

Mapping a More Inclusive Narrative of Western History: An examination of the recent artwork of Tylonn J. Sawyer

By Juana Williams, writer and visual arts curator

Year of the Flood: White History Month Volume I & II is a multimedia solo exhibition featuring the most recent work of Detroit-based artist Tylonn J. Sawyer. The work was completed during a three-year span. It is an ongoing body of work consisting of multiple series and constructed of drawings, paintings, and collages. An obvious division of the work is between *White History Month Vol. I* and *Vol. II*. *Vol. I*, which was completed in 2019, ventures outside of the borders of the United States and contemporary time periods. Some works focus more on historical, social, and cultural elements. *Vol. II* is a more recent body of work, mostly placing a magnifying glass on American social, political, and cultural events. This division is indicative of the shift in Sawyer's artistic practice. Prior to 2020, Sawyer meticulously planned each work with a foundation heavily settled in deep research. Yet, the onslaught of information from the media and the many changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed him with imagery and ideas. *Year of the Flood* references Canadian author Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel of the same title. Atwood's *Year of the Flood* is a fictional story that details a world ravaged by a pandemic. A religious sect previously predicted the pandemic, referring to it as a waterless flood, which caused the characters of the novel to reference the year of the pandemic as the 'year of the flood.' Sawyer adopts the same title to parallel the many forced transformations that resulted from the 2020 pandemic. While creating the newer work, Sawyer also felt a flood of information that he is attempting to intuitively process. Thus, the title of the exhibition offers a glimpse into Sawyer's reality.

Although the exhibition is divided between *Vol. I* and *Vol. II*, there is a more nuanced conceptual and aesthetic division. There is a visual separation between the series of large-scale drawings, smaller portrait drawings, and the large-scale figurative paintings. Yet, the framework of the entire exhibition offers commentary and critique of Western social history and culture, and a documentation of Blackness within the context of visual culture. Sawyer is reintroducing Black narratives where they have been ignored or not elevated enough.

Included in the exhibition are three large scale sanguine, charcoal, and pastel drawings, which examine well-known historical imagery, bringing forth new narratives. Through his research of Western art history, Sawyer noticed patterns in the imagery of men and women, most notably a focus on representations of fertility for women and power for men. These characteristics are explored in two of the large-scale drawings, "Strata Drawing I," and "Strata Drawing II." With each work, Sawyer brings forth three iconic art historical images drawn in red, black, and green, as a reference to pan-Africanism, and layered atop one another in chronological order.

"Strata Drawing I" features *Venus of Willendorf*, *Venus de Milo*, and *Maria in der Hoffnung*, which were created around 25,000 BC, 130-100 BC, and 1520 AD, respectively. Although the three works of art were produced in dramatically different time periods, they all explicitly highlight what was considered the central role of womanhood in each society, the role of childbearing. The source material used for the drawing are all very small-scale works emblematic of the hierarchical structure within each society, and the woman's role as lesser than men. Sawyer renders the figures at a much larger scale in the drawing, elevating the significance

of women. With “Strata Drawing I,” Sawyer is criticizing the debasement of women to simply conduits of new generations of the human species, and art history’s obsession with illustrating this ideology, especially within religion.

“Strata Drawing II” features drawings of Myron’s *Discobolus*, *Colossus of Constantine*, and *Christ the Redeemer*, similarly layered in a chronological order and drawn individually in red, black, and green. The three images come together to emphasize central themes of virility and power, which Sawyer critiques. Myron’s original *Discobolus*, which translates to ‘discus thrower,’ was believed to be a bronze, life-size Greek sculpture completed in 450-460 BC, portraying a nude, young athlete throwing a disc. Although the original sculpture is lost, numerous Roman copies remain, continually propagating the idea of physical masculine power. *Colossus of Constantine* was an enormous acrolithic statue of the Roman emperor Constantine I, consisting of brick, a wooden frame, and white marble. Only fragments of the statue survive, including the head, which is depicted in “Strata Drawing II.” Constantine I successfully ruled Roman from 306-337 AD as an emperor with military and religious prowess, and the statue was created in 312-315 AD. As the first Roman emperor to confess Christianity, he shifted the empire and paved the way for the future spread of Christian doctrine. Many components of *Colossus of Constantine*, especially its grandeur, were meant to convey the transcendence of the Emperor beyond the human realm, elevating him to the status of a celestial being. Similarly, Brazil’s concrete and soapstone *Christ the Redeemer* statue stands at a staggering 98 feet high with an arm span of 92 feet. The statue is installed on a 26-foot-tall pedestal, atop Corcovado mountain, which overlooks the city of Rio De Janeiro. *Christ the Redeemer* was constructed between 1926 and 1931 and explicitly encourages dominance of masculinity and Christian power. Although each layered drawing illustrates a different time period and narrative, overarching ideas of dominant masculinity and seemingly unlimited power are disseminated. Sawyer criticizes these ideas of power, hierarchy, and religion, as well as compulsions of erecting monuments of specific men as emblems of their perceived power. He argues that sculptures such as these act as reminders of the inappropriate significance of these figures and propaganda to continue their legacies. Contrary to the original statues of femininity referenced in “Strata Drawing I,” the original sculptures this work imitates were all very large-scale statues, speaking to the perceived higher status of males within each society. In Sawyer’s work, the male figures are drawn at a smaller scale, which parallels the size of the female figures in “Strata Drawing I.”

