Dialogue: Invisible Forces

Theophilus Kwesi Mensah[1], Edward Buxton[2], Ebenezer Kow Abraham[3]

[1,2]School of Creative Arts, Department of Art Education, University of Education, Winneba. P. O. Box 25, Winneba – Ghana

[3]Department of Art Education, School of Creative Arts. University of Education, Winneba P. O. Box 25, Winneba-Ghana.

ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the contemporary existential quandary of African identity a crisis indelibly shaped by the lingering spectres of colonialism. Utilizing a practice-based research methodology supported by curatorial strategies and postcolonial theory, the study excavates the pervasive stereotypes, epistemic violence's, and systemic marginalization's that have historically and persistently defined African subjectivities. Employing an interdisciplinary arsenal of visual strategies painting, collage, and photomontage the research culminates in a series of conventional yet enigmatic portraiture, each suffused with ornate textile motifs drawn from deeply symbolic iconographies. These works, echoing the stylized formalism of medieval representational traditions, seek to deconstruct the mythologized archetypes imposed upon African bodies, instead fostering an aesthetic dialogue that reveals the irreducible complexities of human ontology. Beyond mere representation, this visual inquiry illuminates the imperceptible yet tectonic shifts within our cultural topography nuances often eclipsed by the myopia of collective consciousness. By rendering the invisible visible, the study aspires to disrupt hegemonic narratives, inviting a profound renegotiation of what it means to be, to belong, and to resist within the contested terrain of African identity.

Keywords: colonialism, multi-faceted, iconography, identity, stereotypes, marginalization.

INTRODUCTION

In this era of globalization, multiplicity is what defines an individual or each and every one in our world. Appiah (2004) affirmed this, when he asserted that confining the composition of identity of a person to one set of factors such as gender, race, culture and religion is synonymous to restricting the identity of such individuals.

In this purview, an individual is not and cannot be known only by reference to one point of entry due to the complex interconnectedness shared by the world today. This idea has in turn projected an allusion of a sensation of belongingness to a community irrespective of the interval which Anderson (1983) calls 'imagined community'. Unfortunately, not every race or people have that luxury of experiencing this community. This is in regards to the stereotypical ideologies concocted in European traditions with reference to the constitution of African identity and the different experiences of racism and imperialism that is still in prevalent of the African today. This challenge of the African is based on the assumption that the history of Africans lies outside the pale of people. Echoing the pulse of this heartbeat, Palmerg (2001, p. 206) said, when history is cut, the first to be sacrificed is that of pre-colonial Africa. The refutation of an African past is somehow linked with the inception of racism and stereotypical ideologies in Western Europe. And what is more, most of these views can be described as political and ideological indoctrination designed to belittle and outrage the significance of the African, all-in bid to project white superiority. This steered a moral quest to fight against the depersonalization and dehumanization that countless number of Africans were subjected to in the past and are experiencing now.

This statement served as the premise on which this paper took form. Our artistic practice critically examines the misrepresentation and stereotypical sentiments ascribed to African identity. In this study, we were

profoundly influenced by some literature written by Hall Stuart (Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices), Joy Degruy Leary (Post Traumatic Syndrome), Ed Guerrero (Framing Blackness) and many others alike. Through these arrays of literature, we explored the varying circumstances and environment under western traditions which stimulated the inception and propagation of some of these stereotypes and misrepresentations. We also reviewed a few works by Yinka Shonibare MBE and Kahinde Wiley who had influenced our artistic practice and were also in conversation with the same subject as we are.

A series of studio experimentation were also conducted to that effect, which provided the premises to artistically explore the contradictions: between embracing a European idea or material and fighting stereotypes to conceive self-identity. This paper relies mainly on painting as our main mode of expression, through which we employed materials and motifs which deals with contested histories of identity and exchange: African wax prints produced in different places and fixed with local meanings; Victorian and Baroque wall paper motifs that refer to formation of empires; photographs dealing with the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its residues across the diaspora.

