

SHADOWBOXING

Photographer Nona Faustine and Painter Kit White



“The painter constructs, the photographer discloses.”

-Susan Sontag

"Shadowboxing"; a pairing of painter and photographer to connect the abstract with the concrete. Each artist envisions "the soul of the place and the power of experience."

-unknown source



In 2018, Nona Faustine and Kit White were invited by curator Lisa Banner to share their work in a panel discussion at The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Though they work with different media and emerged from different backgrounds, their work resonated. Both have a strong personal tie to history and view the revisiting of long held assumptions about the past as necessary to move forward. History is something alive and personal in their work; something which has forged individual identities and plays a critical role in how we perceive the present.

Nona Faustine's photographs of monuments as part of her *My Country Series*, especially those relating to the aftermath of the Civil War that have re-entered our consciousness as points of contention, asks us what deserves to be memorialized? How do these memorials project a misguided message to the culture?

Kit White's recent work employs Civil War era photographs as grounds on which to mark and impose a second space. This repositions the idea of landscape as something that is inherently political and often contested.

The photograph becomes a provocative ground upon which other meanings are imposed in both of these artists works. This physical place becomes something that carries its history with it and on to which we inscribe our own sense of what that history means.



Kit White and Nona Faustine, October 2019

“Though they come from different backgrounds—Faustine is an African-American woman who works with self-portrait photography and White is a White American man who works with abstract painting—both of their practices are deeply informed by history and rooted in revisiting long-held assumptions about the past in order to move contemporary life forward.”

-Excerpted from, Culturedmag.com, “Gallery Peeping: 5 Shows to see in New York this October”, Kiara Ventura, October 2019

The following is excerpted from a transcribed telephone interview recorded on November 20, 2020 conducted by Mary Ann Caws with Nona Faustine and Kit White discussing *Shadowboxing* an exhibition at FreedmanArt.

“You make the moment thicker; you give space to the history of the moment Nona. I mean, it feels like that to me, the fact that in front of the one with a swath of red, you don't think swath of red, you think, "Oh.” Without even saying to yourself red and blood and all that. You think "Oh." And I think you give the observer the opportunity to think for himself, or herself and ourselves. We take this kind of moment to relive the past and the present.” (Mary Ann Caws quote taken from interview)

– Mary Ann Caws born 1933, an American author, translator, art historian and literary critic, a distinguished Professor Emerita in Comparative Literature, English, and French at the Graduate School of the City University of New York, and on the film faculty, a Fellow of the New York Institute for the Humanities and has received many awards.



Nona Faustine

Untitled (Stonewall Jackson Statue, Charlottesville), 2019
Pigment print, 30 x 40 inches, Edition no. 1 of 10

Mary Ann Caws, 1933, Wilmington, NC.

Kit White, 1950, West Virginia.

Nona Faustine, 1977, Brooklyn NY.

Mary Ann Caws: Let me ask, as anybody would, about the title. I mean, how did Shadowboxing come around?

Kit White: Well, my understanding is that there were several names, but that “Shadowboxing” actually came from you, Nona. And I even remember asking you, what is it about that title? And your answer was something to the effect that we're always wrestling with ourselves and the past. Something along those lines.

Nona Faustine: That's true I do remember saying that. So much has happened in my life since that summer, before we came together to make this show. I mean, so much has happened to me, things big and small, I can't even go into it. One, I had COVID and my whole family had COVID and so that took a major toll on us. From what I have heard, it messes with your memory. I blame it on the COVID.

K.W.: Well, I do remember that your explanation was quite wonderful and because both of us were dealing with the past, but in different ways and wrestling with it and wrestling memory and collective memory, it seemed a really appropriate title. So, thank you for that a second time.

N.F.: Well, you're welcome and thank you for being my memory.

M.A.C.: And Nona not just shadowboxing with one's memory, which is wonderful, but I was thinking when I saw that fantastic show about how you have to take the time to see and then I see Kits title *Open Field* and then I read the part between, it comes next, unidentified Civil War battlefield, and I think, "How you have to take your time to look at things." And then you rethink them, and you redo them and that's just what occurred to me. How you think of, then rethink what you do. I mean, if somebody says "Oh, gosh, wow, can you just add two things each?" Would you ever do that, or does it seem to you, kind of complete? It feels complete, but does it feel complete to you? Would you add something?

