

WHITENESS

FROM WHITE TO WHITENESS

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Whiteness, A Wayward Construction is an exhibition of work by twenty-eight contemporary individual artists and collaborative teams employing various media who explore representations of whiteness in the United States. The selection of artists is not restricted to whites but includes artists of various ethnicities. The exhibition is about the image of whiteness in the public imagination and in contemporary art; it is not an analysis of particular historical developments. It approaches whiteness as being less about the color of skin and more about an ideology of power. As the title indicates, the notion of waywardness is central to the exhibition and its conception of whiteness, referring both to the wayward, or capricious, power that whiteness confers and also to its ungovernability—the impossibility of pinning a single, overarching identity on any individual. The exhibition is divided into three overlapping categories that move from the general to the specific and are meant to suggest a movement from unawareness to reflection to problematizing the white as a racial subject.

The first section, "White Out," looks at some of the broader issues that underlie the representation of whiteness, particularly the idea of white people not seeing themselves as having a racial identity. The artworks in this section explore how whiteness develops into a seemingly unacknowledged yet dominant value system, exploring topics such as the association of the color white with purity, Manifest Destiny as justification for geographical expansion, present-day consumerism as a continuation of this "destiny," the history of the blackface minstrel, and Western attitudes toward "primitive" non-Western art.

The second section—"Mirror, Mirror..."—explores the outward qualities that identify one as white and thus confer privileges. As Cheryl Harris has noted, when the United States gave whiteness a legal status, as it determined whether one was a slave or free, it moved "whiteness from privileged identity to a vested interest." In this sense, whiteness, or "what *legal* entitlements arise from that status," can be viewed as property.¹ The artists represented in this section consider whiteness as a tangled relationship among identity, status, and property in works that examine such themes as the white-collar work

¹ Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," in *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, ed. David R. Roediger (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 104.

environment, hierarchies within the art world, the Ku Klux Klan, Christianity, the concept of "white trash," and associations of racism with the American South.

The third section, "The Graying of Whiteness," delves into the complex relationship between private and public personas, looking, for example, at the complicated issues that arise when race is considered in relation to other components of identity, such as gender and sexuality. Some artists explore the experience of being designated as white, even though they view themselves differently, and the subsequent realization that they have the choice to pass for white or black, knowing that certain disadvantages and privileges will accrue once their decision is made. Such situations point to this nation's history of racial mixing, which complicates the notion of whiteness, requiring a redefinition that may be linked to skin color. Lastly, some artists in this section mischievously suggest the possibility of a complicit alliance between victim and victimizer as a way to shed light on a romanticization of the past.

Almost all of the seventy-eight artworks selected for the exhibition were created between 1990 and the present. This period coincides with a particular development in the contemporary art world as artists and critics responded to the emergence of intellectual movements such as poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and multiculturalism, from which the cultural study of whiteness arose in the 1990s. The majority of the artists in the exhibition are based in California. This regional focus is fitting because the state is poised to cross the threshold into being a white-minority society. California is home to 10 percent of the nation's population, so the state may be a bellwether for the rest of the nation. In *The Coming White Minority*, Dale Maharidge writes: "In the 150 years since California lured gold seekers to its lands, well-known political and social trends have started there and rolled east ... and so it goes with the racial transition. California will become polyracial, joining Hawaii and New Mexico. Other states will follow, Texas sometime around 2015, and in later years Arizona, New York, Nevada, New Jersey, and Maryland. By 2050 the nation will almost be half nonwhite."² Maharidge's conclusions are based on projected population statistics from 1995 to 2020 published by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 1996. Perhaps the more subtle point, which he makes later in the book, is that the United States will be the first predominantly white society in the industrial world to evolve into a "mixed culture."

In California signs of the power struggles to come have been apparent in the first half of the 1990s: students staging hunger strikes to win funding for ethnic studies departments; the 1992 Los Angeles riots; voter approval of Proposition 187, which denied public services such as hospitals and schools to illegal immigrants and mandated that teachers report nonresident children; and the 1995 reversal of affirmative action in the University of California system.

The specific inspiration for organizing the exhibition came from an article by cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha published in the May 1998 issue of *Artforum*, in which he surveyed the rising academic field of the cultural study of whiteness and its literature. The common thread that he saw running through the books was that "the critique of whiteness, whether from literary studies, labor history, autobiography, or sociology, attempts to displace the normativity of the white position by seeing it as a strategy of authority rather than an authentic or essential 'identity.'"³ Four years later, in his own survey of such publications, David R. Roediger wrote that the overarching

² Dale Maharidge, *The Coming White Minority: California's Eruptions and America's Future* (New York: Random House, 1996), 3.

