

Brittany Scott  
English 1101  
Dr.Desmet  
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When Words Fail

Make a glance last a lifetime: This is the primary goal of artists. Tracing back to Leonardo DaVinci during the Renaissance Era, one of the ultimate purposes of art has always been to create a piece so eloquent that the elements of the artwork tell a story themselves (Atsma). Hence, in this form art relays a message, making it a definite form of literature. As literature, art is a tool to bring about social awareness, consciousness of history, and/or aesthetic appreciation. Kenneth Vann reveals his familiarity with art as a tool of expression. When asked how his works benefit him personally, Vann explains that “his artwork gives [him] a means to express an idea that [he] can't find the words to say.” A notable example of such artistic expression by Vann is his painting *The Fight*. In this piece, Kenneth Vann uses eclectic details with rhetorical incongruities to present the internal struggles for self-worth that African Americans endure and to furthermore provide aesthetic social commentary, which highlights the fact that Blacks' concurrent mission to find equality and freedom in America is still highly incomplete.

Without any application of a deep analysis, one major detail is easily digested by Vann's

audience. That detail is African Americans in America. History proves that the entire process of Americanization for African Americans was a struggle. Dated back to 1619, when African Americans first stepped foot in America, the “fight” was in progress. According to Darlene Hines, Africans' first business in America was their positions as indentured servants (Hines 282). However, in only a few years this willingness was taken full advantage of. As America's greed grew, the need for servants grew. And soon, “the willingness of indentured servitude grew into the helplessness of slavery” (Hines 283). The rule was simple; if your mom was black, then you were black, and if you were black, then you were a slave (Hines 283). Hines explains that by the 1700s ninety percent of all African Americans were building what we know today as the land of milk and honey (299). They spent two centuries turning America into one of the Industrial Revolution's prosperous countries and turning American factories into the most appealing trade market of the globe. Thus, one concludes that African Americans helped shape America and the nation's abilities around the globe with their bare hands, on their bare knees—literally.

Such knowledge about the early journey of African Americans in America is needed for any true analysis of Kenneth Vann's image. This information is the foundation of the oppression that the image depicts: Vann states that his image “symbolizes the seemingly everlasting struggle of the black community” (Woods 15). The history's significance also derives from the fact that the creator himself “is an African American History and Art major at Howard University” (Woods 13). Therefore, his intellectual and cultural connection with the struggle of African Americans allow him to deeply explore it in his painting. With this one painting Vann portrays the overall conflict African Americans face, an internal conflict of historical and cyclical significance. The internal battle can be seen by simply focusing on the three subjects. Each of the subjects reflects a historical aesthetic piece that assists Vann in emphasizing the inner issues of all African Americans—specifically, the three major stems of the struggle for the last two centuries: self-regard, civil rights, and emancipation.

This fight within is first depicted by the man on the left. His head is completely back. His arms are slightly outstretched, and his muscles are being strained. This posture allows Vann to give off the impression that this man is a reflection of Jesus Christ, for Jesus is drawn and sculpted this way on more than one occasion. Such examples include Nivardus of Milon's painting entitled *The Crucifixion* and James Tissot's eighteenth century painting entitled *Jesus Praying*. As with Jesus and Christianity, the man's prayers are for the society around him; he is praying that they change their ways and perceptions. Also as Jesus was on the cross, the subject is helpless and hopeless in the hands of society. He is begging for help from a higher source. He is in need of an answer, for a change.



Similarly to the man on the left, the man in the middle's posture directly resembles another famous work of art. The man is kneeling and holding a globe in Vann's attempt to recreate Cardinal Alessandro Farnese's sculpted Greek Titan, *Atlas*. In Homer's *The Odyssey*, Atlas symbolizes endurance (Atsma). Specifically he is labeled the one who "knows the depth of all the sea" (*Odyssey*, i.52.). However, because he leads a group of Titans to rebel against Zeus, the Gods place the world upon his shoulders as punishment. In relation to Atlas, the symbolism of Vann's subject's posture lies in the fact that for hundreds of years African Americans did nothing more than build America from soil and lead America to prosperity with production; when they rebelled, they were punished. Consequently, the inner deconstruction of this unjust lifestyle still cages their minds and souls. The mental destruction is a burden that they struggle to uplift off their backs still.



