization at a young age and sexual abuse in relationships. The cake is a simple representation of my body, while the text tells the deeper story. I want the viewer to notice the scent and texture of the cake. The scent and texture are meant to make it feel like a real cake instead of a sculpture. From this, they should feel joy or desire to eat because of how delicious it looks. Once looking closer at the menu and reading the text, they'll realize that it's not just a cute little dog eating a cake. Using these context clues, they should understand that this represents

my body being used for enjoyment. The goal is to show this isn't a sad story but an example of me reclaiming my life from traumatic experiences. When confronting these experiences in my life, I want to display these dark themes in a more illustrative and vibrant style. These pieces shouldn't feel like a sad, dead-end story, but provide closure for those who need it, and channel through art as a coping mechanism.

Clay as Language

Clay was the first material I became fascinated with as a kid, and it also made me discover my love for art. I was free to create whatever I wanted without expectations or guidelines. Unlike other media, I quickly understood the behavior and could easily manipulate the clay to whatever I imagined. I never had a specific reason why I prefer or only work with clay, but it was a natural connection that I felt drawn to. As I got older, I worked with all different types of clay, like polymer clay, modeling clay, etc. Having a wide range of clay types grants me the flexibility to construct different textures, colors, strengths, etc. In particular, my piece *"Bleached Beauty"* uses polymer clay and resin to imitate glass doll eyes. As well, the polymer clay is more suitable for smaller details to create realistic texture. For instance, the baked goods are made from polymer clay, where I captured the texture of a brownie

or cookies. I can also add a scent element to my pieces. Since polymer clay is oil-based, it can use essential oils to add scent and leave a fragrance even after baking. This becomes useful with my pieces that involve food or a mood I want to bring to my viewers. I like to use it to fully transform the sculpture into an experience as if it were the real thing. When smelling the brownies, I want viewers to relive the memories of eating cosmic brownies as a kid or baking cookies with a loved one. Having these positive reminders allows people to find a safe place within my pieces.

Claiming Space

My goal is to keep creating safe spaces, having uncomfortable discussions, and normalizing being vulnerable. I can see my work being an icebreaker to these serious topics, specifically Black racial issues and mental health. Black people can find pride in the alternate storyline I created, which is never reciprocated in society. They should reclaim the narrative as liberation instead of only oppression. Trauma isn't your fault, but your responsibility to heal. As a Black queer woman, my Blackness will always be calculated in everything I do with a system that wasn't written for me. This gave me the confidence and power to write my own rules and take up space. I think it's important to embrace differences and challenges as a strength rather than a weakness. Given the opportunity, would you challenge the rules for the benefit of your healing? How would you break these rules to accomplish that goal?