

The Truisms of Robert Colescott by Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins

July 22, 2013

In *The Legacy of the Black Arts Movement*, author Trey Ellis suggests that the New Breed of Black artists, writers and critics advanced a broad range of aesthetic positions that pointed to an awareness and acceptance of their "cultural mulatto" status and recognized their immersion in and indebtedness to "a multi-racial mix of cultures."^[2] The New Breed Artists regularly employed popular culture as both a playground and a tool of empowerment, using highbrow and lowbrow references that were easily interpreted by all sectors of Black society. Ellis was particularly interested in the tensions these artists experienced between their competing desires to adhere to European and American aesthetic norms and to present an alternative view of Americans whose heritage included a history of enslavement and miscegenation. This double consciousness often invited a collision between content and style, but sometimes, as in the work of Robert Colescott, this twin consciousness became inextricably intertwined as it informed form and materiality.

Though it would be a stretch to characterize Robert Colescott as an active member of the Black Arts Movement, his work certainly exemplifies the notion of double consciousness. Born in Oakland, California in 1925, Colescott was educated in the public schools there and then attended and graduated college from the University of California, Berkeley. Colescott's visual arts foundation took shape in the context of the San Francisco Bay Area and, more broadly, the Pacific Rim. Thus, his work can be associated with that of West Coast expressionists David Park and Elmer Bischoff, as well as with Robert Crumb's countercultural comics. Colescott's expert ability to mimic the tropes of European and American art history was matched by a singular gift for challenging and subverting modern art's appropriations of African sources through sardonic comic relief and a unique melding of form and content. This historic moment in Black visual art production had far-reaching influence in the global art world. Colescott's imaging of the double consciousness of Black Americans paved the way for Black artists from Sanford Biggers, Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker, Ellen Gallagher, the Cuban artist Elio Rodriguez, to an explosion of artists such as Mickalene Thomas and Xavier Simmon—and non-Black artists alike, and his comic satires have been hailed as precursors to provocative animated series like *The Family Guy* and *South Park*. In a 1991 interview, artist David Hammons admirably noted Colescott's unusual use of himself as a subject in his work— rather than making biographical art about himself, Colescott entered the flow of life by putting himself in a "position of interaction



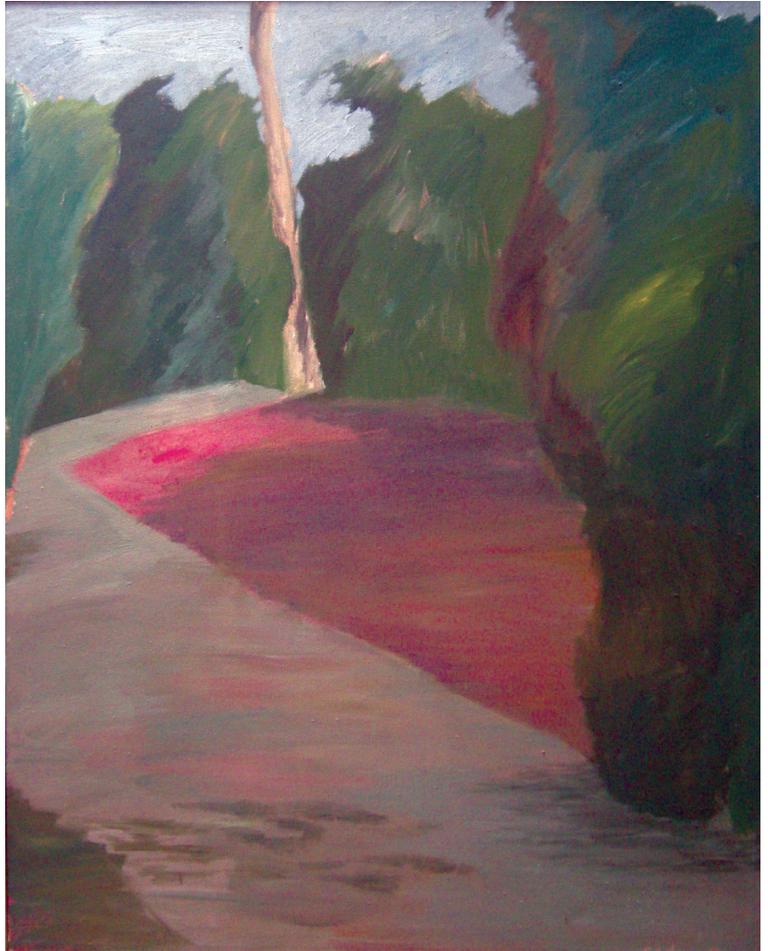
Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder, 1979.

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and contact" with clear abandonment [3] (Fig. 1) *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder*, 1979. The insertion of self-as-subject and considerations of what constitutes beauty, are troupes adopted by Colescott's younger adherents, especially in photographically based artworks and this should be remembered when considering that Colescott was literally out there by himself.

Colescott's family was aware—and accepting—of what Ellis would term their "cultural mulatto" status. Recognizing their immersion in and indebtedness to a diverse cross-section of cultures, Colescott's family educated him at a young age about the pervasiveness and effects of racism in the arts. His mother, Lidia Kenner Hutton, was a teacher who also played the piano, and his father, was a classically trained violinist who was unable to pursue music professionally and was forced instead to work as a chef and waiter on the Southern Pacific Railroad. Aside from waiting at dinner tables on the train, he'd only occasionally pick up jobs playing jazz. Colescott recalled, "I think he would have loved to have played in the symphony. A lot of the guys on the railroad were over qualified, but it was the job available to Black men. You bet I sensed disappointment in him." [4]

Colescott's father fought in France in the 92nd Division, a Black Army unit, during WWI. Upon returning to his home in New Orleans, he resumed his old job with the railroad until 1919, when he moved his family west to Oakland, California, the end of the rail line for the Southern Pacific Railway Company. Thinking of his parents making the cross-country move, Colescott noted, "They were part of that first move, that first migration. They'd both been educated in segregated schools. They both went to Black schools in New Orleans. My parents had changed their whole lifestyle and way of life and [re]located where we had access to the University of California [UC Berkeley]." [5] Colescott's family was part of the growing Black middle class in Oakland. His father's railroad job allowed the family, like many others, to put money aside for the children to go to college. Attending college was—and continues to be—a required family duty among many upper middle-class Black families.



Paul Cézanne, *Landscape with Pathway* (c. 1950s)

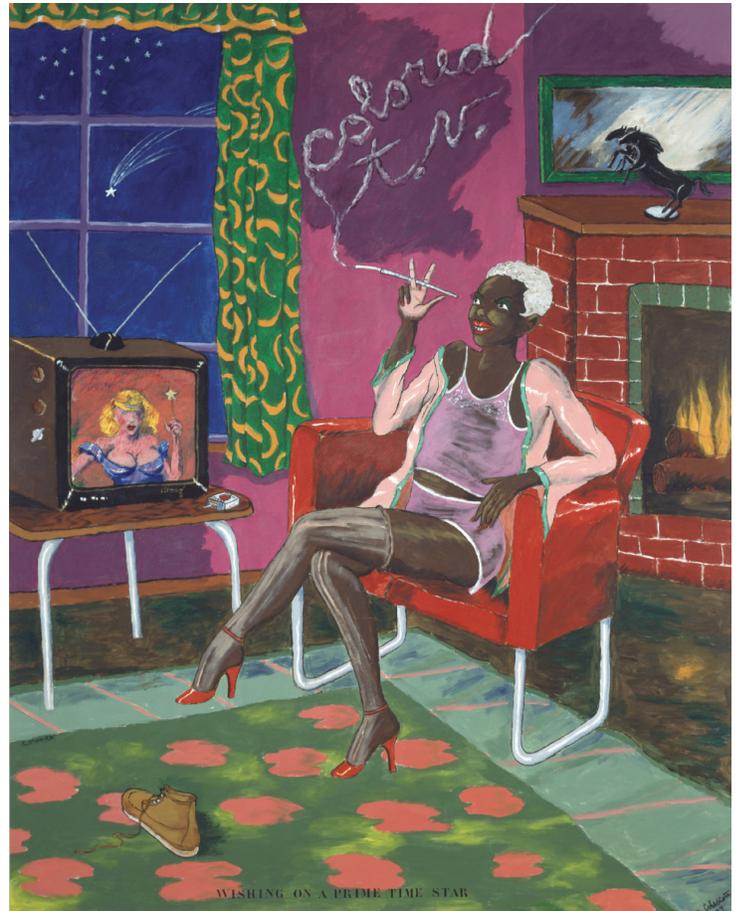
When one interviewer, Paul Karlstrom, remarked during an interview with Colescott that his parents "[sound] typically American in many respects," Colescott was quick with a retort. "Probably even closer to the mark is the Chinese and Japanese kids, you know," he said. "That's probably closer, for an apt comparison." [6] In correcting the interviewer, Colescott highlighted that living on the West Coast of California meant that Black children and their parents interacted regularly with an ethnic mix of immigrants from Pacific Rim countries. A significant Chinese population had flourished in the Bay Area since the Gold Rush days, when Chinese boarding houses were among the few establishments where Black miners could find lodging. Following the Gold Rush, Japanese, Pilipino and Black neighborhoods intermingled or were in close proximity to each other in the urban areas of San Francisco, Berkeley, and Los Angeles. Likewise, in the enclaves of Long Beach and Sacramento—and later, in San Jose— Mexican, Samoan, Tongan, and Vietnamese communities, though insular, were populated with children who socialized with each other on a day-to-day basis. [7]

