Backtalk:

Visual Language and the Representation of Black Women

by

Cathy Charles

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, FL

May 2018

Backtalk:

Visual Language and the Representation of Black Women

by

Cathy Charles

This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Professor Stephanie Cunningham, Department of Visual Arts and Art History, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Stephanie Cunningham, MFA.
Thesis Advisor

Camila Afanador, MFA.

Linda Johnson, MFA.

Eric Landes, MFA.
Chair, Department of Visual Arts and Art History

Michael J. Horswell, Ph.D.
Dean, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

Khaled Sobhan, Ph.D.
Interim Dean, Graduate College

April 18, 2018
Date

Acknowledgements

.

I am profoundly thankful to all the women whose shared perspectives laid the foundation for my work.

Many thanks to my thesis advisor and supervisory committee for their guidance and support through this process. Their immense knowledge helped me in the research, writing, and production of this thesis.

I am incredibly gratefully to my family and friends. Their encouragement has inspired me to be a courageous black woman.

Finally, I am especially grateful for my fiancé for his unwavering love, creative input, patience, and most of all, encouragement. You keep me grounded.

Abstract

Author: Cathy Charles

Title: Backtalk: Visual Language and the Representation of Black Women

Institution: Florida Atlantic University

Thesis Advisor: Professor Stephanie Cunningham

Degree: Master of Fine Arts

Year: 2018

For years, black women have endured the mainstream stereotypes of the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire.

Backtalk is a conversation about black women using their own language translated into a graphic visual language. It examines ways in which black women are active agents in the social scripting of their own identities. Their complexity is visualized using a formal semiotic system based on their individual descriptions. This new visual language allows black women to deconstruct the limiting categorizations mainstream culture allows them, freeing participants from category-based expectations.

Backtalk:

Visual Language and Representation of Black Women

List of Figures

Introduction

Since their arrival in American society, black women have historically been in the power of the dominant white culture. Thus, they are falsely depicted through three main stereotypes: the Mammy, the Jezebel and the Sapphire. These gross over-simplifications that manifest in mainstream culture, through both visuals and literature, leave black women without the ability to define themselves as complex individuals. This thesis is not a work of history, but it offers brief accounts as a frame of understanding collective race and gender misrecognitions of these women.

Mammy

The Mammy is the first popular caricatured depiction of black women. This stereotype was created to serve the political interest of white America. Mammies are black women who worked as nannies or housekeepers for white families, and oftentimes nursed their children. The caricature came to represent loyalty and servitude to the white man. Early depictions portrayed the Mammy as content and happy with her position as a slave. She is usually the submissive, motherly voice of reason. She was eventually used as propaganda in an effort to humanize the institution of slavery.

The mammy is oftentimes desexualized. She is depicted as obese with exaggerated facial features and pitch black skin. There are no romance narratives associated with the mammy, although she oftentimes has many children. The mammy materialized in novels, plays, and commercial products. Arguably the most notable is Aunt Jemima. Aunt Jemima is a jolly ex-slave cook and the face of Davis Milling

Company's famous pancakes.[1] The trademarked figure prides herself on her secret pancake recipe that she makes for houseguests, parties and parades. A driving selling point is that the pancakes tasted as though Aunt Jemima, your own faithful slave, made the pancakes right in your kitchen.

Figure 1. Vintage Aunt Jemima print advertisement

Following the success and popularity of Aunt Jemima, the mammy caricature continuously reinvents herself in popular media. This is evident in major films such as *Gone with the Wind, Imitation of Life,* and Tyler Perry's fictional character Madea. It is interesting to note that Madea is a contemporary mammy imagined through the eyes of a

[1] McElya, Micki. *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-century America.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007.

black man. Despite minor contemporary adjustments, all the original characteristics reign true: she is an unattractive, asexual, obese, unfeminine woman with no romantic companionship.

Jezebel

Contrary to the mammy, the Jezebel continuously expresses black women as promiscuous and sexually immoral. It is claimed that she is not satisfied with black men, and fancies sexual relationships with white men. The stereotype stemmed from European misinterpretations of African tribes. Europeans mistook the semi nudity of Africans for lewdness, therefore deeming them primitive and savage. As a result, female slaves were reduced to sexual objects subjected to nudity for audience entertainment, rape, and were banned from legal marriage. Saartjie Baartman, also known as Hottentot Venus, is an iconic example of the exploitation of black women's bodies. Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa whose body, both in life and death, became a literal exhibit in London's Piccadilly Circus.[2] Baartman was used in the understanding of black women and served to scientifically support that they were anatomically different from white women. The Victorian idea of true womanhood required adherence to a code of virtue, grace, and modesty – white womanhood. Baartman's sexual organs and buttocks were deemed freakishly large and abnormal, and that her, and other black women's, rampant sexuality was a result of these abnormalities. The stereotype excused the casual sexual exploitation of black women, maintaining gender- and racial-controlled slave societies.

[2] Harris-Perry, Melissa V. *Sister Citizen Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. p. 58.

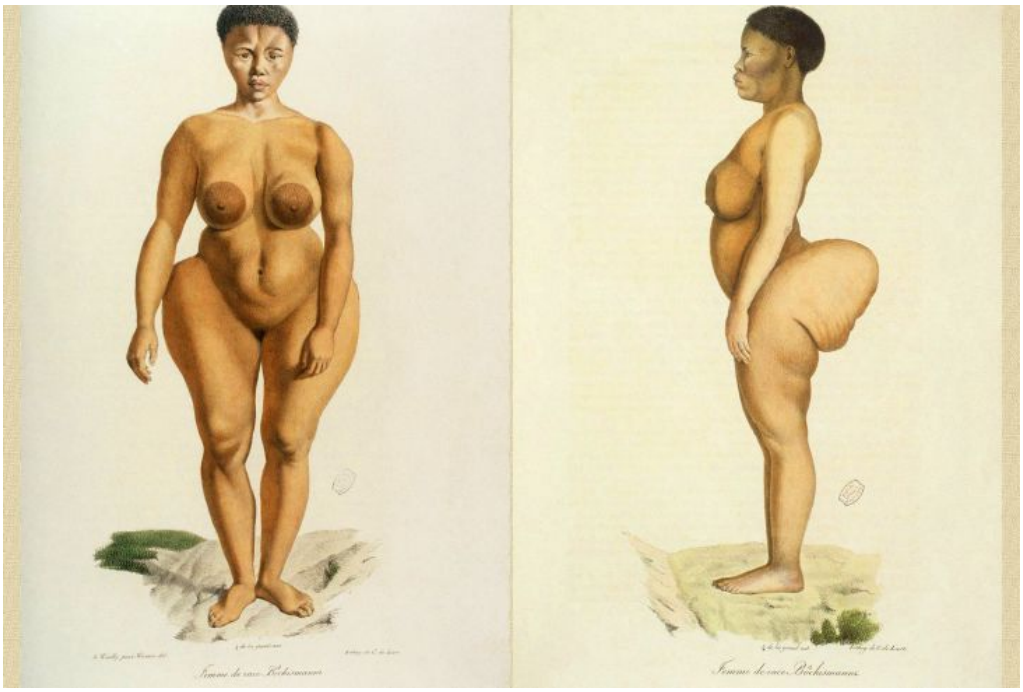

Figure 2. Portrait of Saartjie Baartman

Figure 3. Saartjie Baartman exhibit at Piccadilly Circus

Jezebels have since become popular in literature and film. Recurring instances are used to brand the perception of black women. A noteworthy example of this is Halle Berry in the film *Monster Ball*. Halle Berry in her role feeds into the Jezebel stigma by

engaging in a seductive, controversial relationship with a white man. Despite mixed reviews, Halle Berry won an Oscar for that performance and, ironically, was the first African American actress to do so.

Although the stereotype was historically created by dominant white institutions, present-day manifestations are just as rampant in black communities. They frequently appear as video vixens and backup dancers in hip-hop videos. These mainstream representations have oftentimes caused black communities to denounce black women as sexually inviting. This has been especially true in cases of sexual harassment and rape. High profile examples include Anita Hill vs. Supreme Court Nominee Clarence Thomas, rape victim Desiree Washington vs. Mike Tyson, and the underage rape victims of R&B singer R Kelly's. Each of these instances garnered public support among African Americans where the community rallied behind the male and punished the alleged abuser. These women were "slut-shamed" by their own community, asking what she had done to provoke or encourage the harassment.[3]

The Sapphire

Of the three, the Sapphire is the most commercialized stereotype of the 21st century. This stereotype categorizes black women as excessively assertive, combative and radical. They are irrationally angry and are "always mad about something". Sapphire is the formal name, but communities have adopted many iterations such as the bad bitch, angry black woman, and hussy. The Sapphire became prevalent in the 1970s through the emergence of blaxploitation films, a new cinematic genre that targeted, and flooded, black communities. In films, such a *Coffey* (1973), black women were portrayed

[3] Ibid., 54.

as aggressive rebels who are radically committed to seeking gruesome revenge of injustices.[4]

Through the ever growing technology of media- and social-platforms the Sapphire has been cultivated and sustained. Savagery and irrational anger has always been used to dismiss or discredit passionate black woman, especially in politics. An example of this is Michelle Obama's continuous misrepresentation in mainstream media. While speaking at a Wisconsin political rally Michelle stated, "for the first time in my adult life I am proud of my country because it feels like hope is finally making a comeback." Those words were use to paint Michelle as an ungrateful, unpatriotic radical. Fox News contributor Cal Thomas tried to compare Michelle Obama and black female politicians in the context of the Sapphire. Thomas stated:

> Look at the image of angry black woman on television. Politically you have Maxine Waters of California, liberal Democrat. She's always angry every time she gets on television. Cynthia McKinney [former congresswoman from Georgia], another angry black woman. And who are the black women you see on the local news at night in the cities all over the country? They're usually angry about something. They've had a son who has been shot in a drive by shooting. They are angry at Bush. So you don't have a profile of non-angry black women... except Oprah Winfrey.[5]

For the July 2008 cover of the New Yorker, artist Barry Blitt created a satirical illustration of Michelle Obama and her husband. They were depicted as "terrorists", burning the American flag in the Oval Office. Michelle appears angry and pleased as she fist pumps her husband dressed in Muslim attire. Michelle is drawn sporting an afro, dressed in black panther, military attire with an Ak-47 slung across her shoulders. Not

---

[4] Pilgrim, D. (2008, August). *The Sapphire Caricature - Anti-black Imagery* - Jim Crow Museum - Ferris State University.

