Karine Percheron-Daniels' seemingly photo-shopped painting of First Lady Michelle Obama is embroiled in controversy (http://fineartamerica.com/featured/first-lady-karine-percheron-daniels.html). With the exception of the face and the insertion of the American flag, Percheron-Daniels' portrait is an exact replica of Portrait d'une négresse painted by Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist and exhibited in Paris in 1800 at the Salon.

According to Art historian Hugh Honour, author of The Image of the Black in Western Art IV: From the American Revolution to World War I, originally published by Harvard University Press in 1989, what made the Portrait d'une négresse distinctive was her clothing and her gaze.

Honour suggests that the painter Benoist was attempting to disrupt the traditional representations of Blacks, who were often painted in clothing of servitude and who rarely had a gaze that suggested anything other than subservience. Writes Honour,

…the sitter was probably a servant brought back from the Antilles by the artist's sailor

brother-in-law. But there is not the least suggestion of servitude in the painting. The black woman is completely at her ease in this warmly humane and noble image. With perfect poise and self-confidence she looks at us with a gaze of reciprocal equality (p. 7).

Pictured (above): The Magazine de Fuera de Serie cover, (below): Portrait d'une négresse (1800) by Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist

Honour goes on to complement Benoist's ability to project "visual sensitivity" in how the white clothing sets off the subject's black skin. He also notes that the portrait was done in the period between 1794 and 1802, "…when a black citoyenne[citizen] was 'free and equal,' that is to say as free and equal as any French woman" (p. 7). Honour concludes that the painter, Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist, intended the portrait as a tribute to Black emancipation and to a regal representation of Black womanhood. "There are traces of feminism in the history of the abolitionist movement in which women played a notable part" (p. 7).

Art Hurts!

The real question on the table is whether Percheron-Daniels can lay claim to conveying liberation and dignity in her portrait of a partially nude Michelle Obama entitled "First Lady." On her website, the artist has posted a statement in response to the criticism she has received. It reads in part:

If any of you have found this piece of art insulting I would like to say that my GENIUNE intention was never to chock [sic] or upset anyone. In my eyes, the picture I created here is of a beautiful woman with a beautiful message: The first Lady of America in the first time in history is a black woman who proudly and confidently displays her WOMANHOOD (the nude) her ROOTS (the slave) and her POWER (the First Lady of America embraced by the American flag). This picture, is a celebration of achievement and in my opinion is not a racist slur (http://fineartamerica.com/profiles/karine-percherondaniels.html).

It must be noted that Percheron-Daniels has done portraits of other famous figures. She may paint them but they look like photo shopped images in which the face of a famous painting is replaced with that of a contemporary figure. It reminds you of the old carnival photo booths where you stood behind a cardboard image of Superman or Wonder Woman, with your face peering through. Percheron-Daniels also has images of President Barack Obama in the nude (which interestingly no one has mentioned) as well as Prince Williams of England. The Queen of England also appears semi-nude, though neither of her breasts is showing.

So what's the big deal about a nude First Lady? The first contrast between the original portrait and that of the First Lady is the gaze. In the original portrait, the Black model is looking directly at the painter in a non-smiling pose. She has dignity, even though one of her breasts is revealed. Her clothing is not that of a tattered slave, but in fact is suggestive of a woman of means. Thus, the French painter Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist may have been playing with contradictions and disrupting the social expectations of her time about how people expected Blacks to be depicted.

By that I mean that slaves rarely looked at whites directly. They were expected to lower their gaze in the presence of whites as an acknowledgement of their subservient status. The moment at which Benoist completes this portrait is a historical anomaly in which the French

government has abolished slavery, though the institution is reinstated a few years later.

An examination of Percheron-Daniels' First Lady portrait and the original reveal some interesting differences. The first is the gaze—we are not treated to a direct look. The eyes of the First Lady portrait are turned away from the viewer, slightly downcast. Such a look can be traced back to the Victorian age in which "a proper lady" never looked directly at people, especially when she was interested. Instead, she struck a demure or coy demeanor—a way to be indirectly flirtatious.

In not having the image of the First Lady face the artist and the viewer directly, Percheron-Daniels has robbed her portrait of the original's power. In Benoist's original painting of d'une négresse, the contrast of the figure being nude yet staring directly at the audience gives the painting power and dignity—there is a quality of defiantness in the Black woman's gaze. By having the image of the First Lady look away, Percheron-Daniels has made her appear more an object--somewhat docile and perhaps too ashamed to face the viewer. The First Lady's cheekbones have been softened in Percheron-Daniels' portrait, taking away the sharpness of First Lady Michelle Obama's features that give her presence, and there is a poutiness to her mouth that is suggestive of a seductive smile. The seriousness and strength that exude from the face of Benoist's original painting is clearly missing in Percheron-Daniel's copy.

The second difference in the two paintings is Percheron-Daniels use of the American flag. Benoist in her painting could have used symbols of the French nation but did not. Thus, her painting is about the woman figure and not about France. By including the American flag as the backdrop to her nude, or as partial cover, Percheron-Daniels creates a tension between the image and viewers who might feel that such a draping is an insult to this national symbol.