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Colescott and his extended family were members of a fair-skinned migratory group of New Orleanians, some of whom chose to live as *passé blanc* (passing as white). Though Robert Colescott never attempted to pass as white, he possessed a double consciousness with respect to European culture that was specifically French in orientation. Many migrants from this group who settled around Los Angeles area and in the San Francisco Bay Area spoke a French Creole language and continued to do so within their 8 community for most of their lives.[8]

As a child, Colescott met artist Sargent Claude Johnson, a friend of his father's from their work together on the railroad. Although Johnson was from Boston, his wife came from New Orleans, like the Colescotts. As an artist, Johnson's cultural context was not unlike other African Americans living in major California cities among immigrant communities. From 1937 to 1939 Johnson was active in the wpa/fap program in San Francisco. Typical of other progressive artists of the period who believed that art could not be separated from its social context, Johnson followed the lead of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, whose work encouraged class unity and glorified folk roots and peasant culture, and even made many trips to Mexico to examine murals and pre-Columbian art. When Johnson moved from Berkeley to North Beach in 1935, it was like expatriating from the US to an artist's community in Paris. Colescott, a playmate of Johnson's daughter Pearl, remembered his parents discussing Johnson's move and the slight scandal it caused in their community. Johnson was the first artist Colescott ever met,[9] and when visiting Johnson's home to play with Pearl, he often noticed the artist working in clay in the bedroom. "I think he went on the government's Works Projects Administration during the Depression; that's how he got off the railroad. It's a memory, slightly dim, because I was little, six or seven, maybe eight, when we knew him," Colescott recalled.[10] In North Beach, Johnson frequented the bars and cafes, lived a bohemian life free of his wife and daughter, associated with artists, musicians, and writers, exhibited in the local City Lights Bookstore, and led the charmed life of an artist, even if it did border on poverty. Johnson, along with a handful of other Black artists working in California—including Thelma Johnson Streat, Lester Mathews, and Harlan Jackson—was smitten with Modernism, an ideology that encouraged artists to explore, stretch boundaries, learn and be of the world, and embrace diversity. These artists were interested in experimenting with art forms from non-European cultures and pushing beyond classical traditions. For example, Thelma Johnson Streat was a dancer and designer/painter fascinated with Polynesian and Pacific Northwest Native American dance forms and imagery. She and her husband traveled to Hawaii, Mexico, and Canada to study indigenous dance and to promote the creative expressions of native inhabitants to a wider audience.[11] Harlan Jackson's work references Haitian sculptural forms and culture, while—as noted by John Bowles—Johnson's early busts of children incorporate Asian subject matter and stylistic references. Throughout his career, Johnson familiarized himself with African, Hispanic, and Japanese art forms, revisiting these various influences over the years in the many phases of his works. At the end of his life, his affection for eastern sensibilities took on a more introspective and spiritual direction.

Streat, Jackson and Johnson were able to interface with other cultures through their involvement with Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project funding, travel awards to study art forms in other countries, and by availing themselves



The Colored TV, 1977

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to exhibitions at local museums. The wpa also brought Black artists together, allowing them to collaborate on projects. At the age of eleven, Colescott was also introduced to the murals of Diego Rivera during Rivera's stay in San Francisco while he was painting the Pan American Unity mural in 1938 at Treasure Island for the Golden Gate International Exhibition (1939-1940). "I saw Rivera himself on Treasure Island as he was working on a mural. He was up on the scaffold, just like the image of him in his San Francisco Art Institute murals. And Frieda [Kahlo] was down below grinding pigment. I was eleven.[12] I could sense the strength in it, even as an eleven-year-old kid. The longer I am around, the more important he looms in my work." [13] Later, as an art student, he encountered Rivera's *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City* (1931) at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) where Sargent Johnson had also taken courses. Like Rivera, Johnson also had a work on display at the Golden Gate International Exhibition. *Incas on Llamas*, a major sculpture, sat at the entry of the exhibition, adjacent to the Mexican Pavilion.

After graduating from high school, Colescott followed in his father's footsteps and enlisted in the Army in 1942 at the age of seventeen for four years. He was stationed in the Pacific and experienced combat in France. Upon his return to Oakland in 1946, he enrolled in San Francisco State University, where he began preparing himself for a career in international relations, political science, and economics. A history buff, Colescott saw himself as part of a wider world, especially since he had experienced several years in France and become engaged in international issues. He was disappointed to discover that his college counselor—like so many other high school and college counselors for Black students—advised against pursuing a career in the diplomatic corps. "And so a person of color really could not aspire to working for the government overseas," explained Colescott.[14]

Colescott's first art professor, Ed Corbett, encouraged him to pursue painting. Although he had never considered pursuing painting as a career or vocation, his hopes for a diplomatic career were crushed, so he decided to develop his childhood hobby. He later remembered thinking to himself, "Well, I really enjoy art so why don't you just focus on that." [15] Colescott took an elective art course from Ed Corbett and began to seriously consider becoming an artist. His interest in travel and his engagement with international issues were apparent in his paintings. In addition to his professor, Colescott continued to be supported by Sargent Johnson, who by that time was a well-regarded artist in the San Francisco Bay Area with his work in the collections of the de Young Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and with several Harmon Foundation exhibitions in New York under his belt. With Johnson's blessings, Colescott transferred to the University of California, Berkeley, where his older brother, Warrington, was also an art student. In those days, according to Colescott, art majors were mostly focused on painting.

The French painter Fernand Léger lived in the Bay Area during WWII and taught at Mills College in Oakland, until he returned to France after the war in 1945 just before Colescott returned to the Bay Area in 1946. In 1949, after graduation, Colescott wanted to return to Paris. He asked one of his instructors at UC Berkeley, James McCray, where he could go for more



A Taste of Gumbo, 1990

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advanced study in painting, and McCray told him that Léger was taking new students. With benefits from the GI Bill, Colescott left for Paris to study with the Léger in his Paris studio. The two artists were at odds aesthetically—Léger's approach was figurative, while Colescott had embraced abstraction at Berkeley, where Clyfford Still was a major force. Adamant that abstraction fails to communicate ideas to people, Léger initiated a struggle within Colescott, who found himself caught in conflict between the figurative and the abstract. Recalling Léger, Colescott said:

"He didn't think that abstract work had enough meaning and enough significance for his people [the celebration of ordinary people and their rights as French citizens to the pursuit of *liberte, egalite, and fraternite*. And so he encouraged me to go back to the figure and give up abstraction as such.[16] So I figured, well, I'm just going to start working from the figure so I can get his attention. One way or another, I've been working with a figure ever since." [17]



Sunday Afternoon with Joaquin Murietta, 1980

When Colescott was accepted into UC Berkeley's graduate painting program, Léger's admonitions against abstraction and encouragement to focus on the figure ran contrary to the prevailing current at Berkeley where Sam Francis, Jay DeFeo, and others were fully committed to Abstract Expressionism. Colescott, believing too much was left out with Abstract Expressionism, felt more connected to classic styles of painting. "And that was the beginnings of wanting to connect with historical painting," observed Colescott. "And I'm still doing it. And I'm still working on it and I still haven't got it right." [18] Instead of focusing on Abstract Expressionism and figurative realism, Colescott spent his time in graduate school calling upon his French sensibilities and investigating the compositional structures and geometric forms that Paul Cézanne exhibited in his 1907 retrospective at the Salon d'Automne. These structures had also influenced Léger's early paintings. Colescott felt that most of his professors at UC Berkeley, because they were engulfed in Abstract Expressionism, had a narrow and faux academic idea of Cézanne's works— their interpretations were generally, "fake academic interpretations that concentrated on a decorative approach to Cézanne's work." [19] Colescott worked from the model and personalized what he learned from his examination of Cézanne's works. Reflecting on the work he was making at that time, Colescott explained, "I put together these eclectic paintings. And I got a certain amount of encouragement. I kind of blew apart abstract painting and put it back together again." [20] Colescott's decision to investigate historical painting traditions illustrates Ellis' analysis of the New Breed of artists; this artistic choice points to an awareness and acceptance of a "cultural mulatto" status informed by a diverse, multi-racial mix of ethnic and historical influences.

