

Truths and Reckonings: The Art of Transformative Racial Justice

February 7–April 19, 2020

Truths and Reckonings explores how reparative curatorial practices attenuate legacies of historical racial violence by turning this teaching gallery into a “pop-up” memorial museum. The aim is to facilitate understanding and commemoration of this haunting presence of the past and encourage greater commitment to transformative racial justice.

Exemplified by museums engaging the Holocaust, enslavement, genocide, and other atrocities, memorial museums seek to translate education and commemoration around past injustice into ethical commitment to a just future. Memorial museums are a form of transitional justice practice, collectively meant to transform rights-abusing social orders into just societies organized by equal human and civil rights. Yet transitional justice often fails to transform, and past patterns remain present. In theory, transitional justice becomes *transformative* by freeing political culture from the trappings of past injustice, which requires facing this history, building shared truth, and committing to reparation and reconciliation.

Artworks and institutions are vital to this process. As mediators of historical consciousness, they inform understanding of the past and our relationship to it. To these ends this installation bears witness to difficult truths, enabling the acknowledgment and processing of traumas that are socially embodied and sustained, and imposing a counter-memory on a political culture invested in forgetting without knowing. Grouping objects to create unscripted dialogues between artworks from the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum’s permanent collection and items on loan from Washington University Libraries’ Department of Special Collections, *Truths and Reckonings* stages a virtual public hearing where the evidence informs critical reflection, unsettles and rebuilds understanding, and promotes openness and urgency to change.

Stationed at the gallery entrance, Frederick B. Schell’s engraving *Plantation police, or home-guard examining passes on the road leading to the levee of the Mississippi River* (1863) opens a meditation on legacies of enslavement. Tracing the origins of policing in the United States to the crucible of chattel slavery, the image affords a long view of our enduring ordeals of racialized over-policing and under-protection and captures quotidian aspects of racial subjugation. Kara Walker’s *Golddigger* (with Klaus Bürgel, 2003) and *The Bush, Skinny, and De-boning* (2002) invoke more intricate and varied instruments of racialized violence and repression, a more general brutalization of our political culture, and the social reproduction of racialized violence in the era of enslavement and its aftermath.

Truths and Reckonings counters the false narrative that settler colonialism, genocide, and enslavement—histories deeply embedded in our nation’s origins—“ended long ago” by charting their wake. Selections from Glenn Ligon’s series *Runaways* (1993), which employs the format of wanted posters, call to mind a persistence of hyper-surveillance and racialized social control, including their discursive aspects. His textual portraits of a complex black personae contrast with caricatured, flattened renderings more typical of such posters and much mass communication since, including racist discourses of today (such as on “thugs” and “illegals”) that rationalize contradictions of repression and confinement in our alleged “land of the free.”

Representations of a related and longer-run racial project, where constructions of “racial threat” seek to legitimize genocidal violence against American Indians, similarly map the presence of the past. The grouping near the gallery entrance features Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds’s protest work *Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf, Telling Hachivi* (1989), critiquing racist stereotypes and the appropriation of Native American culture. Accompanying are the illustrative caricatures (white and Indian) of Henry Howe and Robert Telfer’s *Heroism of a Pioneer Woman* (1860) and a present-day paean to Manifest Destiny, the St. Louis County historical marker memorializing white settler colonialism. Erected in 1955, a year after Thurgood Marshall and his colleagues technically prevailed in *Brown v. Board of Education* (US schools remain segregated to this day), the marker stands today outside the county police headquarters, defining the jurisdiction as a white place, compromising equal protection.

As an intervention in public memory, *Truths and Reckonings* seeks to unsettle stock notions of American freedom so that liberty might be realized. Just beyond Glenn Ligon’s *Runaways* are portraits paying respect to Archer Alexander, Missouri’s reputed “last fugitive slave,” who escaped from St. Charles, Missouri, to St. Louis, where he would never actually be free. Aided in escape by Washington University’s founding president, William Greenleaf Eliot Jr., Alexander was nonetheless assaulted by the slave patrol and imprisoned in a St. Louis slave pen. Eliot helped Alexander attain another tenuous liberation shortly before the Emancipation Proclamation made its way to Missouri, freedom’s Compromise State, and commissioned these portraits of Alexander to serve as a model for the formerly enslaved person depicted by Thomas Ball in his memorializing sculpture *Emancipation Group* (1875). Ball’s rendering of Alexander as an inferior signaled the persistence of white supremacist ideology and the related reign of racist violence—cultural, structural, and direct—in America’s apartheid era (c. 1870s-1960s). Alexander died in 1879, shortly after St. Louis’s mayor pledged to deny sanctuary to destitute southern black migrants fleeing persecution.

