An Aesthetic Theory of Gamesmanship

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An Aesthetic Theory of Gamesmanship

By

Derek Fordjour

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Name of First Reader

May 20, 2016
Date

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Name of Second Reader
Dedication:

For my parents, Dr. Isaac and Janet Fordjour who have supported my art making from the age of three.
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Abstract
An Aesthetic Theory of Gamesmanship is an in-depth analysis of the personal, sociological, and historical elements contained within the art of Derek Fordjour with considerations given to artistic and literary influences that inform his intention and goals in the work. Also included are illustrations of specific art works and descriptions.

Keywords
Painting, Drawing, Sculpture, Games, Sports, Competition, Economics, Race, Sociology, Politics, Feminism,
In the following pages, I will discuss the motivating factors that inform my painting, sculpture and installation. These include my personal origins, unique sociological perspective, and major influences. The central theme in my work is an exploration of the “game-ification” of social structures and the inherent vulnerability of the individual situated within a contest. The political implications of such structures, individual and collective strategies, as well as the element of spectacle, are related concerns.

**Personal Elements**

My personal interest in the intersection of gaming and art began with an interest in the athlete in uniform. For many years I simply depicted the athlete, often black male basketball players in uniform. Frequently, the conversations around those works became dominated by questions of celebrity and the particular sport depicted. The power of the sports industrial complex cast too long a shadow on the images in my work. It became clear to me that I would need to push beyond my topical interest in the athlete as icon.

(Fig. 1) No. 85, 2014

I experienced divorce in 2012, which began with an extended period of separation. It was during this personal crisis, my most vulnerable period, that my interest in the icon of the player deepened, and my personal investment in this icon was revealed. In many ways, the symbol of the player was a mediator for a conversation I was incapable of confronting directly at the time. I was attracted to a human symbol, which appeared strong and nearly invincible, situated within a struggle on a public stage. Beyond his outward strength, the player was vulnerable to the outcome of the game, replaceable, owned and accountable to many layers of management. Through his body he created his value, and his tenure was predicated on his production. This was the connection. Just as my tenure as a husband and father came to an abrupt end, so could an athlete’s career with one wrong move or bad season. Beyond my role as husband, I began to
acknowledge multiple potentially crippling vulnerabilities I managed regularly. The experience of confronting these ideas directly opened me up to broader possibilities around my personal anxiety. As an artist, as a black man, I was exposed to and subject to uncertainty and various forms of hostility. This was the moment of crystallization.

My earliest memory of understanding injustice and racial disparity, a reality of growing up the shadow of legalized segregation in Memphis, Tennessee, came in the form of a simple sporting analogy. I was approximately thirteen years old; Jesse Jackson was running for President. In his speech he explained that if two teams are engaged in an otherwise earnest contest, one that appears fair and balanced on the surface, but the rules are different for each team, then how hard one plays becomes irrelevant to the final outcome. With unfair rules, one can never win, despite how hard he plays. As a child battling external signs of inferiority, this simple analogy reduced large, complex, social and historical problems into one comprehensible narrative.

Another early memory is of watching the evening news along with my two, beloved brothers, elder and younger. We are born four years apart. I am the middle child. The evening anchor opened with the following statement: “Good Evening. One in three black males will be in jail, dead or on drugs by the age of twenty-five.” I looked at my two brothers, counted us up, and began to sink in fear. This kind of deadly association between my skin and my life expectancy, between data, numbers, statistics and my complexion was a bizarre, ominous, public spectacle. It was an association that I wanted so desperately to resist with the force of my own will and body, but such effort was hopelessly futile. These early moments of realization anchor my interest in the player and game at deep and persistent levels of vulnerability within me.

