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Eat The Meat. Leave The Bones. Black Fatigue: Facing Visibility and Invisibility

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Abstract

Historically made invisible there is an unseen struggle that permeates Black art and the representation of Black people within art. The brutalization and oppression of Black people is often masked via retelling, co-opting, and romanticizing. Marc Ferrez, a 19th century photographer who captured depictions of the slave trade and plantations represented violent and brutal realities as beautiful genre photos, using slaves as an artistic element of compositon, not to show the reality of plantation work. One of many, Ferrez and works like his are common when looking at the representation of Black people in fine art and its history. This representation of Black bodies changes with artists like Kerry James Marshall, whose paintings starring Black figures stand as a celebration and focus of Blackness and Black people. This research and corresponding artwork explores examples of visibility and invisibility of Black people within visual arts and the connection it has to contemporary Black artists'and their own work. Paint allows the artist to research the effects of systemic oppression and perception of Black people within fine arts through artmaking and exhibiting. The artist's work references contemporary Black artists, like Faith Ringgold and Kerry James Marshall whose work focuses on depicting Black people as subjects and defining characters instead of background formal elements. Using self-portraiture, the artist redefines and calls attention to visibility and invisibility of Black folks in the United

States South through personal accounts and historical connections. Both color and subject matter play major roles in the research surrounding these pieces and their final presentation for the thesis exhibition displaying them.

1. Body of Paper

“But the idea of infinity, of a life and a world of infinite possibilities, where anything is possible for you, unconstrained by the nightmare fantasies of others, to have the presence of mind to walk as wildly as you will, that’s what I think about most, that is the direction I’ve always wanted to move in. Following my own nose and doing as I damned well please has always seemed to me to be the most radical thing I could do. It isn’t so much about placing black people in the canon as it is about saying that we’ve always been here, we’ve always existed, self-sufficient, outside of nightmares and imaginations, pre and post 'discovery’, and in no way defined or limited by who sees us.”

- Lynette Yiadom-Boakye[1]

The visibility of Blackness in art has been weaponized for spectacle or erasure, yet reclaimed as a declaration of existence. From the romanticized depictions of enslavement in Marc Ferrez’s Slaves at a Coffee Yard to the assertive presence of Kerry James Marshall’s Supermodel (Female), the portrayal of Black bodies has reflected the social conditions that surround them: commodified, muted, and reclaimed. Mary-Frances Winters’s concept of “Black Fatigue” provides a lens through which to understand this tension. She describes how the constant negotiation of identity within systemic racism inflicts both physical and psychological exhaustion. My body of work responds to this cyclical rise and fall of visibility, reclaiming the image of the Black figure as both witness and artist. Drawing from artists such as Faith Ringgold, Fred Wilson, and Kerry James Marshall, I explore how Black presence in fine art is not just representation but acts as resistance.

Mary-Frances Winters, a North Carolinian diversity and equity consultant, coined the term “Black Fatigue”. She describes Black Fatigue as an “underlying syndrome of sorts that permeates my very being”.[2] This is a persisting issue that often spans the entirety of a person’s life, as an invisible systemic harm. Structural racism and stress can cause lifelong damage to both the body and brain and is recognized as a threat to public health by the CDC. Winters also makes sure to note that the tools of oppression are the problem. Blackness is not exhausting, but racism is. Problems like depression, anxiety, and internalizing hate/stereotypes are associated with Black Fatigue, but African Americans are the least assisted in mental health capacities.

Black Fatigue describes chronic harm to marginalized communities that are victims of systemic racism, but it has been co-opted by conservative commentators and entered the pop culture vernacular. Instead of circulating media for its original context, it has been twisted to describe a

supposed fatigue with Black voices, representation, and narratives. This not only serves to erase the original term but also accelerates the erasure and backpedaling of “Blackness in public discourse”.[3] In 2020, there was a boom in purchases of Black portraiture and from Black artists, but by 2024 prices and purchases had begun to dwindle. Isshaq Ismail, whose work primarily consists of acrylic and collage Black portraits, sold Head 13 for $252,000 in 2021. In 2023 his portrait Zulkida sold for £3,810.[4] Prices soared as the pain and harm of Black bodies persisted in the media, and now that the narrative has grown tired, or too exposing of Blackness and Black struggle in pop culture, Blackness is intentionally being erased and turned invisible again.

