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When I look at Walter Price, I feel unsure where I'm at. Location is as indeterminate as qualities are abundant in Price's settings. Some space, maybe much. Ample seating. Staggered palm trees are alternately full-bodied plantings and stamped motifs. Under a deep lavender sky, a brushy behemoth of a gray hat and disembodied green shadows. Varied, vaguely busy beings. Things aborning. Sometimes none. A branch butts in and seems to cover a lot of the view. The butting-in proves to be constitutive for that view.

Clearly Price revels in the formalities of putting together an exciting picture, and he's bonkers for color. His penchant is for punchy color: weighted with value and density, it approaches in sheets or lands with a thud, it bewilders, and it is potent exactly because it talks more to the body and imagination than to the head. A friend who warns they're feeling punchy is letting you know they could surprise you. 'Nothing would surprise me at this point' is the kind of jadedness Price's pictures oppose, using placement and color to generate problems ongoingly.

Try for a resolution like 'Price's places are richly colored,' for they almost always are, and it's as though a painting cuts you off. Architecture, the paradigmatic place of painted interiors, entirely melts into the yellows of *Chipo-che-roar-wah* (2017, fig 1). Yellow is where Price places us, opposite some very-much-at-ease figures. And that 'yellow,' several times in this picture, changes: its hue, shape, weight, speed, and most of all, situation in space. Real optical anomalies abound. Surface-bound outlines of brown, pink, and orange scream 'flatness.' Heavily painted edges convey paint away from us, as if into the wall. This color occupies real spatial depth. Suddenly the object courts the very illusion the image on it defers. It's work to keep up with the changes, a labor of precise, dynamic attention. You could say assumptions and paradigms do not hold up—but it's *how* they fail that you want to understand. *Chipo-che-roar-wah's* use of yellow as a mutable material and a context shows how. A great many hats and hat types show how: some country, some modeled on the Hasidim's biber and hoiche, some hobo—a figure for restless mobility itself. Two aspects of a recurring motif show how: prominent, cryptic detail and its manifestation in



Fig 1. Walter Price, *Chipo-che-roar-wah*, 2017, Acrylic on wood panel, 16 x 20 inches (40.6 x 50.8 cm)



Fig 2. Walter Price, *Its not if you see color, its how you treat color*, 2019, Acrylic, gesso, and Flashe on canvas, 73 x 78 1/2 inches (185.4 x 199.4 cm)

contrasting-color outline, alternately dotted or solid. A shape and an aperture, this is detail to see and to see through. Consider the starring trio of outlined signifiers in *Its not if you see color, its how you treat color* (2019, fig 2). The empty payload of an El Camino. A hollow wheel well. An axle floating free of transmission and chassis—a staple in the mechanic’s wheelhouse, a sign of trouble on the road. But in a painting—a thought at once about drive and about breakdown.

A rule of Price’s image with respect to position: a vague aboutness, deeply trustful of loose connection, preferred to landing. In scenery such as the landscape or interior, artists pursue their elusive accord with the given world.¹ In scenery, the fantasy of art as a real place finds its most fertile setting. Price advances into

scenery, spreading out inside of color, to trouble position. The presence alone of figures does not ensure a figure-ground relationship, which is often deferred. Gone is landscape’s traditional equivalence with outside and interior’s with in. In Price’s exuberant unnaturalism, characters and psychological objects proliferate, establishing a weird spatiality where one expects a plot or a setting that could explain things. (His titles offer little help; rather, like unimplicated bystanders, they say, Don’t look at me!) To think the multifarious happenings in Price, imagine a junk drawer. Think how a pack of gum shows through a binder clip through a black scissors handle, woodgrain and printed matter through the woolly clear of bag plastic. Amid layers and adjacencies, the undivided life of this utterly familiar, bizarre reality appears in a play of tones. More ‘and’ and ‘through’ than ‘what.’