After graduate school, in 1951 Colescott moved to the Pacific Northwest. By 1955 he had established a distinctive painting style, but he had difficulty finding a college-level teaching job. Instead, he taught art in junior high school in Seattle for ten years, feeling like "a mail-order bride, shipped to Seattle," in his words. [21]

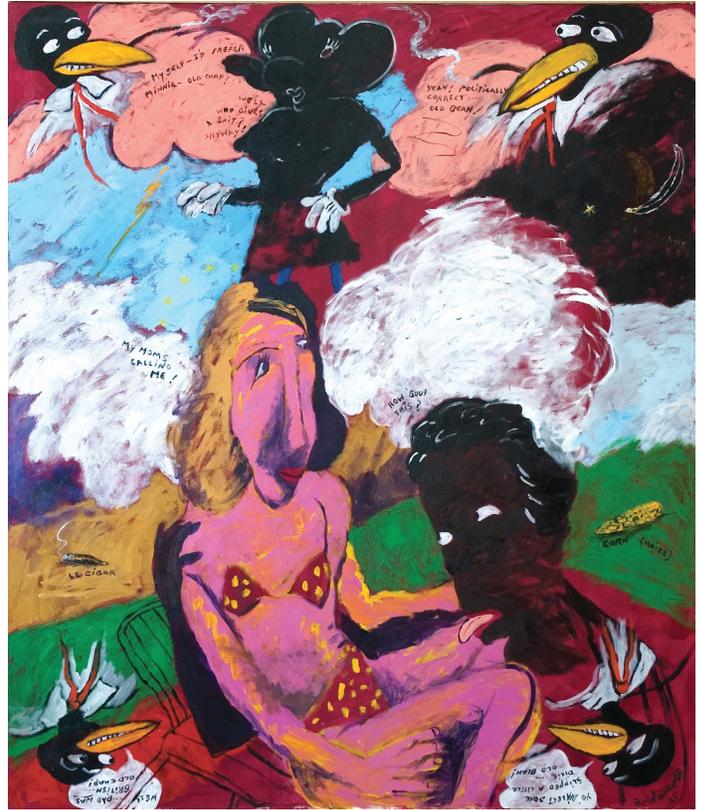
"My first teaching job was seventh grade, up in Seattle," he says. "The one thing I really knew was that I was not a teacher, I was an artist, and that the only difference was that the artist does the work. So I would come home from teaching and become like Superman going into the phone booth: I would take off my suit and tie, put on my jeans and my beret and my sandals.

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After dinner I'd go down to my basement studio and paint until 2 and 3 in the morning. I accepted the fact that I taught, but I wouldn't accept the fact of being a teacher....I wanted to solve the problems of paint. I kept trying to learn how to use my brush with some sense of strength and energy and personality, and so I painted all kinds of things: I painted figures, I painted still lifes, I painted flowers, I painted 22 landscapes. I just painted everything." [22]

Regina Hackett, former art critic for the Seattle Post Intelligencer, interviewed Colescott in 2008. She wrote:

"For most of his career, being black in the art world was like riding a bicycle in a swimming pool. No matter how good the swimmer, it's tough doing laps on a bike. When the issue came up at all, curators, dealers, collectors and critics could be counted on to affirm their high-minded commitment to quality in art, regardless of the race or sex of the maker. [...] And yet in overwhelming numbers, the artists in the forefront continued to be white males. White females came next and people of color far in the rear. Even though white is no longer always right in art circles, Colescott made his reputation before that change. What's more, he achieved a position in New York during a time when being from the West Coast was almost as bad as being black." [23]



Summertime, 1995

Seattle proved fruitful for Colescott; it was the place where his ideas on figuration jelled. Colescott continued to explore the style of Cézanne, painting landscapes such as (Fig. 2) *Landscape with Pathway* (c. 1950s) in earth tones typical of the Pacific Northwest environment and also explored Edgar Degas' works, specifically his (Fig. 3) *Little Ballerina*, 1958 (seemingly after Edgar Degas' controversial *The Little Fourteen-Year Old Dancer*, 1879-70, also known as *The Little Ballerina* or *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*)—but for the sly and sardonic Colescott, his *Little Ballerina* isn't little or even young at all, she is a slumped shouldered aging ballerina. We know that Colescott seemed to thrive on controversy throughout his art career and his "ballerina" is an early cue to Colescott's revealing imperfections not only on the physical body and ideas of beauty but also on the imperfections of society in general. The initial reviews of Degas' dancer exclaimed that the three-foot sculpture exhibited "extraordinary reality" calling the work "a real masterpiece"...."One of the greatest works of art since the dynasties of the Nile." [24] *The Little Dancer* with the fabric tutu and wig was exhibited in in the Louvre in a glass case like Egyptian sculptures so visitors easily made associations with Egyptian sculptures that also had wore. But the real controversy of the young dancer was not lost on Colescott, an avid reader about French painting. The model for the sculpture was a dancer from the Paris Opera, Marie van Goethem, and typically those dancers came from the humble households. Unfortunately, these young girls were prey as sexual partners by rich dandies that frequently led them into lives of prostitution. So for many museum visitors, the young girl represents the quintessential poised ballerina but the undergirding of her narrative that Colescott presents in his *Little Ballerina* is someone who has been a part of the sex trade, now worn out and a depraved woman. [25] Another early cue to Colescott's development is in (Fig. 4) *Untitled (Nudes)*, from the early 1960s, one of the earliest paintings, if not the earliest, in which Colescott painted Black and White female nudes in the same composition—a combination that he would repeat throughout his career. At this time he also painted still-lifes, the usual tables with sparse objects, indicative of studies in light and shadow. In one painting from this period, a piece of watermelon sits alone on a tabletop except for a striped piece of cloth. Patterned fabrics, especially checkerboard patterns, were also a recurring element in Colescott's paintings. Could this allude to a racially checkered past? Colescott delighted in embedding visual cues in his paintings that were personal to

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him but could also be suggestive to other Black people familiar with speaking in codes. Despite its conventional composition, *Dixie Belle*, ca. 1960, illustrates an early tendency towards irony and satire that was to explode in Colescott's work a decade later and continue throughout his career. In an interview years later he quipped, "It's the satire that kills the serpent you know." [26]

While *Dixie Belle* is one of many of Colescott's still-lives that reveal his indebtedness to Bay Area Abstraction in the style of Elmer Bischoff and David Park, the use of the venetian red background in the (Fig. 5) *Untitled (Red wall, flower on table)* (ca. 1950s) would become the ground for Colescott's paintings for the rest of his life—he cleverly combined this classical technique with racially and sexually charged content. He had several one-person exhibitions in Seattle, with the earliest ones at the Miller Pollard Gallery in 1953 and 1954, and at the Duzanne Gallery in 1957, where *Journal Art* editor Louise Aaron used the term "radiant" to describe his paintings. [27] Colescott said, "I had the idea of the moment. I worked it out in Seattle and it took me places." [28] A portrait of a young Colescott shows him holding one of the figurative paintings he was known for during his Pacific Northwest period, in preparation for his show at Seattle's Duzanne Gallery.

Colescott was ultimately hired by the art department at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, to teach painting and drawing. He moved with his second wife, potter Sally Dennett, and his two sons to Portland, where the family remained for four years as Colescott established his career and continued to be exhibited in solo and group exhibitions. In 1961 he began a long relationship with Arlene Schnitzer of the Fountain Gallery of Art, the site of his first solo show in Portland. Schnitzer discovered Colescott through painters Carl and Hilda Morris. [29] Colescott also had solo shows at the Portland Art Museum and participated in their Pacific Coast Biennial exhibition as well. His inclusion in a show in Victoria, British Columbia in 1965 marked his entry into the international art world.

