Toni Scott's "Bloodlines": Remembering Yesterday, Understanding Today, and Empowering Tomorrow

by

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Installations have become a staple of contemporary postmodern artworks for the past several decades. These efforts generally include multiple natural and human-constructed materials, including painting, sculpture, found objects, video, audio, film, photography, text, and other features that create a total environment for viewers. The effect is to provide audiences with a complete visual and auditory experience. The most effective and artistically constructed installations evoke powerful viewer responses. They can also perform uniquely valuable educational functions that far transcend the frequently tedious lessons of the conventional curriculum from elementary school through postgraduate studies.

I have seen literally hundreds of installations in my work as an educator and cultural critic. Some, unfortunately, are banal and derivative, often produced by younger artists following in the dreary tradition of emulating artworks they believe to be the current fashion. Others are competent efforts that add modestly to the body of contemporary art, including the growing tradition of visual social and political commentary. Occasionally, I find installations that are so spectacular in both conception and execution that I feel impelled to bring them to wider public attention.

"Bloodlines," by Los Angeles sculptor, painter, and multi-media artist Toni Scott, is in that category. Indeed, this large-scale installation, currently on exhibition at the California African American Museum in Exposition Park in Los Angeles, is one of the most compelling works of visual historical consciousness I have *ever* viewed in more than 40 years of teaching and writing about the arts. This work combines life-size and smaller sculptures, paintings, montages, maps, audio recordings, slave ship, cotton field, and genealogy tableaux, and other elements. Scott uses photography, graphic design, digital rendering, sculpture in resin, plaster bandage, metal and wood, collage, fiber, cotton, burlap, ink, acrylic paint, moss and twine in an extraordinary fusion of forms and materials in this remarkable installation.

This powerful artwork evokes the memories of slavery and its legacies in the United States. Toni Scott is an African American artist of mixed ancestry who is committed to bringing the tragic story of the African American experience to her viewers, engaging them in a quest for deeper historical consciousness. Her broader artistic vision makes her equally committed to linking that history to the present, especially to the continuing impact of American institutional racism. Likewise, she seeks to reveal the close connection of slavery to the Nazi Holocaust as well as to other examples of historical genocide and inhumanity. In preparation for her exhibition, she visited the Simon Wiesenthal Museum in Los Angeles and observed the unnerving but moving depictions of Nazi atrocities, paying particular attention to the human consequences of the Holocaust.

"Bloodlines" is remarkably similar in its profound emotional impact to the Wiesenthal displays as well as to some of the exhibitions at the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. As with all installations (and all art generally), the full impact requires an actual visit; any verbal account, at best, can only approximate the deeper meaning. Still, art criticism is valuable in augmenting the impact of any artwork, offering an interpretative perspective to larger audiences and encouraging some readers to move from the written word to genuine personal experience itself.

The installation itself, first created in 2009, occupies approximately 1700 square feet of space. Visitors entering the exhibition first encounter ten small-scale three-dimensional figures, mounted on wood planks, on the wall (Figure 1). Although these are later dwarfed by the larger elements in the full sized installation space, they are nevertheless hugely significant. They are *individual* faces; although anonymous, they represent real human beings whose lives were lost during the horrific Middle Passage and during the centuries of slavery in the Americas.

Millions of Africans were forcibly abducted from their ancestral homelands and untold millions died. The human toll is often regarded as the African Holocaust, an entirely appropriate designation for one of the greatest catastrophes in human history. The initial viewer contact with these smaller sculptures faces sets the tone for the remainder of the exhibition. These works invite, even compel, viewers to reflect on the actual human realities of what they are about to experience. Whatever the actual numbers of kidnapped and brutalized Africans, these were real human beings, with all the hopes, fears, aspirations, and the multifaceted emotions characteristic of the human experience.

Like the Nazi Holocaust, with its six million Jewish victims and the countless others who perished under fascist barbarism, these figures can remain little more than icy abstractions. They lack concrete meaning until viewers, readers, and other observers begin to understand that the victims are not mere numbers, but people whose lives were cut short in monstrous crimes beyond their control. For the audiences entering "Bloodlines," the initial encounter with the small sculptural faces are an indispensable introduction to the overarching thematic focus of the artwork as a whole.

