BLOUINARTINFO

Kenya (Robinson) on the Fate of Excellence

BY Modern Painters, Kenya Robinson | October 03, 2016

Sanford Biggers, "Laocoön," 2015 (Courtesy of the artist)

Carla Hayden was recently confirmed as the first woman to serve as the Librarian of Congress. As president of the American Library Association (2003–04), she battled for the continued protection of library users' privacy, courageously opposing section 215 of the Patriot Act during a public discourse with former Attorney General John Ashcroft. Now, preparing to oversee the library's digitization and IT restructuring efforts, Hayden stands as a paradigm-shifting successor to the previous national librarian, James Billington, an academic who reportedly avoided email. She is *excellent*, in the parlance of my youth, nearly beyond reproach in both skill set and moral quality. She's a Muhammad Ali type, unmoved by larger powers, and in fact has accumulated agency by doing her job extremely well.

But that age of excellence is dying. Now, our cultural elite wear bodysuits while mimicking the Black Power movement. Cultural critics neglect journalistic investigation, preferring circle-jerk panels, magazine editorials, and information dispersed via social media. A consistent set of artists endeavor to reproduce instead of revolutionize. The Internet's call of fame acts as a cultural lighthouse beacon, magnetizing the multitudes, Pied Piper-style, but meanwhile leaving a void—one that might be filled by a more critical notion of badassery.

In July, Taylor Renee Aldridge wrote an essay for Artnews.com describing what she sees as the "problem with contemporary Art's appropriation of race (née, Blackness)." I clucked audibly while reading the piece, shaking my head like a Mother Jenkins sitting in the Amen Corner. Using a work by Sanford Biggers ("Laocoön," 2015), Aldridge presents a cautionary tale for carpetbagging artists dealing in the #BlackLivesMatter movement for fun and profit. But this practice is a historical phenomenon filtered through a digital context, and is not, as she writes, something "sensational" that's only just come to surface. By collapsing what she claims is politically irresponsible into this shrunken timeline, she and the piece's editor missed an opportunity to expand the narrative beyond a description of status quo. The article reads as perfected indignation,

rather than thoughtful critique.

In the article Aldridge references an Instagram video of Biggers's piece installed at last year's Art Basel Miami Beach. The work is an inflatable sculpture of Fat Albert, facedown, respiring artificially. She writes about her reaction: "I thought of Michael Brown. I thought of black lives. I thought of death. Then I noticed that in the video, the body was surrounded by a festive group of gallery goers, sipping wine, taking pictures of the panting body. The scene was grotesque. I thought, Not again."

"Grotesque" describes something that is comically or repulsively ugly or distorted. Certainly, Art Basel is a shopping mall for wealthy collectors and ground zero for the art-as-profit scenario, but this "scene" is not a distortion, comically or otherwise. It is a reality cosigned by more than 70,000 ABMB visitors and nearly $3 billion in art offerings. In fact, it is the writer's own train of thought ("Michael Brown …black lives …death") that reveals the commodification of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and less so the evolving intentions of the artist. The hashtag is essentially a branding strategy, but so is the motif of exploitation, pain, suffering, and the temporary triumph of "black bodies" that has been successfully marketed since the transatlantic slave trade. Aldridge exalts an earlier work by Biggers: "Lotus," 2011, a steel and etched-glass sculpture, in which "each petal in the flower has carved images of diagrams depicting slaves in slaves ships." Approved blackness and codified imagery are here "used to better effect" and do not, the author posits, suffer the fate of "Laocoön's surface-level confrontation with its audience."

Yet Aldridge's critique exists on the surface too, unfortunate marbles rolling off the edge of respectability politics. By her account, Biggers offered a vague explanation of "Laocoön" at a conference she attended, referring to an ultimate "loss of trust and authority" that underpins the work. In spite of Biggers's "nebulous" account, the sculpture speaks quite specifically through the artist's formal choices. It has been gendered male, but complicates the masculine by using the soft and round figure of an over-weight adolescent. An obvious avatar for Bill Cosby, who created and voiced the character, the Fat Albert's prone position can't simply be restricted to Michael Brown. It necessarily recalls sexual assault allegations by means of drugged incapacitation—rape culture in full effect. And "last breaths" notwithstanding, the programmed pump suggests the digital as life force, a notion not so far-fetched as we hashtag for human rights.

Aldridge asserts: "Artists have made systemic racism look sexy; galleries have made it desirable for collectors. It has, in other words, gone mainstream. With this paradoxical commercial focus, political art that responds to issues surrounding race is in danger of becoming mere spectacle, a provocation marketed for consumption, rather than a catalyst for social change." The same could be said
for her writing. It's important to note that the essay was penned for a mainstream, international digital platform, its click-ability duly enhanced by a growing list of racialized tragedies rendered consumable via social media. Unfortunately, an immediate dependency on clicks and likes betrays the potential for online platforms to support the growth of their writers. Editorial standards are compromised as page views act as the barometer of success. In this particular case, Aldridge is not required to investigate the context created by the other works in the space or question the space itself—a singular sexy (or "grotesque") image will suffice. It seems these platforms simply aren't built to accommodate thoughtful critique towards a black excellence.

Art™ has this stubborn habit of imitating Life®, so if artists do find themselves exploiting tragedy for personal or professional gain, it's mainly because they have a historical model to follow. Or, more appropriate to this dialogue, if Art™ writers do feel a particular sculpture or conceptual poem is exploitative, they now have a precedent to wait seven months to express a critique that can be conveniently (coincidentally? predictably?) bookended by another murder-by-police in the headlines. Aldridge presents an appropriation narrative not as a "problem," as her title indicates, but as a snafu. Appropriation is the standard for American cultural production. Making a complaint about its existence doesn't define it as a problem. Perhaps if she'd investigated beyond the usual suspects (Hank Willis Thomas, Sanford Biggers, Theaster Gates, Clifford Owens, Dread Scott, et al.) she would've discovered a gender balance more reflective of the #BlackLivesMatter movement itself (hashtag Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi). And, since the contemporary Art World™ specializes in marginalizing black women, an intentional focus on underrepresented individuals then becomes a sly act of resistance. Revolution is more precise language. It asserts black people, instead of black bodies. Living, instead of lives. And humanity over everything.

Excellence, it would appear, is at a crossroads. Will it be bound by search engine optimization, click analytics, and bounce rates? Criticality silenced by accusations of hateration and accompanied by finger-wagging guides for the work artists ought-not-be-doing? Or, will the pursuit of excellence continually challenge and innovate? Excellence is the refusal of bullshit and

making a way out of no way. It is demanding a standard of rigor individually, from our peers, and from our platforms.

It's Sondra Perry, hiring members of her family as performers for a work exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum this past spring, and revising models of payment for creative work. It's Doreen Garner excising medical histories in silicone and glass.

It's Martine Syms publishing books in the midst of her own art practice, and sending checks to her writers in a timely fashion. It's Autumn Knight collaborating with Chelsea Knight, sharing #BlackGirlMagic and tenderly challenging #WhiteGirlProblems. It is the integrated, and intergenerational, discussions at Heather Hart and Jina Valentine's evolving forum *Black Lunch Table*, 2005–ongoing. It's not believing a performance of ignorance—just because whiteness does it so well—and accepting a repeated message of what we already know. It's doing the work over and over and over and over and over...and over again. It's not playing the Magical Negro, but sharing the magic through a full-bodied documentation of what's possible, not just a lament. This is how we nurture and create excellence, regardless of race, class, or gender.