

Frieze

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Black Is, Black Ain't



BY JASON FOUMBERG

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Reintroducing specific landmarks from the history of black society in America but with a twist

Both polarized by race and, at turns, seamlessly integrated, what better place than Chicago to host an exhibition titled 'Black Is, Black Ain't'? The Renaissance Society's thematic group show follows seven years after the similarly themed 'Freestyle' at the Studio Museum in Harlem. In a catalogue essay for the latter show, Hamza Walker, the curator of 'Black Is, Black Ain't', argued that the characteristics of blackness depend largely on external representations rather than innate personality traits. ('A 'we' was assumed,' Walker states, 'imposing itself on whatever meager sense of self I could muster.') It is on this point that 'Black Is, Black Ain't' departs from the earlier exhibition's free-for-all multiculturalism, wherein all art made by black people was deemed 'black art'. Instead, Walker's exhibition re-introduces specific landmarks from the history of black society in America, and, with a twist, welcomes non-black artists into the discussion. Their inclusion highlights an attempt to define race as largely a community effort.



Paul D'Amato, 624 W.
Division (2007), archival Inkjet
 print, 47 x 39 inches

The art in the show does not 'represent' blackness, says Walker, toying with the term's double duty on the street and in art history. Instead, many pieces express an identity tempered by complexity, contradiction and subjectivity far from easy black-and-white conclusions. Joanna Rytel's video about interracial love and curiosity stokes an outmoded taboo, but its persistence acts as reminder and warning to successive generations. Likewise, Jason Lazarus's photograph, *Standing at the Grave of Emmitt Till, The Day of Exhumation, June 1, 2005* (2005), epitomizes the exhibition's theme of historical restoration. The image documents the murdered civil rights leader's unearthed grave after Till's body was carted away for autopsy. The exhumed plot registers as a small disruption, hardly as turbulent as the day Till died, in the otherwise serene, park-like cemetery on a calm sunny day in Chicago.

The history of blackness in America includes revolution and liberation during advertising's golden age. Hank Willis Thomas' *It's About Time* (2006) is a store window prop, cut in the shape of the Black Power salute, the wrist adorned with a gold watch. The symbol of strife and solidarity is reduced to a single note, but it also illustrates that every revolution does sport its own style. Mickalene Thomas' photograph, *Lovely Six Foota* (2007), re-issues a Blaxploitation-era foxy female stereotype, replete with afro, hoop earrings and leopard print. David Levinthal's photographs from the 'Blackface' series include knick-knack figurines in the 'Aunt Jemima' style, subservient with a dash of sass, with exaggerated lips and kooky eyes. Like Rytel's video about the interracial taboo, it's

difficult to see Levinthal's figurines as anything but memorabilia, especially as racial slurs are today so often used in light-hearted comedic refrain.

Andres Serrano's *The Interpretation of Dreams (White Nigger)* (2001), a photograph of a white man who passes for black beneath black-face makeup, prompts the physiognomy question, as does a nude family portrait by Willis Thomas, *The Johnson Family* (1981/2006). Here, a happy, loving and black family smiles with Normal Rockwell-esque sincerity as if to say, this is what black looks like.

Separating out the trite from the true – the 'is' from the 'ain't' – is not the task that the exhibition sets itself. Instead, things get necessarily muddled: Glenn Ligon's *Warm Broad Glow* (2005) declares the phrase 'negro sunshine' in neon, but the tubes have been painted black on the front, eclipsing any dazzle of sunburst. Rodney McMillian's *Chair* (2003) is a found broken lounge chair, its feet askew, cover torn and filling gutted. Absent a body, but included in this exhibit, the chair is poised to question assumptions about race and class.

Amid what amounts to a retrospective of stereotypes, it's the poetic flourishes that prove most satisfying. Sze Lin Pang's small floor-bound *Fétichito* (2006) sums up and echoes many of the show's themes. Emerging from a dollar-store purse in the shape of a leather-clad big booty is a grotesque lump of a body covered in black tar. Afro-picks decorated with fists and peace symbols puncture the tarred, or charred, body, as do flamboyant peacock feathers. Mixing humility with dejection, wit and pride, the fallen do rise.

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