

Canon, Race, and Gender in Elizabeth Colomba's *Daphne*

Elizabeth Colomba is a classically trained French artist of Martinique descent now based in Harlem, whose paintings recreate mythological stories, especially those of Ovid, presenting the main characters as Black women. Her art thereby resituates those traditionally excluded from the Eurocentric canon at its very center. By giving her viewers depictions of Black women in luxurious surroundings, featured as the central characters in well-known tales, and draped in rich costumes, she criticizes how Black women have historically been depicted as servile by white European and American (primarily male) artists, and simultaneously challenges how Black women artists such as herself have been excluded from the production of such art.

This paper will focus especially on her painting *Daphne* (2015), which presents us with an image of Ovid's well-known nymph that both conforms to and challenges our expectations of the representation of this figure. On the one hand, the painting's style, imagery, and use of symbolism align it with the traditional canon of "western" painting associated with white male artists. Colomba clearly positions the painting within this particular canon and speaks its visual language. On the other hand, the painting undermines how Daphne has so often been depicted within that canon. In Colomba's painting, Daphne is a fully clothed Black woman not literally *becoming* a laurel tree but using the laurel pattern on a domestic wall to hide from her approaching assailant. Rather than being gripped by Apollo as he attempts to rape her, we see her alone, holding an arrow in her hand—presumably the arrow of Cupid that has struck her, which she has now made into her own weapon. The shadow of Apollo lurks on the floor, but the focus is entirely on Daphne. Colomba's choice not to show us a metamorphosing Daphne, as in the

vast majority of artistic representations of her, restores her agency and her humanity—this is a powerful refusal to objectify her.

On the table next to Daphne is a small replica of the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, a statue that features a Cupid-like angel who himself wields an arrow nearly identical to the one in Daphne's hand. Colomba's incorporation of this work of art into her painting visually demonstrates how Daphne has turned the tables on Ovid's Cupid by repurposing his weapon to her own use—just as Columba has turned the tables on her own artistic predecessors such as Bernini, whose statue of Apollo and Daphne must also have been in Colomba's mind. Colomba's Daphne, unlike Bernini's famous depiction, undermines the male gaze—it is Daphne's own gaze, rather than her nude body, that draws our eye. We do not gaze *at* her as if aligned with Apollo, but gaze *with* her as she poises herself to fight him. She towers above his shadow, both mimicking and inverting the gender positioning of Bernini's *Teresa*, wherein the Cupid-like male angel towers over the reclining female saint. Colomba thereby repurposes masculine modes of representation to empower both herself and the Black women she depicts. Such re-empowerment is typical of Colomba's artistic practice, as I will show by comparing her representations of other mythical figures such as Danae, Circe, and Medusa.

Columba does more than claim a position for Black women within a masculine, white tradition—she also shows how such a claim must bring with it significant challenges to that tradition. To quote Colomba herself, her paintings give us “the colonized imitating the culture of the colonizer but hesitant to fully appropriate it.” By working *within* the tradition of European painting and the Greco-Roman myth and literature that inspired it, she poses a challenge to the canon in ways she could not do if she were working outside of it. In doing so, she forges a relationship to the canon not unlike that of Ovid himself. Ovid too works within a tradition, i.e.

epic, taking up its formal qualities while undermining many of its expectations (e.g. a single hero, a central conflict). He therefore both conforms to and defies the very genre in which he is working, positioning himself simultaneously inside and outside of established tradition. It is no surprise, then, that Colomba can find fruitful ground in Ovid for positioning herself within the European artistic canon even as she exposes its many shortcomings.

Bibliography

Colomba, Elizabeth. 2013. "Limbo: The Collective Unconscious." *Small Axe* 17.3: 223-26.