

THE URBAN ITALIAN PROJECT
A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS
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The Urban Italian Project

Statement of the Problem

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight (*New International*, I Peter 3: 3-4). Fine art is usually labeled as something beautiful. Fine art is defined as things such as painting, sculpture, or music, concerned primarily with the creation of beautiful objects. *Webster's Dictionary* also defines art as an activity that requires a fine skill (Fine Art). Art is the psychic expression of beauty as revealed through truth. It is important to first define art and beauty. Art is about creating, personality, and freedom. Art can be seen as either beautiful or ugly, however it is still art. It is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. What is beautiful to one individual might be offensive to another. So who labels what is art and what is beautiful in our world today? Concepts of beauty can be cultural constants or hold a persistent meaning, while truths are variable, or ever changing throughout time and culture.

The Urban Italian Project was inspired by my trip to Italy in the summer of 2009. I flew over the Atlantic to experience one of the world's most famous places for master artists, Italy. I marveled at the Sistine Chapel and I shed tears when I stepped foot into St Peter's Basilica. I asked myself a few questions, "*What about the people who never have the opportunity to travel outside of their immediate environments to experience great feats of craftsmanship and art as I have?*" "*What about the people who never obtain the money to afford a golden ticket to the dream world of great artists but are forced to stay*

within the small realm of what they are subject and exposed to?” “What can I do to stretch the limits of their understanding and expand their definitions of beauty?”

Exposure to what is beautiful within arms reach was the overall goal of this project.

On that trip I explored some of the world's finest works of art. I stood in total awe of beauty that had been studied for years, like Michelangelo's *Pieta*. I stood there ever so thankful for this once in a lifetime trip. Art has always been my passion. However, I could not say I found that same awe and beauty within my hometown of Gary, Indiana. With this project, I set out to find and redefine the beauty within my hometown, my "people", and my way of life. This project gave me the opportunity to research artists who looked at the world the way I did. I went home to Gary several times in search of beauty. With each research visit I found a new and peculiar way to look at the beauty my city had to offer. I created several paintings and sketches that allowed me to look into the history books of art and compare what is labeled beautiful art to what I found beautifully artistic in my urban city. The work I created exhibits my knowledge of artistic giants like Michelangelo, Bernini and Caravaggio and other artists like Kerry James Marshall, Amy Yoes, and Kara Walker. I've wondered habitually within this time frame of study, who labels what is to be taught as beautiful?

Creating these paintings has allowed me to look for and find beauty within my own hometown and even within myself. I forced myself outside of my comfort zone with each painting. I have gained knowledge in the history of contemporary painters and watercolor techniques. This body of work illustrates a commitment to learning art history and the profession of art. I possessed a new found freedom to experiment with imagery

and different media outside of my personal comfort zone of oil painting and watercolor. I have gained knowledge of famous artists who think and create imagery in a way that I can relate to on a personal level. The paintings I created show a commitment to the process of collage and using various mediums to produce a cohesive artwork. Just as the great African American artists before me used simple imagery to address complicated issues, I too have created a series of work that speaks loudly about issues of beauty and history that some of us only whisper about.

Review of Influences/Literature

In preparation for completing this body of work, I revisited pictures I took during my trip to Italy. I looked over different books I purchased while I was there and evaluated the work I produced and the journals I wrote in during those 33 days from Venice to Rome. In one of the traveling books for Italy I found the perfect description of my Italian experience.

Italy has drawn people in search of culture and romance for many centuries. Few countries can compete with its Classical origins, its art, architecture, musical and literary traditions, its scenery, or food and wine. The ambiguity of its modern image is also fascinating; since World War II Italy has climbed into the top ten world economies, yet at its heart it retains many of the customs, traditions, and regional allegiances of its agricultural heritage (Wild 21).