Sociological Elements

From a sociological perspective, the social space occupied by both games and art within culture is for me, a fertile point of inquiry and social critique. In his text Sports and American Art, Allen Guttman expertly articulates the social relationship between sports and art as follows:

Sports and the arts are both cultural universals. I cannot imagine a culture, past or present that lacks either of them. What is the relationship between them? Although French and German philosophers have asserted an identity, arguing that sports should be unapologetically recognized as one of the fine arts, I prefer to assert more modestly, that sports and the arts have the kind of relationships that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe described as Wahlverwandtschaften (“elective affinities”). Sports and the arts are similar in that both—in their ideal-type forms—can be understood as non-utilitarian human expression. They serve no practical purpose. They are autotelic (from auto, “its own”, and telos, “goal, end, or purpose”). They are both born of what the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga, following Freiderich Schiller’s Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind (1794), called “the play instinct.” Sports and the arts may not be twins, but they do have a sibling relationship within the extended family of culture. It is, unfortunately a relationship that neither athletes nor aesthetes have been inclined to acknowledge (1-2).
Noted historian of science and writer Graham Burnett recently devoted an article to such considerations, entitled “On the Ball,” in which he moderates a “conversation that … will meaningfully re-center a number of debates associated with theoretical reflection on culture and history of ‘sport’” (page 87). Graham explains that the aim of the article is to “‘think sports’ from a perspective frequently overlooked, and thereby to solicit insights from a subject position ineluctably central to many sport forms, but almost entirely marginal (for whatever reason) to sport discourse” (page 88).

Graham also includes within the article a diagram (Table 1) that becomes, in essence, the visual summation of his basic claim. Graham’s central thesis draws parallels between the intimate personal experience of interpersonal play and the grand spectacle of organized professional sports. While the article remains focused primarily on sport, the parallel logic is also relevant to the field of art. Building on Guttman’s earlier reference to Freiderich Schiller’s notion of “the play instinct” (page 66), it then becomes possible to interchange the word “play” in the diagram with the word “art.” Both art making and, by extension, art appreciation at the most rudimentary level is an intimate experience, which often begins in youth. In fact, making play and making art tend to surface in the unstructured activities of children during similar developmental periods.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus:</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Sports</th>
<th>Spectators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants:</td>
<td>“Players”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rewards:</td>
<td>Intrinsic</td>
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<td>Basis for action:</td>
<td>Authenticity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action theme:</td>
<td>Spontaneous expression</td>
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<td>Structure:</td>
<td>Open/self-created</td>
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<td>Dynamics:</td>
<td>Free flowing</td>
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<td>Goal:</td>
<td>Personal enjoyment</td>
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</table>

Beyond individual tendencies in early childhood development, both art and play soon become regulated within an institutional context. In the case of art, the debate amongst educational researchers within the field of Art Education has centered, for decades, on an indisputable impulse in the child to express herself through pictures. The progressive approach seems to have dominated. As Lowenfeld and Brittain assert, “The art room should be a sanctuary against school regulations, where each youngster is free to be himself [sic] and to put down his [sic] feelings and emotions without censorship” (108).

In the spirit of Allen Guttman’s extensive examination of sports and art, it is possible to draw
many parallels between both fields. Previously, I have chosen to highlight the early institutional imprint on the individual in society, beginning with the basics of developmental education. Within the context of my work, the institutional relationship to the individual is important. As referenced in a previous section on the personal origins of my interests, the player situated within a game as an individual or within a collective effort becomes a resonant symbol.

In writing about Bernard Suit’s visionary book, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, Thomas Bindle states:

> Suit … sought to specify the contours of what he called the “lusory attitude,” the necessary mental posture of a “player” undertaking one of the forms of formal and regulated “play”: he or she must accept the “contract” of such a situation, which involves a willingness, as Suits puts it, to submit to a set of arbitrary rules in the course of a “voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.” In a “utopia, “ Suits pointed out, there would be, by definition, no real obstacles—so every instance of game playing can actually be understood as kind of premonition of, or feint toward, utopia. It is a remarkable argument. (page 81)

The predicament of Bernard Suit’s “player” encapsulates the essence of the player as symbol in my work. The “lusory attitude” provides considerable latitude in which to embed psychological content within a narrative context. Often within my work, the game context, spatial environment, or team presence can function allegorically as institutional presence.

