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IMA320: Visual Culture

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### **African-American Artists In A Modern Society**

There is an ideology present within Western society surrounding the African American community, bringing about negative connotations in relation to not only those in the art community but in the culture as a whole. These presumptions about the African-American race was especially prominent during the early years of the twentieth century when modernism thrived. The public sphere surrounding the white male prospered for their views where considered the hegemony of the culture, while everyone else was considered as other. (P.O.T chp 6) However, there are many African-American artists that have decided to speak out against this way of thinking.

Renee Cox is a prime example of one of those artists. prominent Jamaican-American contemporary artist. She was born in Colgate, Jamaica. Eventually, her family moved to Scarsdale, New York, where Cox eventually pursued photography. Cox is known for frequently putting herself in her art, using her own body as a way of celebrating black womanhood as well as addressing the social stigma of a woman's naked, unsexualized visage. Much of her work tackles the negative ideology surrounding sexism and racism, specifically the violence directed towards the black community in Western culture. (Source no. 1)

Cox uses a broad variety of ways in approaching these topics in her work. Sometimes her approach is very subtle, using her own forms of connotated procedures as a way of easily falling alongside the Western ideology. One example is of the photos taken in her series *Queen Nanny of the Maroons* (2004-2005). In this series Cox depicts herself as a Jamaican folk hero, Queen Nanny, who was leader of the Jamaican Maroons. The Jamaican Maroons were descendents of former slaves during the 17th and 18th century. After escaping from their plantations, the Maroons built their own independent settlements. The photos of Cox as Queen Nanny portray her in a powerful light. She is wearing traditional Jamaican clothing as well as Nanny's iconic headscarf. Multiple photos show her wielding a sword. Her stance is very direct, her gaze always

pointed at the viewer. Her stoic expression along with her guarded stance gives the feeling that she is almost tempting you into trying to go against her. This series also contains portraits of everyday Jamaicans. There are photos of the young, old, male and female. Sometimes she even incorporates herself with children groups stating that it is a way of preserving and celebrating black culture. (Source no. 4)

Cox has also done many abstract works in her career. One in particular is a series called, *Soul Culture* (2018), where she took photos of black models and manipulated their images to form intricate hypnotic video and mandala-like reliefs. Many of its imagery derives from inspiration found in Hindu and Buddhist religious art. These works were meant as a way to comment on race and gender and to promote positivity and empowerment among the western community. (Source no. 5) One of Cox's more controversial series is her *American Family*, which is an autobiographical work in which Renee Cox depicts herself as numerous identities, both fictional and real. Most of the images in this series contain Cox in the nude, either by herself or with her family present, while donning traditional Jamaican clothing and accessories, along with western forms of erotic clothing. Many of the photos in which the artist is by herself can be described as almost pornographic, showing her in ridiculous poses that resemble that of women found in many Renaissance paintings. Some photos don't even show her face and instead pay emphasis on her breasts and genitalia. One disturbing image in particular where she is shown bound to a tree by wire, naked with bullet wounds. She is completely vulnerable and her body is on full display to the viewers. This in a way gives the viewers a sense of agency as we have complete control over Cox, giving us the opportunity of choosing whether or not to look at her tattered body. This series was Cox's way of exploring herself and the multiple identities she obtained throughout her life. (Source no. 3)

While Cox has masterfully found ways to convey her messages through unsettling imagery and photo-manipulation, she has also used the technique of religious symbolism. In Cox's words, "Christianity is big in the African-American community, but there are no representations of us...I took it upon myself to include people of color in these classic scenarios." (Source no.1 ) She frequently took inspiration from the works of famous Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci, replacing the figures in their pieces with herself and

other black people. Because of this, her religious based works has created a non-hegemonic response among the catholic community.