With reference to Price’s exercising-figure groups (fig 3), Ashley James describes the artist’s “general interest in feats of human extension.”² James’s observation is profound, keenly perceiving what may also be the hardest thing about art, namely the stretch it requires. Opposite Price, very often one’s comfort, as attendant to the image, is at issue. Valleys, rooms, furniture, hats—things of accommodation, invitations to accept or refuse. Because looking at art is hard. Perhaps you

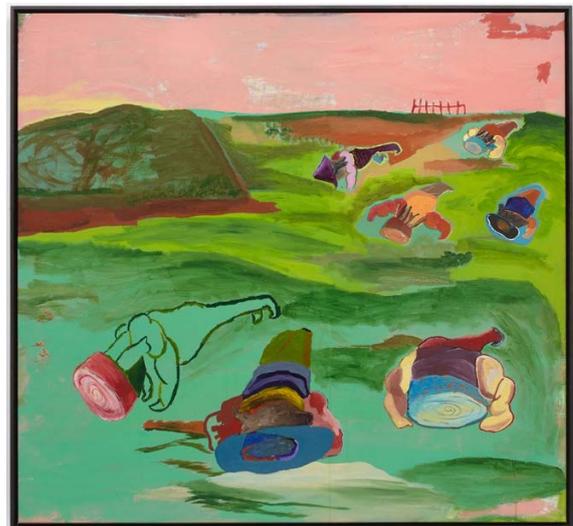


Fig 3. Walter Price, *Mountain climbers (scaled)*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 51 inches (127 x 129.5 cm)

¹ *Les Nabis et le Décor* (Paris: Reunion des Musées Nationaux, 2019) ingeniously explored a high point in the art history of this theme.

² Ashley James, “Push and Pull-Ups: The Paintings of Walter Price,” in *Studio Museum in Harlem, Fictions* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2017), 68-71: 69.

could use a seat or some shade. Here. There, there. You might prefer to remain less involved, pass the time in hardship. That could be a problem here.

Price told James that a work is finished when it's suitably funky, a word of sensual alertness (and evocation itself) that points to a whole other way of work. Funk, a major form of seeking "our way out of our constrictions," depends on our willingness to draw down our resistances. When the funk says, "I Can Move You (If You Let Me)," it means that without your body its constitutive groove cannot achieve form. You'll have to meet the art halfway. The funk for its part is unafraid to be extremely sexy. It targets the pleasure centers directly, to get you where you don't want to get got. Resistances are obdurate and working-through is arduous. The funk is hard-won, quicksilver. Once it's in you, it's still more work to keep it. You'll plead with your feet: "Feet don't fail me now / Do you promise the funk?"³

Price constructs his energetic, expansive image at the seam of abstraction and representation. It's got generosity to impart. For the work to be seen and heard, to travel its own course through the public way, its unsettled orientation with respect to place, position, color, and story should be honored. Its dialogues with history are key to that process.

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When I look at Walter Price, I see an art that finds natural company among the work of individuals who got the art they needed by making considered rejections of orthodoxy, then claiming what ideologies of art foreswore. Particularly informative with regard to Price are Peter Saul vis-à-vis abstraction at the 1950s end, Sigmar Polke vis-à-vis American composition around 1963, and Kerry James Marshall vis-à-vis autonomy. In each practice, transgression entails or implies the artist's analysis of limits he has experienced. I offer them not as models present within Price's practice, waiting to become apparent to the viewers of his work, but as aspects of his chosen medium. After total abstraction, committed painters used painting to discover its capacities afresh. Unabstracted and made un-Modernist (demodernized?), painting could resume its historical project as a medium of communication by engaging, without shame, matters of worldly concern.

A friend quips, "Remember modernism—when shit was tight?!" riffing on the way looseness, in painting, can signal that an ideology has been experienced as a problem. Loose is a way to describe painting confidently uncertain, or wanting to engender a less-sure discourse regarding 'should' in the practice of art. Saul's characteristic form emerged between 1958 and 1964, which he spent in Paris and Rome. Saul's image, an undulant space crowded with detail, combines the most lurid color with details drawn from the whole gamut of broadcasted imagery. What made his painting uncongenial (post-ideological) were its social inclusivity regarding subject and casualness regarding reputability. Visiting a 2015 exhibition of his work from this period, Saul proudly noted, "There's nothing responsible here." He portrayed the too-muchness that was endemic to modern life but edited out of Modernism. His predilection for edge-to-edge and layered juxtaposition make his pictures as cognitively overwhelming as they are compositionally overfull. Yet all is not noise; Saul offered surprisingly congruous collisions of figures, objects, events, and themes.