In Oregon, he began to develop the cartoon-like figurative style of his childhood drawings. When he was young, his parents encouraged his love of drawing cartoons. "I drew Toots and Caspar and the Katzenjammers a lot," he said. [30] He re-envisioned Mickey Mouse as a Black character and painted him saying "Hi black folks!" [31] Perceptive about stereotypes at a young age, he recognized that these early American cartoons were just minstrel figures, many of them in blackface, perpetuating derogatory stereotypes of Black people to young audiences. These cartoons merged with his Abstract Expressionist and figurative sensibilities, as well as with his astute interest in Black world history and international affairs. Mickey Mouse would reappear in Colescott's later compositions, in such works as *Ode to Joy (European Anthem)*, 1997.

A 1964 fellowship to study and teach at the American Research Center in Cairo took Colescott to Egypt just as his cartoon-like figurative style began to take shape. "Walking down the street in Cairo was to be walking among people like myself. Everybody—the president of the country and on down—was a person of color," he remembered. [32] During his visit, Colescott was enormously impacted by Egyptian art. "I came into contact with the narrative form because Egyptian art had a strong narrative sense to it; it was really important to tell a story. And the sense of monumentality that Léger kept trying to



Café au Lait au Lit, 1974

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poke at me was so well-illustrated in Egyptian sculpture and architecture that it kind of put the pieces together." [33] The Pharaonic tomb paintings and friezes also spoke to Colescott, who observed, "I got in touch with the importance of narrative, which I didn't see much of in modern painting." [34] The appointment ended after one year, but Colescott stayed in Egypt and became the first artist-in-residence at the American University in Cairo." [35] While there, he and his wife started a daycare center in Maadi, a suburb of Cairo. [36]

The profound effect that the Pharaonic narratives of racially mixed and multicolored people from Egypt and ancient Nubia had on Colescott cannot be overstated. Most of his attention was focused on the Valley of the Queens, the ancient female Egyptian rulers. The warm colors of the Egyptian sand and the vivid, gold-threaded clothes of the Egyptians crept into his paintings. This new color palette and rhythmic patterning connected him to the bustling city of Cairo, and inspired him to embrace the gestural linear movement that he had first explored with Churi Obata, a Japanese master printmaker in Berkeley. "I began to see a whole other way of looking at art without the Western European tradition. I realized, then, that I could not serve two masters. More than anything else, Egypt submerged me in my non-European identity. It freed me to be myself, as I am. I felt at home there," Colescott explained in an interview for the catalog from a 2007 exhibition of his work.

In Egypt, he finally understood that his connection with Léger was located not just in an emphasis on the figure but also in a desire to focus on the stories and lives of ordinary people who had risen above the odds to attain the American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that was supposedly ordained by the Declaration of Independence for all American citizens. Throughout his career, Colescott poked holes in that famous founding document, showing how it only worked for some American citizens and failed so many others.

Colescott and his family left Egypt before the outbreak of the Six-Day War, but the experience had a lasting effect on him. "I thought, well, here's a little corner for me. When I got back to Paris in 1966, believe me, it was the museums with 19th-century history painting that I hung out in," he recalled. [37] Hanging out in the museums offered Colescott opportunities to read deeply into many of the historical paintings and to conceptualize how he might use such narratives to reclaim and paint his own history—one based on truth rather than idealism and betrayal.

Colescott flew from Paris to Portland for his first one-person show in Portland at the Fountain Gallery of Art. Fifty-four paintings and drawings—in the vein of his *Valley of the Queens* series (1963-66) shown previously at the Portland Museum of Art— comprised the exhibition. He described the paintings as the "result of a moving personal experience in a certain place that evoked images based upon a very romantic idea: that this was a place where dwelt all these female spirits— where the Queens were buried, and where, according to their own ideas, they still lived." [38] (Fig. 6) *We Await Thee Valley of the Queens*, 1964. The paintings included the usual representations of Egyptian queens, but Colescott included Nubian queens as well, inserting an element of Blackness into the typical Egyptian art historical narrative that had traditionally separated Egypt from the rest of Africa. Of these early paintings, Colescott said he was concerned with "matching incongruous ideas, though



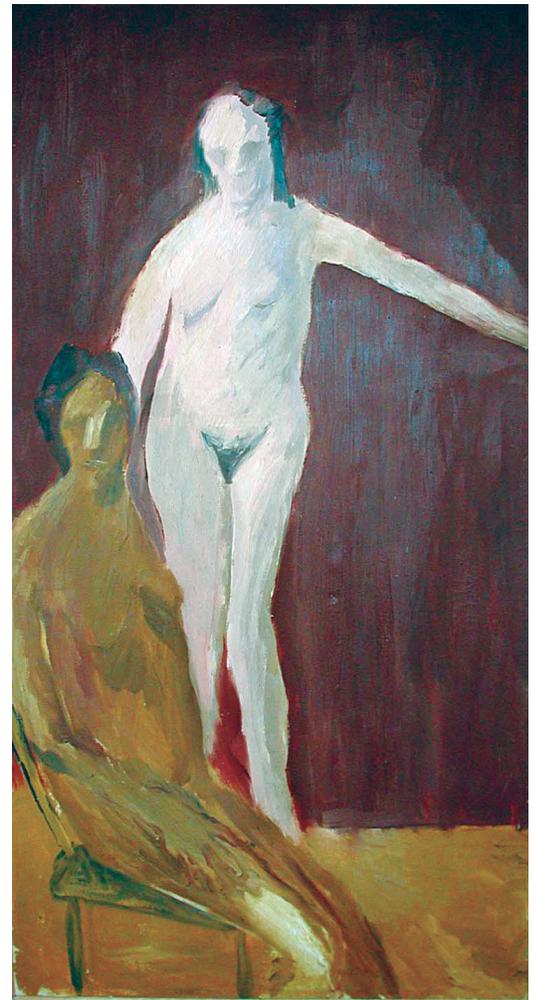
Ace of Spades, 1978

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there is different form and emphasis which might be somewhat more shocking because of the hyped-up color." The artist explained, "Color is only valid if it has to do with the idea. If clashing, color reinforces clashing ideas, clashing presences on the canvas—the quality of contemporary life. What started out to be a romantic statement about the world, [the] *Valley of the Queens* paintings end up an allegory of contemporary life." Recalling the effect of his time in Egypt on his work, Colescott noted:

"Even while still in Cairo, I had begun to realize that this romantic idea was beginning to extend itself into less romantic subjects that were more taken out of daily experience, people and situations I know—that the work was becoming everybody and every place, and the idea began to have a lot to do with everybody's discovery of their own fate, with the kind of conflict between our own consciousness of what it means to live and what it means to die. Then in thinking of those ideas, a ludicrous thing slips in, where our own idea of what it means to live or die becomes a contradictory and ludicrous image; then we get into the whole idea of absurdity of human relations. For example, the images become ludicrous drawings upon all kinds of things like graffiti, primitive art, cartoons—new imagery crept in to help support the idea of this ridiculous human state." [39]

Magic Window, ca. 1960s, is another interesting series of paintings exhibited at the Fountain Gallery. In the *Magic Window* paintings, Colescott forced a collection of related and unrelated narratives to coexist in a single picture plane, sharing the world of the canvas. Colescott's description of works and the few examples available on exhibition at Arlene Schnitzer's Fountain Gallery strongly recall the work of another Black artist, Bob Thompson, who was known for his fluid figurative appropriations of European master works, in which he often portrayed himself as a black bird or black nude within an art historical context. Most of the paintings in this show were figurative, except for a series of volcano landscapes in which Colescott concentrated his gaze on different views of a volcano in France, in the fashion of Cézanne's late Mont Sainte-Victoire series, 1904. The contours of the mountain rupture the space of the otherwise lightly rolling countryside. Discussing the obvious changes in his choice of subjects and painting style, Colescott observed at the time, "I paint in a long series, and now, I'm right in the middle of this one." [40]



Untitled (Nudes), from the early 1960s

Colescott originally planned to remain in Paris until the Egyptian war settled down. He visited Rome, where his brother Warrington was teaching. Returning to Paris, Colescott and his wife Sally decided to buy a five-acre farm in the Auvergne area of France to set up a summer school there for American pre-college students ranging from ages thirteen to eighteen. "We'll have painting, pottery, sculpture, and students up at the farm. And since the area is not far from the prehistoric caves, the Loire Valley and the Mediterranean, there will be some wonderful side trips," Colescott explained. "It's an area something like the Alps," he said of the mountainous region of Romanesque churches, castles, crumbling villages and lakes. [41] The Colescotts planned to maintain their home studios in Paris during the winters. It remains unclear to what extent these plans actually materialized; this was a joint husband-and-wife artistic adventure, but when the Colescotts returned to Portland in 1966, Robert Colescott returned as a changed man.