Her most controversial religious based work was arguably *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1996), as it stirred quite an uproar in 2001. When this series was presented in a exhibit in the Brooklyn Museum of New York, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani along with many other catholics were outraged at the portrayal of a nude black women in the place of Jesus. The piece is based on Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. It is a large horizontal plane made up of five, 31x31 inch panels that show a depiction of the Last Supper, a scene that takes place in the Bible where Jesus shared his last meal with his disciples and revealing to them that one of them would betray him. We as the viewer knows that it is Judas who eventually betrays Jesus, leading to his crucifixion and death.

In Cox's piece, the disciples are represented by black men, most of them wearing brightly colored robes, save for Judas, who is represented as a white man. Most of the black men are in traditional, natural hairstyles, some examples being afros and dreadlocks, which is what most of the disciples in *Yo Mama's Last Supper* are donning. This was Cox's way of portraying black culture in a positive, holy light, as many outside the black community view these kinds of hairstyles to be "unprofessional" and "dirty." The bowls on the table contains the usual bread of Christ alongside tropical fruits such as bananas, peaches and grapes which originated from African and Caribbean countries. Behind the figures in each of the images is a square curtain. On the far left photo the curtain is a solid red. Second is a gray curtain with a symbol of a cross in the center. Third is a bright solid yellow followed by another gray curtain with the same symbol. Lastly is green. These colors are associated with the Jamaican flag, which is where Cox was born.

Cox herself is in the place of Jesus. She is nude, standing in a T-pose, her arms are outstretched on either side of her towards the disciples. Her palms are open and she is looking upwards towards the ceiling. These signifiers are similar to many images depicting Christ in the same manner. Draped over her arms is a white sheet, which alongside the robes adorned by

Christ, it could also possibly play with the idea of white representing purity, which is ironic when relating it back to the fact that her private parts are on full display. Her pubic hair is unshaven, stating in her biography that she does not find herself nor the natural female body as shameful, and that it is just how, in christian beliefs, god created women to be. Her hair is in dreads and falls to her shoulders, mimicking the shoulder length hairstyle Jesus is typically depicted with in European based religious imagery. The significance of Judas being a white man is representational of the long, violent history of white supremacy and oppression against black people, as well as colonization and appropriation of black cultures. The difference in sex could also attribute to gender hierarchy, especially the violence of white men directed towards not only black women but the race as a whole. The greatest enemy of black people has always been the white man, thus the white Judas being the downfall of a black female Jesus. (Source no.2)

The work eventually resulted in a huge debate between Cox and William Donohue, who at the time was the president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Donohue accused Cox of being an “an irresponsible anti-Catholic propagandist” for depicting herself nude in the place of Jesus. The idea of the female body being so offensive was exactly the kind of ideal Cox was challenging in her art. Cox was later asked if the whole meaning of the photo was to heighten her self image, to which she eloquently replied with, "I have a right to interpret the Last Supper just as Leonardo da Vinci created the Last Supper with people who look like him." (Source no.2)

In turn, Cox’s use of ethical connotations helped in playing a huge role into the contemporary art movement. Cox had a variety of social issues that she addressed in her art as well as subject matter, and was not afraid to push boundaries or put herself in uncomfortable scenarios. Putting herself in these scenarios made the messages more personal because she is telling us her own story, adding to the depth and believability of her art.

Alma Woodsey Thomas was an African-American Expressionist painter and educator in the early twentieth century. Born in Columbus, Georgia. At the age of fifteen years old, Thomas and her family moved to Washington, D.C due to racial tensions in the south as well as Thomas’s inability to get a proper education. There, she enrolled in Howard University, becoming the first



graduate of their art department in 1924. From there, she spent over 35 years teaching art classes at public schools all over Washington, D.C. What was interesting about Thomas is that she did not begin her path as an independent artist until way into her sixties. (Source no. 7)

Alma lived during a period of time in which art forms such as expressionism, cubism and abstract art were prominent. Cubism began as an art movement developed during the beginning of the twentieth century. Cubism is when an artist will take a subject matter, break it down and build it back up into geometric shapes. The point of this artform is to view a subject at multiple points of perspective, instead of just one. Pablo Picasso is a prime example of artists during this time period, being arguably one of the most influential cubist artists to this day and creating well-known works such as his 1907 piece, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. Expressionism, on the other hand, developed as a reaction against the negative effects industrialization had on society. The style can be described as expressing the emotions within a subject matter instead of the actual physical form. Vincent Van Gogh is considered to be one of the most famous expressionist painters.

