

FICTIONAL TRUTHS ; THE AUTO-MYTHOGRAPHY

WITH ASSISTED LIVING FROM THE DEAD.

MO'LASSES :THEORY AND PRACTICE.

The hands of God were upon me and she brought me out by the sweet spirit of her honey and set me in the middle of a valley that was full of bones, dust dry bones. And then she said unto me, prophesy to these bones and say to them, dry bones, hear the word of life and I will make water enter you and you will come to flow into my bosom and witness all ages of time, future past and present. God then began to dance and with each sway of her hip and stomp of foot, there drew a river from the belly of the bottom of the valley and I was gifted a bottle and commanded to soil each dust dry bone back to life.

-excerpt text from film Ancestors Wake

In the speech by Toni Morrison entitled, *The Site of Memory*, she pulls the words of Zora Neale Hurston who said,

"Like the dead-seeming cold bones, I have memories within that came out of the material and ancestry that went to make me." In other

words, there is truth and knowledge to be found in the marrow of our bones, in the quiet recesses of desires and doings who's origin we may not know.

Whose origins may in fact be inherited from ancestors whose desires went unfulfilled and now linger in their descendants" (Morrison 1993) Similar

The seeker must know how to read and how to ask lots of questions to which no one answer brings satisfaction. The seeker must know how to close a door and be open to responding to how another something may unlock in same moment. The seeker must know how to tell time by the sound and light of the moon.

to Hurston and Morrison I have come to find that working with the “memories within and the remains of ancestors” becomes essential in expanding cultural imagination and filling in spaces excised in detail as it relates to personal and collective memories. While their work is primarily literary, the concept of the archeo-auto-mythologicalization of self is possible with any art form and is described by Morrison as, “greater than fiction, it is the blending of artifacts, memoirs and guess work to create a detailed and elaborated exploration of self identity in relation to a cultural meta narrative”. This strategy becomes particularly valuable to practitioners whose mediums and methods are used as instruments for introspection and navigation of and through the outer world.

The American Folklife Center defines an ethnographic field collection as: a multi-format, unpublished group of materials gathered and organized by an anthropologist, folklorist, ethnomusicologist, or other cultural researcher to document human life and traditions. It is a unique created work brought together through the intentions and activities of the collector. An ethnographic field collection may bring together materials from a wide range of formats including sound recordings, drawings, photographs and field notes correspondences. Although each item in an ethnographic field collection may have individual value, it gains added significance when viewed in the context of the other materials gathered by the collector in interaction with the people and activities being documented. (www.afc.org lasted 2016)

Why should one bother to investigate material objects in the quest to celebrate culture? Objects are used by a much broader cross section of the population and are therefore potentially a more wide-ranging, more representative source of information than words. They offer the possibility of a way to understand the mind of the great majority of

people, past and present, who remain otherwise inaccessible except through impersonal records and the distorting view of a contemporary imagination. Just as persons invest aspects of themselves in things, it is now an established framework across disciplines of material culture that things themselves might be said to have biographies. The idea of things as inanimate and passive carriers of meaning or "props" of master narratives has been abandoned in favor of theories of agency deriving from a range of theoretical and socio-spiritual perspectives. The hybridity of object-subject afforded by social anthropologists to "other" cultures is now more broadly applied to modern societies. Material culture is the study through artifacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time. The term *material culture* is also, frequently used to refer to artifacts themselves, to the body of material available for such study. Material culture is singular as a mode of cultural investigation in its use of objects as primary data. It is a means rather than an end, a discipline rather than a field. For creative practitioners, material culture becomes extremely valuable when phenomenological' sensibilities to art making and display are taken into consideration. This phenomenological arts approach is based upon our experience of the world through the senses and it is most affective through multisensory interactivity. Smells, tastes, sounds textures all become stimuli for cultural re-awakening and legibility for participants.

