

“...Oh, We’re on the Same Page”: In Conversation with Danny Giles

Upon entering the Jacob Lawrence Gallery located in the art building of the University of Washington, four thick texturized black lines frame an opposing 10’ x 10’ white wall. The dark texturized edges of the opposing white wall almost make it appear more white than usual. Could it be that the several-inches-thick border of combined charcoal, ink, pumice, and other media fosters this brightening effect? Panning the room, it becomes evident that not all of the gallery’s walls are as strident as this one. Greyblack finger marks from spectators smudge the wall beneath a few of the untitled pieces that line the wall. More than a dozen asemic mixed-media articles line the gallery, each undecipherable character begs to be fingered despite the obviously dire consequences.

Printed on the wall to the immediate right of entry is a didactic that identifies Danny Giles as artist. Based out of Seattle, Giles spent 2019 as artist-in-residence of both the Jacob Lawrence Legacy program as well as the Chicago Artists Coalition’s BOLT program. Curated by Emily Zimmerman, Giles entered the Seattle art scene late January with *The Practice and Science of Drawing a Sharp White Background* at the Jake and *Figura* at SOIL.¹ His work showed through Black History month alongside artists like Quenton Baker, Kenneth Moore, Jite Agbro, Anthony White, and Henry Jackson-Spieker. Below his name reads, “Western aesthetics have structured whiteness by responding to various moments in the interwoven histories of science and visual art practice” (2019). The ways in which science and art practices have historically been braided together operates in the interest of the West, that is: a sharp white

¹ As Emily Pothast describes in a feature for *Art Practical*, the title of the article is drawn from Harold Speed’s *The Practice and Science of Drawing* (1972) and Glenn Ligon’s *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)* (1990) which is a quote borrowed from Zora Neale Hurston’s essay “How it Feels to be a Colored Me” (1928). For more on Giles’s *Figura* visit <https://www.artpractical.com/column/danny-giles-draws-a-black-frame-around-whiteness/> for Pothast’s article.

background. While framing whiteness and drawing attention to both the latent and blatant white supremacy of our world order, Giles' work simultaneously renders visible the material implications of this for non-Western aesthetic.

Hanging along the walls of the gallery are several untitled wall drawings that utilize the same black mixed-material that lines the mostly blank large wall dividing the gallery space. Taking this wall as the front and back cover of a book, the following drawings entail a semi-legible table of content and a much less intelligible index. Spread throughout the space are tracks, treads, trellises, and traces of texturized asemic writing tunneling across multiple white pages. One looks like an indecipherable letter, another like the close up of a finger print, and another like some sort of map. Besides the gallery's patrons there are scantily a few figures present including a portrait of Elmer Fudd, the cartoon. Many of the muddied drawings produce an array of backgrounds as the black medium bleeds into the whiteness of the page: each set against a slightly different tone of gray, all a bit fuzzy and murky despite moments of shrill contrast. After threading through the gallery space, it becomes clear that this is an animated artist book in the form of a social sculpture. Moving through the drawings of the book, the audience is held captive by the cover(s) and arranged (or, is it arraigned?) by the book's spine.

The more people animate the space, like a plot, the book thickens. In *Interstices: A Small Drama of Words* (1993), Hortense Spillers proposes that the syntax and performance, or the arrangement and flow of power in any particular drama resides but on a single page, embedded in the grammar and tense of what is said.² Giles playfully rearranges Western aesthetics clearing space for his own agential action for the spectatorship of gallery goers. In exploration of form, the book's performative implication for participants reveals a degree of material malleability! As

each patron become a page they become witness to other pages, able to move with them or against them while walking freely through the space. Close to the wall, then away, around, into the small offshoot room, and back out again. However, in the moment of live viewing, patrons cannot deny a particular indictment by the spine of Giles' book, that is: the institution. Along with the dynamism of living fluid and ambiguous lives, there is an undeniable crystalized quality that lingers. The process of book formation involves the static structuring of and suturing to a spine.

Borrowing Giles' white wall as the frame for our project, we focus in on the academic institution's nature as spine by highlighting the shared material manifestation of interpersonal and structural microaggressions experienced within the academy. Drawing on Adrian Piper's *Mythic Being* from the 70's and the conventional quadrant-paneled comic structure, *We're on the Same Page* (2019) draws a single page of Giles' artist book under the microscope in a fractal revelation (see figure 1). The larger tensions of Giles' artist book still surface on a single comic-strip in which several university students exemplify unique yet ultimately similar moments of constriction. Vibrantly cast as dreamers and artists with friends and colleagues, the stark contrast between their color and the panel's sharp white background continually proves to be consequential. As Kemi Adeyemi explains, whiteness is "oriented around, if not obsessed with the verticality and perpendicularity of the 90° angle" (2019).³ The disjointed but collusive narratives in each panel were inspired by our personal experiences and hyperbolized through the 2016 student-led protest at Seattle University where they called for the eventual resignation of the school's dean, Jodi Kelly as well as the 2018 incident in a Yale dormitory where police were called on a young black woman who had simply fallen asleep. Focusing in on a singular page's

³ <https://www.womenandperformance.org/bonus-articles-1/29-1/adeyemi>

tethered nature to the spine draws on the dialectical tension between abstraction and representation, between the institutionalized 90° and the quotidian ways in which we as underrepresented students of the institution lean into and against its discipline.



Figure 1. Yabsira Wolde and Meshell Sturgis. *We're on the Same Page*, 2019; Digital photography, felt, and ink on paper. Courtesy of Danny Giles' *The Practice and Science of Drawing a Sharp White Background* (2019).

What binds a book? What draws us together on a single page? In our own play with form, we come to understand that the spine does not care who you are, only where and how you materially remain. We all aren't always necessarily on the same page, but for brief moments we may find ourselves in the same book, part of the same story, and sutured to the same spine. In our attempt to deconstruct and understand the aseptic language of Gile's artist book, what

remains is the cover which became the frame for our comic, and the institutional spine around which our panels are oriented. Whether an article pinned to the clothing line like Carletta Wilson's artist book *Letters to a Laundress* hung at Bainbridge Museum of Art this year, or the opaque and crystallized books that line Arceneoux's *Library of Black Lies* in the Henry Art Gallery, and just as Spillers attunes us to note: we all are cerebral characters fluidly navigating space in ways that demand the spine to respond even as we are bound to fill its pages, lines, and panels in the dramatic animation of this life.