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RIT

THE NEW NEGRO HAS NO FEAR

by

Abiose Spriggs

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine
Arts in Painting
School of Art
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY
December 3, 2021

Thesis Approval

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ABSTRACT:

THE NEW NEGRO HAS NO FEAR, is the title of my thesis for my Master of Fine Arts candidacy. This body of work focuses on the heroic stature of Marcus Garvey and my contemporary reflection on the philosophy and principles of the UNIA (United Negro Improvement Association) and its founder. In my artwork I try to convey the story of Garvey and the UNIA by removing the figure and focusing more on simplistic yet timeless imagery like boats, chairs, cars and articles of clothing. In many paintings I explore the significance of each object that is being depicted as pieces to the story that is the UNIA. A lot of the imagery used is taken from photographs found online and visually reinterpreting the imagery to follow my art's thematic purpose. I use a pastel palette of yellow, pink's, blues and bright greens and reds to relate directly to Garvey's Caribbean heritage, whereas other paintings have a clean hard edge that lends itself to modern abstract expressionism. As a contemporary artist, abstract expressionism reminds me of the glitchy digital world we rely on for information and communication. It lends itself to my visual vocabulary, to share my beliefs on the importance of the UNIA to others of my generation and younger. With each painting arriving closer to the marriage of abstraction and surrealism. Each painting is a feeling/emotional point where my intelligence, my life experience and my artistic skills came together to produce each artwork.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS:

WHEN SPIRITS TALK (1 & 2)

Acrylic/ sand medium/ spray paint/ ink

20 x 24 inches





BLUE SPACE
Acrylic on canvas
20 x 24 inches



SYLDD
Acrylic on canvas
20 x 24 inches



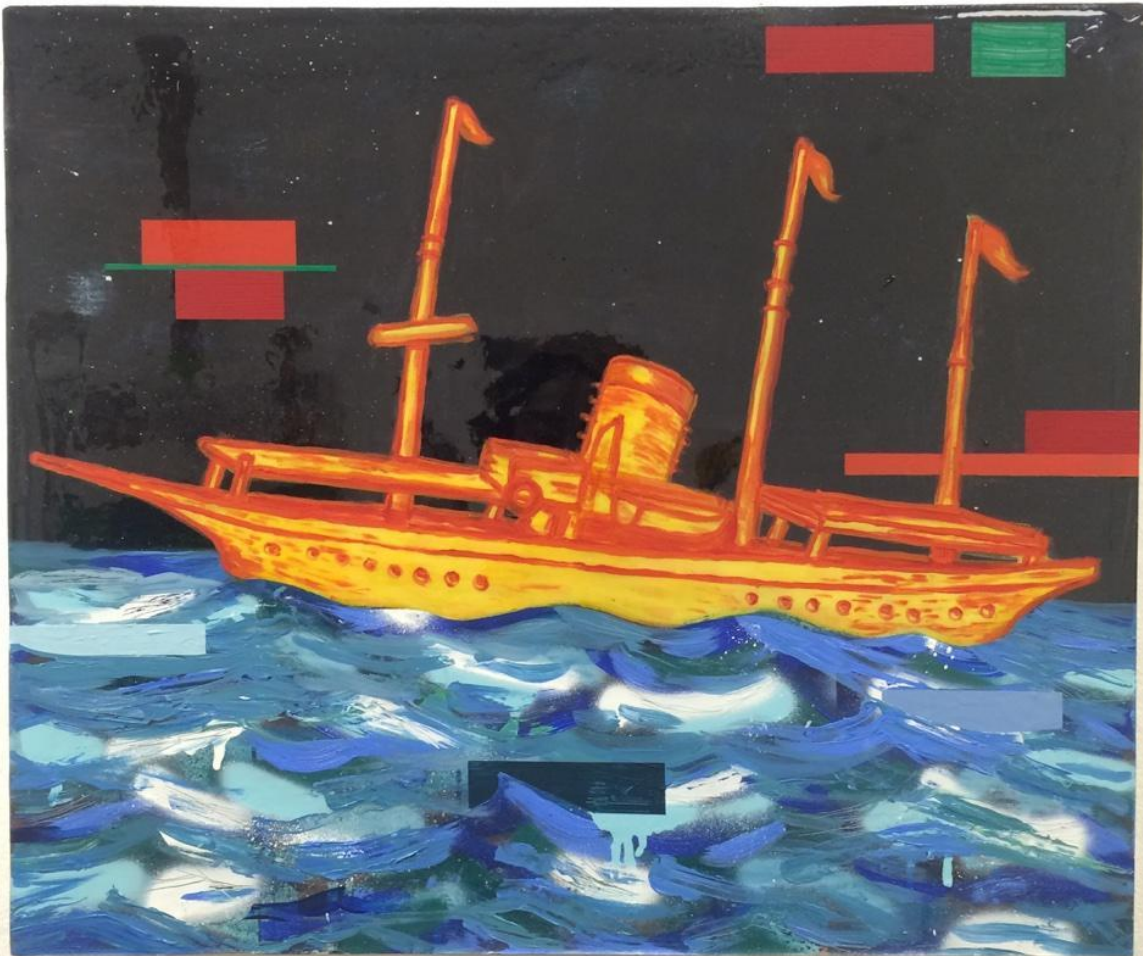
EVERY NIGGA IS A STAR
Acrylic/ spray paint/ resin/ glitter
48 x 48 inches