The exhibition space holding the myriad components generates an immediate and powerful sensory reaction. Depending on the specific direction that individual viewers take, the sequence of emotional reactions differs slightly, although the overwhelming holistic impact remains the same. A logical initial step is to observe the slave ship detail of "Bloodlines" (Figure 2), placed perpendicular to a large didactic map of the Slave Trade from 1650 to 1860. The map is itself an extremely valuable reference point, guiding visitors on a graphic and historically accurate journey that reflected the most pernicious feature of capitalism and colonialism: the ship voyages from Africa to the Americas that yielded obscene profits to the traders in suffering human cargo. Toni Scott placed human faces on the outlines of the continents of Africa, North America, and South America, underscoring the human dimension of the installation and adding a striking visual element to this detail of "Bloodlines."

The sculptural elements adjacent to the map are the most engaging if disconcerting features of the entire work. The artist has assembled several male and female figures in the brutal confines of a slave ship. This is a three-dimensional counterpart to some of the classic works of contemporary African American art that addresses this troubling but necessary theme. Like the works of recently deceased African American artists John Biggers, John Riddle, and Tom Feelings, Scott's effort recreates the horrendous conditions of the slave trade while reinforcing her message of the incalculable human cost of this historical tragedy.

The sculptured figures are shown chained, lying in grotesquely cramped conditions that regularly led to severe illness and death. The standing female figure is nude, suggesting that she is a likely victim of sexual assault or worse—a regular occurrence on slave ships and one of the most egregious assaults on human dignity during that era. Moreover, the enslaved woman is shackled around her neck with one of the slave owners' ubiquitous iron collars, adding yet another level of horror and humiliation. Scott offers her viewers the opportunity to reflect on these human rights abuses in ways that are far more effective than the dry analytical accounts they often encounter—if, indeed, they encounter that narrative at all.

Augmenting the horror of the slave ship experience in "Bloodlines" is the multi-media shack of the enslaved that contains images, prints, and audio recordings (Figure 3). The top of the shack has well-known images of the enslaved and the floor and walls contain narratives of the enslaved. By far, the most moving features of this detail are the actual recordings of the former enslaved, retrieved from the Works Progress Administration efforts during the New Deal in the 1930s and long buried at the Library of Congress. Listening to these former enslaved persons is a haunting experience, transporting contemporary audiences back into the most shameful era of U.S. history. And the artist underscores that experience by adding selected transcripts of the recordings:

My Master Was A Mean Man
Nawsuh, he wasn't good to none of us niggers."
"Now, nigger, I'm goin' to teach you some sense,"
"Wid dat he started layin' on de lashes."

Contemporary audiences and many members of the public generally are familiar with the cruelty of whipping of the enslaved. But that monstrous reality can also easily fade into an abstract notion that diminishes authentic understanding and reduces serious compassion. The artist includes a widely reproduced image (Figure 4) in the shack of the enslaved that compels a dramatically opposite response. The highly visible scar tissue inflicted upon the enslaved male by barbaric whippings reinforces a view of the perverse cruelty of slavery while focusing its impact on the real human victims of its savagery. Few viewers can emerge unaffected. Scott joins a long list of notable Black artists, including Claude Clarke, Horace Pippin, Jacob Lawrence and many others, in incorporating this grisly detail into her artwork. African American art, like this installation, has assumed a burdensome but essential responsibility for serving as an educational corrective in narrating the more unsavory features of history that too infrequently emerge in educational and media institutions.

"Bloodlines" pursues its themes even more fully by adding a vision of the cotton fields where captured Africans labored under wretched conditions of physical brutality and insufferable weather. The cotton field detail (Figure 5), constructed with a mural background of images of laves toiling away in the plantation fields, a sculpture of a individual cotton picker, and actual examples of cotton plants, is another highlight that contributes to the full and dramatic impact of the entire installation.

The most poignant feature is the stooped worker. Set at a 90-degree angle, the enslaved person's body reflects the years (or even decades) of unrelenting torment. The enslaved were routinely forced to carry large stuffed bags of cotton. This task cumulatively wore them down and caused physical deterioration of bones, joints, and muscles. While picking the cotton, they encountered winter conditions with frost that would cause hands to crack and bleed and summer heat and humidity that would cause dehydration and fainting. With regular beatings and inadequate nutrition, life was usually unbearable, a matter of complete indifference to slave owners beyond the economic calculations pertaining to their "investments."