N.F.: Would I add something to the exhibition? I've been working on some sculptures... Well, actually, I only have two, but I hope there'll be more, but really, they're sculptures of the Presidents, reinterpreted. So, I have one of Jefferson and it's called Interim. And I took the title from something he wrote in his diary. And the statues are kind of cathartic, kind of almost like therapy, where I take these iconic busts of the Presidents and I reinterpret them or add some things that are symbolic of, I think, what's left out or not talked about or little known. Same thing that I kind of do in my photographs and silk screens of the sites. So, for instance, I took his bust and he had a nailery on his Monticello estate plantation and it was run by some little boys and they were enslaved. And he basically had them working really a hard day's work at this nailery and I don't think a lot of people know about it. So, I took his bust and I reinterpreted it using hand forged nails, wire, electric tape. I doused him in black paint and almost like in the way that

African sculptures, if you have seen the Bisbee sculptures of the nails, but it's the reverse meaning of that. I'm supposed to give out what I'm going to do with Washington and stuff like that. So, I think the element of culture would have been really nice if we could have pulled it together.

K.W.: Mary Ann, to get back to you, that query that you sent out to us where you said, how much is about re-looking and re-contextualizing history. I would add to that "reminding", in the business of re looking, especially with visual material, is to me so much what it's about because there is the quick apprehension and then there's the slow apprehension that comes with repeated looking with that kind of slow looking. I've always gravitated toward things that reveal themselves over time, not just the instant get. And I think that that's the one thing that I really appreciate about the dialogue that is going on between those photographs and the paintings, is that it's a very slow dawning of what lies beneath the image that finally comes out. And it's a conversation that's all about being reminded of the things that we overlook, and we forget and especially with Nona's photographs, they're so direct and yet they stop you. And they make you ask the question of "Why is this band here? What does this band signify?" That's the kind of re looking that I think we are losing track of because we're being so trained by electronic media for the quick get and art is all about the slow get. I think that re-looking is so much a part of what it is.

M.A.C.: I do too, and it seems to me that the depth that both of you somehow make the observer feel, which you do, not only makes you want to go again, but think about it

slowly before you go back again. I mean, it certainly does not seem to me something you go through rapidly, but even as you go through it at whatever pace is yours, you still have to redo it again, like that repetition, like the re-looking you're talking about Kit. But you know, you can't redo them, as you know, they're proof you can redo, but not so well. And it does seem to me that looking at your dialogue was just so important for me and for everybody who went in. I was thinking how important it is to be looking at something together. I went with a friend and we talked about it and then afterwards as we talked about it, but I think that the interior talking somehow is maybe more important, like the re-memory, like the Shadowboxing precisely. That kind of slow re-looking, not just rapid "Oh, I can do it again." Not "I can do it again." But let's do it together again, that kind of thing.

K.W.: You know I'm always amazed when people will look at something that they don't immediately understand, and they will pose a question "What is it?" as if that represents a problem. Whereas it seems, if something doesn't make you question what it is, then you're not getting beyond what you already know. So, I always think, well, if you ask, "What is it?" That's the first question and that leads you to the inquiry and that forces you to slow down, that forces you to reexamine, to look more closely, to figure it out.

We have gotten to the point where we avoid the enigmatic as if that's an impediment, but it seems to me the more enigmatic something is, the more it gives you an opportunity to insert yourself into the interpretation of it. And that's one of the things that I love about seeing Nona's

photographs next to my paintings it is that they do force you into looking for the place where they meet and looking for the place where they cross over. And that kind of dialogue often doesn't happen when you're looking just at one person's photographs or one person's paintings. Because you start to read the vocabulary and then you don't get further but then if you have to ask "Well, what are these things talking about with each other?" That's what got me so excited.

M.A.C.: The wonderful how-ness of it and the fact that it's not complete, I love the fact that leaving it and now talking about it seems to me so wonderfully incomplete. You know, completion is sort of way to say "Bye" and this is something you don't say goodbye to, of course, that past, impossible to say goodbye to, impossible. And that anticipation of that conversation with oneself, but the crossover you're talking about Kit, and that both of you show, I mean, it was just extraordinary. And then that wonderful one of Nona's photographs, nobody's looking at anybody. Nobody's looking at you and nobody's looking at anybody else and that kind of forced interiority seems to me to be one part of the wonderfulness about this juncture. And it is wonderful. All those pictures you have Nona and all those people, and you think "Hey, could I just talk to one of those people? No." And they're not to each other. And I love the fact that it's going in all directions and that's what both of you do, but especially with us Southerners. I mean, it makes you think "Oh, well maybe I better kind of shut the hell up and go inside." And I was thinking about those things called pillow moments. And I guess in photography or dance

when nobody's saying it... The moments of silence, that sort of eight seconds in which you'd have to not say anything.

