"One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is a black? First of all, what's his color?"
—JEAN GENET, epigraph to The Blacks: A Clown Show (1958)

“What's his color?” Jean Genet’s controversial play does not attempt to answer his own query. But it leaves open room to consider color as a signifier of racial identity alongside how it registers in the eye as spectrum, as tone, as pigment. And it is exactly this question you might find yourself asking when confronted with one of Laylah Ali's enigmatic Greenheads series, for they too solicit puzzlement regarding color: though brown-limbed and brown-torsoed, their heads are a dark shade of green. “Color” as an index of race can also reference a range of facial features; many such markers are noticeably missing in the Greenheads themselves. Their bright wide eyes have no irises, and instead peer out with black pinhole pupils, their sockets sometimes limned with shadowy edges or their whites shot with red veins. Their noses are rendered as nothing but two circular nostrils, like twinned hole-punches on the surface of their flat circular faces. They rarely have hair, and when they do it is scarce and bristled against a pale scalp.

Other absences: most have no necks, and instead their disproportionately large heads balance between their shoulders. (Only when there is a collar around the neck, or a belt or rope, is there a discernable space between chest and head.) They have no eyebrows. No ears. No lips to speak of, but sometimes they bare fleshy gums over precisely aligned teeth as their mouths open into grimaces, screams, or pleas. They are frozen in the midst of an utterance, or arrested in space as menacing actions unfold—running in formation, lashing each other, pointing accusingly, holding up dismembered heads as oblique offerings (p. 73). What governs their movements? Who is giving commands? Who rations out mercy? You might further wonder: are the Greenheads male, female, androgynous? They are clad in an array of garments with a variety of accessories both mundane and elaborate: shorts, undershirts, skirts, robes, jumpsuits, religious tunics, priestly vestments, gloves, surgical masks, decorated headdresses. What exactly are these figures? Human, inhuman, puppet, phantom, toy, android, cartoon character? Conventional codes that help map race and gender are here scrambled, as these schematized bodies traffic in the logic of resemblance—they are person-like, dream-like, creature-like.

Ali's Greenheads, made between 1996 and 2005, thwart easy conclusions. There are over eighty paintings in the series, each made with careful applications of gouache on paper. All are untitled, with fairly intimate proportions that rarely exceed twenty-one by twenty-eight inches. Many are in the ten by twelve realm—that is, usually sized small enough to be manageable on an office or home desk, akin to documents to be read, filed, shuffled, and processed. Leo Steinberg famously characterized this suggestion of a horizontal workspace as the “flatbed picture plane.” Steinberg had in mind the juxtapositions of artists like Robert Rauschenberg, with his collage of images that suggests a “data-ingesting mind.” Ali is an obsessive clipper of photographs and pop-cultural images past and present, which she mines for information about the body, group dynamics, and physical gesture. In contrast to Rauschenberg’s amalgamations, Ali’s paintings are wholly fictionalized distillations of her image scavenging. Sources are di-
gested and spit out—expelled as if exorcised—in completely transformed terms in the Greenheads, as the stories on offer are utterly unfamiliar. Though contemporary culture is saturated with visual depictions of brutality, the mise-en-scène that Ali constructs are strikingly original.

In a work from 2000, one figure with a leg that ends just below the knee and arms that stop at the elbows is held by another in a black mask that covers his narrowed lids, forced to face three dangling men (p. 75). There they hang, mouths slightly agape, identical but for what they hold in their hands: a lower leg, a belt, a forearm. Are these some of the displaced accoutrements of the witness, or are they talismans of some other sort? No text or title clarifies the situation, but the details draw the viewer in—the bandaged chests, the belt buckle, the indication of shoelaces, the saucer eyes of the witness. Only by looking closely does one see that one of the hanging figures has let loose his grip, that the severed forearm has been let go and has begun to fall. Hanged bodies, particularly those “of color,” are highly volatile in U.S. history; Ali conjures racialized spectacles of violence while depicting these scenes, with biting humor, in a stylized comic book manner. The world the Greenheads inhabit is specifically Ali’s: a placeless fiefdom ruled by its inhabitants, a realm sometimes marked on the lower edge with a strip of low ground, but containing nothing else but undifferentiated blue in every other direction, sans horizon line, sans architectural shelter.

