



Finding Truth in Society Through Art: Aaron Coleman Artist's Talk

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Aaron Coleman is an artist working in printmaking and mixed media, focusing on social and political issues that affect his personal experiences. The artist's early work combined iconic images and style elements from comic books, calling to mind pop artists such as Roy Lichtenstein. Coleman had a background in hip-hop culture before he attended graduate school at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. During his talk, he presented several of his sampler sounds that are part of a new musical composition. The producer he was working with pulled bits and pieces of different songs together that shared various stories of identity in his music sampler. For a long time, hip-hop and street culture influenced Coleman's art practice more than anything else.

When Coleman pursued his Master of Fine Arts program at Northern Illinois University, something changed his mind. The young artist was having a conversation with his advisor about his art practice. His advisor asked him, "What kind of person do you want to become?" The question made him rethink his projects, as he did not have an unmistakable style or message before this turn. He wanted to become an artist who impacted society, changing the way people think about the role of stereotypes in society. After this moment, Coleman's works became much more unique, radical, and iconic, transforming his medium into mixed media that brings together comics, graffiti, pop, and street culture in a way that highlights the tension between these styles. Taking images from "The Death of Superman," Coleman began drawing parallels between comic books and religion, as both are stories where supernatural beings guide fallible humans to atonement and salvation.

During the talk, Coleman exhibited a few of his works. *Heaven's Dogs*, 2012, is a lithograph about contradictions within the systems of society. He appropriated images of stained glass found in churches, juxtaposed against images of people fighting, presenting the tension of good and evil at play in our world. Coleman also questioned deep religious beliefs because he saw a lot of violence in society. *Akin's Annunciation*, 2013, is also one of Coleman's famous artworks. This particular work focused on a statement politician Todd Akin made in 2012. Akin indicated he did not believe any women could become pregnant in "legitimate" cases of rape, meaning that he did not believe in laws that allowed women to abort fetuses conceived through rape. Coleman made ironic alterations of the politician's statement, overlapping Lichtenstein-esque outlines of a crying woman on top of a Renaissance style portrait of the Virgin Mary, combining various facets in history that blocked women from having autonomy over their bodies. In his sculpture exhibition at the Mesa Art Center, *True and Livin'*, 2019, the artist wanted to present racism and multi-race coloration that society often ignores. For that exhibition, Coleman made a series addressing the Blue Lives Matter movement, a movement among police that emphasizes the danger of police work. Even though there are no full-body figures in his exhibition—only legs or torsos—the audience could understand the artist's message through Coleman's symbology. For example, the Nike Cortez, present in several of Coleman's works, symbolized purity, as many Black kids had these shoes when they were young and kept them scrupulously clean. Through this symbol, many viewers understood that Coleman wanted to express the continuous and cruel process of colonialism deep-rooted in American society.

In the end, Coleman's works give us an idea of finding the truth in society. Coleman said he does not want to illustrate trauma. Instead, he wants to create coded images that explore the idea of religious, political policies, and pop culture. These examinations critically tell the story of Black, Latino, and Indigenous people to unfold myths about racialized people that create stereotypes, which have real, material consequences in the law and in daily life.

Aaron Coleman Artist's Talk was organized by Jaime Knight, Assistant Professor in the Print Media Program, in collaboration with the Exhibitions Department and CCA@CCA.

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Shih Ting is a graduate architecture student who focuses on environmental issues and trying to design a sustainable future.