SPACE IS THE...
Acrylic/ spray paint/ resin/ glitter
48 x 48 inches



SS FREDERICK DOUGGLASS
acrylic/ spray paint/ resin
24 x 20 inches



THE NEW NEGRO
acrylic/ spray paint/ resin/ glitter
20 x 24 inches



UNIA (harlem's own)
acrylic/spray paint/ resin/ glitter
20 x 24 inches



GARVEY'S DREAM
acrylic/ spray paint/ glitter/resin
96 x 48 inches



WHO ELSE IS A BLACK STAR?
acrylic/ glitter/ iron castings
48 x 48 inches



Up, you mighty race! the father of Black Nationalism

As a child my father would awaken me sometimes on the weekends by proclaiming in a public speaking sort of tone “Up you mighty race!”. As an adult it has become my mantra when facing adversity of any kind. The story of an immigrant in search of a better life becomes a leader, a businessman, and an intellectual amongst his community. Due to the political climate of America in the 1920s he was persecuted, jailed and deported. Since Garvey there have been countless leaders and successful people of color who have brought about change for the entire country.

This body of work however will be focusing on Marcus Garvey during the period when he was the leader of a Black social group that promoted family, unity, knowledge and the ability to organize a portion of black people in America at a time that upset the status quo. Garvey’s heroic stature in the canon of black history, specifically America, has always captured my imagination. To have seen the marches and attend the rally’s and be a part of something greater than myself, would have been incredible. With my focal point in painting, taking the array of classes such as sculpting, printmaking, and learning to think conceptually about the work I’m making and implementing my new practices into this body of work.

My artwork work tries to convey the story of Garvey and the United Negro Improvement Association by removing the figure and focusing more on simplistic yet timeless imagery like boats, chairs, cars and articles of clothing. The significance of each item lies in the fact that the items are all connected to the story of the UNIA. Imagery taken from photographs of Garvey and members of the UNIA and visually reinterpreting the story these images tell. With each painting arriving closer to a marriage of various styles that are referred to in contemporary art. This has been my visual investigation during my time at RIT. Thank you for the opportunity to bring this work to life. I have enjoyed my time experimenting with various mediums to inform my artistic practice.

