

# Where We At

## Whitness in Fine Art

Steph Ericson, Garrett Bell-Paolucci, Sanji Lapre, Amber Fitzpatrick, Nick Vitale

Whiteness is an issue that has been pervasive throughout the fine art world since people first began to define what is fine art. What is fine art has long been defined by a select few critics perceived to be at the top of their field most of whom are white. This leads too often to the majority of artists being chosen to be elevated to fame are of similar descent. This raising of the great artists like Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rothko and Warhol came at the cost of passing by of many minority artists who lost opportunities in the field. It is also all too often that a white artist tries to make an impactful piece of art from the views of the oppressed which they cannot truly understand rather than from the views of the oppressors whom they represent. These shortsighted artists fail to truly understand the views of the oppressed and in doing so unintentionally offend the culture they were trying to portray. The fine art world has long chosen to be exclusive and exclusionary rather than diverse and open as it ought to be.



Take for example Jack Whitten an artist hailing from Bessemer Alabama during segregation, which he referred to as "American Apartheid" experienced the grip that race held on the world of art firsthand. He attended Tuskegee Institute however they did not even have an art program at the university. He eventually had to move to New York and attend Cooper that he was allowed to break into the art scene. He had to move across the country to find an environment that was open enough to allow him to even practice his art in an open forum. He went on in his career to honor black individuals he felt made an impact on society with his "Black Monolith" series, a reflection of things he was not able to find in the art world previously.







Another amazingly talented artist who faced the challenges of racism was Faith Ringgold who was an art teacher, author and artist who fought for the integration of the New York art world in the 1970's. During the 60's she created her most influential series called "American People" which depicted the people and tensions of the time through her eyes. In the 80 she went on to work on her most well-known project, a series of quilts which focused, among other things, on race and the divides between people. Ringgold found inspiration in the issues she saw around her and worked tirelessly to create an environment in New York where all artists could be included and appreciated in their own light and strove in her art to create the changes she deemed necessary. She has received numerous accolades including a National Endowment for the Arts Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship for painting and an NAACP Image Award for her numerous career contributions to the world of art.



One artist who struggled to fully grasp the racial implications of the sculpture he was producing. His installation titled "Scaffold" was a representation of the gallows used to hang thirty-eight Dakota Sioux Native Americans, the largest mass execution of prisoners in American history. While remembering the event itself is not inherently racist, Durant's sculpture was placed in the previously whimsical Walker Art Centers sculpture garden for families and was akin to a jungle gym and encouraged children to climb and play upon the gallows. As can be imagined symbolically inviting children to dance on the graves of Native American ancestors was not taken well by the community who were understandably outraged. Durant and The Walker Art Center apologized and the statue was taken down by the Dakota Sioux tribe who blessed and burned the structure treating it as "...planting a seed of healing and change—which might be an oak, solid and lasting, if the Walker nurtures it."

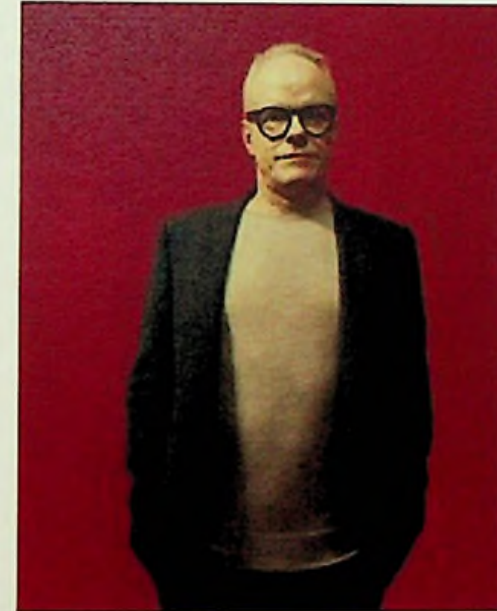




A poor example of how to present art comes this time courtesy of London's Barbican Center and Brett Bailey who were "...interested in the way these zoos legitimized colonial policies." Instead created what was perceived to be a rehashing of the same racism that was present in the original zoos. The Zoo included several tableaux that were shocking to people including a female slave chained to a bed waiting to be raped by her master to feed her family. These tableaux were perceived to do much more harm than good members of the community wishing for the past to remain the past rather than be thrown in their face. The threats against the project got so bad the entire exhibition was forced to shut down as it opened in the interest of safety. The Barbican Center stood with Bailey and supported their project saying that the intention clearly was not to offend but to illustrate and educate. It is obvious in these cases the court of public opinion is held in higher regard than the artists intentions.



Gatekeeping has long been an issue literally and metaphorically at the forefront of the art world, to the average person the tastemakers and critics are so distant from themselves they don't even try to understand what makes "good" art "good" they take it as some mercurial quality they cannot access rather than what it in fact is, nepotism. To be deemed as fine art is to be allowed to pervade the world of fine art and find success in your career, however, to be unable to pass this barrier is to be unable to reach the epitome of what your career can be. To be featured by a supercritical such as Hans Ulrich Obrist can create a future for an individual out of nothing but a color on canvas while other more innovative and evocative artists are ignored in favor of what one white man deems best.



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