

HYPERALLERGIC

OPINION

Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz's Image of Emmett Till

Presuming that calls for censorship and destruction constitute a legitimate response to perceived injustice leads us down a very dark path.

Coco Fusco | March 27, 2017



Dana Schutz, "Open Casket" (2016), in the 2017 Whitney Biennial (photo by Benjamin Sutton/Hyperallergic)

The presence of blackness in a Whitney Biennial invariably stirs controversy — it's deemed to be unfit or not enough, or too much. The [current Whitney Biennial](#) is no exception — the art press has been awash this past week with reports of a [protest](#) staged in front of a painting of a disfigured Emmett Till lying in his casket and a [letter](#) penned by an artist who called

for the work to be removed and destroyed. The painter is [Dana Schutz](#), a white American. The author of the letter is [Hannah Black](#), a black-identified biracial artist who hails from England and resides in Berlin. The protestors are a youthful coalition of artists and scholars of color. The curators being called

on the carpet are both Asian American. Debates about the painting and the letter rage on social media, to the exclusion of discussion of the many works by black artists in the show, most notably [Henry Taylor's rendering of Philando Castile](#) dying in his car after being shot by police. This multicultural melodrama took a rather perverse turn on March 23, when an unknown party hacked Schutz's email address and committed identity theft by [submitting an apologia](#) under her name to the *Huffington Post* and a number of other publications; it was printed and then retracted. Up to now, none of Schutz's detractors have addressed whether they think it's fine to punish the artist by putting words in her mouth.



Henry Taylor, "THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!" (2017) in the 2017 Whitney Biennial (photo by Benjamin Sutton/Hyperallergic)

I would never stand in the way of protest, particularly an informed one aimed at raising awareness of the politics of racial representation, a subject that I've tackled in various capacities for more than 30 years. A group of artists staging enraged spectatorship before an artwork in a museum strikes me as an entirely valid symbolic gesture. A reasoned conversation about how artists and curators of all backgrounds represent

collective traumas and racial injustice would, in an ideal world, be a regular occurrence in art museums and schools. As an artist, curator, and teacher, I welcome strong reactions to artworks and have learned to expect them when challenging issues, forms, and substance are put before viewers. On many occasions I have had to contend with self-righteous people — of *all* of ethnic backgrounds — who have declared with conviction that this or that can't be art or shouldn't be seen. There is a deeply puritanical and anti-intellectual strain in American culture that expresses itself by putting moral judgment before aesthetic understanding. To take note of that is not equitable with defending whiteness, as critic Aruna D'Souza has [suggested](#) — it's a defense of civil liberties and an appeal for civility.

I find it alarming and entirely wrongheaded to call for the censorship and destruction of an artwork, no matter what its content is or who made it. As artists and as human beings, we may encounter works we do not like and find offensive. We may understand artworks to be indicators of racial, gender, and class privilege — I do, often. But presuming that calls for censorship and destruction constitute a legitimate response to perceived injustice leads us down a very dark path. Hannah Black and company are placing themselves on the wrong side of history, together with Phalangists who burned books, authoritarian regimes that censor culture and imprison artists, and religious fundamentalists who ban artworks in the name of their god. I don't buy the argument offered by a pair of writers in the *New Republic* that the call to destroy Schutz's painting is really "a call for silence inside a church"; the vituperative tone of the letter hardly suggests a spiritual dimension — not to mention that the biblical allusion to silence in the church seems to come from a Corinthians passage about requiring women's submission and obedience! I suspect that many of those endorsing the call have either forgotten or are unfamiliar with the ways Republicans, Christian Evangelicals, and black conservatives exploit the argument that audience offense justifies censorship in order to terminate public funding for art altogether and to perpetuate heterosexist values in black communities.





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

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Black and her supporters argue that the painting is evidence of white insensitivity; that a “painting of a dead Black boy by a white artist” cannot “correctly” represent white shame; that it’s an example of an unacceptable practice of white artists transmuting black suffering into profit; that white artists who want to be good should not treat black pain as material because it is not their “subject matter”; and that Emmett Till’s mother made her son’s dead body “available to *Black* people as an inspiration and warning” (my emphasis). The mainstream media’s “willingness” to circulate images of black people in distress is equated with public lynching. Despite attempts by her supporters to suggest that Black doesn’t really want to destroy the artwork, she recommends this explicitly in her opening line. The insistence that white people cannot understand black pain and only seek to profit from the spectacle of black suffering is reiterated throughout.