Italy has been seen as the key place for art and beauty. Within the walls of the Vatican City sits the most famous Sistine chapel, St. Peter's basilica, Michelangelo's *Pieta*, and great works from Raphael. Within Italy, there are numerous museums that hang the most beautiful pieces of art known to man, specifically Western beauty. Looking throughout the studied images a question proposed itself, "*so what about the*

people who will never see these great feats of beauty?” and “what about artist like myself, where are our works of art displayed for the public’s admiration?” I knew that there had to be something beautiful within my hometown and even within myself, something that I could use to show that Gary, Indiana can too be seen as beautiful. Finding a way to effectively display the imagery that I was working with became the focal point. My research quickly turned to the work of Kara Walker for her silhouetted figures and Kerry James Marshall for his collage techniques, amongst other things. A new mission was then formed: to compare and contrast the beauty found in Italy, TA, traditional art, to that found in Gary, Indiana, UB, urban beauty.

The silhouette work of Kara Walker was an important influence to this creative project. After struggling for some time with an appropriate depiction of a self-portrait, I turned to Kara Walker’s work and experimented with the silhouette figure. I found this to be a magnificent fix to the problem. I found that Walker’s silhouettes speak volumes due to the rich black, flat, and no depth approach that they take. To me, the color choice of all black speaks for the race of the African-American. The all black silhouette appears to be a simple solution, however I find it extremely powerful. The flatness of Walker’s silhouette carry a different meaning, they appear remind me of nightmares, or vivid memories because they have no depth drawing onto them. Kara Walker’s artwork has been criticized due to its strong racial content and the fact that it was not considered fine art. However, the silhouettes hold more meaning then what I attached to them and more meaning than what she has been criticized for. Kara Walker has a distinct style to her work and more meaning then what the surface entails. Pamela Caserta gives a little more

detail to the meaning of Walker's work in the following paragraph. Here she explains the major focus behind the wonderful works of Kara Walker.

Kara Walker is perhaps best known for her cut-paper silhouettes. She mentions being drawn to early American silhouettes as she explored an interest in kitsch. Kara Walker's silhouette images work to bridge unfinished folklore in the Antebellum South, raising identity and gender issues for African American women in particular. However, because of her truthful approach to the topic, Walker's artwork is reminiscent of Andy Warhol's Pop Art during the 1960s (indeed, Walker says she adored Warhol growing up as a child). Her nightmarish yet fantastical images incorporate a cinematic feel. Walker uses images from historical textbooks to show how white people depicted African American slaves during Antebellum South. "Most pieces have to do with exchanges of power, attempts to steal power away from others." —Kara Walker (Caserta)

I viewed her images as a power source. Walker's images hold power and speak loudly through one solid color, black. I took that interpretation and used it to fuel yet another self-portrait within my body of work. In the painting *TA-I*, the Vatican City painting, I painted the female all black using acrylic only. This solved a composition problem and birthed a new image full of meaning in an attempt to steal power from the well known imagery found in the Vatican.

Space and perspective was another thing with which I struggled. I found it difficult to create a solid horizon line within some of the pieces. This body of work can be categorized as emotional and expressive. The work is personal and generated from my experiences as a young black woman in the world of art where I had no voice and studied masters of art who looked nothing like me. Thus the feeling of aimless wander and isolation takes over the ground of my work. The imagery seems to float in and out of the space. Space and perspective takes on a symbolic, meandering form. According to Panofsky, "space is conceived of as being transformed into 'lived experience' by a social

'subject'..." The social subject is a construct of the viewer and is relative to a form of social conditioning (Panofsky 67). We have been conditioned to see things in art based on an arbitrary vanishing point. I felt as though I needed to have a horizon line and work from a sure vanishing point. I realized my work comes from a different place, a place where there is no ground, therefore no vanishing point. I was not taught the elements and principles of art until sophomore year in college. I was not raised with an appreciation of the visual arts. I did not see faces like mine within the thick books like Gardner's *Art through the Ages*. I had to research on my own for artists who looked like me, expressed like me and sounded like me. I found great inspiration and influence in Kerry James Marshall.

