

Sulton Rogers: The Demonization of Black Bodies

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Abstract

For centuries the Devil has been depicted as a dark creature that lurks on earth, tempting humans with sin. Depictions of the Devil have varied over time but the most prominent feature lingering is the Devil's iconic small horns. The distinctive motif of devil horns can be seen in multiple sculptures by folk artist Sulton Rogers. The research conducted includes taking a closer look into Roger's curious wooden figures and what their violence and crudeness may represent. Not much is known about Sulton Roger's life and work and this investigation of his figurines is original research which focuses on his pieces *Two-faced Man* and *Two-faced Woman*, which reside at the Asheville Art Museum. As he is a black artist, why might Rogers feel the need to so frequently implement iconography linked to the Devil in his work? Further, this research looks into Rogers' possible representation of black figures as the Devil. The research conducted also delves into the history of creating icons that demonize and stigmatize the black body and how these ideas have informed stereotypes that we see today, specifically in Roger's work.

1. Body of Paper

Historically and presently, the Devil is depicted as a dark creature that lurks on earth, tempting humans with sin. Many people are under the impression that this imagery evolved from the Bible, but there are no written descriptions of his appearance. Through the ages, ideas of the Devil have varied from a blue angel to a winged flying goat.¹ The most prominent feature that has prevailed through time to contemporary interpretations is the iconic devil horns. The distinctive motif of devil horns is distinguished in multiple sculptures by Sulton Rogers. Using visual analysis, comparison and historical research, this paper will explore why Rogers might feel the need to so frequently implement iconography linked to the Devil in his work. Further, the research conducted will investigate if these devilish depictions have any link to race.

Sulton Rogers was born in Oxford, Mississippi in 1922. His father, a carpenter, taught him how to widdle figurines and canes.² After being married multiple times through the 1940s and fathering ten children, Rogers moved to Syracuse, New York to pursue better work opportunities.³ Rogers spent the majority of his life in New York, where he worked the night shifts at an Allied Chemicals plant.⁴ It is here where he utilized his father's teachings to carve wooden figurines as a way to keep himself awake during the late nights. His coworkers began stealing his projects leading Rogers to create more eccentric work such as coffins so that they would not be taken.⁵

Rogers coined his figures as "haints" stemming from people in his daily life and dreams, which he called "futures."⁶ "Haints" is a term originating from the descendants of African slaves brought to Coastal Carolina, and the Gullah Geechee legends. Haints refers to evil spirits that harm disobedient children and roam the earth causing mischief.⁷ Rogers also creates "Haint Houses" where he creates a scene or collection of figures that follow a specific narrative.⁸ These figures and scenes are often grotesque, sexual, and off-putting, with intriguing qualities such as concealed compartments within a coffin.⁹ It was not until Rogers' retirement and subsequent return to Mississippi in 1983 that he really became recognized as a sculptural artist.¹⁰ Rogers' work has been placed in shows and collections that

categorized him as a folk artist, black artist, outsider artist, or self-taught artist who utilizes art as a coping mechanism.¹¹

Sulton Rogers sculptures, *Two-faced Man* and *Two-faced Woman* (Fig. 1) are companion wood carved figures that demonstrate the devilish characteristics that Rogers applied to his work.¹²



Figure 1 - Sulton Rogers, *Two-faced Man* (shown on the far left) and *Two-faced Woman* (shown on the far right), carved and painted wood, http://www.artnet.com/artists/sulton-rogers/four-figures-xFk5F2Au96EevzeKO_9RJQ2

Although these works are not dated, it can be assumed that they were created sometime in between 1970 and 2003 during the short span of time that Rogers was a working artist.¹³ These two figures pair together as they take shape from a soft wood such as sugar pine or gum, showing visible grain and smooth texture.¹⁴ Some areas of these works have been painted to define the figures' clothes and elongated facial features. Rogers hand carved these figures most likely with a pocket knife, evident through cuts that allowed him to plan facial features such as the placement of an ear.¹⁵ Stylistically these figures have very few differences, but shifts in added detail bring these characters to life. Both figures hold two heads that are conjoined at the neck. Their bodies maintain a similar stiff, open-legged stance and they stand straight up with arms detached from their body.

