

Dark Secrets & White Lies

Billy Colbert

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March 31 - May 12, 2022

Essay by Dr. Tiffany Barber

Flecker Gallery
Suffolk County Community College
Ammerman Campus, Selden, NY

Director's Foreword:

I've known Billy Colbert for over twenty years and am so delighted to have the opportunity to show his beautiful and complex paintings. This exhibition presents a difficult subject as the central theme of the work - race in America. In these paintings he explores the rift between representations of life in popular culture and the often very different and harsh realities those representations obscure. Colbert uses familiar images from pop culture, especially advertisements and both historical and contemporary political and cultural landscapes. His paintings are densely packed compositions juxtaposing images both comic and tragic.

In them he creates relationships that invite the viewer to question these often-jolting combinations. There are hard truths explored and difficult questions posed. Among them is what is our place in this history? How much of it do I really understand? What is my role? I hope that this exhibition reveals a vision of pain and frustration but also hope, of progress and regress, of a past that reaches into the present, and empathy for the plight of others. It is our job to listen, consider, and discuss all of these issues with civility in order to advance. Unity can only come from healing divisions, and though painful, the divisions must be examined.

We are also thrilled to include an insightful and poignant essay from Dr. Tiffany Barber, Assistant Professor of Africana Studies and Art History at the University of Delaware. Her analysis of Colbert's work as a kind of blur, and placement of it within important historical context provide a rich and elegant lens through which to explore this work.

Enjoy the catalog and exhibition.

Matthew Neil Gehring
Director

The Art of the Blur

By Dr. Tiffany Barber

- To make or become unclear or less distinct.
- A thing that cannot be seen or heard clearly.
- An indistinct memory or impression of events, typically because they happened very fast.

Multidisciplinary artist Billy Colbert uses humor and satire in visual form to critique the history and effects of racial formation in the United States. For *Dark Secrets & White Lies*, the artist presents seven large and medium scale paintings that personify the art of the blur. Thematically, each work is chock-full of contradictions and characters whose relationships to race and power are not immediately obvious, drawing attention to how these forces underlie accepted myths about Blackness and Americanness. Formally, the paintings juxtapose radically disparate images marked by swaths of paint that obscure important details—the covering of a body part, an incomplete action. These gestures make certain figures and relationships indistinct. They also interrupt the experience of time and nostalgia by freezing the accelerated speed of media and technology, thus inciting both maker and viewer to pause and inspect the rate at which racial oppression persists. To begin, Colbert creates a floating surface, an underpainting to which he adds and subtracts various concentrations of paint and text. What results is a scattered message board of information that Colbert wants viewers to interpret, even if—especially if—it makes them uncomfortable. This “eclectically inviting” work, in the artist’s words, allows viewers to reflect on their own place within past and present matrices of representation and power. It also produces a dissonance, both visual and cognitive, that mimics the disorienting effects of capitalism and anti-Blackness in an image-saturated world.

Comprised of well-known references, Colbert’s paintings are part of a lineage of Black visual satire. A number of artists of African descent, Robert Colescott, Kara Walker, and Michael Ray Charles among them, have deployed subversive humor in the last forty years to dispute matters of identity, viewer expectations, the possibility of social change, and the historical and ongoing currency of cultural and racial stereotypes. According to art historian Richard J. Powell, the visual forms of satire produced by Black artists in twentieth and twenty-first-century America engender anti-racist dissent and introspective



Why Does the White Man's Ice Always Seem Colder,
(detail) 2022, acrylic on canvas, 62 x 62 inches



Land of Fake Believe, (detail) 2022, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches

critique that defuses the social power of art. Colbert's *The Land of Fake Believe* (2022), for instance, depicts U.S. founding father and slave owner Thomas Jefferson embracing Sally Hemings, the enslaved girl to whom Jefferson was related (by marriage) and with whom he fathered children. For more than 150 years, rumors circulated in primary sources about this "dark secret." Though scholars have speculated on what kind of bond Jefferson and Hemings might have shared, Jefferson was her master. Under such conditions, consent was untenable. By placing this pairing at the center of the painting, Colbert urges viewers to question their own understanding of slavery and its legacies. The other elements in the painting reinforce this spur. Clowns mingle with infant minstrel caricatures. A boll of cotton hovers above an army figurine. Figures fade in and out of view. The phrase "Fried Chicken" appears in the background; its hot pink capital letters resemble the kind of neon signage typically seen in urban, fast food establishments across the U.S. Taken together, the elements of *Land of Fake Believe* coalesce into a colonial fever dream.

