

Harmonia Rosales and Henry O. Tanner:
Powerful Artists of the Diaspora



The Creation of God (ca. 2017)
Harmonia Rosales
Oil on linen, 48 x 60 inches (121.91 x 152.4 cm)



The Annunciation (1898)
Henry Ossawa Tanner
O/C, 57 × 71 1/4 inches (144.8 × 181 cm)

The works of Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) and Harmonia Rosales (b. 1984) reveal a similar yet oppositional intersectionality of race, gender and faith within the fine arts. Rosales openly challenges white male hegemony by empowering the Black feminine via classical Eurocentric motifs. Tanner followed 19th-century Eurocentric artistic tastes yet countered Black stereotypes in American and Orientalist imagery. Tanner and Rosales share the issues of their times, giving us a poignant celebration of Black identity within the African Diaspora.

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AH 453 Arts of the African Diaspora

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Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) and Harmonia Rosales (b. 1984) are two artists who have faced similar challenges within the art world. Rosales reinterprets Black feminine empowerment using classical Eurocentric iconography. Her works have been criticized for undermining traditional white male hegemony in the arts. The largely self-taught Rosales seems to be the opposite of the academically trained Tanner, who embraced late 19th-century Eurocentric taste in art. Like Rosales, however, Tanner weakened the hegemonic narrative through new interpretations of biblical and Orientalist themes. In the era of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, Rosales communicates a powerful resistance to concretized white patriarchy in the visual arts; Tanner, in a deeply personal struggle with identity and freedom, renounced a racist America to live in a more liberal France. He defied the label of “artist of color” while becoming a mentor to Black artists in Paris and an icon for American civil rights. Rosales and Tanner give us a poignant contrast of Black creativity within the modern African Diaspora.

I. The Artists

Henry Ossawa Tanner was born in Pittsburgh, PA on June 21st, 1859. His father Benjamin Tanner was a freeborn Black minister in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church and a champion for Negro rights. Henry’s mother Sarah Elizabeth Miller was a former slave who escaped North via the Underground Railroad and opened a school for poor Black children in her home.¹ Henry’s middle name was meant to honor Osawatimie, Kansas, where John Brown launched his anti-slavery campaign in 1856.² At the age of 12, Henry took a walk with his father through the local park and saw a man painting a landscape. In that moment, the

¹ Kelly Baker, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Race, Religion, and Visual Mysticism*, 2008, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, pgs. 10-12.

² Anna O. Marley. *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*. George Gund Foundation Imprint in African American Studies. Philadelphia [Pa.]: Berkeley, Calif.: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; University of California Press, 2012, pg. 7.

young Tanner decided to become an artist, and he started painting with a brush kit his mother bought for him.³

In 1880, Henry was enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts under Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), one of the most progressive art instructors in America and famous for his painting *The Gross Clinic* (1875). Tanner learned from Eakins, "...a feeling for the structure and weight of the human body...and the importance of light. Not the Impressionist's light that blurs and disintegrates form, but light that reveals the character and nature of things."⁴ When we consider *The Annunciation* (1898), we can see how Tanner's mastery of light created a new paradigm in the depiction of biblical narratives, with a vibrant yet simple realism informed by his travels in Palestine.⁵ Tanner created dozens of paintings of various subjects, but we must mention that Tanner's most often-quoted works *The Banjo Lesson* (1893) and *The Thankful Poor* (1894) share his expertise in the use of light but also highlight his efforts in supporting the concept of the New Negro. We shall discuss these topics later.

There is not enough space in this paper to explore the many factors contributing to the dramatic emergence of women artists of color in America; they are no longer rare and several have achieved international recognition. Harmonia Rosales is a contemporary painter whose works have drawn both high praise and condemnation, mostly due to her open criticism of traditional white hegemonic imagery in the arts. Harmonia Rosales was born in Chicago, IL in 1984. Her father (whose name I have been unable to locate online) is Cuban, and her mother is Melodye Benson Rosales, a multi-media artist, author, illustrator of children's books and

³ Baker, pg. 12.

⁴ Marcia M Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner, American Artist*, Negro American Biographies and Autobiographies, University of Chicago Press (Chicago and London, 1969), pgs. 24-27.