Marshall is known for large-scale paintings, sculptures, and other objects that take African-American life and history as their subject matter. His work often deals with the effects of the Civil Rights movement on domestic life, in addition to working with elements of popular culture. I am most fond of his *Garden Project*, which critiques the glorified names of housing projects that conceal desperate poverty, and the *Lost Boys* series, which examines young black men "lost in the ghetto, lost in public housing, lost in joblessness, and lost in literacy." (Marshall)

Kerry James Marshall's work feels as though it is an exact replica of my childhood experience. I can relate to this artist on so many levels. I understand his upbringing, his subject choice and even the thinking behind his composition. The following paragraph is a short excerpt on Marshall and his work.

The subject matter of his paintings, installations, and public projects is often drawn from African-American popular culture, and is rooted in the geography of his upbringing: “You can’t be born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955 and grow up in South Central [Los Angeles] near the Black Panthers headquarters, and not feel like you’ve got some kind of social responsibility. You can’t move to Watts in 1963 and not speak about it. That determined a lot of where my work was going to go,” says Marshall. In his “Souvenir” series of paintings and sculptures, he pays tribute to the Civil Rights movement with mammoth printing stamps featuring bold slogans of the era—Black Power! and paintings of middle-class living rooms where ordinary African-American citizens have become angels tending to a domestic order populated by the ghosts of Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and other heroes of the 1960s (Sohal).

Marshall’s work is based on a broad range of art-historical references, from Renaissance painting to black folk art, from El Greco to Charles White. A striking aspect of his paintings is the emphatically black skin tone of his figures, a development the artist says emerged from an investigation into the invisibility of blacks in America and the unnecessarily negative connotations associated with darkness. Marshall believes “you still have to earn your audience’s attention every time you make something (Marshall).” The sheer beauty of his work speaks to an art that is simultaneously formally rigorous and socially engaged.

Marshall explored the concept of black beauty in contrast to Western ideals with his painting *La Venus Negra*. The figure, this time a nude woman, literally blends into her dark surroundings, her sensuous shape barely discernable. Yet once the viewer looks closely, her curvaceous figure evokes a womanly power only enhanced by the deep black of her skin (Crouther). As Marshall admits, he himself “had not considered that a black woman could be considered a goddess of love and beauty,” but with this painting he proves its possibility (Crouther). He challenges the classic perception of a goddess as a

white woman with long flowing hair, speaking again to the issue of African-American identity in the Western world. This concept has more meaning when looking at the African pattern on the top quarter of the background (Crouther). With this addition, he references the movement begun during the Harlem Renaissance to incorporate traditional African aesthetics into African-American art. In an attempt to reconcile the African art and Western ideals, Marshall places both in his painting. Thus he highlights the search for a black identity that involves all aspects of their ancestral history and their current situation. Although African Americans may feel connected to two differing cultures, Marshall's painting of a classically Western figure represented with a new black aesthetic brings the two together, showing that they can live in harmony. This is the underlining problem within my series of *The Urban Italian Project*, trying to tie the black aesthetic together with the Western definition of beauty. Marshall also used the "black" figure within his work, completely different from Kara Walker's paper cutout silhouette figures. In the following paragraph Sohal discusses Marshall's aesthetic choice of the black figure and the symbolic importance.

Marshall's work avoids clichés of Blaxploitation or predictable kitsch. As Marshall states in his Art21 segment, he rethinks pictorial representation with black figures — frolicking at the beach, lounging at picnics, boating – taking part in activities suggesting leisure time and dispensable income. The fact that Marshall's figures are absolutely black is an aesthetic choice whose defense he has come to in interviews, insisting on the beautiful depth of color that black paint provides in creating the figure/ground distinction. This is important symbolically; the actual blackness of the subjects is discomfiting and even disquieting as it plainly confronts the representation of blacks in pictorial space and in historical popular culture. Black here is a disassociation, an abstraction from blackness that turns figures in Marshall's paintings into ideas of "something-other-than-us," rather than people. The abstraction is advanced by collage work that acts, at times, as defacement (Sohal).

