

THE NASSAU
Guardian

The Case for Lavar Munroe: the Son of Soil

October 27, 2018

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Lavar Munroe, *Over the Rainbow*, 2014, acrylic, enamel, spray paint, bandaids, feather poly-fill rope, and stickers on cut canvas, 66 x 36 inches

In order to understand the work of the critically acclaimed artist Lavar Munroe, you have to throw away the sole reliance of beauty when it comes to apprehending art. This recommendation should be considered because being dismissive of this work can truly make one lose out on an art practice that is genuine and truly profound. For centuries, the idea of art being defined by its beauty has been a heavily populated thought; a thought that was molded by the minds of western philosophers, like Immanuel Kant and David Hume – two thinkers that shared a background in western culture and privilege and associated 'great art' with European standards of taste. With all of this being said, there is an underlying question that exists. Is there space to appreciate the uncanny?

Sigmund Freud, a problematic figure in the field of psychology, gave a definition of 'the uncanny' that is used in the art world. Freud defines 'the uncanny' as something that is released from the unconscious mind and it is deemed as frightening and yet simultaneously familiar. This began as the foundation of the artistic method of the surrealist of the 1920s and the definition continues to influence the work of contemporary artists. One might argue that this is the essence of Munroe's ten-year survey on view at the National Art Gallery of The Bahamas (NAGB), "The Son of Soil."

If given the opportunity to take a look at Munroe's survey, the viewer might notice that he shares several narratives in his work. Munroe unleashes his unconscious; he analyses his memories and his life growing up in the underprivileged environment of Grants Town. He focuses on recurring themes in life such a trauma, violence, West African folklore and stereotypes of African diaspora. While doing this, he also finds room to comment on the ongoing negative effects of colonialism in his community. Munroe shows the viewer a perspective of life in The Bahamas that's is often concealed from the public eye, despite the fact that this life is embedded in the veins of this nation. This was and probably still is a part of Munroe's reality.

In his practice, Munroe examines a world where the life of a Black man from the 'ghetto' can be equated to the life of a 'potcake'. In the Bahamas, a 'potcake' is a mixed breed dog that is undesired by many and at times treated as vermin or they are adored and given shelter. Munroe shows us disturbing imagery of a corpse of dog decaying on the ground in the painting called "When Dogs Die, They Go to Heaven" (2017). In that very painting Munroe allows the viewer the decided the value of the dog's life by placing it next to the feet of a bystander. The viewer can then decide on whether the bystander will ignore it or honor the body by burying it. The theme of death is also carried out into the painting "Fallen" (2010). In this painting, it shows imagery of a young Black man's body on the ground decaying like the dog in the painting previously mentioned. The major differences between these paintings are that, unlike "When Dogs Die, They Go to Heaven", "Fallen" shows the body of the young man alone and being devoured by maggots and flies. This suggests that his body was left to rot for a very long period of time, perhaps even longer than the potcake's body.



Lavar Munroe, *Self Portrait as Prized Pink Pony*, 2015, acrylic, latex paint, spray paint, ribbons, found fabric on cut canvas, 98 x 102 inches

In his other work such as "Election" (2008) and "Kingdom Come" (2010) he shows that the lack of merit of Black lives was heavily influenced by European culture and colonialism. These paintings display white prominent figures. In "Election" Munroe shows a reclining woman wrapped in lavish cloth in the foreground and in "Kingdom Come" he paints an appropriation of the infamous romantic painting by Jacques-Louis David, "Napoleon Crossing the Alps", (1801). Both paintings include visuals of black figures either suffering or decimated. He displays the truth behind these uncanny ideas that have carried its influence everywhere, including into the community of Black people. It can be seen in paintings like "Love Triangle" (2010) and throughout the "Shank-Survival" series (2013) and "The Devils" series (2016). "Love Triangle" shows lust as a means to murder, while works from the "Shank-Survival" series highlights institutionalised racism, incarceration and its strong relationship within the U.S. prison system. While "The Devils" highlights the presence of evil and violence carried out by gang members, policemen, politicians and etc., Munroe creates visuals of the appearance of the devil that uses the appearance of everyday people as a collection of disguises. In the paintings, "These were Travelling Nomads" (2016), "That Day the Mad Man Cried" (2016) and "And Night Dwelling Villagers" (2016) he gives the devil a deformed face with big, chilling eyes. The eyes give a sense that there is a troubling presence among the present. Munroe also depicts what it's like when the devil is absent in "Fallen, Godspeed, Glory (Angel No.2)". Like the other paintings, the subject has a deformed face but differs because it is an empty vessel; the eye sockets are vacant. This can possibly suggest that individuals in underdeveloped areas can be saved from the clutches of the devil after death.

Lavar Munroe's work is definitely not for the faint hearted because it highlights an uncomfortable truth. When an individual thinks about "The Bahamian experience", he or she might think only think of sun, sea and sand. Munroe is proof that this is not the case for a lot of Bahamians that share a similar background to his. "The Son of Soil" is an invigorating collection that creates an enlightening experience for the viewer, especially if the viewer is unaware when it comes to knowing about the Black Bahamian experience.