Section I: Context

As an artist you tend to draw on your personal experiences/memories, philosophies, political/social interest and stories to create a body of art. Throughout my scholastic artist career, I have used my personal life experiences as a source material. In undergrad I focused on spirituality and religion and my family's relationship to both. I traced the path of West African religion to the Americas by the Atlantic slave trade, I looked at various religions that were similar and from different regions of the Americas (the Caribbean, South America, and the Southern United States). Growing up being exposed to Santeria (Cuba) and being told wise tales of High John De Conqueror (Hoodoo, America) I delved into a body of small works on paper. These works tried to convey the long history of these religions and the use of spoken word to pass on these traditions in a visual manner. (When Spirits Talk1 & 2) *

In graduate school, I'm focusing on a personal hero and his effect on my childhood memories of self-awareness or black awareness. Meaning, that I was raised to know my people's history in this country and beyond. The story of Marcus Garvey (Jamaican immigrant who founded with his wife the social organization known as the United Negro Improvement Association or UNIA) is a meaningful one to tell during an era of social unrest due to classic villains such as racism. Hero's such as Garvey aimed to unify not divide and unity throughout this great nation is the only real cure.

I spent most of my time in the beginning of my time at RIT looking at post World War II art, specifically abstract expressionism. Artists like Picasso and Matisse to de Kooning (both), Phillip Guston, Hans Hoffman, Josef Albers, Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman. These artists were a part of the "New Art" or Abstract expressionist painting movement in America. I was drawn to

this because it reminded me so much of my surroundings at RIT, hard-edge, square buildings that held some dominance over me and the rest of the student populace. I began to work in the likes of Ad Reinhardt, his hard edge larger than life work really excited me. His use of color and the way he layered and weaved shapes into a composition that was visually satisfying. I was really in awe of his black paintings and was struck by how some artists use a color to defy a period of their artistic career. My first complete graduate paintings were my attempt to connect with the art style. I saw a connection to modern day design and technology, to me through abstract expressionism art was reduced to 1s and 0s. Broken down to the elements of design the artwork transcends the simplicity of the subject matter. (Blue Space and S.Y.L.D.D.)

Although highly recharged and influenced by the abstract painters mentioned in the previous paragraph, I still had the historical art knowledge of various black modern and contemporary artists and the stories they told through their artwork. Artists such as Chris Ofili, James Kerry Marshall, Radcliffe Bailey, and David Hammonds have shown the art world that black art and subject matter is an important and viable part of the contemporary art world. These artists often pull source material from the so-called “greats” in order to broaden the conversation, giving black art and artists a seat.

Section II: Evolution

“Every Nigga is a Star” * and “Space Still is...” *, are paintings celebrating the UNIA. These paintings were inspired heavily by Ad Reinhardt and Gerhard Richter. They were done as an experiment. I wanted to work larger, learning how large work really captures the attention, I wanted to mix hard edge abstract work with the looseness and fluidity of abstract expressionism. This became a pivotal moment for my art process, I incorporated resin because I wanted an invisible layer that I could directly work on. Adding the shapes and forms on top of the resin gave the paintings the illusion of depth.

“Garvey’s Dream” was (at this time) my goal, to work large, creating something that people really had to set and think with. After watching a documentary on Jim Dine’s charcoal drawings,

I was inspired to create one of my own, using my entire body to physically create the drawing. It started as one piece but became a diptych, by the end of my first year of school the drawing felt unresolved. I tried to make the work mixed media applying triangles of color paper that imitated the shapes in the two pieces previously mentioned. However, it didn't work for me and walking away from the work really helped me to realize what it could become. I revisited the piece that summer and encased the entire drawing in epoxy resin. Resin had become a part of my visual language; its purpose is to "encase and protect " bar tops and tables but I used it to incase my work. This "protective" layer changed the initial concept of the drawing into something more. With my arsenal of acrylic, spray paint, tape and glitter I used the image of Garvey's hat as a boat traversing the harsh stormy waves at sea.

This became the beginning of my thesis show, I began to search images of Garvey online, and some of the most interesting photographs I found were by James Van der Zee*. Most photographs were grainy or just photos of unidentifiable faces in urban settings. But a few were great source material for my art. Specifically two photos by James Van der Zee, one where he is taking a group photo with Prince Marc Kojo Tovalou Houenou and George O Marke, both gentlemen from the continent of Africa who openly critiqued the European colonization of Africa during the 1920s. And another photo of Garvey in a moto-cade, where he is in a full Napoleon military outfit, both photos were inspiration for THE NEW NEGRO and UNIA.