The artists Thomas drew inspiration from, however, were Cézanne and Matisse. Paul Cézanne was a French impressionist painter known for his use of shape and color to create vibrant compositions all while maintaining perspective. Henri Matisse, also a French artist, was a painter, sculptor, and printmaker known for his patterns, bright colors, and abstract shapes. His paintings were inspiration for Pablo Picasso, who referred to him as the “father to us all,” in regards to cubist painters. Thomas studied these artists and their mannerisms all while developing a style of her own.

An example of Thomas' early work was her 1964 painting *March on Washington*, which was one of her first paintings that geared towards a more cubist style. This oil painting was based on Thomas' own experience when she participated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August of 1963. It was a march advocating for civil rights and racial equality. This was done in a similar style as the previous painting, but less rendered and more gestural. She relied on uneven brushstrokes and splashes of contrasting colors to create forms in this piece. The foreground is made up of a crowd of people. Though they are faceless, we can tell they are

made up of different genders, ethnicities and ages due to the difference in height, skin color, hair color and length. They are mostly wearing various shades of blue but some stand out in yellows and reds. Not one person is wearing the exact same color as the individual next to them. We can see the crowd is outside by the light blue background, most likely between morning to afternoon on a bright, cloudless day. The surface they are walking on seems to be a yellow path, making the blue crowd stand out even more. On the rightmost side we can see a green surface meant to be patches of grass, drawing our attention to those dressed in red. To further frame the crowd we see white signs behind them tinted in various shades of warm colors as well as blue scratch like brushstrokes to imply there were pictures and writing. The left side we see a tan rectangular shape that gets cut off. We can assume this is a wall or a building the crowd is marching in front of. (Source no.8)

While Thomas has shown great skill in her illustrative paintings, her style became more and more abstract as she continued to grow as an artist. Eventually there was little to no subject matter in her paintings, just patterns and shapes, creating a mosaic like appearance to them. Even so, these patterns were indexical to the piece as it created depth with the use of different sized shape and difference of tonality in colors, as well as occasionally creating scenes with this technique. Alma Woodsey Thomas was influential in the contemporary art movement because not only was she an African American woman who excelled during a time where all the odds were against her, but as well as a message that it is never too late to pursue your goals. Her work and success was an inspiration for many black artists to come.

Another black modernist is Chris Ofili. Born in Manchester, United Kingdom, Ofili is a british artist who grew up creating abstract and contemporary forms of work. He centers his work on neo-expressionism, an art form that came about in the late years of modernism and early postmodernism. This style consists of present physical forms, such as the human body depicted in an abstract way, and with the use of vibrant colors, the works are portrayed it in a very rough and even violent way. This kind of art form is often meant to be seen in a very emotional light and was a way of resisting against conceptual and minimal art that was so present during the 1970s. Ofili's approach to neo-expressionism is a little different, however, as he uses references from blaxploitation films and gangsta rap. He seeks in having his viewers question racial and sexual stereotypes but in a humorous way. One can see this sort of playful tone in the way he

incorporates material into his works. Piling layers of paint and resin on a canvas, Ofili accentuates his works using glitter, photos and animal dung, applying it directly to the canvas in the form of dried spherical lumps and sometimes even using it as supports for his paintings. (Source no. 9)