In the example of *Formations* (Figure 2), a 60” x 40” acrylic and oil painting on wood panel, the objects appear to inhabit a fairly believable space. The environment resembles a stage, set, or game show, with a darkened backspace and a curtain obscuring the view of a few figures. The ground on which the figures stand is heavily patterned and seemingly dimensional, but not structurally legible readily. They do not appear to form a staircase or an easily scalable terrain. There are seven men donning very similar uniforms reminiscent of sporting costumes. In the foreground there are folding numbers, propped up.

(Fig 2) Formations, 2016
I witness and experience the world through the lens of an African-American male artist. My outlook on society is one that is involuntarily complicated by race and gender, which gives rise to questions of class and history. Having lived most of my life in the United States, the appeal of a democratic society and upward social mobility is an integral component in my reasoning. Additionally, as the child of Ghanaian immigrants, questions of race, class, and nationalism inform my identity even more keenly.

Regarding the idea of a racialized lens, Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson’s 1995 study on “stereotype threat” best exemplifies my concern. The following is a condensed version of their findings:

*Stereotype threat* is a situational predicament in which people are or feel themselves to be at risk of confirming stereotypes about their social group. Stereotype threat has been shown to reduce the performance of individuals who belong to negatively stereotyped groups.\(^4\)\(^5\) If negative stereotypes are present regarding a specific group, group members are likely to become anxious about their performance, which may hinder their ability to perform at their maximum level. Importantly, the individual does not need to subscribe to the stereotype for it to be activated.

From the perspective of my lived experience, I have demonstrated and experienced first-hand the occasionally elaborate schemes and strategies adopted by African-American people to counter the threat of stereotyping and discrimination. My family placed an intense focus on the importance of attaining educational credentials. This experience is obviously informed by the promise of educational attainment that immigrants of non-industrialized nations often perceive. In my case, I have many friends and relatives who have earned double undergraduate degrees, combined graduate and professional degrees, and a myriad of certifications. Personally, I am currently pursuing my second graduate degree. And I am an artist. The notion of hyper-
credentialization and an obsession with validation through educational accomplishment suggests the presence of some anxiety. In my work, I have introduced the presence of medals and trophies as a symbol to express this tendency. It becomes a point of inquiry into the attainment of value, questioning validation, and the pursuit of affirmation seeking through accomplishments.

**Historical Elements**

**From a historical point of view**, there is a need to distinguish ‘games’ and ‘sports,’ as I often use them interchangeably and at times in reference to one another. For the purpose of an historical analysis of themes present in my work, it is best to define each. In Burnett’s “On the Ball” article, Xin Hao makes reference to Burnett’s diagram (Table 1) to explain the difference between games and sport: “Take Gregory Stone’s well-known typology from 1973: ‘sport’ is a body of activities that lie in the middle zone of a continuum that runs from ‘mere play’ across to ‘pure spectacle.’ This captures something we all feel immediately about the category—that sport encompasses much, but not all of the terrain we associate with ‘play.’ Yet it also extends into a sphere of physically embodied ‘performance-situations’ quite distinct from Mah-Jong or roulette or ‘cowboys and Indians’ (Burnett page 65). Therefore, Xin Hao expresses a view of sport that is chiefly distinguishable from games due in large part to the element of spectacle. Historically, my interest in the legacy of sports, in this sense, is primarily concerned with economics and race.

With regards to games, in her book *Reality Is Broken*, Jane McGonigal argues, “Games aren’t an escape from reality” (page 120). Rather, McGonigal contends, they are an optimal form of engaging it. In fact, if we could just find a way to impose game mechanics on top of everyday life, humans would be infinitely better off. We might even use these approaches to help solve real-world problems like obesity, education and government abuse. Some proponents point to successful examples of games applied to everyday life: Weight Watchers and frequent-flier miles, for example. (McGonigal page 78). McGonigal expresses an optimistic view of games, even in advance of the newly burgeoning field of gamification. I’m interested in McGonigal’s logic, but would rather express it retroactively. In my view, historically oppressive systems of discrimination were in fact evidence of social gaming. Legalized segregation, de facto segregation (even after it was illegal), school lotteries, mandatory minimum sentencing (e.g. three-strikes laws for incarceration), voter identification laws, and housing and immigration restrictions are all examples of gaming systems. The administration of each of these systems plays out within the public realm, yet egregious patterns of gross discrimination abound.

