

Jennifer Packer's Unique Employment of Color: How the Artist Uses Hue to Mystify and Politicize Simultaneously

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Abstract

Jennifer Packer has immensely impacted the art world since her emergence a decade ago. An African American woman, Packer uses her art to depict, analyze, and complicate the intricacies of living in the United States as a Black person. Packer's singular style of intimate portraits bordering on the abstract makes her work both intellectually and visually engaging. This essay argues that Packer uses color, through various techniques, to address the socio-political dilemmas she wants to get at in her work. At the same time, she uses these hues in abstraction to lift her paintings away from reality.

Since her emergence onto the scene just 10 years ago contemporary artist Jennifer Packer has already made her mark on the art world. After graduating from the Yale MFA program in 2012 she received a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem and was the focus of a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art among other accomplishments. Working mainly as a painter, Packer has focused her craft on portraits and still lifes. Her unconventional approach to these genres, however, employs an expressionistic sensibility that places the work on the precipice of abstraction. As a Black artist and a woman artist, much of Packer's work focuses on examining questions of race and intersectionality, especially within American society. It is intriguing then, that her most cited inspirations are old-White-male artists of a problematic Western past. In an interview with Jane Panetta, a Whitney Museum curator, Packer mentions Caravaggio, Seurat, and Michelangelo to name a few. She examines this precarious relationship to the so-called geniuses of art history in a conversation with Charles Henry Rowell:

Art History champions the qualities of White, heterosexual, male access and vision as Mastery. The privilege to touch, own, demand, and control is often founded on the disregard for the personhood of marginalized bodies. I can't separate that position from historical works of art. Black women's reproduction supported the US economy for so many generations but their bodies are nearly invisible within US painting history either as artists or subjects ... I'm thinking about painting from a position of invisibility or erasure (541).

To this end, Packer works to emphasize socio-political dilemmas that face Black people by recontextualizing the White-male language of art history. Much of this political commentary comes through her meditations on Black death with a number of her works being odes to those who have died due to police violence. As one can see, Packer's idea of representation evades the notion of simple depiction, and this subversion plays a great role in what makes her work so compelling.

Packer's subversive methods in delivering messages also translate to her distinct style of painting providing an abstracted perspective on figurative traditions. Her willingness to supplant the standards of figurative painting is most notably observed in her use of monochrome. Her portraits tend to focus less on the details of the sitters themselves and more on how various washes of color can affect how they are perceived. Packer has said how she is interested in seeing how much she can take away from a painting while still retaining its core meaning. In discussion of her use of the monochrome Packer describes it as: "a severe editing process. It was a way of being critical about making very tight pictures with considered surfaces. Can you make a good painting with one color?" (Obrist and Packer). Packer's considered use of color is able to move the viewer's eye around a painting in a particular way and is likely the first theme one will

identify in her work. Due to its immediacy, though, it seems as though scholars have skimmed over the immense complexity and thought that goes behind Packer's relationship with color. For this reason this essay intends to investigate how Jennifer Packer engages with color in a theoretical way and how her unique employment of color has the ability to address socio-political dilemmas through an other-worldly lens. Of her many works three pieces have been selected here to exemplify this element of Packer's practice: *Tia*, *A Lesson in Longing*, and *Blessed are Those Who Mourn (Breonna! Breonna!)*.

To begin, it may be worth examining one of Packer's more traditional portraits. She has a number of paintings depicting a singular person in a seated position, pulling from the multi-century lineage of where portrait painting has come from. While still avant-garde in their own right these pieces give a good base from which to view Packer's more experimental takes on what this genre can be. *Tia* is a great example of Packer's work inside of this format and a great jumping-off point for this examination. The work depicts a woman sitting on an ambiguous piece of furniture in a cropped-off room with little other contextual information for the viewer to make sense of. While many other portrait painters may attempt to give the viewer as much detail as possible Packer leans in the opposite direction. One motivation for this may be that she feels her biggest role in painting her subjects is protecting their identities:

There's something really exciting about the unknowable that feels tied to protecting folks in the work. It's essential because I know that there is a desire for reduction by people who don't understand the consequences of Blackness in their world who will interpret it, and they won't be honest about the interpretation. They'll say, I get it, I see, I understand, but they don't. I'd rather just tuck things away" (Musser and Packer).

