

## **JET REFLECTIONS: IN CONVERSATION WITH ILLUSTRATION PROFESSOR JOEL CHRISTIAN GILL**

Lyssa Palu-ay: Thank you Joel for being here in our JET Reflections monthly series of conversations highlighting art, design, writing, research that demonstrates how members of our MassArt community have demonstrated the power of art and design to transform our world so thank you, Joel Christian Gill who is an associate professor in our Illustration department.

I'm really looking forward to talking with you and learning more about your work and we are meeting during another difficult week in the United States with racial unrest and violence inflicted on our Black community and I've been thinking a lot about this current moment in the role of artists and designers to lift up and translate and in some ways offering truths that it seems like we're not able to see without, maybe in some senses being mediated through the creative lens and I'm actually wondering how you feel about that, do you see your work playing a role in this current moment or how you see your work playing a role in this current moment?

I know I'm starting with a really big question to start but I feel like it's really pressing right now.

Joel Christian Gill: You know the way I've thought about my work since you know when I first started drawing comics it was because my story, all the stories that I was telling/painting were failing and a friend of mine was like you know you should think about telling stories and so and as I was going through the process of learning how to do comics I stumbled across the story of Henry Box Brown who was an enslaved African who sold himself in a box from Virginia to Philadelphia and I decided to tell his story and you know originally I was thinking about this as like ways in which to tell stories that like hipsters would like right hipsters will spend you know, ten dollars on avocado and toast I think they'll buy comics about this stuff right so like it was just like these are the people who I can get my widget to buy my widget, right?

And I went to my first book signing after "Strange Fruit" was published and still thinking like really really interesting stories that people have forgotten about right like these are stories that people have forgotten about and I want to get them out there.

And this man came up to me at the bookstore and he had like tears in his eyes and he was like well he was welling up and he was like, "you know thank you for telling these important stories."

And I mean I you know I took what I was doing seriously but not the not understanding the power that this would have for some people and it really sort of changed the way I thought about what I was doing and about how stories really have the power um to humanize and to create empathy in communities and I thought you know at that

moment I thought that my platform gave me a unique opportunity to share these stories in the same way you have a cup of coffee with someone.

If you have a cup of coffee and have it, and well when we used to be able to have a cup of coffee with people, right?

Like you sit down and you talk and you say, you know, "I like this thing," you know, "I went to this school. This is what it was like for me growing up, you know?" Like you humanize things, right?

Like we've all heard that story about the person who like, "I was homophobic until I met a gay person or I was racist until I met Black people."

Or you know like those people when you have that conversation and you get that empathy and now you have a changed perspective on people and I thought that using my using my platform to tell the stories of of Black people that had not been told gave me an opportunity to be on a macro level to have that conversation with people, to open up those things and so you know it's about for me, it was always about how the power to tell stories really shares a piece of our community and our shared society and community that people have not thought about or not thought about in the way that I'm thinking about, so I feel like it's my responsibility to, I mean, I want to tell these stories and I think it's important to tell these stories but I think the broader understanding about how these stories work basically weaves a narrative about what American history is and what it means to be American that people have completely set aside and said that they're you know "you're a hyphenated American," in reality we are Americans right like this is Black people in America have a story that is quintessentially American and that's the story that I'm trying to tell, yeah.

LP: Yeah, they're you know this current moment seems like the most important story to tell for me kind of thinking about it, I'm also wondering if Joel, you can talk about your origin story as an artist is there a moment you can describe or you remember that defined your creative path?

I don't know however you want to answer that question.