Although created in the following year, “Pangea” is the third piece of the *Strata Drawing* series. The composition is similarly dominated by tricolored imagery. Yet, “Pangea” displays the dichotomy between Sarah “Saartjie” Baartman, also referred to as the Hottentot Venus, and a representation of late nineteenth century European female attire. Rather than a tri-level layering of the images, “Pangea” features a paralleling of the images, with red, black, and green horizontally dissecting the drawing. Sarah Baartman was a South African Khoikhoi woman who lived during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. She was brought to western Europe and put on ethnographic display because her physical attributes were considered uncommon and fascinating to Europeans. Baartman’s body was analyzed as a spectacle and the components considered most interesting were her large breasts, broad hips, enlarged genitalia, and steatopygia, which is a diagnosis of the accumulation of large amounts of fat on the buttocks. The critical examination and prevalent display of Baartman’s physique aided in laying

groundwork around myths regarding physical, moral, and social traits of Black women. Scientists and managers of “freakshows” used their studies of physiognomy of Africans to explain how physical appearances could be used to deduce social and moral characteristics of people, in general. Baartman’s physical features were used to argue for what Europeans referred to as the overly sexual and less civilized, savage nature of Africans. Scientists further contributed their analysis of these elements to their studies of the hierarchy of races and scale of beauty because comparisons between females played a crucial role in comparisons between races. The skulls of Gregorian-era Caucasian and Negro female skulls were examined, ultimately leading to initiations of the field of race science and racial hierarchies, which placed Caucasians at the top and Negroes on the lowest level. Europeans utilized pseudo-science and scientific racism to influence cultural stereotypes and legitimize Europe’s commodification and subjugation of Africans during colonialism.

With “Pangea,” Sawyer displays imagery of Baartman juxtaposing a visual representation of Victorian-era royal femininity. Baartman’s body is turned, displaying the physical characteristics European scientists deemed most spectacular, which is congruent with historical depictions. Counter to Baartman is an ornate dress, replete with rear bustles, which creates a silhouette that parallels Baartman’s. During the late nineteenth century women’s fashion in many European countries shifted from bell skirts to dresses with flat fronts, narrow waists, and exaggerated, bustled rears. Bustles were a device worn under the rear of a dress or skirt to expand the garment just below the waist. Some argue that bustles were worn as fashion accessories, adding fullness to the hard-edged front lines of the garment and keeping the skirt from dragging. Others believe bustles were uncomfortable devices worn to delight males, further acting as a symbol of patriarchy. Either way, the irony of western European clothing resembling the aspects that were criticized in the previous era’s African women ought not be lost on the viewer.

Three bodies of work within the exhibition merge to deliberately honor notable African American figures and investigate their cultural significance. The series of portraits began with works that are not included in *Year of the Flood*. Created in 2017, the first edition of *Golden Boys* is a set of charcoal portraits of African American men who have held prominent roles in American intellectual spheres. Shifting to visual artists, Sawyer created the original edition of *Grâce Noire*, highlighting African American female visual artists in 2019. The series continues with *Grâce Noire (B-Girl Edition)* and *Golden Boys Vol. II*, which both focus on African American hip-hop artists. As Sawyer continues to contribute to conversations around African American artists and their effect on history, he constantly adds to his visual archive.