³ George Clinton, Walter Morrison, and Gary Shider, "One Nation under a Groove," *One Nation under a Groove* (Warner Brothers, 1978); George Clinton, Cordell Mosson, Bernie Worrell, and Bootsy Collins, "I Can Move You (If You Let Me)," *Up for the Down Stroke* (Casablanca, 1974).

*Advertising and design made an increasingly aggressive appearance and proceeded to dominate the picture in a riot of color. There was no denying it: the new colors were on the march and they were interpreted as new quality. [...] But the grayness of the neighborhood has somehow endured.*⁴

Grayness, for Gachnang, figures contradictions made glaringly visible by capitalism, even amid color riot, regular disorders dreamt away through supermarket design. Polke's frank drawings of this period materialize an everyday rich with alternatives to the one Pop framed, rich for being rife with palpable vexation and not-particularly-excited affects. Pop may've landed, but for many, meeting basic needs required complex choreography.

Polke's 1960s drawings constitute a casual if sustained attack on Pop's representative and representatively modern image, its composure, agreeable disposition towards commercial color and technique, and silly fantasy of automatic modernity. Many attempt a humanistic consideration of the interplay of plenty and privation that insurgent consumerism brought to view. Inability to partake in Pop life factored nowhere in Pop. In Polke's Germany, for instance, the Berlin Wall meant a boundary to send the newly plentiful goods, color TVs, and dazzling designs over and around, by illicit transfer from West to East, in real-time exchanges between haves and have-nots that immediately became normative. If a particular effort was needed to connect the two concurrent realms, an image uniting them would show that strain. A slight still life from 1963 (fig 5) is at once a work of typically northern European art and an insight into the clash between grayness and particolored materialism. Polke seats a slender, common flower vase (with a wisp of green-tipped clippings) upon a chair of just twelve swift strokes of blue ballpoint. Visually, the vessel weighs greatly more than the chair, which is almost all paper, its seat an unarticulated plane. For being nearly colorless—indeed the high tones are not pigment at all but yellowed varnish—the rootless scene feels the more impoverished, inadequate, and lacking in overall resplendence, as though orphaned by the genres of northern European still life and Pop alike. In four errant-seeming strokes of ochre, yellow, and lavender, Polke provides the missing colors, but at a taunting remove from the ostensive subject (as well as from drawing). Like traces of thinking realized elsewhere or dropped altogether, they're also rather like color swatches or brush tests, and not unlike art-supply displays featuring both. Color is entirely out of place, formally and ideologically, pointedly displaced from object (chair, vase, clippings), and indifferent to surface. In a sense independent, this color expresses not feeling but its lack, a total disregard for the parlor picture, academic procedure, the mythologized substrate, and the

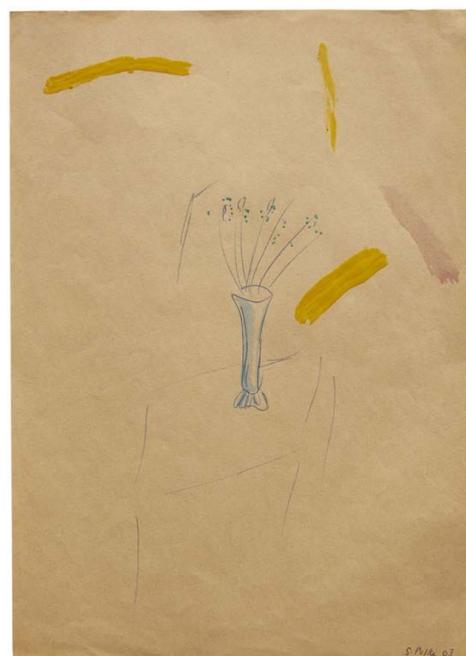


Fig 5. Sigmar Polke, *Untitled*, 1963, Ballpoint pen, watercolor, and varnish on paper, 11 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches (29.2 x 21 cm)

⁴ Johannes Gachnang, *Sigmar Polke: The Early Drawings 1963–1969*, trans. Catherine Schelbert (Berlin: Verlag Gachnang & Springer), 1991, 8 and 9.

supermarket. The swathe of unused paper signals a completely ordinary triumph, against every capitalist instinct, of managing to leave some space empty.