Adjacent prints, photographic works, digital media, and other artifacts revisit this era of American apartheid, a key sociological bridge between present injustice and that of the distant past. In the illustration *Dedicated to the Chicago Convention* (1864), Thomas Nast warns of the threat of Confederate victory and an associated continuation of racial terror, hoping to build Union resolve to win the Civil War. Today his rendering can be mistaken as memorializing the Compromise surviving that war. Assorted nineteenth- and twentieth-century newsclippings in the center of the gallery present material evidence of this still-unreconstructed political culture, including a masthead from *The Weekly Caucasian*, a newspaper published on the outskirts of Missouri’s “Little Dixie” region from 1866 to 1875, which was explicitly pledged to white supremacy.

In another of Nast’s illustrations, *Patience on a Monument* (1868), a black Union veteran waits atop a stele listing several cases of racial terror in the period, his family lying slain below. Adjacent screens reproduce the photographic memorabilia of a cross section of white civic actors implicated in several lynchings between 1885 and 1935. Forbearance of their racial terror was such that many of these photographs became postcards, circulated through US mail. Similar to Ken Gonzalez-Day’s 2006 photographic exhibition *Erased Lynchings*, the selected images exclude lynching victims in order to focus on the men, women, and children committing and consuming the atrocities.

Related Exhibition

Concurrently on view at the Julian Edison Department of Special Collections in Washington University’s Olin Library is *Truths and Reckonings: The Book Arts of Transformative Racial Justice*, an installation of book art from Special Collections, curated by Geoff Ward with Miranda Rectenwald and Jessi Cerutti, including works by students in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts. For details visit <https://library.wustl.edu/exhibitions/>.

The era's less spectacular yet more ubiquitous lethal structural and cultural violence is captured in photographs by Bruce Davidson, Lewis Hine, and Madeleine Osborne, as well as other objects of visual culture that comprise this grouping. It closes with *Thurgood in the Hour of Chaos* (2009), in which the artist Rashid Johnson—dressed as “Mr. Civil Rights” (Thurgood Marshall)—pays homage to “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos” (1988), a song by Public Enemy (PE) protesting state violence. An overlay of PE's crosshair logo onto the image of Johnson-as-Marshall suggests the ongoing construction of black Americans as enemy threats that must be contained and eliminated.

You might hear before you see *Free, White and 21* (1980), a video in which the artist Howardena Pindell testifies to everyday racism and sexism. In this work, reportedly born of her therapeutic effort to recover lost memory after traumatic injury, Pindell's monotonal testimony seems symptomatic of physical and complex trauma. Her truth is contested by a familiar, self-appointed, white arbiter whose micro-aggressive withholding of recognition undermines repair. As a sonic and visual element, the work challenges visitors to resolve a source of potential discomfort and confusion by seeking, hearing out, and understanding its protest.

This challenge continues through a grouping that foregrounds the contested truth—its evidence be damned—of racialized over-policing and under-protection. Works by Bruce Davidson and Andy Warhol document police repression half a century before the images displayed in conjunction with these works poured into the Documenting Ferguson archive, an initiative of Washington University's Libraries to preserve and share digital media generated by community members after the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Three digital screens cycle thematically selected images—of people, protest signs, and state officials drawn together in the subsequent uprising and the broader call and response of the Black Lives Matter movement.

That ongoing local and global charge to end white supremacy and its violence through transformative racial justice remains contested, including by a resurgence of white nationalism. This response is anticipated by Glenn Ligon's *Untitled (Two White / Two Black)* (1992), which combines narrative and print techniques to reflect on ordeals of invisibility, whiteness, and othering as addressed in Zora Neal Hurston's *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* (1928) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Ligon's technique both animates and obscures these plaintive texts, evoking an unwillingness to acknowledge and heed anti-racism alongside the enduring need to bear witness to its plain, if unpleasant, truth.

This installation is presented as a pop-up memorial museum in order to stress its commemorative focus and to embrace its exploratory and fleeting presence in this particular space. The exhibition serves to illustrate that restorative practices can unfold in museums and galleries, notwithstanding—and in some ways owing to—their impermanence. Many institutions can create more space for reparative work, but the dynamism, expressive freedoms, accessibility, legitimacy, and influence of museums make them ideal for the commemoration of truth—the cornerstone of transformative transitional justice. As sources of historical representation and understanding, museums can uniquely expose the legacies we embody and reproduce, and in this way support our repair.

Geoff Ward

Associate Professor

Department of African and African-American Studies

Arts & Sciences

This Teaching Gallery exhibition is curated by Geoff Ward, associate professor in the Department of African and African-American Studies in Arts & Sciences, in conjunction with his seminar “Monumental Anti-Racism,” offered in spring 2020.