In the selected body of works, we incorporated these mediums and textures to permit us create an endless play of moments frozen out of time that glean from history. This aroused our audience to reflect on what history has done to us, what we have become and what the tales of the past have done to our becomingness as they engage with the works. The sense of historical events that beamed from the work, provided a window into the cultures that we are living in today

The Conception

When we examine the history of Africans within the context of contemporary social problems, it is clear that colonialism played a major role in redefining the experiences unique to Africans both internal and in the diaspora. It is therefore within the context of this discourse (Africa's colonial experience) that Cesaire once said: "*I am talking of societies drained of their essence and life, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out.*" (1972: 21-22)

In light of the above, scholars from a wide range of theoretical perspectives have been critically examined some of these challenges with regards to the stereotypes and misrepresentation inducted during colonization and post-independence and methods adopted by Africans in response.

This paper's examination of the inception of these stereotypes and misrepresentations ascribed to the personal identity of many Africans and slave descendants was greatly influenced by the publications of some few scholars of which Joy Degruy Leary is part. In her Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (2005), she discusses the impact of slavery as a trauma suffered by many members of the African-American population. Degruy Leary argues that many stereotypes and representations credited specifically to African-Americans stems from slavery as adapted behaviours that were necessary for survival.

In the same vein, (Johnson, 2018) also asserted that, for one to become aware of self-perceptions of contemporary African-Americans, it is eminent to explore slavery's impact on societal consciousness. She further stressed on the need to note that the creation of stereotypes about African slaves was dictated by slave owners; the identified traits were reported and often openly declared as the truth. The reinforcement of negative stereotypes provided the "proof" needed by White people to accept stereotypes as accurate; additionally, this reinforcement increased the probability that African slaves would incorporate within themselves these negative stereotypes.

Hall (2003, p. 245) also talked about the stereotypes attributed to African Americans, in the book, Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices. Hall's assertion that Africans were undeveloped and their culture was inflexible (in contrast with Westerners who were capable of adjusting distinct features of their culture) were taken up and reinforced as complete representations. They were reduced to their very soul. Idleness, staunchness, brainless 'coon', scam, and infantile behaviour were the qualities of blacks as a race, as a species. This reduction perpetuated the idea that "there was nothing else to the kneeling

slave but his servitude; nothing to Mammy but her fidelity to the white household…" These representations became the basis for the inception of destructive stereotypes that was consistently connected with Africans and African-Americans.

According to Hall (2003, p. 258), the continually recurring nature of stereotypes stems from power demonstrated by representations that encourage the promotion of differences". Hall (2003, p. 259) further explained that, the power to control others in representation switches the ownership of an identity from individual/group possession to an external authority. This right to accurate representation was stripped from African-Americans during enslavement and Whites constructed negative stereotypes that were reinforced in a variety of images and elaborate story-telling. These images have empowered White supremacy and undermined African-American identity; therefore, favouring whiteness and disadvantaging blackness.

It is within this context that Ed Guerrero examined power demonstration through representations that ensured the advancement of differences. He discusses the influence of media in shaping the black image on the commercial screen, mainly Hollywood's ideology of racial domination and difference that creates black people as other and subordinate, while it naturalizes white privilege as the invisible but sovereign "norm". In his book Framing Blackness (1993): The African American Image in Film; focused on the creation of African-American inferiority and White superiority in films. Guerrero highlight on the preserved negative imagery in the United States' film industry by probing movies created from early 20th century until the mid-1990s. Guerrero is of the view that the historic misrepresentation of African-Americans in film has challenged many African-American filmmakers and artists to create new definitions of "blackness" as a refusal and form of disapproval to predominant negative stereotypes.

The Stories Beneath the Story

The production of art has undergone a massive transformation over the past centuries as the advent of new materials has incited artists to experiment and explore in an attempt to find different techniques and means of art production, which in turn has brought about amazing changes in our very notion of art.

