

Un-Fair Trades: Artistic Intersections with Social and Environmental Injustices in the Atlantic World

Day 1: Thursday, October 10th

Location: The CUNY Graduate Center, Segal Theater

Panel 1

1:15-3:00: *Indigeneity and Intersectional Ecology*

Moderator: Hayes Peter Mauro, Associate Professor, Queensborough Community College, CUNY

Christine Garnier, Ph.D. Candidate, Harvard University, “Squaring Silver’s Void: Deforestation and the Mining Photographs of Timothy H. O’Sullivan”

Nathan K. Rees, Assistant Professor, University of West Georgia, “Racializing Resources: The Colonialist Ecology of the Utah State Capitol Murals”

Zoë Colón, Ph.D. Student, University of Delaware, “Material Absence, Relational Presence: Courtney Leonard’s *Breach* Series and Whales as Medium”

Christine Garnier
Ph.D. Candidate, Harvard University

***Squaring Silver's Void:
Deforestation and the Mining Photographs of Timothy H. O'Sullivan***

During the winter of 1867-68, Timothy H. O'Sullivan carried his stereo camera into the depths of the Savage silver mine as part of his work for Clarence King's *Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel*. The stereo camera's square frame harshly crops O'Sullivan's staged photographs of miners, mimicking the vertical and horizontal wooden beams of Philip Deidesheimer's square-set timbering method as if to lampoon the figurative structure of the silver mining industry as a whole. Around the same time, O'Sullivan took a group portrait of local Indian agent H. G. Parker with a group of Northern Paiute men and women dressed in western attire, who were likely displaced by the same mining ventures O'Sullivan was tasked to photograph. This paper considers the gap between these two images by examining the environmental ramifications of silver mining on the Northern Paiute community. The influx of industrial mining ventures into the Great Basin disrupted intricate Paiute systems of food cultivation in the desert area, driven by the deforestation to support the mineshaft networks of the Comstock. Known for their adept knowledge of desert root vegetation, leaders in the mining industry often labeled the Paiute peoples as "savage diggers" to construct a binary between "primitive" indigenous knowledge and "advanced" industrial mining techniques. Yet many of the Northern Paiute peoples remained central experts on the land, including as scouts to King's survey team. Forced to find wage work on farms, in borax mines, and on infrastructure projects (i.e. mills, roads), many Paiute workers helped sustain the mining population of Virginia City by contributing their knowledge of the terrain. By reinserting the Paiute community into the history of the Comstock, this paper aims to critique capitalist assertions of technological superiority that come into question in O'Sullivan's photographs.

Nathan K. Rees

Assistant Professor, University of West Georgia

***Racializing Resources:
The Colonialist Ecology of the Utah State Capitol Murals***

In 1935, Utah dedicated a PWAP project led by painter Lee Greene Richards, a monumental cycle of murals inside the dome of the state capitol representing the history of the state's settlement. At that moment, Utah was dealing with an unprecedented environmental crisis—drought had brought aquifer levels perilously low, critically endangering the region's agriculture-driven economy. I explore how the Utah State Capitol murals marshal the racial politics of colonial history to advocate for radical human intervention in the natural hydrology of the Great Basin as the solution to the state's water crisis.

Richards' mural cycle engages with the state's ecological history, positioning colonizers and colonized in an antipodal relationship with the natural world. The panel "Peace with the Indians" stereotypes the Timponogos Utes as representing wild, untamed nature. "Advent of Irrigation by Pioneers," by contrast, imagines Mormon Settler's hydrological interventions as having transformed an arid waste into an agricultural paradise—civilization supplanting barbarism and fostering human progress. The murals' counterfeit history effaces Native Peoples' successful strategy, over millennia, of adapting their lifeways to the natural ecology of their homeland, producing a flourishing culture on the shores of Utah Lake. But dramatic overuse of freshwater resources for irrigating environmentally- inappropriate crops contributed to the near complete disappearance of the lake by 1935. Twentieth- century Utahns were faced with the choice of adapting their water consumption to the reality of the arid environment or further expanding their intervention in the region's hydrology. The state chose the latter, supporting the Provo River Project, a system of reservoirs and canals which redirected water away from the Ute's Uintah and Ouray Reservation and toward the agricultural settlements that had replaced them along the Wasatch Front. By advocating irrigation, Utah's capitol murals advance the state's ongoing colonialist exploitation of resources at the expense of Native Peoples.