When I spoke to my mother, Jacqueline Carter, about the sadness that comes from feeling misunderstood and misrepresented, she would often say “eat the meat, leave the bones”, advising me to take the pieces of critique that resonate and leave the rest. For me, a Caribbean-American, this quote paralleled not only my moments of confidence, throwing bones over my shoulder, but also days I felt the world had eaten me up –leaving a pile of bones.

Eat the Meat. Leave the Bones, tackles my experience with hypervisibility and invisibility, being both overpoliced and overlooked. Combining traditional oil paint, acrylic paint, airbrushed applications, and digital painting, I use multi-media and self-portraiture to give representation to my struggles with Black Fatigue while coming of age in predominantly white institutions.

It is remiss to speak about the invisibility of African Americans without referencing the historical and a systemic practice of slavery and its impact on the Western world. For the system of Afro-Atlantic slavery to not only exist, but flourish, it had to be normalized. Lilia Moritz Schwarcz writes “Forcible labor cannot be maintained without parallel attempts to invisibilize trauma and suffering”.[5] Slave markets were not pictured with the horrific details that travelers accounted for, but were marketed as serene markets to the wealthy. With no concern to the brutalization of those being traded, it made little sense to humanize them with accurate depictions.[6] The visual arts were indispensable for creating an image of delight and ease surrounding the afro-atlantic slave trade. Art has been used to pass news, recreate historical events, and provide aesthetic pleasure. If it wasn’t important enough, it was not to be created and shown, and if the right subject wasn’t the focus, then the controversy surrounding a piece could ruin an artist’s reputation.

Figure 1. Marc Ferrez, *Slaves at a Coffee Yard in a Farm, Vale do Paraiba, Sao Paulo*, 1882, platinum print, 40 x 30 cm (Instituto Moreira Salles, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)

Marc Ferrez, photographer and Brazil native, was prolific in landscape and industrial photography. The everyday life of Brazilians and their work were photographed in romantic dreamy scenes with gripping composition. *Slaves at a Coffee Yard in a Farm, Vale do Paraiba*, Sao Paulo (1882) is no exception to Ferrez's legacy.[7] In this image, we can see the use of art and composition are used to veil over the grotesque reality of the scene. The enslaved workers stand spaced into a grid-like pattern, with large round hills providing a rest from the figure filled scene. There is a striking amount of angles and dynamic motion that contrasts with the serene and foggy nature, adding depth as the hills recede. The coffee plantation looks harmonious, orderly, and completely integrated as a scene of everyday life.

It is a miraculous action shot, one that shows clear and purposeful intent. Brazil, the last country to abolish slavery in the Americas, depended on coffee as a main export in the 19th century. By the end of the 19th century, the Paraiba Valley was a main region for coffee plantations and hosted the "highest concentration of enslaved people in Brazil".[8] The enslaved Africans wear clothes that are too white and too clean, a contrast to the brutal realities of slavery in the Americas. The white man supervising the setting holds no weapon, and his extended arm leads us up and into the rest of the image, where depicted in the back is a plantation building nestled into the scenery. It is speculated the image is staged, but the end result makes no difference. This work was created to quiet and romanticize the lives of the enslaved and the successes of their labor.

I involve Ferrez's work because of his compositional prowess that holds the same importance in painted work. He has involved the Black figure, but not in acknowledgement or celebration.

Their selling point is that they are invisible and obedient, nothing more than a device to improve the composition of the scenic shot. The Black body is used as a backdrop, as was the goal of such romantic depictions of the scenes that were realistically incredibly violent.

