Artistic Lies and Human Truths:
Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle, and the Greenheads Series

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According to Pablo Picasso, “Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.”¹ He and his fellow modern artists are considered revolutionary for their time, because they embraced the facet of art that is a lie in order to better point to the truth in the work; they strived to create something innovative and outrageous, while giving great insight into timeless human experience. They completely dove into the idea that art, unlike real life, has the ability to deceive and mislead thoughts, emotions, and sensations. While this deception can seem to give art a rather superficial and irrelevant tinge, Picasso and his contemporaries understood that it actually provides the viewer with an uncompromised view of human ideals and truths. Artists after him, like Jackson Pollock, established fame through the creation of works of art that surrendered to artistic lie in order to convey a human truth. Contemporary artists, like Laylah Ali, are still attempting to solve that exact same problem: how to successfully unite artistic lie and human truth. In this light, Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon of 1907 and Pollock’s The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle of 1943 can be compared to the work of contemporary artist Laylah Ali—work that didn’t present itself until decades later.

Towards the end of the year 1906 and on into 1907, Picasso began working on a very large installation that one of his friends would later name Les Demoiselles d’Avignon. While the

subjects of the painting—prostitutes in a Spanish brothel—come directly from Picasso’s own experiences, the influences on the painting from other sources are undeniable. Picasso likely channeled the style of El Greco, a master expressionist painter during the sixteenth century, in his dealing with space and form of the painting. Further, the painting’s composition mirrors that of Paul Cézanne’s Bathers. Additional influence on the painting was found in Iberian sculpture and primitive African tribal artwork.

The subject matter of Les Demoiselles d’Avignon caught the attention of audiences everywhere and became an artistic scandal at the time of its creation. In dealing with the subjects of the painting alone, one can immediately see that they are a group of naked women involved in some sort of gathering or assembly. Furthermore, the title of the work indicates the location of this gathering as Avignon—a street in Barcelona that was infamous for its brothels. With no additional details of setting, the audience is able to interpret the rest of the story for themselves.

In his work, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, Pablo Picasso distorts the human form to rid the painting of emotion, concern, and soul. In 1907, when the work was completed, the artistic movements of Impressionism and Fauvism were highly regarded in the world of visual arts. In Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, Picasso intentionally abandoned the emphasis that artists of these movements placed on color and light. The sharp, jagged edges of the bodies make the figures seem more like injurious machines than people. The faces of the women in the work, which have characteristics of either African masks or of the Iberian people, add to the primitive,

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3 Ibid., 17.
abrasive nature of the painting. The color of the women’s skin and surroundings also make the work feel extremely unnatural and aggressive. By utilizing distorted representations of human forms in his work, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, Picasso began an artistic revolution.

Not only do the appearances of the subjects of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* conjure up feelings of discomfort and distress in the viewer, but the composition of the painting contributes to these feelings as well. While he was painting *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, Picasso had originally placed a male sailor in the brothel along with the five women; eventually, he decided to eliminate the man from the painting.\(^5\) If he had kept the sailor in the work, the audience would only act as innocent bystanders of a compromising situation. Because of Picasso’s decision to eliminate the sailor from the work, he gave the audience the moral responsibility of acting as a patron to the brothel. No longer was the audience merely an innocent bystander; the viewer was now an accomplice to the offense. Picasso intentionally allows the viewer of the work to play the role of “client” in the brothel—a position that has great potential to seriously disturb the viewer down to his very core. The glares of the prostitutes are both stoic and accusatory, piercing the moral fiber of the viewer who is forced to endure their stares. Picasso not only embraced but encouraged the sense of discomfort and hesitance that goes hand-in-hand with the composition of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*.