Although these figures clearly accompany each other, there are unique qualities to these sculptures that draw the viewer in. When these figures are shown together it is clear that the male figure is slightly taller than the female. The *Two-faced Man* stands at sixteen inches tall whereas the *Two-faced Woman* is fourteen and three eighth inches tall.¹⁶ The *Two-faced Man* possesses two faces that join together at the neck. These faces are almost identical with boxy elongated noses, slender red lips, painted wide open eyes, and wood burnt facial hair. The largest distinction between these two faces is a pair of grey devil horns that appear on the left man's head. These horns have small fractures where they have broken off and been reattached. The caramel skin tone of the figure is shown through the natural grain of the wood. The wood throughout the figure is rounded, soft, and organic in shape. The man's chest is broad and has two arms that detach from his body. These arms appear to be carved from the same piece of wood and have little anatomical definition. The arm's reach out and down away from the man's body. His hands point back towards his thighs and appear elongated with exaggerated, detached thumbs.

The viewer's eye is drawn to the area of the man's mid-thigh, dark blue shorts. This is the only additional paint applied to the figure. On closer inspection, the viewer can see light cut marks below the hem of the shorts where Rogers had planned to cut the clothing longer. There is little definition within the man's lengthy legs, much like his arms. His calves are bulky, and this thickness in circumference is maintained all the way down to the ankle. One of the most prominent features of the *Two-faced Man* are his feet. Just below the ankle, the viewer is able to see a line where the artist has attached additional wood to create the man's exposed feet. The feet are flat except for the long big toes that turn upwards towards the viewer. When looking closer one can see that the artist has also given his left foot the traditional five toes, but the right foot has six.¹⁷

Additional features, like an extra toe, are not uncommon within Rogers' work. The *Two-faced Woman* also has hidden oddities such as an additional finger on her left hand. Similar to the *Two-faced Man*, this figure holds two

heads that have almost identical faces with boxy elongated noses, slender red lips, painted wide open eyes, and wood burned shoulder length hair. On this figure, the gray devil horns are presented on the right head. The female figure differs from the male as she is shown with two necks that are conjoined together. These necks are unusually extended, and both include a pointed Adam's apple. Farther down on the figurine, the viewer is met with a bright red undergarment that barely covers the woman's full breasts. Similar to the male figure, the woman is depicted with smooth, elongated arms and torso. Rogers has used a wood burning tool to cut a small navel on the woman's stomach, right above her bright red underwear. When viewing this piece from the back, the viewer is met with a provocative depiction of the woman's buttocks. The artist depicts a suggestive, small, red bikini that barely fits over the woman's large bottom. Similar to the male figure, Rogers displays the woman with thick legs and ankles. Her legs smoothly connect into brightly painted red high heels.¹⁸

Provocative garments and overtly sexualized interpretations of women occur often in Rogers' work. His stylistic choice of characters seem to follow similar patterns of "Black Jezebel" and "Uncle Tom" stereotypes. Rogers' women figurines are shown in skimpy clothing and often represented with multiple breasts and voluptuous bodies. These sexualized figures fall in line with America's history of exoticizing the black female body. "Jezebel" statues and usable items have taken part in homes and stores for centuries. Many of these items are functional and serve a purpose, such as the 1950's collectable "Virgin Fishing Lucky Lure," which features a black woman with bright red lips, straight black hair, and large exaggerated breasts. Objects such as these make the sexualization of black women commonplace, and the practical knick-knacks also reinforce the notion that black women are usable objects.

