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The Blackness of Blackness

HUEY COPELAND ON "BLACK IS, BLACK AIN'T" AT THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY



Glenn Ligon, *Warm Broad Glow*, 2005, neon, paint. Installation view, Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2008.

AS EVER IN CHICAGO, there is no dearth of tragedy where racial politics are concerned: ongoing revelations about city hall's involvement in covering up police torture of black suspects; a recent 18 percent increase in the homicide rate that disproportionately affects black youth; and the threat of further black disenfranchisement for the sake of the 2016 Olympic bid. For the past several months, however, conversations about race in the Black Metropolis, as elsewhere in the United States, have turned to Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama. He too is a marked man, at once targeted for castration by Jesse Jackson and hailed by Ted Kennedy as a leader of messianic proportions. As I write, it seems inevitable that in the weeks to come, the hopes, epithets, and ire heaped upon him—be it in "celebrity" commercials or on "satirical" magazine covers—will only increase. Because for all of Obama's best efforts to be reasonable, the schizoid discourse around his candidacy gives further legs to an old adage of Frantz Fanon's: When blacks walk through the door, Reason walks out. (And, we might add, the palpable phantasms of race, sex, and violence that are the legacy of slavery swoop in to take its place.) For some folks, the responses to the Illinois senator's exceptional rise have underscored the continuing grip of antiblack sentiment on the organizing structures of American life. For others, his nomination sums up a shift, however provisional and symbolic, in previously held attitudes toward race within the culture at large.

As *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter argued this past March in a reflection on the past few decades of African-American art seen through the lens of Obama's "color-blind, or color-embracing" dream, the art world is also of several minds. Race has become a productive if persistently problematic subject for artists of various inclinations, raising questions that come thick and fast. What does blackness mean now, in the wake of multiculturalism? Are there particular formal vocabularies and stylistic antecedents that currently matter to its articulation in the visual field? Is it possible to make sense of the radically divergent discourses of race evoked by, say, Martin Puryear's recent retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the concurrent run of the late artist Jason Rhoades's final installation, *Black Pussy*, 2006, at David Zwirner's Chelsea gallery? Given the exhibition spaces from Watts to Warsaw that make some claim on, or at least some use of, black visual culture, how might we begin to analyze the competing investments that currently inform the imaging of blackness on either side of the color line? What is the critical purchase of any racial signifier in an age when a white politician from Tennessee spearheads a congressional apology for slavery and when Bill Cosby has made it clear that for many class has trumped race as the prime site of social schism?

A much-needed map of this uncertain terrain was on view this past summer right in Obama's backyard. Borrowing its title from the famous sermon in the prologue to Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, the exhibition "Black Is, Black Ain't"—elegantly mounted at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, and traveling to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit next spring and to the H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute, Missouri, in the summer of 2009—is intended to survey, in the words of curator Hamza Walker, "a moment in which race is retained yet is simultaneously rejected." To trace the contours of that moment, Walker called upon a multi-racial roster of twenty-seven artists, whose

individual contributions are by turns sly, disturbing, melancholic, and humorous, sometimes all at once. They range from Andres Serrano’s *Woman with Infant* of 1996, a photograph that signifies on the role of black women in the nourishment of white children, to Sze Lin Pang’s *Fétichito* of 2006, a dark, lumpy mass decked out with charms, peacock feathers, and Afro picks for extra talismanic punch. The different histories of blackness and relations of power summoned up in each instance make clear that the works gathered in “Black Is, Black Ain’t” resist any singular program, thereby affirming the willingness of contemporary practitioners to imagine how what Fanon called “the fact of blackness” might open onto a wild array of aesthetic conceits. It was fitting, then, that in Chicago Glenn Ligon’s 2005 neon sculpture *Warm Broad Glow* graced the entrance to the gallery, for in its rendition of the words NEGRO SUNSHINE—culled from Gertrude Stein’s 1909 novella *Melanctha*—the work models a wry attitude toward the historicity of blackness as well as a complex imbrication of artistic discourse, racial politics, and cultural memory that “Black Is, Black Ain’t” makes its own.