Colescott's friends noticed a dramatic change in his demeanor and his paintings. According to George Johanson, one of Colescott's artist friends in Portland, Colescott was known as charming, intelligent, and popular with women. "Yes, he was a

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rascal but an awfully nice guy. Maybe it was because those were the days before race was openly talked about. But nothing was ever mentioned. We didn't talk about his race. And he didn't talk about it," said Johanson.[42] His gallerist, Arlene Schnitzer noticed the change too—he looked different, his bushy mustache replaced by a pencil-thin mustache resembling that of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, causing Schnitzer to comment, "Bob, you look more Egyptian than the Egyptians," thereby introducing race to their conversation for the first time. [43] Colescott's moved away from his signature muted earth-tone compositions in favor of bright, almost straight-from-the-tube colors. "What it [Egypt] did to my sense of color is also interesting. I had been living in the Northwest, and my color had gotten grayer and grayer, greener and greener. When I went to Cairo, I found color again. Very bright, pure color. I think that the sense of ambiguity and mystery that a lot of the works of art represented has stuck with me in terms of what I do today.... My paintings coming out of that period were really quite poetic, and they were about spirits.... The paintings became abstract because the figures and the spirits of the dead did not necessarily stand on two feet, and so it encouraged me to be very liberal about the way I saw form, human form, and the environment. Elements could play off one another in almost any way because I was talking about a spirit world, where the body is secondary.... A lot of the works that I have been painting over the last 10 years have a lot to do with those idea—those poetic ideas about the Valley of Queens," said Colescott.



We Await Thee Valley of the Queens, 1964

He also mirrored classic European art in a different way, no longer following the techniques or styles of a nineteenth and early twentieth-century art canon, but smashing it and reconstructing, reconfiguring and redefining it in the context of his own empowered concept of being a Black man in a largely non-Black art world. He was thinking and painting differently, and by 1967, he left Portland and returned to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1968. It was different this time—he and his work were on another path. His second marriage ended in divorce. "When I returned in 1968, I could see the change," he said. "I was overwhelmed. My experience had been that you came back from Europe and the only Black people you would see in airports were people pushing a broom. Now they were demanding more, and that affected my painting. I felt like I had a lot of things to say.[44]"

Black Nationalism was in full swing, and abstraction was still the dominant art practice for many, but it was the Bay Area Figuration School where Colescott found his niche. It was during this time that he arrived at his most recognizable and raunchy figurative style, making paintings of intense ambiguity that subverted the art historical references he had studied and absorbed in French museums. This body of work offered confrontational images of Black people throughout world history. But this was also the era of the Vietnam War, in which many Black soldiers participated and died. In *Bye, Bye Miss American Pie*, 1971, Colescott, a war veteran himself, expressed his protest of the war. Here a nude blonde Miss America stands in front of a cloud-filled globe, her genitals covered with a slice of pie as a Black GI armed with a rifle aims his gun at a map of South and North Vietnam. It begs the question, what did these people of color do to him, and how will he be received, if he survives the war, when he returns to the US? Colescott himself knew the reality of fighting for one's country in a foreign land (as he, his father and brother did) only to come home to face segregation and racial injustices. How does one deal with that?

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Often criticized for his characterizations of female nudes, Colescott explained, "I've had women ask me when I'm lecturing, 'Why did you make her naked?' My answer is: because I'm painting in the grand tradition. The Egyptians painted nude women. African art is almost entirely nude women. And it's the grand tradition in Western art that I'm part of. A lot of things I think about women have to do with the female body. Take that away from me and what am I going to talk about?'[45]" In a 1988 interview with the *Houston Chronicle* Colescott explained his attraction to nude female forms further saying that he just wanted to paint a nude (many of his early watercolors from the 1950s and 60s were studies of nude female bodies). "I wanted to get rid of the burden of the idea and of the burden of humor. I wanted to get rid of the idea of costumes. What kind of shoes does she wear? What type of tie is good for him?...So I said, "OK. I'll do nudes.... Bathers are a good subject, I thought. Ever since the Romans, since the Egyptians, even. It was liberating. It became more of a formal problem. The brush stroke got looser....But on the way to the pool, the bathers got involved with stories and the painting became about identity and my idea of the first encounter between blacks and whites—the white man was the intruder....The whole thing was about standards of beauty in art, and physical standards of beauty. And the clash: the standards of the dominant culture and the things other cultures do to meet them."[46]



Dutiful Son, 1979

Colescott's penchant for irony was hinted at in his Degas-inspired *Little Ballerina*, but it came into full view after he became empowered by his Egyptian residency and found his voice in his paintings. Two pieces from this period are representative of his newly embraced satirical streak: (Fig. 7) *Café au Lait au Lit*, 1974, a reference to the skin color (a mulatta) of a waitress serving (or sexually servicing) a Black man in the bed; and (Fig. 8) *Ace of Spades*, 1978, featuring a celebrated airman's image in the center of an ace of spades playing card, a play on the word spade, a derogatory term commonly used by non-Blacks in reference to Black people. In this latter painting, Colescott attributes nobility to the airman as he did George Washington Carver in his quotation of Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851; Colescott replaced George Washington with his 1975 rendition of *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page From an American History Textbook*. The Tuskegee Airmen and George Washington Carver were characters who upwardly mobile Black people like Colescott's parents and extended family could relate to and who they used as examples to inspire their children to continue their education. Historicizing these characters in paintings highlighted their contributions beyond the context of Black people; Carver's scientific experiments and inventions affected all parts of society globally and the Tuskegee airmen contributed to the continuation of a free and democratic Europe.

But Colescott wasn't satisfied with only addressing Black historical narratives in his paintings. He was interested in creating messages that would reach a wider audience, and he did not want to be beholden to anyone's agendas, especially the dogmas of Black Nationalists. Using image appropriation and irony, Colescott freed himself from the limits of a Black cultural dimension that was dictated by non-artists. As one reads Colescott's paintings within the context of this cultural turning point in the 1970s, it becomes obvious that in addition to challenging and breaking down the Western art history canon, he also placed himself front and center in his paintings as storyteller, revealing the complexities and the confusions of his background and his identity as it merged with events in the world. In his paintings, Colescott's life is an ongoing theater. Arlene

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Schnitzer, his gallerist since 1961, asked him what caused his work to change so dramatically. His answer is unknown, but according to D. K. Row, Schnitzer and Colescott never discussed the issue again.[47] She continued to represent him through the mid-1980s, when her beloved Fountain Gallery burned to the ground in 1977, destroying about thirty of Colescott's earlier works as well as the works of other artists in the gallery and works in her personal collection.[48] Since 1988 Colescott has been represented by the Laura Russo Gallery in Portland; Russo's husband Michael was an artist colleague of Colescott's. With the recognition garnered for works such as *Eat Dem Taters* (1975), after Vincent Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* (1885) and *Natural Rhythm: Thank you Jan Van Eyck* (1976), after Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), Colescott proved he was doing more than just painting Black people into a Western art historical art canon.

In *Natural Rhythm*, Colescott's "Black" wife also points to another trope—the miscegenation that was personally and culturally taboo in many circles, but that here, in characteristic Colescott style, is thrown into the viewers' faces with a dose of humor. "Appropriation, as I cast it, is more about taking over a painting and putting it to a very different use or giving it a very different meaning than the original artist has done. It may even be contrary to the thread of meaning in that original work. In a sense, I would steal the painting—the idea and the look of it—and put it to my own use," said Colescott in an interview with Sharon Fitzgerald for *American Visions Magazine*. [49]



Untitled (Red wall, flower on table) (ca. 1950s)

For the next fifteen years, Colescott taught painting at several Bay Area universities including California State University Stanislaus, the University of California at Berkeley, and the San Francisco Art Institute. He continued using preexisting imagery as source material for his paintings and exercised a subversive sardonic sense of humor that turned modernism on its head. He received recognition throughout the nation in museum and gallery exhibitions. Having studied the art in museums in Paris, Colescott was keenly aware of the appropriations of classical African sculpture by modern artists, the Cubists in particular. Through a combination of irony, exaggeration and distortion, Colescott's appropriations allowed him to make corrections by unmasking the appropriators.

