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Khaaliqua and Jeff

While watching a panel discussion on art and race, an audience member made the comment that today's African-American artists feel the need to assert their blackness. They feel the need to show how black they are in their work. One particular response resonated with me. Someone noted that, realistically, as soon as you depict a black person in your work, you are asserting your blackness whether you intend to or not. This notion of unintentionally asserting "blackness" piqued my interest, and inspired me to create a body of work that wasn't representational of stereotypical blackness. In my previous work, I was creating archetypes rather than individuals, so I began to explore portraiture. Portraiture demands to be accepted on its own terms, and for me it is the best way to capture truth.

For about a year, I painted the portraits of my family and friends. I had each person pose in minimal clothing. I didn't want any material object represented so as not allow the viewer to make a specific assumption about the individual based on stereotypes or popular culture. To create the environment, therefore, I considered the individual's personal life, personality and current hardships or struggles. I feel there isn't anything one could identify as "black" from the portraits. Therefore, the viewer is forced to look past race and focus on the subjects' facial expressions, the position of their bodies and hands, the colors of their clothing, and how they are painted to determine what type of person they may be.

I painted the figures larger than life, facing the viewer, but not looking directly at the viewer. I wanted to create the impression that the viewer is being let in on an intimate moment, that the viewer personally knows those depicted. Because when you actually know someone personally, your opinion of that person is most likely based on inner qualities and personality traits rather than on race.

Class of 2007

Class of 2007 was the last painting I completed as a graduate student. Therefore, I wanted the painting to be a kind of culmination of my entire experience at Parsons. I am interested in fusing multiple issues, so I set out to address the disproportionate number of white students in M.F.A. programs and the disproportionate number of African-American males in prison. I also wanted to address the idea of creating a work that is “universal.” Over the course of my time at Parsons, several of my classmates noted that they felt as though they could not completely relate to my work. They commented on how they were unable to see their role in a painting about race. So I questioned what would make a work about race issues “universal” until I finally came up with an answer. I figured that I would paint my classmates as African-Americans, filtering them through my vision, I would be able to create a painting more understandable to them.

My entire time at Parsons, I found myself battling against the notion of “Black Art” and the expectations for a “Black Artist.” I was the only African-American student in my class, and some of my classmates assumed that simply creating a class portrait would amplify that fact. They assumed the main objective of the portrait would be to show that I was the only black student in the class. But I’m not one to do the expected, so I led my classmates to believe that I would be creating a simple class portrait. Knowing that I would secretly switch everyone’s race including my own, I insisted that the painting not be revealed until the installation of the show. I admittedly wanted a mixed response: some angry, some excited. I therefore did the best I could to take everyone’s personality into account so as to determine what skin tone, hairstyle and accessories each student might be dissatisfied or pleased with.

During the big reveal, I got the unexpected: silence, then confusion, then laughter. Most seemed genuinely pleased, while some were visibly uncomfortable.

I had been searching my entire time in graduate school for what I consider the perfect balance: work that is conceptual, humorous and visually pleasing, while at the same time commenting on extremely uncomfortable race issues that can be experienced by anyone. With the creation of *Class of 2007*, I had finally begun to feel like I was within arms reach.