Similarly, multiple works of Rogers' are functional, and act as a place to hide objects. Although Rogers' female figures do not always particularly serve a function, there is still an obvious fetishization. Seen in works such as *Nude Couple* is the continuation of "...Jezebel images which defame African women."¹⁹ The female figure in this couple is completely naked and presented crouching on the floor. Her face is masculine with a boxy jaw and large lips. The figure has three exposed breasts, and she sits with her legs open and vagina exposed.²⁰ The explicit nature of this work follows stereotyping deemed "...pathetic othering [and] includes those depictions of African women as physically unattractive, unintelligent, and uncivilized."²¹ The sculpture encapsulates the "primitization" of black women that was brought forth by white European men who traveled to Africa and "misinterpreted [nudity] as lewdness."²² Rogers' male figures also follow stereotypes of minstrel blackface such as bright red lips, elongated noses, and wide eyes. Since the skin of these figures is usually untouched with paint, it is unknown whether Rogers is attempting to create black subjects. His reference to African traditional "Haints" leads the viewer to believe that these figures are black, but this is an assumption and it opens up the question of why Rogers might want to depict black subjects as evil.

Due to the accumulation of racist iconography associating black bodies with evil, it seems odd that Rogers might want to reinforce these stereotypes. Ideas of the color white representing pure and black representing wicked are centuries old.²³ Historic texts such as Cotton Mather's book, *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, written in 1693, associate indigenous and black individuals with the Devil, stating that the Devil appeared on earth as "a small black man."²⁴ Another example of this racist association is in the 16th Century Dutch story of St. Nicholas. While St. Nicholas traveled into town on his white horse, a mischievous Devil named "Black Peter" followed behind him. Black Peter was described as "black-faced" and bearing horns, as well as being dressed in black clothing. He would conceal himself as a Moor, a racially and culturally charged term that refers to someone of African, Arab or Muslim descent. Black Peter acted as St. Nicholas' evil counterpart, as he punished the bad children and threatened them with Hell.²⁵ The association of Hell and fire explains why Rogers painted a portion of his Devil characters with a red skin tone. Biblical interpretations of the Devil being black are likely connected to the idea of his body being charred from the fires of Hell. Satan formerly played a more comedic role in the Bible, but as time progressed, imagery of the Devil became more humanistic and subsequently more black. Images of the Devil have shifted greatly through history causing his size, horns, and ugliness to relate to location, religion and cultural patterns of the time.²⁶ A more recent interpretation of a dark skinned Devil was seen in the History Channel's 2013 movie, "Son of God." This movie was under extreme scrutiny for darkening the skin of the actor who played the Devil, and the production ultimately cut all scenes with this actor.²⁷ Even the term "Dark Magic" coined during the Salem witch trials of the 1690s refers to the European concept of the Devil working with witches.²⁸ The association of black bodies and the Devil has only strengthened through history since then.

Rogers' religious background is unknown, but other works of his allude to Christian symbols of evil such as the serpent, as seen in his piece, *Woman on Snake*. Featured in this work is a woman with brown hair who wears black underwear, nipple coverings, and high heels. She rides a large red-spotted snake with its mouth agape. Thick golden thread is used like a bridle and reins for a horse, which the woman grips onto loosely.²⁹ In the story of Adam and Eve, the serpent is depicted leading the pair to sin. New Testament stories have directly and indirectly connected the serpent in this story to Satan.³⁰ Animals also play a large role in not only Christian stories but African legends. Within Southern American art, African legend commonly influences these artists to utilize reptiles, which represent witches.³¹ In

Rogers' work, *Two-faced Man* and *Two-faced Woman*, he alludes to these evil spirited ideas of being deceitful. While we don't know Rogers' religious background it can be assumed that growing up in the deep south, where Christian religion dominates, played some role in his work. For many self-taught artists from the South, having "... direct access to the Bible and the Holy Spirit figured in their art..."³² Other works of his tie him to Christian symbols of deceit, such as the forked tongue. The "doctrine of the forked tongue" teaches Christians that "...the devilish idea that our sinful nature is not really dead and extinct but instead resides in us..."³³ The double tongue visual was created due to the idea that Satan spoke through the serpent, who had a forked tongue.³⁴ Rogers marries these two symbols together in his work *Haint Coffin*. In this piece, a woman with bright red hair lies in a dark gray coffin. The front portion of the coffin is opened to reveal the woman, her eyes shut and mouth agape. Out of her mouth is a long red tongue spotted with white scales. Her tongue is forked and each end includes a snake's head, dotted with yellow eyes.³⁵