I looked at other artists as references for structural elements, however my main artist was Kerry James Marshall. I found meaning I could relate to within his work. I admire Marshall both for his style of art and for the African-American issues he chooses to display. Kerry James Marshall is an artist who speaks my personal language. Our stories are similar and we share the same passion over the invisibility of blacks in America. I would not say that my paintings are about Black Power, but they do tell a story about blackness. This is just the beginning of what I feel is a life long project for me.

Amy Yoes has been interested in ornament and architectural space for many years. Her recent projects have become more three-dimensional and have involved animation and light. The work of art that I pulled inspiration from by Yoes was *Sightseers Folklore*. This work is painted on the walls, closer to the ceiling of Wave Hill in the Bronx of New York. This work consists of wood sculpture and red acrylic paint. The painting is a complex series of interlocking structures and part architecture (Yoes). I tried to use the same interlocking structures within my work to frame specific images.

Description of the Artworks/Process

This thesis project started with narrowing down the number of paintings to work with. Ten 22”x 28” sheets of watercolor paper in various textures were chosen for experimentation with mixed media. The media choice was primarily watercolor on paper. However, throughout the process of this creative project and the content, mixed media seemed to over take the strict plan for watercolor only. Ink and pen, Sharpie markers, china markers, acrylic paints, and even gold leaf crept into *The Urban Italian*

Project. There is a lot of symbolism within this series of paintings. The symbols seemed to evolve and take on a meaning of their own. Another part of the experimentation process was the use of brewed coffee and Epsom salt. The coffee and Epsom salt created imagery that represented ruins found in Gary, Indiana and Italy.

For visual reference, I looked at pictures I had taken in Italy as a starting point for the traditional art, TA, paintings. I narrowed down my favorite pictures and works of art from Italy and replicated the images according to my skill level. I also studied and gained inspiration from works by Amy Yoes.

To begin the watercolor process, I started with a wash using a limited palette. I laid down colors with no imagery or plan in mind. I painted on two watercolor sheets of paper at the same time in hopes of having a similarity between the “Italy” paintings and the “Urban” paintings. After the washes were laid down and dry, I began penciling in different images. Each image fed off of the previous image. I would start each painting with only two images in mind. Once they were positioned on the paper I then allowed the painting to speak to me and lead me to the next image. Within some of the pieces, the background wash worked in the foreground as well. Each painting seemed to develop a different symbol.

The process and media were a little different with each painting. I will start with the breakdown of the symbols found within most of the pieces. I have selected a few symbols to discuss in further detail. The first symbol I have selected is the black bird. The black birds in the majority of the paintings are a symbol of black freedom. The African-American artists, who found a way into the history books, fly across the paper. Most

birds can fly, which distinguishes them from almost all other vertebrate classes. Flight is the primary means of locomotion for most bird species and is used for breeding, feeding, and predator avoidance and escape. Flight is the process by which an object moves either through the air, or movement beyond earth's atmosphere, by generating lift, propulsive thrust, or by simple ballistic movement. African-American artists like Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker, Romare Bearden, and Jacob Lawrence take flight throughout the African-American history of artists. The black birds also represent the African-Americans of privilege, the birds who can fly unlike the Blackfoot Penguin, the ghetto artist, the graffitist, and the one who cannot fly. Dodo, flightless bird, tiny winged African-American, my brother, my friend, the unfortunate one; they too are beautiful and capable of creating beauty.

The blue ribbon started as a self-portrait symbol. The ribbon then became a personal signature within this series, which I used to personally sign each work. The blue ribbon evolved within each painting and had the same underlying meaning of a personal signature, however, it also took on a different meaning within each artwork. Within the *UB-I* painting, the ribbon acts like a noose around the neck of the black silhouette and it also flows horizontally across the paper with scarf-like attributes. The blue ribbon is used as the common thread throughout the series. This ribbon pulls all the pieces together and unifies them. There is a dialogue of fragmented images within this body of work, which speaks of several personal things pertaining to me as an artist. This common thread, the blue ribbon was much needed to ground the series.