Erasure doesn't always mean the subject is literally invisible. Enslaved Africans became part of the landscape, because their perspective was not one to consider. The fields tended by the enslaved were in no way romantic, and there was not good profit in advertising the realities of broken, Black bodies and their uses for trade. Ferrez does not critique slavery in this photograph, he normalizes and naturalizes the systemic practice. Not only are they posed to imitate a docile reenactment of labor, but they themselves have to participate in this fantasized reality.

Figure 2. Katana King, *Dimmer*, Digital, 2025

Dimmer was created from the erasure of violent realities through media and fine art. I use warm greens and yellows in a near chromatic palette for the entire piece. My left eye holds focus with its high contrast from the shadow the figure lays in, and pulls the viewer to question my gaze. Within the right eye I use a green that is cooler and darker than the surrounding yellow sclera,

making the iris become the darkest point of the illuminated section. I look towards the viewer, unsurprised and solemn. My arm wraps back unnaturally towards a dimmer switch that my finger presses on the surrounding wall. Wearing a long suit jacket, I conceal most of my form in boxy shapes that repeat in the square buttons and vertical lines traveling throughout the piece. The title ‘Dimmer’ refers to the present dimmer switch in the piece and the power of light. With this switch, I have the power to choose how much I want to reveal. However, as exposed by the line of light permeating my figure, I am subject to this illumination as well. Both the viewer and I will be put into light and have to observe and reconcile with our surroundings and each other.

When taking control of the light, I am taking control of my own visibility. I am still visible in the darkness and hold focus to the page with the size of the figure and contrast of color. Underplaying horrific oppression and harm by hiding it in the media and art is not new. The artist chooses what the viewer should focus on, and what can be hidden from the viewer. Dimmer emphasizes my power to unveil myself and the reality that surrounds me in my work.

Figure 3. Faith Ringgold, *American People Series #20: Die*, 1967

Faith Ringgold’s *American People Series #20: Die* (1967) also functions as a precursor to these themes. Before painting *American People Series #20: Die* (1967), Faith Ringgold asked "How could I, as an African American woman artist, document what was happening around me?”[9] She used a multifigural composition of grappling salarymen and women whose long limbs stretch across the canvas. The painting depicts a chaotic scene of racial violence, its composition echoing Picasso’s Guernica and centering the racial tensions of 1960s America. The people stab, shoot, and scream, no one left unharmed by the violence around them. *American People Series #20*: Die reflects her fear of the United States future. No one is left unaffected, even children huddle in fear of the chaos that surrounds them.

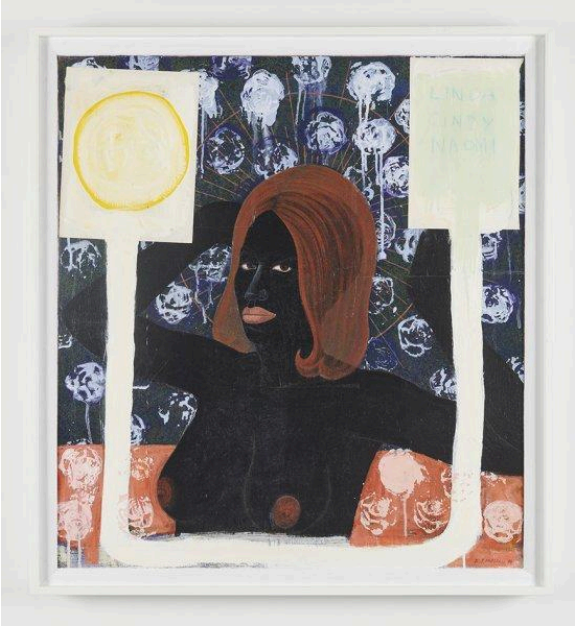

Figure 4. Kerry James Marshall, *Supermodel (Female)*, 1994

Kerry James Marshall's work is also referenced in *Sutter Ave*. I was enamored by Marshall's ability to paint Black women with autonomy and dignity and wanted to create a piece with multiple figures and dark values. The Supermodel is nude in Marshall's piece, but holds the gaze of the viewer steadily, already familiar with the stare of a voyeur. As a model, she holds her composure and poses for the viewer. Marshall holds a prolific history of painting the Black figure and creating pieces bringing a "physical presence to the women and men who were made invisible for centuries."[10] The model stands as the focus of this piece and the viewer's gaze, purposefully and with professionalism. I reference both Ringgold and Marshall for their dedication to color with the Black figure, and scenic representation and acknowledgment of the Black race in American settings and context.

