

A Curation for your Thoughts

Hamza Walker's mission when curating an exhibition is the will to educate the audience on diversity and race through selected pieces of artworks from emerging and un-recognized pioneering contemporary artists. For this research paper, I will be analyzing the curatorial practices of Hamza Walker, using two of his exhibitions as my examples: *Black Is, Black Ain't* and *Made in L.A., 2016*. I will examine how Walker has successfully implemented rhetoric in his exhibitions as an old-school anti-essentialist while maintaining a system of structure for community engagement.

In 2017, the Witney Biennial had on display *Open Casket (2016)* by Dana Schutz¹. Its initial intention as a memorial to Emmett Till soon became the focal point of massive outrage by the Black community. Protests began, and an open letter was directed to the Whitney Museum asking them to take down and destroy the painting. It is not okay "for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun..."². However, Hamza Walker presented a different perspective on the controversy in his interview with Julie Weitz in 2018 after becoming the Executive Director of LAXART. He expressed how misguided it was to want to destroy a painting without context. In his eyes, Dana Schutz was not the enemy. It was a painting; it was art, and one should try to redirect the discourse and have it be more casual and constructive instead of fetishizing it further. What would have been a practical approach was if Dana had sold the painting and donated the money to an organization such as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. For Walker, her work of Emmett Till was just another painting. He questioned why people were not looking towards artists like Kerry James Marshall or Jack Whitten, who had at the time moved to Hauser & Wirth, "... here's a senior black artist getting paid. Let's celebrate that."³

This particular interview was referenced to illustrate how Walker's attitude towards working with and around controversial topics satisfies Robert Storr's requirement of a curator's main task; to bring forth ideas that would not have otherwise come to attention⁴. The concept behind the 2008 exhibition *Black Is, Black Ain't*, which the Renaissance Society in Chicago hosted, was re-introducing specific landmarks from the history of black society in America⁵. The twist here was his inclusion of thirteen non-black artists with the thirteen black artists. The show

¹ Greenberger, Alex. "'The Painting Must Go': Hannah Black Pens Open Letter to the Whitney About Controversial Biennial Work." *ARTnews*. ARTnews, March 2017. Web. 1 April 2021.
<https://www.artnews.com/artnews/news/the-painting-must-go-hannah-black-pens-open-letter-to-the-whitney-about-controversial-biennial-work-7992/>

² *Ibid*, quote was taken from the open letter written by Hannah Black.

³ Weitz, Julie. "Interview with Hamza Walker." *Contemporary Art Review*. Contemporary Art Review, 24 Jan. 2018. Web. 2 April 2021. <https://contemporaryartreview.la/interview-with-hamza-walker/>

⁴ Sarah Thornton, "The Biennale," *Seven Days in the Art World*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008. pp, 221-253. Robert Storr's quote was taken from page 228.

⁵ Fournberg, Jason. *Black is, Black Ain't*. Frieze, July 2008. Web. 10 April 2021.
<https://www.jasonfournberg.com/writing/reviews/2008/112/>

did not represent blackness, where art made by black people was 'black art.' Instead, the art pieces selected for the show expressed an identity tempered by subjectivity, complexity and contradiction that was far from just black-and-white. It highlighted an attempt to define race to be primarily a community effort. What was fascinating to learn from this exhibition was the story of Emmett Till, presented in art pieces by both a black and a non-black artist. The entire purpose of this show was to have a cultural conversation. Therefore, it was important to establish a proper distance from the art to be able to debate about it⁶. The Till case is a sociopolitical event that happened in the past. There is no question to who's entitled or who owns this subject; there is no right or wrong. What needs to be addressed is where society is generationally concerning the case⁷

Aside from being a black American, Hamza Walker did have two advantages with presenting Emmett Till and the prejudice against African Americans that Dana Schutz and the Whitney Biennial did. The first was in the year the two exhibitions were showcased. The Whitney Biennial, unfortunately, occurred after the inauguration of President Trump. And although racial prejudice was still prevalent in the late 2000s, people of colour could no longer ignore the extremities of the past decade. The second and perhaps the most significant advantage was the purpose, size, and recognition of the institutions behind each exhibition. Against the 'esteemed' Whitney Biennial, I see the Renaissance Society as a safe space. Ferguson notes that curators who are part of outside institutions have more liberty and less social and market pressure⁸. The Society's association with the University of Chicago allows them to extend the safety of a learning environment to its exhibitions and provides room for experimenting with new interdisciplinary approaches. The detailing of his oral presentations alone in *Black Is, Black Ain't* mimics the structure of a university seminar.