Finally, as some of the comments on Percheron-Daniels' website have pointed out, how is it that the artist settled upon slavery as the beginning point of the First Lady's identity? Why not make her an African Queen?

In using slavery as a starting point, the artist reifies the idea that prior to slavery Blacks had no

existence, or that the institution of slavery was so powerful, it erased that prior history and culture. This was the thesis advanced by Stanley Elkins, a historian in his 1959 book, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life, later condemned by historians such as John Bracey and John Blassingame. A behaviorist in his analysis, Elkins concluded that the behaviors slaves exhibited were a reflection of who they were internally. Out of this approach was born his controversial thesis:

"Elkins' second argument was that the experience of slavery was psychologically infantilizing to slaves, making them follow what he controversially called the "Sambo" model." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_Elkins;
accessed 9/4/2012)

If one follows Elkins' thesis, what is Percheron-Daniels trying to reveal about the First Lady. She claims in her statement of defense that her intent was to celebrate and honor First Lady Michelle Obama. But we all know that intent is not impact, as a good coach once reminded me. Percheron-Daniels has the privilege as a white foreigner to be unaware of the debates that have circulated historically around the appropriation, representation, and use/misuse of Black women's bodies.

Percheron-Daniels shouldn't be so ignorant, however, since one of the most famous appropriations and inhumane displays of a Black woman's body occurred in Paris at the Musée de l'Homme—that of a South African Khoikhoi woman called Sarah Baartman and referred to scientific circles and popularly as the "Hottentot Venus." She is the only person known to us to have been dissected and her skeleton and genitalia put on display for "scientific" reasons. Writes anthropologist Angela M. Gilliam in her essay, A Black Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Commodification of Women in the New Global Culture, "…What kind of ideas of the times in which Sarah Baartman lived made it normal to dissect the body of a human being, make a plaster mold of it, remove the brains, and slice off the genitals for exhibit into the twentieth century?" (1).
Gilliam's question is also relevant to the 21st Century. What kind of ideas do we have about Black women's bodies that draws the attention of someone like Percheron-Daniels and the media? First Lady Michelle Obama has had her body become the site of much discussion—her derriere, her arms, and so in representing the First Lady's body as a nude Percheron-Daniels has tapped into an emotional minefield of images of Black women used as breeders and forced sometimes to mate with their own sons under slavery, Black women subject to rape whether slave or free, Black women referred to as "hoes and bit-hes," Black women characterized as "angry," if they are strong and assertive, Black women portrayed as the penultimate caretaker in the form of "mammy," and most recently a slew of films by Black men in which they resurrect a

contemporary mammy in the form of Madea and Big Momma. Yeah, we Black women are a little bit sensitive about how we get represented—ya think? And so, when people like Percheron-Daniels start messing with the few positive images of Black women that have survived brutal scrutiny such as First Lady Michelle Obama, they'd better be prepared for a reaction. There is art and there is insult, even if it's presented as art.

Of course, one of the occupational hazards of being in the public eye is that your image and your life are open books, up for grabs, and subject to numerous interpretations over which you have little say. Karine Percheron-Daniels is capitalizing upon First Lady Michelle Obama's image and reputation. She may make a fortune due to the controversial nature of her work.

I hope that she will take some of those funds and support programs devoted to efforts that improve the lives of Black young girls living in France and/or in the United States. Perhaps doing so will somewhat relieve Percheron-Daniels of having to defend herself. She also would be operating in the spirit of generosity and the ethos of service that First Lady Michelle Obama represents to all of us in the United States and globally.

As my favorite poet the late Gwendolyn Brooks once wrote about a Picasso statue, art hurts. But it can also heal and while we may not agree with Percheron-Daniels depiction of the First Lady, it has made us more aware as viewers of the power of image, raised questions about the social responsibility of artists, and perhaps laid a foundation for this artist to demonstrate a level of social responsibility by contributing some of the funds from sale of this controversial image to improve and enhance the lives of black girls and women globally. Now, that would be an unequivocal way to show some respect and admiration for the First Lady.

Anything less will call into question whether anything was "lost in translation" as Percheron-Daniels has claimed, or that what we see is what the artist truly intended: art or insult? The jury's still out on that one.

Read More:

1. Gilliam, Angela, "A Black Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Commodification of Women in

the New Global Culture." In Irma McClaurin, Ed. Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Praxis, Politics, and Poetics (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001). http://rutgerspress.rutgers.edu/acatalog/ Black_Feminist_Anthropology_701.html
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File :Marie-Guillemine_Benoist_-_portrait_d%27une_negresse.jpg
Hugh Honor, The Image of the Black in Western Art IV: From the American Revolution to World War I and Black and White Myths (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
Revised editions of The Image of the Black in Western Art, All volumes: http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674052611
http://cunycomposers.wetpaint.com/page/%22The+Chicago+Picasso%22%3A+Pablo+Picasso+and+Gwendolyn+Brooks

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