Many of the earlier Greenheads are multi-frame, with several scenes appearing on one piece of paper. For instance, in a painting from 1999, three panels interrupt and cause a visual stutter in the narrative (p. 53). In the bottom panels, four figures wield wooden poles, their faces stiffened by what seems to be hate, or maniacal glee. The upper frame shows three impaled torsos hoisted aloft in the sky; they have been cut neatly and bloodlessly at the forearm and waist to reveal red insides. The disconnect between the number of pole-holders and the number of impaled bodies generates some of the image’s friction, as do the multiple panels. Do they inhabit the same space at the same time, or is this a compression of a longer temporality, a
suturing of several different moments together? The “victims” have been sliced in half—but so too have the “perpetrators,” as they are also visually cut off below the waist via the painting’s use of cropping. What could be over-the-top or grotesque is here reined in by the clarity of the lines: notice the crispness with which Ali has depicted the small, amputated tubular arms, how assiduously she has demarcated the moment of transition from brown outer skin to tan threshold to crimson interior. No drops of blood or messy fluids mar the perfect incisions.

Ali’s work has been understood, especially as speaking to critical issues regarding race, and has been contextualized within black contemporary art, most prominently when the Greenheads were featured in Thelma Golden’s Freestyle exhibition in 2001 at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Freestyle brought together work by twenty-eight African American artists and was most closely associated with the generational and ideological shift that Golden identified as “post-black.” As Golden writes, “It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.” Along with other artists of her age like Kara Walker, Ali works with and against cliché and stereotype to dismantle assumptions about race, gender, and contemporary U.S. politics.

In their imagery, both Walker and Ali depict aggression, power, abuse—sometimes punishingly so—while also unraveling that violence using formal maneuvers, including absurd inventions, numbing repetition, compelling surfaces, and narrative incongruity. In the face of Ali’s ambiguity, art historians are not always in concordance regarding how “blackness” as such is signaled within her work. Michelle Wright has commented: “The faces are dark, the whites of the eyes and teeth in exaggerated contrast, like Sambo, like Jolson—like any representation of the black that is eager to underscore the unnaturalness and naturally frightening aspect of black skin on humanoid bodies.” Here it is blackness specifically that is at stake, yet as Jacqueline Francis points out: “Ali uses black and brown hues and greens that will not fit within the black-white dichotomy, hence displacing whiteness from the niche of universality that it has held throughout the modern period.” Further, as Alondra Nelson argues, Ali’s paintings elicit responses of racial anxiety and alienation not through reference to naturalistically rendered, clearly raced bodies, but through their very otherworldliness, as Ali “uses alienness to reveal both human connection and detachment.”

Ali has mentioned that this series was started during the Clinton era. To delve further into this observation, 1996, the year of the first Greenheads, was not just any year in the Clinton era, but the beginning of the President’s second term in which he focused on, as he put it, “ending welfare as we know it.” This oft-invoked campaign promise—and the eventual passage of welfare reform via the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996—was motored by the pathologization of poor black motherhood and the regulation of black maternity and reproduction. In his State of the Union address that year, Clinton asserted that one of the great challenges facing the nation was “to take back our streets from crime, gangs, and drugs,” phrasing shadowed by the rhetoric of race relations while never explicitly stated as such. At the same time, Clinton was hailed by author Toni Morrison as displaying “almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-play-
ing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving-boy from Arkansas." She famously declared: "white skin notwithstanding, this is our first black President." This indicates the paradoxical vagaries of race during the late 1990s, as it was further unhinged from skin color at the same time that it was continually consolidated through state acts such as welfare reform. That is, race was publically disavowed or unmoored, while simultaneously obsessively referenced and made to matter in newly ruthless ways.

A further crux of Clinton's agenda in the late 1990s was the implementation of V-chip technology in televisions to monitor children's exposure to explicit material (the Telecommunications Act of 1996 made this chip mandatory). The growth of the internet at this moment also led to an exponential possibility of streaming violent or sexual images into the domestic sphere, where parents might exert limited control. However, violence has long been a staple of children's entertainment; classic cartoons brim with exploding Acme-brand bombs and scattered animal parts. How do we reconcile this frenzy of near-death imagery with the impulse to protect the young? This conflict is crystallized in Ali's painting from 2000, in which a small Greenhead is crammed into a bicolor unitard with a larger Greenhead; the adult is raising his hand, perhaps to signal for help, or to surrender (p. 22). The child's hands and legs are missing, and it is unclear if the figure is bound to its protector or its victimizer. In a sense, part of the potential of a cartoon is that it can stylize violence away from itself; it can depict something explicit without being exploitative. Ali's work partakes in this dual register of the "graphic": its graphic flatness and schematization provides an alibi for its graphic, disturbing content.

The reclamation of cartoons and comics has propelled much post-war art, but Ali also taps into a vast array of art historical sources, such as ancient Egyptian wall paintings and Indian miniatures of the seventeenth century. Most saliently, she is situated within the broader history of contemporary political figuration, which includes artists of a previous generation such as Ida Applebroog, Robert Colescott, Leon Golub, Philip Guston, and Nancy Spero. These artists turn to the human form—however distorted or unrecognizable—in part because it is a flexible way to make visible, or allegorize, power relations. Think of Golub, whose work on torture and war crimes makes reference to photography of atrocities, in contrast to Guston, who like Ali is indebted to the language of cartoons. With Guston's post-1970 canvases, with their peachy-pink skin tones and sinister Ku Klux Klan hoods, he emerged as one of the preeminent painters of whiteness. For each of these artists, bodies are recruited to perform different roles, but all manifestly maintain their commitment to the figure.