It is difficult to reason with the enraged, but I think it necessary to analyze these arguments, rather than giving them credence by recirculating them, as the press does; smugly deflecting them, as museum personnel is trained to do; or remaining silent about them, as many black arts professionals continue to do in order to avoid ruffling feathers or sully themselves with cultural nationalist politics. (As a commercially successful young black artist once confessed to me over dinner, “My dealer says collectors don’t want to hear about my problems.”) Hannah Black’s letter can and should be unpacked separately from an interpretation of Schutz’s painting as a painting, or as the expression of a white person’s sentiment.

Black makes claims that are not based in fact; she relies on problematic notions of cultural property and imputes malicious intent in a totalizing manner to cultural producers and consumers on the basis of race. She

presumes an ability to speak for all black people that smacks of a cultural nationalism that has rarely served black women, and that once upon a time was levied to keep black British artists out of conversations about black culture in America. Her argument is laced with an economically reductionist view of artistic practice and completely avoids consideration of the visual strategies employed by Schutz. Some of her supporters assert (without explanation) that abstraction in and of itself is illegitimate for representing a traumatic figure, a claim that ignores key 20th-century aesthetic debates about the problems with *realistic* depictions of extreme violence.



Kara Walker, "A Subtlety" at Domino Sugar Factory (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

Furthermore, in her letter, Black does not consider the history of anti-racist art by white artists. She does not recognize that the trope of the suffering body that originated in Western art with the figure of the Christian martyr informs much representation of racialized oppression — by white and black artists. She does not account for the fact that black artists have also accrued social capital and commercial gain from their treatment of black suffering. Numerous black artists have depicted enslaved bodies, lynched bodies, maimed bodies, and imprisoned bodies in the early stages of their careers — and then moved away from such politically charged subject matter without having their morality or sense

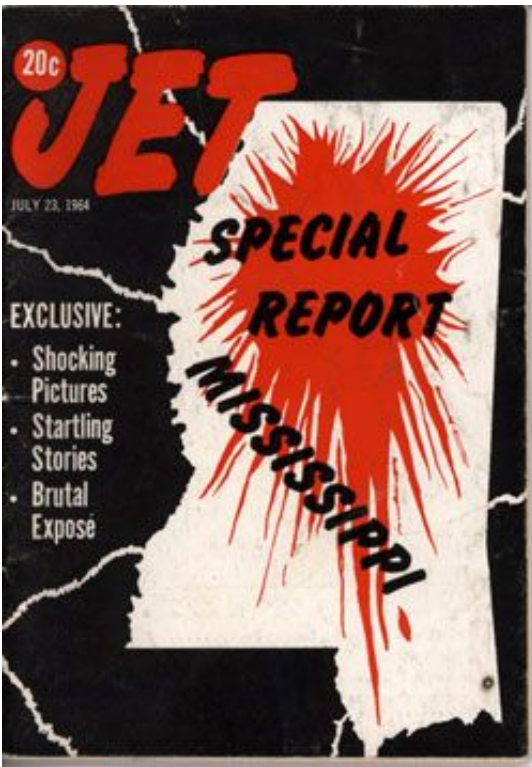
of responsibility impugned. Others, like [Kara Walker](#), who delve into complicated racial fantasies that are tinged with abjection or eroticism, have been on the receiving end of character assassinations by black people who find the work disrespectful or prurient and claim to speak for “the community.” Whether Black intends it or not, her dismissive treatment of Schutz’s painting,

her essentialist position on black and white racial identities, and her use of offense as a rationalization for censorship reinforce elitist and formalist views that ethical considerations don't belong in the aesthetic interpretation of art.

The authority to speak for or about black culture is not guaranteed by skin color or lineage, and it can be undermined by untruths. My 25 years of teaching art have shown me that a combination of ignorance about history and the supremacy of formalism in art education — more than overt racism — underlie the failure of most artists *of any ethnicity* to address racial issues effectively. Many young black artists harbor deep insecurities about their capacity to “represent the race” because their Eurocentric art education leaves them with few tools or references to work with. Only a privileged few hail from socially engaged families committed to exposing their children to black art, history, and cultural traditions. They also face intense social pressure from teachers, peers, and art world power brokers not to “rock the boat” with political discussions about race. I myself was once grilled at a job interview by the white male search committee chair about whether I agreed with black artists' criticisms of Kara Walker — which I understood immediately to be the litmus test of my acceptability at an elite institution.