[5] Harris-Perry, Melissa V. *Sister Citizen Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*., 87.

only is the cover tasteless and offensive, it is an inaccurate representation in that Michelle Obama is the antithesis of the three stereotypes. She is a successful, educated black women and has always been forthright, and passionate in her husband's campaign. Yet, her unique qualities were still used to paint Michelle as pushy and controlling of her spouse. Thomas' comments, Blitt's illustration, and others like theirs, show how stereotypes powerfully shape perceptions. As a result, any black woman who coveys any dissatisfaction and displeasure, seemingly with a hint of passion, are treated as Sapphires. The stereotype is enduring and intimidating. Most black women fear this label, silencing dissent and critique amongst them.

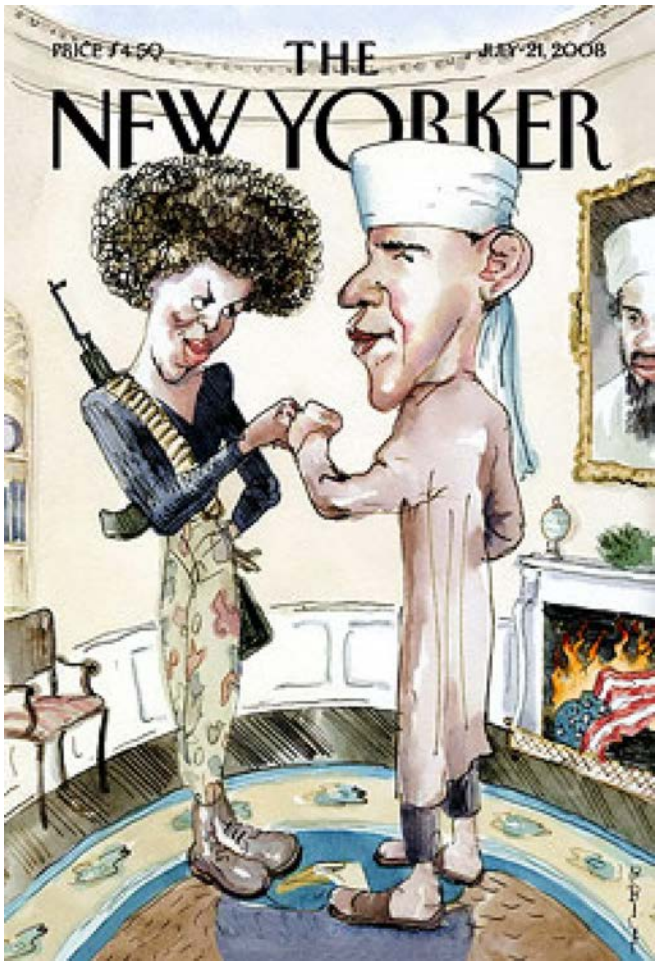

Figure 4. The New Yorker July 21, 2008 Issue

These three caricatured representations leave no space for complexity or deviation for black women and girls. Black women have been reduced to three archetypes that fails to represent real women in all their complexity and vulnerability. And yet, these stereotypes instill fear that all the stereotypical characteristics described are negative qualities. These caricatures ultimately create a social world where black women must resist their true identity in order to secure public recognition.

Othering and Identity Formation

Age-old myths and contemporary stereotypes of American media and literature have routinely portrayed the black woman through a distorted lense. Not only are negative characteristics used to portray these women as misfit and undesirable, these qualities are commonly the sole depictions. Negative representations reinforce a continuous cycle of othering, where society isolates black women based on specific grotesque characteristics. This becomes problematic in that othering is dissimilar to, and opposite of the self.[6] It negates all complex and subtle characteristics that are unique to human identity: ideas, aspirations, personal preferences, and emotions. Consequently, consistent projections of black women as a homogeneous cultural community, ultimately impacts identity formation in two major ways.

The first instance is through a process called belonging, where, due to limiting outlets of representation, the individual is subconsciously conditioned to become the other. This is commonly seen in black women who embody “mammy” characteristics. These woman feel increasing pressure to fulfill traditional gender roles.They are often

[6] "The Other", *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought, Third Edition*, (1999) p. 620.

passive and submissive, and typically downplay their talents or strengths in hopes to secure, or maintain a male partner.

The second instance is where, despite personal wants, the othered characteristics are rejected in moralist terms. This can be found in the development of the "strong black women" archetype, a popular alternative who appears to be a positive, more professional contrast to the three traditional stereotypes. However, this stereotype is built on the assumption that strong black women must tirelessly persevere against all odds. Black women shift to this stereotype *to* manage direct acts of discrimination, while simultaneously neglecting their sense of burden, emotional strain, and loss of identity.[7] In both cases the individual is offered limiting and confusing parameters for identity formation. As a result, individuality amongst black women is often overlooked, or concealed by members.

Identity formation, in some ways, is always a social process. Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argued that representation and language are essential in constituting identity, and that recognition is gained and affirmed by the powerful.[8] Therefore, the identities of subordinate groups are dependent on the legitimacy and superiority of the dominant group. Changing perceptions of black womanhood in America requires black women to take control of their representation by systematically countering American media discursive practices using systems that depict them as a diverse, complex entity.

---

[7] Baumann, Gerd, and Andr. Gingrich. *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 3-4.

[8] Jensen, Sune Qvotrup. *Othering, Identity Formation and Agency. Qualitative Studies*. [Online] 2:2 2011. p. 64-65

Cultural Codes and Sisterhood

Black women have continuously tried, individually and as a group, to skillfully and fervently express themselves, while simultaneously tackling the representational issues of black womanhood. However, these women are not currently in the position to compete with the established, sophisticated visuals and literature of white-dominated American media. Power is a principal factor in the developing and molding of cultures and identities. Thus, black women must create and dominate a language in the form of cultural codes that are given life by contemporary issues. Cultural codes are symbols, or a hidden system, of meaning that are relevant to a particular culture. The systems can be used to facilitate communication within the group and are also used to conceal, or reveal unique messages to outside groups. [9] Codes can be visual, verbal, kinetic, tactile, and auditory. They are reflective of ideas, and instill influential images and thoughts that are withstanding and impressionable. Codes define the roles of the individual. They represent how people think, and how they function. They may define one's reasoning, worldviews, and value systems. They are organized in a specific way by contributors and members, and although they are unveiled at an observable point, they are generally the result of the interactions with other culture groups. The meaning of the codes are only known to the author(s)—traditionally the ones with power—however semiotic analysis as well as mutual engagement between groups will not only provide definitions, but promote an interactive approach to conflict resolution.

Semiotics is important as it allows us to understand the relationships between signs, what they stand for, and the people who must interpret them. Semiotics also helps

[9] Hyatt, Jenny, and Helen Simons. *Cultural Codes – Who Holds the Key? The Concept and Conduct of Evaluation in Central and Eastern Europe.* London: SAGE Publications, 1999. p. 23.

us to understand that reality depends not only on the intentions we put into our work, or sign systems, but also the interpretation of the people who experience it. It is effective in graphic communication in that visual signs communicate faster, and are more memorable than verbal communication. Sign systems can be understood by diverse audiences and therefore are universal.

The behaviors of nations are dependent upon the communication between individuals and cooperatives. So, the effectiveness of culture codes in conflict situations does not exclusively rely on the individuals and their message, but are a collaborative process of participants from varying social, political, and interpersonal circumstances. Critical investigations between code writers and engagers reveal much about the culture and inherent power structure: Who is writing the codes? Why were they created? Who carries the codes? And how are they distributed? Engagement that reveals the meaning of those codes, and the context in which they were created, may promote understanding by forming environments where communicative standardization leads to a shared reality.[10] [11]

The creation of codes by and for black women can strengthen the presence of sisterhood in black communities. Not all women live with the same opportunities and confidence, in that event sisterhood bridges the gap between those who do and don't. It transcends age, status, practice and personal preferences. It positions itself amid the concern of the group and its members, and can be seen as the fuel for the growing movement of black feminism.

---

[10] Banfield, William C. *Cultural Codes: Makings of a Black Music Philosophy: An Interpretive History from Spirituals to Hip Hop.* Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010. p. 10.

[11] Donald G. Ellis, Ifat Maoz. "A Communication and Cultural Codes Approach to Ethnonational Conflict". International Journal of Conflict Management. Vol. 14 Issue: 3/4, pp.255-272, https://doi.org/10.1108/eb022901 (2003).

While addressing the larger issue at hand, black women can mutually erect, affirm, and sustain a self-defined standpoint. Sisterhood is important to the success of their cultural codes in that it protects the rights and privileges of society, serves as a source of empowerment, and ensures unity and stability in those communities.

Application

Community Discussion

Participant data was crucial to the completion of this thesis project, therefore I organized and facilitated a discussion group of nine women, designed to explore the impact of gender and race roles expected of black women in America. A Facebook and Instagram post was created that called for volunteers who would be interested in being apart of a thesis exhibition that will deconstruct limiting stereotypes of black women. The goal was to investigate how sexism and racism impact their self-image, relationships, and work experiences. I was interested in learning how these women modify their body language and speech to counter stereotypes. An important goal of the effort was to draw data from black women of various backgrounds, and to discuss any psychological issues they may endure. The project included a questionnaire, group interviews and discussion, as well as a two-part photoshoot. Although diverse, the sample of women interviewed are not representative of all black women in the United States. It does, however, provide a worthwhile look at the diversity of black women in this country.

The interview, consisted of open-ended questions including:

- Who do people expect you to be?
- How are you working to meet their expectations while balancing yours?
- What are five compliments you like to hear about yourself from others?