It seems as though Rogers uses many of his works, such as *Woman on Snake* and *Haint Coffin*, as a humorous play on Christian votive figures. Seen today and through history, people have decorated their homes with figurines of Gods and Deities which they worship. Not only does this help the devotee to interact with their God and pray, but it allows the God to enter into the devotees' space.³⁶ A more contemporary example of this tradition is the practice of burying a statue of St. Joseph in the front yard. St. Joseph, "the patron saint of workers and fathers", supposedly aids in the selling of a house when buried upside down and prayed over.³⁷ Ideally, Rogers' works could have been meant to be sold and placed within homes of buyers. Rogers seemed to play with this idea of functional figurines that could act as an homage to their chosen character.

Rogers' fascination for devilish figurines could also be explained by the time period in which Rogers was creating art. Although these works have no set date, it is assumed that they were created sometime from 1970 to 2003.³⁸ In the 1980s, towards the beginning of Rogers' art career, he was living in Syracuse, New York. The state of New York was fearful during this period due to the perceived increase of Satanic practice and rituals. One of the leading causes of anxiety in New York was the murder spree of David Berkowitz, often called the "Son of Sam", who claimed to be in a Satanic cult. In Berkowitz' confession he claimed to kill innocent victims because his neighbor's black Labrador retriever was possessed by an ancient demon who told him to murder.³⁹ The fear around Devil worshiping only grew as the 1980 novel "Michelle Remembers", written by Lawrence Pazder and Michelle Smith, hit the market. Their memoir, now discredited, became popular due to Michelle's claims of "... a childhood spent undergoing a wealth of shocking occult sexual abuse."⁴⁰ This led to over 12,000 court cases of "Satanic Ritual Abuse", and is now called the "Satanic Panic".⁴¹

New York's fear spread around the world and people were perplexed by the perceived dramatic increase of immorality and unlawfulness taking place in white suburbia. During this time the media was primarily showcasing criminal acts of African-Americans, enforcing the notion that black criminals were entering white neighborhoods to commit these crimes. The "hysterical paranoia of implausible, vaguely supernatural scenarios was arguably made possible because African-Americans from the inner city were not present amid the relative homogeneity and financial comfort of many panic communities".⁴² It's possible that Rogers may have been displaying these scenarios portrayed in media through the sculptural set-ups that he called "Haint Houses". Although many of these arrangements contained sexual abuse and violence, Rogers would often set up domestic scenes involving his devilish figures that depicted everyday life such as a marriage, family, and death. Some of these narratives use Devil figures that are painted red, creating a more creature-like character. A large portion of these Devil characters are left unpainted.

In conclusion, there is a humanistic quality to these scenes and figures that leaves the viewer wondering if Rogers was implying a specific meaning with the beige and brown skin tones of these Devil humans. Throughout history, humans need to humanize the devil have caused an increase of instances where he is depicted by a black man which may have influenced Rogers' work. These figures are more anthropomorphic and utilize "...satire to ridicule the human condition".⁴³ The *Two-faced Man* and *Two-faced Woman* in particular seem to be "...referencing a duplicitous nature..." where religious concepts such as deceit are visible to the viewer.⁴⁴ These overtly human attributes surrounding immorality have been marked within stereotypes which haunt people of color. Based on information such as the titling of "Haint's" and the utilization of natural brown wood we can speculate that these figures are black. And if these figures are meant to represent the black body, it's possible that Rogers is reclaiming the black body by being the person to link images of spirits and oddities to the demonization and fetishization of African-Americans. In the chance that these figures are meant to represent white figures, Rogers could be creating work where he gets to present white bodies as Devils, which is not often shown through history and contemporary iconography. Although little is known about Rogers' and his work, when looking at a collection of his pieces we can infer based on varying painted skin tones that he was presenting multiple races. Based on this research we can reason that, although it is unclear exactly what race these figures are, that may be the point. Perhaps Rogers' wants to implicate us all, no matter our race, with his devilish depictions.

2. Endnotes

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