Applebroog's œuvre in particular resonates with Ali's work—the use of multiple frames within a single painting, for instance, along with the charged atmospheres, tense with anticipation, cut by sardonic wit. Both artists push at the boundaries of the representability of the body; they do so, in part, through a consideration of painting's limits and possibilities, focusing on the aesthetics of outline, geometry, and surface. In Ali's case, the textures of her painted paper are heavily worked; they have been labored over through her meticulous process, which includes extensive preliminary drawings and rigorous advance planning of composition, form, and color combination. Each painting is executed over the course of several months, as Ali outlines the images on paper in light pencil and fills in their contours with gouache using small brushes.
Ali produces paintings that, when viewed up close, manifestly reveal the touch of a hand. Given her geometric forms and the flatness and uniformity of her colors, some of the control evident in her brushwork is not easy to read when the images are reproduced. When printed in a book or catalog, the Greenheads can appear almost computer generated, but in person they reveal themselves as the culmination of conspicuous manual effort, slow and skilled work in gouache. An opaque, matte medium, gouache is finicky, unforgiving, and difficult to rework; it must be accurately and steadily applied to yield the minute detailing that enlivens the Greenheads. Ali uses up to ten layers, built up over time to increase her control over the paintings' almost velvety surfaces. It is this painstaking hand-execution that paradoxically lends Ali's paintings a schematic, technologically mediated quality. Her stubbornly analogue pieces exist in productive dialogue, then, with digital image culture. In addition, Ali relies on reduced geometries, combining and recombining a repertoire of shapes to take the figure apart and put it back together. Circle, half-circle, and oval are combined with square, angled line, straight line, and rectangle.

The Greenheads are all set against a uniform blue background, harking back to the spaceless gold ground of medieval icons. The shade of blue varies from image to image, but what they have in common is this: the blues may resemble the sky, but without suns, or modulated
light, or shadows, or detectable atmospheres, they are airless, blank, and claustrophobic. Rather than wide-open natural expanses, Ali’s backdrops call to mind the blue screen of a special effects studio, a “neutral” or cancelable hue onto which some other scene will be superimposed, or a scrim for a theatrical production. The color blue also has a specific register within art history, as it was once made of powdered semi-precious stone, namely lapis lazuli, and was thus so prized that patrons during the Italian Renaissance would specify how much blue, and what kind of blue, they wanted within the works they commissioned. Blue not only had religious significance (it was often associated with the Virgin Mary), but was linked to material value, expense, and worth.

Within the constrained palette of Ali’s paintings, these tonal registrations matter. The green she uses for the heads is also specialized, if somewhat hard to locate, sitting somewhere along the forest continuum. It is an almost vegetal hue, but could also be a swatch from a camouflage pattern. What we choose to name this color has meaning: “army green” has military overtones, while “woody green” sounds an ecological note—indeed, the simple term “green” is now freighted with an entire worldview regarding environmental awareness. “Pine green,” perhaps the closest descriptor for the heads, has been popularized through a rather banal source; it is one of the standard colors in a box of Crayola crayons, and was first introduced to the American public in 1949. Ali’s *Greenheads* repurpose a color scheme that is not necessarily symbolic, or Othering, or foreign, but is familiar, even pervasive: after all, we see “green heads” any time we use U.S. paper currency.

Along with her attention to shape and color, Ali is a serious student of gesture. Her bodies speak to each other through the wordless discourse of posture—she observes how arms are positioned, how chins are tilted, how fingers are arranged. With her formal toolbox, Ali sum-
mons bodies into being; often, they are bodies in the midst of being disciplined. Most of the implements used for that disciplining are, in a sense, old-fashioned: the Greenheads often use their hands to choke each other, or to plunge into chests. There are no guns, though there are belts, rods, and chains. One figure has dynamite tucked into its Speedo, along with a captive (or complicit?) youngster (p. 63). Pressed together in a very shallow space, as if lined up on a frieze or at the edge of a narrow stage, the figures rarely overlap to demarcate volumetric space. Indeed, this is not really a universe where the rules of perspective hold sway. Neither, necessarily, do laws of gravity evenly apply: sometimes caped figures fly through the upper register of the image, though their rigid suspension looks more like stasis than liberation.