ANCESTRAL MUSEOLOGY MEMORY SHAPES IDENTITY

Objects have the ability to trigger a "kinesthetic imagination" or act as "faculties of memory" in the humans experience For instance when a knife cuts a finger and the person to whom that finger is sliced

performs a dance of pain , it is stored in the bodies physical and psychological database of memory. Heightened precaution, skepticism or extreme aversion to knives and cutting may result in reaction to the experienced trauma made to the finger. Some psychologists suggests that there is a repository of spiritual memories as well that reverberate past an experienced moment. It is safe to say then, that the material world has a direct influence on our cognitive processes, and the processing of processes influence how present and future reactions are experienced in ones life. Folk art and contemporary arts practices that take into account traditions and memories as part of reinvention are in essence augmenting the realities of the past in order to re-present or recreate experiences in the present and thus the future.

In the case of my Great Great Great Grandfather Jack Givens, the journeying to the site of memory was less concerned with forensically pinpointing his exact whereabouts. Neither was the excavation of material culture from Givens Hill, intended to be used as prop's to "re-stage" or replicate a historical moment as expected from a "museum diorama", rather conceptually, ethnography and my ancestors material culture become instruments and thresholds for me as a creative practitioner to fabricate and embellish the historical imaginings of my people and by situating these historical re-imaginings in spatial arrangements for public engagement, they in turn become a nexus for collective reassessments and redressing's of forgotten, unknown or discarded memories as well as material for the (re) creation of contemporary art objects.

This manipulation of matter and memory can lead to a transformation of perceived reality. Blackness in its multifactedness, for too long has been perverted distorted by the westerns epistemology. Our

perceptions of verbal memory, visual memory, spatial memory, episodic memory, semantic memory are all affected by the impressions and post impressions of the material world. Memory plays a role in all of our faculties. It helps us retain information, and recall processes that develop our collective and individual identities. It is a direct witness of our past, present and future selves. What then does it mean to redress and Through the arrangement of the rich cultural material we are then able to reshape and redirect memory to serve us rather than act as inhibitors in transformation.

“ art imitates life, life imitates art” in the case of my ancestral museology the lives of my ancestors are imitated in creative imaginings of my practice in order to reread and rewrite their unknown histories.

“Objects created in the past are the only historical occurrences that continue to exist in the present. They provide an opportunity by which we encounter the past at first hand; through artifacts we are able to have direct sensory experience of surviving historical events.” Artifacts themselves may not be as important as the historical events, but they are, to the extent that they can be experienced and interpreted in present.

My role as artist is to use these past objects and the embedded memories and moments within for the sake of unearthing new ones. Creating discourses, using the ethnographic lens, the curatorial lens, the historical lens to recreate and create mythological narratives, that reference a real history. The use of fiction to edit and reimagine fact. The reimagined fact to create new fictions. One of the major misassumptions about the use of ancestral, folk or traditional variables in the development of contemporary work is that there is a replication to tradition, a referencing of the past with no acknowledgment or

suggestion of the future, or contemporary present. Just about everything that black folk do is expressive, dynamic, fluid suggestive of movement and motion. We respect and revere tradition, while simultaneously valuing the primacy of the contemporary experience, as its being felt. The mature (ing) Black folk artist must be based in on the presence of a idiosyncratic virtuosity a riffing so to speak that allows for both recognition of pre-established traditions or aesthetic philosophies improved upon and extended with multigenerational justification. As a black man investigating the dislocation of my great great Grandfather amidst the Americas tradition of castration, displacement and white supremacy, it rings ever so vibrant and relevant in the wake of a prison industrial complex, spiritual retardation and political disenfranchisement.

Toni Morrison author of the seminal book *Beloved* has coined the idea of rememory . Morrison uses the word rememory to mean the act of remembering a memory and the continued presence of that which has disappeared or been forgotten. This rememory is when a memory is revisited, whether physically or mentally. Yet the word is not a verb but a noun. It is an actual thing, person or a place that takes on the existence of a noun. Re-memories, then, are places, or better, pictures of certain places triggering off re-presentations, vivid descriptions or accounts. Morphologically, the word rememory is formed by prefixation, where i) re- occurs originally in loan words from Latin (memory), used with the meaning again or again and again to indicate repetition, or with the meaning back or backward to indicate withdrawal or backward motion (Webster 1989); and ii) memory, the lexical base, the mental capacity or faculty of retaining and re-viving impressions, or of recalling or recognizing previous experiences. The objects that make up my archive and installation practice, tend to all point to period in southern American

history that some much rather forget. However given the inherit lack resolve with in American social politic, as our nations southern pasts lives and linger in ways that despite our best efforts to ignore, repress or forget, they manage to resurface and affect us.