Such an ambition for art is, of course, at least as old as Ellison’s text, though in this case we need not go back so far: The earliest work in the exhibition, a video of Shannon Jackson’s autocritical performance *White Noises*, 1993, gives us a clear date of departure. Not unlike several exhibitions from that moment which took up related thematics, such as “Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art” in New York in 1994, at the Whitney, and “Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference, and Desire” at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and Iniva in London in 1995, “Black Is, Black Ain’t” takes the ambivalent play of the sign as central to the visual articulation of race, perhaps the most intransigent of social constructions. In the “post-black” present, the game seems to have loosened up: For artists today, blackness is not only globally commodified and affectively charged, but also an always already deconstructed and culturally networked cipher, providing the basis for a lingua franca that anyone can mobilize, whether to “capsiz[e] the niggerati” (as in the title of Deborah Grant’s witty collages on view here) or “to think things you don’t want to” about black men, which, in a sense, is precisely what happens in Joanna Rytel’s thus-titled 2005 video, whose Swedish narrator appears caught up in the web of fantasies that structures her interracial relations.

The shifts within artistic discourse that have recently taken place are made clearer by comparing “Black Is, Black Ain’t” with two older works that were crucial to the 1990s redefinition of black identity and that took Ellison’s same words for their titles: Marlon Riggs’s semiautobiographical 1995 film and Isaac Julien’s 1992 essay, subtitled “Notes on De-Essentializing Black Identities.” Both works invoked the eponymous phrase to debunk stereotypes of black masculinity, to pointedly critique the homophobia of contemporary popular culture, and to carve out an expansive terrain for the imagining of queer African diasporic subjectivities. In Riggs’s film, embracing the diversity within blackness is cast as the only way to forward “our progress as a people.” In Walker’s exhibition, there is no such heartfelt sentiment, less faith in a communitarian ethos, and little overt figuration of queer subjectivity—though illicit difference still matters: Indeed, it seems to be taken for granted, or taken in another direction. Consider the kind of desiring gaze directed at a seated and retro-clad woman in Mickalene Thomas’s 2007 photograph *Lovely Six Foota* or the variations evident between thirteen street artists’ renderings of one woman in Virginia Nimarkoh’s *Nubian Queen*, 1999.



Mickalene Thomas, *Lovely Six Foota*, 2007, color photograph, 65 1/4 x 67 1/4”.

Nimarkoh’s artistic strategy—the accumulation of images in order to emphasize the differential visual production of a single black subject—is also one of Walker’s key curatorial moves, perhaps most strikingly in the juxtaposition of two photographs centered around Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black Chicagoan on summer vacation in Mississippi who was brutally murdered by white racists in 1955, ostensibly for whistling at a white woman. The criminal investigation of this notorious case has sputtered along for a half century, but the photographs of Till’s disfigured body that circulated in *Jet* magazine not only spurred on the civil rights movement but also supplied a lasting image of racial violence in all of its caprice and ubiquity that has been internalized by countless black boys born after his death. In *Till*, 2004, Demetrius Oliver—black—at once reenacts and exorcises that image by capturing his own face slathered with chocolate frosting. Jason Lazarus—white—seems to say it all in the title of his photograph: *Standing at the Grave of Emmett Till, Day of Exhumation, June 1, 2005 (Alsip, IL)*.

This pairing would appear—despite calls by some thinkers for African-American politics to move beyond black and white—to assert the relevance of the binary that continues to structure the racial imaginary. While the formal and affective differences that separate Lazarus’s work from Oliver’s might be partially attributed to the artists’ respective identities, in working through Till’s legacy, they each underline the ongoing necessity of artistic attempts to find a language capable of describing individual investments that acknowledge—without capitulating to—a racial endgame. This concern is particularly prominent in the exhibition’s video program, which models a host of possibilities for engagement. You might give in to what Rosalind Krauss long ago called video’s “aesthetics of narcissism,” repetitively confessing your white straight male obsession with “what a black man feels like,” as in Thomas Johnson’s 2004 piece of that name. You might follow Elizabeth Axtman’s lead in *American Classics*, 2005, performing a hilarious “re-speaking” of the words Hollywood cinema has put into the mouths of its “tragic mulattoes.” Or you could try Dave McKenzie’s tack, in *Babel*, 2000, using sign language to communicate your attempt at communicating, with a microphone in your mouth and (in the version on display here) its cord snaking around your throat.

