

# Formal Analysis of *Junk* by Barkley Hendricks

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4 Pages

ASRC 3305 Formal Analysis

## **Junk 1971**

Upon walking up to *Junk*, I actually felt a bit disoriented. The colors were difficult for my eyes to latch on to. There was a strong tone of dark colors, but it was somewhat unobvious to me. It made me feel like the lighting in the room was wrong for the painting or the angle at which I was viewing it was bad. I tried turning the lights on and off, standing up on things to change the angle at which my eyes were meeting the painting, and slowly I began to realize it was the way black was being used that was so disorienting to me.

I simply was not expecting to see as much black as was actually there. At first, my mind put a very clear separation between the subject's shirt and pants, but then I realized that not only was I unable to separate his top from his bottom by texture, but even the color was the same. I do not know what made me want to reinforce the separation between these articles of his clothing except for the fact that the painting itself is drawn very realistically. It is not a portrait that tries to present a physically unrealizable character, and so I thought a figure so normal-looking should have a normally separated shirt and pants.

There is a pleasant contrast between the realistic features of the subject—a black and gold ring on his left hand, a silver earring on his left ear, the saxophone resting on his right hip—to name a few, and the unrealistic color and spacial effect of there being no separation between his shirt and his pants and the seemingly abyssal black from which his cloths are composed. Perhaps the contrast is meant to emphasize the firmness and clarity of the idea which the subject is meant to represent, but what is the idea?

The items on the subject's body were nice—he looked clean and fashionable, but not really exceptional. They were still the sorts of things that could decorate any personage I might find on the street. This presentation of the subject, led me not to expect what I took as a philosophical statement made in the subject's clothing which was nothing more than a sheet of black in the shape of real cloths, draped over his body. To make this statement more dramatic, the background of this painting is white—at once this juxtaposition of black and

white seemed too clichéd a philosophical remark to put on top of the subject's solid and real features and his overarching coolness. After trying out this interpretation, I was still uneasy, unbalanced viewing the work. I had just picked up on what I thought was a clear separation between the black of his clothing and the white of the background, only to find a nuance which made my experience of the work start to fall into place.

All of the colors used in the painting had black mixed in with them—even the white background. I am not sure how to interpret the prevalence of black in the colors of the painting, but it adds to the cool feeling that comes from a name like 'junk'. Somehow the prevalence of black in all of the colors make it seem a little more worn out, less shiny and new, like the blackness slipping in to all of the colors of the painting is a sign of wear that was baked into the painting from its inception, something old in its prime, so to speak. It is like the image being portrayed was not intended to exist in a pristine, preserved fashion, but rather to continue to exist alongside the tarnish and decay of age.

Stepping away with this new spin on the age old contrast between the extremes of black and white, my eye returned to the physical presence of the subject. Eyes closed, head back I scanned his features more closely to try to place him in some sort of context. Is he about to perform? What sort of performance is it? Is it one in a sea of performances eating up all of his time while he is struggling to 'make it' in the industry? Or is it a low-key jam session with a bunch of like-minded individuals? Is he going for fame or success, or is he just looking for the scene—for the fashion, good music, and pretty people? And where does the junk fit in to all of this?

His stance is exaggerated and dreamy. His shoulders are slumped—his right shoulder up and his left shoulder down, perhaps to help him support his saxophone in his slightly unnatural position. His lumbar and thoracic spine are in extension, exaggerating the natural curves of his spine into a powerful, enticing pose. He has very long, toned arms and the combination of these features bring out the long straight lines that make up his skeleton—like

his skeleton is not just holding up his body, but the whole painting.

Somehow, all of this is natural to him. Even without realizing it, he has transitioned from just holding up his own life, to being a part of something larger, an icon of a movement and a time. And perhaps the fact that it is so natural to him is requisite of his ability to represent the experience he is embodying. The cool, calm, and dreamy look on his face as he stands framed in space highlights the objectives that the author wants to emphasize—the presence of his body, his instrument, the contrast between black and white, and the prevalence of blackness holding everything and giving it an unexpectedly dark and black, and warm and murky feel.

There are also important aspects of lightness to the subject. He is young, probably around twenty-years-old, his body does not have any noticeable scars or wear. Even his hair, is not drawn as a jet black, but a lighter, almost muddy, brown. The choice of an individual like this to frame “Junk” is significant. Some might say that it takes someone experienced and tactful to make changes in the world, but sometimes age and wisdom makes you too cautious and too easily overwhelmed by the hopelessness of present situations. Somehow, the youthfulness of the young man in the portrait is necessary as well.

Bringing these points together, Hendricks has sucked me in with a seeming imbalance in color which makes it difficult for me to feel settled with the painting and writing it off as a pleasant addition to the scenery. At first, I am unwilling to qualify this imbalance as a conscious statement of the painter, leading me to suspect some unintentional fault in the way it is being presented to me or the skills of the painter. Uncomfortable, I am implored to look deeper and to try to balance myself within the painting. The question of the colors makes me wonder about the balance of forces in the world that the painting is taking a snapshot of. What is the significance of black everywhere—even in the white? Continuing to reflect on this I taste ideas both new and old—the foundational contrast between black and white and the undertone of something unusual in the black mixed in with all of the

colors. Having experienced the black as something making the painting itself feel a little older and more tarnished, I am surprised to see how young and unburdened the man in the portrait appears. The contrast between these two aspects of the painting feels like one which will resolve itself in time. The new generations are cleaning up the junk through their dreamy actions in the present, not even fully understanding what they are doing along the way. Besides, rather than being sucked into these heavy thoughts, I want to listen to the saxophonist in the painting as he readies to form his first note in the warm, dark ambience of my favorite club.