Kerry James Marshall represents an apposite manifestation of anti-ideology in contemporary painting. Marshall designed his practice to reconcile ardent love of painting, indeed of the challenge of its legendary flatness, with his equally ardent love of his Black world, which Modernist norms proscribe and worse, both implicitly and explicitly. Whoever said modernism and Black self-determination couldn't strengthen one another's positions, Marshall's image insists, was flat wrong. Here, all humanistic content derives from "within the Black,"⁵ a black both cultural and chromatic, while every mark and figure acknowledges, and so demands we acknowledge, the board of planed plastic below.

Untitled (Club Couple) (2014, fig 6) carries forward historical genres of museum art, and many of the most fanciful techniques associated with them, as pretexts for updating the formats themselves as well as the history of art in (nearly) the fullest sense the modern survey museum can imagine. The ordinary meaning of *update* is too coy to capture Marshall's project. He wants the whole of art history, not just the parts designated 'Black,' for himself and for his people. Looking at *Club Couple*, I still register its congenial friction with any number of paintings in museums within spitting distance of the London gallery where *Club Couple* debuted in fall 2014. Its type of commemorative portrait spans traditions. The two Bluetinis in gleaming stem glasses have cognates in centuries of still life and genre scenes. The electric sign at upper right, whose cord disappears behind the female figure, gives off the buzz Rachel Ruysch would have used a bee or a fly to transmit. That cord descends toward a blue box the male figure displays for us alone. With electricity, Marshall both authenticates and allegorizes the love between his posing subjects. He plans to pop the question, but for now it's our secret. The two are achingly gorgeous, each more so thanks to the presence of the other, and content in equal measure. All this strikes one as really so despite 360 square inches of manifest unreality. One's belief in the painting, in its reality, helps one believe everything else that is happening in turn: we three are together, in a world made by art, where blackness is fully, peacefully integral.

Marshall's 'no' addresses the ideology that would allow figuration only on the racist condition of autonomy, from which modernity already excluded its many disempowered underclasses. To go all the way with medium specificity (where painting went to assert its autonomy) would have meant forsaking the bond between himself and Black life, his habits and primary subject. Blackness is central and determinant in the Modernism Marshall constructed; he makes a picture Modernist by strictly observing his materials' technical limitations where even decoration and illusion are

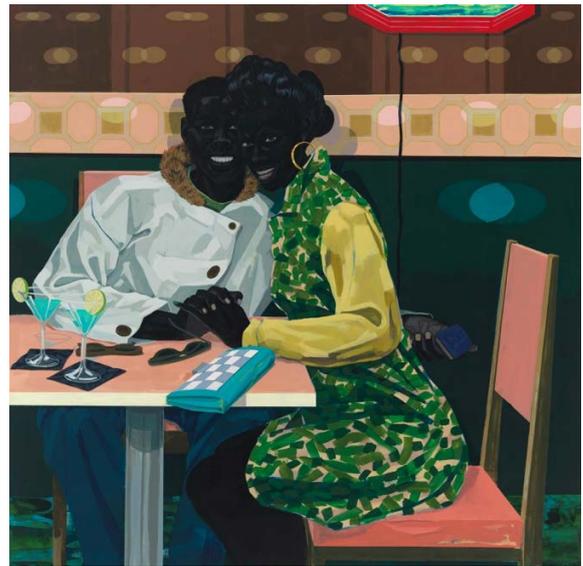


Fig 6. Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Club Couple)*, 2014, Acrylic on PVC panel, 59 5/8 x 59 5/8 inches (151.5 x 151.5 cm)

⁵ Kerry James Marshall in conversation with the author, November 2015.

concerned (note the abstract motifs across the wall, napkins, clutch, dress, and floor). Radical specificity still holds, only it's palpably radical. In this way, with every figurative painting, Marshall does service to his people while fully inhabiting his chosen medium, thereby securing in practice a freedom Modernism extends him only in theory.

In all three cases—Saul, Polke, and Marshall—moves had to be made, and stakes moved, to have, in art, ordinary freedoms that art ideologies abjure. A free practice has the space that self and work need to coexist.