JCG: So my origin story, I mean, I think I'm, I am just like all kids, right? I was just like everybody else and that I drew up until I was about age 12 and I think that it was at at 12 that I decided that I needed to figure out what noses actually look like as opposed to just drawing you know like a rectangle or a triangle, right? JCG: And I remember sitting in front of the television you know years before I mean it wasn't before it's like we were poor so we didn't have a video we didn't have a VCR at that point but I'm sitting in front of like Saturday morning cartoons and drawing every single nose just like trying to figure out how to get those things out and then there was a period in time when I was in high school that I wanted to be a lawyer and I was really interested in history and I was really interested in politics at the time and I'm like you know I should go into I should go in to law and my wife's stepdad is a lawyer and so this was like I was inside we had a government day where I actually got to to um shadow a

judge um throughout the entire day and I'm like this is this would be really cool to be a judge and to be a lawyer and then I spent like a little bit of time with my wife's stepdad and uh in his law office and it was so boring it was not at all "Law and Order.""

It was not you know, it was just not that. And it really changed the way I thought about things and I had been drawing comics and thinking about telling stories at that point so it was like so I originally wanted to draw comics and then I fell in love with painting for a long time and so I spent a long time painting but um it was it was understanding that you know it's funny like if I could not paint I would have been a lawyer if I could not draw I probably would have been a lawyer and so it seems like the work that I do now about telling these stories and doing non-fiction comics um is like the perfect vehicle for my my love of storytelling, my love of like history and my love of politics and sort of putting those things out there and telling those types of stories so I think it's real like I think that's that's where I would say that my origin story is it was like this combination of finding like the things that I really love and then like I'm lucky my wife tells me this all the time, I'm lucky, like the thing that I think about at night is the thing that I want to get up and do in the morning.

It's the thing that I do and then I go to school and I teach the thing that I love to talk about so like it's just like this circle that um that's really sort of amazing, but I guess that's my origin story like my father-in-law's boring, his job was boring.

LP: Well so can you share a little bit about your painting? What, how can you describe kind of that time in your life and maybe some of the challenges or things you learned from your paintings?

JCG: I love painting. I don't paint as much, I mean I wish I had the time to still paint, but now I have so many other projects to do that I just don't really have time to do it. But you know it was I wanted to be Basquiat, right? I wanted to be uh I wanted to make paintings that made people cry and I spent a - a lot of time painting figurative work.

Most of my work was figurative it was all, I did a lot of paintings of my family, I did a whole series of lynching paintings which sort of spurred the comics that I was doing called strange fruit.

I did a whole series on Billy Holiday song, "Strange Fruit" and so that ended up being sort of the catalyst for the comics that I was making.

I mean like painting people always ask me, this is a common question that I get about how does painting influence my how to play, how did painting influence my comics and I'm like, it is, it does influence comics because like a lot of the color that I think about the way I learned the color theory that I know came from painting. JCG: The compositional skills that I learned came from painting and it's just like trying to figure out how to dial back how much you how much information and how expressive you want to be in order and the expression serves a different function now right before the expression and the way in which I worked was all geared around design and

composition and sort of activating the picture plane where it's now it's about how do I use these same things in function to tell the story?

Because I need to actually use that in order to tell the story. JCG: And so how do I do that? and so that's sort of how it sort of, it sort of influences me now it's more about how do I use those things that I use to tell stories when I was painting to tell stories that are long that have plot points and those that expressions sort of tell the story so that's how it sort of that's how it works to tell the story.

LP: So I'm imagining we've talked about, uh you brought up "Strange Fruit" we were just talking about before the recording came on a story I was drawn to Benjamin Darling and Malaga island in Maine, which is really and all of these stories really are I've heard about a few of the characters and my 12-year-old son was going through the books and I said you know I'm give me a question to ask Joel and he was wondering, he's like "Well how long does it take to research?"

I'm imagining you are in a library a lot, kind of trying to understand, as we talked about earlier I love history as well and there's so much we don't know um about the world around us and um so just wondering about your process of research and how you find these people, like what is the thing do you have some criteria that are like, "oh I, or I see, I'm seeing this story," like how does it...

