

## BLACK BODIES, WHITE CUBES: THE PROBLEM WITH CONTEMPORARY ART'S APPROPRIATION OF RACE



Sanford Biggers, *Laocoön*, 2015.

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In December 2015, while at Art Basel Miami Beach, I was scrolling through my Instagram feed when I found a video of a large inflated object. The object was a body, lying face down, on its stomach. It was a black subject, male, and large. The sculpture, I learned, was called *Laocoön*, by artist Sanford Biggers, and was part of a solo exhibition at the David Castillo Gallery in a wealthy neighborhood of Miami Beach. The work depicts Fat Albert, from Bill Cosby's *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, and so it was dressed in a red shirt and blue pants. I watched the video for a moment and saw that the body was inflating and deflating slowly, like a person who was having trouble breathing, or perhaps experiencing his last breaths. I thought of Michael Brown. I thought of black lives. I thought of death. Then I noticed that in the video, the body was surrounded by a festive group of gallery goers, sipping wine, taking pictures of the panting body. The scene was grotesque. I thought, Not again.

Many contemporary artists respond to instances of police brutality, racism, xenophobia, and homophobia through their creative practices. In the wake of the recent attack on the LGBT community in Orlando, for instance, the art community rallied around the victims. Pioneer Works in Brooklyn [held a vigil concert](#). [Terence Koh recited](#) the names of the Orlando victims in a meditative performance at Andrew Edlin gallery. Hank Willis Thomas posted a photo on his [Instagram](#) of an enormous flag he'd made featuring some 13,000 stars—one for every victim of gun violence in the U.S. in 2015.

As new political movements like Black Lives Matter have gained influence in recent years, social practice has risen in stature and popularity in the art world. This has contributed to the hypervisibility of cultures that have, for a long time, operated along the margins—consider how integral [the work of Theaster Gates](#) has become to at risk communities in the South Side of Chicago, or how [Project Row Houses by Rick Lowe](#), taking inspiration from Joseph Beuys, has helped revitalize a section of Houston's Third Ward. But there is a new wave of contemporary work influenced by racial injustices, one that has arisen in the last two years and is decidedly more sensational, predominantly focusing on pain and trauma inflicted upon the black body. Artists have made systemic racism look sexy; galleries have made it desirable for collectors. It has, in other words, gone mainstream. With this paradoxical commercial focus, political art that responds to issues surrounding race is in danger of becoming mere spectacle, a provocation marketed for consumption, rather than a catalyst for social change.

Too often, I wonder if artists responding to Black Lives Matter are doing so because they truly are concerned about black lives, or if they simply recognize the financial and critical benefits that go along with creating work around these subjects. The year 2015 was a watershed in the new art responding to racism, arriving just after two separate grand juries failed to indict police officers who killed unarmed black men—Michael Brown in Missouri and Eric Garner in New York. Another shattering incident was the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, who mysteriously died while in custody, en route to a local police station. Artists responded to these events in different ways. At the Venice Biennale, [Adam Pendleton covered the walls](#) of the Belgian Pavilion with large panels that read BLACK LIVES MATTER. Robert Longo made a hyperrealist charcoal drawing of the heavily armed Ferguson, Missouri police, which was later [purchased by the Broad museum](#) in Los Angeles. Photographer Devin Allen—who was, in fact, protesting while documenting (or vice-versa) the 2015 Baltimore protests in response to Gray's death—captured a profound image of the Black Lives Matter movement that ended up in *Time* magazine.

There were, however, two artists—both white—inspired by Brown who stand out in particular for their unsettling crudeness. In March 2015, Kenneth Goldsmith gave a public performance in which he read aloud Brown's autopsy report, with slight edits to the text, during a conference at Brown University. A few months later, Ti-Rock Moore, a New Orleans-based artist, exhibited a realistic life-size sculpture of Brown's body, lying face down, recreating the moment after he was killed, taking his last few breaths before dying. Both of these pieces sparked wide-ranging criticism, but resulted in few repercussions for the artists. Goldsmith was later [profiled rather glowingly in the New Yorker](#). And even after Brown's father [shared](#)

[his disgust](#) about Moore's lifelike sculpture of his son, the work remained on view in a Chicago art gallery. The artist then unapologetically admitted that she creates her so-called socially relevant work for profit in an interview with *Pelican Bomb*. "My art is expensive to make. I am very far in the hole, and it has gotten to the point that I must start making money to be able to make more art," [Moore said](#).

This is lewd voyeurism masquerading as empathy. Moore's case is even worse for being sanctioned by a commercial gallery. (Her sculpture of Brown was not for sale, as Moore told the *Chicago Tribune*, but other works—including one that depicts the Confederate flag—did sell.) The platform that makes space for a sculpture of a black corpse by a white woman only further perpetuates the exploitation of black traumatic experiences. This co-optation is a general concern for artists interested in the new wave of social activism and racial justice. In a [2015 interview with Milk](#), the performance artist Clifford Owens said:

I know that it [Black Lives Matter Movement] is important but my concern is that the movement is an image. It's about a representation of blackness and I don't know if that's enough. I don't know if black American artists are doing enough because what I see some Black American artists do is use the image of #BlackLivesMatter to promote their own interests. Some have even made commodity out of the movement.