Norms of acceptable and permissible sexual behavior are completely abandoned in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*; content that is often purposely overlooked or blatantly ignored is the crux of this work. It is curious that Picasso himself chose to roll up the canvas of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* and hide it from public view for several years after its completion. This surprising

fact goes to show that even the artist knew the gravity of the painting’s subject matter; even mention of it was taboo. It was this taboo, though, that made the painting so revolutionary in the early twentieth century and makes it still relevant today, over a hundred years later.

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, Jackson Pollock harnessed his reverence for Jungian principles and incorporated them into his art. According to Jung, the moon is a symbol of the female unconscious. Pollock focused on this symbol in his works *The Moon-Woman* (1942) and *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle* (1943). Specifically in *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle*, the woman is wearing a Native American headdress; this channels the North American Indian myth upon which the painting is based, and also, the Jungian principle that a feathered bird is “an archetypal symbol for aspirations toward a masculine consciousness.” The action by the woman shows the immense power of the female psyche.

Similar to Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, the composition of *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle* is difficult to divide; there is no apparent foreground, middle ground, or background. The space is extremely chaotic, yet very unified and connected. This treatment of space contributes to the fantastical, unrealistic nature of both paintings and prevents the viewer from connecting it to real life at first glance. Presumably, Picasso and Pollock understood this disbelief and intentionally harnessed it in these paintings so as to play upon the audience’s emotions and perspectives. Their works would have been much too direct and straight-forward if they could be immediately attributed to real life.

Contemporary artist Laylah Ali’s most famous series of paintings, *Greenheads*, deals with especially controversial issues in a seemingly playful manner. The juxtaposition of culturally-

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recognizable and politically-controversial objects such as nooses, whips, tall hoods, robes, weapons, and military uniforms with figures that look like they are straight out of a cartoon creates an extremely interesting tension in these paintings. The figures look almost identical with stick-like, brown bodies and perfectly round heads, making mechanical gestures rather than emotional ones. While it is extremely difficult to distinguish right from wrong and good from bad in these paintings, it is obvious that they play off of feelings of shame, disgrace, and guilt.

In one painting from this series that was created in the year 2000, two Greenheads are watching three other Greenheads hanging by their necks. At first glance, the painting looks straightforward and simple; the audience seems to be witnessing a hanging. With a closer look, however, the spirit of the work comes alive. While all of the Greenheads appear to be completely void of gender and race, the viewer can surmise that Ali’s intentional placement of only one fully green Greenhead in the work contributes to its overall message. Could this mean that the painting is a metaphor for racial struggle? Further, each hanging figure holds something in its hand: an arm, a leg, or a belt. Not so coincidentally, the fully green figure that is being forced to observe the men hanging is missing all three of these things. Could this be a metaphor for the dispersal of guilt in violence? It’s tricky to fully understand the situation of the painting and Ali’s intention in the work, but recognizing the work’s complexities is the first step toward doing so.

While artists like Picasso and Pollock came to be recognized for breaking boundaries of visual arts at the time of their prime, contemporary artists like Laylah Ali are doing the same today. Just as Picasso creates tension in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* with an eerie combination of
distorted figures and heavy subject matter, Pollock creates that same tension in *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle* by depicting a skewed human form in an unusual context. Ali also achieves tension in her work by juxtaposing bright, colorful, comic book-like figures in the setting of somber, dark, politically incorrect situations.

In all three of the works in question—*Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle*, and the painting from the *Greenheads* series—the artists play with the idea of gender. In his work, Picasso blatantly chose female subjects to heighten the intensity of the situation. At the same time though, he placed tribal masks on some of the women’s faces, almost erasing their gender altogether. The sharp angles and exposing positions of the bodies also rid the subjects of their femininity. Pollock erases gender from his subject in *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle* as well. Of course, the title of the work makes it seem as though the figure in the painting is fully and inarguably female; Pollock’s incorporation of Jungian principles, like the headdress symbolizing masculine consciousness, upsets this clear-cut demarcation, creating a male/female duality. Ali’s work, along with her entire *Greenheads* series, is completely void of any trace of gender or sexuality. It is easy to assume that the figures are male, but there is no explicit evidence to prove that assumption one way or the other. In the *Greenheads* series of paintings, Ali mirrors the originality and idiosyncrasy of Picasso and Pollock by asking gender-specific questions while portraying gender-neutral figures.