A re-memory differs from a memory because it can be shared. The collective nature of slavery and its social conditions created re-memories, known to more than one person. Even those who never shared in the experience can feel its affects. While my installations tend to highlight objects from my families material archive, the objects themselves are not illegible to a broader audience. Rolling pins, lace garments, mirrors, keep sake boxes, vintage bibles, Aunt Jemima culinary memorabilia, aged mason jars, marbles all have the capacity to mediate the cultural and epistemological clashes of Colonial history.

VALUING ANCESTORS

The most obvious cultural belief associated with material objects has to do with assumed *value*. There are different ways of appraising value, the most baseline consideration in the appraisal of an object is the quality and rarity of materials used in the making of said object, for example a set of antebellum coin silver Hotchkiss spoons are valued at \$1,520.00 dollars. I took my Aunts hand sewn aunt Jemima quilt to an appraiser and while he did note the flour sacs used to make the quilt were nearly 100 years old he valued the quilt at \$60.00. I have since used that very quilt in several iterations of the project and to date it stands as one of the most evocative and sought after objects in the archive. I can emphatically say that no silver spoon can come close to stirring the same reactions from the public, no matter its "appraised value" In a way my work interrogates and reinterprets the assumed value of objects beyond

the market culture of commodity, in fact the use of seemingly commonplace or low market value artifacts are most affective in triggering a collective historical “rememory”.

Collecting things collecting objects.

Thing theorists have eloquently explored the ways in which this animative power derives from the psychological investments of people or from a thing itself. It has also been discovered that things literally shape human behaviors. A chef's knife, a laptop computer, and a wooden caricature all invite—indeed, create occasions for repetitions of acts, distinctive and meaningful motions of eyes, hands, shoulders, hips, feet. These things arrange and propel bodies in recognizable ways, through paths of evocative movement that have been traveled before. An object becomes a thing when it invites a person to be. Things are not alive, but people “behave,” as W. J. T. Mitchell notes, “as if works of art had minds of their own, as if images had a power to influence human beings, demanding things from us, persuading , seducing , and leading us towards longing and distraction.” Things are legible – they challenge is how to read them. Or maybe the challenge is not how to “read” them, but how to engage them in some other way, beyond the notions of reading that terms such as “illegible” suggest.

WHAT IS CONCEPTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY?

Tempting spirits to make their presence known. My work is precisely about staging material tableaux's that imagine the traditional futurity of the imagined

present. The stirring the dead. Stimulating the imagined and real manifestations of the dead. My work is an investigation of the relationship 'tween the visible and invisible affects of material culture . It is my Stir the ghoust of the contemporary past in the traditional present..objects, space, and how the geomancy the material tableaux conjure where the ghosts of the contemporary past collide dwell in fabricating interstitial places where lines of mythology and the factual blur, where audience explores the liminal realm between legible public places and private ritual spaces. ancestral legacies. in my practice intersect the contemporary past and the traditional present, to investigate there shared relationship. invented realities and the personally lived experiences are laid heavy in Diasporic visual and philosophical elements next to harnesses the power of the imagination to nikisi to cast spells of intention for her wishes and she wishes to speak to her ancestor, RJ .This is valuable as a member of a cultural group whose cultural identity is systematically been under attack.

Since the arrival of African bodies in this country has the diasporic, new world African had to negotiate our identities in the cacophony of toxins that make up the Colonial mentality. Spiritually, physically, emotionally, linguistically aesthetically there is a constant confrontation and surveillance of who we are and who we are assumed or relegated to be per the American Imagination. The installed temples that make up my visual spatial work, are sanctuaries where the black aesthetic unapologetically dwells, where language and time, posture, smell, all convolute into a amalgam of cultural identities, of personalities that strive for a presence to breathe. These temporal altars becomes spaces where the long silenced past is brought to life, they become spaces of resurrection.