Zoë Colón

Ph.D. Student, University of Delaware

***Material Absence, Relational Presence:
Courtney Leonard's Breach Series and Whales as Medium***

A recent UN report on declining global biodiversity emphasizes the need for Indigenous perspectives in order to find sustainable solutions to species extinction.¹ How can art express knowledge about Indigenous communities' culturally vital relationships with animals, especially when colonialism, economic globalization, and ecological devastation have impeded their ability to engage in those relationships?

I explore this question through the work of Courtney Leonard (b. 1980), a Shinnecock artist who articulates the changing relationship between Shinnecock and whales in her mixed-media series *Breach* (2013–ongoing). Whaling has long been integral to Shinnecock life and culture on the northeast Atlantic coast, in the community now known as the Hamptons. Declining whale populations and the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which outlawed all use of whale parts in the United States in response to commercial whaling, have compelled Shinnecock to adapt their relationship to whales.

Breach, which includes painting, ceramics, and multimedia installations, invites reflection on the possibilities of reconciliation of the capitalist system that led to the devastation of whale populations, and Shinnecock ecological knowledge. In particular, I address *Scrimshaw Studies* (2013), a grouping of ceramics that simulate the shape and size of sperm whale teeth. The sculptures, inspired by the scrimshaw carving tradition, contemplate the intimate relationship between the small Shinnecock community and local whales, including their intersection with an exploitative history of colonialism in which Shinnecock traditions were appropriated for the global expansion of commercial whaling.

Drawing on ecocritical media theory, I argue that *Breach* engages with whales as a medium, despite their material absence in Leonard's work. Through whales' material absence, *Breach* demonstrates how Shinnecock knowledge preserves the relational presence of whales in their coastal community, thereby ensuring the resilience of Shinnecock-whale relations even when Shinnecock access to whales is severely limited.

Note

1. See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedented-report/>.

Un-Fair Trades: Artistic Intersections with Social and Environmental Injustices in the Atlantic World

Day 1: Thursday, October 10th

Location: The CUNY Graduate Center, Segal Theater

Panel 2

3:15-5:00: *Extractive Industries and the Environment*

Moderator: Katherine E. Manthorne, Professor, The Graduate Center, CUNY

Tara Kaufman, MA, Temple University, “Antarctic Encounters: Perceiving Ecological Change in Frank Wilbert Stokes’s Landscapes”

Eliza Butler, Core Lecturer in Art Humanities, Columbia University, “Tiffany and Company’s Orchid Brooches: Environmental Damage as High Style”

María Beatriz H. Carrión, Ph.D. Student, The Graduate Center, CUNY, “From Lago Agrio to Sour Lake: Pablo Cardoso, Oil Extraction, and Environmental (In)justice in Ecuador”

Tara Kaufman
MA, Temple University

***Antarctic Encounters:
Perceiving Ecological Change in Frank Wilbert Stokes's Landscapes***

In 1902, American artist Frank Wilbert Stokes embarked on his third voyage to polar regions, this time to the Antarctic. The motivations for the expedition that he joined proved to be particularly complex when its leader, Swedish geologist Otto Nordenskjöld, revolutionized the understanding of the region's climate and ecology at the same time that his captain, Carl Anton Larsen, established the first Antarctic shore station for the whaling industry. While the first accomplishment deepened our current understanding of the region's biodiversity, the latter developed an industry that was dependent upon its disruption. In perceiving the Antarctic landscape as a potential resource for economic gain, this expedition subjugated polar ecologies to the environmentally destructive practices of human industry precisely when the scientific understanding of the region's ecological history had just begun. By linking Frank Stokes's work to that of the expedition's, I argue that his Antarctic landscapes, particularly those that include the region's wildlife and native peoples, display an ecological sensitivity that makes visible the rather contradictory but entangled ambitions of scientific exploration and industrial development.

Using an ecocritical methodology, I position Stokes's work in its social, economic, and environmental context in order to articulate the romantic and nationalist perceptions that Western explorers held in the global race to investigate this allegedly unexplored frontier. This paper stems from original research conducted as a graduate fellow at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, where through Stokes's work I examined the ties between art, science, and industry in polar regions at the turn of the twentieth century. This research bridges the boundary between the work of an artist from the United States and the global dynamics in which he took part as he journeyed across the Atlantic Ocean. In employing a contemporary ecocritical lens, my project considers the ways in which Stokes's early twentieth century depictions of polar landscapes, as well as the native communities and other lively beings that inhabit them, prefigure the current critically-endangered conditions of both Arctic and Antarctic ecosystems.

