

Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America

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By *David Carrier*.



Dawoud Bey, *Fred Stewart II and Tyler Collins*, from the series "The Birmingham Project," 2012. Archival pigment prints mounted on Dibond, 40 x 64 inches. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, CA and Rennie Collection, Vancouver.

The New Museum

Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America

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Just before the end of his life, Okwui Enwezor worked with Massimiliano Gioni to organize this exhibition, which now is installed on all three floors of the New Museum. It is presented with curatorial support from Naomi Beckwith, Glenn Ligon, and Mark Nash. Almost all the works included were made within the past decade, and all 37 artists featured here are Black. This advance review was written from the show's massive catalogue, in which Enwezor describes the show's overall narrative: "The crystallization of black grief in the face of a politically orchestrated white grievance represents the fulcrum of this exhibition."¹ His exhibition's title clearly identifies these dual, essentially linked motivating concerns. "Grief" is the legitimate feeling described by these artists in response to the history and present situation of Black lives in America. And "grievance" extends beyond Enwezor's characterization of white, racist resentment to embrace these Black artists' presentation of a visually convincing response to those who refuse to recognize the fact that it's their Black fellow citizens who have truly legitimate grievances to air. The Black artists whose work appears here are the real American patriots, for they want our country to honor its as yet unfilled promises. And they are optimists, for with full awareness of America's often dreadful racist history they have real hope for our future. Change, they believe, is possible.



Rashid Johnson, *Antoine's Organ*, 2016. Black steel, grow lights, plants, wood, shea butter, books, monitors, rugs, piano, 189 x 338 x 126 3/4 inches. © Rashid Johnson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

As might be expected, the works displayed here are very diverse. There are paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jack Whitten, Daniel LaRue Johnson, and Kerry James Marshall. The photographs of Dawoud Bey, Garrett Bradley, and LaToya Ruby Frazier appear, as do sculptures by Kevin Beasley, Melvin Edwards, and Charles Gaines, and the videos of Theaster Gates, Arthur Jafa, and Kahlil Joseph. Pre-Modernist Western art often presented mourning in a way that focused on sacred Christian subjects, a tradition with a surprisingly long afterlife. But that Eurocentric, classical iconography has become distant for most artists, white or Black. Indeed, it's instructive here to consult Kenneth Clark's magnificent, now very dated, 1956 survey *The Nude*, in which, after charting the lasting influence of classical models on representations of pathos, he remarks that only in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907) with its "appreciative study of Negro sculpture" do we finally find "at last ... a totally un-Hellenized stylization of the body."²

That said, his book hardly looks outside of the white West. And so what's called for now in America is the invention of a new visual worldview, one adequate to our present political situation. That's what's starting to happen in *Grief and Grievance*.



Theaster Gates, *Gone Are the Days of Shelter and Martyr*, 2014. Video, sound, color; 6:31 minutes. © Theaster Gates. Courtesy White Cube and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



Arthur Jafa, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death*, 2016. Video, sound color; 7:25 min. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

In his 2017 exhibition *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965* at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, Enwezor presented art from almost everywhere, convincingly showing that no

narrow focus on works from Western Europe and the United States could possibly provide a satisfactory survey. To get a valid view of that period, you needed also to look at Socialist Realism from China and the Soviet Union, figurative art from India, and abstractions from Latin America. But in thus revealing the extreme diversity of global artistic practice, he didn't claim to uncover some common feature. Rather, the aim was to display the amazing multiplicity of art made in that period. In *Grief and Grievance*, however, he had a different—in effect converse—goal, asking that we identify the common features of these very diverse contemporary works, seeing how they all address Black American griefs and grievances. His ambitious aim was to find pictorial symbols adequate to the experience of mourning and race in America. How can visual art represent the immediate present, revealing the deep racist shadow that the past casts on present Black life? That is no easy task. But doing it has become essential.

For Enwezor, however, the task of picturing Black experience goes beyond representation, of the body or otherwise. In a conversation reported by Glenn Ligon in the essay he contributes to the exhibition's catalog, Enwezor suggests that Blackness and abstraction can be productively connected. He proposes that works like Mark Bradford's *Sapphire Blue* (2018), with its "epiphanic and colossal polyphony of his abraded urbanscapes" or Julie Mehretu's "massive paintings," such as *Black Monolith, for Okwui Enwezor (Charlottesville)* (2017–20), constitute "explorations of the spectral in which skittering glyphs circumnavigate the surfaces of erased images of race riots."³ Many of these artists are very familiar to New York audiences. What's new in this show, however, is this interpretative synthesis. Here, then, we find the constructive sketch of a fascinating, deeply challenging visual worldview which deserves and is sure to get vigorous discussion and development. And that is a very significant achievement. The challenge for commentary is to link and relate their art to the theme.

1. *Grief and Grievance. Art and Mourning in America*, exhibition catalogue (Phaidon Press and New Museum, New York: 2020), 7.
2. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 297.
3. *Grief and Grievance*, 177.

Contributor

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