

James, Ashley: *Push & Pull-Ups: The Paintings of Walter Price*.
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Push & Pull-Ups: The Paintings of Walter Price

Ashley James

From the top: a black woman with her hair in Bantu knots lies supine and relaxed on a red platform, her right leg dangling over its edge, her right hand cradling a splayed book. While this single figure is more or less defined and thus identifiable as a woman, what lies beneath her—the form which constitutes the majority of the painting—is diffuse: an entanglement of persons, the raised arms of whom are working to bear this elevated woman's weight.

While the vertical support seems clear, the central activity in Walter Price's (b. 1989) *Extra Virgin Olive Oil* (2017) conspicuously exceeds the bounds of physics and anatomy both. Though a number of notably muscular arms clearly hold the platform in place, less certain is to whom each of these limbs belongs, precisely. Arms do not trace back to discrete individuals, but instead to a messy mass of parts. The colors and patterns of the clothing converge; brown into blue into green-and-black stripes. These convolutions are characteristic of Price's paintings, wherein subjects lie just at the edge of legibility, recognizable, but never fully comprehended. Even the distinctly fashioned top hats these quasi-characters don—one crimson, another checkered yellow—lose their definition at points. A blue hat's brim bleeds into a wash of pink.

Related to this subjectival distortion is Price's larger interest in the interplay between foreground and background. Here our perspectival faculties are put to the test as vanishing points dissolve and Euclidian space is defied. This disorientation is notable in works such as *Untitled* (2017) where a domestic space appears as though it is floating in ether. In *Extra Virgin Olive Oil*, rich strokes of orange serve not only as a backdrop for the frenzied group at center, but also envelop the collective in a fiery all-over atmosphere, all while the presence of stars seems to indicate a celestial locality. Yet even the stars themselves are itinerant, at once framing the mass and enmeshed among its persons. This is

assuredly not outer space, but another dimension altogether.

It may be compelling to read the composition of *Extra Virgin Olive Oil* narratively—perhaps as apocalyptic vision, or somehow in relation to that elusive culinary title and its attendant sexual undercurrents—but as is true for all of Price's paintings, the work is above all guided by questions of painting itself, as medium and as genre. Self-described as "obsessed" with the practice, Price works the surface of the canvas through a Hans Hoffman-esque (1880–1966) "push-and-pull" method, whereby color and its application are mobilized to create dynamic spatial relations. Rather than preplanning a composition, Price processes it into being, remaining open to what the canvas might desire of him next. In this sense, a blurring of figure and ground, of exterior and interior, and/or of up and down, is less a comment on planetary instability or an impressionistic technique, than it is an extension of a painting practice marked by the dynamism of the picture plane, in pursuit of a surface energy that can be felt. The painting is finished, Price notes, when it just "*feels funky*."¹

For all its perceived mysticism, Price's funky "push-and-pull" process is still an informed and prepared one. No small degree of readiness is required to make fluid and good decisions in the moment, and in an unforgiving medium at that. For this reason, drawing is key for Price—both as a model for a painting practice that can remain loose and guided, and as the very literal practice that allows Price to confidently tackle the infinitely mutable medium. While his drawings are not preliminary sketches for his paintings, making them helps Price open up to and prepare for what may come when he eventually makes his way to the canvas. "The repetition [of drawing] allows me to be as confident with the paintbrush as I am with the pencil," Price notes.²

Figures are thus of secondary concern for the artist; they derive from the painting process



Top to bottom:

hyperthermic conditioning 2, 2017. Acrylic on wood, 18 × 24 × 1½ in. Courtesy the artist and Karma, New York

Entrance with no exit, 2016. Acrylic on paper mounted to panel, 40 × 50 in. Courtesy the artist and Karma, New York



rather than serve as impetus for a painting's creation. Most of the time, Price begins a work without a precise idea of what he will depict, and allows the "push-and-pull" to inform his eventual subject matter. The literal subject of *Extra Virgin Olive Oil* is the elevated black woman in contemplation, and while Price's depiction of this reverent gesture is indeed deliberate—he cites the discrimination he's witnessed black women face in general, and in the art world specifically, as reference for the work³—the decision to *depict* such a scene, in *this* particular painting, came out of the painting process, just as any other subject might. Price's relationship to his subjects are thus as deliberate and fluid as his approach to the more abstract elements in the work. From observations of his everyday existence, he paints what he means, even as his paintings are never reducible to those meanings alone. Thus one often finds black people—at play, at rest, or in the air—

in his paintings because he lives and loves alongside them in general.

Over time, one can trace a series of symbols and motifs in Price's works, like the sofa, which for Price represents home and domesticity, or the previously mentioned hats, which struck him as a generative sign of stylized collectivity upon seeing them worn daily in the largely Hasidic community in which his studio is located. At times, however, his choice of subject matter rhymes with his more formal painting interests, as in *Extra Virgin Olive Oil*, where the raised woman mimics the very technique that brought her into being—a pushing-up. Indeed, another key motif in the artist's work is a figure exercising, doing push-ups or stretching. This is not an entirely coincidental trope, for it stems from what can be understood as Price's more general interest in feats of human extension—of which aerobic exercise is one, and painting is just as certainly another.

It's no surprise, then, that Price is continually pushing himself within the medium, refusing to remain comfortable in his methods. Most recently, this has meant working the canvas in new ways, growing his texture range and applying paint more thickly, as in *hyperthermic conditioning 2* (2017), or in other instances tweaking scale and color. Of course, exploring new frontiers in paint has required new kinds of approaches. While Price begins from a number of directions with the smaller paintings, for example, with the larger ones he starts from the bottom and paints his way up—to the black woman at rest on her pedestal, as in the case of *Extra Virgin Olive Oil*.

It's a useful model for a viewer, this "working up." Begin from below. Swaths of hunter, moss and olive green paint coat the perimeter, as if forming a ground, but one not fully material, not quite terrain. Up above: a frenzy of stars.

¹ Walter Price, conversation with the author, August 22 and November 15, 2017.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*



Extra Virgin Olive Oil, 2017