



Quantum Exchange: The Diasporic Art of Daniel Minter

Daniel Minter's art is a navigation system. A map to another tone in the world. In the midst of an historical moment in African American life that some compare to Rayford Logan's post-Reconstruction "nadir," Minter's work offers both assessment and arsenal. He describes his art as a technology; a mode of creativity that uses African diasporic sensibilities to enable an alternative understanding about the world; a way to recognize and access ancestral resources for individual and collective struggle. The artist's creative production includes sculpture, painting, illustration, printmaking and assemblage/installation, all rooted in a necessary usefulness and nurturing. "My idea of the purpose of art" Minter says, "is to give people ways of using their culture to solve everyday life problems."

This emphasis on the utilitarian in his art is reflected in the metaphoric range of Minter's symbols. Growing up in the small farming community of Ellaville, Georgia in the 1960s and 1970s, his vision and work emerged from the soil, sites, implements and histories of Black southern life. Minter's art is heavy with gross materiality – thick planks of wood, found objects, metal, wire, stone, the heft of human presence in the world; and particularly, the physical and psychic weight of Black embodiment in the Americas, especially in the US Blackbelt South. And at the same time, there is an astonishing ephemerality in the work. Sometimes, as in the assemblage, "A Distant Holla," these two tendencies exist side by side, interwoven and conversing, in continuum.

Although he spent his formative years in Georgia, Minter has lived elsewhere for more than two decades – first in the Pacific Northwest, then in Chicago, and now, for the past 16 years, in Portland, Maine with his

wife and son. He travels widely – and has spent periods in Brazil, East Africa, Mexico and the Caribbean. He favors working in community with other visual artists and his artwork has a decidedly diasporic cast.

In some important ways, Minter’s mode aligns with that of other Black creatives – scholars, writers, musicians, dancers and visual artists – whose approach, sometimes considered *afropessimist*, acknowledges and explores the depth and breadth of the inherent antiblackness at the heart of modernity; its historicity; and the fact that it is not likely to disappear from the earth anytime soon. In a conversation with Minter earlier this year, he talked with me about the commodification of Black bodies and Black productivity at the founding of the modern world – and how slavery, and the persistence of Black fungibility has provided the reigning paradigm for capitalism into the 21st century; using up everything and everybody until there is nothing left. And then using the carcass.

What we see in Minter’s work is the profound recognition of the assault on, and the precarity of, Black life; melded to an equally essential emphasis on “another tone.” In fact, his greater accentuation is on the alternate timbres, which are also conceptual tools; those vital, transformative modes of being, that are cultivated over generations and that carry an-other meaning of the possible (an *afrofuturist* vision) at their heart. Minter’s art is the labor of tender excavation, unearthing the wisdom buried in the culture – sometimes deep in the terrain of memory, sometimes flat-footed in plain sight all around us. Minter’s vision helps us recognize and reinterpret the strengths and possibilities in a radically inclusive African American and Afro-diasporic vision of the world.

Diaspora Literacy

The late cultural critic and performance scholar, Vèvè Clark, developed a concept she called “diaspora literacy,” to describe the capacity to “read” texts from Indigenous and African diasporic cultural perspectives “beyond the field of Western or westernized signification.”¹ Reading Daniel Minter’s work, at its deepest levels, requires a certain fluency of the sort to which Clark referred. So much of his art is steeped in the tropes and meanings of Southern African American culture that viewers without at least some familiarity with Black histories, idioms and traditions may miss some of the deeper-strata information he shares with us. But Minter’s work is also a strategy and a pedagogy – instructing viewers in the essential elements of its language and suggesting ways to engage its multiple meanings.

Over the course of his career, Minter has both searched out and created an iconography of Afro-Atlantic experience – a set of symbols that are powerfully centered in the Black US historical context but that are also visual cousins to symbols from the Caribbean, West and Central Africa, and especially, Brazil. Inspired by the koan-like short poems of Lucille Clifton, (especially those in her series, *Blessing the Boats*²), Minter was drawn to the idea that a simple image or figure can tell a complex and layered story and that there are certain recurring, elemental and iconic symbols in Afro-Atlantic life that could be gathered as a kind of codex of Black experience in the world. With Clifton’s poetry as a catalyst, Minter began to systematically observe and note similarities among the symbolic resources of diasporic communities and more consciously include these in his own artwork. His visual language includes reiterations of water and wind; fish and boats; musical instruments; brooms, axes and other implements of labor; bottles and bowls; Black people’s

¹ Vèvè Amasasa Clark, “Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness.” *Theater Survey*, 50 (2009): 10-11

² Lucille Clifton, *Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems, 1988-2000*, (Boa Editions, 2000)

faces, bodies and hair; traditional foods like okra, black-eyed peas and greens; turtles; birds; and various representations of Spirit, the continuity of the life force, and the power of healing in the world.

Minter calls these symbols, “keys.” And he is especially drawn to the way the symbols contain and transmit stories, lessons, wisdoms. He began exploring the “keys” as block print carvings – wanting to make sure he used images that people could recognize and feel connected to, with the intent of building a visual and conceptual grammar that would resonate as broadly as possible across African American and African diasporic experience.