One painting in particular that I wish to discuss is his 1996 piece of *The Holy Virgin Mary*. This painting depicts a very abstract representation of a black woman adorning a blue robe, an attire that is commonly associated with the Virgin Mary. The figure is divided into sections, each section being a solid color. The woman's skin is of one color while her robe is made up of different shades of blue. The woman's facial features resembles that of the many stereotypical attributes commonly associated with African American people in western culture. Everything is exaggeratingly large from her giant wide set eyes to her protruding forehead, enlarged nose, and fat red lips. These features take up such a large portion of her face and it is only emphasized by the roundness of her cheeks and forehead. There is no indication of a floor beneath her so it is unclear whether she is standing or sitting. The figure remains floating over a yellow background comprised of intricately placed dots of paint and glitter. The woman is shown with her robe strewn over her body which is represented by the way certain areas of her gown are painted in the same brown as her skin. This brings me to believe that her left leg is most likely uncovered and on full display to the viewer. Her right breast is also uncovered and a dried clump of dung with a blue spiral drawn on is placed over it to represent her nipple. Surrounding the figure are collaged photographic images of rear-ends and genitalia, belonging to women found in the pornographic business. The painting is displayed on the floor of the gallery, propped up against the wall. It is supported underneath by two lumps of dried varnished elephant dung. (Source no. 10)

The way the Virgin Mary is portrayed in this piece greatly differs from the preferred ideology portrayed in western culture. His work, in turn, became very controversial as there were many who were angered by it, viewing his work as being crude and insulting to Christian culture. This grievance, of course derived from the usage of animal dung and pornographic imagery on a religious figure. Ofili, who was actually raised in a Roman Catholic family responded to these accusations saying, "Elephant dung in itself is quite a beautiful object." (Source no. 10)

Ofili was not the first artist to represent the Virgin Mary as a black woman and is actually a reference to the Black Madonna paintings and statues that was often made during the thirteenth and fourteenth century. The way the figure is designed, being made up of in separate solid-colored pieces, may also play homage to the stain glass windows that are found in catholic churches. The floating buttocks and genitalia are a play on putti, better known as cherub angles, which are figures found in many forms of religious work. Putti are depicted as small, chubby, male children who are often found naked adorning angel wings. What often noticed by them are their round butts and the fact that the word putti sounds similar to the term often now used for the female genitalia. Her facial features, like stated before are a representation of racial stereotypes placed on black people by the american culture. This depiction of black people was heavily portrayed in during the nineteenth century in different media such as cartoons, movies, and advertisements where white people would even go so far as to adorn “black face”, painting their face as a way to represent a black person. Some critics have even questioned whether or not is should be okay if black artists are representing their culture in the same light. However, Ofili’s goal was to call attention to racial stereotypes, as well as to the assumed whiteness of biblical figures in Western representations.

The final African-American artist that will be discussed is David Hammons. A conceptual artist, Hammons is known for his works in and around New York City and Los Angele where he takes everyday objects and transforms them into allegories. These allegories depict those who sadly fall under the category of “other.” Whether it be due to race, gender, or social standing, Hammons showcases their experiercer in the contemporary world. His goal was to respond to the hegemonic ideology surrounding the white artist and take on hand-drawn realism and turn it into something contemporary. Hammons has even stated that he never liked the traditional style of artmaking, “I can’t stand art actually. I’ve never, ever liked art,” and felt that installation works were are means of incorporating the artwork with everyday life.

Born in the year 1943 in Springfield, Illinois, Hammons took night classes at Otis Art Institute where he met a realist artist and activist named Charles White, who was known for his works that depict violence done to African Americans by white people. Hammons took great

inspiration from him, for White's work forces the viewer to confront the harsh truths surrounding the development of America. At the start of his career, Hammons made body prints, using himself as the subject. He did by covering himself in grease and transferring it onto paper. He would then sprinkle the result with pigment and graphite. What was unique about this way of transferring was that it manages to pick up even the smallest of details from to the different textures of one's skin and clothes to even individual strands of hair. (Source no. 12)

