ART

Who Decides What Is Violent in the Museum?

Tone deaf, in a period defined by police brutality and racial discrimination, the MCA in Denver's spring exhibitions meditate on violence through a lens harkening back to Jim Crow.

Julie Carr May 10, 2018

Exterior view of MCA Denver, installation by Cleon Peterson, "Untitled" (2018), (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

DENVER — The first time I went to see this year's spring show at Denver's Museum of Contemporary Art, I had two 10-year-old girls in tow — my daughter and her friend. I was excited for Arthur Jafa's video "Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death" (2016), which I'd heard about, and curious about the

other works in the museum as well. Approaching the building, we were, you could say, struck by the massive mural by Cleon Peterson adorning the exterior, but since we weren't primarily there for Peterson's graphic (in both senses of this word) depictions of male violence, we walked on by and up the ramp to the front desk to pay our admission fee (only 1 cent that day). The young guy at the desk, who happened to be, like us, white, glanced down at our group and offered me a caveat: "You might want to watch the video in the basement on your own first before deciding whether or not to let your kids see it." "Oh?" I said, "Why? Sex? Violence?" "Well," he responded awkwardly, "it's about black life, so ... "

I left the girls to wander around on the first floor and went down to the basement on my own. Outside the room where Jafa's video is installed, I confronted another warning: "ADULTS ACCOMPANYING YOUNG VIEWERS MAY WISH TO REVIEW LOVE IS THE MESSAGE THE MESSAGE IS DEATH IN ADVANCE, DUE TO ITS INCLUSION OF VIOLENT CONTENT." Thus armed with maternal caution, I entered the installation. In, around and through the "aspirational and eschatological rap-gospel masterpiece" (Greg Tate) of Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam" runs Jafa's lovingly edited montage of black sociality, virtuosity, vulnerability, sadness and beauty. It's hard to capture in a list how extensive Jafa's range is. There's pregnancy, baptism, motherhood and fatherhood; marriage, child-play, friendship, protest and dance. There's the microphone and the ball field and the podium; the

street, the house party, the church. There's celebrity — from Michael Jackson, Jimmy Hendrix, and James Brown to Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers and Angela Davis.

Arthur Jafa, still from "Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death," Angela Davis (2016)

There's black cinema from *Killer of Sheep*, to Lee's *When the Levees Broke*, to Bradford Young walking with purpose, pressed against scraps from *Birth of a Nation*. There's also violence, just about all of it from the police: the murder of Walter Scott; Eric Casebolt throwing 15-year-old Dajerria Becton to the ground; hoses in Birmingham; and one devastating scene where a black mother and her two kids are forced to walk from their vehicle, hands up. "You're terrorizing my children!" she says to that cop in a moment of defiant courage that's so important to the film that it marks its center, the only time when all other sound drops away. There is no sex, but there is precisely five total seconds of some amazing twerking, which another white mother must have found inappropriate, for every time it came up, she'd belatedly cover her young son's eyes.

The violence, all of it found-footage from real life and easily searchable on YouTube, all of it already viewed by millions, occupies precisely 48 seconds of the film's 8 minutes.

"Profound": That's the word that Jafa uses most often when discussing the film with Greg Tate and an audience at GBE Gallery in New York (the video of that conversation is playing

on three monitors outside the screening room, and is also available on Vimeo). That's also the word I would use to describe the emotional scale, political value, and technical mastery of the work. "Love is the Message" is, I think, an example of what Christina Sharpe calls "wake work": "Black visualsonic resistance to that imposition of non/being" (Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*). What aspects of this work are the museum staff and wall-text protecting me, or my kids, against?

Back on the first floor, I found the girls giggling, a little uncomfortable. The first floor is dedicated to an exhibit of the collage paintings of Denver artist, Diego Rodriguez-Warner titled *Honestly Lying*. The work is colorful, playful, and citational (quoting works by Matisse, Yoshitoshi and others). The paintings chosen for this exhibit also happen to be pretty packed with images of women's bodies, or rather, body parts. Legs, breasts, vaginas — generally presented as if cut or carved up and partially pieced back together.