Colescott's works from the mid-1970s were unapologetic quotations of masterworks by such artists as Vincent Van Gogh and Willem de Kooning. Colescott answered de Kooning's *Woman, 1* (1950-52) with *I Gets a Thrill Too When I Sees De Koo...* (1978). Here Colescott employs coded language: "de koo" for "coon." His "mammyesque" portrayal of de Kooning's nude is just as grotesque as de Kooning's painting. Both present degrading representations of women, and the minstrel blackface worn by Colescott's woman adds an additional layer of comment—but both are dynamically painted. Colescott's depiction transforms mammy into a Black Nationalist nightmare. His work has at times been criticized as decrying the powers of Black femininity or painting an unpleasant picture of Black female sexuality.

By the late 1970s, Colescott's work included socially and politically charged pieces that commented on the intersection of politics and pop culture. (Fig. 9) *The Colored TV*, 1977 and (Fig. 10) *Dutiful Son*, 1979 are two such paintings. In both, females rest half-dressed in their underclothes. One reclines in a chair, the other on a sofa, both relaxed and smoking the same

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brand of cigarettes, with the boxes resting on their respective tables. As fires blaze in each of their red brick fireplaces, night falls. But these aren't simply interior scenes. After Black political actions, riots and protests, Blacks became more visible in advertising and on television. The sitcom *Good Times*, 1974-1979, even featured the character JJ, a comically enduring young Black character that aspired to be a successful artist.

In the sitcom, a financially challenged Chicago family tried to "keep their heads above water and make a way when they can," as the show's title song said, all the while maintaining a tightly knit family. In *Dutiful Son*, the figure's racial ambiguity raises questions: just how far reaching are the son's duties, and what has been swept under the carpet that he is cleaning while his mother(?) looks on approvingly, yet curiously? In these paintings, Colescott was as usual addressing the complexity of Black life and its lack of representation in the larger discourse on American contemporary society.

In 1979, Colescott painted *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder*, his rendition of Matisse's *La Danse* (1910). As he sits in his chair, hand at chin, he ponders the blonde model before him as she disrobes. The title is written on a scrap of paper on the floor near the model's red high heel shoes. Is the beholder a sly voyeur? Does beauty refer to the dancers on his painted canvas, or the partially nude model? Is he talking about art or the female form? We don't know, and in fact, Colescott has often



Pontchartrain, 1997

said he leaves a lot up to the viewer to figure out. What we do know is that Colescott kept pushing people's buttons with his frank and visually and conceptually difficult works. "I'm keeping alive the idea that you can damn well say what you want... Americans don't really dig censorship with art," said Colescott.

In (Fig. 11) *Sunday Afternoon with Joaquin Murietta*, 1980, a Black woman, mostly nude, save for her red cowboy boots with one boot strategically pointed between the open legs of one of her two male companions sits displaying her beauty, sexuality, and power in the company of Murietta (said by some to be Cherokee and Mexican), the California bandit or Robin Hood, depending on what is believed about the controversy that surrounds his legacy. Colescott's painting portrays an idealistic sensual moment. Murietta, whose mining claim was said to have been stolen by Anglos, his wife raped, and he beaten senseless ultimately seeks revenge for these actions and vanquishes his enemies. Baring all, the female's gaze confronts viewers, as if daring them to think that she is not entitled to share the spoils among her male companions. By inserting the Black nude female among the Brown resistance fighters, Colescott references an even older story of the history of California—that of the mulatto, Pio de Jesus Pico, (1801-1894), the last governor of Mexican California. The painting appropriates Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), whose female nude also gazes directly at the viewer, but without the fearless attitude as Colescott's nude—her gaze is more of a courtesan in the company of her fully dressed companions. When first exhibited, this context led

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viewers and critics to question the liaison on the grass in paintings. Some found the context of the nude woman in Manet's painting suggestive of sexual activity—a nude prostitute perhaps on the grass with the artist. Was it now her turn to service the two men, especially since the clothed women in the background appears to be bathing, perhaps after her servicing her companions. The two paintings are also divided into two types of compositions, both more traditional images of female bathers at a water's edge and the landscape is also painted in a more traditional painting style that sought realism in landscape paintings but foreground of the picture plane, the three central figures are painted with an impatience—modeling the figures, their skin tones, clothing have little modeling of the forms, thus their shapes are more solid shapes—the viewer has to imagine the details. So here, Manet left traditional academic painting behind in the background with the clothed bather—his new and modern views on painting lie in the foreground, which rightly places this composition at the onset of French Impressionism. Colescott paid homage to Manet by honoring him with a redo of his painting and celebrating his boldness in bucking the status quo of the French Salon. To paraphrase Colescott, he took something that has since become a signature of high art, renowned for its influence on the development of French Impressionism and made it subversive, low art. To accomplish this, he took the scene away from the French and positioned it in the American West, alongside Joaquin Murieta and himself, as he often did in many of his appropriations.

In *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama* (1985), Colescott revealed the sources for *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) by Pablo Picasso, an artist he admired for always doing exactly what he wanted to do. In his own art, Colescott emulated that attitude. In a 1997 interview with Faye Hirsch, Colescott explained that he retrieved Picasso's images and pointed to African sculpture as the source imagery in order to highlight the reality of those appropriated sources.[51] These works ridiculed stereotypical white perceptions of Black culture and history, thus subverting the iconic status of "master" paintings. Of his appropriations, Colescott told the New Orleans Times-Picayune, "I was one of the first to use appropriation in a way that might be called postmodern. But most artists who appropriate do it as some sort of homage to an artist they admire. Mine was no homage. I wanted to dominate that other artist." [52]

Colescott's approach to playing with art history and his mastery of painting techniques combined to create a singular body of work that expertly conveys his ability to blend European and American historical content with intentional ambiguity, cunning, and wit. Keenly knowledgeable of history, he wove threads his personal politics with contemporary global events to make works as compelling as those of any other contemporary artist working today. Yet, if we look beyond the subject matter, we can easily become totally absorbed in the materiality of Colescott's paintings. The tumultuous movement of paint as the figures rub, smash up against, and almost fall over each other, and their co-existence with tousled words—race, sex, love—vividly underscore his thoughtful deconstructions of art history in particular and American history in general. Colescott's explorations of various narrative approaches to figure painting served as precursors to the signature works he would create later.

In his work from the 1990s Colescott mined his New Orleans, Louisiana ancestry and tackled the issue of miscegenation head-on. His art was affected by some members of his family who chose to not define themselves as Black; many of his works from this period explore skin color, layered identities, and a diversity of views on what it means to be Black. Happily, though, Colescott did not insist that we only read race into his paintings. He often included "paint buckets" strewn about his paintings, labeled "race," "sex," and "love," to illustrate mixed-race encounters and the results of those unions, the historically "tragic mulatta/mulatto" that has been historicized in literature as well as visual culture in the Western hemisphere. He also mixed a substantial dose of abstraction into these paintings, creating a chaotic mix of cultural readings and to confuse his viewers through complex and ambiguous representations of racial and gendered roles. Thus, his (Fig. 12) *A Taste of Gumbo*, 1990, is not just about the African-inspired recipe that made its way to Louisiana with African slaves through the Middle Passage—it is also about miscegenation and white privilege. *Blues for the Muse*, 1993, is another work exploring miscegenation, as it refers to Alexandre Dumas, a figure who, like many Creoles, did not acknowledge his African ancestry and chose instead to live life as "passé blanc." Colescott confronts this conundrum face on. He places himself in his paintings and becomes part of the narrative. Two works from 1990, *A Visit from Uncle Charlie* and *Grandma and the Frenchman (Identity Crises)*, also deal with the acceptance of miscegenation and the stigma attached to it. Painting the faces in the composition part black

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and part white, Colescott reminds viewers of the African slave trade and its legacy—the gray areas of identity that have left a trail of confused identities and tensions among Black people based on color. Colescott described *A Visit from Uncle Charlie*: "It's about a couple of mixed race. The guy is possibly Black. The painting depicts the moment when he has to explain this to his wife because his Uncle Charlie [who appears in the painting as a nude black man] just showed up for a visit and blew his cover." [53] Colescott increasingly dealt with the subject of racial mixing, and his own family heritage, in his mature years. Many Black and White families are caught between two worlds, with racially defined "skeletons in the closet" that are often not revealed until family members face their mortality. This relatively new discourse on biracial trauma is not new—people have been living with it and dealing with its legacy and ambiguities since slavery.