⁵ Dewey F. Mosby. Henry Ossawa Tanner, Darrel Sewell and Rae Alexander-Minter. *Henry Ossawa Tanner*. First Trade ed. Philadelphia, PA: New York, NY: Philadelphia Museum of Art, Rizzoli International Publications, 1991, pg. 162.

educational advocate.⁶ Rosales graduated in 2012 with a BA from Glenville State College, West Virginia,⁷ and her career took off in 2017 when her painting *The Creation of God* went viral.⁸ Her works have been exhibited in MoCADA (the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts), several galleries in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, and collected by people such as actor Samuel L. Jackson⁹ and collector Amar'e Carsares Stoudemire.¹⁰

Rosales says that her works focus on Black female empowerment, new forms of aesthetic beauty and countering the long-dominant white male hegemony in arts and culture.¹¹ She depicts the *orishas* of her Afro-Cuban heritage as sources of healing, and she may use materials such as “rust” to comment on social conditions. Inspired by the beauty of Renaissance art but “unable to relate to it,” Rosales incorporates Renaissance styles she adored as a child. She also replaces the traditional white male characters with Black women of various hues, and some with the skin condition known as *vitiligo*.¹² Her stunning images highlight the beauty of Black women (and men), but it is *The Creation of God* that draws a lot of attention. Rosales says:

“It was more shocking not because of the praise but [because of] the negative comments. People said, ‘God should not be a black or Muslim or anything like that,’ and that tells me that what I’m doing is not only what needs to be done, but I need to keep going... Why have we accepted this image of God being a white male for so long? We should start

⁶ Melodye Benson Rosales, personal website. <http://melodyerosales.com/#about>.

⁷ Harmonia Rosales, personal website. <https://www.harmoniarosales.com/publications>

⁸ Sonaiya Kelly, “Words and Pictures: Viral artist Harmonia Rosales’ first collection of paintings reimagines classic works with black femininity,” Los Angeles Times, 21 September, 2017. Online. N.p. Accessed 11 3 1029. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-cm-harmonia-rosales-the-creation-of-god-reimagined-20170919-story.html>

⁹ Harmonia Rosales, “Samuel L. Jackson Acquires *The Virgin*.” *Instagram*, artist account, 14 September 2017. N.p. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BZCXI68Abp9/>

¹⁰ Rosales, *ibid.* <https://www.instagram.com/p/BX1EUKBAcn4/>.

¹¹ Rosales, personal website.

¹² *Ibid.*

asking ourselves why."¹³

II. The Works: Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Annunciation* (1898)

From 1876 to 1895, Tanner painted mostly landscapes, marine paintings and genre scenes. In 1891 Tanner went to Paris, returning in 1893 to convalesce from typhoid fever. *The Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor* (both 1894) are the works most commonly associated with Tanner as a "Negro" artist. In 1894 his Philadelphia patron John T. Morris bought *The Thankful Poor*, and the earnings allowed Tanner to go back to Paris permanently and begin his journey as a "religious painter."¹⁴ W.E.B. DuBois, the famous writer and activist for Black empowerment, had hoped Tanner would become a founder of "American Negro Art," but this was not to be. In 1896 Tanner's first religious painting, *Daniel in the Lion's Den*, received an honorable mention award at the Paris Salon.¹⁵ The painting was exhibited in the United States and Tanner traveled again to Palestine and Egypt. At the 1897 salon his *Resurrection of Lazarus* won a third-class medal and was purchased by the French government for the Musée du Luxembourg. Tanner's reputation as a great artist was now sealed. In the 1898 salon, he showed another religious image, *The Annunciation*.¹⁶ *The Annunciation* received great plaudits when exhibited in the Salon of 1898. When it was brought before the jury, "a storm of 'bravos' burst forth."¹⁷ The French critics "invariably characterize his work as *personelle*, which is the highest praise it could receive. To produce what is truly personal is to be great."¹⁸ Such is this piece, a great wonder to behold.

The Annunciation is a favored topic in Christian art, with the oldest version possibly

¹³ Kelly, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Marley, pgs. 275-279.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 279.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Helen Cole. "Henry O. Tanner, Painter." *Brush and Pencil* 6, no. 3 (1900): 97-107. doi: 10.2307/25505551. JSTOR.