Discerning viewers of the cotton field detail in "Bloodlines" also understand that the cotton field horror went far beyond the end of slavery itself. After the end of the Civil war and the ratification of the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that outlawed slavery, many formerly enslaved had little opportunity to escape the oppression that characterized their lives before their ostensible freedom. With no mule and no 40 acres, thousands were forced to remain on their former owners' lands, continuing to work in the fields as sharecroppers, living under virtually the same conditions as before, absent only formal ownership and regular whippings. Still, the sharecropper arrangement was an American version of feudalism, which fostered dependence, increased poverty, reinforced racism, and led to generations of human despair. This feature of Toni Scott's magisterial installation reflects a strong vision of historical continuity and encourages audiences to reflect closely on the longer-term impact of slavery on American social, political, and economic life.

The artist's quest for a deeper historical vision leads her to add an intensely personal dimension in this installation. She provides a "Tree of Life' (Figure 6) that reveals her tri-racial ancestry from Africa, from the Creek Nation, and from the white plantation owner who originally enslaved her ancestors. Once again, Scott joins a long tradition of African American artists for whom genealogy infuses their artistic content. In recent years, such major figures as Betye Saar, Mark Greenfield, John Biggers, Pat Ward Williams, Whitfield Lovell, Dominique Moody, and many others have used their work to honor their ancestors. This is unusually significant in a society where ordinary, hard-working Black women and men have rarely received the recognition for their labor and for their frequently heroic efforts in keeping their families intact.

Toni Scott's version represents an individual twist on a common story. Many African Americans can trace their roots, in part, to Native American ancestry. And many, obviously, have white roots owing to their involuntary servitude. The genealogy feature of "Bloodlines" is richly detailed in tracing the specifics of the artist's origins.

Photographs of each ancestor are strategically placed, with dates of births and dates appended like leaves on the branches of a tree.

The most dramatic images are labeled "Ex-Slave," a poignant yet effective reminder that contemporary African Americans emerge from a unique history that carries implications of enormous consequence. Above all, this heritage underscores the remarkable fact that African Americans have survived, and occasionally thrived, despite unspeakable historical conditions that could have doomed them to perpetual marginalization or even extinction. The genealogy section of "Bloodlines" likewise reveals how the artist herself emerges from a personal history that her family members had to work assiduously to reconstruct. That fact is also momentous in its implications: history, including personal history, is empowering; the lack of history is conversely disempowering. In recapturing her own past, Toni Scott finds some of the sources of her own creativity and encourages her viewers to do the same. Although this is particularly important for African Americans and other groups that have endured oppression, its impact is truly universal.

"Bloodlines" is, above all, an artwork with a vigorous historical vision. Its compelling fusion of visual elements and details emphasizes the past, generating a simultaneous intellectual comprehension of slavery and an emotional linkage to its human costs and consequences. That alone would qualify the installation as an exemplary contemporary artwork. But its impact goes further in its implicit recognition that historical knowledge is itself no panacea. Merely knowing the past, even feeling its impact, is not an end in itself. The most valuable feature of such knowledge is to apply it to the present.

That application is the deeper message of "Bloodlines." A regular refrain—and not only in the conservative media—is that slavery is long past and that the time has come to "move on." I have regularly found this attitude among some of my university students, most of whom, in conventional terms, are politically progressive. This perspective essentially holds that slavery was evil, that it generated Jim Crow, but that the advances of the civil rights movement and major changes in public opinion have moved us close to a non-racist society, one that even elected an African American president.

That view is dangerously naïve, similar in effect (and emotional indifference) to the views that the Nazi Holocaust is over because World War II ended in 1945 or that the Armenian Genocide happened so long ago in 1915 that it is no longer worth contemplating. A careful viewer of "Bloodlines" who reflects on its deeper implications would swiftly understand that the legacy of slavery has insidious contemporary consequences. Perceptive analysts well understand that both overt and institutional racism remain potent forces in contemporary America.

Public reaction, for example, to the 2009 arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates and the recent killing of Trayvon Martin has divided sharply along racial lines, suggesting a substantial if unacknowledged racial animus among America's majority population. Disparate unemployment and poverty figures for African Americans likewise reveal the intractable racism that millions face daily. It is no secret too that racism pervades the criminal justice system, housing, and education. All these features originate in the slavery that Toni Scott depicts so vividly in her installation.

Fuller historical knowledge is genuinely empowering. It enables people to incorporate the past into their plans and policy prescriptions for the future. Most importantly, it equips them with the kind of comprehensive vision that makes them fully human: a vision that understands and acts upon the complex synthesis of the past, present, and future.

