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The Apotheosis of White Femininity: Race and Remembrance



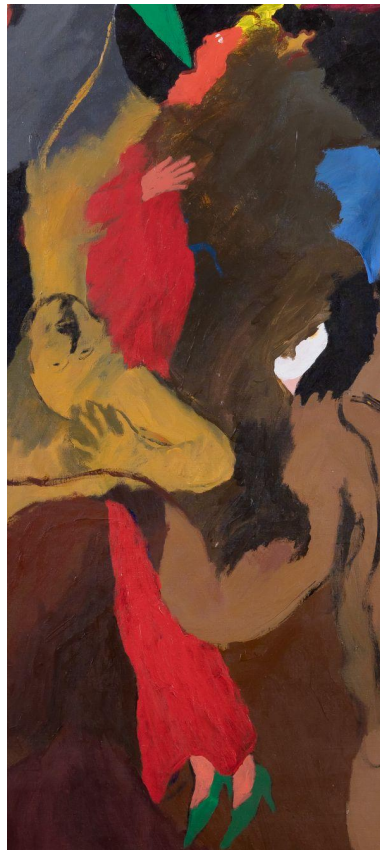
Robert Colescott, *Untitled*, circa 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 149.9 x 3.8 cm. 2023 The Robert H. Colescott Separate Property Trust/ Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the Trust and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo. Photo: Jenlee Harmon

It is impossible to avoid looking one's own internalized prejudices in the eye when faced with Robert Colescott's paintings. With his loud layering of acrylic paint utilizing a broad color palette stretching across large scaled canvases, Colescott satirically and painfully illustrates the African American experience in the West. Across his career, his work grew into an interactive exploration of how Western oppressive culture has violently pervaded the world's spiritual and physical relationship with identity. In his 1967 painting *Untitled*, the ingrained cultural perpetuation of white supremacy is disguised as catharsis. What appears to be a ceremony of healing functions more so to display the exclusionary privilege it has become, keeping emotional freedom and remembrance from all those who cannot fit onto the social pedestal of whiteness. Robert Colescott's *Untitled* wields abstraction using color and composition to depict the cultural apotheosis of white femininity through the vivid spectacle of catharsis; Colescott's atmosphere absorbs the viewer within race's governance over who is granted the right to healing and remembrance in Western society.

At first glance, it is difficult to pull a figure apart from *Untitled*'s overflowing mixture of shapes. This task is a necessary one if the viewer seeks to grasp the work's core, interlocking themes of divinity and race. Void of realist composition, *Untitled* forces the viewer to decipher its abstract mosaic of color through the use of its figuration: a web of fragmentary bodies with limbs so outstretched they do not fit on

the canvas, and instead, leave a tangle of unfinished arms and legs for the audience to undo. Despite the perplexing layering that each body is caught in, none fail to convey a sense of flying-like and magnetic movement. Colescott's figures do not solely exist in *Untitled*'s otherworldly landscape of color, but behave and belong as equally otherworldly extensions of the space itself. Unlike many of Colescott's earlier works, *Untitled* exhibits a hyper level of abstraction and disruption of composition. The shapes that cut into and surround the figures are conjoined, as if crushed into one broken horizon. Part grapefruit pink sunset, part deep blue sky, and part emerald green, Colescott's choppy colors create a supernatural mosaic of the world's natural beauty.

This is especially exemplified by the bodiless face looking down upon the colorful chaos below from its high position at the painting's top edge. Appearing as a sort of divine god, it embodies how the painting grapples with a merging of the divine and the physical. At the messy center of this physical and divine landscape, a floating woman whose peachy body turns a bright red on her face is screaming, expelling a green, then red ray of thick paint from her mouth. Upon further observation, one cannot ignore the power of Colescott's composition as the viewer's eyes are wholly captured by her spotlight. There is no mistaking the hidden, yet evident power dynamic. She is intentionally more visually digestible, easily understood, and palatably put together. She is the closest figure to bodily completion whose form is not muddled by the mysterious web of arms or legs, and whose elegant clothing outshines the general nakedness of the bodies below her. Withal, this woman levitating in a Christ-like manner above the rest in the painting's center, she who is shown experiencing a grand divine release around which every fragmentary body and colorful form orbits, is the only white appearing figure.



