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Contemporary Black Women Artists' Narratives

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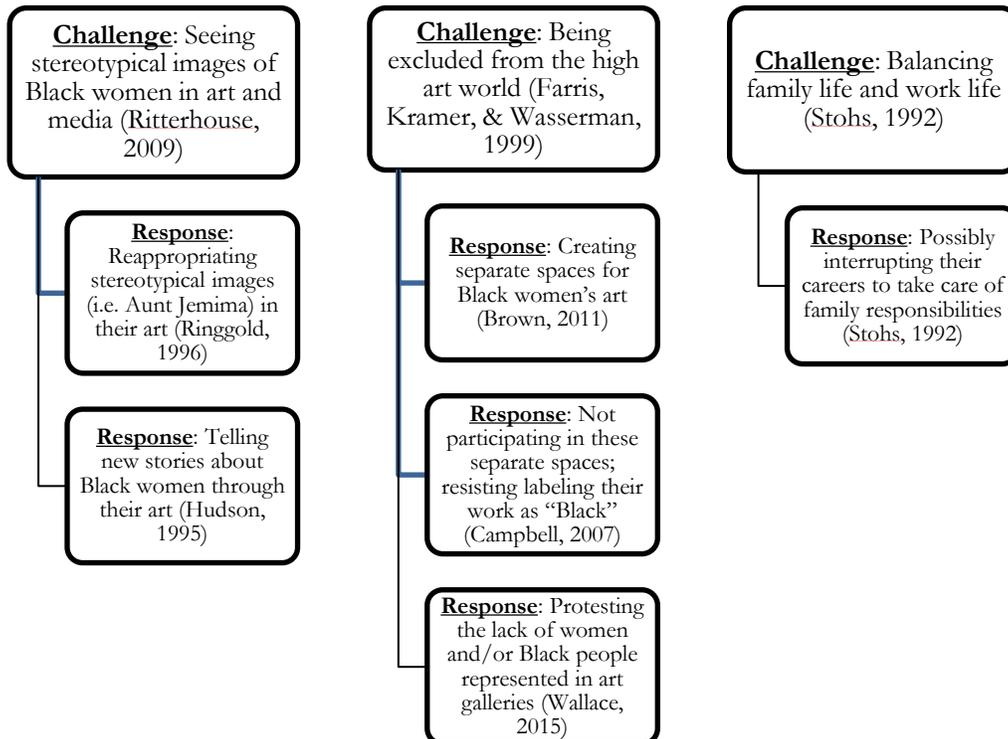
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore contemporary Black women visual artists' experiences in the arts. Specific experiences studied include: finding support, balancing family responsibilities, and overcoming gender and race barriers. Though there are numerous articles on Black women's artwork (e.g., Edwards, 2015; Murray, 2014; Wickham, 2015), there are few about their lived experiences, in their own words. To address this gap, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Black women visual artists from the southeast United States. Despite its focus on a particular group, the study speaks to diverse audiences about surmounting challenges in life and work.

Two interviews have been conducted so far, and preliminary results show common themes. These themes include family support for art-making and family participation in art-making, mentorship and helpful connections with other Black professionals, strategic navigation around gender and race barriers, culture as an important theme in their work, and an integrated relationship between their academic professions and their artistic work. These results are clearly not conclusive nor generalizable, but may provide leads for future investigation. The results might also provide helpful information and guidance to emerging Black women artists. Both artists interviewed affirmed the importance of learning from more experienced artists, and this study can serve that end.

BACKGROUND

Black women visual artists have historically faced challenges including the following:



METHODS

Interviewing

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Black women visual artists from the southeast US. Art professors recommended potential participants. The following interview questions were created for contemporary artists based on historical literature review.

1. What led you to your career in the arts?
2. Did anyone help you along the way? Who? In what way(s)? How did you meet them?
3. Were there any gender or race barriers you had to overcome to get to the position you're in now? If so, what did you do to overcome those barriers?
4. Do you confront stereotypes in your work? How so?
5. How have galleries responded to you and your work?
6. How do you find time to work on your art? How do you balance family responsibilities and your creative work?
7. Is your family supportive of your work? How so?
8. Are you able to make a living as an artist? Do you have another job to support your work? Does your "work" life inform your creative life and vice versa?
9. Have there been any recurring themes in your career?
10. In my historical study, I found that self-definition was an important theme for Black women artists. Is that true for you? If so, how do you integrate this into your work?

Each interview lasted less than one hour. Audio of the interview was recorded if permission was

given by the interviewee. If permission was not given, detailed notes were taken during the interview then verified with the interviewee for accuracy at the end of the interview.

Analyzing the Interviews

Grounded theory was used to analyze the interviews. Grounded theory is the "discovery of theory from data" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). In this study, the "data" are the responses to the interview questions.

Coding is used to develop grounded theory. "Coding means categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). For example, in this study, the name "family support" was used to categorize pieces of data.

The analysis in grounded theory has two main steps. Step one is initial coding. Charmaz (2006) describes this step as "open" (p. 47). Step two is focused coding. Charmaz (2006) describes this step as "selective" (p. 57).

RESULTS

Two interviews have been conducted so far, and preliminary results are as follows. The results are not conclusive nor generalizable, but may provide leads for further investigation. The following common themes were found:

- The artists come from families who have supported their art and creativity from a young age. Both families also participated in art-making activities with the interviewees.
- The artists emphasized the importance of mentorship and connections, and they were both presented with career opportunities by other Black professionals.
- Both said they have faced gender and race barriers, but have found ways to strategically navigate around them.

- Culture is an important theme in their art. One artist highlights African and African-American culture, and the other uses her art to reach out to cultures other than her own.
- The artists make the majority of their income from teaching. They both said that their academic careers and artistic careers are highly integrated and symbiotic.

DISCUSSION

A clear limitation of this study is its small sample size. However, there is much opportunity to expand this research by interviewing Black women artists outside of the southeast US. Results from the study may provide insight and/or encouragement to emerging Black women artists about overcoming career challenges, but the benefit is not limited to this demographic. Further coding will produce “generalizable theoretical statements that transcend times and places” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43).

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