JCG: Yeah, so the stories originally came to me when I first wrote the story of Henry Box Brown because I was researching something I was reaching out to another cartoonist whose name is Box Brown and Henry Box Brown story came up and so then it was then people started telling me more of story so people would come up to me when I was selling these mini-comics at comic conventions and they would say have you heard of this and if you heard of that and I would write them down and the funny thing happens when you start to do research especially people who are in the age range that grew up with card catalogs and then converted to computers um because I grew up with originally with card catalogs and then moved to computers and I tend to think about the internet the same way I think about a card catalog um so I do a different type of search um and I, you know, I go down these

So what I typically do when I'm researching a story, is if someone is if I have an idea about a story I try to read as much as I possibly can about that person's life and take notes and leave myself breadcrumbs so like if it's like copying the link like saving all of those those internet addresses that I looked up for my web search um in a folder and then getting books about that person, reading the books and doing, it's doing all of those things until I can actually tell the story, and then I think about interesting ways in which to tell the story so my new, my newest book which will be out in February tells of the talented 10th volume, number three, about Robert Smalls.

Robert Smalls was an enslaved African who stole the U.S. confederate ship, the Planter, and sailed it through confederate waters to the union with 13 other people. JCG: So he stole the ship and he stole the people and so I read as much as I could read a book about Robert Smalls.

I read papers about him, I found first-hand information specifically newspapers from the from right after it happened where they sort of chronicled the idea and then I found information about him because he was a congressman, he was a businessman, he ended up buying the former plantation that he was enslaved on and then letting his former captor live on the plantation.

Yeah so Robert Smalls was like, he was the man. And so I try to find that as much information as I possibly can and then I try to figure out how to tell the story and for Robert Smalls a story, it's a heist story, right?

It's like how do we steal the ship, and how do we get it to, how do we get steal the ship, and us and get him somewhere else? JCG: And so that's the way I tell that story.

Whereas with Bass Reeves story I wanted to find, I wanted to find a really interesting hook for that one, that was Tales of the Talent Attempt, number one, and one of the people he had to pass, Reeves, who was the most successful U.S. Marshal in American history, a former enslaved African he had to arrest his son, so like I told the story around arresting his son with Betsy Stringfield, which is the second book in the series she was the first Black woman to crisscross the United States on a motorcycle and she did it in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s and so for her story it was just her telling the story of her life.

She's telling it to her interviewer so it's kind of like it's all in flashbacks about those stories so I just try to find different ways to tell, tell to find the hooks for those biographies for people.

With "Strange Fruit" it's more those are more short anthology biographies like here's what's happening in that person's life as opposed to the long-form biographies which are you know trying to find some kind of a story to tell that's not just this happened, this happened, this happened, this happened.

And the thing that sticks out for me in most of my stories is I try to find things that are not, not just like the first Black person to do "X" or the first Black person to do this, because that's, I feel like it's boring. JCG: I try to find the ones that are the most like the most incredible story like a Black woman Bessie Stringfield wasn't the first woman to crisscross the united states on a motorcycle but, she was a Black woman who was driving a motorcycle in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, like that's an amazing story, right?

Robert Smalls wasn't the first slave who escaped, he just happened to steal a ship when he did it, right? Bass Reeves wasn't the first Black deputy, Bass Reeves was amongst a number of Black deputies including a bunch of Native American deputies called the Lighthorse Brigade which most people don't know about those guys either, which were like this like deputies that were basically on the reservation by the U.S. government that was called the Lighthorse Brigade and they would like arrest outlaws in the Old wWest.

Bass Reeves was amongst those people and he just happened to do some amazing things like he caught more criminals like 4,000 criminals over the course of his career. He only shot one person, like it was, these are amazing stories, right? JCG: Even if you take out the fact that these are Black people and with white people, they're still amazing stories, right?

Sort of like they're just elevated because they're doing it in a time in which they weren't even really considered people, right?

LP: Right, right, right.

JCG: That's the thing that it's sort of that's what attracts me to those stories and that's what look for when I'm trying to do those stories.

LP: Yeah, I mean just as you're saying that it just you know the description you gave I'm like when's the major motion picture, right? LP: Like any of these carry, I mean like you said, you know kind of they're incredible stories, just as stories, and so...

JCG: I have one offer in my inbox and I'm waiting for.

LP: oh so this is so yeah all right good!