One example of these prints is *The Wine Leading the Wine* (1969). In this print shows, based on physical attributes, presumably two African-American men. Both men are facing left and standing in similar positions, both having their left arm raised and tilted upwards. What is different about the two, however, is the one on the farthest left is holding something to his lips and judging by the title, is possibly a wine bottle. The man behind him has his hand resting on the first man's shoulder. The men are both dressed in regular everyday urban clothing, which signifies them to be members of the urban, community possibly of the middle-lower class. The posture of the two brings the thought that the one not holding the bottle is possibly begging the other for it and going back to the title, it could a correct assumption. The first man's posture very dynamic. His arched back causes his body to create a curved shape and it is only emphasized by his raised arm, leg and upturned head. His posture gives the sense that he is almost gloating at having the bottle while the other is the complete opposite. The second male's back is hunched over and his arm is meekly stretched outwards towards the other male. His puckered lips resemble that of a pout, indicating the whine or in this case "wine." What's notable about this piece is that it brings up the assumptions commonly associated with black males and how they are considered "shameless" or "drunks," resorting to even begging in order to get their fix. (Source no.13)

Eventually moving to New York in 1974, Hammons dedicated his career to creating sculptures made from trash found in urban African American communities. One example in particular, is his 1993 work, *In the Hood*. This sculptural piece is of a used, green hood cut from a sweat jacket. It is displayed mounted onto the wall which can be related back to tribal masks found in Africa. What is so powerful about this piece is the effect it had on society not at that moment of being showcased but merely nineteen years later with the death of Trayvon Martin,

who wore a hood scarly similar to Hammons'. Trayvon was a seventeen year-old boy who was gunned down by a white man. To this day it is unclear as to what exactly led up to this, however, what what is certain is that there was a clear underlining of racism involved in the attack. Despite Hammons' piece being nothing more than recycled trash, the message behind it holds a lot of weight as it causes people to question their own ideology surrounding African Americans and how we are presumed to be "violent" or "dangerous," and how these assigned presumptions are associated with the clothing we wear. (Source no. 11)

In conclusion, these few artist are only a mere number in the amount of minorities that have spoken out against this "white" favored ideology. These artists bring to light the effects modernism has had on society and how they are able to showcase these problems through their work. As the spectator, looking at these works forces us to stop and not take everything in at face value and what needs to be done in order to change this way of thinking.

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One of the many photographs found in Renee-Cox's series *Queen Nanny of the Maroons* (2004-5)



One of the many reliefs made in Renee-Cox's series *Soul Culture* (2018)



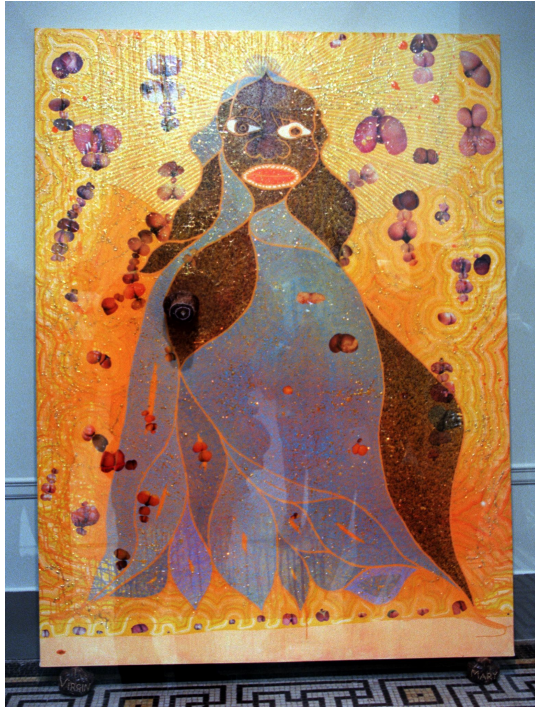
One of the many photographs found Renee-Cox's series *American Family*



*Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1996)  
Renee-Cox



*March on Washington* (1964)  
Alma Thomas



*The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996)  
Chris Ofili



*The Wine Leading the Wine* (1969)  
David Hammons



*In the Hood* (1993)

David Hammons