Risa Puleo, "The Linguistic Overlap of Color Theory and Racism," *Hyperallergic,* December 2016.

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The Linguistic Overlap of Color Theory and Racism

Tomashi Jackson found that the language Josef Albers used to describe color perception mirrored the language of racialized segregation.

Risa Puleo

Installation view, *Tomashi Jackson: The Subliminal is Now* at Tilton Gallery (all images courtesy Tilton Gallery)

While studying painting and printmaking at Yale University, Tomashi Jackson noticed that the language Josef Albers used to describe color perception phenomenon, in his 1963 instructional text Interaction of Color, mirrored the language of racialized segregation found in the transcripts of education policy and civil rights court cases fought by Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF). The discovery led Jackson to use the properties of color perception as an aesthetic strategy for investigating the history of American school desegregation and the contemporary resegregation of public space. The results are large-scale abstract works that connect past and present, formalism and intuition, languages of color theory and human rights legislation.

What's more, works like "Avocado Seed Soup (Davis, et. al. v County School Board of Prince Edward County) (Brown, et. al. v Board of Education of Topeka) (Sweatt v Painter)" (2016) combine painting with sculpture, textile, embroidery, printmaking, and photography. "Apartheid Blues II (Old Texas Courtroom)" (2015) features a blue similar to the color used for chroma keying in early video technology, and has been used as a projection screen in the video collage "Forever 21: The Essence of Innocence Suite" (2015). Through a deft integration of mediums, Jackson is guided by methods of desegregation and dehierarchization. She visualizes a merger of historical and contemporary experiences of color perception, and she considers their effects on human life in public space in America.

Tomashi Jackson, "Avocado Seed Soup (Davis, et. al. v County School Board of Prince Edward County) (Brown, et. al. v Board of Education of Topeka) (Sweatt v Painter)" (2016)

Born in Houston and raised in Los Angeles, Tomashi Jackson is currently based in New York City and the Greater Boston area, where she teaches at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Her solo exhibition The Subliminal is Now opened at Tilton Gallery on November 3 and is on view through January 7, 2017.

Risa Puleo has been talking to Tomashi Jackson over the past year. What follows are some of the collected and edited highlights of their conversations.

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Risa Puleo: *How did you connect Josef Albers's* Interaction of Color *to the legal battle to end segregation? How do Albers's optical color theories mirror race interactions in social space?*

Tomashi Jackson: In 2014 I volunteered for Nia K. Evans at the Boston NAACP, documenting their coalition work with the Boston Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice to protect school bus service for middle school children in public schools. Boston was notoriously forced by the federal government to end *de jure* segregation — segregation enforced by law — in 1974, 20 years after Thurgood Marshall and the LDF fought and won the five cases of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas in 1954, outlawing Jim Crow segregation. Communities were still trying to resist segregation on behalf of their children in 2014.

Tomashi Jackson, detail of "Mario All Alone (Davis v County School Board)" (2016)

I read *Interaction of Color* line by line as I read *Brown v. Board of Education: A Documentary History* by Mark Whitman. At one point Marshall argued 650 cases simultaneously. Though most of the cases Marshall worked on in the 1940s and 1950s were collegiate, the *Brown* cases focused on primary schools. The documents are filled with paranoid rhetoric defending the separation of "colored" people from "white" people at all costs. Marshall's team provided sociological research, including the famous Kenneth and Mamie Clark doll study, revealing the damaging psychological impact of segregation on all children, especially "colored" children. Transcripts illustrate the absurdist nature of American racism as it dictates social policies then and now. I recognized terms about how "colors" interact from Albers's text: colored, boundaries,

movement, transparency, mixture, purity, restriction, deception, memory, transformation, instrumentation, systems, recognition, psychic effect, placement, quality, and value. The language around *de jure* segregation is similar to Albers's description of the wrong way to perceive color, as if color is static. Marshall and Albers concluded that color is relative, and what a viewer perceives a color to be is determined by the color nearest to it. Color is always changing, and, contrary to popular belief, it is not absolute. I saw the phenomenon of vibrating boundaries aligned with residential redistricting and redlining. Color theory and human rights are conceptually interwoven in my paintings. I find the language comparisons appropriate metaphors for a critique of racism rather than a critique of categories of race.