Owens's argument is not a new one. The extent to which the representation of blackness by artists and institutions is either enlightening or degrading has been debated for as long as artists and institutions have been representing blackness. In 1971, 15 artists withdrew from the Whitney Museum's "Contemporary Black Artists in America" as a result of the show being exclusively organized by white curators. In 1999, Kara Walker's *A Means to An End*, a five-panel etching depicting a grim antebellum scene with a pregnant slave and her abusive master, was censored from a show at the Detroit Institute of Arts after intense condemnation from representatives of the museum's Friends of African and African American Art. The group, [according to the Detroit Free Press](#), "complained that the piece had offensive racial overtones."

The representation of the black image in response to issues championed by Black Lives Matter is something else entirely, though. In these works, blackness becomes a metaphor for the movement itself, a kind of branding that can be bought, sold, marketed, and consumed. This played out in comments Biggers made about *Laocoön* recently at a conference on art and race in Detroit. The artist showed a video of the artwork, and the room was silent. "He's on a pump, so he's actually breathing his last breaths," Biggers told the audience, which responded with a collective moan. "Ultimately, I think this is about the loss of trust and authority. Bill Cosby was America's father figure, and through recent events we lost trust in him. We've lost trust in police, and their authority because they take our bodies."

In the conference, Biggers went on to share that "my work *does* live inside of white cubes, museums, galleries and so on, but I do have opportunities to take it out, because I think context adds to the theme of the piece." Biggers is not naïve about the importance of context, especially when presenting blackness, but this awareness

makes *Laocoön* all the more perplexing. In recreating the image of Brown, frozen in lifelessness, Biggers only valorizes the power of authority he aims to critique, and places it in a space that is necessarily voyeuristic—the white cube, where objects are gawked at.

I was in attendance at the conference, and as Biggers talked about the work, I surveyed the audience. Many of the reactions to the piece were simply silent, coupled with scattered gasps of exasperation and sadness. The audience members, I imagine, were recalling instances of police brutality—unwanted, yet deeply entrenched memories. This is what I was thinking of, anyway. But Biggers generally glossed over Brown—whose body, lying in the street, has become one of the default images of Black Lives Matter. The artist instead spoke nebulously about “authority” and fell back on the image of Fat Albert, a comedic cartoon character. This was crass and irresponsible, and depoliticized the very premise of *Laocoön*.

Nonetheless, this practice of incorporating (popular) historic material into art is nothing new for Biggers, and has been used to better effect in his work, like [Lotus \(2011\)](#), a 7-foot-diameter glass disc with hand carved images. The shape is modeled after the lotus flower, a popular symbol in Buddhist culture representing purity, wholeness, peace, and transcendence. In the work, only visible at a close encounter, each petal in the flower has carved images of diagrams depicting slaves in slaves ships. Another version of the piece was later installed on the outer wall of the Eagle Academy for Young Men, a high school in the Bronx, New York, that aims to prioritize young men from the black and Latino communities in the borough. Students had an opportunity to experience the work and “acknowledge a past that shall never be forgotten,” as Biggers said during the conference.

The work’s pedagogical element places social engagement at its core, unlike *Laocoön*’s surface-level confrontation with its audience. This is a crucial distinction, one that other successful political artists have explored. [Simone Leigh](#) has committed much of her work to promoting healing and self-care—two priorities that are extremely important in black America now considering the continuing brutality inflicted upon black bodies. Leigh has not exclusively tied her work to any contemporary political movement, but she reflects the experiences and needs of marginalized people, particularly black women. In 2014’s [“Funk, God, Jazz & Medicine: Black Heritage in Brooklyn.”](#) a public art project organized by The Weeksville Heritage Center and Creative Time, Leigh created the *Free People’s Medical Clinic*. The clinic, staged inside a 1914 Bed-Stuy brownstone mansion that was once home to a private obstetrical gynecological practice, Leigh recreated a free walk-in health clinic modeled after similar spaces opened by the Black Panther Party in the 1960s. Leigh, has been one of the few artists to respond to social injustices by focusing on black subjectivity—not just black bodies.

As I was writing this piece, I learned there had been more murders of unarmed black men by the police, one in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and yet another in St. Paul, Minnesota. These killings have become common and visible in recent years, but they remain, especially for a black person in this country, life-shattering, disabling, and immensely traumatic. I was reminded of an exchange I had with the artist and activist Dread Scott, in October 2015, when we appeared on a panel together. Scott has incited critical dialogue around American injustices ever since burning an