

Search for the Meaning

- Nancy Hughes, October 2010

Parade by Mequitta Ahuja is chosen as the topic of this paper because it is new; accession was not completed as of October 2010, and Ahuja's visit to Austin in October 2010 made it a good time to look at her work.

Parade by Mequitta Ahuja



Diptych, each panel 96" x 80"

Enamel on Canvas

Gift of Melanie Lawson and John Guess in honor of Mickey and Jeanne Kline, 2009

When you look at any work of art, do you wonder about the meaning? Does it have a personal meaning for you before you read the label or delve into comments made by the artist or critics? Is that personal meaning altered after you read that label or commentary?

Looking at Parade by Mequitta Ahuja, our first impression is about the size. A diptych where each pane is 96" x 80" is huge, so it is easy to see and quite overwhelming to be standing in front of it.

Maybe your first impression is dictated by the bright and vivid colors of enamel paint Ahuja used on the canvas. Although the major marks made by the brush seem to be black, the bright colors elsewhere seem to evoke a positive mood. And, the black marks seem to be the hair flowing behind the female figure that overwhelm both sides of the diptych. Is this a portrait? The figure is prominent, but not quite like a portrait. Details are absent that might make the person recognizable. Does a figure have to be recognizable to make it a portrait? Probably not, so let's call it a portrait.

Something about the portrait feels tropical. Is it because of the turquoise pool in the background or the rocks or sand she walks on? These elements lead us to think she is walking on a beach. Although there is no sun or shadow, the turquoise of the water in the landscape tells us it is a beautiful day. Maybe the peach color in the top left corner is a reflection of the sun. Her skin is tan or she is of a dark-skin ethnicity. We really cannot see details well enough to decide. The long tresses that fall behind her as she walks the beach overwhelm both canvasses with a rhythm that leads us to think that maybe the hair is the subject of this work. What are the reds, yellows, pinks, and blues we see through her hair? Are these items in her hair or background behind? Follow the black lines and identify which lines represent her hair. The texture seems to be implied rather than actual. Although we can see brushstrokes, there is not a thick impasto layering of the paint. Ahuja has said that each mark, or area of a painting, should have a rich surface with complex color, texture, and residue of earlier marks. She wants paintings that sustain the spontaneity and editing process. Our painting is realistic. We now identify a woman, her hair, and the landscape, but the emphasis on the hair leads us to wonder why the emphasis. If the female were not in the painting, we might not even recognize it as hair.

So, let us think about why hair would be the subject of her painting. We grow our hair long, cut it short, curl it, straighten it, color it, and shave it. We agonize over losing it. We copy styles we admire. Does sense of identity come from hair? Samson was surely devastated when he lost his. Men shave their heads to resemble Michael Jordan, the basketball idol. ZZ Top band members have identifying long beards. Women have copied tresses of Farrah Fawcett, Halle Berry, and Jennifer Aniston through the years. Have you copied someone's hairstyle? Very few of us ignore our hair. Maybe this woman's hair is her identity. Her hair is long; it's curly. What else can we say about it?

We can look at Ahuja's background. What do Ahuja and her critics say about her paintings?

Mequitta Ahuja was born in Michigan in 1976, but grew up in Connecticut, where family still lives. She says being a woman of mixed ethnic origin, East Indian and African American and an artist, she simultaneously occupies multiple subject positions.

Her education consisted of a B.A. at Hampshire College – Amherst, MA and a MFA at The University of Illinois in Chicago where she was taught and mentored by Kerry Marshall. After graduate studies, she worked in Dayton, Ohio as Program Director of Blue Sky Project and was one of the first Resident Artists. In 2006, she began a 3-year assignment in Houston as resident in the CORE Program at the MFAH Glassell school of Art. After Houston, she went to New York where she worked at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

In college, Ahuja read *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* by Audre Lorde, which was very instrumental in her development. Lorde was a Caribbean-American lesbian who challenged white women and racism in the feminist movement.

Self-portraiture, costuming, ethnic identity, and hybridity are all ideas Ahuja has worked on for a very long time. She says the black hair and the black marks are building layers of mark to create this bushy hair in what she calls “*automythography*”, her ongoing exploration into the “auto-mythic”, a term coined by author Lorde to describe a merging of history, myth, personal narrative, nature, and self-invention. The Blanton’s painting is about self-inspection, self-examination, and self-representation. She blends her personal cultural history and myth with a personal narrative. By combining these elements, she integrates representational forms relating to painting and photography that span portraiture, fiction, realism, and abstraction.

The artist absorbs this notion in depictions of Black hair that, according to her, physically & conceptually convey “the psychic proportions hair has in the lives of Black people.” In Ahuja’s hands, long boundless locks become abstract, & sometimes colorful, forms. Entangled tresses morph into exquisite illustrations of cultural experience & exorcism and her personal understanding of her ethnic experiences, visually linking the transition from figuration to abstraction. Hair begins to look embryonic and lines start to resemble the delicate roots of plants or membranes

The central issue of her work is the production of selfhood, the tools available for self-invention and taking control of one’s representation. Self-portraiture that confronts the viewer with her own specific concerns, the ongoing process of self-making that focuses on being black, being Asian, being mixed, bridging the differences to the various groups with which she identifies. The premise of much of her work is that race exists only as a social construction and not as a fact of biology. Her emphasis on her ethnicity coincides with these topics in history and literature. But, she also sees feminism as one system of analyzing the formation of private and public identity as well as a political impulse toward freedom of equality, which would coincide with history and literature of the feminist movement in multi-discipline connections. The premise of much of her work is that race exists only as a social construction & not as a fact of biology. Feminist analysis of the construction of gender was the avenue to better understanding the formation of a racialized individual & group.

Ahuja’s physical process begins by performing gestures in front of a camera using a remote shutter control. Through preliminary drawings, she develops the imagined elements of the work such that the flow from the head is also a flow from the mind. With medium and image, she proposes that identity, including racial and sexual identities, although narrowly defined by social norms, is both fluid and plural. In response to the history of black hair as a barometer of social and personal consciousness, she makes the image of hair both corporeal and conceptual, giving it the psychic proportions hair has in the lives of black people where the flow from the head is also a flow from the mind.

Accuracy in accordance to what she calls “body sensing” is the most determining aspect of how she develops a piece. She relies on an internal “vision” and recreates the balance of internal senses in external form, not having a clear picture of the work, but letting the first mark guide the next. She renders the figure as simultaneously specific and as an archetype of the human, the female, and the artist.

Now that you know more about Ahuja’s history and opinions, does it alter your view and opinion of the painting? Is the meaning the same as the one you made without viewing the label or personal information or is your interpretation of the meaning still the same?

Sources:

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