From the testimony of the women who participated in this thesis project, the most profound theme to emerge is that black women continuously deal with race and gender based myths, and expectations. The findings from the interview revealed common frustrations among participants. 1.) There is an overwhelming amount of pressure for black women to be successful, but not too successful. 2.) Individuals are expected to be submissive, and emotionless. 3.) Characteristics that are potentially damaging to the perception of black women, such as a high sex-drive, should be suppressed and buried. 4.) Shifting conflicts with identity development.

Most participants express how success is expected in the home, the workplace, and in their spiritual lives. However, the expectation of success is not in line with their wants, but rather with the wants of others. For example, Lyse's mother believes success is achievable for her daughter, only if she does everything the way that the mother would. Lyse describes living a "perfect life" with little to no margin for error, and even though she feels as though she is doing her best, her best is never enough for her mother. Semline too describes how success is fundamental to her self-worth, but "challenging the impossible" is deemed beyond her place and capabilities.

Submissiveness, another strong concern of the participants, was described as an inaccurate, old-time myth that is counterproductive to the image of contemporary black women. Martine describes the expectation for her to endure all without complaint. Myriam also describes the need to always be present for others, despite her own wants, agendas, and personal priorities. She describes how she is always placed in a traditional maternal role, without her consent. Her gender alone is enough to validate the decisions made on her behalf. The requests are frequent and vary, 'Myriam can you do this? Can

you do that?' but the expected answer of "yes" is always the same.

A surprising discovery was how common it was for black women to suppress characteristics and wants regarding their sexual desires. As Martine describes how sexual conversation has become acceptable between her and her mother, the group disrupts in disagreement, shouting how 'that type of talk' will never be OK. Participants express the need to talk about sex and how open discussions about it would be beneficial to their romantic relationships, but the idea altogether is considered unladylike and taboo. One should also note that avoiding these types of conversation is damaging, leaving black women ignorant to basic sex education.

When asked how each woman balances the expectation of others with their own wants and needs, eight out of nine participants confirmed that they are personally affected by assumptions and have consciously, and subconsciously, altered or "shifted", their persona to comply with differences in race, gender, and class. Shifting is a coping mechanism most participants have habitually endorsed as a staple for every day survival. Author Charisse Jones and psychologist Kumea Shorter-Gooden describes shifting as an internal part of black woman's behavior where some adopt an alternative demeanor, attitude, tone, or performance act to avoid direct affiliations of negative stereotypes.[12] Francine, Martine, and I all acknowledge cases in which language shifting occurs. We describe similar situations where, assumptions are made when engaging with both white and black communities. One is usually greeted with surprise when a white person encounters an intellectual black woman, 'Wow, you are so well spoken.' Their surprise is attached to the connotation that we are exceptionally different from other black people.

[12] Jones, Charisse, and Kumea Shorter-Gooden. *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*. Pymble, NSW: HarperCollins e-books, 2008. p.6

Other times we are labeled “Oreo,” slang terminology developed in the black community and used to label other blacks who exhibit “characteristics” of white persons, such as proper speech, eclectic taste in music, being raised in an environment with a majority white population and so on. The term carries a negative implication that suggests the individual is betraying their black roots. In an effort to manage such labeling, we shift to a “white” voice for working in professional environments, and shift “black” when we return home. At one point, Martine even describes second-guessing her choice of a braided hairstyle because she didn’t want to be perceived as “too black” in the workplace. It is a result of the psychological effect of white-beauty standards in which straight hair is glamorous and beautiful, while African-descent styles, still popular in black communities, are considered unkempt and primitive.

Leila is the only participant who does not acknowledge negotiating her wants with the expectations of others. She does mention how this choice has led to some isolation. It is interesting to note that although she has developed her identity free of other influence, being headstrong in that process has affected social relationships with others.

In the discussion, I asked each woman to reflect on how they hope to be perceived. A range of descriptions followed. They wish to be affirmed in their beauty, creativity, strength, intelligence, and compassion among other things. By listening to their voices in these interviews black women were revealed in all their dimensions. Their experiences and language collected from the interviews influenced every decision of the visual thesis projects. The idea of telling their stories, served as the basis for a newly developed semiotic system that would be used to break down the shrouding barriers that suppress identity formation and individuality in black women.

Woven Photographs

Figure 5. Backtalk: Visual Language and Representation of Black Woman, Exhibition overview

"Photography has very persuasive and propagandist characteristics in a documentary approach."[13] The camera is a notable, and universal, communication tool and photographs are a viable medium in that they artistically convey what words cannot. More importantly, as it is applied in this thesis, photography is used as visual imagery to influence perceptions.

The first exhibition component features nine photographic compositions featuring the eight group participants and myself. Each portrait is a combination of two poses of the same model, woven into one, and set in nine different color backgrounds. The backgrounds are warm, vibrant and striking, pulling inspiration from the African diaspora by using Caribbean color palettes and West African fabrics. In their own way each portrait offers a depth and complexity that challenges the traditional norm. No portrait is

[13] Szto, Peter. *Documentary in American social welfare history: 1897- 1943. Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare,* 35(2), 91-110. 2008.

the same and each displays different weaving patterns which emphasize individual character. The weaving into a single image portrays black woman as complex yet complete. A single pose, or photo, cannot possibly capture the full essence or summarize the entire character of the model. Each portrait attempts to redefine the black woman as a unique multifaceted human being. Together, the installation of all nine portraits provides a multidimensional representational montage of black women.

This innovative application of photography serves as a visual shorthand for the autobiographical text provided during community discussion and communicates to a fresh awareness. The use of images as representational tokens of a larger group is common in graphic design. This association infuses the initial image(s) with sign attributes. The portraits created in this project can be understood as visual signs that create a vernacular of social wants, and cultural truths. They are used to visually communicate, in an expressive manner, the realities of identity, and individually of black womanhood. Each composition mirrors a mood that is set by the model's personality, while the poses capture a telling expression, revealing traits of the individual. The weaving and color produces a texture separation, that not only becomes expressive, but allows the viewer to distinguish varying poses in the background and foreground. The tactile quality and weaving are also vehicles that literally communicate a complex concept. Their functions are to create a visual metaphor that represents the abstract ideas of multiculturalism and versatility. The photographs were exhibited close to life size which increased the level of intimacy and life-like engagement between the object and viewer. Quantity was significant to this project. One image cannot change social impressions, but rather a culmination of many different portraits. Quantity manifests an

idea of visual plurality which leads to a more comprehensible representation; a much broader, and diverse illustration of black women.