"I am not a writer. I present an image that can leave it to you to write the story," said Colescott. *Sunset on the Bayou*, 1993 invites the viewer to compose a narrative from its many layers of meaning with historical and contemporary elements: the Louisiana Purchase; a dumbfounded half-Black, half-White Africanized masked-like mammy with a grown white woman in red high heel shoes still being nurtured by her across her knees; and cartoon bubble chatter from the smiling blackface as well as the black crow.

As a lighter skinned Black person, Colescott's images were often challenged for their raucous racial interactions. Even the color of Colescott's own skin was debated. Barbara Rogers, a fellow faculty member who taught with Colescott in the Bay Area as well at the University of Arizona, recalled that she once taught a class in which Colescott came in and lectured about his art. The class, unaware that Colescott was Black because of his lighter skin tone, was not pleased with his depictions of Blacks. "When he left, the students said to me, 'Why would you invite a white person to talk about his work when his work was about Black people?' They didn't believe that he was African-American. He was always dealing with that," Rogers said. [54]

In a review entitled, "Abstract Yet Pointed," of *Choose Paint! Choose Abstraction! Celebrating Bay Area Abstract Artists*, a recent exhibition at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco, Jonathan Curiel asked the question: "Do African-American artists who specialize in abstraction feel obliged to portray subjects crucial to black culture?" He answered, "For Colescott, the answer was most often 'yes'.... 'A day doesn't go by that I don't think about being a black person,'" Colescott said before his death. "I can't remember a day, even going back to my childhood, that it didn't affect the way I am and what I am." [55] So this is why Colescott has been so true to his form, so true to his commitment to not only include Black bodies in his compositions but position them in a way that competes on equal ground with the materiality of his masterful painting techniques. And, his masterful storytelling and wit add that additional bit that keeps viewers gasping at his images, but coming back for more. In the painting (Fig. 13) *Summertime*, 1995 a White blonde reclines under a sky filled with black birds circling a buxom Minnie Mouse while a Black man with his tongue hanging out approaches the blonde. Here Colescott reaches back to his love of drawing cartoons as a child when he drew Mickey Mouse as a Black character saying "Hi black folks!" [56] Most Black people recognized the inherent racism in the animated Disney children's film *Dumbo*. Faceless Black men set up the circus in this 1940, pre-Civil Rights Movement film. The black crows on the wire in rag-tagged clothing and spats are led by their leader named Jim Crow. Portrayed as intellectually inferior, they speak in Ebonics, affectionately calling each other "brotha" with southern accents, and are remembered for singing the catchy jazz-infused tune with scatting, with one crow playing the trumpet on his beak. In *Dumbo*, the young big-eared elephant has a sympathetic friend, a mouse named Timothy. In *Summertime*, Colescott substitutes Minnie Mouse for Timothy. Though the character is already black in color, Colescott further subverts the narrative by implying cultural and racial Blackness as well, thereby forming a relationship between Minnie and the crows that was not a part of the Disney plan.

In 1997, Colescott was chosen to represent the United States at the 47th Venice Biennale and although he viewed it as a grand symbolic event, he confided to Seattle critic, Regina Hackett, "I'm working my way through it. Like the bumper sticker says, 'I'd rather be surfing.' It's an honor, a privilege and a pain in the ass." [57] In a 2009 interview with the *Baltimore Sun*, Colescott characterized his selection to represent the US at this international event: "It was a grand symbolic event. But like Jackie Robinson, I had to be good enough to be there. If I had dropped the ball too many times, I wouldn't have got there." Colescott

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took this opportunity to show many of his works that dealt with miscegenation, and embraced it with humor. "The Moors are descending on Venice again," he said.[58]

In 1997, he completed (Fig. 14) *Pontchartrain*, a monumental, ten-foot-long etching at Crown Point Press in San Francisco. This sugar lift print is more animated than his early paintings. Colescott explained, "Art is a spiral. If you keep painting long enough you come back to where you started, but not quite. You bring the baggage of all you've learned. As long as I'm willing to let something new happen, the work continues to develop. If not, it's a disaster." Colescott's marriage of abstraction, calligraphy and dreamscape imagery had been solidly positioned in the Pacific Rim, while his figuration in the French tradition was tied to the mixed-race situations arising from his family and immediate personal history. To quote another essay that I wrote on Colescott "While many of his paintings are well known for their re-writing of history, revealing memories and stories from his past, *Pontchartrain* represents a fond memory for Colescott of the stories that his father told him about a jazz concert at a picnic on a boat on the lake. He and the other musicians, including a young Louis Armstrong, had to continually play Steamboat Bill or their instruments would be thrown into the water by their employer. Colescott questioned the tale, but later when he met Louis Armstrong at a concert, he confirmed the story about the picnic and his father's part in the band. In a way, this piece serves as an homage to his father and his pursuit of music that he was not able to fully realize. The calligraphic lines in *Pontchartrain* are gestural linear movements made with sumi-e ink, a technique Colescott learned from the Japanese-American master painter Chiura Obata (1885-1975), with whom he studied at Berkeley. Obata played a pivotal role in introducing Japanese art techniques and aesthetics to other artists in California. These methods, revealed in his one-man shows and perfected in paintings and sketches made on trips to the high country, often with the Sierra Club, became one of the distinctive characteristics of the California Watercolor School. Formally, Colescott married Japanese calligraphy techniques with imagery derived from the Aboriginal dream paintings he saw exhibited at the Venice Biennale, which used lines to track the psyche and tell stories that are revealed in dreams." [60]

Colescott is noted as saying, "If you decide to laugh, don't forget the 'humor is the bait,' and once you've bitten, you may have to do some serious chewing. The tears may come later." Of the artist, Huey Copland has written: "Colescott's attitude toward the blackness of comedy and the comedy of blackness put his work in dialogue with that of a number of African-American cultural practitioners who likewise emerged in the '70s and enjoyed cross-cultural appeal: George Clinton, David Hammons, Richard Pryor, and, perhaps most significantly, Ishmael Reed, whose 1976 send-up of the slave narrative tradition, *Flight to Canada*, features George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware on the cover of recent editions." [61] The mid-1970s, introduced a juncture as viewers began to encounter Colescott in his paintings. In 1976 he recreated a performance piece and presented it at the San Francisco Art Institute where he was teaching. The work, a commentary on what Colescott deemed boring art historical lectures, was a 45-minute slide lecture on Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* set to the music of Edgard Varèse. In a gesture of appropriation, Colescott painted his own version of Delacroix's *Liberty* entitled *Homage to Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People*, while listening to recordings of Varèse's *Intégrales*, *Density 21.5*, *Ionisation* and *Octandre*. The result was Colescott's (Fig. 15) *Duclacrow's Masterwork: A Mockumentary Film*. The comic and satirical Eugene Dulacrow was Colescott's alter ego in the film.

Huey Copland borrows cultural critic Greg Tate's term for artists like Colescott, a "freaky-deke," and goes on to describe him as an artist "who travestied black nationalist proprieties in plumbing the mythic and the mundane, the glorious and the perverse, the surreal and the superfluous, with work that was as wonderfully absurdist as black life itself." [62] But of his paintings themselves, Professor Emerita at the University of California, Peter Selz reminds us that Colescott painted the figure when it was not in fashion and that he bathed his paintings with a great sense of materiality through brush strokes and luscious consistencies of paint, with a healthy mix of political and racial and sexual content. [63]

Finally, the most engaging analysis of Colescott's work comes from his fifth wife, Jandava Catron, who wrote Colescott's obituary for the UA News (University of Arizona):

"Robert's work has an almost mystical bent that winds around a self-effacing and humorous core. [...] Just looking at his

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paintings isn't enough. Just thinking about them isn't enough either. There are reservoirs of meaning. It's one of those things you don't tell people about; you just look forward to having the experience, like most good things . . . have the power of call and response acknowledged around the world as legendary in African American musical and oral traditions. [...] [This] power of call and response that creates a dynamic exchange – one that can yield insight. Such reverberations [can lead to] continuing echoed responses." Cattron maintains that "The best audience for Robert's work hasn't even been born yet. [...] It's because we are still living in the throes of the events in world history and American history and in art history that are the recurrent themes in Robert's work." [64].

Endnotes

[1] Roberta Smith, "Robert Colescott, Painter Who Toyed With Race and Sex, Dies at 83," *Art and Design*, *New York Times*, June 9, 2009.

[2] Trey Ellis, *Legacy of the Black Arts Movement*, 1989, 235.

[3] Bankowsky, Jack, Editor at Large, What becomes a legend? Jack Bankowsky on David Hammons. *Artforum*, 2007.