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When I look at Walter Price, I recall the instability of the black figure in visual art and of blackness in the public imagination, and I am reminded that constructing an abstract or inclusive or difficult image needn't mean forsaking one's own. Price stands firm (and invites us to join him) in a turbulent formalism full of identity that adheres to no single identity politics. This keeps his image strange and buoyant, distinguishing it from so much obvious art. Noting the diversity of Price's figures, you realize that his work does not uphold the tradition where the presence of black figures licenses a culturally specific narration. Rather, Price answers the call to represent by claiming and combining cultural differences an otherwise inclined artist would forfeit and separate. (As noted, it's less than certain they're figures at all.)

In this, Price's image advances the work of artists who disregarded or took critical aim at the figurative imperative in Black art ideology, including Bob Thompson (fig 7), Robert Colescott, Pope.L, Kara Walker, Dave McKenzie, and others. Like them, Price breaks another way. The equivalence between appearance and identity, between black artist and black art, does not hold. Rather, the variability of this relation constitutes a (one) subject of the artwork. Into the black image these artists introduce wandering color, part-objects, uneven textures, fractured space, irrationality, and, most important, other differences. The structurally integrated artwork represents several differences at once, honors their embeddedness in the mess of the real. "There's nothing responsible here." No, everything invites questioning of representation's hard-won bona fides. What is it to represent? To fill a gap in representation? What is it to do neither? Would you really trade your fantasies for a 'positive' image?

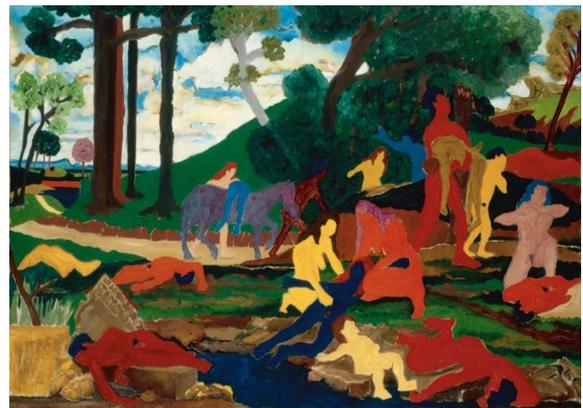


Fig 7. Bob Thompson, *Death of the Infant Bethel*, 1965, Oil on canvas, 60 x 84 inches (152.4 x 213.4 cm)

When these questions become *historical*, the likes of Price emerge. Price was born in 1989, in Macon, Georgia, starting life almost a half-century after Marshall, who was born in 1955, in Birmingham, Alabama. A four-hour drive and one-and-a-half generations separate the artists' birthplaces, both icons of the Deep South. Marshall's Birmingham is renowned for race terror and, improbably, as a base of operations for the integrated nonviolent movement. Price's Macon is renowned as the home of widely imitated legends of racially integrated American culture, from Little Richard and Otis Redding to the Allman Brothers Band. Marshall's from "Bombingham," the

nickname Birmingham earned as the site of numerous dynamite attacks, from 1945 to 1967, against black residents and supporters of desegregation. By contrast, Price describes home as a hilly place, lush with cherry trees. Price came into a sense of his people during the twenty-first century. In twenty-first century fashion, that sense is definitively interracial, likely cemented during the time he spent, directly out of high school, in the US Navy's hermetic, masculinist multicultural, which challenged and expanded him. Price's imagery reflects all this (fig 8). Indeed, if the tight enclosure where we meet the *Club Couple* also evokes compulsory heterosexuality, which broadly endorses the oppressive idea that marriage is socially reparative and may not recognize this woman's right to refuse the impending proposal, the looseness of Price's image extends to these considerations as well as painterly ones. After all, elemental to Price's image is a fluidity that touches the sexes and all they do, every bit as much as it informs the beings and things of his world, settings included.

Price finds us—all of us—as, most often, we find ourselves, which is to say, among others, awash in otherness.

