

A Word to the Visitor Regarding Labels in the *Can You See Me?* Exhibition

I can largely contribute my growth as a poet to my relationship with visual art. A little over a decade ago, I began to experiment with *ekphrastic* poetry (poetry written in response to a visual image). I began crafting poems that were in conversation with the work of visual artists such as Joseph Hirsch, Nick Cave, Kehinde Wiley, Marcia Kure, Sonie Ruffin, Ada Koch, and of course, my dear friend, Harold Smith. In the process, I found my mind turning corners it never would have, had it not been for the influence of those stunning visual images. Inevitably, I began to learn more about the art world itself in terms of historical movements, style, technique, curatorial practices, etc. I also learned how racially and politically charged the world of art is. With that in mind, I wanted to offer some context concerning the labels you will encounter in the *Can You See Me?* exhibit.

I first met Harold in 2010 as we began to collaborate on the *Colors of Jazz* exhibit for the American Jazz Museum. I was immediately impressed with Harold's point of view, his prolificacy, the spirit of improvisation he invoked as he lovingly attacked each canvas with wild abandon. We became fast friends and have been ever since. That being said, the labels I was asked to produce for the exhibit are not neutral or objective, nor were they meant to be. I am unapologetically a fan of Harold's work. Furthermore, the labels are not didactic. I am not an art historian, an art critic, or a curator, so it wasn't my intent to teach you anything per se. The labels are a personal commentary – my thoughts and reactions to the various paintings in the exhibit from the perspective of a poet, an art lover, and a Black man living (or trying to live) in America. Hopefully they will offer you a different way of "seeing" or engaging with the paintings you will encounter. However, I realize the limitations of language and the words we use to communicate our experiences with art. An associate of mine recently admonished, "...words wrap art in a winding sheet of logical fallacies..." echoing the sentiment of Gustave Flaubert, "The best discourse on art is silence." In the end, my words are only supplemental at best, Harold's art speaks for itself.

– Glenn North, poet, Kansas City, Missouri

Open Your Eyes

"Our brotherhood is a sacred bond that we can now look at each other – especially after *When They See Us* – we can look at each other and be like, 'Damn, I knew that there was something special about us.'" – Dr. Yusef Salaam, One of the Exonerated Five

Can't you see / America still struggles / with her original sin / a system rooted in slavery / with
no attempt to amend / will lead to five innocent boys / being treated like violent men / and how
many more of us are there / being coerced to take a plea / 400 years later / the black man is still
not free / can't you see / our broken lives / our ruined families / our communities laid to waste /
as the least of us are treated / as if we have no place / and can it be / the actual offender / who
confessed to the crime / has more compassion than / the justice system we hold so high / can't
you see / through eyes crystal blue / that when you dehumanize me / you lose your humanity
too?

Can You See Me?

The unnamed Black narrator in Ralph Ellison's classic novel, *Invisible Man*, commented, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." This portrait, *Visible Man 2*, from Harold Smith's *Black on Black* series, visually captures the sentiment expressed by Ellison in an alarmingly unique way. The artist's use of black paint on a black background, requires one to pause for a moment to give the eyes an opportunity to focus, to perhaps even change vantage points to find the optimal sight lines to clearly see the image. This effort required by the viewer embodies how difficult it is for some people to truly see black men. The year 2019 marks the 400th anniversary of slavery in America and in a country that historically categorized black men as being 3/5 human, the struggle for black men to be seen in their full humanity has been a constant one. Furthermore, in the face of oppression, of being falsely characterized and stereotyped, it has become extremely difficult for black men to see themselves for who they truly are. However, art has an uncanny way of disrupting the status quo and changing peoples' perspectives. Perhaps that is what we are witnessing here. Ultimately the question remains, "*Can You See Me?*"

The Portrait Speaks

I am a man of color, which is to say, I am a Black man. In fact, I am the Black man who was kidnapped from Africa. I am the Black man who provided the free labor that made this country an economic superpower. I am the Black man who was emasculated, forced to watch while my women were raped and my children were sold. I am the Black man who was lynched, made to endure decades of racial terror. I am the Black man who protested, boycotted, and marched to regain a God-given freedom that was stolen from me. I am Trayvon Martin. I am Michael Brown. I am Oscar Grant. I am Eric Garner. I am Alton Sterling. I am Walter Scott. I am Philando Castile. I am a composite of every black man who has been murdered by a police officer who was the product of a corrupt justice system that is the product of a flawed government which is rooted in a history characterized by a refusal to see me. The colors that comprise me don't blend because I was never offered the opportunity to blend into the country I helped build. When, in the history of America, has my life mattered? Look into my eyes. Is it any wonder that I weep white tears?