JCG: I'm waiting for another call so I've got an offer, yeah.

I'm waiting for a call from I'm waiting to set up a meeting with somebody else to have a conversation.

LP: Well good, good because I mean just as these stories have been buried essentially right you you're unearthing them and their representation of our history and Black history has been so it needs that elevation...

JCG: Interesting because these stories aren't buried, right? Yeah uh the thing that, the thing that I've come to understand this was actually with a conversation with my mom who lives with me grew up in the segregated South and we were talking about all of the celebrations you know like we were like this push to celebrate Juneteenth in America, right?

I didn't learn about Juneteenth until I was in high school. I went to a predominantly Black high school and I was talking to my mom about it I was like you know we didn't celebrate in our part of the South we didn't celebrate she was like well I always celebrated and I'm like no we didn't he was like well we always did it in school and it dawned on me, my mom went to a predominantly Black school. JCG: She went to a school she went to a segregated school and so Black history in a segregated school was real it was a real part of the curriculum it was a real part of pedagogy and when we segregated when we desegregated the South. It wasn't a real it wasn't a real integration it was more of an assimilation, right?

Like we're not going to take the stuff that you were doing in the Black schools you're just going to come over here and do this do the same thing, do the stuff that we do now, so it was more of assimilation, right.

And so I came to this realization that there's an entire generation of Black people who know these same stories because they were taught them before who had the same stuff that was giving them and what we didn't do when we quote-unquote integrated the schools was was real integration.

Look at what people are teaching looking what they were learning and taking those things and embedding them in into our pedagogy which is what I think we need to do now, right?

Like this is a reason that we should you know look at pedagogy across the board about how we in turn incorporate these things so that's their real representation as opposed to just getting a brown person and saying you know like as long as a brown person is in charge of a thing, everything is fine now but that's just not the way it works right we we need representation which is embedded into our systems and which means that we have to look at like how we teach art history, how we teach education, how we teach a lot of things and that's what that's the moment that we failed in America we failed it a couple of times we failed it after 1877 with um the end of reconstruction and we failed it in the 1960s, and 70s with um with assimilation, not integration if at any of those points we had to look at a real integration of how we, of how we look at society.

A real integration, a real coming together of Black culture and white culture as opposed to not and not in a way that is um exploitative but like let's look at the best, and best of these things and put them into our society we would have actually gotten somewhere in this country. JCG: And the reason that we haven't is because we keep not doing that, we keep not acknowledging it like the big for example the biggest um one of the biggest um the biggest export that American has is part of culture is hip hop right which is the definitively Black music, right?

So when you look at the beginning of hip hop in the 19 late 70s and early 80s it was very very integrated like a lot of Jewish white people were definitely involved in like the beginning it was a real clear like racial unity in that that was seen as just Black music and now that it's exported it's the number one music in America.

Black people make up 13% of the population but we make up how much of the culture and not taking that into consideration and using that to look at the way we teach and the way we educate in the way we look at art and history and politics and not thinking about those kind of things is going to keep us segregated.

LP: And to your point, I think the way that the school system and maybe even the country has looked at it has relegated it too "well I'm going to give you back your words, you know to the 28 days."

JCG: Yes.

LP: You know you have that talk 28 days are not enough and you know because I think the way that you're describing it hasn't been integrated it's been relegated to Black history month it's been relegated to Asian or Hispanic history month, or what whatever it is I can't keep track of what months are supposed to be what groups at this point so.

JCG: I mean it's like you think about it when Carnegie Woodson created Black history week, right? Which was at first a week and it was supposed to celebrate Douglas's and Lincoln's birthday in February and then it was expanded into two weeks and when Nixon recognized it nationally in the 1970s it was because of, because of the Black Student Union at Kent State University, I think is where it was, right?

And I understand all of that I understand that those are all pro positive progress, but I think they missed the point where you like, don't we, don't need a separate thing, right?