Eliza Butler

Core Lecturer in Art Humanities, Columbia University

***Tiffany and Company's Orchid Brooches:
Environmental Damage as High Style***

Tiffany and Company promoted environmental injustice in their enormously popular orchid brooches produced by designer Paulding Farnham in 1889. Representing cut orchid blossoms with exacting verisimilitude out of enamel, gemstones, and gold, Farnham recreated South American orchid specimens that were even more perfect than the real thing. However it was not only the representation of orchids that called attention to Tiffany and Company's desire to control natural resources but also the materials from which these orchid brooches were made: diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and other stones— all of which had been extracted by Tiffany and Company's gemology team in North and South America. When these brooches were displayed at the Tiffany booth at the Exposition Universelle in 1889, they were accompanied by descriptions of the orchid varieties and their geographical locations and also of the gemstones used and where they were unearthed by the firm.

This paper explores the ways in which Tiffany and Company used the exploitation of natural resources as a promotional tool. With families like the Goulds, Havemeyers, and Mackays, who amassed large fortunes from extracting raw materials, making up a major portion of Tiffany and Company's consumer base, Farnham saw an opportunity to use extraction as a means of appealing to his clientele. The brooches, I argue, celebrated Tiffany and Company's own ability to identify natural resources, remove them, and then turn them into something more expensive, more perfect than the original natural specimen (according to market demands.) Promoted to their patrons and displayed on an international stage with this idea in mind, Tiffany and Company used extraction and exploitation as a means of endorsing their brand. This, I argue, contributed to a transatlantic imperialist aesthetic that celebrated environmental destruction as high style.

María Beatriz H. Carrión
Ph.D. Student, The Graduate Center, CUNY

***From Lago Agrio to Sour Lake:
Pablo Cardoso, Oil Extraction, and Environmental (In)justice in Ecuador***

The 2008 Ecuadorian constitution's legalization of the Pachamama synthesizes the ecological turn of Rafael Correa's presidency (2007-17). Correa mobilized an anticolonial agenda that condemned the exploitation of Ecuadorian nature at the hands of foreign companies. In 2013, the government launched a mediatic campaign against the oil giant Chevron-Texaco, which deliberately destroyed extensive areas of the national rainforest and polluted the principal water sources of the county of Lago Agrio. This initiative directly endorsed the twenty-year legal battle of the Shuar indigenous people against Chevron. While protesting against oil-drilling, nevertheless, Correa built refineries in pristine natural sites.

Amid these contradictions, Pablo Cardoso examined the predicaments of oil- drilling in his pictorial series *Lago Agrio-Sour Lake* (2012). Here, he depicts his journey from the Amazon to the Texan town of Sour Lake, where Chevron-Texaco opened its first oil-producing well. In traveling from Ecuador to North America, Cardoso reverts the itinerary of the corporations that historically expanded southwards. Moreover, the series features a strong performative component: During his trip, Cardoso carried a sample of oil-polluted water obtained in Lago Agrio that he eventually poured on Texan soil.

Informed by decolonial and eco-critical methodologies, this paper positions Cardoso's *oeuvre* in the broader ecological network developed during Correa's mandate. In this context, the argument of this essay is twofold: First, it proposes that *Lago Agrio-Sour Lake* evinces the asymmetries of the Ecuadorian extractive economy by visually linking the environmental destruction of the Amazon to American wealth. Second, it proposes that the series demonstrates that the decolonial alternative associated with Correa has been more actively pursued by indigenous and environmentalist groups than by the central state. In conclusion, this essay examines Cardoso's production as an aesthetic of protest and resistance that denounces the destruction of Amazonian territories and supports indigenous peoples' demands for environmental justice.