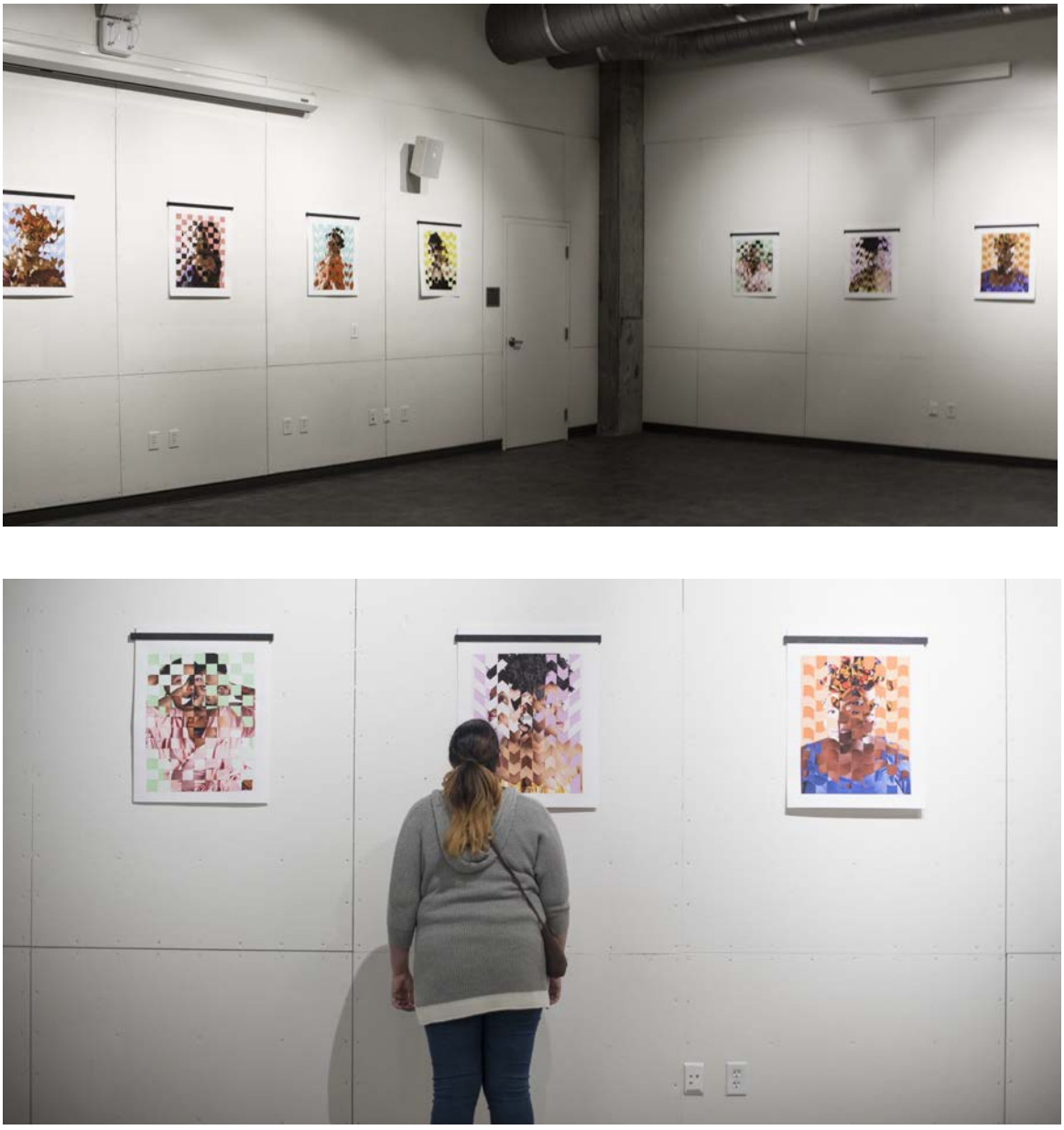

Figure 6. Woven Portraits

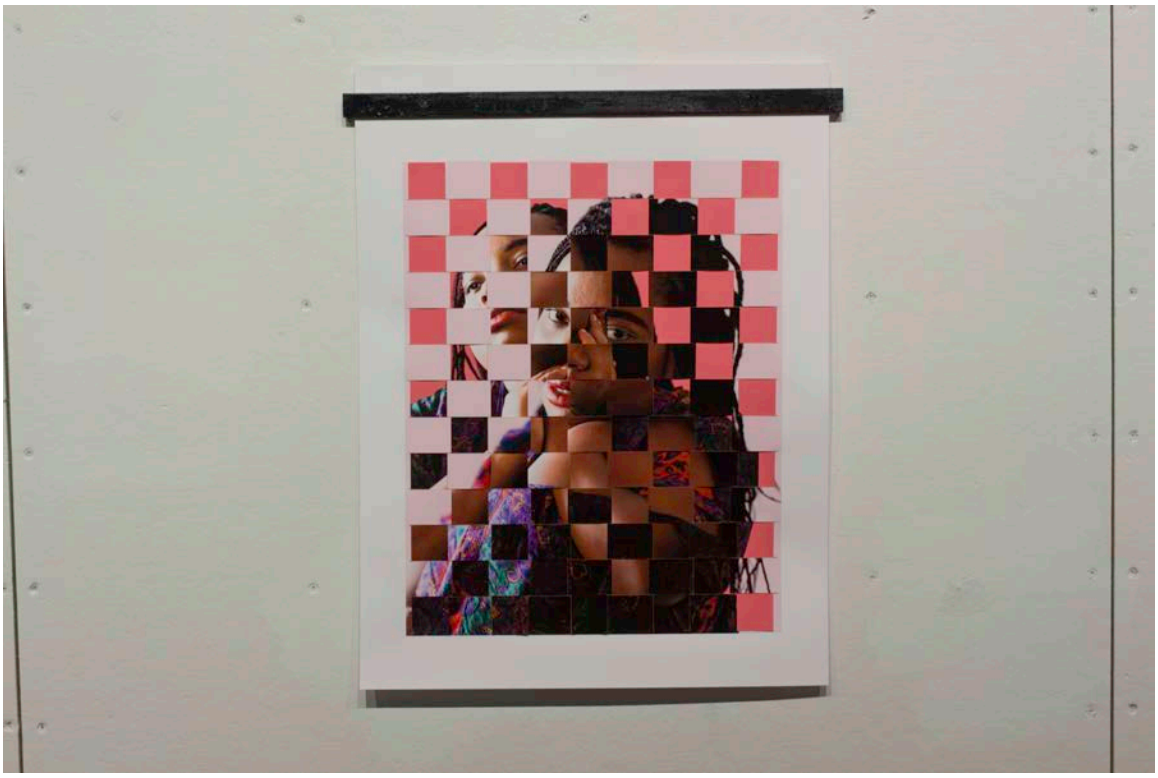

Figure 7. Woven Portraits: Marie Lovely Liberice

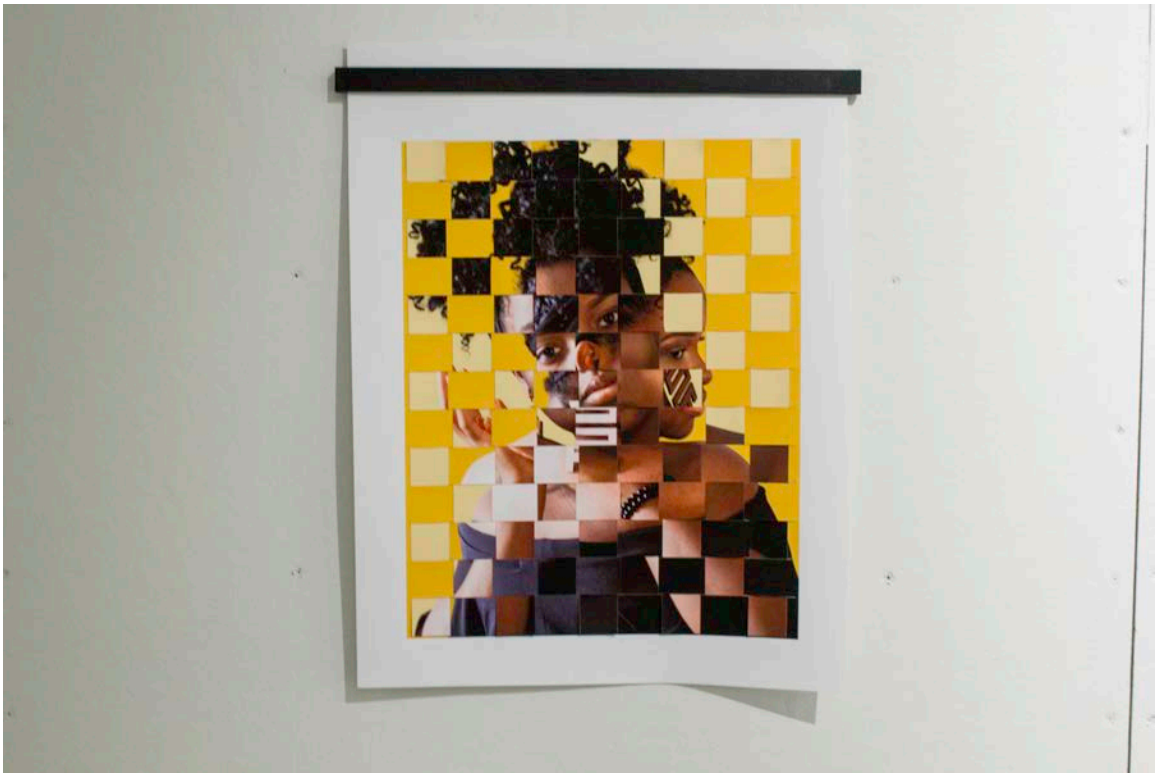

Figure 8. Woven Portraits: Semline Delva

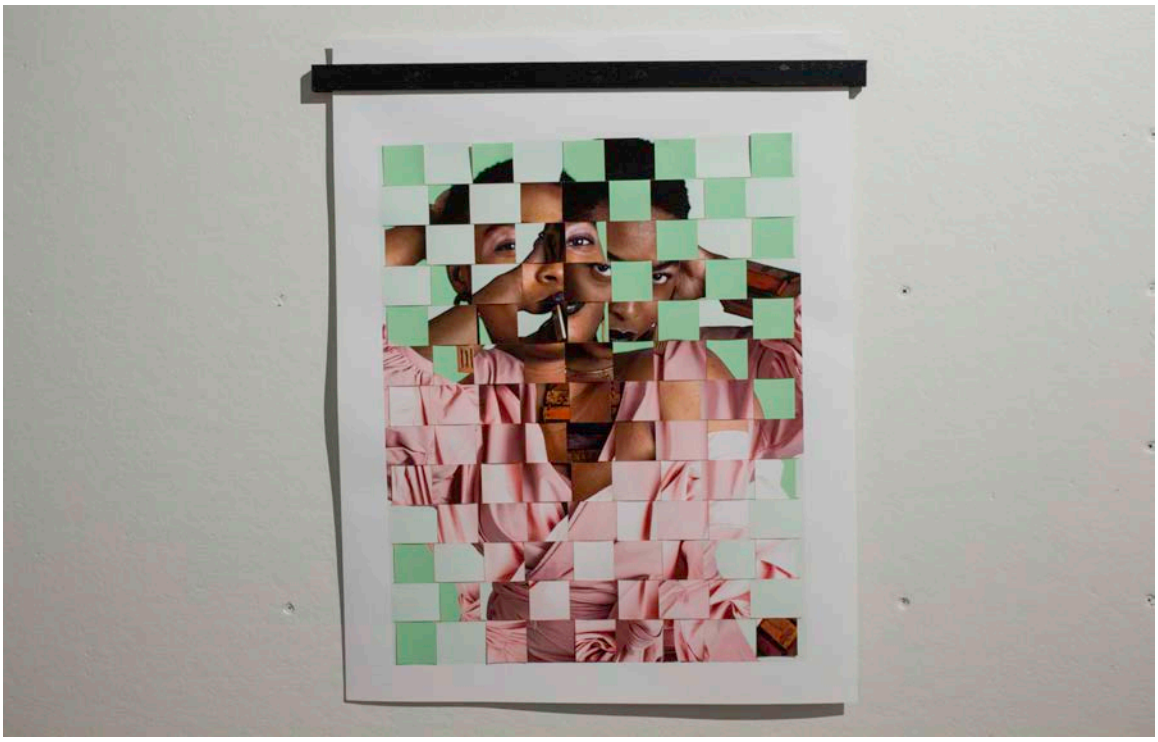

Figure 9. Woven Portraits: Myriam Lessage

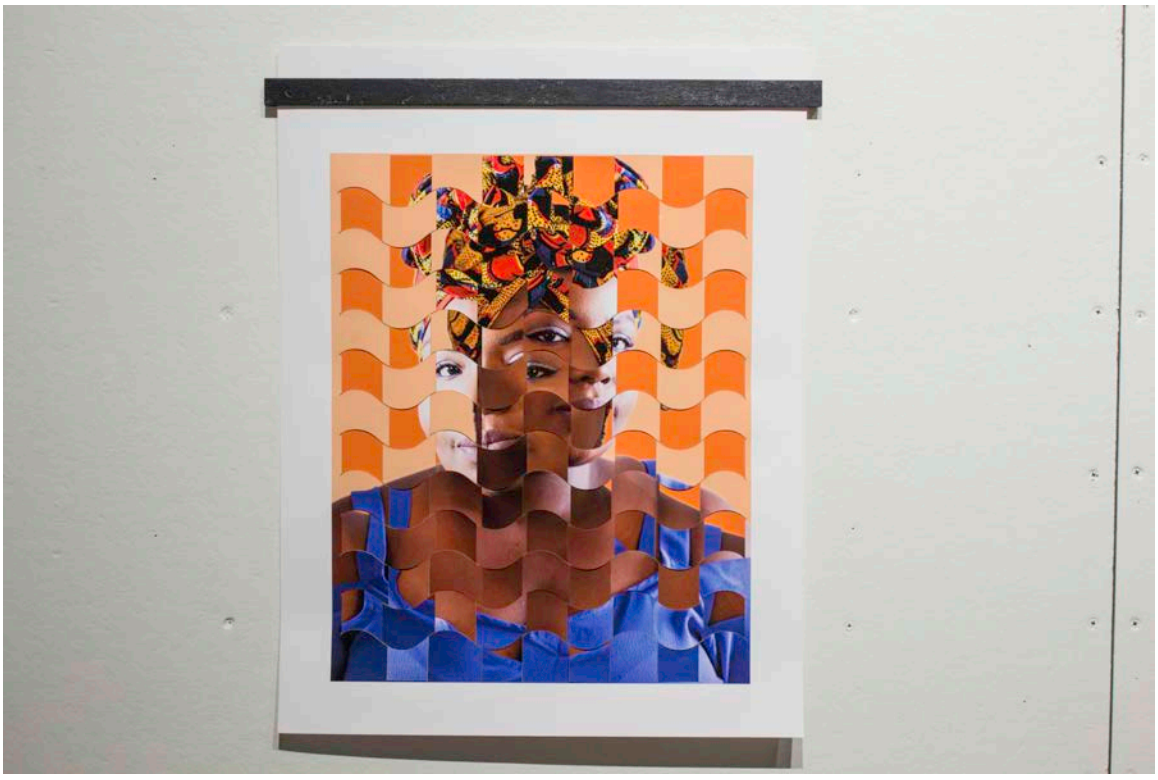

Figure 10. Woven Portraits: Aeisha Rowe

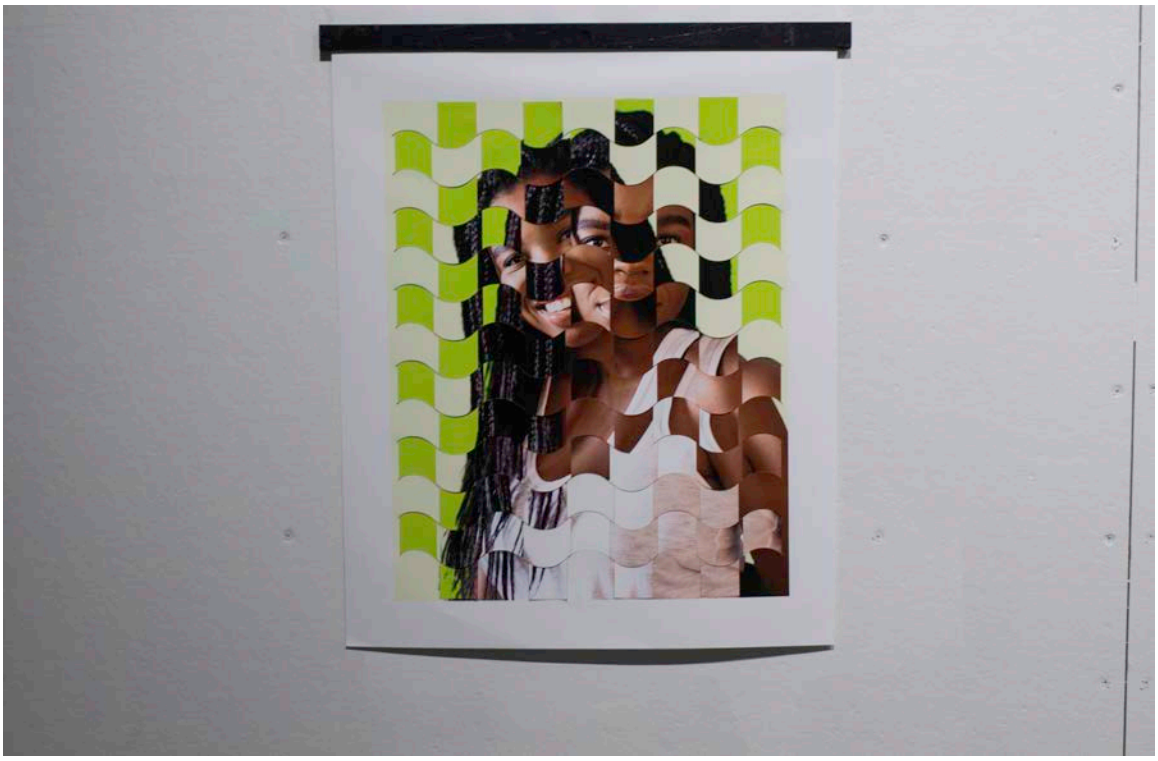

Figure 11. Woven Portraits: Martine Domond

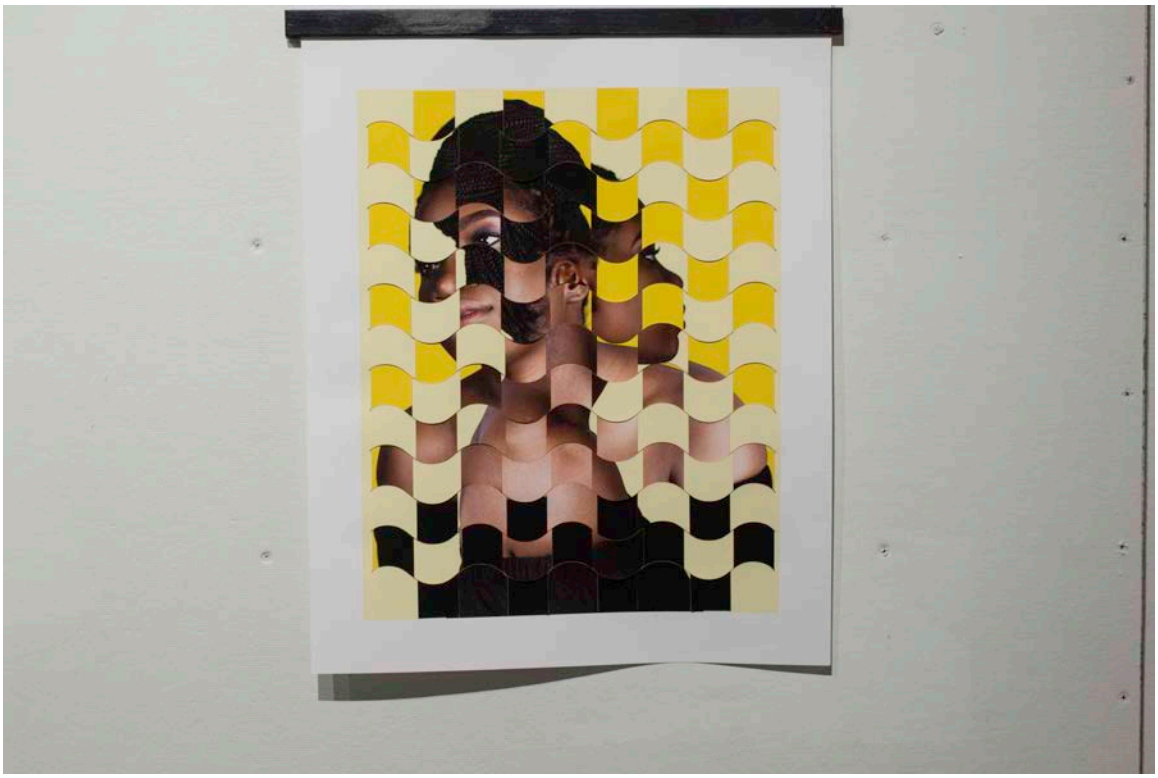