The black silhouette female figure first emerged within the *TA-I* painting from frustration. I tried painting a more realistic copy of a marble sculpture of *Justice* by Giulio Cartari found in the basilica of St. Peter's. With frustration guiding my paintbrush, I turned to the black acrylic paint and covered my previous watercolor attempt. I allowed the acrylic to dry and to my astonishment the black worked wonderfully and fixed the problem I had with the composition.

I chose the city of Gary, Indiana because I was born and raised there. I went home several times in search of beauty. As I gazed over the abandoned buildings on the infamous Broadway Street, I marveled at the ruins of the civic theatre, the library and most of all at the City Methodist Church, I thought about the streets of Rome. I remembered the cobble stone roads as I gazed at the Colosseum in great amazement. How is it that I can view the Roman Colosseum with eyes of admiration and view my own city ruins with a focus on immorality, corruption, and contamination? It's simple; I was never taught to find beauty within the rubbish. I did not know how to look for the beautiful colors found within the moss that ran up the buildings, which contrasted with the bright vivid colors of the graffiti.

Beauty was found within the city of Gary, Indiana. There was a type of sad, romantic story within the ruins of the City Methodist Church in Gary. CMC was shut down in the 1970s due to a lack of attendance and suffered a fire in 1997. To this day, CMC it stands in the streets of Gary, Indiana as a relic of the past, the vast sanctuary, shadowy hallways, and decaying innards a testament to the ravages of time (Luca).

Lastly, I will discuss the painting titled, *UB-2*. This painting is completely different from the rest of the series. This painting consists of coffee and Epsom salt as it's primary wash. I poured an old pot of coffee onto the paper and then randomly sprinkled Epsom salt into the coffee. The results of this experimentation surprised me. The coffee stained the watercolor paper beautifully and the salt created patches of grotesque beauty. Within some of those patches, it looks like fiber and in other patches; it looks like a strange mold that consumes the watercolor paper. When the wash was finished, I knew exactly what imagery I wanted to put on the paper. I chose the abandoned City Methodist Church of Gary, Indiana. I centered the sanctuary of the church in the middle of the paper. The only color I wanted to add was that of the blue ribbon. I focused on the middle of the painting and worked my way out. I did not interfere with the edges created by the coffee. This created an irregular border for the center of the sanctuary. I outlined certain images like the stained glass windows, a short flight of stairs, a balcony and the main supporting columns in brown ink. I wanted the painting to remain brown in relation to the coffee stains. I wanted the viewer to appreciate the coffee stain and the interior of the church. I did not want the two competing for visual focus.

I did not research the origins of the Epsom salt and coffee until after the painting was finished. I experimented with the coffee because of the different shades of brown color it produced. The different shades reminds me of the skin colors found in Gary, Indiana. After researching the term coffee, I found that Ethiopia is the natural home of the Arabica tree and the setting for most of coffee's origin legends. The word coffee is said to be a derivation of "Kaffa," the name of an Ethiopian province (Ethiopia Facts). This information struck my curiosity and I researched a little about Ethiopia. When one

hears of Ethiopia we usually think, famine, war, and wrenching poverty. This ancient East African nation south of the Red Sea, north of Kenya, and north and west of Somalia is not for the faint of heart. Millions of years ago this part of the continent was known as the cradle of humanity (Ethiopia Facts). This knowledge span new ideas for a different body of work with coffee as my primary wash. This information works out beautifully with *The Urban Italian Project*.

