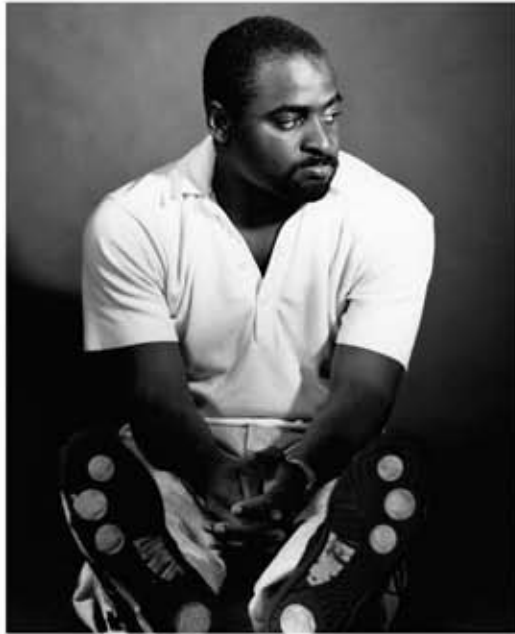


THE AFRICAN MALE MUSEUM: AWAKENING

images and words by carlton f. wilkinson
The Art Gallery: Cultural Arts Building

October 02 - November 07, 2008
University of North Carolina Wilmington



Name: Benneth W.
Born: Nashville, 1960
Artist

"I did not know racism when I was young. I did not know rich or poor, black or white. My first experience with racism was when I was 13 years old. My family went fishing and my mother sent me to buy bait. Some white men at the dock store began to harass me, calling me a "nasty nigger." I ran and hid on the back seat of the family car. I did not know how to handle it, so I panicked. I could not explain to my mother what happened, but a white lady came out of the store to deliver the worms and talked with my mother. My mother, I guess, was used to that kind of stuff, so she did not make issue of it. "

Contemporary Voices:

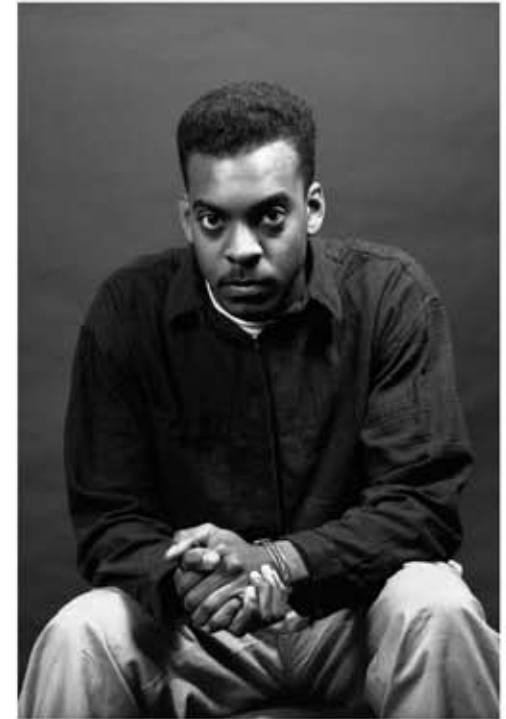
Name: Erin B.
Born: Nashville, 1971
Service Industry

"We had separate facilities, bathrooms or could not eat in the same restaurants. We may be able to do those things now but, some things have not changed. People still treat us differently.

What I have gotten from the civil rights movement is pride. I can say I am a black man and not be ashamed of it. I can walk down the street and not be afraid looking at a white person or expressing myself openly. I think if we did not have the movement or Martin Luther King, (Jr.) we would not be where we are today. Even the Muslims would not be where they are without his influence."



African American Males Speak



Name: Warren B.
Born: Atlanta, 1971
Professor of Computer Design

"In high school, a white girl came to me and said that I didn't act like a black person. I asked her why and she said that black people were loud and act up. A lot of black people did not do well in school. Because I did well in school I was labeled a "white boy." Talking proper and making good grades singled me out as "acting white." I was ostracized in high school.

Sometimes, racism can be experienced from your own people."



Praise

In my western room
for almost 500 years,
Relicent, I step forward
toward the eastern sunlight
I kneel before its warmth
then I clasp my hands
. . . and I raise them
toward the misty sky.
It is my will to give praise
to the God of my past,
present, and future
for our sin-soaked lives,
and redemptive souls -
forever more - I give praise
that the humanity
of my people did not perish
on freedom's darkside.

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left: Praise, silver gelatin print
top right: Undaunted Past, silver gelatin print
bottom Right: Elmina Slave Castle, Ghana, West Africa
digital lambda print



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The exhibit represents a simple concept, which is immersed in a complex historical and psychological quagmire. It is a collective history that has been riddled with tragedy and triumph for the lives of males of the African Diaspora. I have realized that there has been an emotional disconnect for most African Americans from the continent of Africa. The languages, aesthetics, histories, wisdom and most tragically, ancestors and families have led to a disconnection from oneself. The soul of the past has lain dormant for over four hundred years. Thus, you have reached a generation of individuals who fail to awaken to the call of his ancestors to be in remembrance of a great past.

I live in Wilmington, North Carolina where three-fourths of the murders committed in 2007 involved black males. As I commute to work each day I have the distinct, emotional challenge of passing seven plastic floral displays on the streets that mark the site of murdered, young black males from gang and/or drug violence. More depressing, I try not to be traumatized by the disproportionate numbers of young black men – and women – who are being diagnosed with HIV and AIDS in America. Negative reports and statistics reveal higher teen-pregnancy, incarceration, mortality and education dropout rates. Further destructive behaviors, such as, murder and suicide no longer become the exception.

I wonder how I navigate the overwhelming bad news that seems to overwhelm men of the African Diaspora. I wonder how long before I become numb for my own people's despair in American society and beyond. As economic conditions worsen for many Americans-at-large I wonder how this elucidates the sense of hopelessness that seems ever present in poor black neighborhoods? Living in downtown Wilmington, I am subjected to this reality every day juxtaposed to the urban renewal projects now being undertaken. Many in the local, black community may never realize the benefit of such efforts due to their economic status.

Conversely, I watched the congregation of over 200,000 people in Germany who wanted to hear a United States Senator and citizen from the United States. This man, Barack Obama, is an African American. The stories of Nubian King Shabaka, Hannibal Barca, King Shaka (Zulu), Patrice Lumumba, Frederick Douglas, Jackie Robinson, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr. and others who forged a path of freedom and community activism. Today, the perceived endangerment of African American males juxtaposed with the rise of a new influence in the most influential nation on earth creates conflicting emotions within me. How do you use the strength of one or few against a tidal wave of despair?

As an artist, who is an African American male, I have directed the attention of my art to the triumphs, challenges and tragedies of black men. This installation, which is entitled "Awakening," is a term that refers to the epiphany one receives that allows one to elevate his spirit and courage in the face of great adversity. From historical figures to contemporary courageous activists we find their stories awe-inspiring. These examples represent a biblical-like tenet that the determination of one can inspire countless others for all of eternity. The role of the tribal historian, the Griot, may share his knowledge with future generations. This tradition has been greatly compromised in the African American community of families.

One could justifiably open this discussion to the challenges of other ethnic genders. Life's challenges are universal to race, gender, sexual orientation, classification, tribe and nationality. However, I choose to communicate a universal message using the example of men of the African Diaspora. Through my own "awakening" and empowerment, I graciously accept this challenge as an artist, an activist – and as a human being.

Carlton F. Wilkinson

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op image: Body Symbol #1 (2005), digital print
bottom image: Together (1995), silver gelatin print