We need that what we've done in this country up until this point to be acknowledged, right? The idea that people have told me to go back to Africa, my family there are rumors and I don't know if this is true because I don't spend much time doing those the ancestry or those DNA things that my family can date back to 1619 when the first enslaved Africans were coming to America that means that before this country was a country you were here we were here, right?

LP: Yeah, yeah. JCG: And to say that you know somebody who came during Ellis island in the 1920s who just after a generation no longer has an accent and they eat burgers and fries and are now you know considered and white because they're American because they're white, they're American, and I'm not because I'm Black like that's the thing like recognize what we've done and then the histories that I'm telling will no longer be uncelebrated.

LP: Right, right so I want to give you a little time too and this is relates to what a question that just came to my mind is like how did we get here, right? Like why is that the case, right?

And I know that you're working on a project right now that that begins to explain a little bit of the really the conceptual thinking behind this condition where you know and so can you can you talk about Stamped a little and you're...

JCG: So "Stamped from the Beginning: a Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America" by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi lays out the ideas that have driven racial thinking and the misconceptions about that.

The misconception, the common misconception is that racist people are these people who hold ignorant ideas, and these ignorant ideas and opinions are what drives racism in America.

But that's not the case it's not ignorance it is willfully taking advantage of an impressing people for lots of times before for economic reasons, right? The ideas that start the - the slave trade after when it became easier to steal Africans as opposed to Slavic people, the root word for slave is actually slav they were stealing so many Slavic people and when the Slavic people started fighting back it was easier to go down to the coast of Africa to start stealing people, and then it was then it was we had to separate these people out because it's it was it was clear and obvious that they're people they just look different but how do we how do we rationalize keeping these people?

And so the book chronicles the ideas that rationalize the enslavement of Black people up into mass incarceration so at every given point from enslavement to segregation to mass incarceration to all of these things, it looks at those ideas that have permeated American history and society and sort of like embedded themselves into our systems and it's really the thing about this moment that's really disheartening where is that we have people who are arguing that things like systematic racism don't exist.

And one of the things that Ibram says in the book that I think is like this is the thing that I want to say to everybody like if I can say this to every single person if you really believe that Black people and white people and everybody is equal and you look at things that only affect some people and they don't affect others if you believe that they're equal then you can't blame those people you have to actually look at the policies - policies have to be looked at so you know people were saying at the beginning of the covid epidemic that this was the great equalizer but Black and brown people are being are being affected nine times higher in some places.

LP: Yeah, right.

JCG: And if that's the case it's like okay then why are these people being affected? If you say "well it's because of Black culture," then that's a racist idea, right?

That's saying that there's something wrong with Black people right and I think that that's what we need to start thinking about if people for whatever reason people don't want to, they don't want to look at um the policies that got us here because policies have 100% got us here and it's their places they're you know from from Black codes, to redlining, to FHA loans, to you know mass incarceration, to the drug war.

Like all of these things are disproportionately affecting Black and brown people and nobody and - and people are saying well it's because Black people are committing more crimes or it's because - it's because racist white people are leaving the inner city.

That's why that's why we have segregated neighborhoods but anytime like it's just there's so many maddening things about this stuff that um like it just makes it's one of those things it's like it renders me inarticulate sometimes.

Like yeah, it's so infuriating when somebody says what about Black on Black crime when that just that term in and of itself indicates that we are still segregated because Black people commit crimes who are to people who are close to us so you're basically

pointing out segregation in America still and why is that people are talking about opportunity zones now like we're going to invest in Black and brown communities when you say opportunity zones.

I hear gentrification that's what I hear because who's going to whose money is going to who's going to come in and invest that money in those places that means that money's going to be taken out of the neighborhoods. So, it's those kind of things.

LP: so, yeah no, no it's so important and I - I'm curious too though how you know when you were doing your other - other books are focused on a character right or a story and I think "Stamped" is also that but it then it's also all these really kind of complicated concepts that you know that you just described.

I'm just wondering do you find that it's um as challenging or differently challenging than the way that you've approached your work before?