Installation view, *Tomashi Jackson: The Subliminal is Now* at Tillton Gallery

RP: *Was Albers aware of the social and ideological implications of his theories?*

TJ: Albers's work isn't just about color theory; it is a proposal for a way of thinking. Albers was a World War II refugee living, educating, and making art in the United States from the early 1930s until his death in 1976. He spent the majority of that time at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina and Yale University in Connecticut. The American South and New England are hotbeds of racialized inequity across public and private realms, then and now. Thurgood Marshall was arguing these cases at the same time that Albers was teaching. Sixty years ago, there was a need for anti-lynching legislation because people had to be told that there were consequences for kidnapping people and hanging them from trees, cutting babies from pregnant women, castrating men, and setting them on fire. And it was

opposed. The Tuskegee syphilis experiments ended in 1972. This is the social backdrop of *Interaction of Color*. Whether or not Albers spoke frankly about it, European ex-patriots were aware and more willing to acknowledge the fact of this horror than many Americans for whom such violence was normal. One of Albers's students at Yale was a painter named Robert Reed. In Virginia, he had been denied access to higher education due to segregation that persisted after *Brown*. He went on to become a great artist, the first Black professor in the School of Art and the longest tenured professor at Yale. I doubt the lawyers and law students were aware of what Albers and his art students were doing, but the lawyers' work was truly transforming public space. It could not have been lost on artists who were affected by the outcomes.

RP: *Some of the works in your exhibition were begun last summer in Houston, a season notable for a number of violent acts committed by Texas police against black women and girls, including the killing of Sandra Bland, the assault of Charnesia Corley, and the McKinney Pool Party. Why were you in Houston? Can you talk about some of the choices you made for "Vibrating Boundaries (Law of the Land)(Self Portrait as Tatyana, Dajerria, & Sandra)" (2015), a video that combines painting, textiles, performance, and archival information from current and historic events?*

TJ: I was in Houston to research Marshall's landmark 1949 case *Sweatt v. Painter*. This was the first case to successfully challenge the "separate but equal" doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), desegregating the University of Texas Austin Law School. Much of the significant work happened in Houston's Third Ward. I went Texas to make paintings and absorb the history of this case that took place there. In June, when I saw the video of teens at a McKinney, Texas, pool party being brutalized by police officers on my Facebook feed, I understood this history as ongoing. I immediately thought of Albers's principle of vibrating boundaries in action: "The conditions for these varying effects occur between colors which are contrasting in their hues but also close or similar in light intensity. This initially exciting effect also feels aggressive and often even uncomfortable to our eyes." (*Interaction of Color,* p. 61)

Installation view, Tomashi Jackson: The Subliminal is Now at Tilton Gallery

For “Vibrating Boundaries (Law of the Land),” I worked with Houston artists Patrick Renner and Emily Peacock to reenact the stress positions endured by Tatyana Rhodes, Dejarria Becton, and the late Sandra Bland in a series of *tableaux vivants* at Project Row Houses. I had planned to stage these reenactments in Dallas, but Sandra Bland’s death in police custody made me concerned for my safety. We held five poses, each for one minute, conjoined by a tubular knitted color study on a concrete slab in the 100-plus-degree Texas heat. In the William Stamps row house, I recorded Naiymah Jackson reading to her children, Iyonna and Omar, Jr., from Albers’s chapters on “Vibrating Boundaries” and “Teaching Color: Some Color Terms” as I rearranged black-and-white photos of Heman Sweatt, Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP LDF team, Sandra Bland, Tatyana Rhodes, Dejarria Becton, and Eric Casebolt. The cyan painting behind her became a space for inserting video from the pool party assault in post-production. My work interrogates distorted color perception and its impact upon the value of human life in public space. The profiling, resource deprivation, detention, brutality by police and vigilantes, and legalized abuse of entire communities. A terrifying reality in plain sight.

RP: *Working with medical gauze imbues the paintings with an incredible transparency when layered. Gauze is also pretty loaded as a material.*

TJ: In 2006, my first interest in the material had to do with flesh — my own flesh and damaged flesh. Color is a light issue. I looked to stained glass in cathedrals for sublime inspiration. The pieces are often attached to materials I’ve pulled from the insides of buildings like pipes and floorboards, activated by natural and artificial light. In recent years I’ve added food wrappers from the children I took care of as a nanny from 2012 to 2014. I’m interested in the materiality of resources and how value is created.