Diego Rodriguez-Warner, "Untitled" (2018), acrylic, spray paint, and latex paint on carved panel

While these bits and pieces of the female form are appropriated from other periods and genres might ironize their impact (as curator Zoe Larkin puts it in her blog-essay on the show, "Why try to paint another nude woman when several really nice ones already exist?"), wall-text offers an art-historical context for the use and misuse of the female nude. However, perusing Rodriguez-Warner's own website

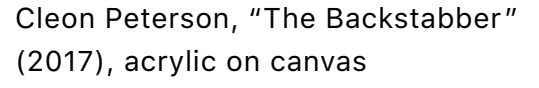
reveals an impressive range of works in a variety of styles, most of which don't traffic in carved-up breasts, vaginas, or legs. It appears likely that works were chosen for this show specifically for their interest in "violence," one of the museum's overall themes. But no trigger warnings accompany this version of violence.

Diego Rodriguez-Warner, detail of "Sirens" (2017), acrylic, spray paint, latex paint, and wood stain on carved panel

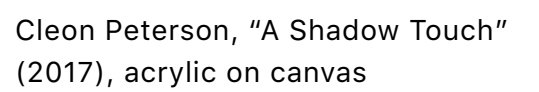
Yes, the girls were embarrassed, but their giggling seemed to house another set of feelings too — those underground emotions girls and women are forced to manage when confronting the bits and pieces of our bodies garishly offered up as invitation for someone else's eyes or pleasures, as we do every day of our lives. Call it shame or disgust or rage. It's fine, I told them, there's nothing in that movie you shouldn't see. They went down, and I went up to the second floor.

The second floor galleries, like the entirety of the museum's street-facing outer walls, are dedicated to the show titled *Shadows of Men*, by the white male artist, Cleon Peterson. Peterson's black, white and occasionally beige paintings and sculptures, inspired by Greco-Roman vases, do not just feature images of male violence, they embrace it with the kind of vigor we might find in a Reddit thread on the 2nd amendment, or in a frat house, or in the White House. But unlike the one color we most associate with those locales, Peterson's images of

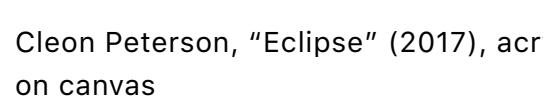
demonic male violence are overwhelmingly black. Black male figures tower above or thrust daggers or swords into the cowering or pleading bodies of white ones:



Cleon Peterson, "The Backstabber" (2017), acrylic on canvas



Cleon Peterson, "A Shadow Touch" (2017), acrylic on canvas



Cleon Peterson, "Eclipse" (2017), acrylic on canvas

White females tied with rope are hung up as if lynched, or run-through with phallic swords in the hands of their black attackers:

"Black people running for their lives," Jafa had said more than once in describing black life in America, but here on the second floor, it's whites who are begging for theirs.

Cleon Peterson, "Hocus Pokus" (2017), acrylic on canvas

There are no warnings specifically for white mothers or black or brown mothers or white or black or brown children on these walls. Instead, a sign outside the first gallery neutrally announces: "This Exhibition Contains Violence," information that comes a little late, considering the museum's exterior. Overpowering the sign is a quote from Carl Jung, instructing us in how to comprehend — "Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is

embodied in the individual's conscious life the blacker and denser it is" — and the work is further explained and justified with direct language from the artist himself who gives us some biographical information about growing up in a dysfunctional home and suffering from addiction. "I don't want to refrain from painting my impulses," he asserts, "My work is about hedonism as well as power. It's like the Roman Bacchanalia festival, where society breaks down for a day and everybody acts on impulses." Understand, these are not paintings of orgiastic festivals, nor do they depict the actual power relations between black and white people in America. These paintings offer extraordinarily outsized but ultimately ordinary stereotypes of black male violence and white female (and male) victimhood. The "impulses" they seem to indulge are those toward racism and misogyny. And why not? Everyone else is doing it.