Where games and sports converge are in the expectations of ethics and honesty. As sports ethics researcher Masters explains, “The commonly accepted standard definition of corruption, established by the World Bank and now used by Transparency International—the abuse of entrusted power for private gain—derives from the economists’ perspective” (112). Masters then proposes a slightly different view:

Corruption in sport equates to the deviation from public expectations that sport will be played and administered in an honest manner. Within this definition, playing sport encompasses both athlete preparation and actual competition. The term ‘administered’ includes multiple levels of sports administration incorporates all levels of refereeing or adjudication associated with sport—on and off field refereeing, tribunals, panels, courts
Considering this definition of public and private corruption, and McGonigal’s recommendation for the application of game theory over social problems for the good of the public, the unavoidable conclusion, in my life experience, is that blind justice is a fallacy. Gross abuse of public goods that systematically disadvantage African-American people and other marginalized groups, including women, is commonplace. There is no more apparent example within the realm of sports than the plight of the black athlete. Bill Rhoden’s *Forty Million Dollar Slave* provides context for this examination. Rhoden writes:

> Though integration was a major pivot in the history of the black athlete, it was not for the positive reasons we so often hear about. Integration fixed in place myriad problems: a destructive power dynamic between black talent and white ownership; a chronic psychological burden for black athletes, who had to constantly prove their worth; disconnection of the athlete from his or her community; and the emergence of the apolitical black athlete, who had to be careful what he or she said or stood for, so as not to offend white paymasters (page 35).

Rhoden went on to lament the pillaging of the independent black sports leagues that were thriving at the turn of the 20th century -- complete with black owners, managers, agents and players. His analogy highlights a connection I seek to embed in my work: the correlation between talent and labor, specifically and historically in the case of blacks. “The Negro Leagues were invaded for talent much as Africa was invaded for human labor,” Rhoden writes (page 94).

As a working model to illustrate this historical trend, the recently published research of two college, married professors -- Amy and Robert McCormick -- speaks volumes. They live across the street from the practice stadium for Michigan State Spartans. Every morning they witnessed giant athletes on their tiny rickety personal bikes dashing to practice.

The imbalance ate at the McCormicks: college sports were a multibillion-dollar business, and here was a top talent stuck with a dilapidated two-wheel. While standing on the field at the school's Spartan Stadium during a football game, something else struck Robert, an image he couldn't shake. The players were in uniform, covered in Michigan State's green and white colors, but Robert could see their bare lower legs. ‘Almost all of them,’ he says, ‘were black.’ Just like Rogers. Meanwhile, everyone else—the coaches, the administrators, the faces in the crowd, and Robert himself—was overwhelmingly white. ‘I saw a small group of black faces in the stands, and they were [football] recruits,’ Robert says. ‘It was incredible. I realized all of the people being paid or getting the pleasure out of the game were white, and the vast majority of the people playing and risking their health were black.”’ (page 173).

When the championship game of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's men's basketball tournament between the University of North Carolina and Villanova University tipped off in Houston in spring 2016, the scene was similar, a microcosm of major college revenue sports as a whole. Most of the players on the court—whose sweat and sacrifice make the whole show possible—were African-American. Almost everybody else, from Tar Heels coach Roy Williams and Wildcats coach Jay Wright to the corporate glad-handers in the luxury boxes, was not. The game was the culmination of another successful season for a cash-rich campus athletics
industry—and thanks to the NCAA's longstanding amateurism rules, which apply to college athletes and no one else in America, the lion's share of that money flows from the former group to the latter: from the jerseys to the suits, from black to white.