³ Homi K. Bhabha, "The White Stuff," *Artforum* 36 (May 1998): 21.

4. David R. Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 23.

theme was "that white identity derived from the experience of dominating, rather than from biology or culture."⁴

As noted, the cultural study of whiteness evolved out of the emergence of poststructuralism and postcolonial theory in the 1970s and 1980s. Generally, both schools of thought profess profound skepticism toward many concepts and values that have been central to Western culture, such as reason, the individual, truth, freedom, institutions, the nation, history, and almost any approach that attempts to impose an abstract, totalizing narrative on specific historical events. Philosophers and cultural theorists who were later placed under the rubric of postmodernism—such as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan—argued that power, for example, is a network of relations, rather than being something that one group possesses or uses, which means that power encompasses the rulers as well as those they rule.

Not only did other academics read the works of these theorists, but art critics and artists did as well, and these theories began to be taught in art schools. Subsequently, in the 1980s, the art world began to take a theoretical turn. Essentially, both the cultural theorists and the artists saw representation and reality as overlapping, because customs of representation or language are learned and internalized so that they are then experienced as real. Since all representations are created within a context, there is always an underlying ideology. Because of its concern with power structures and the ideologies behind them, postmodern theory was of particular interest to artists whose work was informed by the social activist movements that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, such as the civil rights struggle, feminism, and gay activism. These movements were about individuals locating themselves more visibly within a dominant white, male, heterosexual Western culture that treated them as invisible. So by the 1990s vocabularies and strategies had developed based on the notion that forcing the dominant culture to recognize itself—to *name* itself, when for so long it had claimed to have no name—was the first step toward dismantling it. Discussing the study of whiteness, Henry Giroux has noted that it "becomes a less a matter of creating a new form of identity politics than an attempt to rearticulate 'whiteness' as part of a broader project of cultural, social, and political citizenship."⁵

It is important that an exhibition focusing on images of whites does not in fact focus on nonwhites. This is not meant as a tactic to recenter whites in society and debate, but it is an acknowledgment of the history of whites using nonwhites to define themselves. In her groundbreaking book *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison explores how a young America saw itself by examining its early literature, including works by Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville. She concludes that the white man of early American literature could define himself and his country only against the backdrop of the black man, of slavery, of an "Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity" of autonomy and freedom.⁶

The ultimate goal of the cultural study of whiteness is simply to recognize the United States as a multicultural nation, where whites, as Lucy Lippard has written, "will be encouraged to see themselves as simply another Other."⁷ Despite this goal, however, the background will always be the effects of "whiteness" as dominant

5. Henry A. Giroux, "Racial Politics and the Pedagogy of Whiteness," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 295.

6. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 44.

7. Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 23.

culture, ones that cannot be easily dismissed, even if being "white" becomes a category among others, with its own history. This exhibition attempts to put its faith with the complex ambiguities of art, where uncertainty is life affirming and works against the development of stereotypes.

White Out

Previous museum exhibitions that have dealt with identity have for the most part presented only images of other races, and not those of whites. This is perhaps due in part to the relative abundance of works in which others reread and reinterpret dominant culture, defining themselves in relationship to it. As Richard Dyer notes, however, in his seminal book *White*: "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people."⁸ The artists in the "White Out" section of this exhibition explore the invisibility of whiteness and how whites are made out to be generic and the norm.

The symbolic associations of white and black have been firmly fixed for thousands of years. In the Bible, black is the color of affliction and calamity: "I go about blackened, but not by the sun; I stand up in the assembly, and cry for help" (Job 30:28). White, by contrast, is associated with holiness and purity: "Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined" (Daniel 12:10). Further elaborating on the symbolism of colors in the Bible, Frantz Fanon, one of the most influential early writers on postcolonialism, wrote: "In Europe ... Satan is black.... Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, and the labyrinths of earthy, abysmal depths, blacken someone's reputation; and on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical, heavenly light. A magnificent blond child—how much peace there is in that phrase, how much joy, and above all how much hope!"⁹

