

September 2016

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Recommended Citation

Pike, Mackenzie (2016) "Family Is Forever," *The Idea of an Essay*. Vol. 3 , Article 23.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/idea_of_an_essay/vol3/iss1/23

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Family is Forever

Mackenzie Pike

Mackenzie is a criminal justice major with a passion for the corrections system in America. Along with a love for reading and writing, Mackenzie loves to make people laugh, which is why she loves being part of DTR, the improv comedy group on campus. A fun fact about Mackenzie is that she went skydiving and would recommend it to every single person.

There are thousands upon thousands of differences among the human race. Wars have been fought and lives have been lost over these differences. Yet, something transcends between race, age, gender, and culture. That something is family: family. No human being on Earth will go an entire lifetime without family ties. Even the child orphaned at birth had a mother for a few moments, and could very well go on to build a family of his own. While walking through the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, I came upon the exhibit entitled Beyond the Roots of the Ghetto. Omar Shaheed addressed this ever relevant topic in the form of a brass bronze sculpture entitled The Family. , which is contained in the this exhibit,Beyond the Roots of the Ghetto.In this piece he uses ambiguous figures, varying texture, and a unified layout arrangement to portray the dynamic of family.

Upon entering this exhibit full of Omar Shaheed's sculptures and colored pencil drawings, I noticed the dimly lit environment and clean lines of the display area of itself. In contrast, many of the sculptures and drawings have flowing, smooth lines and intense pops of color. The floor is home to dozens of brassbronze and limestone sculptures, while the walls display vibrantly colored pieces that recount the hip hop era of the 1980s and 1990s, like the Dope Dog series that shows the harmful nature of drugs and recounts the movement to prevent youth from using these drugsThe Familylies in an exhibit that is all dedicated to African American history. Beyond the Roots of the Ghetto aims to present African American history

and how it led to the ghetto culture. Most of the pieces, however, focus on Omar Shaheed's life experiences, and further apply those to African American life in general. This sculpture *The Family* lies in the back, right corner, tucked away for the viewer to discover. It is an understated piece, cast in a dark bronze, yet situated right under the brightly colored *Dope Dog* saga. next to vibrant colored pencil pieces. Much of his art has a more modern feel, commenting on the hip hop era of the 80s and 90s. This piece, along with a few others, seems to go much further farther beyond the roots of the ghetto , as it were, and discusses the African beginnings of this culture. This piece depicts a family of six: two larger adults and four children, varying in size. While the six figures are distinguishable visually, there is no physical separation. Arms and heads indicate each individual, yet legs, even full bodies, are not discernible from each other. Every member of this family originates from the base of the sculpture. This family is not very tall, standing at about a foot in height. tIn contrast to the dark bronze that makes up the majority of the piece, the concave space that replaces where the faces should be are a bright metallic gold. The family is all conjoined; there are no freestanding The adult figures' clothing is textured, one with a smaller pattern than the other., with a very basic plaid, one pattern larger than the other. There are no defining gender characteristics as the figures all lack hair. Beyond that, there are no faces. Rather, there are smooth concave surfaces that are painted gold. Also, the bodies all blend together, covering any body parts that would give the viewer the gender of the figure.

Upon approaching the figure, one of the first things that can be noticed is the lack of faces. It catches the eye initially because of the metallic shine. This shine illuminates the character of the family, acting almost as a halo. If the faces were dark, it could indicate a darker attitude amongst this group. The metallic, bright faces invite the viewer in, allowing them to imagine the goodness that comes from the hearts of these people and expresses itself through a bright "face." It further draws in the reader viewer because of the lack of something so fundamentally human. While the context of the exhibit and the coloration of the piece indicate that this family is African, the ambiguity of the sculpture allows the viewer, no matter what her background, to appreciate the aspect of family before any specifics of the family. It reminds the viewer that fundamentally,

humans are all the same. Beyond just the faces, the bodies are all ambiguous as well. There are no defining characteristics about any of the figures other than height. Even in that respect, the ages of the children can only be guessed in reference to each other, except the infant being held by the shortest child. Another striking detail the people are missing is gender defining qualities. There is no hair, no physical features to suggest male or female to the audience. The viewer cannot truly make any conclusions on gender or age of any of the members of the family. Again, all members of the audience are able to place their family in context with this sculpture, no matter how atypical.

Despite being cast out of the same material and being interconnected, the parents are differentiated in this sculpture by height, but also by texture. The adults each have textured clothing with a pattern different type of plaid particular to them. One of the tallest figures has a plaid made of long, flowing horizontal and vertical lines, while the other's is made with short lines, resembling a parquet floor. Even though the parents are clearly distinguishable from one another, there is no clear definition of husband or wife. They are a merely a team, huddled in a loving embrace with their kids. The children, on the other hand, have no texture. This is one main reason, other than height, that they are distinguishable as kids; they have not yet defined themselves as individuals. The children are still dependent on their parents. Even further, life has not dug the grooves of its patterns on them yet. They are still smooth, innocent, unblemished. In fact, the baby is hardly distinguishable at all, blending in to the second smallest member of the family. The largest two children are the most distinguished, symbolizing their desire to break free and become "patterned." The tallest child is arching his back away from the embrace of the parents, indicating a desire to pull away from the family, yet he is still very much in the middle of the family. This shows some of the teenage tension of wanting to be independent yet still being very involved in the family. His lack of pattern shows that he is still a dependent, despite being almost as tall as the parents.

The arrangement layout of this piece comments on exhibits the way the sculptor views the family unit. They are all connected, none of them separate from each other. The parents stand tall in the back, embracing each other and looking down at the children.

This sight line calls the viewer's eye to move down to the tallest and presumably oldest child who is between the hands of the two parents. His arm then guides the viewer down to the two smallest children. The second smallestlargest child, however, is back to back with the tallest child. While he is still physically connected to the family, he is off to the side. This family is quite literally all joined together, and yet one can see the tension in the way the second largest child is hunched over, pointing away from the other members. This indicates the strife that occurs in even the closest knit of families. By unifying the arrangement of this piece and interconnecting all individuals, Shaheed is showing the oneness and tight knit nature of this family. The unity of this family group in context of this exhibit exemplifies the importance of the African family in the development of African American culture. Even though many families are not as well rounded or connected as this one, the idea of family is still very important in culture. The idea of community and family is illustrated carefully in this sculpture..

Traditional African culture and African American culture are radically different. Yet, without the first there would not be the latter. One theme that is carried over through numerous generations and a long journey is the importance of the family unit. In *The Family*, sculpted by Omar Shaheed, the unity of a family is reflected as one of the most important qualities. One only has to take a walk through the exhibit *Beyond the Roots of the Ghetto* to see the complexity and relevance of familial relationships. One of the first sculptures that can be seen is a mother holding her child, also with those mystifying gold, empty faces. So next time you are around Wilberforce go into this museum. Make your way to the somewhat dark, very intriguing exhibit full of dull limestone or bronze sculptures and brightly colored drawings. Meander your way between this mother and child, all the way to the back right corner where you will meet *The Family*.