While Packer's notion of protection clearly has something to do with obscuring her sitter's identities, what she wants to do with these pieces is definitely more complex. For example, even though the viewer is merely given a piece of furniture and a pillow to situate themselves in the piece, these fractions of clarity give more insight into the sitter (Tia) than a realistic depiction could. Tia's surroundings are filled with warmth evoking the feeling of a place that one has come to know intimately, a place that has become a part of Tia herself.

This idea of visual obscurity producing detail is also visible in the depiction of Tia's body. Tia is surrounded by this yellow-golden hue that appears to emanate from within. While this wash of monochrome makes the portrait less detailed in terms of a realistic depiction it more than makes up for it in emotional strength. Packer's employment of color gives the viewer the sense that they are looking into Tia's spirit. While some of her physical features are obscured this method gives one a stronger insight into Tia's soul than could ever be obtained otherwise. In his observation of the piece, Beau Rutland notes that "[Tia's] body is outlined with sketchy brushstrokes, but blazing orange radiates from her shirt like an aura, overriding those demarcations. Packer's paintings are less snapshots of what someone looked like on a given day than documents of what the artist feels for them." In this way, Packer is using color to place the piece in another dimension, one where people can literally wear their emotions on their sleeve. This notion also plays into her motivation to protect her sitters, because by obscuring certain parts of Tia, Packer ensures her subjectivity. By not allowing the viewer to obsess over her sitter's minute facial features, skin tone, or body type, Packer prevents them from becoming an object. She puts this theme into words in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist: "There's an important difference between having a body and being a body. Bodies can be almost anything and subject to mindless objectification or a loss of humanity. I'm usually thinking about the significance of that distinction as I work." This statement from Packer

further amplifies what is already noticeable in *Tia*. The way in which the golden hue dances around Tia, bleeding into the objects that surround her, gives the onlooker the sense that this aura is the real Tia—her body is simply a form to house that energy. Through these methods Packer is able to create a more accurate depiction of Tia than a hyper-realistic rendition ever could.

While the viewer does not get much formal detail in the piece, the one exception to this rule is Tia's pair of socks. The intricate patterning of these articles, along with their contrast in shade, makes them a focal point of the piece. Their teal, blue, and red interweaving design instantly draws the viewer's eyes to them. Usually the artist would be motivated to draw the viewer's attention first to the sitter themselves. In *Tia*, the socks add an element of complexity to this standard. In an interview with Jessica Bell Brown, Packer discusses her interest in the elements of a portrait outside of the sitter: "I start to think later on, and up until now about the matter in the work. The bodies are made up of the same things as the space ... Thinking about living with an object, like an actual experience that's not a stagnant object." Through this statement, Packer reveals the importance of the objects she surrounds her sitters with. These items are not extraneous elements used to fill up the composition but instead extensions of those who she paints. In other words, Packer uses the socks in this piece as a way to further subjectify Tia. These socks are a way for the viewer to get to know Tia without Packer having to make a display of Tia herself. Their great contrast in color not only gives visual emphasis to the socks but portrays their importance to one's understanding of Tia. This technique leads assumptions of her character further away from being tied to her physical form, mitigating the dangers of objectification due to perceived race or gender. Packer's use of color in *Tia* shows her motivation to use the monochrome as a tool to mystify. In addition it shows her ability to subjectify her sitters through obscurity. In this way Packer is

simultaneously grounding her works in the political present while they exist in a world outside of our own.

Packer pushes many of these methods even further in a work from 2019 titled *A Lesson in Longing*. In this piece Packer dives deeper into her fascination with obscurity making it more difficult for the viewer to identify what she has rendered. The two figures that flank each side of the piece seem to meld into the background of the work itself with some of the body parts not even existing within the painting. Most noticeably the left figure's legs are made up solely of sparse drips of paint that connect the feet to the torso. The jarring absences in this work immediately place it in a realm that feels separate from reality. With these figures existing in what appears to be a state of limbo it is sure to spark questions about if the people in this piece are even real or if they are a figment of one's imagination. Through the clues Packer leaves in the piece, it would appear that she leans towards the latter.