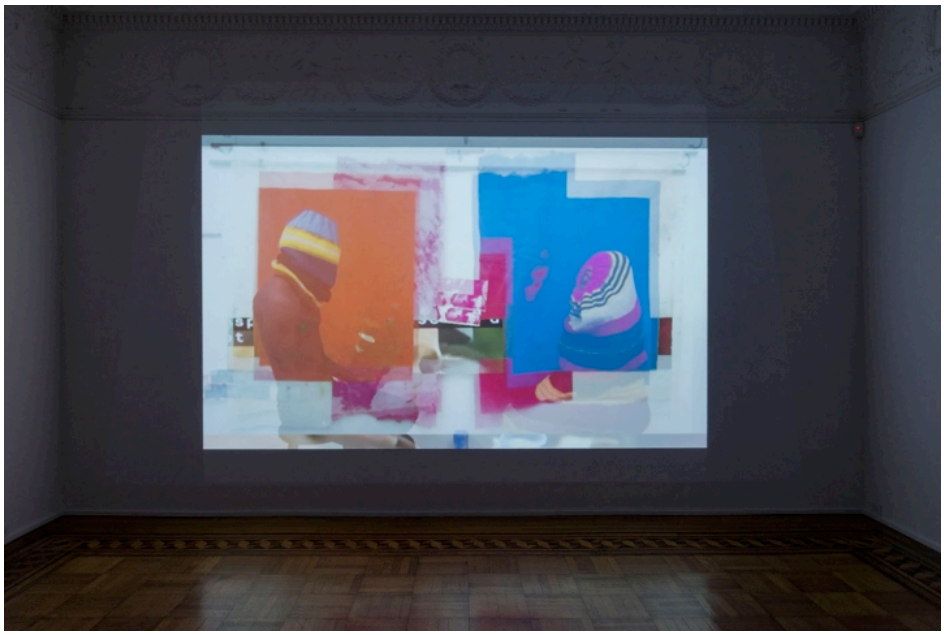
Tomashi Jackson, “The Essence of Innocence: McKinney Upside Down” (2016)

RP: *The work isn’t wholly abstract; embedded within each piece is an archival image that reveals itself over time.*

TJ: Marshall and the LDF were the first legal team to use photography as a key element of their strategy. I use photography and printmaking to weave documentation of *Brown*-related cases with contemporary imagery of human rights abuse and advocacy. I turn photographs into halftone line images for printing. This allows me to use printmaking to draw into my paintings with cross-hatched lines. The photographic image serves to introduce graphic color into the painting ground. It formally comes back to the discipline of drawing. I love when things emerge over time, like moments that differentiate the treated and raw gauze or when a cluster of cross-hatched lines, embroidered or printed, reveals a courtroom scene.

RP: *In “Self Portrait: Tale of Two Michaels” (2014), a silent Michael Brown is audience to your performance as Michael McDonald of Steely Dan and Doobie Brothers fame. Outside of the deep love that you and I share for Steely Dan, how did you bring these two figures together?*

TJ: I love the Doobie Brothers. I find that music soothing; it reminds me of my childhood in Southern California. In 2014, I was listening to them and Steely Dan almost exclusively during what seemed to be an endless epidemic of blatantly racist violence against people of color without recourse. Shortly after Darren Wilson killed unarmed 19-year-old Michael Brown, Jr., Michael McDonald released a public letter about the intensely segregated Ferguson, Missouri, that he himself grew up in. He wrote that the death of Brown was the moment for America to address the depth of its tolerance for the dehumanization of Black people. He asked, “How many tragic losses of this nature must we endure before we’re called to conscience on this issue.” Wilson was not indicted for killing Brown.



Tomashi Jackson, "Self Portrait: Tale of Two Michaels" (2014)

As I listened to "Minute By Minute," it hit me: One Michael from Ferguson gets to live a long life; the other did not. I could embody both, and "It Keeps You Runnin'" was my song. I hooded Alteronce Gumby with a knitted color study, activating simultaneous contrast with the painting behind him. He grooved to the song as I lip-synced the lead vocals. The green of the painting became a screen for video from an Al Jazeera news broadcast of Ferguson demonstrators, mourners, and militarized police.

RP: *Your show at Jack Tilton Gallery is called* The Subliminal is Now*, a riff on Barnett Newman's essay "The Sublime is Now" (1948). How does Newman figure into your thinking?*

Tomashi Jackson, "Color Study in 3 Reds, 2 Blacks, 2 Greens" (2016)

TJ: When Newman wrote "The Sublime is Now" in 1948, he believed that the awe-inspiring could be accessed without an idealized European figure at the center of a majestic composition. Newman posited that the sublime is sought through the production of painting itself, that abstraction is a vehicle for intellectual content, that art is inherently political and potentially transformative. "Subliminal" describes something that operates below the

threshold of consciousness — something that affects one's mind without one being aware of it. I find our current moment to be subliminally charged with horrifically distorted perceptions of color. Albers said that color can generate physio-psychological deceptions that no normal eye can control. Marshall, using a legal strategy I consider to be sublime in its brilliance, argued that the rule of law must be used to protect the public, especially children, from the damaging psychological effects of *de jure* segregation and the violently warped policies and characters it validates. My video collages from the last two years have felt like horror movies of some bizarro world in which people were rewarded for killing children. But the work is about now. Color is projection, obstruction, reflection, and illusion. It is subliminal and sublime.

Tomashi Jackson, "Untitled (Briggs v Elliot (South Carolina))"

Tomashi Jackson: The Subliminal is Now *continues at Tilton Gallery (8 E 76th Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through January 7, 2017.*