Whiteness and its interrelated connotations of purity, innocence, and cleanliness are deconstructed in the work of Ernesto Pujol. The series *Whiteness (Still Life)* (1999; see figs. 10, 12) includes eleven color photographs of seemingly straightforward domestic still lifes, for example, white vintage plates and white booties atop a white faux-Victorian mantelpiece. Upon closer inspection, however, the viewer sees that the manufacturer's stamps on the plates shown facedown in the photos include a swastika. Suddenly chaste whiteness shatters: this work is about ethnic cleansing and the Aryan ideal. Kelsey Fernkopf's sculptures, such as *La Brea Faberge* (1999; fig. 13), explore American consumer culture. He uses ready-made plastic toy horses as his primary symbols of America and the history of Manifest Destiny, the supposed inevitability of the westward expansion of U.S. territorial boundaries. He alters them, adding dollhouse miniatures and other small collectibles. He also uses the toilet as a pedestal to symbolize a conduit by which information is swallowed and then excreted, examining ideas of purification and cleanliness and the desire for a sanitized history. Erika Rothenberg's work parodies this American "right to consume," which extends not just to fast food and cars but to nations and peoples as well, in ironic storyboard/billboard paintings such as *You Can Cure Yourself of Racism!* (1987; fig. 11).

Many artists find that their cure for racism is to review and revise history by taking into account significant events or details that were marginalized earlier. In *State Birds of the Slave States (After J. J. Audubon)* (2001; fig. 5), Peter Edlund

⁸ Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 1.

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 189.

mimics nineteenth-century painting techniques to point out the inherent contradictions of American Romantic paintings such as the works of the Hudson River School when viewed in the context of the political realities of the time. There is an additional irony to Edlund's display of state birds, since Audubon was of mixed race, passing as white during the time of slavery.

In a similar kind of double exploration and reclamation, historical images of blackface minstrels form the basis for photo-text iris prints by Mark Steven Greenfield, such as *Uncle* (2001; fig. 22). Blackface minstrelsy has a complicated history. It began with black slaves who danced in mocking imitation of their masters. Whites missed the critique, however, and when they mimicked the dance of their slaves, they highlighted their buffoonery. Today many black entertainers are taking back the minstrel image, but in a manner that comments on its complex origins and misguided adaptations and how it has now become a stereotype of white racism.

John Feodorov calls on his Native American heritage, setting tradition against modern-day kitsch to create a hybrid mythology in *Office Shaman* (2001; fig. 6), an installation that humorously joins contemporary office culture with ritual healing and sacrifice. Feodorov plays with stereotypes of the Native American as spiritual, with the notion of office culture as Manifest Destiny pragmatism, and with whites seeking spiritual renewal through New Age mysticism, but as long as it can be done in the convenience of a cubicle.

Richard A. Lou and Robert J. Sanchez, a.k.a. Los Anthropolocos, are two self-described Ch.D.s (doctors of Chicanismo) from the University of Aztlan whose ongoing conceptual White-fying Project aims to discover the details surrounding the strange, Maya-like disappearance of those colorless people, "los Whites." In *A Sunday Afternoon Capturing "The Colorless Ones" on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (2002; fig. 1), the anthropologists ironically overlay their latest specimens onto Georges Seurat's painting of a stoic and refined society, reversing the hierarchies established in Western culture between high art and "primitive" ethnic art.

Clifford Lecuyer makes photographs, usually untitled, of tabletop models that he constructs with wet white porcelain (see fig. 9). His intuitive landscapes are reminiscent simultaneously of a body's interior organs and of otherworldly architectural monuments. It is as though we inhabit a world of Western spirituality: an interior and exterior of all-whiteness. Emilio Cueto based a recent series of four works on the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: War, Famine, Pestilence, and Death. The title of the stark, tonal seven-foot white painting *Gone* (2002; fig. 4) refers not only to the absence of paint in the large oval at the center of the composition but also, for Cueto, to Death. In Revelations the Four Horsemen symbolize God's wrath against human injustice, but the dissolution of the white paint and this association with death also point to, as Dyer describes it, "the degree to which whiteness aspires to *dis*-embodiedness. To be without properties also suggests not being at all. This may be thought of as pure spirit, but it also hints at non-existence, or death."¹⁰

James Casebere's photographs explore institutional archetypes of instruction and control. Like Lecuyer, Casebere creates tabletop models, but instead of being ambiguous spaces saturated with spirituality, they are specific man-made institutions constructed to discipline and punish our bodies and minds, such as prisons, in

¹⁰ Dyer, *White*, 39.

The Prison at Cherry Hill (1993; fig. 3), and schbols, in *Toppled Desks* (1998; fig. 19). In his photographs, they appear to be familiar, real structures, yet they are stripped of detail, rendering them strange and illusory too. It is as though even in our own private dreams we experience the institutions that keep hierarchies in place. Kavin Buck's installation *Collapsed Staircase* (2001; fig. 2) is composed of a crumpled wooden staircase covered with white latex. The fallen architecture—a hereafter for Casebere's solid-state institutions—is a literal and metaphorical deconstruction of the ivory tower of straight, white masculinity. Here the presence of Home Depot construction materials suggests fragility and incompetence more than strength and ingenuity.