The challenges posed by some of these historical phenomena have become a subject of critique and muse for artists to explore with. It is within this same context that these series of works presented in this paper stem from. The interest in some of these historical narratives especially one that pertains to the effects of colonialism, has heightened our curiosity to take keen interest in how its legacy continues to affect the lives of people of colour in our world today. Through the lenses of our practice, we began exploring themes like black subjectivisation, resistance, and to a larger extent, issues pertaining to authenticity, politically and aesthetically. These conversations led us on to narrow down the paper scope to the contradictions: between embracing a European idea/material, and fighting stereotypes to conceive self-identity. This was made possible through materials and motifs that cropped up within the work which dealt with contested histories of identity and exchange. For instance, African wax prints produced in different places in the world and fixed with local meanings (Figure 1), were not just decorative fabrics but contested signs—symbols of colonial trade, African resistance, and diasporic exchange. Victorian and baroque wallpaper patterns (Figure 2), were not backgrounds but active participants in reasserting the visual codes of empire. Photographs dealing with the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its residues across the diaspora (Figure 3), were not static references but active fragments, reordered to resist closure and disrupt historical continuity. Through collage and montage, these materials constructed an aesthetic of fragmentation—mirroring the discontinuities of African identity under colonial scrutiny.

These specific choices made with respect to the elements and medium employed, somehow points to specific and particular historical events. Even though it is specific and particular, it also had the tendency of deconstructing these coherent parts that forms the characters into fragments to reveal all these contradictions and tension beneath it. This in turn brings these selected works into a contemporary conversation.

Figure 1: Images of African wax print

http://blackeconomics.co.uk/wp/african-fabrics-the-history-and-background/

Figure 2: Images of William Morris Victorian wall paper patterns

https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/william-morris-and-wallpaper-design

Figure 3: Image of British colonial officer carried in a hammock.

https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/566538828097391465

Stitching The Pieces

All of the materials and processes used in creating the various characters in this project, revealed layers of contradictions that were imbued within them. Despite the fact that we relied mostly on painting as our main mode of expressing key ideas for this paper, other technique like collage and photo montage were incorporated to stitch the pieces of our ideas together. In the construction of this visual information, each piece began with painting as the foundational stone on which other forms were later laid. Like a scribe, Acrylic paint became the medium that was leaned on to inscribe this information onto the canvas and papers that served as the scrolls. The paper unlike the canvas did not really need to undergo any surface preparation process, therefore requiring us to work directly on it. Once the primed canvas was dry, the ground was painted flat with a layer of acrylic paint which served as the base paint on which the figures and background motifs were sketched and painted. Our approach with the paper was however quite different in the sense that, the figures were painted on another sheet of paper, cut out, transplanted and then fixed onto the main sheet. Each piece was rendered in the form of a portraiture whereby little emphasis was placed on literal likeness in the depiction of the subject. Instead, each subject consisted of separate interconnected parts, solicited from different sources which gave them unique identities quite different from the literal. This idea, subverted the very notion of portraiture which sought to depict the unique appearance of a particular person or express individual identity, and rather projected an identity that is not absolute but exists on the basis of its relation to others. This unique identity of the subjects in effect, reflected the shifting and adapting nature of the African identity influenced by some literature written by Hall Stuart (Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices), Joy Degruy Leary (Post Traumatic Syndrome), Ed Guerrero (Framing Blackness) and many others alike. Also, considering the sensitive nature of the issues that the works dealt with and in a conscious effort to subvert it, each subject was depicted in a form of a caricature to induce humour and playfulness through exaggeration of physical features. Apparently, this was intended to prevent viewers from being defensive anytime they encountered the works. The subjects were depicted from head to waist or hips (half-length) and head and shoulders (bust) with the heads placed frontal, in profile and in three-quarter view. This permitted us to create views from multiple directions in order to engage viewers. The backgrounds of the portraits were also given a lot of attention in the sense that, they were highly integrated with delineated designs appropriated from African wax prints, Victorian and Baroque wall papers (Figure 4-7). These motifs or designs were drawn and painted directly onto the canvas. The stencilling method was also employed to transfer some of the designs onto the canvas. In transferring the motifs using the stencilling method, designs were drawn directly on cardboards and cut out to expose the negative area of the design. The cut out or negative area of the design was placed directly on the canvas and then filled with another layer of paint different from the base paint with the aid of a brush to transfer the design. This process was repeated in a particular pattern which differed from one canvas to the other with the objective of creating an endless flow of patterns that stretched from one end of the canvas to the other in an effort to question authenticity in reference to mass production. With regards to the treatment of the subjects with acrylic paint, it involved building up layers of colours that moved from darker to lighter values which gave an illusion of three dimensionality despite the fact that they were executed on a flat surface. However, our rendition of the figures with blurred paint strokes as against the flat/delineated backgrounds and the use of source of light in contrast to the flat/neutral background generated some kind of tension or contrast between the two. In an attempt to subvert the principle of emphasis employed in most traditional compositions, the main subject and the background of the works were given equal importance in terms of colour, contrast and textures.