Figure 5. Katana King, *Sutter Ave*, Acrylic, Spray Gun, and Colored Pencil on Canvas, 2025, 6.5'x4'

With family spanning Brooklyn, I am no stranger to the busy, outdoor Sutter Avenue stop, I remember holding hands with Papa and walking together down the green steps. For Sutter Ave, I keep my palette low-key, avoiding lights that were too far from value from the darkest shadows of the piece. Using acrylic instead of oil, it was difficult to bring out light as it continued to dry down dark and matte. Using this to my advantage, I took inspiration from Ringgold's line use, and Marshall's use of value painting the figure. The figure was especially intended to be monochromatic and dark, with layers of paint and glazing creating dimension of a fleshy figure. My figure lays across classic, metro blue subway seats, bracketed by the rest of the train car. Figures press against the glass and tussle with each other while I give a prim and slight grin to the viewer.

Sept. 15, 2024, NYPD officers fired at Derell Mickles within a train car, after he refused to leave the Sutter Avenue station in Brooklyn, New York. The bullets not only injured Mickles, but also one officer, and two civilians. Gregory Delpeche, who was on his way to work, was shot in the head, resulting in severe brain damage and no ability to speak.[11] The Sutter Avenue Station shooting raised concerns about the crime of fare evasion, mental health assistance in crisis, and extent of force used in proportion to crime in NYPD's historically violent interactions with civilians.

Although holding a face of confidence, I have my back turned to the commotion behind me, "safely" hidden in the train car. *Sutter Ave* questions what happens when there is no space to be invisible and keep your head down. It is common knowledge to practice nonchalance in busy cities and transportation, but no matter what confidence or cooperation, the threat of violence still lingers.

Fred Wilson's *Guarded View* is entirely different from a painting, but his ability to put the every day into a different perspective was illuminating to me when speaking about the idea of representation and visibility. He explores the dynamic of civil and service workers and the passing clients, customers, and administration they interact with. "You're standing there, you're silent, people walk by you, but unlike the artwork, you are invisible", Wilson comments on the piece.[12] Wilson details he was often the only nonwhite person in the museum; made invisible by both his profession and race. Guarded View calls attention to the issues of inclusion Black people suffer from lack of acknowledgement, but also lack of influence in fine art settings. Ignored and invisible, the guard does not choose what art hangs on the walls and must stand as another element of the museum, not the art and content.

Figure 6. Fred Wilson, *Guarded View*, 1991

In Bell Hook's essay, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," she writes: "Since most white people do not have to 'see' black people (constantly appearing on billboards, television, movies, in magazines, etc.) and they do not need to be ever on guard, observing black people, to be 'safe,' they can live as though black people are invisible and can imagine that they are also invisible to blacks".[13] With this recognition and light shone on Blackness, it also means the perception of whiteness from Black perspectives was also highlighted. Hooks describes the "disbelief, shock, and rage" her white students experienced as they heard Black students speak about whiteness. There was surprise that Black people not only recognized the oppression they face, but think critically about how they appear to white people and their proximity to whiteness. Both Wilson and Hook describe their awareness of themselves and how they appear to their white counterparts.

