

'Consume your Heritage': The Polarity and Interdependence of Pain and Pleasure

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Thameur Mejri

Consume your Heritage

2017

Mixed Media on Canvas

78 7/10 × 70 9/10 in; 200 × 180 cm

19th century English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham believed two things motivate humans, pain and pleasure. “Happiness, according to Bentham, is thus a matter of experiencing pleasure and lack of pain.” ¹Biologically, endorphins are released when stress and pain are detected in the human body, so can you have pleasure without pain?

When I saw Tunisian artist, [Thameur Mejri](#)'s contemporary piece, *Consume your Heritage*, at the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in Brooklyn, this past summer, I was taken aback, not because of the artworks' scale, standing at 180cm x 200cm. ...It was hypnotic. Standing right there I was instantaneously transported into my subconscious. Moments later, and still in a trance, I realized there was more to my sensory than cool blues, bright oranges and sunny yellows. I realized something dark, something painful, something hedonistic.

Mejri uses free-formed and implied lines with the figures on the canvas. Smudged strokes of muted colors simultaneously give the two inert figures on the right, volume, conflated with the look of illness. The figure to the foremost right, with the festive pink hair has a knife in his right leg and appears to be unscathed by its presence, as if he caused this mutilation himself. The pairs, protruding eyes and curved mouths, illustrate their uncanny awareness. The figure to the far left is laying dead. He is decaying, theoretically, leaving only bugs to claim his body. These men are casualties, albeit contributors, to a strange system called capitalism. A system that tricks people into devoting their lives and foregoing their passions to make powerful men richer. Recoiling back to the figures on the right, I sense an obsession, a fervent focus that has been planted in their minds, to keep participating in this race, even if it means losing.

Since 2011, Tunisia's economic injustices have made international headlines. Former fruit vendor, and some may say, martyr to the cause of social justice, Tarek el- Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi, sparked a revolution that would become known as the Arab Spring. Exhausted by abuse of power, by officials who are supposed to protect, combined with meager employment opportunities, in front of a government building, on December 17th 2010, Bouazizi set himself on fire. Today, according to an International Republican Institute (IRI) survey, 90 percent of its citizens insist the economy is struggling, "...while an increasing number of Tunisian's reported having difficulty meeting basic needs." ² In a country

deeply entrenched in political corruption and economic inequality, logic suggests, adopting America's toxic ideology of economic transcendence may have serious drawbacks. It's too late, however, and Mejeri displays its implications.

The artist has portrayed men in the foreground, in my interpretation, to insinuate, it's our patriarchal societies that push this capitalist agenda. Essentially, men are making the choices when it comes to law, economics, spending, healthcare and social issues. In order for consumerism to manifest, private companies and consumers have to play their role. In order to persuade consumers buy products, advertisers have to convince them, that their happiness solely depends on materialistic items. If you don't buy this product that will transform your life, you may become fearful and anxious. One of the major problems with consumerism, is that people simply cannot afford to keep feeding the machine. If there is this unquenchable thirst to accrue more and more, how do we satisfy it? According to economist, Sue McGregor, "Consumerism... contributes significantly to violence among individuals, groups, and nations." ³ Consumerism is a global issue, that the rich, to the unemployed now have a real stake in. The worshipping of money causes conflict, we see this in the act of embezzlement, the gender wage gap and so forth. The famed philosopher Socrates once said, "All wars are fought for the acquisition of wealth".

Happiness, in a consumerist society comes from possessions not from meaning. We are constantly being teased with the new iPhone, the new navigation system, in an overpriced vehicle, more land and square footage. We're overworked and fatigued by our appetite for things. One of the most precious and fulfilling commodities we have as human beings isn't materialistic items however,... it's love. It's human connection, it's our social circles that ultimately fulfill us. It's our purpose, our passions, not the accumulation of objects, that makes us happy long term. This is not to say money isn't important or valuable, in fact we need it for survival,

however, we're spending more than we have, and striving for wealth as if it is limitless. That's not how the system is designed. The government can print money and eradicate homelessness in a nation—but it doesn't.

Consume your Heritage gives the viewer the illusion of serenity. One of arts most useful substance is color. Titian took ultramarine out of the church and into the everyday, with paintings like, *A Man with a Quilted Sleeve* and *Bacchus and Ariadne*. Mejri uses color as a way to distract us from the piece's eldritch message. The artist creates a balance with tertiary mixes of primary colors. This blending creates a compositional softness. Mejri also uses shades and tints to give the figures a dreary rendering. Whilst the message is dark, the colors are in harmony. There is a cooperation of the two here, like there is a linkage between pain and pleasure, one derives and splits from the other. Is it okay to live in a dystopian society? Are we as humans hopelessly lusting for a utopia that doesn't exist? Can we have sunny days without an overcast? There is a melancholy that creeps into your brain when you realize, that maybe just in fact, we are doomed. Our days can never be filled with pleasure. Biologically we will and must feel pain first. Should we acquiescently accept duality as a part of nature? Are our ambitions to change for the better hopeless?

1. ([William Sweet](#))
2. ([Mastic, 2017](#))
3. ([McGregor, "Consumerism as a Source of Structural Violence"](#))