With the foundation laid, we started incorporating other materials like pieces of African wax prints solicited from different tailoring shops into the work. It became a preferred choice of medium because of the exchange and contested histories it shared with the issues we were questioning. Before introducing the pieces of wax prints into the work, they were carefully sorted out on the basis of colour, thickness and patterns. These pieces were then cut into various forms or shapes with the aid of a scissors and fixed onto the canvas and paper with an adhesive.

The pieces of wax prints fixed onto the canvas or paper surfaces were built up in a way that assumed the form of a patched work. This was due to the differences in shape and colour of the fabrics used and how they were fixed next to each other on the support. In experiments conducted earlier on, the prints were mainly used to

create costumes appropriated from different time periods and spaces which served as adornment for the characters within the works. Though the costumes created were usually not contemporaneous with our time, it had that sense of historical events that provided a window into the cultures that we are living in today. In further experiments, interesting motifs that were originally printed on the wax print were cut out, while in other cases new motifs were created with the African wax prints and fixed directly on the canvas or paper to serve as background design for the work.

Once the collage technique had successfully been incorporated into the works, the photomontage technique was then ushered in to complete the work. Most of the images used were solicited from sites on the internet like, Pinterest and other historical websites that were mostly centred on themes like slavery and colonialism. The use of the photomontage technique permitted us to put together images referencing specific historical events from different periods in time by cutting, gluing, rearranging, juxtaposing and even to the extent of superimposing them on or with other elements within the work to create a seamless image. This method of putting time periods together referenced the editing technique used in films, radio and many others to compose their images. In effect, the work created an endless play of moments frozen out of time that glean from history on the canvas.

A large part of the interest in infusing the pieces with borrowed photos which reflect themes of slavery and colonialism and portraitures created from composite parts was that, it echoes how progressive and receptive identity is to changing environments (Figure 4). In evoking issues pertaining to the construction of stereotypes, cultural authenticity and appropriation, the portraits were furnished with a combination of African face painting designs appropriated from the pre-colonial era and costumes, most of which were Victorian, which marked a period in British history when Africa was colonized (Figure 5). This permitted the trace and play with layers of contradictions and entanglements that reflect the contemporary reality of hybridized cultural identities. Through this, viewers are aroused to reflect on what history has done to us, what we have become and what the narratives of the past have done to our becomingness as they engage the work. Contrary to the traditional portraitures that used the eyes as the place one looks for the most comprehensive, reliable, and valid information about the subject, the eyes of our subjects were either rendered closed or hidden behind some form of eye covering as a way of preventing viewers from catching a glimpse of the inner essence of my subjects (Figure 6 and 7). This act was an artistic reflection of how some individuals are blinded by stereotypical and racial sentiments which hinder them from perceiving the inner essences of other racial groups.