Un-Fair Trades: Artistic Intersections with Social and Environmental Injustices in the Atlantic World

Day 2: Friday, October 11th

Location: The CUNY Graduate Center, Segal Theater

Panel 3

9:45-11:45: *Agency and Alterity amid Migration and Displacement*

Moderator: Maya Jiménez, Adjunct Assistant Professor, Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY & Pace University

Sandra Cheng, Associate Professor, New York City College of Technology, CUNY, “In Detention: Art and Immigration in the Case of the Golden Venture Refugees”

Michael Hartman, Ph.D. Student, University of Delaware, “Albert Bierstadt’s American West as ‘The Italy of America in a Primitive Condition’”

Joseph Daniel Litts, M.A. Student, University of Delaware, “Weaving Together War and Memory in Isaac Vincent’s Cherokee Basket”

Abigail Lapin Dardashti, Ph.D. Candidate, The Graduate Center, CUNY, “Growing the Rhizome: Mestre Didi, Afro-Brazilian Abstraction, and Transnational Religious Networks, 1964–1988”

Sandra Cheng

Associate Professor, New York City College of Technology, CUNY

In Detention:

Art and Immigration in the Case of the Golden Venture Refugees

Housed in New York City's Museum of Chinese in America is the Fly to Freedom collection of paper sculptures created by detainees of the Golden Venture, a freighter used to smuggle undocumented immigrants into the U.S. In the summer of 1993, the ship ran aground off the Rockaways and nearly 300 migrants were detained by a U.S. agency that later evolved into Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Imprisoned within a detention center for lengthy periods, the Chinese refugees produced paper sculptures of ships, fruit, and eagles, which their advocates called "freedom birds." This American symbol of freedom and individuality was a contrast to the *persona non grata* status of the detainees caught in an escalation of anti-immigration policies. The plight of the Golden Venture detainees foreshadowed today's immigration crisis with ICE detaining more people than ever and separating families at the border.* A recent exhibition, "Uncaged Art," highlights work produced by teenage detainees of the Tornillo detention center in Texas. Similar to the Golden Venture sculptures, the children's art is produced with recycled materials and rudimentary crafting supplies, including popsicle sticks and pipe cleaners. This talk examines how the display of the detainees' works is used to advocate for social justice. The art serves as both markers of alterity and expressions of self, revealing issues of cultural and artistic transmission as well as the communal and individual agency of the disenfranchised. Caught in the political red tape of a punitive immigration policy, detainees use the creative process to express their deepest fears, anxiety, and hopes, producing art works that have become instruments of activism.

* CNN reports ICE held in detention an average of 40,000 people per day in 2018.

Geneva Sands, "This year saw the most people in immigration detention since 2001,"

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/12/politics/ice-detention/index.html>

Michael Hartman
Ph.D. Student, University of Delaware

Albert Bierstadt's American West as 'The Italy of America in a Primitive Condition'

While on his first journey through the American West in 1859, Albert Bierstadt mailed a letter to the *Crayon Art Magazine* in which he dubbed the western states and territories as “the Italy of America in a primitive condition,” a description that stands at odds with the German atmospheric effects of his critically acclaimed paintings. Having studied in Düsseldorf for three years with Andreas Achenbach and Emmanuel Leutze before travelling to Italy, scholars often note the German stylistic influence in Bierstadt’s paintings of the American West but fail to recognize the simultaneous presence of Italy his western paintings, which Bierstadt so vividly recalled during his first tour through the American West. Examining Bierstadt’s letters and drawings alongside popular novels by Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Fenimore Cooper, this paper recovers how the apparent foreignness of Italy and the American West, of Italians and Native Americans, intertwined within the white American mindset in the mid-nineteenth century and transformed the American West into an imaginary site that affirmed white Protestant superiority over indigenous Americans and rising Catholic immigrant populations.

This paper argues that Bierstadt first developed an interest in the western regions of the United States while a student in Düsseldorf—a city with a unique cultural fascination for buffalo, the open plains, and Native American tribal traditions—but that Bierstadt’s travel through Italy ultimately informed how he approached western subjects in his drawing practice. Detailing his travels, Bierstadt wrote how the West, “reminds me very much of some Italian towns [with] so many mules and curious wagons and picturesque dresses,” and his drawings reflect a broader American perception of a geographic and ethnographic relationship between Italy and the West. These works encapsulate white America’s xenophobic attitudes toward westward expansion, blending them with East Coast fears and anxieties that originate from the urban encroachment of growing Catholic immigrant populations.