Each painting I saw my unintelligent urges become more refined and thoughtful ideas. I witnessed my own progression of skill, color theory, and a depth of art understanding that I had been looking for. I challenged myself with each painting and continued with what I learned from the previous painting. My last painting, WHO ELSE IS A BLACK STAR? was a culmination of my time here at RIT and was more about me than Marcus Garvey. I struggled with the piece for almost four months unsure about where to go next. Having my advisors critique the work a day before the thesis opening got my gears going and brought me to the result which is now hanging in Bevier Gallery.

Section III: The Body of Work

When I started this body of work, I thought most of the work would look something like “Garvey’s Dream” in terms of content, scale and style. As I began to make the body of work it changed right before my eyes. The way I painted changed, the scale changed and some of the mediums I used changed as well. Artist that I was looking at changed from abstract painter to more figurative and painterly artist. The evolution of my work from my first year to my second year took a tremendous jump to something more original. The work that was produced attempts to be true to what the artwork is. The story of Marcus Garvey influenced my entire thesis, his founding of the UNIA and his pan-Africanist ideology propelled him to be a hero to Black people throughout time.

I began to work on “SS Frederick Douglass” and “Harlem’s Own”. In these two paintings I move away from the hard-edge abstraction found in previous paintings (EVERY NIGGA IS A STAR) and attempted to incorporate the interiors and backgrounds I saw in the photographs. This morphed my paintings into abstracted still lives and landscapes. My interest lied in simplifying the image, allowing the brush strokes to become more pronounced. I realized that a photo-realist interpretation of the source materials was unnecessary and what was more important was my artistic interpretations, like painting from a collection of memories. I also took interest in the color palettes I was using. The pastel hues gave the art a tropical, joyous feeling, at the same time I was interested in the relationship between color and emotion. Pinks and greens have reminded me of softness and nature, yet I find that pink is a hue that finds its way in artwork that

responds to societal issues and the changing landscape of the art world during this technological era.

Three of the paintings are devoid of a figure, for example a veranda with three vacant chairs, or a 1920s photography studio background with no one occupying it. This allegory speaks to the legacy that Garvey and the UNIA left on subsequent generations. I use the pan-African colors as a direct relation to Garvey. Black, represents the people, green represents the land (stolen from and land worked), and red represents the blood and pain that African people of the diaspora have experienced since the colonization of the continent.

All the paintings are mixed media, a style of working that was birthed out of modern art. I have used mixed media to inform my artistic process since my youth. Working with various forms of media in my work allows the paintings to change before the viewers eyes. When viewers are looking closely, they find small nuances in the surface of the work. The texture of the paint and brush strokes, the presence of the artist's hand and the materials used by me to bring forth my vision.

Title of Work: S.S. Frederick Douglass

Media: Acrylic, Spray paint, Resin

Dimensions: 24x20 inches

The first of my photographic influenced paintings is “SS Frederick Douglass”, I found an image of one of the UNIA’s Black Star Line ships that was a repurposed World War I naval ship. I drew a few small sketches of how I wanted to compose the painting. I centralized the boat in the center of the surface and began my underpainting. The underpainting of the boat was a light wash of hansa yellow, that I tried to intensify. Against the dark background the boat had this eerie and ghostly quality about it. I thought it interesting that I painted the nose of the ship to the left which suggests that the boat is traveling away, or back in time. My favorite parts of the painting are the starry sky and the bright, loose, and expressiveness of the water. I accomplished both with the

use of spray paint. In reflection on the painting, I would not outline the boat with such bold orange brush strokes. I would like to have used only various shades of yellow to pull out the details in a more subtle manner. The boat would hold the viewers' attention more and become equally as interesting as the water.