The artists in this section explore the ways in which ideas about race are communicated through the narratives, metaphors, and imagery of a culture. Their works point to the subtle internalization of ideas and how an individual can begin to act, unconsciously, in accordance with what is considered "normal."

Mirror, Mirror...

Most of the books on the cultural study of whiteness have been published only since 1993. There are plenty of earlier publications that consider whiteness—most notably by W. E. B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison—but there has never been such a plethora of academic writing on the subject, especially by whites. Nineteen ninety-three was also an important year in the contemporary art world because of that year's Whitney Biennial. The Whitney Museum's director at the time, David Ross, shifted the focus of the two-year survey so that—rather than taking the temperature of a pluralistic art market, as previous biennials had done—the exhibition charted a particular phenomenon. That phenomenon was the degree to which artists working in the United States, largely ones not represented in the commercial gallery system, were exploring the construction of identity. His move can also be viewed as a response to exhibitions in the 1980s that began to look at the visual arts in non-Western cultures yet made the mistake of extricating the art from the circumstances in which it was made or relegated the work to categories other than high art or fine art, such as craft, which implicitly marginalized its importance. There are two prominent examples. The first is the 1984 exhibition "*Primitivism*" in *Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* at New York's Museum of Modern Art, which presented side by side the "primitive" art of Africa and the works of the French Cubists and German Expressionists, giving the former credit as the root of inspiration for the European artists. The second one was *Magiciens de la terre*, held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1989, an exhibition of contemporary art in which equal attention was given to art from the Southern and Northern Hemispheres.

Other museums around the country were also exploring expressions of identity in contemporary art during the 1990s. Exhibitions that recognized this development among artists included *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (1990), co-organized by the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, both in New York; *La Frontera/The Border: Art about the Mexico/United States Border Experience* (1993), co-organized by Centro Cultural de la Raza and the Museum of Contemporary Art, both in San Diego; *Partial Recall: Photographs of Native North Americans* (1993) at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia; *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism* (1993) at the art gallery of the University of California, Irvine; *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity*

in *Contemporary American Art* (1995) at the Whitney Museum of American Art; *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice* (1995) at the University of California, Berkeley, Art Museum; and *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities* (1997) at the Jewish Museum in New York.

As is evident from the titles of the exhibitions and the sheer number of examples cited, this was a period in which "naming" was important. Naming is about locating an identity, but the very need to locate an identity also points to the mechanism of domination that either prevented the naming or imposed a different name. Inspired by poststructuralist, postcolonial, and postmodern theories, the curators and artists involved in these exhibitions accepted the principle that individual subjectivity is generated through signs and symbols in society. As Lippard has written: "As namers, artists participate in an ongoing process of call and response, acting in the space between the self- or individual portrait and the cluster of characteristics that supposedly define a community.... The naming process involves not only the invention of a new self, but of the language that creates the content for the self—a new world."¹¹

¹¹ Lippard, *Mixed Blessings*, 40.

For whites then, it is important that we begin to recognize ourselves not as the norm, but as racial subjects. The artists in the "Mirror, Mirror..." section of this exhibition, like those in the first section, look at how whiteness operates, but they hold up a mirror, forcing whites to look at images of themselves, ones that they may find disturbing.

Tim Oberst makes steel boxes, painted white, that allow viewers to see parts of their heads that they don't ordinarily see. This is done through a set of mirrors that, in *Device #9* (2000; figs. 27, 35), for example, reflect back the top of the viewer's head, the sides of the ears, or the roof of the nose. The disorienting experience causes viewers to reevaluate how they project and portray themselves privately and publicly. As if to remind us that there is no such thing as white or black skin, Byron Kim and Glenn Ligon, in *Black and White* (1993; fig. 25), have created a piece composed of thirty-two monochromatic panels: sixteen versions of white (flesh) straight out of the paint tube, juxtaposed with sixteen versions of black (flesh) straight out of the paint tube.

The white collared shirt is a uniform of the office, representing a hierarchy of both class and race. The outdoor laborer does not wear white, as it will soil, and his skin darkens under the sun, marking him as inferior. On one hand, this suggests that anyone who dons the white collared shirt can rise in status—representing a sense of purity, cleanliness, and luxury—but on the other hand, there are limitations imposed by skin color. Richard Shelton's paintings frequently reconfigure white-collar corporate mentality and its actions. In *Out in the Open* (1998; fig. 29), painted in the style of a wide-angle freeze-frame photograph, three white-shirted businessmen silently direct their power—through their simple but penetrating gazes—upon three women walking down the street. Joseph Havel assembles components of ordinary white dress shirts, such as labels and collars, into freestanding sculptures and wall installations laden with implications about modern work culture, as in *Spine* (1994–96; fig. 23), a hanging column of white collars.