Joseph Daniel Litts
M.A. Student, University of Delaware

Weaving Together War and Memory in Isaac Vincent's Cherokee Basket

In what was an act of “un-fair” trade, Captain Isaac Vincent, while aiding the US Army in the forced removal of Cherokee people (1836–39), collected a Cherokee rivercane basket. Acquiring the basket was a gesture of respect for Native art, but also a gesture of possession. Vincent simultaneously reduced the Cherokee people to one object and memorialized his participation in a military campaign that embodied his masculinity. Made by a Cherokee woman, the basket is a moment of stasis, reflecting long traditions of dyed, twill-woven cane basketry while anticipating later handled wood-splint baskets. The abundance of rivercane and plants for dyes in Georgia struck early Europeans, and the basket incorporates multiple aspects of the local environment. Vincent perhaps inserted the handles: a blatant imposition of Euro-American cultural systems. However, the handles also suggest possible peaceful co-existence, though only on White terms. Collecting Native American art advanced colonialist goals, while trade in these baskets was an important way for Cherokee women to make money. Baskets in inventories of displaced Cherokees indicate their continued importance to their makers. Multiple plausible scenarios surround the basket's origins, including theft, gift, trade, and sale. This tension is manifest in the basket's form and materiality as cultural and political conflict weave together. It is the struggle for Southeastern land in micro form. But in just remembering this basket as an object from Removal, its Cherokee-ness is subsumed within the memory of Isaac Vincent. This memory forgets that removal and assimilation were met with significant resistance, erroneously casting the Cherokee as a noble people nearly extinct in the early 19th century. Returning both sides to the basket creates dissonance between narratives, adding richness to our understanding. Un-fair trades are present in multiple ways, in the making, in the collecting, and in the preserving of this basket—a touchstone to a complicated cultural discourse.

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Day 2: Friday, October 11th

Location: The CUNY Graduate Center, Segal Theater

Panel 4

1:15-3:00: *(Re)creating Space, Recognizing Absence*

Moderator: Anna Indyk-López, Professor, City College & The Graduate Center, CUNY

Samantha A. Noel, Assistant Professor of Art History, Wayne State University, “The Artistic Intersections of Belkis Ayón”

Adrian Anagnost, Jessie Poesch Assistant Professor of Art History, Tulane University, “Looters: African Architectures in the Late-Atlantic European Imaginary”

Michaela Rife, Ph.D. Candidate, University of Toronto, “The Great Crop of the West: An Ecocritical Examination of Sugar Beets in the Art of New Deal Colorado”

Samantha A. Noel
Assistant Professor of Art History, Wayne State University

The Artistic Intersections of Belkis Ayón

Despite the reality that black populations have been deemed ungeographic since slavery, their collective opposition to geographic domination has nonetheless endured. The need to undo traditional geographies made it necessary to establish alternative spatial practices.

The Abakuá Secret Society emerged during slavery in Cuba as a fraternity for mutual aid and protection for black Cuban men. Secret societies such as Abakuá function as alternative social realities that exist in, what Katherine McKittrick calls, subaltern geographical arrangements. In many ways, they almost serve as non-spaces since they have often not been recognized as legitimate. However, this kind of space-claiming has been exclusively for black men.

Yet, as the art of Belkis Ayón has conveyed, black Cuban women have also had a dire need for space in secrecy. This paper will consider how works such as *Perfidia* (Perfidy) and *Resurrección* (Resurrection), both of 1998, recognize power in invisibility and thus disrupt the established paradigm of the secret society, despite its mythology dictating the omission of female members.

Black Cuban women needed access to these secret societies during the era of slavery, and this need for secrecy continued long after the abolition of slavery. Being included in such spaces would ensure the protection and dissemination of knowledge across generations, and opportunities for self-care. Indeed, to be secret is a viable strategy against the colonialist imperative of the hegemonic order. This need for secrecy is due to the forces that maintain imbalances of power socially, politically, and culturally across different time periods.

In this paper, I will explore how Ayón's art reveals imbalances of power in Abakuá given the omission of women which ultimately mirrors social and political inequities. I will in turn examine how her art illuminates how secrecy functions as an act of resistance that privileges black subjectivity.

Adrian Anagnost

Jessie Poesch Assistant Professor of Art History, Tulane University

Looters:

African Architectures in the Late-Atlantic European Imaginary

How was the site of West Africa constructed in the late-Atlantic European imaginary, and what was the role of architecture? At Un-Fair Trades, I will present ongoing research into architectural forms from West Africa, as revealed in details of European prints and photographs from the 1710s through 1890s, as European observers depicted terrains of encounters between West Africans and Europeans.