Contrary to the ethnography of Khoikhoi women and the creation of racist Western visual culture with relation to Black women, the ten artists included in *Grâce Noire (Artist Edition)* are Black women, memorialized for their alternative contributions to visual culture. They portray expressions of their personal experiences and self-defined identities. As the first set of an ongoing series, Sawyer argues for the importance of uplifting and documenting artists who are still living to discuss their continued efforts of contributing Black narratives to art history and American culture. Although the women in the series use a plethora of media, many of them are figurative artists who reclaim images from white supremacist culture. With simple black and white charcoal drawings, Sawyer creates an element of visibility for these women and emphasizes the importance of not only experiencing their work, but the value of recognizing

their individual identities. Black women have been categorically erased from art historical narratives throughout time, making the representation of these women significantly valuable. Each work in the series is a charcoal drawing of an individual artist's head encased in a glitter-filled circular shape, with eyes that also subtly sparkle. The inescapable gaze and simplicity of the figure emerging from a scene reminiscent of the night sky, centralized on a flat white background, creates powerful imagery, forcing viewers to wholly center their attention. The works capture the dynamism of the women, contributing to a more inclusive art historical narrative, and forever immortalize them within the cannon.

Grâce Noire continues with a new set of drawings created the following year, *The B-Girl Edition*, now featuring prominent African American female hip-hop artists. With the second iteration of the series, Sawyer considers hip-hop as an important musical genre that helped him understand many perspectives of Black womanhood. For example, throughout the hip-hop genre, there has been a standing dialogue about Black womanhood and sexuality. During Sawyer's youth, artists such as Queen Latifah provided pushback to stereotyped imagery of the oversexualization of Black women, demanding respect through her lyrics. Artists such as Lil Kim and Foxy Brown, who are also represented in the series, were sex-positive hip-hop artists who never shied away from explicitly discussing their sexual desires. Similarly, Salt-N-Pepa and MC Lyte explored topics of sexuality, often reversing the roles of men and women in their songs and placing themselves in dominant roles as a way to empower women. Among other topics, many of the women in the series adamantly analyze problems concerning female objectification and promote the importance of owning one's sexuality, which aids in Sawyer's understanding of these ideas. The women artists who brought forth these concepts in the 1980s and 1990s also paved the way for more contemporary artists such as Nicki Minaj to continue the advocacy for the expression of women's sexuality in their songs.

Golden Boys Vol. II is visually similar and continues the conversation about musical artists who were prevalent during the golden age of hip-hop and beyond, focusing now on males. With this series, Sawyer chose artists who have aided in shaping history. As hip-hop was the music of Sawyer's generation, he enjoyed it and utilized it to wade through understanding his own identity as a young African American male coming of age during the continued evolution of such a prolific musical genre. Sawyer views the significance of hip-hop as more than entertainment; he understands it as educational material. In *Golden Boys Vol. II*, not only does Sawyer render portraits of hip-hop artists whose music he enjoys, he is also particular about immortalizing artists who play a role in educating others about social issues.

Charcoal drawings of the figures' heads placed on gold leaf discs and white backgrounds, as viewed in many religious works of art, references the internal value of the figures, connotative imagery of placing figures on coins, and gold record awards in hip-hop. Tupac Shakur is one figure represented in the series and memorialized through the work with a golden halo. Shakur is often considered one of the most influential rappers of all time because of his ability to creatively and authentically discuss social problems that were specifically relevant to African American inner-city youth. As a young adult, Shakur witnessed many of the issues that plagued the Black community throughout the nation. He spoke about concerns such as rampant drug use, teen pregnancy, and a lack of necessary resources, and he advocated for equality. Although Shakur only lived until age 25, his work continues to influence listeners and more contemporary artists

such as Kendrick Lamar, who is also in the series. Lamar continues the legacy of hip-hop music's controversial role of emphasizing social injustice and racism, while also examining Black empowerment. Each artist in the series has contributed valuable commentary to dialogue centered on difficulties within the African American community and thus, relevant to American history. The series honors individuals who have developed this conversation and those who are continuing the conversation today. They are expressing their citizenship, and right to equality and freedom from oppression, offering both praise of and conflict with America.

“Good Government” and “Bad Government” are large-scale oil paintings with collages of media imagery from recent high-profile stories and focus completely on critiques of American government and society. The works take their titles from Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fourteenth century Italian fresco series, *The Allegory and Effects of Good and Bad Government*. Contrary to most works commissioned at the time, Lorenzetti's work was solely focused on civic matters, rather than religion, emphasizing the politically tumultuous time period. Lorenzetti's six frescoes almost entirely covered the Council Room of the town hall in Siena, Italy, a room in which much political decision-making took place. The frescoes were allegorical depictions of the virtues of good government, the vices of bad government, and the impact these behaviors could have on cities and countries. They were constant visual reminders of the importance of governmental decisions and the large-scale effects that result. Essentially, Lorenzetti was theorizing that good government resulted in a prosperous and peaceful city, and giving a political warning that bad government led to issues such as a destroyed city, failed businesses, and war.