As a teacher I've been privy to dozens of confessions from students of color at elite art schools who have been scrutinized and intimidated by visiting artists, professors, and peers if they're perceived as obsessed with race or overly concerned with politics. I've been screamed at by frantic students who are afraid of calling themselves “black artists” because arts professionals have warned them not to do so. While elite art schools deploy tokenist inclusion strategies to create the impression of diversity, they actively avoid revising curricula and discourses of critique; the end result is that they produce artists and curators who lack formal opportunities to engage with critical race discourses and histories of anti-racist cultural production. In the absence of informed discussion, we get unadulterated rage.

Hannah Black claims to know more about black suffering than Schutz, but her treatment of history could use more accuracy and depth. She claims that Mamie Till wanted her son's body to be visible to black people as an inspiration and a warning; however, according to Emmett Till's cousin Simeon Wright, who was with him the night of his capture and attended his



The July 23, 1964, edition of *Jet* magazine, which featured photographs of the murdered Emmett Till (via [Pinterest/jetcityorange.com](https://www.pinterest.com/jetcityorange.com))

funeral, Mamie Till said “she wanted the *world* to see what those men had done to her son” (my emphasis). There was no exclusion of non-black people implied, nor was it a deviation from the custom of having an open casket. That casket was donated to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture by Till’s family to be on view for all, not just black, people. Scholar Christina Sharpe’s assertion in an [interview with Hyperallergic](#) that if no white people attended the funeral, no whites were supposed to see the casket doesn’t hold. The trial of Till’s murderers was filmed and shown widely, as were photographs of his funeral. Those

photographs galvanized the Civil Rights Movement: activist leaders strategically and adeptly circulated them to encourage blacks *and* whites in the North to join the struggle, and in order to shame politicians by casting doubts on America’s adherence to its democratic ideals.

My mother, a Cuban immigrant, arrived in New York shortly before Emmett Till was murdered in 1955. She was not physically present at his funeral, but saw pictures of him in the casket and learned about his death from the news. She was so appalled by the violence that she never got over it. She talked to me about the Till case throughout my childhood and refused to let me or my brothers visit the Deep South. She was a pathologist who performed hundreds of autopsies, but the image of a disfigured Emmett Till in the casket left an indelible mark on her memory as the archetypal representation of American racism.

Black claims that Schutz’s painting is yet one more example of white representation of black suffering as an exercise in commercial exploitation. She also suggests that such representations cater to a morbid fascination with

black death that she associates with lynching as a public spectacle. It is undeniable that reality TV shows lionizing cops in pursuit of an endless stream of black and brown men are extremely lucrative for their white producers. It's also true that there are plenty of examples of simplistic and fetishistic representations of black bodies in Western art and advertising. However, it is reductive and inaccurate to claim that *all* treatment of black suffering by white cultural producers is driven by commercial interests and sadistic voyeurism. Black overlooks an important history of white people making anti-racist art, often commissioned by Civil Rights activists.

That history extends back to 19th-century abolitionists who used photographs of the branded hands and scourged backs of slaves to denounce the inhumanity of slavery and to target white audiences in the North. It includes the works made by white artists [Paul Cadmus](#) and [John Steuart Curry](#), who drew and painted blacks struggling against white mobs for the 1935 exhibition [An Art Commentary on Lynching](#), organized at the behest of the NAACP in support of its anti-lynching campaign. It also includes [Charles Moore's](#) and [Danny Lyon's](#) celebrated documentary photographs of police brutality toward black Civil Rights activists that circulated among white people at home and abroad, and helped push a reluctant US Congress to pass Civil Rights legislation. It encompasses the Minimalist sound piece "[Come Out](#)," composed by avant-garde musician Steve Reich in 1966 for a benefit for the Harlem Six upon the request of a Civil Rights activist. Reich's piece consists of a looped sound recording of Daniel Hamm, a young black man in Harlem who was a victim of false arrest and police violence. The speech fragment repeats his explanation of how he turned his physical suffering into spectacle, making one of his bruises bleed visibly so that the police would finally take him to a hospital.

In citing these examples, I do not mean to suggest that all artistic representations of black oppression by white artists and all curatorial efforts to address race are well intentioned, or that they are all good. However, the argument that any attempt by a white cultural producer to engage with racism via the expression of black pain is inherently unacceptable forecloses the effort to achieve interracial cooperation, mutual understanding, or universal

anti-racist consciousness. There are better ways to arrive at cultural equity than policing art production and resorting to moralistic pieties in order to intimidate individuals into silence. Indeed, the decolonization of art institutions that Black's supporters claim to want entails critical analysis of systemic racism coupled with a rigorous treatment of art history and visual culture. Arguing that Schutz's painting must be destroyed because whites aren't allowed to depict black suffering, blaming Schutz for capitalizing on the entire history of racist violence in America, suggesting, as some have done on social media, that she's tainted by having collectors who are heartless real estate developers, while ignoring the work by a dozen or so black artists in the biennial is not going to advance anything.