The coffee was used as a wash, a base or a start for some of the paintings. Some of the world's finest coffee is from Ethiopia, the "cradle of humanity", the start of life. Ethiopia is known by some of the same devastating facts of Gary, Indiana: war and poverty. Gary was known as the murder capital of the world in 1993 due to a lethal combination of drugs, guns and unemployment (Corchado). These two places are looked upon with a negative viewpoint; however, beauty can still be found within each place. The same bright vivid colors found in the graffiti on the walls of abandoned buildings in Gary, can be found painted on young tribal Ethiopian boys bodies. The same rust ginger colors found in the Dallol Volcano of Ethiopia can be matched to the rust colors found around and on the old pipes of the CMC. A lot of similarities can be found within in Gary and Ethiopia, which was all discovered from the research of the word coffee.

Epsom salt is an overachiever of the mineral world. The naturally occurring mineral crystals help heal aches, improve digestion, expel toxins, and relieve stress and prevent circulatory problems. Simply soaking in a warm bath with Epsom salt enables your skin to absorb the minerals (How Epsom Salt Works). Epsom salt within this body of work interacts with the coffee and forms a beautiful grotesque looking crystal mass.

The salt heals the aches of the blinded beauty of Gary, Indiana, for me personally through this artwork. The Epsom salt expels, or drives out the blandness of the coffee stain, and creates a fabulous new substance.

Conclusion and Exhibition Statement

When this series of paintings are exhibited, I hope they bring to mind beauty and desire. I would like for every viewer to create his or her own story when looking at my work. That is why I chose to give a simple title to each painting. I did not want to lead the viewer with my personal titles to the paintings. I hope the viewer walks away with an understanding of dialogue between fragmented imagery. The viewer should look at each painting for its personal story. There is a different focus and story found in each painting. I would like the viewer to take a walk in the paintings and create their own personal meaning for the images presented. This body of work was more about the process and less about the product. I am offering a different perspective of beauty and I can only hope that the viewer finds beauty within at least one of my paintings.

This series of paintings has provided me with an opportunity to challenge myself and explore mixed media. It takes commitment and dedication to finish a cohesive body of work. I have a new found love and appreciation for Kerry James Marshall and his collage work. I tackled a subject that can be extremely difficult to define: beauty. I learned that it is true; beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder. I believe that I truly found beauty within my own city of Gary, Indiana. I will take this series of work to Gary, Indiana and try to find a place to exhibit the work there to show the less fortunate the

beauty that can be found in their own city. I will bring a piece of Italy back to Gary through my work. I will inspire some future artist with my body of work.

Each painting was worked on for hours upon hours. I had a number of different individuals with different backgrounds look at my work and give me their feedback. I was interested in knowing if they too saw beauty within my work. To my surprise, each person saw something different within my work and not all of them viewed my work as beautiful. However, this body of work was a beautiful process. I learned how to look at the ruins and rubbish of my city differently. I learned how to find the beauty of color theory within random graffiti. I learned how to speak loudly within a painting about things that are important to me without being offensive.

These paintings represent my past, present and future. These paintings are extremely personal to me as an African-American female artist. My process taught me a lot about myself as an artist. This body of work shows experimentation of media and content. Throughout this series I have created a signature that I wish to explore more in future works, the blue ribbon. I would also like to explore more mixed media with coffee and salt being my main media.

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Appendix

Artwork List

UB – 1, 2010

22 inches by 28 inches

Mixed media, watercolor, coffee, ink, acrylic, gold metal

TA - 2, 2010

22 inches by 28 inches

Mixed media, watercolor, acrylic, gold metal, pen and ink

TA - 1, 2010

22 inches by 28 inches

Mixed media, watercolor, acrylic, paper, ink, gold metal

UB - 5, 2010

22 inches by 28 inches

Watercolor, pen and ink, gold metal, acrylic

TA - 5, 2010

22 inches by 28 inches

Watercolor, acrylic gold metal

UB -2, 2010

22 inches by 28 inches

Coffee, Epson salt, acrylic, gold metal

UB – 3, 2010

22 inches by 28 inches

Watercolor, acrylic, gold metal

TA – 4, 2010

22 inches by 28 inches

Watercolor, mixed media gold metal

This is how I see it.

44 inches by 68 inches, 2010

Watercolor, mixed media, coffee, acrylic, Sharpie marker, gold metal