By creating and presenting "Bloodlines," Toni Scott has joined the front rank of contemporary African American artists—a distinguished and growing tradition that itself reflects the vitality of African American survival and accomplishment since the time of enslavement. She has continued her distinguished visual production by producing individual "Bloodline" works to her body of paintings, sculpture, photographs, and multi-media works. These efforts also reflect the comprehensive historical perspective about the larger installation—a vision that remembers yesterday, understands today, and empowers tomorrow.

One striking example, "Black Liberty" (Figure 7), is an African American adaptation of Eugene Delacroix's classic "Liberty Leading the People," which commemorated the July 1830 revolution that toppled the reactionary King Charles X of France. In that painting, Delacroix depicted a woman carrying the tricolor French flag, leading the workers, peasants, and middle class rebels over the bodies of the fallen victims. In Scott's version, the central female figure is a Black woman, signifying the huge but still not fully acknowledged role of women in the centuries long Black liberation struggle.

Behind her are other African Americans, who represent the foot soldiers who have played an indispensable role in the continuing fight for racial dignity and justice. Significantly, at the left and right of the woman are front and side images of an enslaved person. These reflect the deepest tragedy of American history and remind viewers yet again of the long, steep climb that people of African origin have had to make since their forced arrival in this land.

In "Civil Rights With Rosa Parks," (Figure 8), another work " from the "Bloodlines" series, Toni Scott modifies the iconic image of Rosa Parks on the Montgomery, Alabama bus the day of her historic arrest on December 1, 1955. In this depiction, instead of an anonymous white man seated behind Parks, the artist places a young nude woman, again symbolizing the role of women in the Black liberation struggle. She also suggests, through the absence of clothing, the inextricable connection between rebirth and liberation. On the sides and underneath the two central figures are images of larger masses of African Americans on the march, a profound vision of a people determined to transcend its historical oppression and assume its rightful place in a democratic and prosperous America.

"Bloodlines" and its progeny reflect a key and recurring theme of modern and contemporary African American art. Like her distinguished predecessors and contemporaries, Toni Scott has used her artistic talent to go far beyond aesthetic satisfaction alone. She understands that art, at its finest, is a remarkable educational tool, one that serves the public and that inspires viewers to both appreciate the long uphill journey of African Americans and to join them in the quest for a truly more perfect union.