JCG: it is, I mean it's historical and if you've read "Stamped" from the beginning you realize that Ibram jumps around a lot so he makes these connections to these ideas that could be like you know this could happen in 1800 but this idea is from 1650 or this could happen in the 1940s but this idea actually came from 1765.

You know so like, all of these there are these things that are jumping around so the challenge is putting it in a linear format can follow in a story which is really which is really good that it's about individual people so because it follows five thinkers - it follows Cotton Mathers, William Lloyd Garrison, I mean Thomas Jefferson, William Lloyd Garrison, W.E.B Du Bois, and Angela Davis.

So using them as vehicles for how we how we think about racial thought in America uh is really um is really what I'm trying to do so like for the, I keep looking over here because it's actually, so looking at how Cotton Mathers you know precursors his family and the ideas sort of drove him and what he was living in the moment and then what he ends up writing and how that's a reflection of all of the things that were happening in a society so it's basically placing each one of these people in the middle of a moment and using all of those moments and all of that information to sort of fuel what they thought and how they influenced American society.

And so that's how I'm taking it it's not that it's not that much different than reading a biography of someone and then trying to figure out how to tell the story it's just this now it's like how to show that this person was influenced by these racist ideas and it's like making those connections visually.

One of the things, one of the examples I'll give you is that in the beginning of the book in the prologue Ibram says that - that we've always thought about this as a linear process about racial progress in America like this thing happens and it gets better, this thing happens, and it gets better but we don't often show that for at every single point when there was some sort of um racial - racial progress there's also been racial regression.

So when we got the end of slavery, yay the end of slavery, 100 years of Jim Crow, when we got the end of Jim Crow, yay the end of Jim Crow, we've got the last 50 years almost of mass incarceration, right?

So we need to be cognizant of like how these things are actually happening in the moment and so what I did with that is I drew it, I drew Uncle Sam, setting it placing a root, putting together a rube Goldberg machine so like as he's at every point you see the the ball moving and changing racial progress there's also um an opposite reaction of racial regress, right?

So it just shows you that this is going in so that that's that's part of the process so when this thing happens, this thing happens, this thing happens, this thing happens, which is not a linear, which is not I mean like even with I mean even like even recently in modern times we actually have a perfect example of that with the election of Barack Obama and then the election of Trump like right? Those are, that is the exact opposite of what we were actually doing moving forward right and in.

LP: In some ways what you're saying is predictable.

JCG: Yes! LP: As we see and as you've given us examples in history. Yeah, it's absolutely predictable because the people who want to, the people, the individuals who are behind the scenes of this they're not ignorant this is, this is the thing that's really important for people to understand it's that's not ignorance that drives this, this is, these are people who are absolutely brilliant and the thing that's at work the thing that's interesting about how systematic racism works it's like an algorithm, right?

JCG: You don't actually have to modify that algorithm, you don't have to do anything to it, you don't have to change it it just runs in the background and it just and unless you go in and like take it apart and look at it it's going to continue to run and so the people who designed this whether and it was for political purposes, right?

Like at every given point it was political purposes you look at what happened at the end of 1877 with the beginning of the Black Codes actually started before that, but you but at that moment look at how the people were looking the confederates they were called copperhead confederates or the redeemers they were the confederates who were they were confederate Democrats who came back into power and how they were looking at how Black people were a large part of like in some places they were they were the majority and so how do we keep them from voting so that we can continue to keep our political power, right?

Not necessarily about race but about how we can keep our political power. Most people don't know that there was even a populist party that was called the fusion party in the South in some places in North Carolina in Wilmington, North Carolina specifically the fusion popular this the only time in American history there has been a coup on American soil where democratically elected republicans that were Black and white in Wilmington, Delaware were basically killed and made to resign so that the

Democrats could come - can come and deal with the proper Democrats could come into power.

So you saw these people like and some of these people some of these Republicans in the south were actually former Democrats and they actually came together and created the fusion party which was a racial unit, unity populist party that was against the planter class and so it's those type of things that I think people misunderstand about like the broader understanding about how history works is that it's not about racism it's not necessarily about those people look differently, it's like those people have some power and if I let them come and control things then they're gonna change. They're going to take my power away from me and I don't want my power to be taken away.