Robert Colescott, *Untitled*, circa 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 149.9 x 3.8 cm. 2023 The Robert H. Colescott Separate Property Trust/ Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the Trust and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo. Photo: Jenlee Harmon

Divinity's subtle, yet underlying conversation with race in *Untitled* is understood more clearly when considering Colescott's biography. Robert Colescott (1925 -2009) was an African American painter whose work sought to colorfully reveal the socio-cultural hierarchies built upon race. Most relevantly, Colescott spent the majority of the 60s enraptured with Egypt during his time at Cairo's American Research Center (1964), and following teaching position at The American University in Cairo (1966-1967).¹ Previously, Colescott and his family had chosen to pass as white in Oakland, CA. For this reason, though his time there was put to a sudden end due to Cairo's Six Day War when he left for Rome, and later Paris, he uncovered a sense of belonging in Egypt's celebration of its racially diasporic history during his 3 year stay. 1966 was a particularly difficult time for Colescott as his mother also died, leaving him to grieve the identity she masked with whiteness amid Cairo's awing honor for blackness.

Contrary to the Western erasure of black history he personally experienced, he noted a spiritual oneness between visitors and the Egyptian ancestors they revered which translated into his art. His time in Cairo culminated in his series "Valley Queen", acting as a love letter to the historical site Valley of the Queens where the wives of ancient pharaohs were buried. Dominated by conceptualizations of healing and harmony, these works establish a cathartic atmosphere that is disrupted in *Untitled*. *Nubian Queen*, a 1966 acrylic painting from the series, features the powerful echo of an ancient valley queen. Additionally, in this series' 1967 piece *Mourning After*, colors replace race as abstract figures of women, drawn from Cairo's tombs, are detached from the racial socio-political conflicts that otherwise permeate Colescott's art. The vague curls of blonde hair and the slanted impression of a black body's silhouette are merely free puzzle pieces within *Mourning After*'s rainbow, unburdened with status. Colescott himself expressed that "I was haunted by the spirit of these dead queens and felt that I could make out their images in the surrounding rocks and crevices,"² proving figuration in these paintings does not serve to communicate an active hierarchy, nor does it function to face the audience with an ingrained prejudice. Rather, Colescott simply illustrates his 'haunting' awe for the honoring of these racially diasporic queens' ancient legacies. He was struck with the remembrance of blackness through cultural deification, a widespread worship of black power he had never seen before. With this series, he allows himself to imagine its everlasting celestial reign and its symbolism of a perhaps spiritually present land in which race has not culturally and institutionally carved civilization. Thus, the women in "Valley Queen" operate in a spiritual realm, one that is nowhere to be found in the current Western world. Cairo's forced displacement from Colescott's artistic and spiritual grasp produced *Untitled* in the turbulent year of 1967: disorienting whiplash from his return to a foundationally racist Western reality. His inspirational stay in Egypt frames this work as he was exposed to Western society's similar participation in a cultural apotheosis, but of white women in place of ancient black queens and historical figures.

In the saturated midst of its abstraction, Colescott's *Untitled* seems to be telling an identical tale of healing and harmony as exhibited in *Nubian Queen* and *Mourning After*. Nonetheless, it is verily constructing a criticism of the deifying spectacle made from the white woman archetype's catharsis. Met with a levitating woman screaming, Colescott's audience cannot help but feel her evoke a supernatural release so transcendental it blurs the line between life and death. By effect of blending free colorful rays

¹Terri, Ginsberg and Duncan, MacDonald. "Robert Colescott: The Cairo Years." Jacaranda Culture. Jacaranda, Accessed July 17, 2023. <https://jacarandaculture.com/articles/colescott/>.

² "Art and Race Matters, The Career of Robert Colescott." Portland Art Museum, Accessed July 17, 2023. <https://portlandartmuseum.org/online-exhibitions/colescott/>.