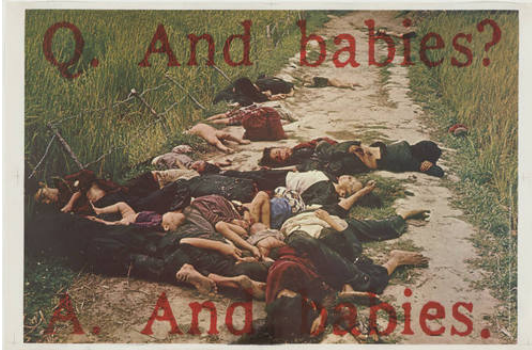
Over the past 40 years, critics, cultural historians, and artists themselves have devoted a good deal of attention to the problems they see with such exhibitions as [*Harlem on My Mind*](#), [*The N*gger Drawings*](#), and [*"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*](#) and such white artists as [Rob Pruitt](#) and [Kelley Walker](#), whose treatments of black subjects have been deemed exploitative.

Black British artist [Isaac Julien](#) and art historian [Kobena Mercer](#) first gained international attention in the 1980s for their critical analysis of white artist Robert Mapplethorpe's depictions of black men, launching an extensive debate that eventually resulted in Mercer altering his original stance to acknowledge more complexity and complicity in interracial relations within gay subcultures. My point here is that reasoned assessment involves more nuanced evaluative criteria, ones that do not essentialize racial identity, impute intent, or ignore the way distinct cultural forms hold differing degrees of power when it comes to racial relations.

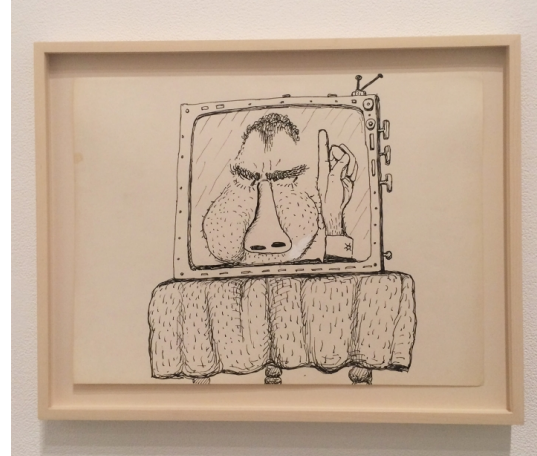
The impact of an individual artist's single, non-mass-produced artwork is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the coercive power of an advertising campaign or a Hollywood blockbuster, and to discuss their effects as if they were the same is hyperbolic and unjust. True, Dana Schutz did not create her painting at the request of Civil Rights activists — however, the fact that she was stirred to resurrect the image of Emmett Till's open casket is a sign of the success of the Black Lives Matter movement in forging awareness of patterns of state violence by politicizing the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, and others. The specter of Till's death at the

hands of the Ku Klux Klan lingers behind these more recent deaths at the hands of the police. Though six decades apart, the circulation of images from these tragedies serves the same function — and sadly signals how little American society and race relations have changed. That is not what mainstream public education teaches American children, and it is not what white liberals would have Americans believe. Schutz is stepping out of line with the dominant culture in underscoring the connection.

Schutz has stated clearly that she never intends to sell the painting, so there is little evidence that she's seeking to enrich herself by it. Artists, myself included, often explore what troubles them for reasons other than personal gain — and if I want an art world that can handle more than pretty pictures and simplistic evocations of identity, I understand that I will have to support not only difficult subjects but clumsiness and mistakes. Though Schutz is not known for painting works about social issues, her inclination to respond to a heightened awareness of violence and injustice is hardly unusual and not inherently opportunistic; other white artists have changed their approach and focus in times of intense social unrest.