Sawyer examines the United States government in a similar fashion with “Good Government” and “Bad Government.” Although there is significant visual imagery, the exhaustion, stress, and despair of the mass of large-scale figures are most prevalent in the works. The body language of the figures represents many African American's responses to existing in a nation in turmoil, with particular attention on anti-Black race relations. Rather than using personification as Lorenzetti chose to, Sawyer fills in the spaces between the figures with contemporary media images. Although the works are rendered in similar visual styles, they spotlight different recent events. “Bad Government” features large-scale painted figures in white suits and collaged sections depicting events and imagery such as mugshots of the police officer who murdered George Floyd, the Confederate flag, the Blue Lives Matter flag, protest signs, forest fires in California, and Amber Guyer, the off duty police officer who murdered Botham Jean, an unarmed Black man, in his apartment. “Good Government” features large-scale painted figures in black suits and collaged elements depicting events and imagery such as mass murderers, the 2021 insurrection at the US capital by white nationalists, a Confederate monument of Robert E. Lee, and the violent Unite the Right rally opposing the removal of the monument. Contrary to Lorenzetti, Sawyer takes on an approach that is somewhat satirical in nature, only presenting negative effects of government, despite the initial possibility of good versus bad. Sawyer argues that regardless of who is in power, governmental decisions are often the impetus for bad behavior and there are many negative ramifications of the government's seemingly good and bad decisions.

The most monumental work featured in *Year of the Flood*, by physical scale and concept, is a large-scale bisected painting, which explores a conversation about time and a blatant judgment of America's foundational obsession with white supremacy. “White on White: Stone Mountain” is a twelve foot wide, five foot tall painting that takes its name from the similarly titled 1918

abstract painting, “Suprematist Composition: White on White” by Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich. The two paintings drastically differ visually, yet there is a conceptual relationship. Malevich intentionally simplified the composition of his painting, creating a slightly tilted white square leaning toward the top right corner of the canvas and resting within a flat background of a somewhat warmer tone of white. The work is devoid of most representational details that could be used to create meaning or bridge a connection. Instead, keeping with the idea of the Suprematism art movement, which he founded, Malevich focused on basic geometric forms and a limited range of colors in an attempt to create work based purely in artistic feeling.

Sawyer, on the other hand, takes an almost completely oppositional artistic approach with “White on White: Stone Mountain.” Although somewhat abstracted, the painting is very much representational and lends a significant amount of information through the figures’s interactions. Similar to “Good Government” and “Bad Government,” “White on White: Stone Mountain” depicts anonymous Black males donning suits that flail and curve in response to the bodies’ of the figures awkwardly twisting and turning. The unpleasant body language of the figures speaks to the unease of African American people existing within systems of oppression.

The figures lie on a backdrop of a representation of the Stone Mountain Confederate Memorial Carving, which is a 90 feet by 190 feet depiction of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, who are all considered heroes of the Confederacy. The size of the painting reflects the monumental scale of the carving, as well as the overwhelming, ongoing anxiety of surviving as a Black American in the United States (U.S.), which relates to the Confederacy. The Confederacy, officially known as The Confederate States of America, were eleven Southern states whose governments seceded from the U.S. between 1860 and 1861 as a result of their fear of the potential ramifications of Abraham Lincoln’s presidential election. One consistent concern was Lincoln’s desire to end chattel slavery of Africans and African Americans in the U.S., which the Confederacy adamantly disagreed with. The eleven states conducted all governmental business separate from the remaining states, from the time of the secession until their defeat in the American Civil War in 1865. Despite the war ending in a loss, many citizens and governmental officials praised the efforts of the Confederacy and continued to uphold racist ideology with regards to Black people. After a complicated process, including many design changes throughout the years, a scaled back version of the massive memorial carving that was initially suggested in 1912 was finally completed in 1972. It rests within the north face of Stone Mountain in Georgia and is the largest bas-relief in the world. One hundred years after the end of the Civil War, in 1965 Stone Mountain Park officially opened to the public, although it had already been in use for hundreds of years. The memorial was not completed yet but with its completion, it became the largest Confederate monument in history, standing as a constant reminder of the refusal to release support for racist and oppressive laws upheld and literally fought for by a nation that existed for a mere five years.