K.W.: Nona and I did an evening of talking in the gallery and one thing that occurred to me later was the one thing we haven't talked about is the chronology of events or the time in history. I'm very conscious now, because of the political events of the last year, that we're both talking about the same moment in history, but all of those monuments were put up 40, 50, 60 years after the fact. And that represents 40, 50 or 60 years of a lack of acknowledgement of what happened at the beginning, at the inception of it all.

And when you start thinking about that, that 60 years can pass after this debacle of the war and in that time, nothing that the war was created to address was addressed. And then this false memory that they represent becomes erected in the early part of the 1900s and so far after the fact. And they managed to completely distort our collective memory for another century. It's taken so long for us to actually look at those statues and think about what they represent and that's one of the things that I think is the hidden gut punch in those photographs. Will we ever look at that statue of Teddy Roosevelt on his horse the same way again? No, no we won't. But it's taken us so long to get to the point of seeing that.

N.F.: I make the work and then I come back to that inspiration that made me create it. And thinking about the bold lines, the black line, the red line, and the more I think about it, I think of it even as going into the void, going through time, time traveling, that black line is about space.

And going right through there, back to another dimension. You know, I think of so many different layers and levels of that black line and what it means, or that red line and what it means. It's so many different meanings and hidden meanings and layers upon layers that exist.

The art critic Antwaun Sargent connected the black line to Roy DeCarava photographs, his shadow. So, he linked it to black and white printing, and Roy certainly was one of my inspirations back when I was in undergrad. I loved his work, I wanted to be him, but I knew I could never achieve that level. But I think it's funny how people who inspire us have a way of... we don't copy them, but in our own way, it comes out reinterpreted in some terrific way. It's a gift they give us and unbeknownst to me, I was channeling Roy in some way and linking my history of black and white printing because I wanted to be a black and white master printer. And I used to spend so much time in the darkroom printing my own photographs, then I gave it up in 2010 for color, which I thought I would never, absolutely never do. And so, I guess I found a way to incorporate that old technique that I loved so much.

K.W.: You know if I could just jump in for a second, Nona, because that is such an interesting thing that you just said. Because color, because we have this immediate visceral response to color, a lot of people avoid it and certainly part of the appeal of black and white photography is the way it has this instant gravitas, it abstracts the world by bleeding it of color. But the fact that you could make the leap to color without diminishing the impact of the photographs, in fact,

enhancing the impact of the photographs, that's a really interesting thing.

M.A.C.: But how great, in this case, there are two of you and then every observer. So, it's like this sort of collective layering of memory somehow, because it's yours, but it's us all and this feeling of thinking it again, those dreadful times of the Civil War and all that thinking of them together in this terrible time right now, this conversation, unbelievable...

K.W.: Wouldn't it be interesting if we could all live 50 more years and see how this moment gets interpreted?

N.F.: A lot of my portraiture is specifically work that I created about my family. I think even in this body of work, it's about the family of man, you know. And I would say that part of the inspiration, I think, in what I was doing or am doing is related to the family album and specifically that you have these moments of travel, of summers, of family vacations, of holidays. And these photographs are a snapshot of a time in our society, in our family of man, that is taking place. And so, specifically when you see the one of Thomas Jefferson and that family there at Monticello at the museum is a direct one. Really specific, but also contested and also the one at the Lincoln Memorial, where all the people and the little girl on her knees taking a selfie in front of the Lincoln statue.

K.W.: It's all a reminder, also, of the fact that all of these things are fictions that we're always constructing these identities for ourselves, whether they're collective or

individual. And whether it's a monument, whether it's a family album, whether it's even a portrait, all of these things are ways to present some sense of self, some sense of community, some sense of family, but it's always a pretense, in a way.

N.F.: And I think that was the challenge too. For me that was a really important to contextualize this moment of what it means not only to me, but to the country and to future generations.

M.A.C.: Nona, when you said the body of work made me think about how close it is to the body, not just the formation of the different parts you put together in a collage and so forth. But the energy, that the physical human energy, that you both had to put both into the photographs and what you do with them afterward, that kind of body-ness seems to me... I would hate to lose the physical feeling of making that you all did and that sort of transmogrified itself into us as we see it. The body-ness of it.

K.W.: I think that looking, we sometimes think of looking as cerebral, but looking is a bodily activity and we feel things with our eyes, and we don't just take in information, we take in textures and we take in the jolt of that red line that jumps across the surface, all of those things. They would be nothing without the body and sometimes we forget that.