Checklist of the Exhibition

Bruce Davidson

American, b. 1933

Arrest of a demonstrator in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963, printed later

Gelatin silver print, 8 × 11 ¹⁵/₁₆"

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, Gift of Jan and Ronald Greenberg, 2012

Mrs. Annie Blackman holding baby Felicia inside her sharecropper cabin, near Selma, Alabama, 1965, printed later

Gelatin silver print, 8 × 11 ¹⁵/₁₆"

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, Gift of Jan and Ronald Greenberg, 2012

The police and the army escort the Selma Freedom Marchers led by Martin Luther King Jr., 1965

Black-and-white reproduction, 8 × 11 ⁷/₈"

Courtesy Bruce Davidson / Magnum Photos

A young demonstrator wrapped in a flag protests racism at the Selma march; behind him Father Smith of San Antonio, 1965

Black-and-white reproduction, 11 ¹/₄ × 8"

Courtesy Bruce Davidson / Magnum Photos

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds

Native American, b. 1954

Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf, Telling Hachivi, 1989

Screen print on 2 joined sheets, 5/50, 72 ¹/₂ × 45"

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, University purchase, 1992

Lewis Hine

American, 1874–1940

Untitled, c. 1920

Gelatin silver contact print, 5 × 4"

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, Gift of Nicholas Vahlkamp, 1994

Henry Howe

American, 1816–1893

Robert Telfer

American, 1825–1868

Heroism of a Pioneer Woman, from *The Great West*, published c. 1857–60

Hand-colored engraving, 4 ¹/₂ × 3 ³/₈"

James E. and Joan Singer Schiele Print Collection, Rare Book Collections, Washington University in St. Louis,

Rashid Johnson

American, b. 1977

Thurgood in the Hour of Chaos, from the portfolio *America America*, 2009

Photolithograph, 47/50, 29 ⁵/₈ × 22"

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, Gift of Exit Art, 2013

Glenn Ligon

American, b. 1960

Selections from the portfolio *Runaways*, 1993

Lithographs, 30/45, 16 × 12" each

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, University purchase, Nathan Cummings Fund and Art Acquisition Fund, 1996

Untitled (Two White / Two Black), 1992

Portfolio of 4 prints: softground etching, aquatint, spit bite, and sugarlift, 25 ¹/₄ × 17 ¹/₂" each

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, University purchase, Charles H. Yalem Art Fund, 1997

Thomas Nast

American, b. Germany, 1840–1902

Dedicated to the Chicago Convention, from *Harper's Weekly*, September 3, 1864

Engraving, 9 ¹/₄ × 13 ³/₄" (plate)

James E. and Joan Singer Schiele Print Collection, Rare Book Collections, Washington University in St. Louis

Patience on a Monument, from *Harper's Weekly*, October 10, 1868

Engraving, 13 ³/₄ × 9 ¹/₈" (plate)

James E. and Joan Singer Schiele Print Collection, Rare Book Collections, Washington University in St. Louis

Madeleine Osborne

American

Untitled (Belle Glade, Florida), 1945

Gelatin silver print, 8 ¹/₄ × 10"

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, University purchase, St. Louis Printmarket Fund, 1993

Howardena Pindell

American, b. 1943

Free, White and 21, 1980

Color video with sound, transferred to digital file, 12:15 min.

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, University purchase, Bixby Fund, 2012

Reprinted newspaper articles (1872–1948)

Sourced from Newspapers.com

Saint Louis County marker outside St. Louis County Police Department building, Clayton, Missouri, erected in 1955 by the State Historical Society of Missouri and State Highway Commission

Photograph courtesy of Geoff Ward, 2019

Frederick B. Schell

American, d. 1905

Plantation police, or home-guard, examining passes on the road leading to the levee of the Mississippi River, from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, July 11, 1863

Engraving, 9 × 14" (plate)

James E. and Joan Singer Schiele Print Collection, Rare Book Collections, Washington University in St. Louis

John A. Scholten Photography Studio, St. Louis

Portraits of Archer Alexander, c. 1870-71

Black-and-white photographs, 4 ¹/₄ × 2 ¹/₂" and 4 × 2 ¹/₂"

William Greenleaf Eliot Personal Papers, University Archives, Washington University in St. Louis

Slideshow of images of apartheid in America

Photographs and ephemera sourced from Artstor.org and Newspapers.com

Slideshow of images of crowds at historical lynchings

Photographs and postcards sourced from Artstor.org

3 Slideshows of images relating to Ferguson, Missouri, in and after August 2014

Sourced from the Documenting Ferguson digital repository, Washington University in St. Louis

Kara Walker

American, b. 1969

The Bush, Skinny, and De-boning, from *Edition No. 19*, 2002

Painted stainless steel in 3 parts, 29/100, 5 ³/₄ × 5 ¹/₂ × ³/₄", 4 ¹/₂ × 4 ¹/₈ × ³/₄", and 5 ³/₄ × 6 × ³/₄"

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, Gift of Peter Norton, 2015

Kara Walker

American, b. 1969

Klaus Burgel

German, b. 1958

Golddigger, 2003

22k gold and mixed media, 2/10, 10 ¹/₄ × 16 × 16" overall
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, Gift of Peter Norton, 2015

Andy Warhol

American, 1928–1987

Birmingham Race Riot, from the portfolio *X + X (Ten Works by Ten Painters)*, 1964

Screen print, 219/500, 20 × 24"

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, University acquisition, 1970