

NOTES ON TIMOTHY WASHINGTON'S SPATIAL MEDITATIONS

BY SERUBIRI MOSES

Timothy Washington's art consists of both a spatial practice and the assembling of objects described by artist John Outterbridge as "editing material."¹ The artworks, which often rise upward, according to the artist are both three-dimensional drawings² and sculptures. Washington's art speaks to some questions evident in critical studies of forms of African American art: such as black literature and black music.

The question of ambivalence, which is discussed by literary theorist Hortense Spillers³ regards the literature of the black sermon. She describes "the African-American's relationship to Christianity and the state is marked completely by ambivalence; we could even say that at moments such a relationship gropes towards a radically alternative program." In a similar sense, Washington's art reveals a particular ambivalence, not specifically towards formalism, since the artist relies on disciplinary terms such as sculpture and drawing to describe his own practice⁴, but rather his art is ambivalent towards canonical art traditions typified in American modern art. Thus, his art adopts an "oppositional stance" towards both standard art pedagogy and

the history of American art. In this way, we may uncomfortably situate the artist within this body of knowledge and its modern context.

In an interview, Washington speaks of his "intrinsic"⁵ approach. He refers to his own idea that "everything is alive"⁶, and "the degree of liveness that everything has."⁷ The intrinsic shows belonging to an essential nature. Ultimately his approach, by following this alternative essence, diverts from the academic approaches in which the artist was trained at the art academy.

Washington's aesthetic brings to mind a second prominent topic in critical studies of black music. I refer to "social praxis"⁸ as well as "social-aesthetic urgency."⁹ For saxophonist Salim Washington, "music enhances the purpose of the social event and helps the people attain greater involvement in it."¹⁰ For the artist, that social event is the social experience that defines black life in Watts, Los Angeles, and beyond. Salim Washington opposes the

1 Lorna Tate (director). Tossed and Found: An Artist's Creative Journey.

2 See Timothy Washington interview in Lorna Tate. Ibid.

3 Hortense Spillers. "Moving on Down the Line: Variations on the African American Sermon". Black, White and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture. 2003. pp 251-277.

4 Washington in Lorna Tate. Ibid.

5 Washington in Lorna Tate. Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Salim Washington. "All The Things You Could Be By Now: Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus and the Limits of the Avant-Garde". Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies eds. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, Farah Jasmine Griffin. 2004. pp 27-49

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.



Exhibition view, Timothy Washington, Pucker Up, 2020, Salon 94, New York, NY

valorization of the “assertive, ingenious individual” in the art world.¹¹ This elaborate focus on the “individual” genius is yet another aspect that isolates Washington from dominant themes of American modern art.

The artist’s “oppositional stance” is confirmed in his collaborative and collective processes. His source materials often come from networks, friends, and colleagues, often in proximity to his own home. This sense of the “familial” in conjunction to art-making upsets the standard heroism within American art. Spillers

articulates what may appear as contradictions and/or refusals in Washington’s artistic practice. She writes, “In another sense, we could say that black culture, having imagined itself as an alternative statement, as a counter-statement to American culture/civilization, or Western culture/civilization, more generally speaking, identifies the cultural vocation as the space of “contradiction, indictment, and the refusal.”¹²

A third aspect that shapes Washington’s artistic practice is its spatial considerations. Here I refer to the spatiality and locality of his practice as distinctly situated in Los Angeles. Washington lived in Watts for the first five years of his childhood. In a panel, the artist described the locality of his practice as such:

¹¹ Salim Washington. “All The Things You Could Be By Now: Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus and the Limits of the Avant-Garde”. *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* eds. Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, Farah Jasmine Griffin. 2004. pp 27-49.

¹² Hortense Spillers. “The Idea of Black Culture”. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 6, No 3 (Winter 2006): pp 25.



Timothy Washington

Influenced by the Kapok Tree, 2009

Mixed media including painted cotton, light bulbs, salt shakers, glass, ceramic fragments, doorknob, buttons, bells, string, plastic dials, and hardware

97 x 21 x 21 inches

"I started from an early age walking around the block, and that was the extent of my travels."¹³ This statement not only speaks to the importance and centrality of Watts, in his formation as an artist, but similarly in the very idea of the "block" as a lexicography from which he continues to excavate. The emphasis on the block and Watts neighborhood as locales suggest a deeper inquiry in Washington's artistic practice about place and space. Watts was by the mid-20th century a black and brown neighborhood. As an extension of his attention to urban black life, the artist's focus on the 'block' signal his proximate yet peripatetic wanderings. Additionally, his collection practice is shaped by this spatial logic.

Structure informs Washington's art and its easy associations with sculpture. The structural orientation of his art brings to mind his decades long tenure as a set designer for NBC studios, where he gained renown as a master of modeling and fabrication.¹⁴ Thus, modeling design appears in his sculptural works which tend to have sound internal structure. I am reminded when considering the skyward movement of his art-works that there is a spatial-temporal setting. This could be understood in spiritual terms: 'elevation' as a character of Washington's art-works could be attributed to his emphasis on the Creator as the ultimate inspiration.

Simon Rodia, and his site-specific construction, known as the "Watts Towers" is cited as an early and potent influence on his art. The "Towers" were constructed between 1921-1954, in an active process of building, demolition, and rebuilding. Jazz musician Charles Mingus, who lived in the Watts neighborhood, described the towers in his memoir as "three masts, all different heights, shaped like upside down ice-cream cones."¹⁵ This sense of laterality is still evident in Washington's art. In addition, Rodia used clay tiles that both strengthened and embellished his structures. The specific metallurgical materials that Washington assembles draw an aesthetic resonance to Rodia.

- Serubiri Moses

¹³ Timothy Washington in Liz Gordon, *Diverted Destruction* 6. Los Angeles.

¹⁴ Lorna Tate. *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Charles Mingus. *Beneath the Underdog*. Canongate Books, 1998.