Working with the innocuous museum admission tags that one might find attached to these collars, Daniel Joseph Martinez created a special set for the 1993 Whitney Biennial (fig. 26), which were distributed at random to museum visitors. Each tag

contains one or two words that together form the sentence "I can't imagine ever wanting to be white." For visitors moving around the museum, not only was there the potential for unsettling juxtapositions (a white person wearing a tag reading "white" standing next to a nonwhite person wearing the same tag), but careful observation and a certain amount of thought were required in order to reconstruct the statement. It is a project that captures the multiple layers of the sociophysical environment.

Just as Martínez plays with our movement through public space as a way to rearrange hierarchies, Mike Kelley's *Snowflake (Center and Peripheries #3)* (1990; fig. 24) examines the idea of what becomes centered and what becomes marginalized in culture. This work features a blank white rectangular canvas to which are appended, in various configurations, five smaller paintings, depicting a trash bag, a toy rabbit's head, a human toe, and two portraits of ethnic minorities. These images are shown in a marginal and dysfunctional relation to the central white monolith—a trope of high modernism—threatening to defile its purity. The work is a complicated dialogue pitting ornamentation and figuration against clean, pure lines or, more generally, low culture against high culture.

In their writing about "white trash," Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray have noted that this term "points up hatred and fear undergirding the American myth of classlessness. Yoking a classist epithet to a racist one, as white trash does, reminds us how often racism is in fact directly related to economic differences." Gary Simmons's work addresses the kind of rural mountain culture to which that epithet might be applied. Images combined with text present a view of hillbilly life—log cabins, outhouses, stills for the production of moonshine, and slang terms for inebriation. *Still* (2000; fig. 30) is a full-size still, but a ghostly white plastic version produced with computer-aided technology. To quote Newitz and Wray, "White trash lies simultaneously inside and outside whiteness, becoming the difference within, the white Other that inhabits the core of whiteness."¹² But as the word *trash* suggests, it is something that needs to be disposed of in order for whiteness to maintain dominance. Though Simmons's *Still* is pristine and high-tech, it is still a still and thus an other's rubbish.

The American South, often associated with white trash and hillbillies, is the geographical region that has been most closely linked to racism because of its history of slavery, the Civil War, and segregation. It is the breeding ground of the Ku Klux Klan. Andres Serrano sees his Klansman series of 1990 (see fig. 21) and his Church series, completed in 1991, as related because he was always impressed by the power assumed by those wearing white robes, whether Klansman's hoods or ecclesiastical vestments. Travis Somerville takes a cue from artist Kara Walker, evoking negative representations of the American South in many of his works as a way to reenvision it. In *Flag Day* (2002; fig. 36), the Confederate flag takes the shape of a Klansman's hood, and here Somerville can also be seen as extending Serrano's exploration of both the symbolic and the very real power associated with those who bear particular cloths, whether a robe or a flag. Scrolled across the surface is the phrase "One flag or no flag," raising the questions "which flag?" and "for whom?"

The Graying of Whiteness

In a 1994 *New Art Examiner* article, Jennie Klein surveyed the plethora of exhibitions dealing with identity. Commenting on the 1993

¹² Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray, "What Is 'White Trash'?" in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, 169, 170.

Whitney Biennial, she applauded then Whitney curator Elisabeth Sussman for at least making "a genuine attempt to select artists whose work explores questions of the construction of identity within the messily overlapping categories of gender, race, ethnicity, and class." She then went on to note that "the same cannot be said for many other recent exhibitions that have claimed to be about expanding the notion of identity while in fact fixing and essentializing the artists included into static categories of culture or ethnicity."¹³ At first one might think that white identity has enjoyed the exclusive privilege of being multifaceted and fluid since there is no question about its dominance. There has been a tendency, however, to "fix" white identity by defining it based on skin color.

13. Jennie Klein, "Circumventing the Center: Identity Politics and Marginalization," *New Art Examiner* 22 (December 1994): 13.