with figures melting into each other, a landscape of a divine afterlife unfolds. The viewer is struck with their initial assumption that the woman is leaving the material world, cleansing herself of grief through opaque rays dispersing into the painting's vivid atmosphere. However, given Colescott's background paired with his time in Egypt, race is an active undertone across *Untitled's* spiritual tale that transforms its comparison with "Valley Queen" into a juxtaposition. While the works share the fusion of catharsis with an otherworldly atmosphere, the same puzzle of psychedelic rainbow appearing in *Nubian Queen* and *Mourning After*, *Untitled's* focal point demonstrates commanding white power despite emotional vulnerability. "'In the twentieth century,' artist Robert Colescott wrote in 1990, 'an archetype has developed that is designed to sell products—products that include war. Diabolically effective, she has big breasts, long legs, slender hips, and is usually blond with big blue eyes. She promises pleasure, active companionship, and social status.'"³ Having analyzed whiteness so deeply in his paintings, Colescott is no stranger to portraying this white woman archetype—his synopsis of the praised, put-together, and pristine white woman is even present in *Untitled*. Within this specific work, she wears elegant pointed heels, sports a sophisticated long red dress, and has blonde hair to tailor her white femininity's praised delicacy. Looking more closely, both at the painting as well as one's own internalized prejudices, it can be seen that her emotional catharsis is prioritized above all else. White femininity's idealization and advertisement is front and center. Society has placed her upon an untouchable pedestal where her status is socially unattainable. In this way, the initial guess of a harmonious gathering is dismantled, replaced with an exposition of white deification. Her bright scream is what the audience beholds. Her tears are her apotheosis, granting her uplifting release and transcendent freedom at everyone's expense.

During his mourning for his mother, Colescott paints a white woman whose grief will be heard exponentially louder than his own, whose identity was forever chased by his mother and will go on to socially overshadow hers. White women require no historical significance or powerful divinity, deified solely for their assumed emotional fragility and value to the continuation of a supposedly superior white legacy—their white tears meld a thick armor over their skin. This is not to say that white women are emotionally fragile or delicate beings, just that the West's historical treatment of white women has forced them into this role that, though harmful and misogynistic, offers them social protection that black people cannot similarly access. This is seen in the way in which *Untitled's* other figures painted at the white woman's dressed feet are without clothes and without the right to an emotional freedom remotely resembling hers. Colescott's composition permits them to only watch powerlessly as she levitates with radiating grandeur. They even appear disorientated in this environment, confused as to why they are participating in the chaotic worship of this screaming white woman. The emotions that may fill these tangled, naked bodies below her can only grant them a seat to the divine spectacle of her catharsis. Consequently, they are utterly stripped of spiritual resolution. *Untitled* reveals how black gender and overall sense of identity is understood through its contrasts with the idolized and advertised pristine white femininity. Colescott's white woman is undeniably possessed by a height above all others that affords her a spiritual upperground. He engineers the viewer to be a participant within this composition, demanding them to question whether the tangled figures below her can even access the catharsis she is celebrated for. She is, essentially, a reminder to the viewer of the role they play in culturally creating spiritual systems of deification based on race—it is the viewer's responsibility to uncover Colescott's socio-political commentary from vibrant ethereality.

³ Wyma, Chloe. "Robert Colescott "Venus over Manhattan"." Art Forum. February 1, 2023. <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202302/robert-colescott-90057>.

Colescott uses *Untitled* to display how race governs catharsis. His levitating white woman is made into a Christ-like deity for her emotions whereas the black bodies below her are reduced to a tangle of abstract limbs. Colescott commands the viewer with this painting, designing their initial feeling of awe observing her transcendence as well as their blind eye towards the others' condition. This is no mistake, she is meant to capture all attention. Western society continues to place national focus on her healing while black history and legacy is abused, muted, and erased. *Untitled* works to remind the audience of their power in the cultural apotheosis of whiteness. Whether it is the ancient tombs of dead Egyptian rulers at The Valley of Queens, or the memory of his identity and his mother's, Colescott has represented how art immortalizes remembrance. Colescott asks the audience to take the first step in amplifying black voices and history by recognizing their own prejudice in viewing the piece.



Robert Colescott, *Nubian Queen*, 1966, Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 59 inches⁴



Robert Colescott, *Mourning After*, 1967, Acrylic on canvas⁵

⁴ Adam, Reich. "Art and Race Matters, The Career of Robert Colescott." Portland Art Museum, Accessed July 17, 2023.
<https://doi.org/https://portlandartmuseum.org/online-exhibitions/colescott/>.

⁵ Josh, Schaedel . "Robert Colescott: Women." Venus Over Manhattan. Venus Over Manhattan, November 15, 2022.
<https://doi.org/https://www.venusovermanhattan.com/exhibitions/robert-colescott-women>.

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5. Robert Colescott, *Untitled*, circa 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 78 3/4 x 59 inches (200 x 149.9cm). © 2023 The Robert H. Colescott Separate Property Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the Trust and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo. Photo: Jenalee Harmon.
6. Wyma, Chloe. "Robert Colescott "Venus over Manhattan"." Art Forum. February 1, 2023. <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202302/robert-colescott-90057>.