For all its arty intensity, then, Price's image is also plausibly a social space where plainly different 'people' jostle and arrange themselves in reply to inscrutable necessity. Mixture, here, is given. Mixing is thrilling. Mixture is for reveling. Most everything in our culture is designed to separate, but mixing is terminal. Mixture isn't always fun and games. Nobody wants it funky *all* the time. So when mixture happens, it places extraordinary demands on the mind for work.

A cultural worker with this bent may find that the work is mostly uphill. Folks unsettled by experiments in the area of color can lean on instituted rules of color compliance still seen as inviolable and on the combined legacies of their enforcers. Both traverse a diverse history that gathers in its sway everything from *disegno e colore*; Goethe's foundational color theory, Runge's revisions, and Albers's curricula; Jim Crow⁶; modern eugenics; color science; market segmentation; retail environments; and, gerrymandered electoral maps. A similar orthodoxy also reigns in much of the representative intellectual work by theorists of antiblack racism. Even as this work studies and re-describes historical theories and practices of color compliance (across periods, classes, and disciplines), the tradition connecting Marcus Garvey to Amiri Baraka to Saidiya Hartman generates critical power by fastening and refining blackness.

Standing in high relief against this background are those who, in their works, operate color as a vehicle of surprise. Deployed against inherited norms, color used to critique, to break old bonds (art to nature, then to academic conventions, then to objects), or to venture new ones (as in Fauvism, the integrated nonviolent civil rights movement, or Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, where colors, blood-red excluded, appear to Baby Suggs, figures of her ultimate release from the

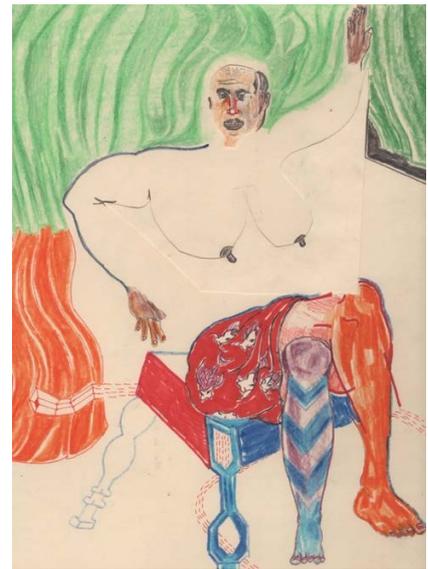


Fig 8. Walter Price, *Right over left or left over right*, 2020, Collage, Scotch tape, double-sided tape, Sharpie, color pencil, ink, and graphite on paper, 12 x 9 inches (30.5 x 22.9 cm)

⁶ On the 'segregation nostalgia' that continues to inform a staggering amount of American cultural production, condemning new statements and representations to reinstate the notion of a static black-white relation, see Adolph Reed Jr., "Dangerous Dreams: Black Boomers Wax Nostalgic for the Days of Jim Crow," *The Village Voice* vol. 41, no. 16 (16 April 1996): 24-29.

impresses of bondage). In notable cases, visual artists—think of Jacopo Pontormo, El Greco, late Courbet, Maurice Denis, Milton Avery, Vilhelm Hammershøi, Lee Krasner, Philip Guston, Thompson, Lee Lozano, Dan Flavin, Marlene Dumas, Marshall, Rachel Harrison—so personalized color that it became thinkable entirely apart from what they use color to do, an historical alterity unto itself. Palette alone tells you who you're dealing with.

Price has planted stakes in both areas, the blackness of his origins, much theorized today, and the indeterminate colorism continually in the making. So his color signals trouble for either/or and here/there approaches alike. If I press its affiliation with the continually surprising color attitude, it's because everywhere in Price intuitive, unnatural color goes way outside the lines, foregoes logical consistency, and sets up non-correspondent relations between declared colors and worldly references, physical or otherwise. Following Price's color into uncharted territory simply means sacrificing the chart, and, less simply, taking on an orientation problem.

Color of this cast—spacious, used at will, compelling consideration of 'how' at the cost of 'what' and 'where'—is a form of freedom still available to the subjects of an increasingly unfree culture. The freedom of color in art takes permission from nature, but only insofar as art color seems freest where what's natural develops along the way. Where imagination and decisions taken during work are determinate. Where a person, place, or object's identifying color does not necessarily make it what it is. Where color is decidedly in and of the real—art's real—and decoupled from what's *given* as natural.