Within Ali’s compositional edits, cropping can register as physical, literally cutting. Her borders are like blades. Her forms have a highly developed grammar of repetition. The paintings function as “schemes”—as plans to be followed, as visionary or impractical projects, or underhanded plots. Ali’s schemes appear like scores or designs for bodies in motion, and in fact, in 2005 choreographer Dean Moss composed a dance in collaboration with the artist based on her Greenhead images, entitled figures on a field (p. 18). The physical manifestation of Ali’s paintings vivified their motions, to be sure, but the use of real people also moved her generic faces away from their potent illegibility. For part of what fuels the intrigue of the paintings is their very schematized nature. To return to fifteenth century Italy, religious painters deliberately used “unparticularized, interchangeable” faces so that churchgoers in the midst of prayer could impose a sense of individuality upon them. Depicting distinct features or personality would have interfered with the power of private visualization—in Ali’s case, the viewer is arguably more compelled by the lack of detail in these faces, as such blankness functions like a screen for projection, lending a peculiar sort of intimate engagement.

Starting in 2003, something began to happen to the Greenheads who, on occasion, took different forms—growing extra limbs and protuberances, sprouting appendages in unlikely locations. Some turned pink-skinned. Many did not look like bodies as we might recognize them, but instead seemed like geological formations or mutant plants: in one painting, a spiny red triangle rises up in the center of the frame, crowned with a single leg and foot, while flanking it on either side are two smaller, rose-hued, patch-worked hemispheres with skinny legs branching out from them (p. 30). Another has become almost a hybrid insect, an ovoid lying flat on its back, trussed up with bandages and belts, arrows either growing out of or embedded in its belly, as two others menace it with a spear and hook (p. 27). In an image from 2005, two balls hug the ground, with limbs jutting out in every direction (p. 109). Is this shape the result of many bodies folding themselves together, imploding into one tumorous mass? Have they been medically manipulated, surgically implanted with prosthetic devices? Or is this cocoon more like a grenade ready to explode and launch its projectiles destructively, shatteringly, out into the world? These later, more biomorphic images crucially blur the line between figuration and abstraction and do not lend themselves to easy iconographical readings.

What is a “normal” body here? Ali’s figures trouble categorical human/object relations, and, as such, they take part in what literary theorist Ato Quayson has described as the “aesthetic nervousness” prompted by the appearance of non-normative—most prominently, disabled—
bodies. Quayson reads some of the fundamental texts of the modernist canon through the lens of disability, arguing that "disability acts as a threshold or focal point." As he outlines, the "dominant protocols of representation...are short-circuited in relation to disability," a short-circuiting that has implications at the level of narrative, as well as when the viewer herself is induced to a "nervous" response to the text by virtue of its representation of disability.

Approaching this work through the lens of disability allows us to see how much disability reigns over this series: all these injured bodies, slings, band-aids, decapitated heads, missing limbs. Are these disablements-in-process records of harm as they are inscribed onto communities? Ali's faceless, enfleshed forms are no more or less monstrous, or freakish, or "deformed" than any of the other physical figures she presents us. The repetition with which she returns to these partial bodies has numerous consequences: they reveal an anxiety about the deviations of humanness, the potential horror of dehumanization, and the regulation of unruly subjects. But they also train us, as viewers, to broaden our scope of what is taken to be a body at all. In this, I echo Darby English's insight that Ali's work proposes an "original synthesis of, and temperate behavior toward, those aesthetic and cultural problems that discipline any serious reconsideration of what we think of as the limits of representation and representability."
With the later Greenheads, we dive into a "nervous" space to recognize how blurred the boundaries are between incoherent subject and dissolving object. The figures are attired in outfits dense with ever more flourish, as they seem to prepare themselves for sacramental rites or rituals that we cannot recognize. Our sense of color is thrown into question, as greens—and blacks, and browns—transform into other hues, inverting the protocol Ali set up in her previous images. To quote the character Felicity in Genet's The Blacks that started this essay, "to you, black was the color of priests and undertakers and orphans. But everything is changing."20

Julia Bryan-Wilson is Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era (2009) and a frequent contributor to Artforum.

Notes
1 Leo Steinberg, Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 82–91.
2 Ibid., 89.
11 Ibid., 32. Morrison argues that this viewpoint was evident by the early 1990s: "Years ago, in the middle of the Whitewater investigation, one heard the first murmurs."
12 Laylah Ali, email correspondence with the author, March 2012.
13 A student of mine, Ryan McDaniels, noted that the South Park television series, with its out-of-scale spherical heads, bears a superficial resemblance to Ali's work. The pilot episode, broadcast in 1997, was completed using cut-paper animation, which proved so laborious and time consuming that the subsequent production utilized computer software meant to mimic its original hand-done look.
14 See Michael Baxandall, Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer of the Social History of Pictorial Style (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 12.
15 Ibid., 46–47.
16 Ato Quayson, Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). I thank Mel Y. Chen for introducing me to this text, and for our formative conversations about the representation of disability.
17 Ibid., 15.