¹⁸ Cole, pg. 105.

from Dura-Europos in Syria, ca. 3rd century CE. The image is based on the apocryphal (non-authoritative) Gospel of James.¹⁹ In that version, Mary goes to a well to draw water and hears a voice saying, “Hail thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women.”²⁰ Most Annunciations painted during the Renaissance drew their sources from the Vatican-sanctioned Gospel of Luke 1:26-38, which does not mention water or a well; Mary is simply a virgin visited by the angel. Earlier Christians did not view Mary in a divine light; she was simply the mother of Jesus.²¹ Her deification as *theotokos*, “the one who gives birth to God” was not granted to her until the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE.²² Tanner’s painting draws on Luke and James by depicting Mary as a simple, young woman sitting in her bedchamber, looking humbly with clasped hands at an electrical column of golden light. Considering the wonders of electricity and industrialism at the turn of the century, such a visual was destined to attract.

Tanner’s subject matter in *the Annunciation* took inspiration from his most recent visit to the Holy Land. The bedchamber has curved alcoves, white walls and square floor stones. Mary’s bed rests in a corner defined by a heavy drape of red, orange and dark green that also frames the young woman. Her toes emerge from a striped sleeping robe of course material common to the poorer classes.²³ A green carpet with linear details covers many of the flagstones. It has been said that the carpet is modeled after one Tanner brought home from his travels, for it appears again in his painting *Christ Learning How to Read* (1910-1914).²⁴

For added visual impact, Tanner chose a large canvas of 57” x 71-1/2,” perhaps the

¹⁹ Mary Leith, "Earliest Depictions of the Virgin Mary." *Biblical Archaeology Review* 43, no. 2 (2017): 40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 48.

²² *Ibid.*, pg. 40.

²³ Mosby, pg. 162.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

largest canvas of his career.²⁵ *The Annunciation* has an interesting polarity compared to the *Resurrection of Lazarus* in that both images express divine birth: one in the womb, the other from a tomb. Tanner's faith and travel experiences can be seen in the context of identity and representation; Tanner was a deeply religious man who wanted to live free of labels. His relationship with Orientalism and Black representation was influenced by a comment from his patron Rodman Wanamaker, who sponsored his 1897 trip to Palestine:

*In the Orient the light, both interior and exterior, the mannerisms of the people, the costumes and habits of living, all are vastly different from anything that could be imagined in the West.*²⁶

Tanner chose a large canvas to make *Annunciation* stand out at the Salon,²⁷ but this also hints at the importance of size in historical paintings and portraits of the Grand Manner. We can also suggest an autobiographical relationship between *Daniel*, *the Resurrection* and *Annunciation*. As a *Daniel* in America, Tanner was surrounded by racists who would gladly consume him; the sale of *Daniel* enabled Tanner's return to Europe, where the *Resurrection* validated his rebirth as an internationally recognized artist; after a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Christ, Tanner crafted a new message of *Annunciation* speaking to the birth of the New Negro. With the prophet DuBois spreading the Good Word to the chosen and demanding hegemonic repentance, Black artists could visit Paris, a truly creative Jerusalem, and commune with an artistic messiah of color. Of course, Tanner would humbly deny this all.

But let us imagine Tanner's spiritual feelings as he walked the stony ground of Palestine; how was he moved to create such a different representation of faith in *The Annunciation*? It is beautiful in its simplicity and use of light. Tanner's representation of Gabriel as a living column

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Mosby, pg. 162.

²⁷ Ibid.

of fire is unique: a cosmic being sans armor, wings, sword, long hair or pearly white skin. S/he is God's power free of the flesh. Tanner's reduction of the angel to pure energy must have been a shock to Catholics and Protestants alike, for his gesture removed the power of white representation in one stroke.