Figure 12. Woven Portraits: Lyse Chery

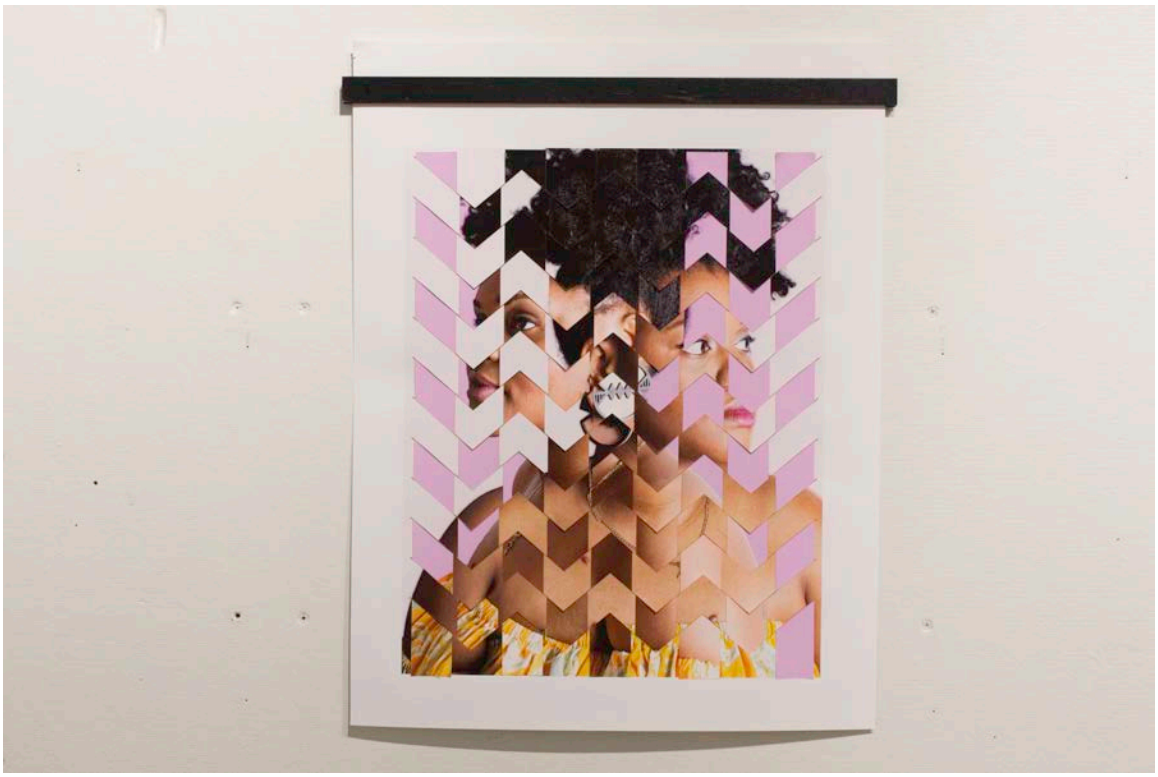

Figure 13. Woven Portraits: Cathy Charles

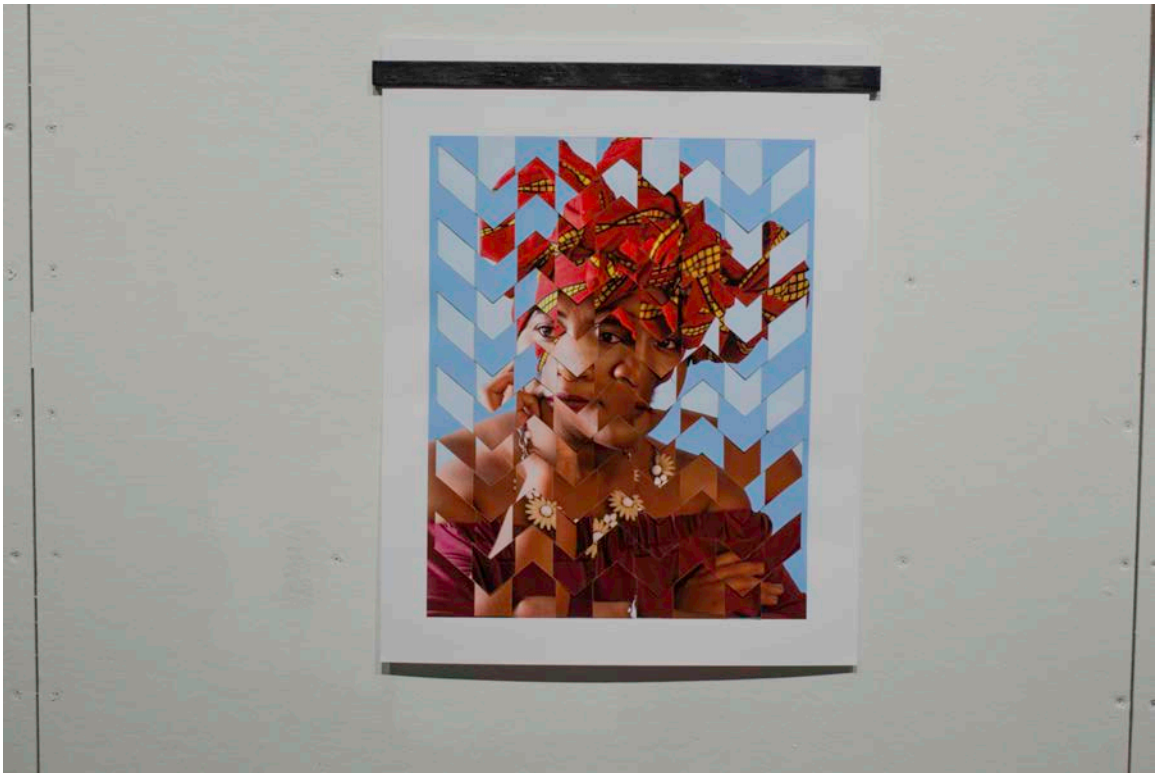

Figure 14. Woven Portraits: Francine Coker

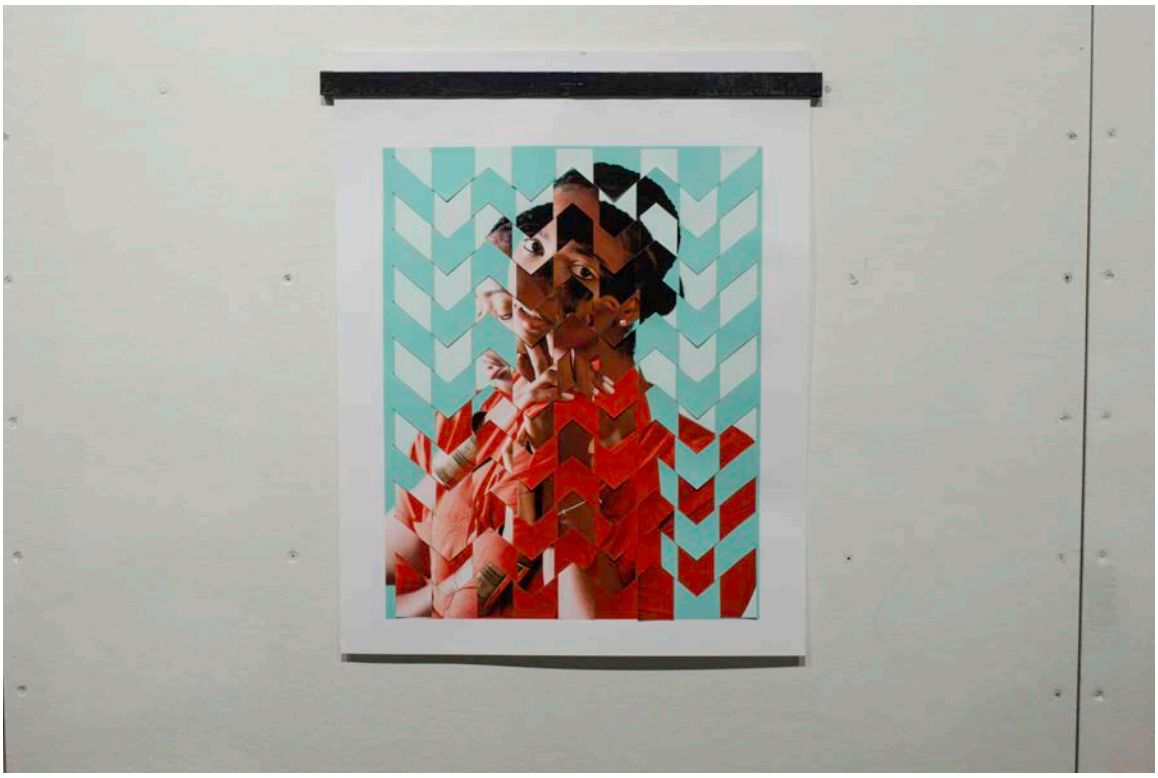

Figure 15. Woven Portraits :Leila Bijoux

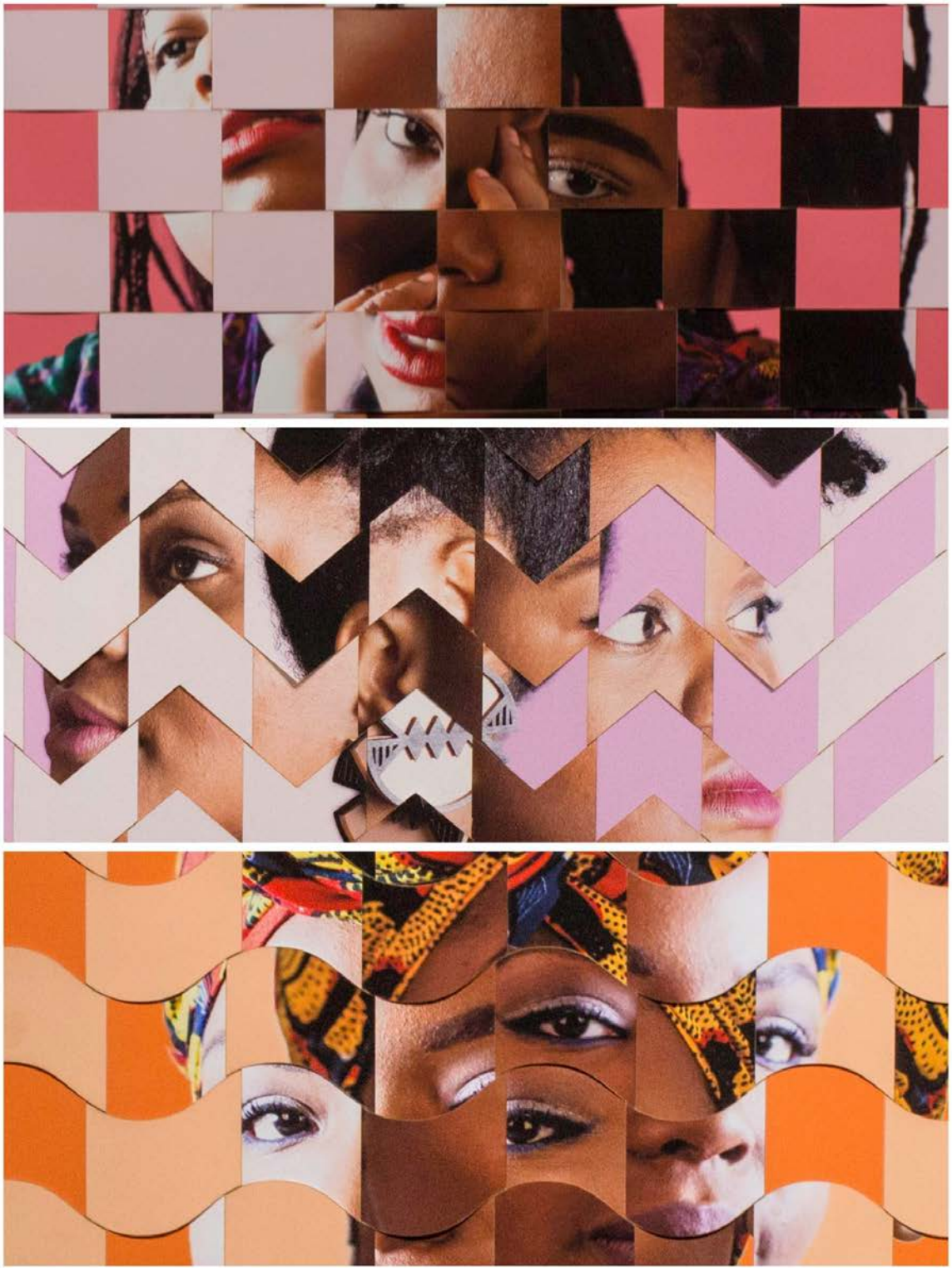

Figure 16. Woven Portraits: Weaving detail

Backtalk and Wax Prints

Following the wall of woven portraits, the viewer enters a second space where nine colorful fabrics are pleated against a wall. These fabrics are "identity cloths" designed for each woman featured in the previous section. The fabrics are bold and vibrant, using color from their corresponding portraits. Each cloth is a pattern of various unfamiliar symbols. Sewn into the seam of the right side of the cloth is tag for viewers to read. One side lists the symbols and their meaning, and the other side is the name of the woman it represents. This component introduces a new visual language where semiotics is emphasized in the object of cloth, and the symbols used to decorate it.

