

Against the Light

by Jada Jarvis

In one of my classes last semester we discussed a photograph taken by Fredrick Sommers called Jack Rabbit. The photo depicts a black and white image of a flattened, dead rabbit on a dirt covered landscape. At first, the photo feels rather morbid or overly vulgar, however, there's something extremely captivating about the image. There is a certain sense of intention that allows for something like roadkill to become art. The flat plane, lack of shadow, and black and white color tone, creates a relation between the environment and the subject. In Jack Rabbit, it is that the deceased rabbit is returning to the Earth; it is completing a naturalistic cycle.



Jack Rabbit by Fredrick Sommers

However, in some of Sommers other work, the meaning is quite the opposite. His landscape work depicts endless horizons of patterning due to shadow or lack thereof, which creates this hellish visage, one that lacks human presence and exudes existential loneliness.



Landscape by Fredrick Sommers

Furthermore, we discussed the Latoya Ruby Fraser's "Flint is Family" photo series, which is a great example of how black culture and black people in general relate to their aesthetic backdrop (which often has some kind of indicator of oppression whether it be socio economic cues or body language outside of black safe spaces).



Flint is Family by Latoya Ruby Fraser

I began thinking, how would this same tactic of evoking emotion through photography would apply when the subjects are black people and the landscape is America. As we know, America has been the back drop of racial strife the entire past year as well as centuries prior. Using my film camera and some black and white film, I decided to photograph my POC friends in candid moments or purposeful moments in order to observe the inevitable sense of otherness as well as moments of tenderness, and how those relate to the composition and landscape.

I took a lot of inspiration by sort of combining the artistic viewpoints of Fredrick Sommers, Latoya Ruby Fraser, and Amiri Baraka, and of course myself. I wanted to use my rooftop because it provided the landscape view that I wanted to incorporate from the Fredrick Sommers work. I tried my best to capture authentic black love because I was inspired by Frasers way of capturing something pure, something candid, something whole. Finally, I wanted to focus on Baraka's theory that the dominance of light represents a sort of violence. In some photos that I included a lot of light, I either had the subjects portraying the vulnerability within that "violence" or seeking comfort within it. I thought it was important to not only portray vulnerability because violence is inherent for people of color, so they do not exist only as vulnerable. They learn to love, laugh, cry, and everything in between, whether they feel one with their environment or not.









The poet, essayist, and playwright, Amiri Baraka, was a key figure in highlighting the black experience in America. In 1964 he published the book “Black Dada Nihilismus”. The two-part book critiques the use of light (or rather whiteness) in Black Aesthetic. Baraka claims that this over portrayal of whiteness creates a connection between the light, racial violence, and religion. The specific poem that addresses this states:

Against what light

is false what breath
sucked, for deadness.

Murder, the cleansed

purpose, frail, against
God, if they bring him

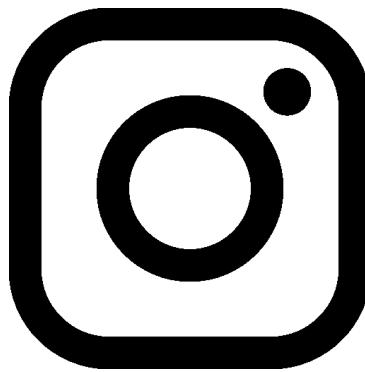
Bleeding, I would not

forgive, or even call him
black dada nihilismus.

The protestant love, wide windows,
color blocked to Modrian, and the
ugly silent deaths of jews [...]







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