M.A.C.: Taking in texture, wouldn't we love to do a sort of collective book about taking in texture. And have it to be memory, texture of memory. And the texture of that nostalgia you were talking about, that just seems so... I just

hate to lose anything from the feeling of fullness even in the subversion of things that I had in that gallery.

K.W.: There's one little story I'd love to tell as long as you have us. Mary Ann, you mentioned that one painting, I think I know the painting you're talking about, which is Open Field. And I believe that photograph is a photograph by an unknown photographer, and it is the Gettysburg battlefield before the battle started. In the actual photograph, you can see a few people walking out into this open space and it almost looks like just a bucolic scene. And when I saw that photograph it reminded me of going to the battlefield at Antietam, in Maryland. When you walk over the battlefield, there are these little markers down in the ground all over the place. So, you walk to the spot, and it would say "At this point, at 12:30 on Tuesday morning, the first regiment from Mississippi charged forward." Walking around the field makes you relive those moments and as I stood there, and I thought, here are these people, they are 1000 miles from home, they've walked the whole way to get to this point. They're starving, they're in ill health, their boots are probably gone and yet, they are still charging to their deaths, for what? It's inconceivable why they did this to me and the carnage and most of these people had nothing. They had no skin in the game, they had no stake, why did they do it? And aptly, how can you go from a moment of standing in a field to suddenly just mayhem, murder and mayhem. I'm sure that Nona has these same moments, when you're in the studio, making something, and you're reliving something at the same time.

N.F.: Oftentimes on my end I'm actually out in the field. I don't have a studio per se, my studio is the street. And particularly, I felt that almost every time when I was shooting my *White Shoes* series. But also, there were times when I was photographing the *My Country* series. And I had that moment when I went down to Charlottesville, definitely. Standing at Monticello. Standing in Jefferson's home and going through this long tunnel under the home where the enslaved people would go back and forth and you could feel all of that history, that weight and just interpreting, trying to interpret what was this all for? How did we get here, why, why? And particularly too when I do research on all my series, I often come across the story of the Lenape Indians, who were the early inhabitants of New York City. And just how the landscape has been transformed. And even today, when I was going into Manhattan and I was on the express bus and there's these great scenes and vistas on the FDR drive. And as you see the canyons of Wall Street, and those side streets, John Street, Wall Street. And then you look out across Brooklyn and the Coast and you are just like, how it must have been back then and how far we've come away from that. The transforming of the landscape from one of this lush beauty, pure environment, clean water, valleys, hills, creeks, to this, just concrete and glass. It's just amazing, it's just... And I also time travel that way in my mind.

When I first started out being a serious photographer, of course, a kid in grad school. Undergrad, actually, at the School of Visual Arts. I wanted to be a street photographer like Weegee and all of those great street photographers. And I think in a way it served me well, because it was kind of like

a training ground to observing and looking and using your instincts to compose a picture, waiting for a picture, looking for signs in the landscape of that moment. And many of those skills and tools I still use in the work that I make now, that is now considered... I consider my work to be conceptual, fine artwork, but I still use many of those tools of street photography and documentary.

M.A.C.: Yes, and the monuments, what you do with monuments, my goodness. The sort of re-conceptualizing of monuments, that's extraordinary, especially that swath of red, that is unforgettable, unforgettable.

K.W.: Nona, I think you've become something different and something more unusual in that, to me you've become a history photographer, but you're doing it in the present and you're giving us this window into what we thought... I always think that the biggest problem we all have is what we think we know. We think we know things that we really don't.

And what your photographs do is they present us with something we think we know and show it to us in such a way that we realized "Oh, I don't know this." And I have to reexamine it. And I think that that... you know, if you talk about Weegee and street photography, that's all-wonderful stuff, Brassai and all of those photographers, but they are just capturing moments.

Whereas you're capturing time, and you're capturing the time that surrounds these critical moments. And it's not an instant of time, it's decades of time. And that's what I mean

by being a history photographer, I think that that is something very unusual and I don't know anyone else I can think of who's doing that.

N.F.: I'm still learning, I'm still trying to figure it all out. And I'm still allowing my instincts to lead me. And I think it in part comes also from certainly always being a student of history and very interested in that. And if I could go back to school, again, without a doubt, I would study to be a historian, I absolutely just love it. I wanted to become an archeologist at one time, but I think I found a way to incorporate all of those first loves into what I do with photographs and I hope to keep building on that.

M.A.C.: You make the moment thicker; you give space to the history of the moment Nona. I mean, it feels like that to me, the fact that in front of the one with a swath of red, you don't think swath of red, you think, "Oh." Without even saying to yourself red and blood and all that. You think "Oh." And I think you give the observer the opportunity to think for himself, or herself and ourselves.