“You have two sets of legal rules that treat two different classifications of people differently, and it's unjustified,” Amy McCormick says. “I would never say college sports are as bad as a system where people are jailed and killed, but it's an Apartheid system”. In 2010, Amy and Robert McCormick co-authored a law journal article titled, “Major College Sports: A Modern Apartheid,” which argues that revenue-producing campus football and men's basketball hold black athletes in “legal servitude for the profit and entertainment” (page 201) of whites. “These are sharp words,” they wrote, “but the facts are indisputable” (page 202).

Others agree. Sports agent Don Yee, whose firm represents NFL players including New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady and retired linebacker Dhani Jones, calls the NCAA's refusal to pay athletes a “racial injustice” Nobel Prize-winning economist Gary Becker described campus sports amateurism as a “regressive wealth transfer from mostly poor African-American athletes and their families to mostly well-off white managers, non-revenue sport athletes and their families” Pulitzer Prize-winning civil rights historian Taylor Branch has written that Division I revenue sports exude “an unmistakable whiff of the plantation” Similarly, former NCAA executive director Walter Byers—a man who ran the organization for decades and essentially built modern college sports as we know them—wrote in his memoir, Road to Damascus, that his creation was suffused with a “neo-plantation mentality,” in which the economic rewards “belong to the overseers,” with “what trickles down after that” going to young men such as Rogers.” (McCormicks)

**Big Idea**

(Fig. 3) Clubhouse, 2016
The personal, socio-logial and the historical converge in the 2016 painting Clubhouse. This work is painted in oil and acrylic on wood panel, mostly in an accumulation of layers with few areas of impasto paint. The composition is two darkened figures in the foreground within an interior dominated by a game court with small balls.

This image is centrally concerned with the difference between ownership and access, bringing into question the relationship of the figures to the environment. Personally, I attended a small private all-male college, I am a fraternity man, and I grew up the child of immigrants who are also members of a rather arcane religious denomination. All of these experiences inform questions of inclusion and exclusion with regards to membership and belonging. I can recall hearing the frustrations of my father, as an African physician seeking referrals from his peers, excluded from the tight knit circle of black physicians, and totally excluded from his white classmates. He had the credentials, but lacked the relationships and was therefore in a tenuous predicament. The insider/outsider perspective is one that is central to the experience of any minority group operating within a larger dominant culture and the experience of exclusion is one I know well. Sociologically, the painting is informed by these dynamics. The patterning on the walls, floor and uniforms allude to patterns of tradition, corruption, nepotism, etc. Historically, African-Americans have managed this dilemma for ages. With specific regard to sports, African-American owned professional teams were organized and thriving before players were poached into larger white leagues. Beyond sports, this is true of Hollywood films and within the space of education. Black colleges suffered tremendously following integration, as students flocked to predominately white institutions. Seeking acceptance and questioning feelings of entitlement and belonging are what motivated this composition.
Ethnographic Aesthetics: Africana and Americana

(Fig. 4) Yam Festival celebration in Ho, Ghana
In Figure 4, the divisional chiefs of Asogli State Traditional Area delivers a speech at the Yam Festival celebration in Ho, the Volta Regional Capital, near Ghana’s capital city of Accra. This image is a typical example of traditional costume and custom in Ghana, the home country of both my mother and father. They are both from the same tribe, the Ashanti. By extension, my siblings and I are also full-blooded Ashantis. My earliest encounters with sculptural objects were Ghanaian carvings, both decorative and utilitarian. I remember the gifts my father would bring home after traveling to Ghana when I was a child, as well as the wooden bowls and odd shaped cooking utensils my mother would use to prepare traditional Ghanaian dishes. She would also routinely wear traditional cloth over her half-naked body. It wasn’t until many years later in visiting Ghana that I came to understand the origins of such domestic practices.

Much in the same way that my parents, at first glance when wearing western clothing outside of the home, appeared to be simply Black Americans, I also straddled a hybrid identity that was also complicated by race. Finding a sense of belonging was a game unto itself for obvious reasons. As it pertains to my work, as is evident in Figure 5, the sculptural bust is reminiscent of black sportsmen and the raised umbrella evocative of sporting paraphernalia of some kind. However, when provided the context of the image in Figure 4, the cultural markers of the object
broaden to occupy a more complex identification, which mirrors the liminal space in which I negotiated during my formative years.