And so like that's what we understand and so that's how I'm trying to show people that these these ideas I mean even Cotton Mather when he was talking about um racial unity because he talks about racial unity and that Black people have white souls and so we should fake them um which was very assimilationist idea um he there's also like these arguments that he's making that actually protect the planter class the elites of society at the time because he's making these arguments because if he preaches any kind of unity for Black people or poor then it means that the people who are in charge the people, the elites are going to lose their power so it behooves him to continue preach this human hierarchy.

So I think that's, I'm sorry...

LP: No, I hear you, I'm also, I'm thinking about something you said earlier and I - I'd love you to just elaborate a little bit more about the pedagogy and the how of what it is that we're learning or teaching in the classroom kind of related to Black history.

Related to these stories that you've started to you know bring light to, can you yeah...go ahead.

JCG: Yeah, one of the things that at my previous institution when I was trying to go through the process of how do we be more inclusive was to look at one of the things is was we put out like in my foundations department we put together a master list of artists and we got all the departments to give us like what artists would you like for us to show like who are the like the most important artists for us all to look at that we could augment with our - when we were showing images right and then what I did was start adding um Black and brown artists to that list and LGBTQIA+ people to those lists so that we and women so that we were being very inclusive about how we're doing.

That like if I'm gonna show you, artists, I'm not gonna just show you dead white guys from Europe, I'm going to show you a range of art from different cultures in society and I'm going to talk about how that I mean, we all know Picasso and Braque were stealing African mask and that's how they got that's where they that's where they started beginning - the beginning of cubism right and how they were sort of influenced

by a lot of things so why are we only showing those guys when we're not spending as much time talking about like the inspire, the influence and inspiration.

I think that's the way we have to think about it is like how do we incorporate these artists as a non-sort of like "oh it's Black history month, let's talk about the Harlem Renaissance," right?

Like, not like that, but like how do we incorporate that into our pain and to our ideas about how pain like people, and it's how do we talk about those things right just in general.

LP: And I think just what you were you were saying before it's like in relationship to each other, right?

Kind of, you know, not necessarily segregated in one area but that how it might be in relationship to the wider conversation about art history or design or whatever it is.

JCG: Yeah, I mean I think it's just it's really important for I mean if we can as artists, if we continue to do what we always done we're always going to get what we always got and so if we continue to look at art history as a eurocentric you know, dead white guy sort of way of looking at our art history we're all we're gonna we're gonna create and produce the same artist right we need to be innovative we need to bring things in um there have been lots of movements to bring in street art and people are bringing in street art but that stuff's been around since the 1980s.

Right, like Basquiat like the early 80s Basquiat and Keith Herring were actually painting on walls so it's not a new thing it's just taking a long time for people to start paying attention to it in academia and I think it's just like incumbent upon us to like tap into what's happening in culture and looking at what people are making and not turning our nose up to it because if we do if, you know, like the stuff that people are making out there is what's influencing our students and so we should know about this stuff right so we get augmented.

I remember I had a student once this was about 10 or 12 years ago it was like I was still in Virginia at the time and I'd done something and somebody had read about me and so she brought her son because he was Black and he wanted to be and he was a painter and he was showing me his paintings and he brought me all these paintings in and I'm like they were all Basquiat paintings and he didn't know who Basquiat was, right?

Yeah, so he was just making Basquiat and I'm like I need to teach you a whole thing about like the 1980s and neo-expressionism and all of the stuff that these guys were doing at that time because if you don't know what's happening you're not going to make anything you're just going to make these sort of bad knock-offs of Basquiat.

So I think we need, my point about this is that we need to be incorporating diverse ideas and I found in my experience not so much at MassArt, but my experience in the past is that at we at art schools to be as liberal thinking as a lot of people are we're

very conservative in the way we want to teach stuff and we're very reserved and we don't want to break out of sort of the bounds in which we teach but I think it's really important for us to think about how we represent students and how we represent, I mean in every single at every single stage like we at found my foundations department we were in charge of writing, and so I was like how do we incorporate more, more diverse writers into this into the canon so that we're not just talking about um you know the main the greatest hits of American writers or European writers.