Religion has long been used to control people of color; kidnapped Africans were often baptized and given new, Christian names upon arrival to the slave pens of coastal Africa.²⁸ The Church fathers crafted religious characters in their own image (as Rosales explains for her title *The Creation of God*), making Jesus, Mary and the apostle's white. We can surmise that this racial convention in religious art was meant for European relate-ability but it was also to promote obedience as colonialism spread globally. Catholicism suppressed indigenous faiths, setting up Christianity as the one true religion; God, therefore, was white and patriarchal, as were his Son, saints, bishops, priests and conquistadores. Tanner dared to remove (or at least make ambiguous) the dominant racial paradigm within religious imagery. This is a major event in the history of art.

The tousled bedding and slightly vexed carpet imply Mary's terrified reaction upon waking up, but Tanner also presents her calm acceptance after the angel says, "Be not afraid."²⁹ Her head is slightly downcast with eyes looking up at the angel. Her clasped hands reveal some anxiety, but Mary seems open to the will of God. A blue rope on the far right of the frame may refer to traditional representations of Mary; until 1706, lapis lazuli was the only mineral pigment of blue for painting³⁰ and had to be imported from Afghanistan. It was an expensive commodity, and patrons of Marian art would pay for *ultramarine* as a gesture of humility. Blue may have

²⁸ Peter I. Rose. *Americans from Africa: Slavery and Its Aftermath*. Vol. 1. Taylor and Francis, 2017, pg. 37.

²⁹ Luke 1:30.

³⁰ John Griswold. "A Revolution of the Palette: the First Synthetic Blues and Their Impact on French Artists," podcast and exhibition, Norton Simon Museum of Art, July 2015-January 2016. Online, n.p. Accessed 11/2/2019.

also served Tanner as simple expression of the primary colors: on the left we have the angel in yellow, the center is dominated by a stripe of red, and then we see the blue fabric on the right.

Annunciation challenges the white hegemony of representation in religious art. Tanner provides an honest view of people in Middle East and undercuts the Orientalist art popular in the era of empire and colonialism.

Harmonia Rosales, *The Creation of God* (2017)

A dissertation written by Syracuse graduate Kyla Murray but unavailable to the public³¹ provides the only academic research on Harmonia Rosales. There are some news and features articles in print or online (some copied or tagged from others), but critical analyses of Rosales and her work is scant. Many of her works are popular to those who know about her, and this may be normal for contemporary artists in the Digital Age. Andy Warhol was partially right: fifteen minutes of fame, but some people will follow you forever!

The bold statement on Rosales' opening website page says, "Exploring black female empowerment through art that challenges Ideological [sic] hegemony in contemporary society."³² Beyond a doubt, *the Creation of God* has done so. According to an interview with BET Online, Rosales revealed *The Creation of God* to the world via Twitter.³³ She received a deluge of mostly positive comments and a few negative. Rosales explained some of her reasons for making the painting:

"A woman is a woman: Black, white or any color," Rosales says. "We have been taught that God created 'man' in his own image. [But] in fact, we have created God in our own

³¹ Kyla Murray, et al. *The Negation of Historic Exclusivity: Rewriting and Legitimizing Blackness through Neo-Slave Portraiture*, 2019, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, and <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2299737496?accountid=10351>

³² Harmonia Rosales. Personal website. N.d. N.p. <https://www.harmoniarosales.com/>

³³ Tweety Elitou and Harmonia Rosales. "This Artist Painted God as a Black Woman and Got a Lot of People Mad." *BET Online*, 24 May 2017.

image. So 'God' is whoever we want God to be, a representation of the ideal, of the divine, of wisdom and love and pure creativity. Let's face it, creativity, starting with the womb, is a female attribute."³⁴

And:

*"The original representation [Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* (1508-1512)] excludes something very important: women and people of color. I wanted people to consider creation through a different lens that, in turn, would cause us to consider the way we see everything else we have been taught to see. Perhaps it is time to rethink."*³⁵

In her famous article on representation, Ann Marie Baldonado quotes Ellen Shohat, who emphasizes the need for us to question the sources of our cultural/racial programming.³⁶ In the *Creation of God*, Rosales performs a visual interrogation of Western hegemony. On a simpler level, she also made the painting for the sake of her daughters, not wanting them to, "grow up mimicking another person out of disapproval of her own unique and gorgeous qualities, including her brown skin and kinky hair."³⁷

On her Instagram account, Rosales shares the progress of works in her oeuvre, including *The Creation of God*.³⁸ Rosales began this work in April of 2017; it was exhibited and sold in June at the Simon Bilodeau gallery in Los Angeles. There is no public record as to who now owns the painting.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ann Marie Baldonado, "Representation." *Postcolonial Studies*, Fall 1996, Scholarblogs at Emory.com, pg. 3 (PDF).