For these practitioners, the issue is less, What does it mean to be black? and more, What can I make out of blackness? As their works attest, in “Black Is, Black Ain’t” the logic of race and the terms of recent artistic production are mutually undone, recasting the look of blackness, if not its enduring political, cultural, and ontological coordinates. The transatlantic slave trade, the commodification of black bodies, the persistence of racial stereotypes, the loss and failure of black leadership, the collapse of public housing: All of these topoi are figured here, in compelling works by Edgar Arceneaux, Terry Adkins, Paul D’Amato, Todd Gray, David Levinthal, Jerome Mosley, Carl Pope, Robert A. Pruitt, Randy Regier, Daniel Roth, and Hank Willis Thomas. Other realities that also matter to the evolving contours of race in America—music as a site of resistance, the black presence within suburban milieus, and the growing visibility of African immigrant populations, for example—have a more muted presence in the exhibition. This no doubt speaks to the near impossibility of canvassing the long reach of blackness, yet it also clarifies the thrust of the exhibition’s brilliantly orchestrated sight lines, such as the juxtaposition of Rodney McMillian’s sculpture *Chair*, 2003, and Jonathan Calm’s 2008 photographs of apartment buildings reflected in pools of water, which created a rhyming of the run-down and runoff that left race somewhere up in the air between them. As Walker’s loosely defined organizing categories—disfiguration, whiteness, stereotype, class, gendered performance, soul, history—indicate, “Black Is, Black Ain’t” brings forward those sites of institutional and ideological formation that are most reiterated, most legible, and thus, paradoxically, most readily made over into varied aesthetic forms that hold out the possibility that we might, to quote another Ellison text, “change the joke and slip the yoke.”

Numerous works in the exhibition pursue this time-tested strategy, though perhaps none more trenchantly than those of William Pope.L, who is represented by a set of eight flour-cone sculptures and twenty of his *Skin Set Drawings*, 2003–2006, which parody the tautology of racial reasoning with phrases such as BLACK PEOPLE ARE CROSSOVER. Most mesmerizing is his twelve-minute video titled *A Negro Sleeps Beneath the Susquehanna (son version)*, 1998–2008. Playing the part of the eponymous Negro, Pope.L sits on a stool near a riverbank, his face immersed in a flour-covered table before he raises his head and begins to speak. It appears he has been having trouble sleeping. “I wish I could—dream stuff,” he goes on to remark, “like that guy—what’s his name? Martin—Luther—King . . . Fisher! I wish I could love something that much—I wish I could love something—But all I got—is the crawfish and the minnow. I wish I could love something that much, but—I’m too black—too naked.” After concluding his pronouncement, he throws a cracked mirror on his back and wanders into the river, presumably in a renewed attempt to sleep—a gesture that brings to mind another line from Ellison’s prologue to *Invisible Man*: “A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action.”

Like Pope.L’s video piece, “Black Is, Black Ain’t” plumbs the possibilities for thinking *with* rather than *beyond* race—its figures, tropes, and trademark forms—possibilities that all too rarely emerge in the realm of politics proper. For if only as a free-floating trace unmoored from individual subjects, an index of the economies that continue to conflate persons and things, or the corroded linchpin of a modern metaphysics, blackness continues to tell us something about what T. J. Clark has termed the “true *structure* of dream-visualization” as well as the forms of despotism on which it relies—not to mention the terms in which it might be contested. Walker’s deft curating encourages us to wonder what we might make of blackness if we took it to be a social formation given over to the marginal, the object, the fugitive, or the socially dead. What would it mean to imagine a utopian future other than a postracial one? The challenge, here as elsewhere, remains how to hold on to what cultural historian Robin D. G. Kelley calls “freedom dreams,” which allow us to rethink the world from blackness up. For the time being, it seems that Obama is the closest we will get—and change, no matter how much you believe in it, is obviously worthwhile given the current regime—but he should not prevent us from having other dreams or even from making the most of a fitful sleep.

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