But, how do we incorporate that to like getting more Black literature getting more LGBT \*inaudible\* literature into the curriculum so that people would so it's not necessarily about, okay now we're going to read this thing that's beautifully written during Black history month about by Ralph Ellison we're going to like let's like just look at this is like literature and writing right and normalizing these things to the point that we don't think about it as being Black literature or white like just like this is all our stuff this is all American history, all American culture let's stop segregating it, let's integrate it all and do a real integration of those ideas so that we move forward with this knowledge that we're all one people.

LP: That's great I'm wondering kind of there's so much urgency I feel like in this conversation and our conversation now kind of at MassArt and the United States and you know society but to kind of maybe ask a question about, you know, there are things that feel insurmountable.

I really, I like this conversation about thinking about the long kind of view of history and in some ways we're in a moment right we're on this timeline and we're here and hopefully, it's swinging back the other way but I'm just curious as far as you know what is that thing that, maybe not one thing, but you know is it the long view of history is it kind of you know your creative juices are just you know getting you up in the morning and you're reading about history and then you're understanding how you might depict it visually I'm just - just curious as I try to find that in myself these days.

JCG: I mean it's it really is for me about every like the next actionable step that I can take right I can't change what's going to happen five years from now but what I can do is work on the things that I feel like might change some like what can I what step can I take right now in any given moment when I'm dealing with a list of things and I might have goals so like for students any student that might be um watching this it might be like I want to be a famous artist five years from now, I don't know how to do taxes can't really worry about taxes right that's that that's so far off in the distance it can be on your list of things to deal with but that's not the thing that you need to worry about right now, what you need to worry about right now is how to draw a hand, like how can you get that hand right so what's the next so it's thinking about not the thing you have to worry about, or the thing that you did in the past is, what can I do right in this very moment it's the first it's the next actionable step.

There's this Taoist story about how people sort of live through the world and it's about this horse farmer, right, and in the beginning his horse runs away and he comes back. His neighbor comes over and he says "I'm so sorry your horse ran away" and he

goes who knows what's good or bad then the horse comes back the next day and brings six horses with it and he's like "oh congratulations for your brand new horses" and the men's like "who knows what's good or bad" and so his son goes out there and he's trying to train these new horses and he breaks his leg and he comes over he's like "I'm so sorry that your son broke his leg" and he goes "who knows what's good or bad" then the army comes through and they're conscripting people into the army and his son can't go, so his son is not taken away in the army and he's like "I'm so glad your son didn't get taken away" and my man goes "who knows what's good or bad" and the point of that story is that they're going to be ups and downs they're going to be places where we don't know where they know it's we're going to have extreme highs and extreme lows we can't live in those moments we have to live in them now because that's the only thing that we have so what can we do in that in that present moment?

Well, what I can do is I can turn to my table and start drawing right I can like work on the thing that's the next thing that needs to be done because i can't really worry about that other stuff because the future is a dream and the past is a memory and the only thing that we have is this moment and if we don't live in this moment and make these changes and the things that we need to do right now like our first actionable step then we're not going to get there.

So we actually have to look and see what those actionable steps are so for me it's about what can I do right now and so I have a list of things that I can do right now until I do those things, so.

LP: Thank you, Joel, that was really, really great to hear and I just want to thank you for your generous space and I mean my mind is just buzzing right now and I think that it's great to get to know you and to have our MassArt community get to know, you more really generous conversation and I just really want to thank you.

And if you have any yeah, and when the motion picture comes or and when "Stamped" is actually done, the illustrated version maybe we will invite you back.

JCG: And uh we can well yeah because is now at BU, so he's in Boston now so um he started the Anti-Racism Center at the university so he's just going to be up the road so we could get us both there.

LP: That'd be great, it'd be great all right.