The Backtalk symbols were inspired by Adinkra in both form and function. Lacking sufficient printing and industrial structures such as the Gutenberg Press, printed materials did not bloom in Africa at the same rate as European and Western countries. Therefore, for historical and cultural reasons, West Africa developed its own sustainable writing language through the development of Adinkra symbols, a library of marks used for everyday communication. These marks were transferred to wax-print fabrics, mimicking the fast flow of information seen in the printing press.

All language, including visual language, is learned. Similar to Adinkra symbols, Backtalk is an ideographic writing system based on arbitrary symbols which adapt semantic value. Backtalk represents ideas and are independent of phonetic sounds. They are significant in that the ideas can be pronounced in many languages, thus establishing a universal system, similar to traffic signs.

The creation of Backtalk stresses how communication can be accomplished through refined graphical representations of everyday beliefs. In graphic design, the

application of signs and symbols are progressively eminent. Once learned, ideographic sign systems leave no room for different interpretations. Its function is to communicate a message in the most effective, direct way possible. Backtalk symbols materialize these concepts by establishing a system that transcends language barriers.

The form of each symbol has an arbitrary relationship to its meaning, however, the repetitive, deconstructed circular form is symbolic. Designer Adrian Frutiger's semiotic analysis of the circle served as the foundation, and inspiration for the codes. Frutiger argues the feeling of being inside a circle generates an impulse to be toward the center, in search for a mysterious unity of life. A circle's core radiates energy from its invisible center outward to its circumference, signifying any given stage of growth, or revelation.[14] And, although soft and feminine, it is viewed as a barrier, protecting from outside influences. The circle serving as the substructure for Backtalk, semiotically reinforces the code's purpose: it allows black women to tap into the core of their true identity, experience growth and expression, while denouncing limiting representations mainstream media allows them.

Symbols systems must have unity, simplicity contrast and scalability. Backtalk symbols evolved from many quick sketches and studies. Those chosen for the system were developed, refined, and unified. They were rendered as decorative, flat, graphic marks. They are simple, yet abstract, and each symbol is a flat form that displays an equal distribution of line weights, geometric shapes, and negative space. There are three varying line weights used throughout. The boldest line weight is used for the perimeter of the shape, which represents the protective barrier that the circle symbolizes. The two

[14] Frutiger, Adrian. *Signs and Symbols: Their Design and Meaning*. London: Ebury, 1998. p. 47.

smallest weights are reserved for inner details. Consistency creates familiarity therefore; each symbol is deconstructed from a perfect circle. The system is unified further through its use of repetitive elements such as concentric circles, parallel and vertical lines. The system's simplicity offers legibility which makes the symbols and system recognizable. This not only ensures system awareness, but that each symbol can be scaled seamlessly at any size, while maintaining their readability.

Figure 17. Backtalk symbols

The fabrics are modeled after African cloth which are typically designed or made by the wearer, and have a longstanding record as a significant communication device in sub-Saharan Africa. The significance of African textile is not in the cloth or clothing itself, but in the motifs depicted. Visuals on the cloth represent the wearer status, political

views, and announce significant events such as life, marriage, and deaths. In like manner, each newly designed cloth depicts a narrative specific to each woman, revealing messages of marital status, talents, celebrations of life, values, or communal proverbs.[15]

Clothing across cultures, traditional and contemporary, serves to inform the viewer what kind of person the wearer believes themselves to be. It expresses what opinions they have, what origin or culture they belong to, religious values, and so on. It is an expression of identity. Twenty-first-century clothing is still valued as a major communication tool, because it is used to portray a desirable lifestyle, usually projected by a brand, or designer. Clothing that is designed and worn by its creator is a unique representation of the maker's thoughts, free of pressures of brand influences. The Backtalk textiles examine how symbolic connections to objects are used to project unique identities. It exists as a means to "wear" identity using visual codes. Equally, it conveys ways in which power is portrayed, organized, and articulated through media. The fabrics ultimately project political, visual language capable of dominating, challenging, and unifying.

The choice to create graphics with a strong African aesthetic is intentional. It has become increasingly popular for Diasporic Africans to reconnect their roots to their continent of origin. The black aesthetic of the textiles' patterns demonstrates pride in African heritage while drawing attention to those roots. They create an important focal point for both the expression of Afro-centric, and individual identity. And although, the fabrics draw inspiration from the diverse market of African wax-prints, style and

[15] Spring, Christopher. *African Textiles Today.* London: British Museum Press, 2012.

application is constant. Cohesion is vital in that it strengthens the visual system, making the marks and cloths distinct and recognizable.

The use of cloth not only mimics traditional West African communication methods, but also mirrors the American use of African clothing as a protest device. This was inspired by Maulana Karenga's Black Nationalist organization, Us, founded in 1965 where members wore African clothing and hairstyles to defy Eurocentrism in mainstream American culture.[16] These fabrics are worn with pride and express the wearer's affiliation with an imagined community that connects black womanhood globally and serves as a recognizable badge of belonging.

Each fabric is cut to 72''x 22'' which are the dimension for traditional African headwraps. The headwrap in African cultures have always been celebrated as a symbol of pride and traditional culture. Because they are worn on the head, they are regarded as a crown, or a helmet of courage. The African headwrap has become a trendy item which has assimilated into American and international fashion. It has become accepted as a staple object in apparel for both blacks and non-blacks. The pleats not only emphasize character and uniqueness of the individual, but are symbolic of the various styles and customization the modern-day trend has brought from individual wearers.

[16] Allman, Jean Marie. *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. p. 214.

Figure 18. Backtalk Symbols and Wax Prints

Figure 19. Backtalk and Wax Prints, fabric and tag detail

Patterninja: A Shared Language

Despite the communicative power of clothing, the potential to affect mass change is limited to individuals whom briefly interact with it. A material takeaway for viewers creates a lasting impression and ensures retention for language learning. The final project of the exhibition demonstrates how a app supports the distribution, engagement, and learning of the new visual language.

An app, among other things, is a communication vehicle. It is a system that provides an organization, group, or product the opportunity to extend their identity to an audience. Apps are powerful in that the masses are provided convenient access to information quickly, consistently and independent of a specific location. Patterninja is introduced as a means to efficiently share visual culture codes, while keeping the iconic aesthetic of pattern making cohesive across different mediums. It is a mobile and web application that allows users to create seamless patterns by combining Backtalk symbols and colors to create unique patterns. Simultaneously it produces an experience of language learning, identity formation, and artistic creation to a wider audience. Patterninja is a preexisting tool created by web developer Sergiy Yavorsky. Its contents, however, are edited to limit users to the Backtalk symbols, making it a dominant visual language. The user interacts with the symbol library, picking traits they most identify with. The overall design of the application is simple. The interface provides a brief tutorial for each new user, and offers direct tools and functions for customization. Visual simplicity is significant to its usability in that it demands that the elements present in the

interface contribute to the applications objective and utility of the user.[17] Patterninja does not assume any prior graphic design or coding experience, but it is designed to help newcomers to explore the art form. It forces users to think about design principles, mainly composition, scale, and color. Users can select graphics and manipulate them using hand gestures, or a mouse. They can change background and symbols colors, scale, layer and overlap elements. Finished patterns can be downloaded in high resolution and used in printing, web, or edited further in professional design programs. They are also provided a unique URL that can be shared across social networks. User-centered designs put participants at the center of their identity reflection, or formation. Their designs reflect personality, character, needs, and emotions.

It is important to stress that Patterninja functions as both a creative and educational tool. Its obvious purpose is centered around creativity and user generated content, however Patterninja is disguised as a learning mechanism to facilitate language acquisition and promote social and cultural change. Recognition of language is part of a greater striving for cultural identity and recognition. While the application helps to standardize a language, identity discovery may help users understand the social and cultural context in which the application was created. This may promote both empathy and understanding. Patterninja has infinite pattern possibilities. That capability symbolically represents, and promotes, a world where diversity transcends all, freeing us of categorizing and stereotypical perceptions.

[17] Cuello, Javier, and José Vittone. *Designing Mobile Apps*. Creative Space Publishing, 2013. p. 82.