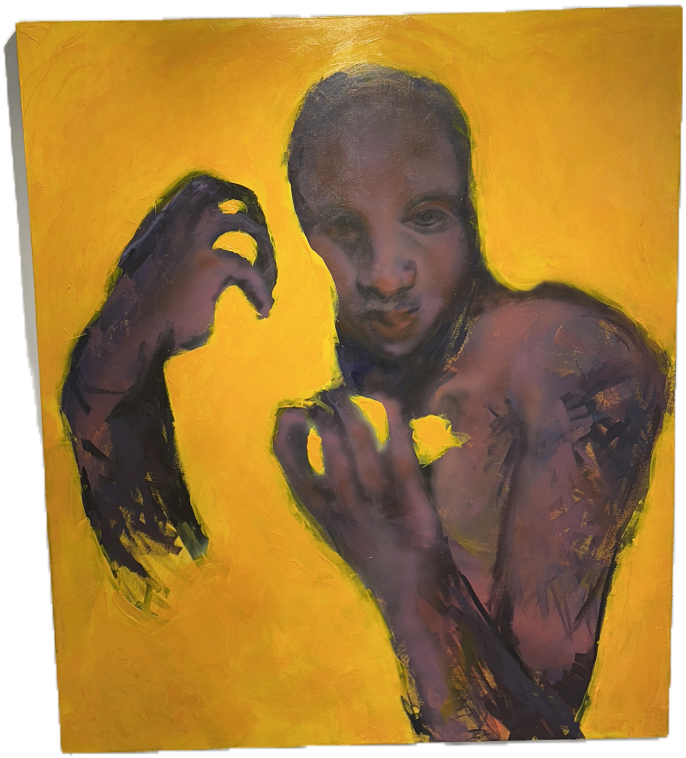

Figure 7. Katana King, *Grip Hold Grab*, Acrylic and Spray Gun, on Canvas, 2025, 5'x4.5'

In my piece Grip Hold Grab, I am painted on a large, almost square canvas. My body is made up of warm purple tones while a blanket of yellow goes around the back and front of the figure. I clutch onto this negative space, holding right with my face pressed against it. In the Fall of 2024, I was surrounded by a lot of history and the making of it. Hurricane Helene and the Presidential election rolled from one to the other, and my physical displacement influenced the content of my pieces. The negative space filled with yellow represents identity, and these outward forces that shape my own. The yellow cloak is both my cover I grip to, my invisibility I wear for my safety while also being the fabric that tangles me. I wear a cloak of my own identity, a large empty space covering half the canvas and my purple skin leans back into the yellow. It is not one uniform yellow filling the canvas, but actually layers of cool, warm and neutral yellows representing the good, bad, and ugly that is often invisible in the context of our identities. All of these things that we cling to that can be ripped away like a blanket, especially when identity is politicized.