Title of Work: The New Negro

Media: Acrylic, Spray paint, Resin, Glitter

Dimensions: 20x24 inches

Compositionally, color palette, and execution all came together in this painting. I think it is visually stimulating and holds your attention well. This painting is based on a photograph of Garvey, who is dressed up in his now iconic Napoleon era French military uniform, outfitted with medals and sword. The background was simple and the resolution in the photograph I printed wasn't very high, so I chose to go with bright and vibrant colors to make the composition interesting. While I was working on this painting, I began to shift my gaze to what I consider to be artists who use their medium as it is without hiding the hand of the artist. Wanda Koop, Phillip Guston, Kim Dorland, and Jules de Balincourt to name a few. In THE NEW NEGRO shapes are used as filters or to hide or make up missing pieces of the image. The bright palette gives the painting a celebratory quality that I really enjoy. Championing Garvey's legacy and the beliefs he upheld.

The diagonally recessed space adds an air of drama along with the absence of a central figure in the composition. The stars replace the figure that you want to see in space, making the stars the paintings focal point. The brush strokes in the backdrop are the most elegant moments in the piece, the look rushed yet thoughtful, full of expression and energy but peaceful and soft as it meets the checkered floor.

Title of Work: U.N.I.A.

Media: Acrylic, Spray paint, Resin, Glitter

Dimensions: 24x20 inches

I worked on UNIA while also painting THE NEW NEGRO, both paintings have a similar color palette, and both compositionally play around with space and depth. This work is based on a photograph found online of Marcus Garvey on an outdoor veranda with two other men (whose identities are unknown to me). All three men were dressed in suits, Prince Marc Kojo Tovalou Houenou, George O Marke and Garvey. As I began to start this painting, it was brought to my attention during a critique that my work was pulling me into the interest of spaces that people exist in, have existed in or are supposed to exist in. The yellow walls, teal window seals and pink floor give a strange island vibe. It's clear that I am still very interested in the brush strokes and using the paint to have fun with color instead of trying to mimic reality. The three chairs are the focal point, although the pink chair is very close to the edge of the painting making that chair seem heavy, yet it almost floats and doesn't seem to be very grounded. The other two chairs were executed successfully, specifically the green chair. I'm unsure how the viewers might have responded to the "mistakes" in the work, I personally think they represent thought and change. With all the bright colors this painting seems the saddest, because of the empty chairs, the chairs bring a lot of questions to mind, and I am unsure if I can answer them in this work. The most challenging part of the painting was the ground that the chairs rest on, it was hard to create the illusion that they were receding into the painting at that angle. Playing around with the shadows underneath the chairs and having areas where it seemed as if sunlight was shining down would have helped to make the bottom half of the piece believable.

Title of Work: Harlem's Own

Media: Acrylic, Spray paint, Resin

Dimensions: 24x20 inches

This was a very processed oriented painting. I found the image of a car from the 1920s, traced it, re-drew it on transparency paper and projected the car onto my painting surface. I was inspired

by parade photographs shot of the UNIA and Garvey by the photographer James Van der Zee. The car originally was a bright and ghostly yellow, like SS FREDERICK DOUGLASS. By taking the car out of its urban context, I separated my work from the photograph. I concentrated my attention to color while working on this piece, but it was severely lost when I decided to tint the epoxy resin. The trees and hillside in the background help the work compositionally. I focused a lot on the paint itself and allowed it to create depth, movement, and space. The spray paint and squares on the surface were unnecessary after thought and really took away from the car. The car itself is the most successful part of this painting, the outlines on the car give it a graphic feeling but still reads as fine art.

Title of Work: Who Else is A Black Star?

Media: Acrylic, Spray paint, Glitter, Iron castings]

‘Dimensions: 48 x 48inches

I felt that Garvey’s bicorn hat was the appropriate object to represent him and his ideas. I began to work on a painting that had the hat as its focal point, creating a wistful atmosphere for the hat to exist in. At some point during the process, I hit a wall with the piece, it disinterested me, and I did not look or work on it for a month. During that hiatus, I cleaned up my star castings to apply them to the surface of the painting. I tapped and threaded five iron star castings and figured out where I wanted to put them on the painting. When I returned to the painting, I worked more on the space the hat is existing in and less on the actual hat itself. Before, I was checked off to hang my work up in the Bevier Gallery, my committee spent a lot of time on the piece, trying to help me resolve it. I played around with selective editing, I taped off areas of the piece and covered it in its entirety with black glitters and embossing powder. I really enjoyed the textural aspect it brought to the painting. A lot of areas that I taped off were small details from the background and details of the hat. Afterwards, I covered the entire painting in black paint and poured the glitter and embossing powder over the entire piece. I put the painting in the thesis show before getting

feedback from my committee, so it was once again the focus of conversation during my thesis defense.