Figure 4: An image of a work consisting of a blend of portraiture and photos

Figure 5: A work showing a subject adorned in Victorian costume

Figure 6: An image showing a subject with the eyes hidden behind an eye covering

Figure 7: Image showing another subject rendered with the eyes closed

Conceal to Reveal

Interrogating Racial Stereotypes, Hybrid Identities, and the Politics of Representation

The exhibition *Conceal to Reveal*, held in the machine room of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology's (KNUST) sculpture studio, engaged critically with the dialectics of visibility and erasure in the construction of racial and cultural identity. Drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly the works of Homi Bhabha (1994) and Frantz Fanon (1952), as well as visual semiotics as articulated by Roland Barthes (1964) and Stuart Hall (1997), the exhibition interrogated the tensions between imposed stereotypes and self-fashioned identity within the African diasporic experience. The title itself *Conceal to Reveal* encapsulated the paradoxical strategy of masking as a means of subversion, resonating with Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry as an ambivalent practice that simultaneously adopts and destabilizes dominant cultural codes. This framework informed both the conceptualization of individual works and their collective curation, positioning the exhibition as a space for critical engagement with representation and identity politics.

The selection of the machine room a site traditionally dedicated to industrial fabrication as the exhibition space constituted a deliberate curatorial intervention that aligned with Michel Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopia, where spaces accumulate layered meanings through recontextualization. By presenting two-dimensional works in a space designed for three-dimensional production, the exhibition disrupted conventional viewing expectations and foregrounded the liminality between form and function. The interplay of artificial and natural illumination introduced a temporal dimension to the viewing experience, recalling James Turrell's phenomenological investigations into light and perception. This spatial strategy not only amplified the exhibition's thematic concerns but also invited viewers to consider how context shapes interpretation. The careful arrangement of works ensured each piece commanded individual attention while participating in a broader dialogue, minimizing visual distraction and encouraging sustained engagement.

The exhibition's thematic core engaged with Frantz Fanon's (1952) psychoanalytic critique of racial interpellation, Stuart Hall's (1990) theories of cultural identity as a process of "becoming," and Kobena

Mercer's (1994) work on hybridity in Black visual culture. These theoretical underpinnings were particularly evident in works such as *Otherness* (Fig. 8) and the *Tignon* series (Figs. 9–10), which juxtaposed Victorian wallpaper motifs with African figuration, creating a visual metaphor for the fraught negotiation between colonial aesthetics and autonomous self-representation. The *Dandy* diptych (Figs. 11–12) further complicated this discourse by appropriating 19th-century European sartorial codes, a gesture that invoked Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performative subjectivity. The figures' elite attire functioned as a Foucauldian (1977) "technology of the self," exposing the constructedness of identity while resisting its essentialization. Meanwhile, *The Orderly Disorderly* (Figs. 15–16), which referenced Ablade Glover's socio-political vision, extended the exhibition's critique to the neoliberal global order. Its fragmented composition and collective arrangement evoked Achille Mbembe's (2001) concept of "Afropolitanism," wherein African identity is continually renegotiated within transnational flows, while the installation's spatial configuration allowing both panoramic and intimate engagement mirrored Okwui Enwezor's (2008) curatorial approach in *Archive Fever*, privileging multiplicity in narrative construction.

The exhibition's success in provoking critical discourse (Figs. 17–18) aligned with Nicolas Bourriaud's (1998) theory of relational aesthetics, wherein art functions as a social interstice. Viewer interactions particularly debates around authenticity and cultural hybridity demonstrated the exhibition's efficacy in fostering what Chika Okeke-Agulu (2015) terms "postcolonial modernism," a framework that reconciles African artistic agency with global contemporaneity. Ultimately, *Conceal to Reveal* operated as both an aesthetic and theoretical intervention, employing visual paradoxes to destabilize hegemonic representations of Black identity. By synthesizing postcolonial critique, semiotic analysis, and spatial theory, the exhibition not only illuminated the politics of concealment but also redefined revelation as an act of strategic resistance. This approach suggests a model for future exhibition-making as a decolonial praxis within institutional art spaces, offering a platform for continued scholarly and artistic exploration of identity, representation, and cultural hybridity.