James Baldwin provided an excellent redefinition of and description of the nature of whiteness in the United States as a social construction in a 1984 essay. Writing about how European immigrants to this country (Irish, German, Italian, Jewish, French, Polish, and so on) began to define themselves as white—sometimes not by choice and other times by choice in order to gain privileges—he explains how this new way of thinking and this new category changed the immigrants' mindset: "Because they think they are white, they cannot allow themselves to be tormented by the suspicion that all men are brothers." In conclusion, he writes: "However—! White being, absolutely, a moral choice (for there *are* no white people), the crisis of leadership for those of us whose identity has been forged, or branded, as Black is nothing new."¹⁴

14. James Baldwin, "On Being 'White'... and Other Lies," in *Black on White*, 180.

Baldwin touches on the essence of what the cultural study of whiteness can hope to achieve: the recognition that "white" is a brand that has been placed upon some of us, just as "black" has been placed on others, and that this brand does carry a particular history. In this light, we have the *choice* to accept it or to change it, that is, to rename our identity.

Choice, as in how you decide to view the past and yourself within it, is at the heart of Kara Walker's work. She attempts to reconcile in the present that which was irreconcilably opposed in the past, using large-scale silhouettes of antebellum figures. In *Another Fine Mess* (1998; fig. 46), master and slave melt into each other; the work suggests that each is bound by the other and that any attempt at separation will create an amorphous, gooey mess. Walker's figures are simply outlines, as if she is re-presenting stereotypes for our reevaluation.

The reaction to Walker's work over the years is of particular note because it has brought to the surface generational differences regarding the representation of racial identity and the history of race relations in the United States. In 1997, two years after she broke onto the New York art scene, Walker was awarded a fellowship from the prestigious MacArthur Foundation. At age twenty-seven, she was the youngest recipient ever. After Walker received this high-profile award, two older African American artists who had participated in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, Betye Saar in Los Angeles and Howardena Pindell in New York, mounted a bicoastal fax attack against the artist, signing their letters and flyers, "artist against negative black images."¹⁵

15. "Artist against Negative Black Images," flyer created by New York artist Howardena Pindell.

In the past, artists and activists such as Saar and Pindell fought against a government and an art system that judged them based on the color of their skin. Walker, however—who is young enough to have benefited from the political advances made by the civil rights movement, feminism, gay pride, and multiculturalism—has focused her attention on the naming process itself, examining, as Bhabha has

phrased it, "the strategy of authority." In an interview, Robert Hobbs—who was the commissioner of the U.S. pavilion for the 2002 São Paulo Bienal and who nominated Walker as the U.S. representative—noted: "Alex Haley's *Roots* is 25 years old; Kara Walker is 32. So as a child she experienced this contradictory romanticizing of slavery posing as an indictment of it, which led her to suggest that all blacks love slavery just a little bit. Clearly these are fighting words for a number of African Americans."¹⁶ In a sense, Walker is questioning who owns the language of protest and of naming, and she has done so by choosing to return to the beginning, the era before the Civil War, as if to start history over for herself.

Several artists in this section of the exhibition explore the fluctuating definition of white skin and its accompanying attributes, such as blue eyes, suggesting that, once our identity is redefined, one must reconsider what it means to be white. Lezley Saar's installation *Mulatto Nation Gift Shop* (2003; figs. 44, 49) simulates a retail establishment offering souvenirs to tourists visiting this fictional nation. Shoppers can purchase bumper stickers, flags, mugs, and porcelain plates with portraits of contemporary mulattos such as Mariah Carey, Sinbad, Colin Powell, and the Rock. The gift shop also sells T-shirts with slogans like "Mulatto Nation—Make Mulattos Not War," "Uppity Mulattos Unite," and "MWA: Mulattos with Attitude." Mulatto Nation is not only a satire but also a reality in light of the hundreds of years of intermarriage in the Americas.

In the *Blue Eyes* series (2001; see figs. 45, 52), Kyungmi Shin digitally altered head-shot portraits so that every subject has blue eyes, no matter his or her heritage. Shin's work speaks to a society that seeks to disguise parts of the body in an effort to remake identity, and also to a history of domination by blue-eyed Europeans. Kammy Roulner finds baseball cards that depict players whose last names are also the names of colors, as in *Colored People (Bud Black)* (2001; fig. 43). She scans and enlarges them, thus removing them from their original context as trading cards. This simple gesture evokes the history of racism in sports and also the manner by which people are identified or misidentified by their names.