Rather than consider this some sort of quagmire, I am more inclined to consider it a typical American immigrant story. In fact, the immigrant story is the bedrock of the American population contrary to homespun myths of entitlement. In this way, I seek to create work that appears reminiscent of a bygone era, harkening back to a more authentically American period. But the way in which ideals of an “Americana” sensibility actually function in my work is more congruous with the assimilation of the immigrant experience, rather than the presence of some bucolic small town ideals of segregated bliss.

After several years of failing to merge circus and carnival themes and motifs with athletes and athletic symbols successfully, it was a trip to Ghana that was the turning point for me. Witnessing the dark ebony Ghanaian skin against bright patterned and dyed fabrics and neon hued brick homes crystallized my search for the appropriate palette. There are elements of the work that are chiefly African, but they are also constructed in a manner that leaves them open to broader associations.

**Key influences in style of painting**

There are several artists to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude. I have borrowed generously from different aspects of various artists’ practices. There are generally two categories of influence for my work. The first category is formal and the second is philosophical.

From formal influences I am informed by the ways in which an artist handles and constructs space, an artist’s relationship with medium and materials, and finally, color palette and any corresponding emotional content or associations that result.

While there is an ever-growing list of artists from whom I draw formal inspiration, I will highlight a select few. First, Christophe Ruckharble is a painter from Leipzig, Germany. In his own words from a 2015 interview:

> Usually, my painting is perceived as figurative and narrative and of course there a lot of theatrical elements, references to art history, etc., but in retrospect, looking back on my development in painting, I would like to see it as a succession of spatial concepts. It started with theatrical boxes, very stage-like, that I furnished with props and personnel. Later I started to distort the spaces, moving into or above the scenery, so that the floor became one with the picture plane, for example. In the next step, I singled out the figures, almost like sculptures in small niches. Then I blended the figures into the backgrounds, almost becoming indistinguishable patterns. (Gaintatzis and Legaki, page 54)

The ways in which Ruckharble conceptualizes space and figures in relation to pattern interests me greatly (Figure 6) While pattern holds primarily symbolic significance in my compositions, formally in the work of Ruckharble it functions as a visual device, increasing optical effect and allowing for a rich interplay between imagined and real space within the picture plane. My interest in pattern references patterns of corruption, collusion, institutional memory and bias.
Pattern is evidence of the systemic. In ‘Clubhouse’ (Figure 3) the “stage-like…succession of spatial concepts” referenced by Ruckharble is at work in the composition. The pattern of the bottom third of the picture plane is contrasted with the flattened perspective of the red court in the middle ground.

(Figure 6) The Fan, 2006, Christophe Ruckharble

Another example of formal influence is Jonas Wood, for his handling of space, balancing a flat planar spatial logic with more dimensional elements. Also, Wood frequently uses pure saturated color and combines sporting memorabilia with domestic scenes and objects. Then, Wayne Thiebaud (Figure 7) is referential for his relationship with paint. His ability to capture a certain middle class American opulence through straightforward means of representation appeal to me greatly. Steven Nash and Adam Gopnik, in an article entitled, “An American Painter” wrote of Thiebaud:

Few American empirical painters have a wider range. He has painted vertiginous cityscapes and nudes and eye-in-the-sky landscapes and bow ties and lipsticks and pinball machines. Yet they all have a feeling in common—democratic abundance seen in aristocratic isolation…Thiebaud’s commitment to painting—not to “expression” or “conception” or even to tradition, but to painting, the act of applying sticky colors to canvas and making them look like something—is the probity of his art (41).