Denver's most prominent art critic, Ray Rinaldi, reviewed Peterson's show for the *Denver Post* (though not Jafa's or Rodriguez-Warner's that I could find). His review offers a kind of query: "It's not exactly clear what Peterson intends us to see as all these black figures massacre all these white figures. Metaphorically, you might decode it as the battling forces of darkness and light. Peterson, through his drawings, and [MCA director and curator Adam] Lerner, through his immersive presentation, force us to see this basic human struggle as something that goes on outside in the real world and within our own selves." Rinaldi thus manages to be critical of the problematic depictions of race and gender in these works while also universalizing and psychologizing their violence: "basic

human struggle"; "within our own selves." A moment later he acknowledges that, "there is also no denying the context of the times we live in, which are racially charged and loaded with bitter divisions sparked by violence between blacks and whites." But Rinaldi seems to conclude that viewing these works through a racialized lens is our problem, not Peterson's (or Lerner's). Maybe we can't help but think about what Rinaldi euphemistically calls "current events" (as if white fantasies of black male criminality were new), but Peterson is nonetheless "brave" for being "true to his vision."

Rinaldi's review alludes to, but doesn't emphasize, the misogyny in Peterson's work, of course, the spears and daggers thrust into and through women's bodies merit no discussion at all on the museum's walls. But it's important to note that female subjectivity is, in fact, treated with dignity and respect — in the basement. Not only does "Love Is The Message" celebrate such intellectual powerhouses as Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Angela Davis, but also, during the conversation with Tate, Jafa speaks directly and often about his efforts to honor the subjectivity, courage, and genius of these and other black women. In one such moment, Jafa notes an interaction between a man and a woman in the video that he finds disturbing. In a scene so brief you have to halt the footage to see it, the man appears to direct the woman into a dance she might not want to have. In response to what Jafa considers the "fixed positionality" of this scene, Jafa has the feminist scholar Hortense Spillers follow it, so that she can, as he says, "bear witness." In this way Jafa acknowledges his own position as a male, in debt to black feminist thought.

Arthur Jafa, still from "Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death" (2016) (Hortense Spillers)

Cleon Peterson, detail of untitled mural

As we were leaving the museum, the girls told me there wasn't any scene of police violence that they hadn't already seen online or in the unit on Civil Rights they'd just finished studying at school. "We know about that, we studied that," they said. And that may be, but the aspect of Jafa's work that I don't think they already know, that I don't believe their mostly white public school has them study, invites them to "bear witness" to, is the video's remaining 7 minutes and 12 seconds of black sociality, artistry, and brilliance.

In a museum, walls do talk. This all-male show with violence at its center is clearly meant to provoke thoughts about masculinity, violence, and race. It's good for the museum to bring these issues to the fore in a range of ways, even uncomfortable ones. And I'd be surprised if the curators, who often feature feminist work, hadn't anticipated some of my responses here. However, the building is speaking a story that I'm less sure its curators are in control of. When white male violent fantasies and fears (literally) surround and dominate the imaginations of the black and brown artists "below," then the show's thrust is toward reinforcing, rather than complicating, our culture's love affair with white "bad-boys," a love affair that seems to thrive no matter, or maybe because of, how painfully familiar their fantasies are.

And when images of white on black violence are warned against, while images of black on white violence and misogyny are presented as universal truths we should all confront, then whose story, whose version of America, does such framing privilege? How many people, heeding the museum's warnings, kept their children from the basement, that space of emotional complexity and truth? Those same people would find themselves and their kids surrounded by images of black males performing violent acts on white figures, over and over and over, find themselves asked by the wall-text to empathize with the artist's "impulses," to empathize with his pain.

The scenes of police violence in "Love is the Message" were not easy on the girls, and not easy on me either. Why should they be? They're sad, the girls said, which is also the word that Jafa uses in describing the face of a young black boy, captured with his cheek against a tree branch — profoundly sad. And perhaps this is the emotion our institutions most want to guard against, warn against, keep in the basement, along with the outrage of the black mother's voice as she cries out to the cop, "You're terrorizing my children!" What might be on the other side of that sadness, that outrage, that terror if white people were ever to actually approach it, to let our children feel it? And what if instead of plastering the outer walls of the museum with familiar, tired, but still damaging tropes of black violence as imagined by a white man, the MCA had chosen to project images of black sociality, black love, black grief, and black humanness onto its very architecture? What then might happen in Denver?

Arthur Jafa's Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death *and Diego Rodriguez-Warner's* Honestly Lying *are on view at the MCA Denver until May 13, and Cleon Peterson's* Shadow of Men *is on view until May 27.*

Thanks to Jennifer Scappettone for the conversation that set this review in motion.

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