

*Aaron Coleman: True and Livin'*

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Review by Aaron Ruiz for phICA

Images courtesy of Mesa Contemporary Arts Museum

As I walked toward the North Gallery there was an installation on my left, which at the time I was not aware is part of Aaron Coleman's exhibition. This was an American flag, constructed with fencing and nails, with a fabric Pan-African flag intertwined. Nearing the showcase entrance, it is important to take a moment and view Coleman's installation just outside



the North Gallery. There is no placard, however, this installation serves as a vestibule for someone about to enter. Once close enough, I realized this was not a religious stance and not a black vs. white statement. Or, maybe it was. What I kept in mind was the liquid effects, stark contrast, and the book was Darwin's, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the*

*Struggle for Life.*

After entering, I directed my focus on his works aligning the exhibition's walls, figuring I'll circle back and finish with the three fairly large installations. It is important to share I do not



read the artist's statement until after. In fact, the least I know the better. Originally just a personal quirk, I now find this reinforces my focus on the art with better scrutiny. In addition, helps me gauge how the artist effectively communicates his message. Looking through Coleman's wall pieces, some key similarities stand out. The contrast of black and white, thick coats of paint (borderline impasto), and a Darwinian theme. Not just Darwin the evolution theorist, but also how we view

Darwin today as evolution's theory not fully

developed. The use of retro era coloring book pages supports my initial feeling of somebody's childhood memories. The thick application of white and black cover these pages, leaving only the original illustration outlines and a few words, all of which are a browning from oxidation.

Under the paint is a rough form of decoupage, most of which are commonly recognized as an African pattern. It is these patterns, the contrast of black and white, combined with the few remaining words highlighting the two colors I see a suggestion. However, there are additional factors that hit me and suggest the colors are factors, not the concern. There is a new color, brown spelling words and outlining illustrations, but it's not an applied medium. This brown is just a byproduct from oxidation, one of the words not painted over in the original coloring book. The coloring book directs the child to color the bird black, and the snow white. The coloring book tells its reader the geese had white bands, black tails, and black feet. There is no hate

towards, or acknowledgment of brown on some of them. No, “let me guide you, child”, or even “I hate you, child”. It reminded me of being nothing, why being ignored is worse than being hated. To be hated, one is at least recognized. One other observation goes back to the African patterns on most. Because, there are a few with patterns resembling colonial damask fabric and organic pattern. And it is present on the pages that present brown as a variation or a result of reproduction. The page says to color the butterfly’s body brown, and another says brown is one of the four kinds of flowers. Brown is separated, but at least recognized.



Assuming, and later confirming Coleman is biracial, his message is clear. Like a child’s voice, tends to go unheard. There has always been one or the other. I do not recall a focus ever placed on mixed race, other than someone’s parents will be mad if mixed babies arrive. Overall, I don’t know if this was childhood experience, ongoing feelings, or fears of bringing a child into this world. I do see a pull towards black empathy, but not feeling worthy of that feeling. I also see white traditions, but not a true feeling of welcome, or accepted like those who are all white.

Now, this was my interpretation and I have had correspondence with Mr. Coleman since. While was on the right track, his chosen symbols are fascinating. A few being the oxidized paper is his skin, and the two colors of black and white have covered the majority. Another attribute is

the thick paint, which he applies on the initial layer and it represents scars. His statement is like the exhibition in that its powerful, but not loud. Nature's wildlife and foliage are considered by some to be what the word "peaceful" brings to mind. Having said this, his presentation is creative and maintains focus, and leaves a space for reflection. He communicates his story well, using universally known imagery, color and other attributes.

The three installations had a central theme of their own. They were more direct and captured African-American injustice in a strong manner, but without the retaliation of hate. Each invoked a different event I recall learning about during various stages of my life. The first resembled a colonial theme, like the early days of slave trade. The deep orange paint applied above the feet gave a feeling of sundown, but the shackles say the man would not be going home. The second had



a pair of running shoes. Although reminded of John Carlos and Tommie Smith's raised fists during the 1968 Olympics, the blue line set the tension even higher. The inference to police order brings an unsettling prediction and this blue line had me considering what must have transpired following the two Olympians silent protest. The last installation was the most powerful, as I immediately thought about Rubin "The Hurricane" Carter. A career top-ranked boxer, Carter was admired by men and women of all color. That all changed in June of 1966. Carter would spend

the next two decades at Rahway State Prison, as he and friend John Artis were convicted of triple homicide. They were released in November of 1985 as the United States District Court granted a writ of habeas corpus, citing prosecution used racism over reason. It can be viewed from the front or back, but his knees buried in the ground and bare feet exposed feels like he is being knocked back 200 years. The same fencing was used in all three works and an attribute the artist uses to reflect upper-middle class America.

Again, this is what I recalled. Mr. Coleman's message, while the subject remains the same, came from a perspective I had not realized. According to Coleman, his message comes from not only historical, but current events, personal experience and family history. As powerful all three are, I find it fascinating he does not show the presence of violence. Not only is a black man being treated unfairly, there is no struggle from them. This exhibition draws a greater amount of respect than others I have visited. It is not like the ones we often see today, expressing opinions on matters occupying the headlines of today's society. It does not garner recognition as supporter for the #ME TOO movement, nor does it feed the polarized stances of our now politically divided communities. Instead, Coleman brings to light a matter many have never considered. It is a struggle many of our children continue to experience in our country. Not because society has defined them one way or the other, but because society has never recognized the question is being asked.