Kim Dingle and Millie Wilson explore the "good girl" status accorded white women, in contrast to the stereotype of black women as sexually promiscuous. Dingle plays aggressively with the codes and conventions of everything from personal memories to U.S. politics. In Dingle's *Girl Boxing (White Girl Boxing with Shadow)* (1992; fig. 40), a little girl, lovingly dressed, takes pleasure in her imaginary contest, as if finally succumbing to an ancient tribal nature, but the shadow implies that she is fighting against her other self as well. Her identification as a "white girl" suggests that she also fights with/against broader national issues of race, which possess their own history of real violence. Wilson, like Mike Kelley, uses references to minimalism to question notions of sexuality, race, and class. *White No. 1* (1992) is a collaboration between Wilson and black lesbian theorist Jackie Goldsby. It includes a page from a 1948 case study of a black lesbian, followed by a five-page letter from Goldsby to Wilson, in which she speculates on a number of things, including their efforts to collaborate. Wilson's use of high-art minimalism becomes a stand-in for the middle-class respectability that a white woman is expected to embody, while Goldsby elucidates the further constraint of black lesbianism being subsumed by the stereotypical view of the black woman as sexual object, thus minimizing any sense of multiplicity.

¹⁶ Charles Reeve, "Kara Walker at the São Paulo Biennial: A Conversation with Robert Hobbs," *Art Papers* 26 (March–April 2002): 13.

Playing off the larger colonialist construct of the respectable versus the uncivilized—which Dingle and Wilson explore as it trickles down into personal, private space—Myrella Moses and Eric Mondriaan collaborate on art that is built around contrasts and the marriage of opposites on a more universal scale (see fig. 41). *In the Mean Time* (1992; fig. 55), an earlier work by Moses, melds techniques of sculpture and painting. It shows a stark white pillow and bed sheets on the left and a brown primitive headrest on tan earth on the right. Half hidden beneath the pillow is a handgun. A knife lies propped against the ancient headrest. Primitive or civilized, we all have something to fear but also to reconcile.

Fear of the other and the refusal to communicate and to develop trust have been among the major themes of Adrian Piper's work through the past few decades. The experience of having light skin, which has sometimes led people to assume that she was white, has inspired her to explore issues of racism, racial stereotyping, and xenophobia. In *What Will Become of Me* (1989; fig. 54), Piper displays bottles containing her hair, fingernails, and skin as part of a work that puts the viewer in the here-and-now of an actual person. It does not so much depict a state of affairs concerning race in America, referring to a political reality that is always elsewhere, but instead collapses the distance between the subject and the viewer by introducing parts of the body as if they are specimens or relics. Her trusting self-disclosure implies an expectation of the same from the viewer, and perhaps she is suggesting that trust can be the formula for willingly exploring the mess of who we are as individuals and as a society.

Adamant Irregularity

Exhibitions that have opened in the past few years—most notably, *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art* (2000) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and *Freestyle* (2001) at the Studio Museum in Harlem—suggest that the exploration of identity in contemporary art has entered a new phase. The use of the prefix *post-* in either the exhibition title or the catalogue essays acknowledges that the artworks selected for these shows evolved *after*, and in response to, those included in the exhibitions of the early and mid-1990s that addressed issues of identity. (Interestingly, *Ultrabaroque* and *Freestyle* were organized by the same museums or curators who organized exhibitions that were part of the initial dialogue at the beginning of the 1990s. *La Frontera/The Border* was co-organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and curator Thelma Golden organized both the *Black Male* and *Freestyle* exhibitions.)

In the introduction to *Freestyle* catalogue, Golden writes: "Post-black' was shorthand for post-black art, which was shorthand for a discourse that could fill volumes. For me, to approach a conversation about 'black art,' ultimately meant embracing and rejecting the notion of such a thing at the very same time." She goes on to explain the use of the phrase "post-black": "It was a clarifying term that had ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions. It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness."¹⁷

Golden's emphasis on the complexity of identity is significant.

A concern with the multiplicity of identity and the hybridity fostered by diverse societies

17. Thelma Golden, introduction to *Freestyle* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.

is central to these recent projects. In her essay for *Ultrabaroque*, curator Elizabeth Armstrong traces the word *baroque* to the Portuguese *barroco*, referring to an imperfectly shaped pearl. Then she relates this definition to her own use of the term, writing that the title *Ultrabaroque* "suggests myriad ideas revolving around the notion of imperfection which are germane to our discussion of contemporary art and culture. Given the baroque's resistance to fixed categories of interpretation, the irregular pearl can be seen as an emblem of, if not a paradigm for, difference and, by extension, a hybridity that resists order and classification."¹⁸

These exhibitions and the artists represented therein suggest that we now live in a world of hybridity and multiple identities. Dyer writes that "the old illusory unified identities of class, gender, race, sexuality are breaking up"—a legacy of the civil rights movement, feminism, gay activism, poststructuralism, and postcolonial thought—"someone may be black *and* gay *and* middle class *and* female; we may be bi-, poly- or non-sexual, of mixed race, indeterminate gender and heaven knows what class. Yet we have not yet reached a situation in which white people and white cultural agendas are no longer in the ascendant."¹⁹

Is all this discussion and display of difference then really just titillating entertainment for whites, who know that they are still in charge? Is the cultural study of whiteness simply a way to recenter the white by appropriating the language of multiculturalism, just as, according to Toni Morrison, white male characters used black men to enable their self-discovery, bolster their self-worth, and define their own identity in early American literature?