Like Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* and Pollock’s *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle*, the painting in the *Greenheads* series is an excellent representation of the intentionality that goes into every detail of an artist’s works. Critics may argue that the surrealism and abstraction of the paintings of Picasso and Pollock seem uncalculated and arbitrary, but this is not at all the
case. Picasso thought out every aspect of his work: the colors, the angles, the body positions, the situational details, etc. Similarly, Pollock understood the psychological meaning behind everything in his painting, *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle*. He understood and took advantage of the duality of the female unconsciousness and the male consciousness; he recognized the significance of every little object in the work: the headdress; the golden, triangular knife; the third eye; etc. Similarly, every facet of Ali’s painting was intentional: the shape and color of the figures, the cleanness of the shapes, the composition of the situation, etc. In paintings as complex and meaningful as these three, it would be a disservice to the work for the artists not to purposefully create everything about it.

Picasso, Pollock, and Ali successfully place the audience in a position among their works that leaves a lasting impression. The viewer of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* becomes part of the illicit activity because of his position in relation to the women of the work. Conjuring in the viewer feelings of guilt and fault is an intentional result of this. The audience of *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle* and the *Greenheads* painting is not so much a character in the story, but is rather a bystander witnessing something momentous. In reference to the violent acts that are often portrayed in her paintings, Ali explains: “It’s not like one [violent] thing happens and you say, ‘Wow! That was just so terrible,’ and it will never happen again. You know it will happen again—either where you’re caught up in a system, whether a family or war . . . or—if you’re in a situation as I happen to be now, not involved in a violent cycle, witnessing violent situations erupt. I’m more in a witness position now.”7 In this statement, Ali gives words to the emotion that Picasso and Pollock were striving to achieve in their works. Picasso wanted the audience to

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recognize the scandalous nature of what was happening in the work and wanted the viewers to be able to picture themselves in the position of witness, even if it is against their will. Further, Pollock wanted the audience to experience the metaphysical nature of the experience in order to gain some insight from it. Through her work, Ali succeeds in doing both. She forces the audience to mature by instilling awareness through their placement into the necessary position of witness to the action of her work; she allows them to feel the emotion of her art and learn something from it.

    Just as Picasso purposefully created emotion, or a lack thereof, in the eyes of the women of Avignon, Pollock creates a void of emotion in *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle* through the use of unnatural form and color. Further, Ali recognizes the emotion expressed in the eyes of the subject might as well tell the entire story of the work. She declares, “I’m also thinking of the portraits as distinct individuals who exist or have existed. The idea is for the distinctness of that individual to come through, to speak in some way about a narrative that is not readily apparent. Something about the way the person is dressed . . . the look on their face, the weathering of their face, tells you a story. The look in their eyes speaks of something larger.”

Picasso was extremely revolutionary in his straightforward portrayal of the intended mood in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*; Ali is just as conscious of the impact that showing emotion through the eyes of her characters can have on the overall effect of the work.

    Whether the painting shows five prostitutes in a brothel, the power of the female psyche, or five Greenheads during a hanging, the art of Picasso, Pollock, and Ali have undeniable parallels. They come from extremely different time periods, yet their works remain

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relevant today. The works’ perversion of human form, their unnatural use of color, the presence of stoic emotion, the audience’s unique point of view, and the heavy subject matter all contribute to their revolutionary nature. Picasso said, “Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.”

Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle, and the Greenheads series of paintings can all be interpreted as fallacies of the human experience because of their stylistic eccentricities; their intended purpose—to make the audience aware of a pervading truth of human nature—resonates clearly. By succeeding in doing so, Picasso, Pollock, and Ali are true artists.