Because such art is inextricable from concerted acts of imagination, further such acts are needed to be reached by it. Art requires a stretch in part because it is completely absurd, an emergence almost directly from imagination into public life, into the cultural field. There'd be nothing to discuss if Price hadn't already said, 'It feels right to me.' With that very voicing, Audre Lorde invests the artist's erotic faculty with utmost usefulness:

Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, "It feels right to me," acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. And understanding is a hand-maiden which can only wait upon, or clarify, that knowledge, deeply born.⁷

Lorde describes a personally seismic event: a deeply felt response to a moment of living, "acknowledged into" true knowledge through practice. In an analogous way, things in Price, both intensely in and out of place, are absolutely true enough.

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When I look at Walter Price, I think of his story. Born in a world-historical year, his mother was a caregiver and his father an auto mechanic. Price describes Macon as a moody landscape: "welcoming on the surface yet dark and intense once you're there."⁸ He took early to art, possessed of an innate creative zeal ("art was when and where you could meddle in your world") that he was encouraged to cultivate even though the idea of going all in on art was a very

⁷ Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic" (1978), in her *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, Ca.: Crossing, 1984), 56.

⁸ Walter Price in conversation with the author, 10 August 2020.

farfetched one. School fieldtrips to the local Museum of Arts and Science meant frequent encounters with the work of local artists, many self-taught, and familiarized Price with Thornton Dial, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, and Betye Saar before Pollock et al. During high school he developed his skill in art classes taken by mail. On graduating, Price entered the Navy, where he held leadership positions in the service, put out fires and cooked aboard a ship, learning firsthand to cherish competencies developed through repetition. After four years, Price left the service. At Middle Georgia College, he concentrated in painting and drawing. Price had loved art well before he knew he could make a life in it, but an encounter with the work of Henry Taylor, in spring 2015⁹, proved revelatory: "Oh this man loves to paint and he's black! I can totally do this." Doing it set Price on a road out of Macon—a fabled place with a "way of thinking"—killer story and all.

Price's story passes through settings of almost mythological richness: Macon, the Navy, twenty-first century art school. They activate a train of captivating mental images. The localities and images track Price to New York, where he has lived and worked for six years. The rifts between these varied images are obvious. Contradictions arise. Price considers them resources.

Our moment is very much about stories, arguably too much about them. We like them rich and compressed, like cubed bouillon. We seem especially to like when they confirm what everybody already knows: thinking about art and identity should be reflexive and easy, not slow and hard; it should be consummately sharable, not erotic, ineffable, or discomfiting. Rarely do we ask what stories cannot do, or calculate the cost of being fascinating. But probably we are unnarratable in exact proportion to the fervid insistence with which we exact stories from one another.

Here the observer's work rebegins: to consider Price as an artist-in-full, to hold his story in mind *with* and *apart from* the flat fictions on the wall, wherein place, color, and position engender problems story won't resolve, at least not truthfully.

Price's mysteries fit awkwardly with the moment. This feels right to me. If we let them, the authentic confusion they engender, the pleasures of response they give might speak directly to the stagnancy of our time. Coming to terms with Price now means leaning into the subtlety that prevailing narratives elide or attack. Subtleties that power discovery in the over-mapped terrain of art: the primacy of nuance, art's own silence and the quiet it calls for, the finality of its subjectivism, its exhilarating unwillingness to explain itself. All these contravene the present factophilia, the tactical positivism, the correlated hardening of differences and fear of getting blackness wrong. I'm all for clarity and exactitude, but without engaging the imagination, no movement can expect to transform consciousnesses. A dialogue from which a capacious, broadly inhabitable, surprising humanism can emerge cannot set limits to meandering and transgression. Art can't happen there.

With story, one might strengthen connections that dissolve in Price's image. That image draws wonderfully liberally on affinities and paradoxes in its whole historical relation to places and worldly beings and things, including other art. A digressive, temperamental and irrational color, an inclination to liquefy place, to welcome streams of casually various figures—these say less about life than about what living through form entails for Price. His world has a place for worldmaking.

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⁹ See https://www.blumandpoe.com/exhibitions/henry_taylor52. Accessed 25 August 2020.