<https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/21/representation/>.

³⁷ Daniela McCalla, "Harmonia Rosales: Brush Strokes of Black Excellence." 2 April 2019, NU Origins. <https://www.nuorigins.com/harmonia-rosales-brush-strokes-of-black-excellence/>. Accessed October 2019.

³⁸ Rosales, *ibid*.

The Creation of God is a critical take on Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, Italy. Rosales has replaced Adam with a nude and dark skinned Black woman. She extends her left hand into space and is about to touch, or has been touched, by the hand of God, who manifests as a mature, full-figured Black woman with a lovely shock of white hair. God is surrounded by a host of angels and a billowing red drape that appears more like a womb, which was a deliberate gesture on the part of Rosales. She wanted that section of the work to appear womb-like in reference to how many people have created God in *their* image or accepted, for millennia, representation of God as a white male hegemon. Rosales has removed that concept from the visual equation but retains a tangible form of humanity.

Unlike Tanner, who replaced the usual Western depictions of winged angels with a column of fiery light, Rosales replaces the white figures in *Creation of Adam* with black women. Before I say "replace" too often, let me recognize the significance of Rosales' work. She has taken a cultural and religiously sacred icon, a masterpiece in the Western canon, and changed the racial and gender dynamic in direct opposition to the historical values of the Catholic Church and male patriarchy. Instead of removing race as Tanner did in *Annunciation*, Rosales is replacing race and transforming the monologue of white supremacy into a dialogue of color and gender. Rosales empowers Black women through the *Creation of God*, but this is also more than just "empowerment" as a popular term: Rosales is re-presenting Black women in a historical context that is more properly based on fact. The first peoples of *Homo sapiens* emerged from northeast Africa.³⁹ City-states and empires existed on the African continent for thousands of years before the contact with Western European cultures. As of 2019, there are more people on the African

³⁹ Vsevolod Yakimov, "Early Man and the Emergence of the Races." *The UNESCO Courier* 25, no. 8 (1972): 50-51.

continent (1.32 billion) than in Europe and the United States combined (841.6 million).⁴⁰ African people, cultures and arts have been, over time, suppressed, destroyed or appropriated. There are arguments today over the rise of Modernism due in part to the borrowing of African creative motifs by European artists like Picasso and Brancusi.⁴¹ Rosales was accused on social media of “art theft,” “negative racism,” and doing the works “for self gain,”⁴² or that the work is, “...a disgrace towards [Michelangelo’s] legacy” that should be destroyed.⁴³ We could expect such a hegemonic reaction to Rosales, which confirms her desire to, “...[re]consider the way we see everything else we have been taught to see.”⁴⁴

Another important aspect to Rosales’ work we have to consider is not only her empowerment of contemporary Black women via her paintings, but also how her work reverses ingrained stereotypes and perceptions. In 1787, English pottery master Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) crafted a popular medallion-seal for the Society for the Abolition of Slavery. It shows a kneeling Negro holding his chained hands aloft in supplication and crowned with the saying, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?”⁴⁵ It became one of the most famous symbols of abolitionism in England and the United States, and was turned into a woodcut image easily printed in newspapers and periodicals. Later that same year, George Bourne published a book describing the conditions for female Black slave. It featured a woodcut similar to Wedgwood’s

⁴⁰ Worldometers, “Population Comparison: China, EU, USA, and Japan,” and “Africa Population (live)”, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/africa-population/> and <https://www.worldometers.info/population/china-eu-usa-japan-comparison/>. Accessed 11/7/2019.

⁴¹ Sharon F Patton. *African-American Art*. Oxford History of Art. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998., pg. 108-109.

⁴² Belita_William, “Detail of The Creation of God,” Harmonia Rosales Instagram account, circa. April 28, 2017. N.p. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BTcBprVgwuV/>.