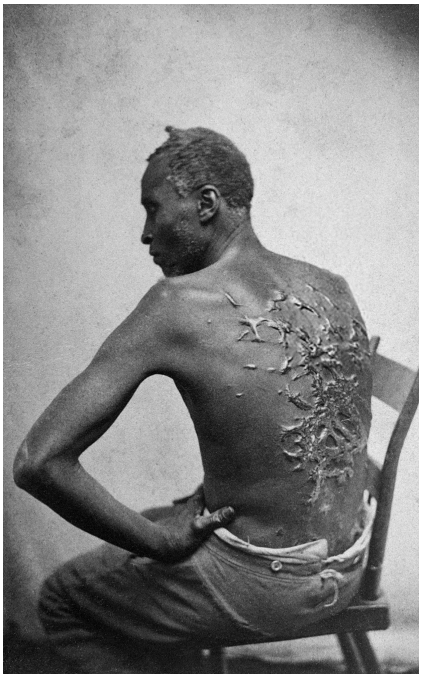

Figure 8. *The Scourged Back (Peter)*, 1863

Figure 9. Paul Cézanne, *The Negro Scipion*, 1867

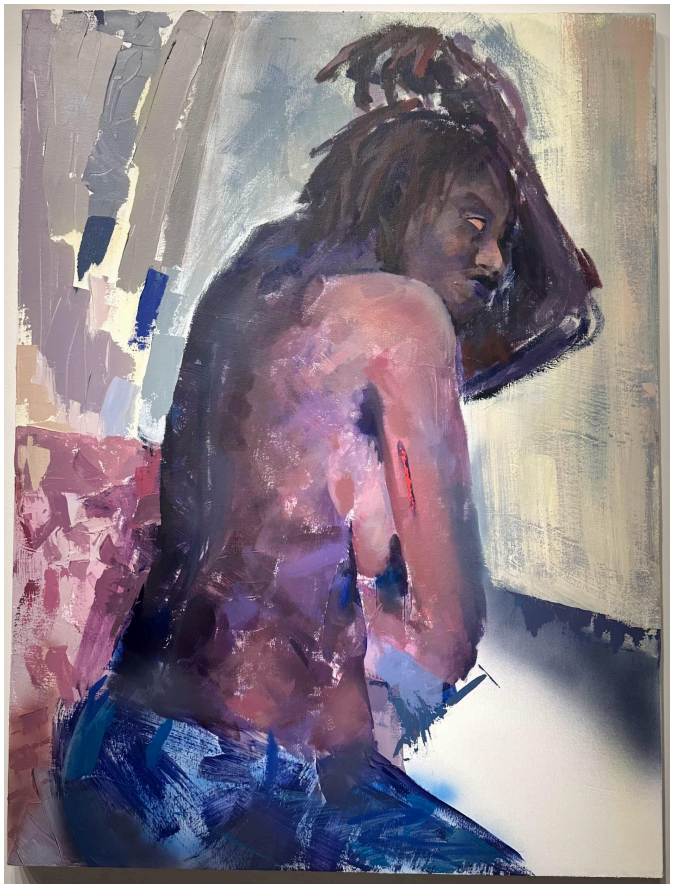

Figure 10. Katana King, *Scipio*, Acrylic, Spray Gun, and Colored Pencil on Canvas, 2025, 3.5’ x 4’

In *Scipio*, I pay tribute to Paul Cézanne’s *The Negro Scipion* (1867), an oil painting deemed a work of “greatest strength” by its owner, Claude Monet. Circulating just a few years earlier was a photograph of “The Scourged Back” or “Peter”, an enslaved Black man facing away from the viewer, displaying his scourged and scarred back.[14] Though prolific, the majority of Cézanne’s celebrated works are not figure paintings. The Scourged Back became a primary reference for the Abolitionist movement as the world was faced with the repercussions of slavery in the United States.[15] This painting shows the power of circulating media and the importance of accurate representation and exposure. Cézanne painted Peter with more contextual evidence of his reality of enslavement. In addition to the textured scars and keloids lining his back, Peter also lays on a cotton pile, a clue to the setting Peter lived in to receive these scars.

On the right arm of my figure I use bright reds to emphasize my own scar, one from medical negligence that left my tricep scarred and raised. Instead of a cotton pile, I lay on a cotton canvas, built and primed with my own hands. I created texture in my jeans with colored pencils and a spray gun. My palette stayed consistent with other acrylic pieces in my series, with rose red and ultramarine blue being the most prevalent colors.

In Eat the Meat Leave The Bones, I use self-portraiture and painting to explore and compare visibility and invisibility in American Art. Focusing on contemporary artists and events I reference the past and how it repeats, relating my own experiences with visibility and invisibility. Black visibility has been both weaponized and reclaimed; used to romanticize labor and suffering in works like Ferrez's *Slaves at a Coffee Yard*, and later transformed into acts of resistance and self-definition by artists like Ringgold, Marshall, and Wilson. My own work continues this lineage, confronting the politics of sight and the agency within being seen. Visibility is no longer a passive condition, but a scale between exposure and protection, acknowledgment and survival. Just as Yiadom-Boakye expresses that Black existence has always been self-sufficient and unbounded by external narratives, my practice asserts control over what is illuminated and what remains dimmed. In claiming autonomy of my own image, I resist the historical systems that sought to define or erase it.

2. Acknowledgments

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3. Endnotes

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