Walker always encourages adventure and presents instability within his curations by "creating a kind of texture-out of the variety of art – against which individual works can mean more."⁹ And this style of combining prose, poetry and imagery is best shown in his critically acclaimed exhibition *Made in L.A. 2016* with co-curator Aram Moshayedi. The *Made in L.A. Biennial* is sponsored by the Hammer Museum and is exclusive to Californian artists¹⁰. The 2016 iteration, titled "a, the, though, only"¹¹, embodies minimalism yet still feels grandeur as biennials are meant to be. There were twenty-six participating contemporary artists whose contributions were housed both within the museum's galleries and the courtyards outside. Cuauhtemoc Medina says, which is cited in Sarah Thornton's essay, that a biennial should never be two things – correct and boring¹². The unique aspect of this exhibition was how multi-modal

⁶ Bruce Ferguson, "Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense," *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, London & New York: Routledge, 1996. pp. 175-190

⁷ Weitz, Julie. "Interview with Hamza Walker." *Contemporary Art Review*. Contemporary Art Review, 24 Jan. 2018. Web. 2 April 2021. <https://contemporaryartreview.la/interview-with-hamza-walker/>

⁸ Bruce Ferguson, "Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense," *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, London & New York: Routledge, 1996. pp. 175-190

⁹ Sarah Thornton, "The Biennale," *Seven Days in the Art World*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008. pp. 221-253. Robert Storr's quote was taken from page 228.

¹⁰ N.p. "Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only." Hammer Museum. Hammer Museum, 28 Aug. 2016. Web. 9 April 2021. <https://hammer.ucla.edu/made-in-la-2016>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Sarah Thornton, "The Biennale," *Seven Days in the Art World*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008. pp. 221-253. Robert Storr's quote was taken from page 232.

it was: the poem that gave the show its name, the music playing in the galleries, the exhibition's website, choreography performances, video, photos, and sculptures. *Made in L.A., 2016* looked at how its artists from different backgrounds and different disciplines resist and defy categorization¹³. This show was meant to state that age and medium are not prescribed to achieve success.

Hamza Walker's visual takes a more simplistic approach than his in-depth public programmes. His standard practice is white walls and small white labels created for guidance but small and blended enough to not distract from the natural flow of the gallery and artworks. The one thing essential for him as an artist-curator is to give each painting space and frame that allows it to live cohesively with the other pieces but maintain its artistic individuality. To create his displays, Walker enhances the appeal of the artworks through clever use of juxtaposition, natural lights, scale, and warm and cool tones. With the first exhibition, the use of white walls with a mixture of natural lighting and warm-toned spotlights created a space fitting for a sombre topic such as race, as the artworks popped out from their frames and presented a striking contrast. There was no mistake in what was important and needed my undivided attention. As for the latest exhibition, though the foundation remained the same, scale, cool-toned coloured spotlights, and natural lighting conjured airy, bubbly, and happy atmospheres within the different galleries. It was an exhibition which screamed Californian pride.

Hamza Walker has a non-romantic view of creating his curatorial displays and defines curating as self-directed. The change-up in the programming during gallery tours with readings, lectures and film screenings proves for him to be a more satisfying experience than just staying strictly visual. For him, it is not simply about the level of content when working with artists but how it also incorporates the discussions related to the technical requirements for the given piece¹⁴. As someone interested in ideas for their own sake and enjoys talking about those ideas, he gravitates toward personal stories like autobiographies or the point in the artist's trajectory where a one feels confident speaking in the first-person point of view¹⁵. When planning his solo exhibitions, he does not cherry-pick work from an artist's studio; instead, he allows them to decide what they prefer to show¹⁶. His expectation for curating is that they should function critically, and therefore, he does not privilege a given medium. As Victoria Newhouse says, "We dress for the season and for the event; what works for one doesn't necessarily work for the other. The same is true for art: paintings need their own dress."¹⁷

¹³ Slenske, Michael. "'Made in LA': Hammer Museum's 2016 biennial explores history and myth." *Wallpaper*. Wallpaper, 27 June 2016. Web. 9 April 2021. <https://www.wallpaper.com/art/hammer-museum-presents-the-notion-of-art-made-in-la>

¹⁴ Salewski, Sibylle. "Unromancing the Renaissance." *University of Chicago Magazine*. University of Chicago Magazine, Aug. 2005. Web. 25 March 2021. <https://magazine.uchicago.edu/0508/peer/unromancing.shtml>

¹⁵ Ise, Claudine. "Hamza Walker: Renaissance man, Renaissance Society." *Chicago Tribune*. Chicago Tribune, 8 Mar. 2013. Web. 2 April 2021. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/chi-hamza-walker-20130308-story.html>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Victoria Newhouse, "Placing Art," *Art and the Power of Placement*, New York: The Montacelli Press, 2005. pp. 212-283. Quote was taken from page 212.

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