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### Black, White, Brown

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BLACK, WHITE, BROWN

Aisha Shani Harrison, M.F.A

University of Nebraska, 2010

Adviser: Gail Kendall

I address emotions and perceptions that are complex and multifaceted. My goal is for the work to communicate these emotions in a way that makes them accessible to others. Most people have felt disconnected, longing, anticipation, relief, anger, frustration and have experienced internal conflict. While this work touches on these emotions, there is, because of who I am, a set of questions I am asking regarding racial identity.

This autobiographical work is a series of ceramic figures that are engaged with symbolic objects which together form allegorical narratives. The scenarios address how I see myself and feelings I experience when interacting with others. The figures are fairly realistic female figures based on my body. With this gesture that encompasses openness and vulnerability, I intend to bring out the individual humanity in the figures rather than create a generalized human form. The figures are various shades of brown that reflect brown skin tones. I address skin color because it is an integral part of my body and identity. I have been taught in school to try to be colorblind but have realized that the idea of colorblindness glosses over rich cultural heritages, the effects of history and it denies the existence of racism in society today.

The figures are smaller than life sized and unclothed. Clothing would add an unnecessary layer of information. Their nakedness, sizes and postures make them vulnerable. This underscores the vulnerability that I allude to by using my body, emotions, and experiences to make this work. The figures however, reveal no self-consciousness about this vulnerability. Instead, they are empowered, actively interacting

with their circumstances. In *Connect*, for example, the naked figure is bent at the waist and has her rear towards the viewer. The center of the figure's forehead connects to the large abstracted hair that extends up the wall. The viewer is given only the profile of her face, letting them imagine the emotion of the figure based on other cues and their own interpretation.

As a member of many non-dominant groups, I am constantly made aware of the dynamics of power that surround me. I investigate this hierarchy in my work by shifting the interplay of power between the figure and its circumstances, the figure and the viewer, and the viewer and the circumstances. I achieve this through scale, nakedness, areas of focus of the figures, and realism. In *Served*, for example, I examine the power dynamics between the two figures as well as the role of the viewer in the situation. One figure is naked and the size of a child but has the body of a full-grown woman. She is focused on getting the other half of her hair from a white square plate on the table. The other figure, less rendered and clothed, is holding up the table as a table leg. The white table and the plate are standard dining-room sized, indicating that the scale of the piece is the same as the scale of the viewer. These factors can lead to questions such as, "who is the Server and what is being served?"

The symbols I use, like white, black and hair, are common. The symbolism of hair is based on its physical consistency and style. It signals social status, identity, ethnicity, desire, beauty, sanity, and gender among many other things. The colors black and white are used to describe oppositional sides, night and day, good and evil. They are also used to describe skin color. My goal is to illuminate and problematize this black and white dichotomy. In the piece *Black, White, Brown*, large black and white panels flank the hollow, brown, vertically split figure that is facing itself. The placement of the figure in relation to the panels indicates that the panels play a supportive role for each half of the

figure. While the panels appear to be black and white from a distance, up close, there is visual depth achieved by the layering of black and white paint over colorful imagery. From one direction the panels are all black, and from the other, all white. From the center, white and black face each other.

I am drawn to clay as my primary material for making the figures because in its wet state, it moves and responds like human flesh. Once it is fired it contains the warmth and variety of skin as well as the record of touch. Because the figures are hollow, I think about them as the shell of a person. In the act of hollowing, I am physically scooping out the insides of the figures and then presenting those insides (emotions and thoughts) as symbolic circumstances outside the figure. In this way, I feel that the materials and content have merged.