In addition to his paintings, Colbert's sculptural installations and video works also combine familiar and found imagery from everyday ephemera, U.S. history, and popular media. In *Packaging of a Race*, an ongoing work that morphs and adapts depending on where it is installed, Colbert uses found images and materials to reconsider the way people look at and imagine Black life in the past and present. Wheat pasted images drawn from twentieth-century American popular culture, many of which are violent and disturbing, wrap around shipping barrels stacked in columns of various heights. The subject matter of the images, along with the intermix of ephemera and solid containers fabricated to store and transport fragile or bulk materials, produces a tension between decay and durability, a metaphor for the Black American experience. As a result, *Packaging of a Race* reveals a composite view of Black social life that amplifies how U.S. public media, from printed matter to photography to film, constructs and circulates reductive representations of Blackness then and now.

Colbert's video collages further examine the intersection of race, education, and class in the U.S. One such work made for his 2020 exhibition at Biggs Museum of Art in Dover, Delaware interweaves mid-twentieth-century material culture artifacts and home video footage from the artist's personal collection. Colbert has an affinity for collecting old things, and he sees his immersive installations as more mature version of his paintings. Projected onto the walls of a fabricated schoolhouse, images of African American children appear as marginal subjects performing mundane activities. They board school buses and pose for photographs;

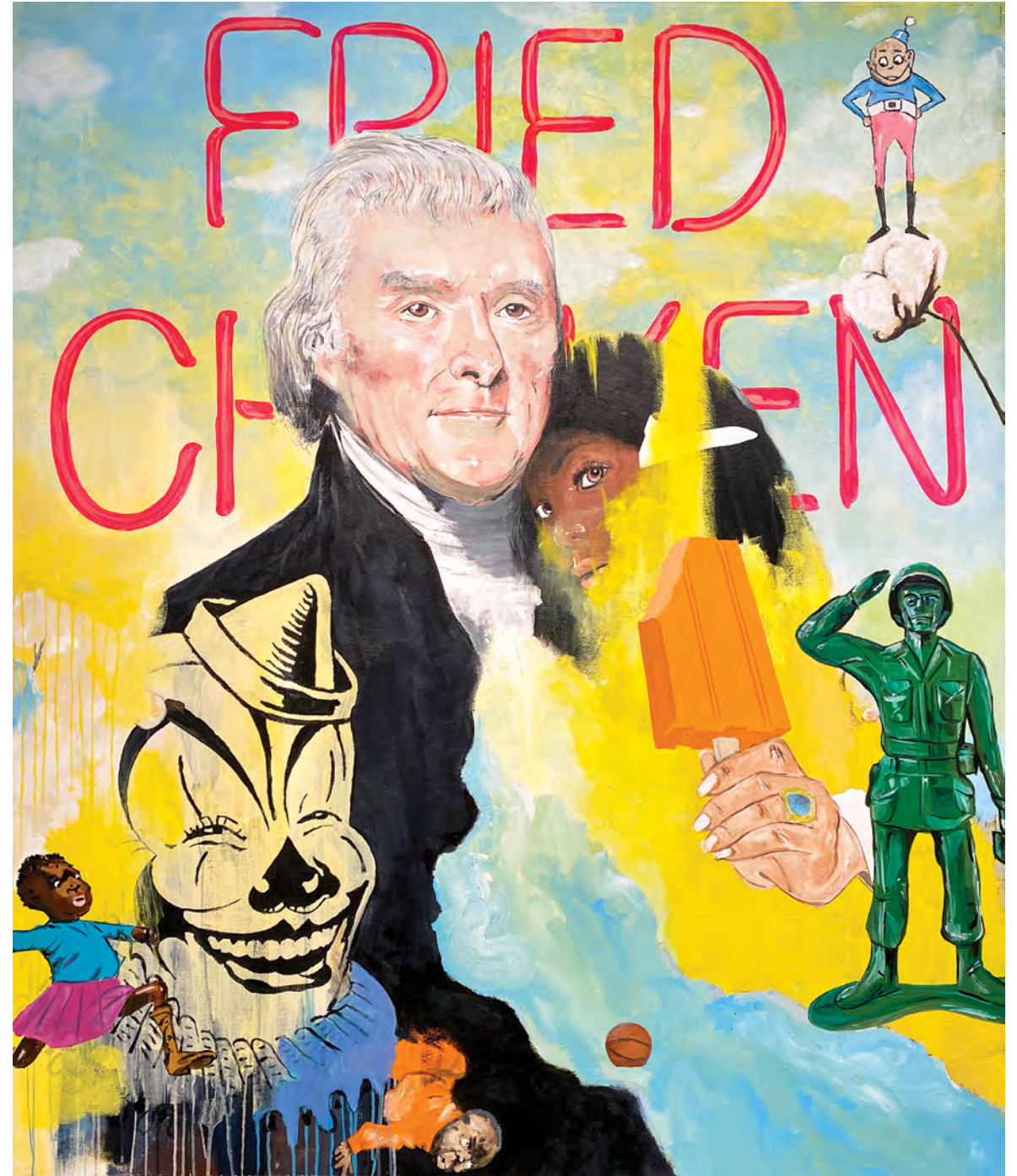
elsewhere, anonymous faces peer at the camera. The art of the blur resurfaces here, in the editing and visual effects—slow motion, overlays—as well as in the grainy quality of the found footage. Other images, such as watercolor illustrations appropriated from the popular children's book, *Dick and Jane*, are more familiar. Known for its simple narratives and whole-word vocabularies, the *Dick and Jane* series first appeared in 1930. Thirty-five years later, a year after the Civil Rights Act, *Dick and Jane* featured its first African American characters. In remixing these seemingly divergent images, Colbert crafts a melancholy moving picture of Black life that mirrors the slowness of social change.