(Figure 7) Majorettes, 1962, Wayne Theibaud
Philosophically, there are two key influences from which I draw diverse inspirations: Jules DeBalincourt and Kerry James Marshall. From Marshall’s most recent show in 2014, the catalogue essay by Rob Storr effectively encapsulated his mission:

Marshall has joined a host of young painters from Africa and the African diaspora who have fastened onto diverse aspects of Eurocentric art history, sampling and recycling its imagery and conventions like tracks of a vintage recording transformed by hip-hop artists, in order to formulate a new postcolonial approach to narrative art. Art that tells stories that could not have been told by old-fashioned genre and history painters had they wanted to. Why? Because the deliberately and “differently” orchestrated and accented
ironies of this purposeful remix of style and subject matter is what the work is all about. It is work about a world in irreversible transition (11).

Jules De Balincourt remarked on his process and subject matter by citing intuition:
My working process is really intuitively-based. Spontaneously searching through that intuitive process without a real set agenda. First, it’s trusting my impulses and going with my own intuition … I find it hard to negate what’s happening in the world. As much as I sometimes try to alienate myself from the current political situation, I think that even if it’s not directly linked you can still feel a certain global anxiety, uncertainty, in my work even when for instance it’s not directly about Syria or an economic crash in Russia. It’s a sort of accumulation of information as a process through painting. Some information is taken directly from images I see on the internet. Some of it is from experiences I have lived through personally. Being on the internet you are constantly bombarded by one thing or another. I process the images—I allow myself to process many different images whether they’re personal or political. Then I put them all together and have them in a kind of orbit, in a sort of atmosphere (Engelen).

Both DeBalincourt and Marshall have intuitive idiosyncratic ways of working, in which the primary medium is paint. The ideas in the work, however, shift through time and theme. In the case of DeBalincourt, his utopian desire in response to geopolitical anxiety is evident in his paintings. Similarly, in the case of Kerry James Marshall, there is a conviction that the black figure deserves an ostensible and unapologetic insertion into the art historical cannon. In this way, they both become political by working in reaction to social political condition. Likewise, my work is chiefly concerned with the economics of political disparity that manifest in a variety of complex social systems. I work in response to a certain set of hard truths undergirded by the reality of a social hierarchy that has shifted minimally over the past several centuries. I am concerned with an inquiry and examination of these dynamics. The grand project for me is to create work that is as true today as it will be in the next twenty or forty years. Informed equally by history as I am in the value of my lived experience and unique perspective, I am staking a claim on the root cause of certain inarguable inequities, while questioning the ethos of a culture obsessed with winning at all cost, individually and collectively.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after presenting the personal, sociological, and historical perspectives of my work, with some peripheral considerations also given to the presence of ethnographic themes of source material and artistic influence, I will consider the goals of the work. Personally, I make art in response to a deep and persistent need to create. On a personal level, in response to that impulse, something should be at stake for me in process of making each object or experience, whether it is my own vulnerability or growth. Sociologically, living as a conscientious person with a marginalized perspective can be painful. Making this work in response to my social condition is deeply cathartic. For me, even though art is not the site for activism, it is a wonderful receptacle for meaning and deep truth. It is for me. And historically, to embed past histories and to search for future histories are both possible within the work I make. Collapsing and expanding time and time periods is a joy to me and somehow amplifies my humanity into far and distant realms.
While manifestos and proclamations are likely rooted in ego, it is my belief that clarity and vision are rooted in the connected and aligned self. Therefore, in that spirit, my vision for this work is that it remains committed to the search for a kind of truth that achieves a few things. First, I wish to create work that resonates with viewers at an instinctual gut level and that this resonance opens up spaces for exhibition and dialogue. Secondly, it is my goal that the content of the work is paramount and that form and medium act as supports for the presentation of ideas. Lastly, I wish to create work that endures with time and continues to unfold, reveal, and make visible that which is not in order to provoke the kind of consideration that contributes to a more empathetic and culturally informed society.
WORKS CITED


Thesis Show

IMAGE LIST

1. Benched, 2016
   Plastic cast, iron, bituminous coal and salvaged wood
   15” x 16” x 85”

2. Second Thursday of the Month, 2016
   Acrylic and oil on wood panel
   84” x 96”

   Oil, acrylic and foil on three separate wood panels
   24” x 18” (each)
INDIVIDUAL WORKS

1. Benched, 2016
2. Second Thursday of the Month, 2016