We take this kind of moment to relive the past and the present. And the present certainly is strongly there in that gallery. I mean, the present is right there, as well as the past and the contestation of the past. Anyway, I thought it was just wonderful the way the photography and the drama and the painting and the re-doing, all work together and I thought it was just wonderful, I want to thank you.



Kit White

Open Field (Unidentified Civil War Battlefield), 2019
photo transfer and oil on wood panel, 23 x 27 inches
Collection of the Minnesota Museum of American Art

The notion of the photograph as after image and symbol led me back to the work of Matthew Brady and his fellow Civil War photographers whose images are so much a part of our historical memory of that conflict. It was one of if not the first wars ever captured as an analog image. Those images still remain potent and charged. They are a vivid reminder of the brutality and loss that occurred. And given the source of that conflict, the Civil War remains as pertinent now as it did one hundred and fifty years ago. It too is a wall, albeit a psychological one, that still separates us as a culture. And, because most of the photographs of the Civil War are so well known to us, they are internalized and inform our sense of history.

- Kit White



Nona Faustine

Contested (Theodore Roosevelt Statue, Natural History Museum, New York), 2016

Pigment print, 30 x 40 inches, Edition of 10

Collection of the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota
and The North Dakota Art Museum, Grand Forks, ND

"Who would have known that under Faustine's images lay the powder keg that was about to blow, bringing with it a message that was right before everyone's eyes, but unseen. One of Faustine's powerful photographs depicts the now doomed statue of Theodore Roosevelt that stands before the Museum of Natural History. Looking at that image now, the violation seems so obvious, but it took this moment to make us see. Faustine, however, saw it all along."

-Kit White



Nona Faustine

Untitled (Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C.), 2016

Pigment Print

30 x 40 inches

Edition no. 1 of 10

“I leave you, hoping that the lamp of liberty will burn in your bosoms until there shall no longer be a doubt that all men are created equal.”

- Abraham Lincoln

Excerpted from, Quotable Wisdom: Abraham Lincoln, Speech at Chicago, Illinois, July 10, 1858



Kit White

Little Round Top (Unidentified Civil War Battlefield), 2019

photo transfer and oil on wood panel

23 x 27 inches

"These paintings employ Civil War era photographs as grounds on which to mark and impose a second space. This repositions the idea of landscape as something that is inherently political and often contested."

-Kit White



Nona Faustine

Untitled (Thomas Jefferson Statue, Monticello), 2019

Pigment print

30 x 40 inches

Situated inside a photographic tradition while questioning the culture that bred that tradition, my practice walks the line between the past and the present. My work starts where intersecting identities meet history. Through the family album, and self-portraiture I explore the inherited legacy of trauma, lineage, and history. Reconstructing a narrative of race, memory, and time that delve into, stereotypes, folklore and anthropology. These are meditative reflections of a history Americans have not come to terms with, challenging the duality of what is both visible and invisible.

-Nona Faustine



Kit White

Untitled (Unidentified Civil War Era Battlefield), 2019

Photo transfer and oil on panel

48 x 57 inches

“To the bafflement we now face around the globe as a country that could still commemorate so widely the side that lost our Civil War in an insurgency to preserve slavery and destroy the American experiment, we would show the world that we can make ourselves better — and freer — again. Americans claim a redemptive narrative, but we know the darker stories as well. Let’s declare that we can do this by acknowledging and not by denying our pluralism, our inhumanity, our bitter contradictions, our victories and our humane gifts to the world.

As we are witnessing, the problem of the 21st century in this country is some agonizingly enduring combination of legacies bleeding forward from conquest, slavery and color lines. Freedom in its infinite meanings remains humanity’s most universal aspiration. How America reimagines its memorial landscape may matter to the whole world.”

- Excerpted from The New York Times: “How the Monument Debate Can Help Biden”, by David Blight, July 18, 2020

Photographs by Nona Faustine with the Coinciding Monuments



*Theodore Roosevelt, Museum of Natural
History, New York*



Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C.



*Stonewall Jackson Statue –
Charlottesville*



Thomas Jefferson Statue – Monticello

“It is a reminder that to assert one’s inner life in a time of reactionary politics is a radical act. The works in *Shadowboxing* are nuanced meditations on memory and memorials. Faustine and White reposition the relationship between image, the artist, and the viewer, and in doing so, they create a discursive third place of indeterminacy, possibility, and irresolution.”

-Excerpted from, Hyperallergic, “One More for the Culture Wars”, Jason Stopa, February 2020



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