Likewise, the woman on the right has her hands held up to the sky, mimicking the *Statue of Liberty*. With the torch in her hand, she is showing desperation for a better day and begging for

enlightenment—which is what the statue's torch truly symbolizes. She needs the light to outshine the expected ignorance of her culture and to light the way of their lives' dark path.

In addition to the figures' symbolic body positions, certain contrasts in the image also provide enlightening details regarding the psychological aspect of African Americans. For instance, all of the subjects' appearances contrast with the colorfulness of the image. Their dull faces do not match or complement the bright background; this further emphasizes the fact that it is “their struggle.” The rest of America will proceed to go with the wind, as the flag attempts to do in the image, without paying any mind to African Americans. Furthermore, the muscular build of the subjects, in contrast with their straining and indistinguishable faces, further underscores the African American psyche. This obvious discomfort of the subjects reveals their awkwardness in the midst of society, but their muscular frame shows their progress inside their own fight. They are not free of trials; instead, they are getting stronger. As Vann states while explaining the title of his image *The Fight*, “There's a factor that people do not realize about African Americans; it is the fact that they are progressing in a struggle, not struggling to progress. African Americans are not even a century out of nadir[lowest point], their minds hold personal low worth” (Woods 14). Vann explains that the subjects are “progressing in a struggle.” However, they have yet to completely overcome the strife. And as a result of the subjects' lack of sufficiency in gaining complete victory, they lack identity. The subjects' virtual facelessness and lack of direct eye-contact reiterate Vann's idea of this incomplete battle and such mental low worth.

One of the main issues that accompany these internal battles and prove that African Americans are still struggling is their lack of equality in America. Obviously, this issue is not as bad as it was when Jim Crow was widespread in the south. But Vann made a point to show that the issue still exists. The presentation of inequality is hidden in a few of his image's incongruities. The most apparent examples are the figures' nakedness and near nakedness. This inappropriate exposure adds to Blacks' inability to properly belong in America. Judged by appearance, this ten percent of America's population stands out in a humiliating, vulnerable, burdensome way. Alongside this detail of their outcast nature is the fact

that the flag is pinned down. Vann establishes ultimate irony in this one detail. A free-flying flag is pinned down. A flag is representative of who the people of a country are, of what the people believe in, and what the people stand for. However, this flag does not fly equally over all citizens. Therefore, African Americans have to pin it down to fully grasp any wholeness of America. They have to fight, as the title suggests, to get the feeling of a true citizen.

This idea of inequality is further expressed with the most dynamic factor in the image, the globe. Usually a globe is blue and green, both lively colors. More importantly, blue and green represent the resources provided by the natural Earth. Contrarily, the globe in Vann's image is black and brown. These somber colors highlight the limited resources and the virtual economic powerlessness of African Americans. Apparently, Blacks do not have equal opportunities. The bright possibilities that the natural world offers the vast majority of American society are dull improbabilities to African Americans.

Alongside the issue of inequality is African Americans lack of freedom, which Vann underscores with the Statue of Liberty that is kept separate from the subjects due to the American flag, which divides the subjects and the statue. This provides social commentary on the fact that America keeps African Americans away from full emancipation. Moreover, Vann precisely makes sure certain details on the Statue of Liberty are hidden. One of these details is the broken shackles that are on the real Statue of Liberty's feet. This underscores the idea that African Americans' shackles are not broken. They are still somehow morally or politically or economically or socially or racially enslaved.

Art captures a moment and makes it momentous. Kenneth Vann does not try to revive history in his image. He is, instead, trying to tell the world that the fight of African Americans, respected as history, is still present. He allows history to enhance art and creates a pivotal masterpiece. His selective artistic and historic elements weave his artwork into a voice that evocatively comments on the lives and struggles of African Americans. This voice, created with oil paints and pastel, is gentle enough to seek pity, yet dynamic enough to reap change in awareness. And that is the importance of a piece of art, to leave the audience with a different or enlightened perspective. Vann allows his picture to provide the

enlightenment that has many times been offered to society: “Black people have always been apart of the American nation that they helped to build, but they have also been a nation unto themselves with their own experiences, struggles, and aspirations” (Du Bois, qtd. in Hines). However, Vann's enlightenment seemingly offers a more captivating presentation and literary richness than the average writers who portray the same theme. This difference can be summed up into one contrasting factor: “They use their pen, [he] uses [his] paintbrush” (Woods 13).

#### Works-Cited

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