In *A Lesson in Longing*, there are various paraphernalia strewn across the canvas. However, unlike in *Tia* where the socks become the focal point of the piece, the objects in *A Lesson in Longing* are almost unidentifiable. The first of these objects is a soccer ball that the right figure's foot rests upon. Here Packer constructs the viewer's vision of the ball solely with the pentagonal spots that accent its form. There is no outline of the ball, and the only notion the viewer has of its materiality is how it supports the figure's foot. On the left side a similar phenomenon can be seen with what appear to be remnants of a bicycle. The bike is rendered in the same shade of pink that engulfs the rest of the work making it virtually impossible to visualize completely. This conscious decision to make the subjects' possessions hard to grasp points towards the notion that the figures themselves are not completely in the physical realm. Compounded with the abstraction seen in the figures themselves it creates a strong possibility of the people displayed being dead already. In this way Packer again demonstrates the mystic ways in which she employs color. By choosing

shades of pink that are similar to what covers the background of the piece, Packer is able to obscure the forms she paints. Her representations blend into each other, becoming abstracted and separated from whatever reality they may have existed in.

Through this lens Packer's mystical uses for color are already notable, however, they become even more meaningful when combined with her methods of bringing the viewer back to the real world. In *A Lesson in Longing*, Packer does this by appropriating a specific shade of pink from a work by Jean-Michel Basquiat titled *Moses and the Egyptians*. In a moment from her discussion with Jane Panetta, Packer details how she became inspired to use this specific color after her encounter with the work: "I'm always looking for people who are doing something that I feel like I'm doing, working in the monochrome, which feels like super rare." While Packer describes how she mainly chose this color to show appreciation for Basquiat a careful eye may discern that there is more to this choice than she lets on. Nowadays Basquiat's work is everywhere: postcards, t-shirts, corporate branding, and more. After his death, the artist's work was appropriated by countless companies to turn a profit, and Basquiat's likeness came to be used in many exploitative ways. *A Lesson in Longing* seems to be a meditation on how people are remembered after they are gone, the slow fading of one's existence as they become more distant in memory. Through this theme Basquiat could be a third member of the painting with his legacy becoming something that was impossible to control after his death. This connection to Basquiat hammers home the notion that the piece is not only about how people in general are remembered post-mortem but, more specifically, the vulnerability of Black people's legacies in a country that seeks to suppress them. Packer dives into this idea of a vulnerable legacy with Amber Jamilla Musser: "The ways in which history and trust and trauma and knowledge, or the lack thereof, interrupt, intersect with the experience you think you're having. That's sort of the thing about biomythography—where does legacy sit? It doesn't sit in

just any one place.” While in *Tia* Packer uses her washes of monochrome to denote subjectivity, here it could be argued that Packer uses this shade to warn of the opposite. As this pink absorbs the figures in the painting they fade into a sea of deceased African Americans who can no longer speak for themselves. Regarding her thoughts on the continuous Black death in America, Packer describes how

I feel really, really cynical about others opening their eyes. It’s like walking down the same street and seeing all the differently colored doors but if someone asked you to name the colors you wouldn’t be able to even if you’ve seen them 1,000 times. Because you sort of refuse to know it or it’s not central to your everyday experience.

With this statement in mind Packer’s use of Basquiat’s bright pink seems to be a physical manifestation of her thoughts above. It’s as though this color is a way to force viewers to remember the people in the painting even after they’re gone. Not only does the color mystify those within the painting, but it simultaneously creates questions of what it means to live, die, and be remembered as a Black person in America. While Packer is using color to firmly place her works in mystical realms she is also using that same color to investigate large-scale questions about what it means to be Black in America, whether dead or alive.

Lastly, Packer examines these themes of death even more directly in one of her most recent works, *Blessed are Those Who Mourn (Breonna! Breonna!)*. She constructed this piece in the year 2020 to process the shooting and killing of Breonna Taylor. Taylor was murdered in her own apartment after police forced entry without announcement. Her boyfriend suspected the police to be intruders, found his gun, and fired a warning shot. In response the officers fired many bullets into the apartment, killing Taylor. The city would end up giving money to Taylor’s family and

promised police reforms, but while some officers would be fired, no one ever faced criminal charges (Oppel Jr., et al.). After the fact many images and videos surfaced online of Taylor's apartment, the most shocking being bodycam footage captured by the officers involved. It is through these images that Packer renders Taylor's apartment on canvas.