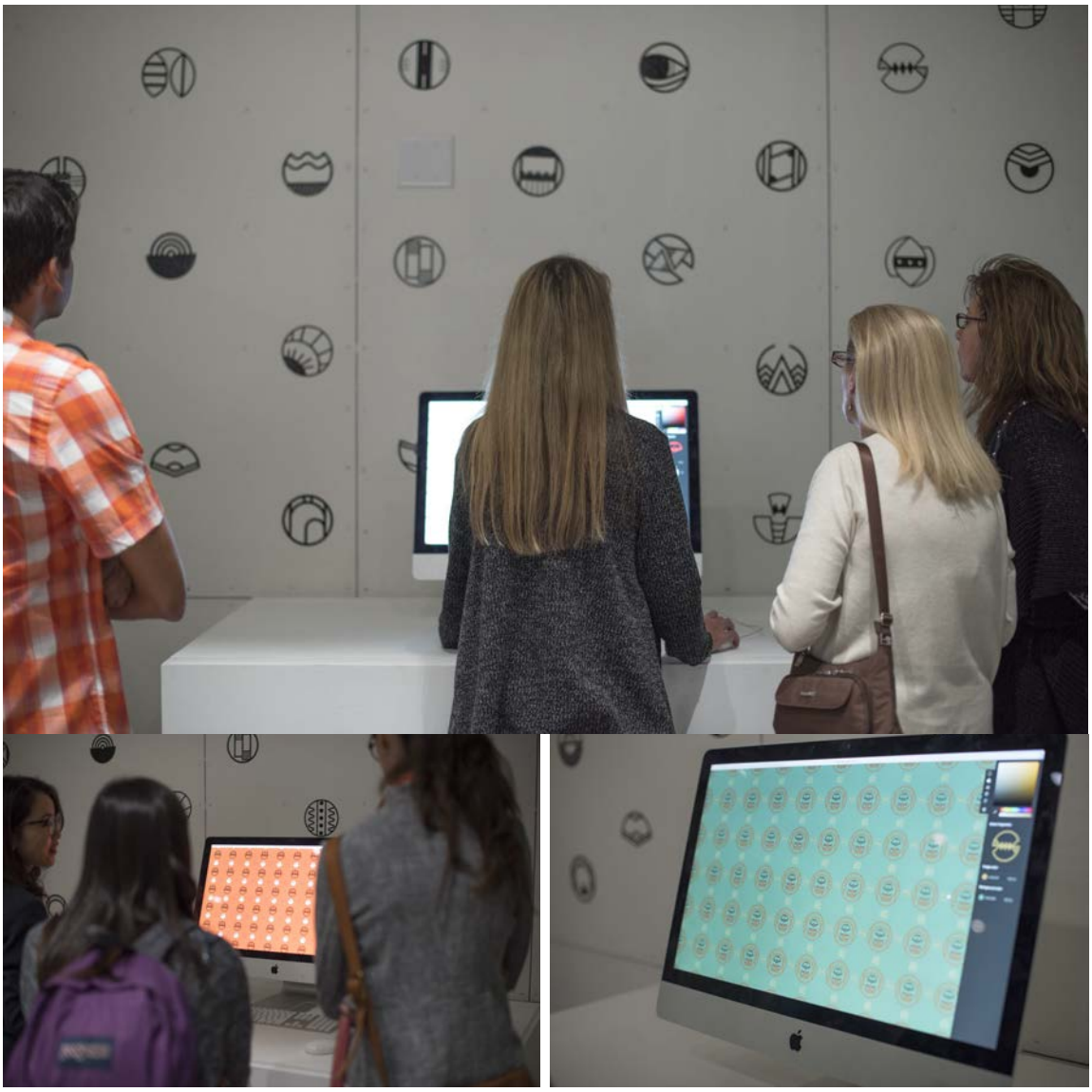

Figure 20. Patterninja, audience interaction and screen display

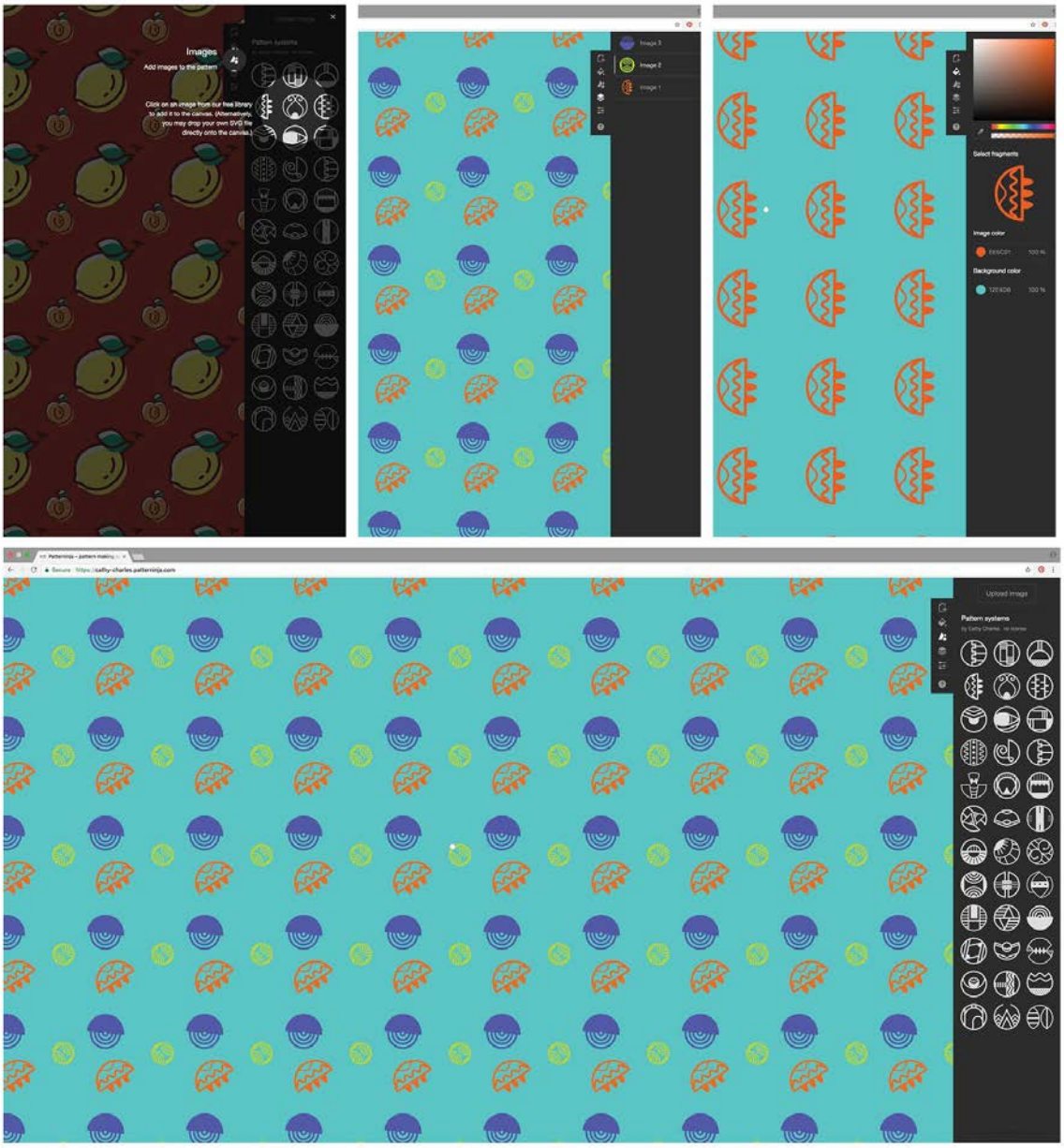

Figure 21. Patterninja, App Interface screenshot

Conclusion

Our society is increasingly saturated by visuals. However, of the 23.5 million black woman in American, their visual representation has been diminished to a measly three stereotypes.[18] American society has been struggling for at least three hundred years to decide what and who black women should be. Representation is currency to visual communication and whomever controls representation influences perception.

This thesis observed ways graphic design enables a new visual language that communicates a set of ideas, attitude and values to others while triggering identity formation, social engagement and social change. Works created for this project dissect language application in various communication mediums, and their influence on promoting a diverse and inclusive representative visual for black women. The research and the work created for the exhibition provided insights on the efficient and educational value of visual languages. Emotional, informative approaches to image making that emphasizes the role of media, aesthetics and social context allows participants to perceive concepts and relationships they had not realized.

Backtalk is fitting for a global multilingual culture. It is a universal and international system that can be used by all. It addresses how one can dominate a communicative space, creating and manipulating perception through sign systems and

[18] Black Demographics. (n.d.). *Black Women Statistics.* Retrieved from http://blackdemographics.com/population/black-women-statistics/

graphics. This project has inspired me to continue expanding this vocabulary and showcase it through innovative responses of graphic design.

Bibliography

Allman, Jean Marie. Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress. Indiana University Press. African Expressive Cultures. EBSCOhost.2004.

Allman, Jean Marie. Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.

Ballenger, Holly B., "Photography: A Communication Tool." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2014. http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art_design_theses/147

Banfield, William C. Cultural Codes: Makings of a Black Music Philosophy: An Interpretive History from Spirituals to Hip Hop. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010. Kindle edition.

Baumann, Gerd, and Andr.″ Gingrich. Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach. New York: Berghahn Books, 2006.

Black Demographics. (n.d.). Black Women Statistics. Retrieved from http://blackdemographics.com/population/black-women-statistics/

Bullock, Alan, and Stephen Trombley. The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought. London: HarperCollins, 1999.

Cuello, Javier, and José Vittone. Designing Mobile Apps. Place of Publication Not Identified: Creative Space Publishing, 2013.

Pilgrim, D. (2008, August). The Sapphire Caricature - Anti-black Imagery - Jim Crow Museum - Ferris State University. Retrieved from https://ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/antiblack/sapphire.htm

Donald G. Ellis, Ifat Maoz. "A Communication and Cultural Codes Approach to Ethnonational Conflict". International Journal of Conflict Management. Vol. 14 Issue: 3/4, pp.255-272, https://doi.org/10.1108/eb022901 (2003).

Frutiger, Adrian. Signs and Symbols: Their Design and Meaning. London: Ebury, 1998.

Hyatt, Jenny, and Helen Simons. Cultural Codes – Who Holds the Key? The Concept and Conduct of Evaluation in Central and Eastern Europe. London: SAGE Publications, 1999. PDF.

Jensen, Sune Qvotrup. Othering, Identity Formation and Agency. Qualitative Studies, Available at: <https://tidsskrift.dk/qual/article/view/5510>. Date accessed: 26 feb. 2018.

Jones, Charisse, and Kumea Shorter-Gooden. Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America. Pymble, NSW: HarperCollins e-books, 2008. PDF.

McElya, Micki. Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-century America. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007.

Spring, Christopher. African Textiles Today. London: British Museum Press, 2012.

Szto, Peter. Documentary in American social welfare history: 1897- 1943. Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, 35(2), 91-110. 2008.