Figure 1

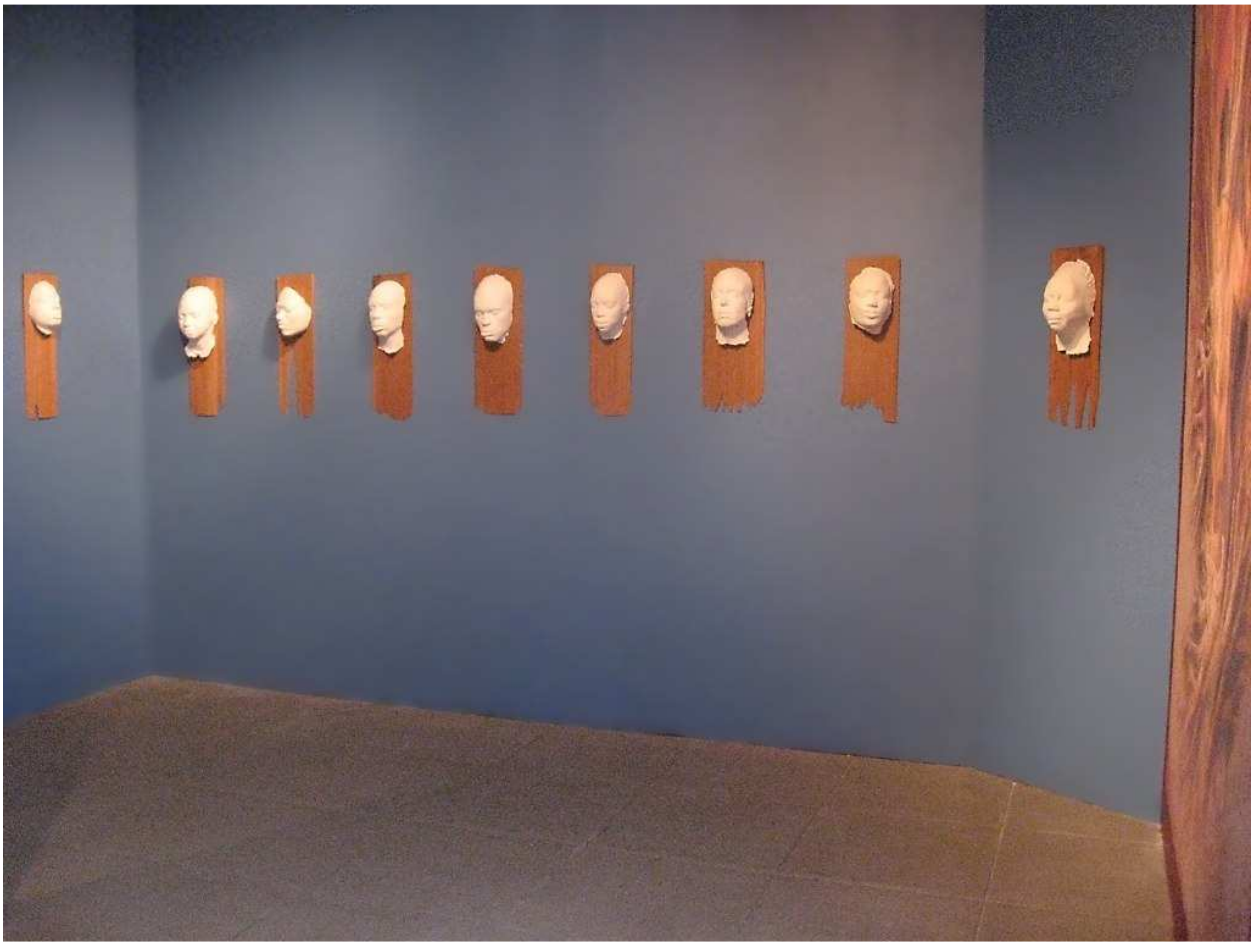

Figure 2


NORTH AMERICA
GULF OF MEXICO
CENTRAL AMERICA
SOUTH AMERICA
PACIFIC OCEAN
ATLANTIC OCEAN
AFRICA
CONGO
CAPE TOWN
SLAVE TRADE
FROM AFRICA TO THE AMERICAS
1650 - 1860