The work depicts a black man laying on a couch looking upward at the ceiling. Packer begins to engage the viewer in this work by first drawing their eyes to him. She immediately subverts expectations by depicting someone who is not Taylor to discuss her death. Leaning into this subversion she has never clarified exactly who the man is. While it may be assumed that this could be Taylor's boyfriend mourning her loss, Packer's resistance to identifying him points towards the man being more of an allegory. Claudia Rankine undertakes an in-depth analysis of this figure in her speech on Packer's work noting how the man has a visible tension to his posture despite the fact that he's laying down. She continues by noting that while the viewer can see a profile of the man's face his gaze is obscured. While this gaze cannot be seen directly in the painting it is evident that the man is still looking *somewhere*. In this way the gaze acts as a way to show that regardless of his emotional state the man still has a will to fight. In addition, the act of not showing the man's eyes generates the possibility of an infinite amount of emotions he could be processing, yet another example of Packer creating emotional depth through obscurity.

The man is only a small portion of the piece, however, and surrounding him is a depiction of the kitchen within Taylor's apartment along with a few specific items that Packer has selected. These items include the poster on the wall and the iron on the counter. There are also three different fans in the painting all blowing in different directions. The fans' desperate attempts to cool bring a sense of heat to the environment, a weight that accompanies the already present sense of loss. The fan on the right appears to share the color of the man's skin tone, possibly linking his feelings to that of a fan's futile efforts to chill a hot apartment in the

summer. Of course, Packer's employment of color here goes far beyond what can be observed in that connection alone. In fact, much like what can be seen in *A Lesson in Longing*, there is a very specific shade that envelops *Blessed Are Those Who Mourn (Breonna! Breonna!)*. In this work, the color manifests in the form of a particular shade of yellow. This is no mistake as the tone is a direct reference to the color that Taylor's kitchen was painted when the police raided her apartment (Rankine). This color, which was captured on the bodycam footage, creates a powerful connection between the painting and the shooting. Rather than being simply a color within the piece the yellow takes on a life of its own. In association with this brutal death the shade becomes more of a stain than a means of beautification. A hue that is absorbing everything around it is inescapable and palpable. It hangs over the man and seeps into his form becoming one with him. Akin to how she uses monochromatic washes in her other works, Packer employs this yellow to describe to the viewer a very specific feeling, one that cannot be explained through figurative representation. This prevalence of Black death in America is a phenomenon that has existed since the nation's conception and still continues today. Something like that could never be accurately represented through a simple *memento mori* or pained face.

Breonna Taylor never asked to become a martyr. This shade of yellow and its proliferation in media across the country displays how even after her death Taylor's privacy continued to be invaded. People should not know such eerily specific details about strangers such as what color their kitchen is painted, yet Taylor's is public knowledge. Through this line of thought, Packer brings into question what it means to have a private and safe space as a Black woman or if that even exists at all. Maybe this is why for a piece in commemoration of Breonna Taylor she isn't depicted. Maybe this is Packer's way of giving Taylor a moment of solace when no one else would. Packer's nuanced discussion of Black female intersectionality and Black death in *Blessed are Those Who Mourn (Breonna! Breonna!)* continues to

speak to her multifaceted employment of color. She uses color not only to refer to issues of the socio-political present but also to connect her works back to the centuries of oppression that Black people have experienced. Packer's use of color not only grounds but also lifts her paintings out of reality in a way that allows her to explore the implications of Black life in America in ways that are otherwise impossible.

Through the analysis of three of Jennifer Packer's most standout works: *Tia*, *A Lesson in Longing*, and *Blessed are Those Who Mourn (Breonna! Breonna!)*, it becomes clear that Packer has a relationship with color that goes far beyond aesthetics. She is able to use color to engage complex topics of race, intersectionality, and marginalized death in a way that is wholly unique. In other words Packer uses color in her works to discuss complex topics of social theory that are extremely difficult to address in a nuanced way. Her washes of monochrome allow her to place her works in a realm outside of reality giving these shades the ability to take on a physical form of their own. Along with this other-worldly employment of color, Packer is simultaneously able to ground her works in the contemporary socio-political world. By using such specific shades of color to unpack such complicated issues, Packer shows how the smallest of details can make the biggest of differences.

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