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Protesters Block, Demand Removal of a Painting of Emmett Till at the Whitney Biennial

Artists are calling for the removal of Dana Schutz's painting "Open Casket" from the 2017 Whitney Biennial, while others want more drastic action.

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Dana Schutz's "Open Casket" (2016) (photo by Benjamin Sutton for Hyperallergic)

On Friday, the 2017 Whitney Biennial opened to the public and protesters showed up to physically block and voice their objections to "Open Casket" (2016), a painting of Emmett Till by Dana Schutz. According to protesters Parker Bright and Pastiche Lumumba —New York-based artists who went to the Whitney on opening day independently, meeting there for the first time — a white artist should not be permitted to use and profit from the image of a black man killed in a racially motivated crime.

“It’s insensitive and gratuitous for the artist, primarily — then the curators and the museum — to willingly participate in the long tradition of white people sharing and circulating images of anti-black violence,” Lumumba told Hyperallergic. “There’s a history of white people taking pictures of lynchings. In 2017, for us to have a white woman painting that image with no context... that’s a grossly deficient way of using one’s privilege.”

The “Open Casket” protesters said the response from museum visitors on Friday was largely positive. No guards interfered. Despite a few critiques of their blockage as an act of censorship — they were, after all, preventing the work from being clearly viewed — the protesters maintain that any conversation should not center on the painting itself, but rather on its content and the implications of who made it.

Artist Hannah Black called for more drastic action in an open letter originally posted on her Facebook page, demanding that the painting be “removed, destroyed, and not entered into any market or museum.” She cited the frequency with which non-black media outlets share images or footage of dead black bodies (dating back to the American tradition of lynching photos), adding: “The subject matter is not Schutz’s; white free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights.” As of this writing, her letter has been signed by over 30 people, including several artists, critics, and curators (including Bright).

Schutz concedes that Lumumba, Bright, and others have the right to respond to her work, though she is less than thrilled by the notion of destroying or preventing the painting from being seen. She adds that “Open Casket” is not now for sale, and never will be.

“I don’t object at all to people questioning the work or even my right to make it,” she told Hyperallergic. “There is real anger and people have a right to it. I’m not for censoring or destroying any work of art. Public engagement and argument around it is important.” While Schutz also believes an artist has the right to paint all manner of subjects, “that doesn’t mean there won’t be bad or offensive art. It all depends on the approach and how something is done.” She added:

There were many reasons why I could not, should not, make this painting. The photograph is an icon of the Civil Rights Movement and a sacred image. I am also a white woman. I would not have made this painting when I was younger, before I had a son. I only thought about the possibility of painting it after

listening to interviews with Till's mother. In her sorrow and rage she wanted her son's death not just to be her pain but America's pain.

Acknowledging the searing significance of Till's body, the co-curators of the 2017 Biennial, Mia Locks and Christopher Y. Lew, said in a joint statement: "Dana Schutz's painting is an unsettling image that speaks to the long-standing violence that has been inflicted upon African Americans. For many African Americans in particular, this image has tremendous emotional resonance."



At the Whitney, a protest against Dana Schutz' painting of Emmett Till: "She has nothing to say to the Black community about Black trauma."

Bright, who wore a homemade shirt reading "Black Death Spectacle" during Friday's protest, did not originally feel the curators' intentions were made clear. "I told people they could go Google search Emmett Till's open casket and see a more impactful image that doesn't simplify or reduce or flatten Till's body," Bright said. "I was more interested in having people confront a living, breathing black body as opposed to one that didn't really have a choice."

In 1955, Till lay in his coffin disfigured past the point of recognition, his face a lumpy, pulpy mess. His mother chose to have an open casket, wanting her son's mutilated

body to remain visible, hoping to show the world what it had wrought upon her 14-year-old boy. Till was murdered after a white woman claimed he flirted with her in a Mississippi shop. Recent revelations confirmed long-standing suggestions of Till's innocence; the accuser, Carolyn Bryant Donham, now 82, admitted that her original claims were false. In 1955, Donham's husband Roy Bryant and his half-brother were charged with kidnapping, beating, torturing, and eventually shooting Till in the head. An all-white, all-male jury acquitted the two men that same year.

Till's body remained on display for days in Chicago that summer, while over 100,000 citizens lined up to pay their respects. Images of the dead teen were published in black newspapers and magazines. Soon, the country had vivid visual confirmation of racial hatred. The Civil Rights Movement began in earnest two months later when Rosa Parks refused to switch seats.

The Whitney Biennial has a history with issues of racial appropriation and unchecked privilege, as seen most recently during the 2014 edition of the exhibition, when controversy surrounded a piece by Joe Scanlan. In "Donelle Woolford," the white male Princeton professor hired black female actors to play the part of a fictional black artist named Donelle. Many objected to the piece's inclusion in the Biennial; the Yams Collective, the largest of eight collectives participating that year, withdrew from the show because of it. Yams Collective member Maureen Catbagan explained that the group felt "the representation of an established academic white man posing as a privileged African-American woman is problematic, even if he tries to hide it in an avatar's mystique."

The 2017 Whitney Biennial is more diverse than the last: about half of this year's included artists are female, and about half are non-white. Curated by Locks and Lew — the youngest curators to organize this long-running exhibition to date, and both Asian-American — the show grapples with current social issues and identity politics; its artists depict the horrors of hate crime, police brutality, and gun violence. Black artist Henry Taylor also has a graphically violent painting in the exhibition, "THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!" (2017), depicting the fatal shooting of Philando Castile by a Minnesota police officer in 2016. Lumumba and Bright argue that Taylor made this image with the understanding it could be *him*, whereas Schutz will never have the same relationship to the anti-black violence that she depicted.



Henry Taylor, *“THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!”* (2017), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 96 in

Lumumba says that he finds the task of explaining black oppression to be emotionally laborious, but necessary. He wishes these talks had started on the “front end” instead of in reaction to the painting being included in the Biennial. “Schutz doesn’t implicate her own whiteness or participation in white supremacy,” Lumumba said. “There is a problem with people who have privilege only listening to other people with that same privilege. Like men reading something about feminism that was written by other men.”

Yesterday, Bright met with Locks and Lew. “Nothing was resolved, but it was one of the best conversations I’ve ever had,” he told Hyperallergic. “It means a lot. I never thought I’d get that close. I don’t think the Met would talk to me, or a lot of other big institutions.” In light of this year’s Biennial, however, Bright says he would avoid working with the Whitney if given the option, and encourages other artists of color to consider their affiliations carefully. “If anything is going to change, it has to come from the white art community,” he said. “We need white allies to help stand up for us, but not talk over us.”

Undue appropriation and careless white privilege are enormously important topics to consider in light of this dispute. But important, too, is the ability of art to arouse empathy. Art provides the opportunity to learn about the pain of others, though all pain is solitary and unique. “Art can be a vehicle for connection,” Schutz said. “I don’t believe that people can ever really know what it is like to be someone else — I will never know the fear that black parents may have — but neither are we all completely unknowable.”

In their comments, the curators also highlight the importance of empathy. “The 2017 Whitney Biennial brings to light many facets of the human experience, including conditions that are painful or difficult to confront such as violence, racism, and death,” they wrote. “Many artists in the exhibition push in on these issues, seeking empathetic connections in an especially divisive time.” It’s easy to become dismissive or contemptuous of either side of the fence, and continued discourse is our only hope. In these dangerous Trump times, if we don’t find ways to talk to each other, we are in deep trouble.