⁴³ Editorial, “This Artist Painted God As A Black Woman — And Folks Are So Mad,” *Blavity.com* <https://blavity.com/this-artist-painted-god-as-a-black-woman-folks-are-mad?category1=news>

⁴⁴ Elitou and Rosales, *ibid*.

⁴⁵ Anonymous, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother,” *Africans in America: Revolution Part 2: 1750-1805*, PBS *SOCAL* online. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h67.html>

medallion but showing a female slave before a tropical landscape, crowned by the words, “Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?”⁴⁶ The importance of Bourne’s book was in his sharp call to white Northern women to fight against slavery for all of their “colored sisters.”⁴⁷ He further demanded that it was a *duty in particular* for Christian women to “loudly denounce that code of laws and that unholy practice which nullifies the matrimonial covenant.” Here Bourne refers to the common practice of slave-owners and their white overseers of raping and impregnating female slaves to create mulatto slave children. He further states that for Christian women to honor that title and put an end to slavery, they shall, “resolutely discard all communion with slave-holders as members of the Church of God.”⁴⁸



Cameo medallion crafted by William Hackwood or Henry Webber and cast by Josiah Wedgwood (1787).⁴⁹



Engraving by George Bourne in *Slavery Illustrated in Its Effects upon Women* (1837), pg. 5.⁵⁰



Designer unknown, *The Slave's Friend*, Vol. 1, New York, R. G. Williams, for the American Anti-Slavery Society, 1836.⁵¹

The first two images did much to promote abolition. The image above right shows how visual representations of female slaves *seemed* to serve the abolition cause but had a negative long-term effect for white American feminists. Jean Fagan Yellin claims that abolitionists like

⁴⁶ “Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?” Engraving from George Bourne, *Slavery Illustrated in Its Effects upon Women* (1837), pg. 5—Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

<https://archive.org/details/slaveryillustrat00bour/page/n17> and <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6726/>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 120-121.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 122-123.

⁴⁹ *PBS SOCAL*, *ibid*.

⁵⁰ Bourne, *ibid*.

⁵¹ *The Slave's Friend*, *ibid*.

Angelina Grimke (1805-1879) cast themselves as perpetual liberators to helpless Black sisters.⁵² Sojourner Truth and other Black activists tried to “break out of this limited vision” and promote the powerful strength of Black females to defy slavery; Grimke’s message would eventually dominate over Truth’s and plague the First Wave of feminism. Second Wave feminist authors like bell hooks and Cherie Moraga began to address this within *intersectionality*, and achieved greater clarity in the Third Wave of feminism of the 1990’s.⁵³ The work of Rosales is a great achievement not only in terms of Black female representation but also feminism. Rosales has been lifted up but the lives and actions of many Black women since Sojourner Truth, who said, “Ain’t I a woman?” In *The Creation of God*, Rosales is fully empowered to attack white male patriarchy and hegemony that had previously circumscribed Black female identity within sexual chattelism. Let us remember Rosales’ own words:

*“Why can’t I celebrate Black women? That’s where I came from. I’m dissecting everything that we were taught, and I’m doing it for me and for women and for my children and other children like them...You’ll never see me paint a slave or anything that just highlights our vulnerability, because I think there’s enough of that out there.”*⁵⁴

III. Tanner and Rosales- Spirit and Orisha

Many of Tanner’s works were inspired by his Christian faith, and subjects were often painted with an inner light of spiritual illumination. Examples include *Nicodemus* (1899),

⁵² Anne M. Boylan, *Winterthur Portfolio* 26, no. 4 (1991): 283-85.

<http://www.jstor.org.csulb.idm.oclc.org/stable/1181354>.

⁵³ Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz and Julia Wood (2015). *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, & Culture*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning. pp. 59–60; hooks, bell [1984]. *Feminist Theory: from margin to center* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge, and Norma Alarcón, "The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism," from *Criticism in the Borderlands. Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture and Ideology*. Edited by Hector Calderon and Jose David Saldivar. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991.

⁵⁴ Kenrya Rankin. "Color Our World." *Essence* 49, no. 8 (2019): 20-21.