I hope that *Whiteness, A Wayward Construction* will contribute to the dialogue about the naming of whiteness as a means to dislodge whites from their centrality and authority. The privilege conferred by whiteness is to be considered human and normal, to be viewed as a multifaceted, complex, and mutable individual, as opposed to being categorized, fixed, and kept in place. If we want to live in a society where others enjoy the same privilege, it will be necessary for whites to acknowledge both their nature as racial beings (even if we accept that race is largely a social construct) and the way that whiteness has operated, often by stealth, to maintain social and economic hierarchies. The artists represented in the exhibition take many different approaches to the subject—ranging from the unsettling to the humorous—but they contribute to this process by reminding us of the history of inequality that we have yet to overcome and by helping us to envision a future beyond whiteness.

18. Elizabeth Armstrong, "Impure Beauty," in *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 1.

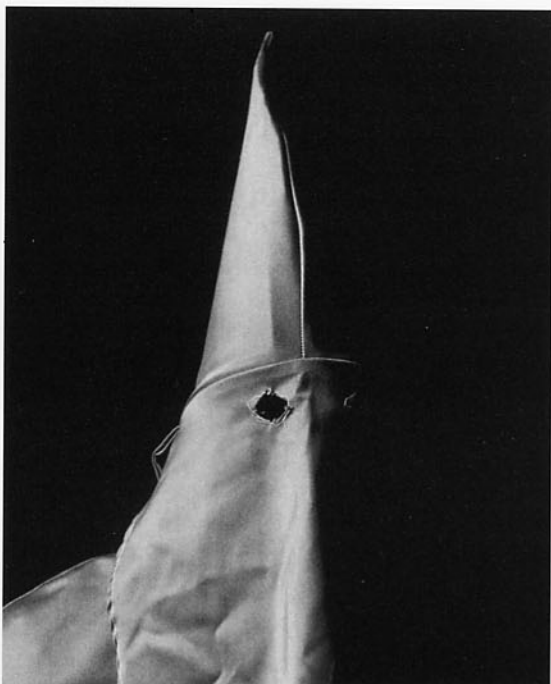
19. Dyer, *White*, 3.



James Casebere

3

The Prison at Cherry Hill, from the Prison series, 1993
Cat. no. 3

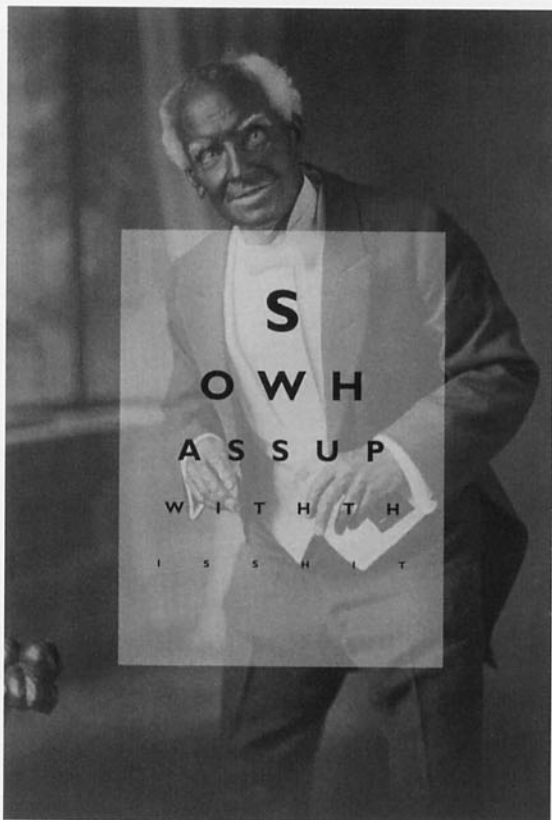


21

Andres Serrano

Klansman (Imperial Wizard III), 1990

Cat. no. 40



22

Mark Steven Greenfield

Uncle, 2001

Cat. no. 19

Daniel Joseph Martinez



26

I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White, 1994

Cat. no. 35



48

Kim Dingle

Untitled (Wild Girls), 1993

Cat. no. 56



49

Lezley Saar

Mulatto Nation Gift Shop, 2003 (detail)

Cat. no. 68