[4] Sue Carswell Lacayo and Robert Colescott, "Mocking Black Stereotypes, A Black Artist Makes Waves," *People Magazine* May 22, 1989, 2.

[5] Oral history interview with Robert Colescott, Apr.14, 1999, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2.

[6] This transcript is in the public domain and may be used without permission. Quotes and excerpts must be cited as follows: Oral history interview with Robert Colescott, 1999 Apr. 14, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[7] As art historian John P. Bowles has suggested, when Johnson moved into his neighborhood "near San Pablo Park, in a Berkeley it was already home to a large Japanese community as well as many European immigrants and some ethnic Chinese. Johnson's home was four blocks from the local Japanese Buddhist Temple, and neighborhood children attended fully integrated public schools. Bowles cites Johnson's portrait of Elizabeth Gee (1925/27) as a portrait of his daughter Pearl's playmate, a Chinese-American girl who lived only a block from the Johnsons who he says has since described the San Pablo Park neighborhood as "a racial oasis in a desert of discrimination" during the 1920s and 1930s. See: John P. Bowles, "New Negro on the Pacific Rim: Sargent Johnson's Afro-Asian Sculptures," in *A Long and Tumultuous Relationship: East-West Interchanges in American Art*, edited by Cynthia Mills and Lee Glazer (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum and Smithsonian Institution Press, 2011). Living in close proximity to Japanese or Chinese populations in California was not a rarity. As a Los Angeles native and researcher on Black artists active on the Pacific Rim, it is clear that in many communities, living near or among immigrants in the West was a reality. In 1845, African-American daguerreotypist, James Presley Ball (1825-1905?), set up a photography studio in Cincinnati and after it failed, he opened Ball's Great Daguerrean Gallery of the West in 1853 in the Weed building also in Cincinnati. In 1887 Ball relocated to Helena, Montana where he documented the black, Chinese and white communities there. In 19th century San Francisco, African Americans often found housing among

Chinese communities when they were denied lodging among Euro-Americans and with the influx of immigrants from Europe San Francisco became increasingly restrictive for Blacks and Chinese and both looked to Canada as their new home.

[8] Personal communication with family members.

[9] An interview of Robert Colescott at his studio, in Tucson, Ariz., conducted 1999 Apr. 14, by Paul Karlstrom, for the Archives of American Art.

[10] Constance Lewallen, *Robert Colescott, Recent Paintings: An Interview with Robert Colescott*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 1. The interview took place at the artist's studio in Tucson, Arizona on October 22, 1998.

[11] "Famed Negro Artist in Maui Visit" *Maui News*, (Wednesday, September 24, 1952): 1-2, "Artist From Hawaii Show Painting of Island Scenes" *The Edmonton Journal*, Wednesday, (September 5, 1956).

[12] Robert Colescott, *Recent Paintings. An Interview with Robert Colescott* by Senior Curator Constance Lewalle [University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley] at the artist's studio in Tucson, Arizona, October 22, 1998, Also see: *Oral History*, 2.

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[13] Kathan Brown, Robert Colescott at Crown Point Press, December 21, 1998, accessed online: <http://arthurrogergallery.com/1998/12/robert-colescott-atcrown-point-press-by-kathan-brown/>

[14] Colescott and Karlstrom, 2.

[15] Ibid., 2.

[16] Colescott and Karlstrom, 7.

[17] Ibid. 3.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Regina Hackett. Robert Colescott – the Seattle Years, June 15 2008, Blog: Another Bouncing Ball Regina Hackett takes her Art to Go (a continuation of her SP-I column).

[22] Sharon Fitzgerald, "Robert Colescott Rocks the Boat, Painter's work shown at June 1997 International Festival" *American Visions*, June 21, 1991.

[23] Ibid.

[24] John Dorsey, Art Critic, *Baltimore Sun*, October 11, 1998.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Pat Joseph, Killing the Serpent, <http://alumni.berkeley.edu/news/california-magazine/spring-2011-articles-faith/killing-serpent>. Also see: Colescott/Karlstrom interview.

[27] Murdoch Collections, Robert Colescott Biography, murdochcollections.com/pages/colescottbio.html.

[28] Colescott/Karlstrom interview.

[29] Randy Gragg, "The Arlene Effect," *Arts & Entertainment, Portland Monthly*, May, 2012, <http://www.portlandmonthlymag.com/artsand-entertainment/articles/arlene-schnitzerart-collector-may-2012/2/>. Schnitzer owns Robert Colescott's Sunday Afternoon with Joaquin Murieta, according to the article, the most widely published and exhibited work in her collection.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Kathan Brown, Robert Colescott at Crown Point Press, December 21, 1998, accessed online: <http://arthurrogergallery.com/1998/12/robert-colescott-atcrown-point-press-by-kathan-brown/>

[32] Brown, 2.

[33] Colescott/Karlstrom, interview. Also see *New York Times*, 1997.

[34] Ibid., *New York Times*, 1997.

[35] Brown, 2.

[36] Jim Herron Zamora, Chronicle Staff Writer, Sally Dennett's Obit, Wednesday, July 30, 2003.

[37] *New York Times*, 1997.

[38] Beth Fagan, Staff writer, "New Colescott Exhibition Called Allegory of Contemporary Life," *The Oregonian*, 1969.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] D. K. Row, "Robert Colescott, 1925-2009," *The Oregonian*, Oregon Live.com. Everything Oregon, June 20, 2009, p.2.

[43] D.K. Row, 2009.

[44] *New York Times*, June 8, 2009.

[45] *New York Times*, June 8, 2009.

[46] Patricia C. Johnson, "Artist Colescott sets his own standards," *Houston Chronicle*, Section Houston, Page 1, 2 STAR

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Edition, Wed 12/07/1988. http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl/1988_588312/artist-colescott-sets-his-own-standards.html

[47] D. K. Row, 2009.

[48] In a June 7-8, 1985 oral history interview with the Archives of American Art Schnitzer said "We had discovered in someone's garage a couple of months before the fire about 70 old paintings of Bob Colescott's that he had been storing, a friend had been storing for him, and they were in a garage, and when I found that out, I said to Bob, "God, let's bring them into the gallery and see what they are, because they're probably just disintegrating out there." And we did, and I had Jack Lucas come over and look at them, and half of them were just destroyed. I mean they had just disintegrated in the dampness over the years in this garage — Bob by this time was living in California and Europe — but there were a few of the paintings that were survivors. They needed restoration and we were going to have them taken care of and restored, and they were all in the fire. Here we — the irony, you know — we had brought them in from a garage..."

[49] Sharon Fitzgerald.

[50] Richard Lacayo, Sue Carswell, Robert Colescott, "Mocking Black Stereotypes, A Black Artist Makes Waves," *People Magazine*, May, 22, 1989.

[51] Faye Hirsch, "From Picasso to Sepik River: An Interview with Robert Colescott," *On Paper*, May June 1997, 35.

[52] Emily Langer, "Painter's Takes on Classics challenged Color Lines," *Washington Post Staff Writer*, *Washington Post*, June 12, 2009.

[53] Holland Cotter, "Unrepentant Offender of Almost Everyone," *New York Times*, June 08, 1997.

[54] Barbara Rogers.

[55] Jonathan Curiel, "Choose Paint! Choose Abstraction: MoAD's Alluring Exhibit," *San Francisco Weekly*, June 13, 2012.

[56] Kathan Brown, Robert Colescott at Crown Point Press, December 21, 1998, accessed online: <http://.arthurrogergallery.com/1998/12/robertcolescott-at-crown-point-press-by-kathan-brown/>

[57] Hackett.

[58] Cotter.

[59] *Ibid.*

[60] Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, "Manipulating Paint's Materiality to Unmask, Decode, Appropriate, and Evoke History: Robert Colescott and Mary Lovelace O'Neal," *Choose Paint! Choose Abstraction! Celebrating Bay Area Abstract Artists*, Museum of the African Diaspora, 2012.

[61] Huey Copeland, "Truth to power: Huey Copeland on Robert Colescott (1925-2009)." *Artforum International* 48.2 (2009): 59+. Academic OneFile. Web. 19 Apr. 2011

[62] *Ibid.*

[63] Peter Selz, *Robert Colescott: Troubled Goods—A Ten Year Survey, 1997-2007*, Society for Art Publications of the Americas; 2nd edition (2008).

[64] Jandava Catron, Robert Colescott Obit, University of Arizona, Tucson. BRN-SPRING-2013.indb 197 4/8/13 9