Manifestation

The audience's immersive engagement with the unfolding sequence of images elicited an unrestrained effusion of emotional and intellectual responses. While a select few interlocutors approached us to articulate their personal encounters with the works, the majority inscribed their reflections within the provided commentary ledger a textual archive of collective contemplation. Upon parsing these entries, we traversed a vast terrain of subjective interpretations, each a testament to the polysemic nature of visual discourse. It became increasingly apparent that, despite our intentional thematic constraints, the artworks' material and technical execution endowed them with an inexhaustible allure. This sustained fascination likely stemmed from the deliberate interplay of heterogeneous mediums each layer imbued with dense theoretical and historical resonances inviting prolonged aesthetic and hermeneutic engagement.

The dynamic, often fervent dialectic between audience and artist sparked by probing inquiries into the works' conceptual underpinnings revealed one of the fundamental mechanisms by which exhibitions engender epistemic production. Moreover, the manifold readings proposed by viewers resisted any singular, authoritative conclusion, thereby expanding the discursive field into a more expansive, globally situated interrogation of the themes at stake.
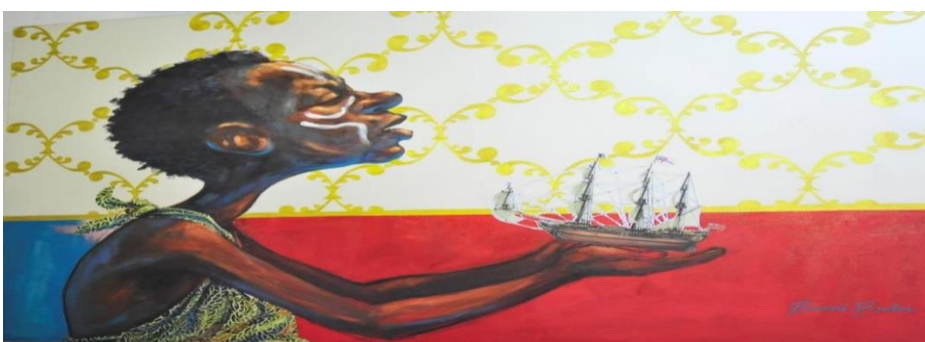

Figure 8: Otherness, 173 X 106 cm Photo credit: Kwadwo (Akomani Prako)

Figure 9: Tignon 1, 90 x 106 cm Photo credit: Kwadwo (Akomani Prako)

Figure 10: Tignon II, 201 x 121 cm Photo credit: (Edward Baani Buxton)

Figure 11: Dandy *I,* 106 X 173 cm Photo credit: Kwadwo (Akomani Prako)

Figure 12: Dandy II, 173 X 106 cm Photo credit: Kwadwo Akomani Prako

Figure 13: *Untitled*, 173 x 106 cm

Photo credit: Kwadwo Akomani Prako

Figure 14: Who am I, 201 x 121 cm

Photo credit: Edward Baani Buxton

Figure 15: Orderly Disorderly: Installation View I, 2017

Photo credit: Benjamin Adjetey Okantey

Figure 16: Orderly Disorderly: Installation View II, 2017

Photo credit: Benjamin Adjetey Okantey

Figure 17: Discourse between viewers in relation to the works I

Photo credit: Benjamin Adjetey Okantey

Figure 18: Discourse between viewers in relation to the works II

Photo credit: Benjamin Adjetey Okantey

CONCLUSION

The *Invisible Forces* project probes the entangled legacy of colonialism and the ongoing struggle for self-definition within African and diasporic communities. Through a fusion of historically charged materials and experimental visual strategies, the artworks resist static representations and assert the fluid, negotiated nature of Black identity.

The exhibition *Conceal to Reveal* exemplified how art can operate as both critique and proposition—a site where concealment becomes a form of subversion and revelation an act of empowerment. In highlighting the politics of visibility, authorship, and representation, this study offers a decolonial approach to art-making and exhibition practice. It affirms that identity is not inherited but constructed, not imposed but performed, and always in flux.

This research invites continued artistic and scholarly engagement with the visual languages that shape our collective memory and future imaginaries. By reclaiming the image, we reclaim the narrative—and in doing so, we begin to chart a more nuanced, empathetic, and inclusive vision of identity.

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