Moving and still images, especially those seen on television and in popular culture, are major influences for Colbert. Prompted by his three older sisters' monopoly of the household television, the artist turned to drawing as a child to pass the time. These initial doodles featured sports figures, cartoon characters, action heroes, and astrodomes, eventually evolving into collages comprised of images sourced from *Ebony Magazine* and *Jet Magazine*. Since 1945 and 1951 respectively, both *Ebony* and *Jet* have focused their news, culture, and entertainment coverage on the lifestyles and accomplishments of influential Black figures, fashion, beauty, and politics. This type of representation matters to Colbert and has impacted his career choices. He majored in graphic design in college, and the advertising references and pop elements in his work speak to his design training as well as his childhood interests and influences. But Colbert turned to visual art because of the freedom of expression if offered as a reprieve from the corporate demands and whiteness of the design world. For his 1993 undergraduate thesis show at Frostburg State University, he created a suite of paintings addressing the Los Angeles uprisings that erupted after the police officers that attacked Rodney King were acquitted. With *Dark Secrets & White Lies*, Colbert continues to investigate art's relationship to historical recovery and social justice. The imagery in the seven paintings is humorous and playful, yet the subject matter is serious. By picturing suppressed histories in new and surprising ways, Colbert invites viewers to acknowledge society's ills and to consider how and where they, as individuals, might change the collective narrative.

Dr. Tiffany E. Barber is a nationally and internationally recognized scholar, curator, and critic whose writing and expert commentary has appeared in top-tier academic journals, popular media outlets, and award-winning documentaries. Her work, which spans abstraction, dance, fashion, feminism, and the ethics of representation, focuses on artists of the Black diaspora working in the United States and the broader Atlantic world. Her latest curatorial project, a virtual, multimedia exhibition for Google Arts and Culture, examines the value of Afrofuturism in times of crisis.

Dr. Barber is Assistant Professor of Africana Studies and Art History at the University of Delaware as well as curator-in-residence at The Delaware Contemporary. She has completed fellowships at ArtTable, the Delaware Art Museum, and the University of Virginia's Carter G. Woodson Institute for African-American and African Studies. During the 2021-2022 academic year, Dr. Barber was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Getty Research Institute where she worked on completing her first book.

Land of Fake Believe, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches



Why Does the White Man's Ice Always Seem Colder, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 62 x 62 inches



"Night" Clubber Lang, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 inches



The Parting Gifts from the Long Boat Ride, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches



The Revolving Door of Generational Racism, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 62 x 62 inches







Using Balls to Break the Glass Ceiling, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 18 inches





Billy Colbert is a Philadelphia-based artist, who has been active in the Baltimore and Washington D.C. arts communities for three decades. Originally from Baltimore, he attended Frostburg State University to earn a BS in Graphic Design and attended in the MFA Painting Program at the University of Delaware on a Presidential Fellowship. He has had solo museum exhibitions at the Biggs Museum of Art in Dover Delaware The Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts, Wilmington, DE; and The African American Museum in Dallas, Texas. He has mounted thirty solo gallery exhibitions most recently at Par Projects, Cincinnati, OH; Vivid Gallery, Washington, D.C.; and Delaware State University, Dover, DE. He has participated in numerous group exhibitions at venues including Napoleon, Philadelphia, PA as well as; George Mason University, The National Academy of Sciences, and the Museum of Contemporary art, all in Washington, D.C. Colbert won Best of Show in the Carol Harris Simms National Black Art Competition at the African American Museum preceding his solo exhibition there.

His work has appeared in Art News, the Washington Post, Baltimore City Paper, and the Dallas Morning News. He is active in his communities serving on the boards of two Washington D.C. arts organizations – Transformer as well as International Arts and Artist - which aim to create opportunities for young artists across cultures. He has curated numerous exhibitions and executed many public commissions including an ambitious mural of John Thompson in Washington D.C. Colbert's paintings are held in numerous private and public collections. He has owned and directed two art galleries - Hyphen in Washington, D.C. and Cubicle Ten Gallery in Baltimore, MD, as well as graphic design businesses. Colbert is currently an Associate Professor of New Media at Delaware State University.

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Gallery Director and Curator: Matthew Neil Gehring

Essay by Dr. Tiffany Barber

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