I was not sure how I felt about the piece, but I knew I liked it. The glitter gives the painting a feeling of depth, under lighting the painting shimmers and moves like staring into a starry night sky or the open water on a calm evening. Areas that I was able to un-tape became these colorfully bright abstract shapes, marks and gestures in the painting. The painted areas meshed well with the textured glitter on the surface, yet by obliterating the hat, expanding on my visual language from previous pieces.

In my opinion this painting is the most interesting of the six paintings in my thesis show.

Compositionally, it keeps my attention, although the star(s) become the focal point. I thought that the iron casted stars would help to balance the painted star, but the gold spray paint makes the star stand out too much. From a distance the casted stars get lost in the work, so they may have needed a patina, or possibly have been allowed to rust so that the stars could stand apart from the glittery surface. The painting may be more cohesive if the star at the bottom was not a part of the painting and more abstracted shapes were allowed to come through from the underpainting

Title of Work: Garvey's Dream

Media: Acrylic, Spray paint, Glitter

Dimensions: 96 x 48 inches

“Garvey's Dream” was the most time I've spent working on a painting. It started as a class project for my contemporary drawing class and became the catalyst for my entire thesis. The use of color, composition, and the subject matter comes together in a way that sort of dazzles and mystifies simultaneously. The heavy use of the square and even the color palette of the various hues of green and red against the dark background really imply a sophisticated use of color and research of hard-edge abstractionist painters. The background is beautifully composed with white gesso, compressed charcoal and loose charcoal, a nod to the abstract expressionist artist Jim

Dine. The hat was more legible as a hand before the drawing was covered in epoxy resin, the resin distorted the image in a way that darkened the piece entirely and obliterated most of the subtle details in the hat. The spastic groupings of the squares and rectangles allow the viewer to move through the piece, and the slick surface of the resin allows the viewer to see themselves in the piece as well. The viewer becomes a part of the painting, they are the final layer. Using the spray paint was almost an afterthought, I could have been more selective with the colors and where I put them. They do read like balloons for a celebration, and that almost fits with the concept of this painting. The marking of time and the direction of the hat, speak to the UNIA's history and the dream that Garvey had of a unified Africa and a black nation free of oppression and colonial rule. Although this was the first work I completed for my thesis work, it also is the culmination of the other works conceptually. I think I have grown a lot as a painter since creating this piece, and each painting since then has been an experiment of composition, materiality and subject matter.

Conclusion

This body of work focused on Marcus Garvey during the period when he was the leader of a Black social group called the United Negro Improvement Association. By removing the figure and focusing more on simplistic yet timeless imagery like boats, chairs, cars and articles of clothing. I explored the significance of each object that has been depicted as parts of Garvey's story. In retrospect, each painting is a juncture of feelings where my intelligence, my life experience and my artistic skills came together to produce each artwork. I have used my personal life experiences as a source material for my artistic practice. We all have our own stories and our own truths, and this awareness allows for visual artists of all disciplines to pursue careers in the arts. My thesis work has been my personal story and relationship with Garvey and why I revere him as a hero. The process that I underwent here at RIT only pushed me forward as an artist. After living with my thesis work for several years I still draw my visual language from the art produced at that time. I've been able to identify things about my artistic process that didn't work for me during my time in grad school and focus more on the things that do. I have been in small shows around the Rochester area and a rather large group show in Buffalo, Ny at the Birchfield Penny. I still draw from life experiences as inspiration and enjoy being an avid art goer.