The Art Workers' Coalition "And babies" (1969) has been described as "easily the most successful poster" opposing the Vietnam War. (photo via Wikipedia)

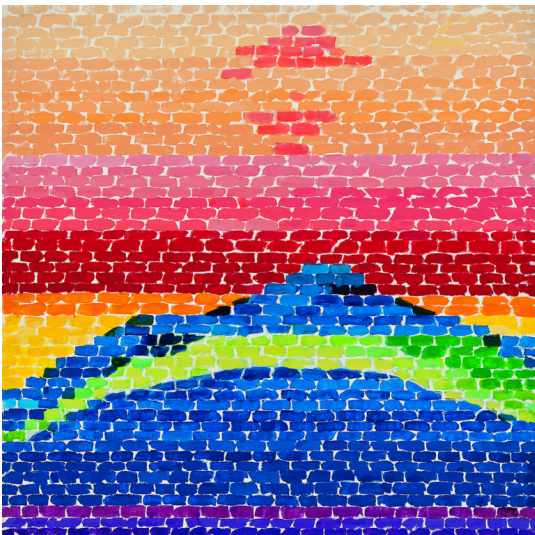


Philip Guston, "Untitled (Poor Richard)" (1971) (photo by Benjamin Sutton/Hyperallergic)

Philip Guston, for example, dropped abstraction in the 1960s and began making eccentric renderings of Klansmen and cartoons lampooning Richard Nixon. The Art Workers' Coalition created the iconic, antiwar "And Babies" poster by reframing a news photo of the Mai Lai Massacre featuring dead Vietnamese people killed by US soldiers in 1969. Robert Gober, not known for an ongoing commitment to racial issues, produced what he saw as a

commentary on white guilt by juxtaposing a white sleeping man with a black hanged man in a 1989 lithograph — and generated a similar controversy to today's when black employees at the Hirshhorn Museum, where it was exhibited, protested. Hannah Black demands that all whites wallow in shame about racist violence against blacks, but in the case of Goyer's work, his attempt to represent white guilt did not prevent a protest. And despite that protest, Goyer sold his piece to Harvard University, whereas Schutz has pledged not to sell hers at all.

The most perplexing criticism that's been bandied about regarding Schutz's painting, both on social media and in discussions I've had, is that some great harm has been inflicted by the act of abstraction, as if the only "responsible" treatment of racial trauma is mimetic realism. Strangely, though Henry Taylor's painting of Philando Castile is no more realist in its rendering than Schutz's, he's been left alone by protesters. I would have liked to think that the days of Black Arts Movement militancy were long gone, but it seems that for some, they are not. There was a time when political correctness in black art was linked with realist aesthetics and didacticism, but it's been widely since recognized that this stance led to the marginalization of black abstractionists. Masters such as Romare Bearden, Bob Thompson, and Alma Thomas, and even contemporary abstractionists like Jennie C. Jones, have bristled at the notion that authentic blackness must be equated with realism and that black art must be subject to sociological approval before being evaluated aesthetically.



Alma Thomas, "Apollo 12 'Splash Down'"

There's a fundamental misunderstanding at work in damning abstraction by associating it with erasure and irresponsibility. Abstraction, like mimeticism, is an aesthetic language that can be interpreted and used politically in a range of ways. It doesn't necessarily mean erasure, but it does complicate the connection between perception and intellection — something that deeply

(1970), acrylic and graphite on canvas, 50 1/4 x
50 1/4 inches (courtesy Michael Rosenfeld
Gallery LLC, New York, NY)

thoughtful painters like [Gerhard
Richter](#) have taken advantage of in
order to make us reflect on how

photographic images represent history and structure memory. [Jacob
Lawrence](#) “abstracted” his black figures, not to obscure their humanity but to
explore new ways of evoking ethnic identity and communal purpose through
color and dynamism. The story of how the [CIA championed Abstract
Expressionism](#) at the height of the Cold War to counter Socialist Realist
propaganda is well known; however, abstraction can also be mandated by
religious beliefs or, in the repressive contexts of many authoritarian states,
serve as a rejection of narrow-minded populism. Perhaps the best argument in
favor of abstraction was articulated by Theodor Adorno after the Holocaust,
when he asserted that realist representations of atrocity offer simple
voyeuristic pleasure over a more profound grasp of the horrors of history.

Whether or not we like the painting or consider it her greatest work — I do
not, but think it still has value — Schutz’s decision to refract an iconic
photograph through the language of abstraction has forced the art world out of
its usual complacency and complicated the biennial’s uniformly celebratory
reviews. She has, perhaps inadvertently, blown the lid off of a biennial that
features an almost too perfect blend of messy painting, which appeals to
conservatives, and socially engaged art, which appeals to the more politically
minded. As far as I’m concerned, that’s not such a bad thing, given the ghastly
state of American political culture at this moment.

*The [2017 Whitney Biennial](#) continues at the Whitney Museum (99 Gansevoort
Street, Meatpacking District, Manhattan) through June 11.*