Candomblé and an Afrofuturist Spirituality

In 1994 and 1995, Minter and his wife, Marcia, spent a year in Bahia, Brazil. Recipient of an NEA fellowship, Minter was exploring connections between figures in African American folk tradition and the *orixás*³ of Afro-Brazilian religious iconography. In the ensuing years, the artist developed a strong relationship with the Afro-Brazilian ritual tradition, Candomblé, and is an *ogan*⁴ of the Terreiro do Cobre temple community in Salvador. In his connection to the *orixás* of Candomblé, Minter’s affinity for toolmaking and creative foresight are associated with the *orixá*, Ogun - the divine blacksmith, sacred energy of communication, technology and road-clearing. His work also has obvious links to *afrofuturism*, a concept, for Minter, that is not something mechanical, or industrial. “I don’t think of it in that way,” he says, “I think about it in a spiritual way.”

In many of his paintings and illustrations, Minter employs a technique of lace-like tracings, white lines superimposed on human figures or appearing within the shapes of items on his canvases. The lines are generally decorative, enhancing the forms in the paintings – often they function as a flourish in clothing, or as a recurring pattern – subtle or bold – in the background of the work. The tracings frequently mark a space in the art where fundamental symbols of Minter’s oeuvre repeat themselves and, taken as a whole, begin to give us a sense of the “alternative routes” Minter sees abounding, as an ancestral indigenous inheritance, just below the surface (or, above it, like a spiritual stanchions) of the regular, mundane world.

In the painting *A Heavy Grace*, for example, there are – in the transparent raiment of a woman bent inside spiritual presence – turtle, rabbit, a glowing sun and spiders. The diaphanousness of the cloth that covers her symbolizes the manifestation of the *orixá*, who she is carrying in her body. Or, there are birds laid over the image of the backcountry loner in *Morning Flight*; a kind of hieroglyphic reminder of other and deeper connections that surround and infuse the human figure. The large medical bag of *The Midwife* is covered with white tracings of long whole okra plants, fish, guinea hens, turtles, cowries, eggs, and drops of water, among other symbols. And these, for Minter, are part of the iconography of resilience and resistance; of healing and renewal that, in both conscious and subconscious ways, have been elements of the survival of African American people and of the indigenous ways of being in the world that persist among the descendants of those who were enslaved in the Americas. Daniel explains, “I want Black people to know that we carry these resources, our cultural resources with us all the time, not just when we are in ceremony or ritual or worship. We have access to them all the time – at our jobs and when we’re going about our

³ *Orixá* is a Yoruba term denoting sacred energies; divinized forces of nature, such as wind, fire, water, mountains, earth, that are cultivated in the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblé.

⁴ An *ogan* is a male initiate with responsibilities for specific aspects of the ritual life of the Candomblé community.

daily lives.” The lines, he says, “denote another presence or another layer of existence. Another something that is beneath, or in front of [the figure].” As he works with the white tracings in his work, he finds the practice of making them meditative; and he sees them as representations of “the spiritual...the other existence.”

But sometimes, as in the painting Minter calls *quantum exchange*, the lines are not simply embellishments; they become the thing itself and offer the viewer a way of seeing the subject of the piece from an entirely different visceral experience; an experience of embodiment. This painting relates to a powerful dream Daniel had in his twenties, in which he was transported and transformed into an essential element of the life force, like an atom or quark. In that infinitesimal state, he moved through many forms of matter – trees, plants, birds, insects, even human remains and the deep soil of the earth. And in each instance Minter became everything he passed through, everything he encountered. At the center of the earth, in the dream, Minter met an ancestral presence who was, at the same time, the artist himself and who lamented the continued enslavement (to capitalism, racism, alienation) that Black people, and all human beings, suffer. It was a singular experience for Minter; one, he says, which has impacted his work ever since. Recently, he is finding more striking ways to visually express the notion that *all forms of life hold all other forms in themselves*. The human figure facing the rooster in *quantum exchange* is, thus, formed of plants, birds and what look like galaxies – the rooster too is more energy than form or feathers; both beings sharing something like an emblem of sight.

The Indigo Arts Alliance: Diasporic Collaborations

Portland, Maine has been home to the Minter family since 2003. Earlier this year, Daniel and Marcia (who recently retired as vice president creative director at LL Bean), inaugurated a cultural center in the city, dedicated to increasing the visibility of, and support for, Black and Brown artists. In just a few months of operation, the Indigo Arts Alliance has become a vital and visionary space, drawing artists and audiences from all over the region, and internationally, for residencies, workshops, performances and public conversations about the essential role of creativity, imagination and collaboration in the life of a healthy, multiracial democracy. Indigo is the manifestation of a lifelong commitment the Minters have shared: a place where their conjoined dedication to art, ingenuity, social justice and diasporic collaboration is seeded and growing with remarkable community support. Daniel sees Indigo as a communal space, a place where Black and Brown artists can encourage each other, exchange ideas, experiment together, and find a way “to move our artwork into an African cultural model that benefits us and strengthens our community, instead of serving the economics of a European art world model.”

Whether in the bricks and mortar of an emerging cultural arts institution or in the symbolic vocabulary of his paintings, illustrations and other artwork, Daniel Minter’s labor is a reminder of the resources we carry with us – the cultural strengths and spiritual insights that are as if another set of internal veins or an exoskeletal possibility. For the artist, the materiality of the culture holds knowledge and historical experience as well as futurity. It also holds an indigenous, ancestral orientation that posits blackness as humanness and humanness as imprinted with (and in relationship to) all other forms of life in the universe. For Minter, African American spiritual sensibilities and the rituals of Candomblé are resources to get to that orientation, that recollection, that remembrance, of radical connectivity, radical love. His artwork guides, like the unborn child narrator of Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*, asserting: “I remember and I recall.”

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