This was a period of trans-Atlantic exchange on a spectrum ranging from commercial trade to kidnapping, enslavement, and violent theft — of people, of art and artifacts, and of raw materials such as tin and rubber, but the built environment is not usually considered part of this history of looting. Painted wooden panels, bronze plaques and sculptural heads, and carved elephant tusks were stripped from palaces and shrines during French and British military incursions in Abomey (in present-day Bénin) and Benin City (in present-day Nigeria) during the 1890s, later arranged in rows within glass cases, or hung Salon-style in stacks running up a gallery wall. Their earlier architectural settings have often been disregarded. In addition to the loss of religious and social contexts, looting thus caused the architectures of West Africa's Guinea Coast to recede into the background.

In my research on architectures of modern Brazil and the 19th-century U.S., it became clear that African precedents were important. Seeking visual depictions (rather than archaeological evidence) of historical west African architecture led me to European prints depicting encounters in West Africa, as well as to a handful of architectural details in Benin bronzes. This paper thus offers a methodological provocation rooted in the unreliability of visual evidence — with European prints and photographs as a chain of repeated images slightly askew from reality, a visual game of telephone that offers one glimpse of a possible architectural typology of the late-Atlantic Bight of Benin region.

Michaela Rife

Ph.D. Candidate, University of Toronto

***The Great Crop of the West:
An Ecocritical Examination of Sugar Beets in the Art of New Deal Colorado***

In 1938 Russell Sherman installed his “Industries Around Loveland” mural in the Loveland post office in northeast Colorado. The scene includes an irrigation canal, a wheat field, cattle, and a sugar beet field and factory. As a locally relevant scene that portrays agriculture in a positive light, Sherman’s mural is emblematic of the New Deal Section of Fine Arts. The prominence of the beet fields and factory is fitting for a region that was dominated by the cash crop from the turn of the twentieth century. Notably, sugar beets in the United States could be accompanied by a utopian quality. For example, antebellum abolitionists researched sugar beet farming as an alternative to plantation-produced cane sugar; during the Great Depression, the beet industry promoted the idea that it insulated the region from economic downturn. This is partial context for Sherman’s triumphant mural that portrays an economically powerful industry in a prominent public space.

My paper uses environmental and labor histories to form an ecocritical lens, revealing the ugly histories of beet sugar that are absent from Sherman’s mural. For example, Sherman does not engage with the (relatively) recent histories of brutal military and settlement campaigns determined to wrest the Plains from Indigenous peoples, nor does it acknowledge the labor conditions of the industry. In fact, backbreaking work was excised from Sherman’s initial sketch, which he noted was due to the influence of a local sugar beet grower. This elision obscures the industry’s massive labor force, largely drawn from Latinx workers who experienced unrelenting racism in Colorado. I will engage surrounding art and visual culture to ask what is missing from Sherman’s mural and illuminate these absences. This careful reading of a public mural is important in light of the continued prominence and inequality of Colorado’s industrial agriculture.

Un-Fair Trades: Artistic Intersections with Social and Environmental Injustices in the Atlantic World

Day 2: Friday, October 11th

Location: The CUNY Graduate Center, Segal Theater

Panel 4

3:15-5:00: *Art and Activism*

Moderator: Ashley James, Assistant Curator, Brooklyn Museum & Ph.D. Candidate, Yale University

Greg Lindquist, Artist and Faculty, Pratt Institute & Rhode Island School of Design, “Of Ash and Coal”

Katherine Fein, Ph.D. Student, Columbia University, “From Hand to Hand: Photography, Abolition, and the White Body”

Rebecca Zurier, Associate Professor, University of Michigan, “Detroit’s Black Power Murals: Site and Meaning”

Greg Lindquist

Artist and Faculty, Pratt Institute & Rhode Island School of Design

Of Ash and Coal

In my work as an artist, writer, and educator, I work with the guiding principle that art facilitates social change, creating space for the mobilizing of political action and reshaping of common values. Working with the Environmental Justice movement, my work serves as a parallel and collaborative counter-hegemonic project. In my efforts, I am intervening in the history of the 19th-century American landscape painting, in particular the settler-colonialist Hudson River School, antagonizing and disrupting its celebration of the Transcendentalist artist and disinterest in any direct social or political critique. By instrumentalizing the aesthetic legacy of this movement to illuminate the communities inhabiting the coal-fired electric plants' surroundings in Texas, Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina, I'm also drawing connections between the colonizing function under Manifest Destiny with the maximum-profit-seeking electric companies, in which the degradation of breathable air and the contamination of drinking water dispossesses people of color and the working class.