Figure 3

Figure 4

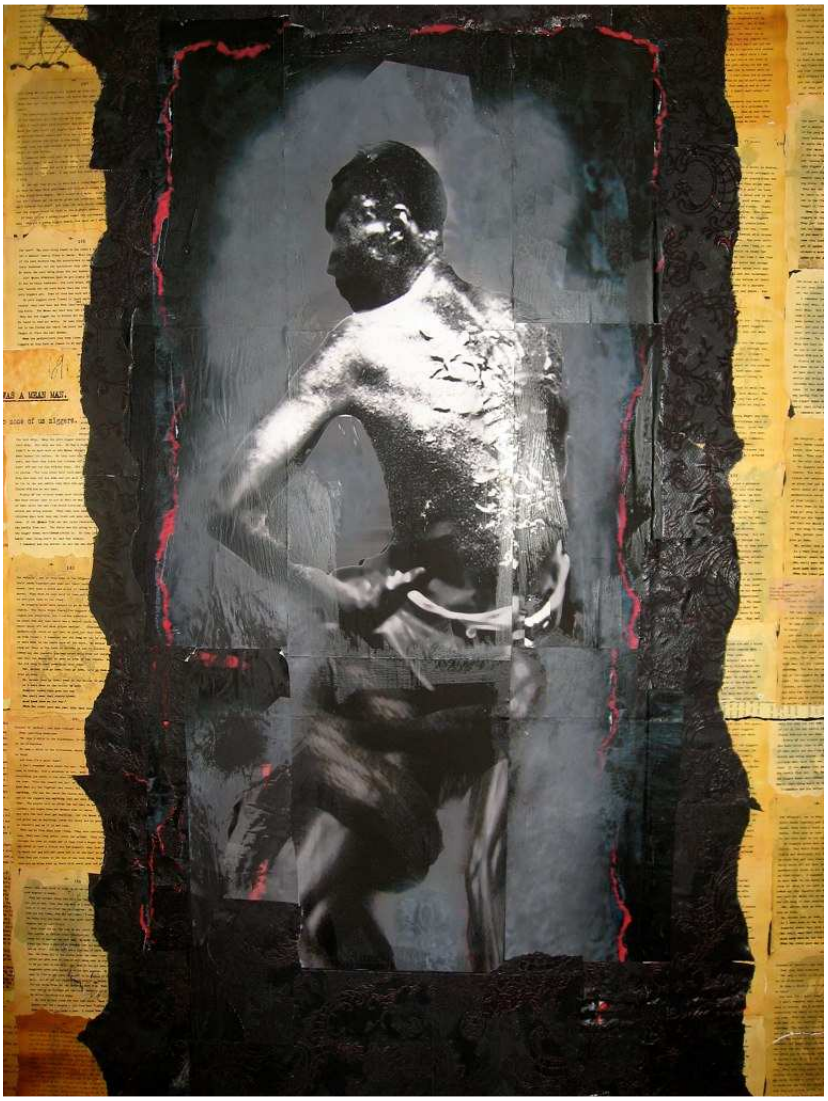

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

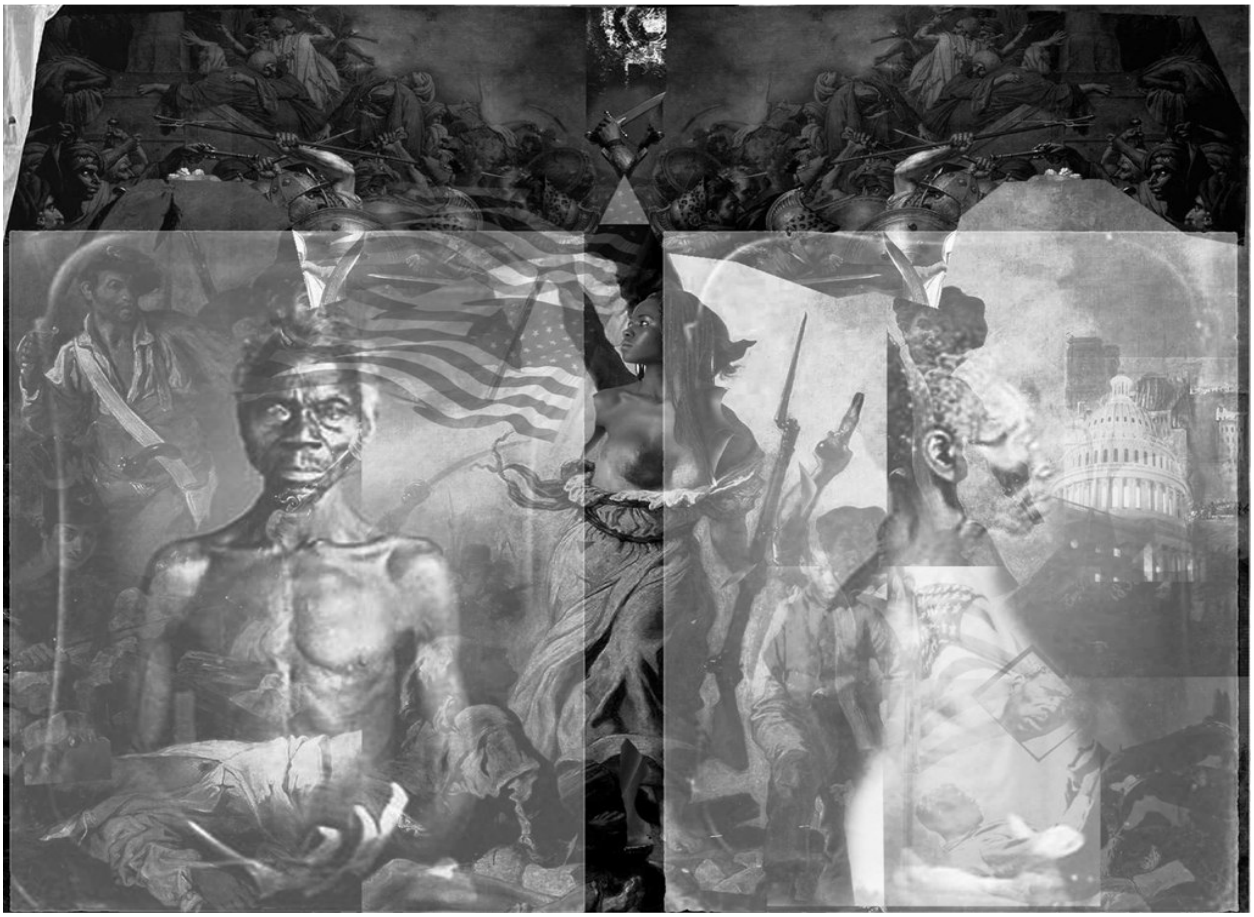

Figure 8