Although Malevich’s painting does not relate to such explicit events and ideas, there is a conceptual commonality between the works. Malevich’s painting is imbued with a feeling of timelessness and evokes a sense of floating. Similarly, Sawyer’s work discusses how the memorial references the continued perpetuation of Confederate ideology despite the distance of time since the Civil War, and the floating figures represent the instability and impossibility of ease of existence of Black people in America. The use of light and shadow in the painting is

particularly compelling and further narrates this connotation. The contemporary and historical connection between the figures and the relief is visually obvious, yet a secondary hint at the historical nature of the work rests in the harsh shadows. The shadows reference the ominously oppressive nature of the Confederacy and the upholding of their beliefs.

Many argue that the Civil Rights Era brought forth new measures toward a more equitable nation, yet the traverse through multiple decades has disproportionately alleviated the racist and oppressive ideology of the Confederacy and the foundation on which it stands. Despite its short tenure, the history of the Confederacy has played a role in the dictation of more contemporary American society. Over one hundred fifty years beyond the conclusion of the Civil War, Sawyer has depicted the continued angst of Black people in America that directly relates to racism and America's refusal to move away from abhorrent systems of white supremacy. Sawyer also relays this message through the most recent works in the exhibition, "Good Government" and "Bad Government." Two years post the creation of "White on White: Stone Mountain," Sawyer utilizes these two works as a continued political critique of inappropriate uses of power and the ramifications of living with visual representations of white supremacy. "White on White: Stone Mountain" perfectly conveys numerous repurposed themes viewed throughout *Year of the Flood*, although it is one of the earlier works in the exhibition. Among others, themes of critiques on art history and the display of grandiose, propagandistic sculptures, as examined in the *Strata Drawing* series, are also explored in "White on White: Stone Mountain."

The titles of Sawyer's work aid in informing the viewer of messages within the artwork. "Pangea" is an indication of the perceived relationship between the two individuals in the drawing. Pangea is believed to have been a supercontinent that existed long before any form of the human species. Although assumptions are made about how the current continents may have fit together in the distant past, there is no accurate record of such an occurrence. Similarly, there is no consistent record of the connection between the story of Sarah Baartman and Western European women's fashion of the late nineteenth century, yet, it appears there may be a possible correlation. Throughout this body of work, Sawyer illuminates these possible connections. More connections are disclosed through "White on White: Stone Mountain." Stone Mountain is already referenced visually, yet partially duplicating the title of Malevich's painting offers an added layer of meaning to Sawyer's work. A similar comparison is made through the *Strata Drawings*, "Good Government," and "Bad Government." Sawyer reveals information, opens the narrative for examination, draws parallels, and begins to question imagery and intention behind it. What has history taught us? What should we question and what is to be understood as truth? Most importantly, whose voices are missing from these accounts and conversations, shifting the histories to a biased portrayal? Sawyer's work somewhat answers these questions but also challenges the viewer to think beyond his interpretations and sharing of information. Viewers should acknowledge this as an opportunity for the creation of a new narrative, one that is holistically derived and inclusive.

The progression from substantially researched, contextually heavy artwork to more reactionary commentary on contemporary events is clear within the exhibition. The range from the *Strata Drawings* series to "Good Government" and "Bad Government," reveal the shift in Sawyer's focus as he becomes bombarded with new information in the latter years. Despite this shift, the overall themes of his practice remain, and the aesthetic precision is further developing.

The Year of the Flood: White History Month Vol. I & II is both visually and conceptually substantial. It includes drawings, paintings, and collages that explore historical inquiry, contemporary manifestations of changes in visual and musical culture, and political commentary, merging numerous ideas. Yet, it ultimately lands on a critique of the American social, political, and cultural systems, which stem from European principles. Sawyer brings forth more precise themes of Black motherhood, the hypocrisy and failures of bipartisan political systems, and criticisms of religious power, as well. With specific regard to upending racist ideology and evaluating historical narratives, Sawyer utilizes his artistic platform to promote experiences of African Americans, memorialize African American cultural leaders, and create a visual archive that is much more inclusive than the Eurocentric, incomplete, and inaccurate account of Western history. He is not rewriting history, rather, he's shedding light on parts of the narrative that are often left in the dark.