

## Undergraduate Research Symposium May 18, 2018 Mary Gates Hall

### Online Proceedings

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#### SESSION 2G

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##### ART HISTORY THROUGH THE AGES

*Session Moderator: Julia Sapin, Art History, Western Washington University*

**MGH 248**

3:30 PM to 5:15 PM

\* Note: Titles in order of presentation.

##### **Empowering African-American Identity in Hip-Hop Fashion, the Work of Kehinde Wiley, and *Empire***

*Thomas Zapletal, Fifth Year, Art History, Studio Art, Western Washington University*

*Mentor: Monique Kerman, Art and Art History, Western Washington University*

In this essay I seek to trace how W.E.B Du Bois's theory of double-consciousness and Alain Locke's theory of the New Negro are reflected within the fashion of hip-hop, the portrait paintings of Kehinde Wiley, and the television show *Empire*. These three examples subvert and appropriate from the predominantly white, male-dominated narrative of the West to create new forms of art within the African diaspora. I also posit that the creation of hip-hop develops into a second Harlem Renaissance, one whose cultural production serves to promote a more modern black identity, creating a new black aristocracy within the African-American community. The examples I use within this essay demonstrate how clothing brands such as Gucci, FUBU and Karl Kani popularized by African-American hip-hop artists such as Tupac Shakur and LL Cool J emblemize a visual representation of Du Bois and Locke's terms double-consciousness and New Negro. In a continuation of Du Bois and Locke's hopes for a new more positive black identity, one that is predicated upon self-assurance and self-empowerment, contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley, in recognizing hip-hop artists as cultural producers and creators of a new black identity, paints the portraits of LL Cool J and the late Biggie Smalls. The television show *Empire* can be seen as the final culmination of hip-hop as a second Harlem Renaissance and marks a recognizable shift into a third dynamic phase of black identity within America's African-American community. Examples of the African diasporic art that can be seen within the show include works from Kehinde Wiley, Kara Walker and Jean-Michael Basquiat. Commonalities between all of these artists

can be seen in the subversion of the Western narrative, the promotion for an empowered black identity and an ongoing discourse with double-consciousness.

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##### **Woman as Death: The Multi-Century Visual Associations Between Death and the Female Form**

*Emeline Agnew, Senior, Art History, Studio Art, Western Washington University*

*Mentor: Monique Kerman, Art and Art History, Western Washington University*

In what social context can the *Mona Lisa*, a thoroughly neutral work, be ascribed vampiric qualities? Ultimately, in a culture that places the feminine form on the precipice between life and death. Since the forging of witchcraft iconography in the sixteenth century, the aesthetics of the woman have operated in the limbo of "otherness," painting her as both the giver of life and, conversely, the bringer of death. Her form is used as a template in which to project male anxieties, existential and social alike. This transforms the woman into a contemplative canvas, where her human qualities are undermined by her poetic associations. This artistic liminality has informed depictions of women throughout history, revealing itself most notably in the overlap between woman and death. In this essay, I analyze how these concepts manifest in Death and The Maiden motifs, erotic corpse paintings, vampire and siren imagery, and death portraiture. While Death and the Maiden imagery establishes a firm connection between death and the female form, the erotic corpse paintings of the Romantic era expand upon it, fully converging death and female sexuality by the nineteenth century. Simultaneously, the vampire/siren paintings of the Symbolist movement depict the threats of women in a comparatively didactic manner, reinvigorating the retired witch iconography of the sixteenth century. Women and death become fully consolidated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where presumably

neutral female figures are endowed with vampiric qualities (or, an inherently sinister sensuality). To understand the gendered visual language that haunts contemporary culture, one must sift through the art of the past. In doing so, there is a clear theme of female demonization and dehumanization, exaggerated through the lens of male death anxiety.