AKA the Thinker

Reminiscent of Rodin's famous sculpture, *The Thinker*, we see in this painting, a Black man in a state of deep thought. As Harold Smith stated in reference to this work, "Black men don't have the liberty to just dance through life. We cannot be as carefree as other people. We constantly have to think strategically." His resonant observation rings as true as the daily news when we take time to think of all the questions black men are confronted with, all the tactical thinking they have to do while navigating the daily vicissitudes of racism in America: *Do I tell the white woman who quickly locked her car door as I walked by that I wasn't planning on pulling a carjacking today? Will the resumes I sent out in search of a job be overlooked because my name is DeAndre and not Dustin? If I sit in a Starbucks for two minutes without ordering anything will the manager call 911? Do I confront my so-called white friend who just said the word "nigger" while singing along to a rap song? How do I safely reach for my wallet during a routine traffic stop so this police officer doesn't kill me?*

When Is the Change Going to Come?

Most black men have assumed the posture of the man portrayed in this painting, quietly waiting for the change that Sam Cooke sang about to come. Even white counterparts who acknowledge the race problem in America admonish us to be patient. A brief timeline of the black experience in America offers evidence of why impatience is justified:

1619-1865: Slavery Era (The most heinous system of slavery in human history)

1865-1955: Jim Crow Era (Marked by lynching, segregation, and racial terror)

1955-1968: Civil Rights Era (Opposition in the form of increased police brutality)

1969-2019: Post Civil Rights Era (The so-called War on Drugs, the rise of the prison industrial complex, etc. etc.)

As Dr. King stated in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* in response to white clergymen, “I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say ‘wait.’ [But] There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.”

Not Being Seen or Heard

In his most recent work, Harold Smith examines the phenomena of feeling invisible that black men experience in America. I would assert that accompanying the feeling of not being seen, black men also do not feel heard. We create art, make music, excel in athletics, and inspire fashion trends that the world adores, but we are not given fair treatment in those very same industries. This causes us to ponder how America could love our culture so much but not love us. We boycott. We protest. We march the streets as we witness policemen brutalize and even kill our brothers and sisters with impunity. Our desperate cries fall on deaf ears. In many cases, our efforts in futility lead us to mute ourselves. As depicted in this piece from the Man of Color Series, we cover our own mouths in quiet resignation. However, Smith’s work also entreats us to keep speaking up. It visually represents the words of the prolific writer, James Baldwin, who said, “I love America more than any country in this world, and, exactly, for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”

Man With Bottle And Cup

When one is perceived to be invisible, or believes himself to be invisible, there is a tendency to develop coping mechanisms to deal with the trauma. Many find therapy in a bottle, comfort in a cup. And who, dealing with the daily weight of racism, or the feeling of being invisible wouldn’t long for comfort? Finding this (Southern) comfort becomes easy for black men living in neighborhoods where there’s a liquor store on every corner. In a consistent state of inebriation, he loses the wherewithal to fight oppression, to be a productive member of society, to be a good husband or father. Notice the blurred lines depicted in the painting, the dizzying mix of color, the figure’s lowered eyelids. The beauty of the man that could be, becomes eerily distorted or hard to see. But after years of drinking, the man no longer cares about being invisible. In fact, the objective becomes to disappear altogether. The Book of Proverbs states, “Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth color in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. So, to echo one of Jesus’ final prayers in a renewed context, “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me.”

KANSAS FOCUS GALLERY

Harold D. Smith, Jr. (American, b. 1962)

Visible Man 2, 2019

Mixed media on canvas

Courtesy the Artist



Untitled (Man of Color series), 2019

Mixed media on canvas

5 paintings, all courtesy the artist



LOBBY

The Five, Can you see us now?, 2019

Mixed media on canvas

Courtesy the Artist



2nd floor Museum Office Suite

Impressions 1, 2019

Mixed media on canvas

Courtesy the Artist