In my extensive work with these communities, I wish to present in solidarity with the working class and people of color who are oppressed by the pollution, resultant draining of property values, and exploitative labor practices. Images of these painted landscapes where electric plants and residential homes populate horizons will be shown with this narration of critical analysis. To assess this history, I propose an analysis investigates and applies the theory of accumulation by dispossession, a concept extensively developed by the geographer David Harvey, which will illuminate the national and global neoliberal capitalist policies, originating in the 1970s. During this time, the majority of these electric plants in the American rural South were built, reflecting the centralization of wealth and power in the hands of the electric companies by dispossessing public and private land and resources, as well as exploiting labor of the working class.

Katherine Fein
Ph.D. Student, Columbia University

***From Hand to Hand:
Photography, Abolition, and the White Body***

In 1844, Jonathan Walker was caught while attempting to aid seven enslaved men escape from Florida to the Bahamas. He received an unusual punishment: his right palm was branded with the initials “SS” for “slave stealer.” The novelty of Walker’s scars captivated audiences on the anti-slavery lecture circuit and, in 1845, compelled Boston abolitionist Henry Ingersoll Bowditch to commission a daguerreotype of Walker’s hand from Southworth & Hawes. This paper examines that daguerreotype—the only known photograph of Walker’s hand—as it probes the troubling potency of a branded white body in the antebellum United States. I contend that the daguerreotype materializes the contradictions of the anti-slavery movement. By simultaneously bringing an absent body near and reifying its absence, and by offering to white audiences a hand simultaneously like and unlike their own, the daguerreotype at once made tangible the brutality of slavery and held it at an unthreatening distance.

The limited existing scholarship about Walker’s hand and this photograph centers on rhetorical strategies and religious invocations. More broadly, while scholars have long acknowledged the role of photography in U.S. abolitionism, they have rarely addressed such photographs as three-dimensional objects passing from hand to hand. Departing from this precedent, I take the materiality of Southworth & Hawes’s daguerreotype into account for the first time and propose that the photograph, like the hand it depicted, operated primarily through touch. This paper contextualizes close examination of the daguerreotype with historical newspapers, pamphlets, and memoirs to recuperate moments of haptic encounter. The daguerreotype traversed public and private spaces, circulated through print reproductions, and came into physical and conceptual proximity with representations of enslaved and formerly enslaved men and women. In all these contexts, touching and being touched by the daguerreotype produced contradictory experiences of proximity and distance, identification and dissociation, that managed white viewers’ investment in the abolition of slavery. Through my analysis, Southworth & Hawes’s daguerreotype emerges as an early case study in what a photograph of a scarred body could and could not do for the cause of abolition, and how the race and status of that body determined its reception among white audiences.

Rebecca Zurier
Associate Professor, University of Michigan

***Detroit's Black Power Murals:
Site and Meaning***

This paper develops models for understanding not only an iconography of art that addressed racial struggles but also how such art functioned in public space. Its focus is the now-destroyed murals that were painted in Detroit a year after, and in response to, the urban uprising or riot of 1967. Created by artists who had been involved with Chicago's celebrated *Wall of Respect*, Detroit's murals emulated the earlier project's arrangement of portraits of contemporary African-American "he-roes and she-roes" but extended their references in both time and space to encompass historical scenes and the leaders of African anti-colonial movements, juxtaposed with everyman figures that spoke to viewers in the present at street level.

The paper explores their function amidst the city's racial geography, in neighborhoods hit hardest by declining employment, white flight, police violence, and the Uprising's destruction of property. They can be understood both as an effort—by Black artists--to enlist the nationalist ideas of the Black Arts movement in fostering creative identity and pride through images of African-American achievement *and* as generating spatially what the historian Mabel O. Wilson terms a "Black counterpublic sphere." This was to aid in the creation of institutions that would foster alternatives to the dominant narrative of African-American life and in doing so, challenge it. In Detroit the spatial metaphor became literal through the repurposing of exterior walls built in an earlier, majority-white city: an abandoned commercial building, the side of a biracial Episcopal church near the epicenter of the 1967 events, and the façade of a Catholic church supported by an ecumenical coalition of social activists. Research into murals' creation, reception, and when and why they were destroyed promises to add a significant chapter in the history of public art's relationship to urban viewers.