Resurrection of Lazarus (1896) and *The Pilgrims of Emmaus* (1905). In all three paintings, a glowing light radiates from Jesus, often making the sole source of light. This visual effect is different from earlier works such as *The Banjo Lesson* (1893), *The Thankful Poor* (1894) and *The Bagpipe Player* (1895),⁵⁵ where the subjects are illumined by fireplace, evening sun or a candle. Tanner said,

*It is not by accident that I have chosen to be a religious painter... I paint the things I see and believe... I have chosen the character of my art because it conveys my message and tells what I want to tell my own generation and leave to the future... I invited the Christ spirit to manifest in me.*⁵⁶



Nicodemus (1899)



Resurrection of Lazarus (1896)



Pilgrims of Emmaus (1905)

Tanner viewed his faith, works and self as one, radiating the same light to all but centering upon Jesus as a source of spiritual and practical illumination. Tanner tried to express holiness and power in a humble yet visually compelling way.

Rosales, by contrast, tends to avoid special effects or Rembrandt-like techniques. She uses classic iconography and a symbolism-of-the-skin to convey holiness and power. In *The*

⁵⁵ Anna O. Marley. *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*. George Gund Foundation Imprint in African American Studies. Philadelphia [Pa.]: Berkeley, Calif.: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; University of California Press, 2012. Plates 21, 22 and 27, pgs. 186, 187 and 193.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 119.

Birth of Oshun (ca. 2017), Rosales “deconstruct[s] and establish[es] a counter narrative as to who and what we consider powerful and authoritative.” Instead of the Roman goddess found in Sandro Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* (ca. 1480), Rosales depicts, “the benevolent and venerated Yoruba, the goddess of fertility, sensuality, and prosperity.”⁵⁷ The artist augments the beauty of blackness by painting the river and love goddess Oshun⁵⁸ with *vitiligo*, a genetic lightening of the skin. Rosales makes vitiligo beautiful, free of the stigma of ugliness or disease normally given to the “condition.”



The Birth of Oshun (ca. 2017)
Harmonia Rosales

Rosales uses African Yoruba mythology and contemporary colorism issues to infuse her works with a spiritual light that socially reconfigures female empowerment. Oshun’s vitiligo revitalizes concepts of beauty, teaching people of all colors to accept the outward loveliness as well as the inward. In other words, Rosales “gets down,” using gold leaf to make the vitiligo shines from the paintings; this method mirrors Tanner’s oil-layering techniques to make the spiritual light in Jesus aglow. Of her 2019 series *The Orishas*, Rosales says:

⁵⁷ Ada Ruiz, “Harmonia Rosales: Black Femininity in Classical Artworks,” *Los Angeles Academy of Figurative Art*, December 14, 2018, online. <https://laafa.edu/harmonia-rosales-black-femininity-in-classical-artworks/>. Accessed 12/1/2019.

⁵⁸ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. First Vintage Books ed., 1984, pgs. 79-80.

The Lucumi religion has always been a part of my Afro-Cuban upbringing. As I explored deeper within the religion as an adult I felt compelled to portray them as tangible beings, with all their natural flaws and defects instead of as idealized Gods.

This approach by Rosales reflects contemporary postmodernist thinking. Rosales humanizes the *orishas* in ways similar to how classical Greeks viewed their Olympians as divine but flawed in temperament. Tanner, who experienced the visual shift into Modernism, held a belief in Jesus as fully divine, but he removed any Byzantine or Renaissance haloes to paint Jesus with a humanistic realism. Rosales uses Orishan myth and the celebration of blackness to illuminate our minds; with similar hope, Tanner painted the inner light of Jesus to illumine his followers and anyone else so inclined.

IV. Conclusion

Henry Ossawa Tanner and Harmonia Rosales are two very different artists in age, gender and historical times, yet they share many similarities. Their works question and ultimately transform Black representation within the fine arts and history, giving people everywhere a new paradigm for human equality. Tanner's *The Annunciation* was one of the first images to question race within traditional religious paintings through the brush of a Black artist. *The Creation of God* by Rosales has become a popular meme on social media and catapulted the artist into a national spotlight where her works inspires many contemporary Black Americans of all ages. More importantly, she represents a certain pinnacle in the works of feminism and Black female representation, one that can, is and should have even greater social impact. With time and research, the impact of these two artists upon human society and Black representation can be more deeply understood.

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