

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Once More Into the Culture Wars

To assert one's inner life in a time of reactionary politics is a radical act.

Jason Stopa February 22, 2020



Nona Faustine, "Untitled (Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C.)" (2016), pigment print, 30 x 40 inches (courtesy of the artist and FreedmanArt)

In 1995, Ai Weiwei purchased a 2000-year-old ceremonial urn. The artist reportedly paid several hundred thousand dollars for it. He titled the work "Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn," and as the title would suggest, Ai then dropped and shattered the vessel. By appropriating a work of symbolic Chinese history, he effectively purchased a cultural artifact, only to destroy it.

This act of willful destruction naturally caused an uproar. When pushed for answers, the artist quoted Mao Zedong, stating, "the only way of building a new world is by destroying the old one." It is arguable that Ai's gesture eradicates a piece of history in a rather minor way; the Han Dynasty remains with or without the vessel.

What this illustrates, however, is our collective desire for a historical do-over, to perform historical tensions, making the past an ongoing present to be reckoned with. The United States is no stranger to this. The country has been thrust into the culture wars for a second time. Contested memorial sites, erected long after the Civil War ended, have become flashpoints with historical and artistic intersections.



Kit White, "Little Round Topz (Unidentified Civil War Battlefield)" (2019), photo transfer and oil on wood panel, 23 x 27 inches (courtesy of the artist and FreedmanArt)

Such is the case with Nona Faustine and Kit White's two-person exhibition, *Shadowboxing*, at FreedmanArt. The 16 works on view in this show traffic in politically charged subject matter using photography as a starting point, yet each artist – Faustine is a photographer and White is a painter — puts the photograph to decidedly different ends. What connects the two is how they reframe the aftermath of the Civil War as a residual hangover that occupies the collective American consciousness.

Nona Faustine is not a documentary photographer, but her work borrows from its familiar form of presentation. Her work, "Contested," (2019), creates an aesthetic barrier between the viewer and the controversial monument of Theodore Roosevelt in front of the Museum of Natural History in New York. The monument, sculpted by James Earle Fraser in 1939, features Theodore Roosevelt on horseback, flanked on each side by stereotypical near-caricatures of Native American and African American men.

By re-presenting the statue as a photographic image, the work seems to be a nod to the appropriation tactics of Pictures Generation artists like Sherrie Levine. What distinguishes it from becoming a facile, postmodern gesture is Faustine's use of a bright, cadmium red photographic overlay that bisects the photograph horizontally, obscuring the lower bodies of the men on foot and the legs of Roosevelt's horse, severing them from the pedestal. The artists' formal intervention poses a threat to the seemingly stable monument.



Nona Faustine, "Contested (Teddy Roosevelt Statue, Natural History Museum, New York)" (2016), pigment print, 30 x 40 inches (courtesy of the artist and FreedmanArt)

Kit White uses photo transfers of Civil War-era photographs as an initial ground, and then paints a lyrical form of abstraction on top. There is usually a hint of a landscape in his abstractions. Works like "Open Field," (2019) feel melancholic, but with just the right amount of levity — a dense atmosphere of pale blues, yellows and grays, on top of which White paints sinewy black lines that contort, knot and, intersect.

The transferred photograph acts as a container for collective traumatic memory, to which the artist has given a subjective response. “Open Field” revels in opposing tensions, flipping figure/ground relationships, and conflations of the personal and the public. White’s quasi-abstract landscapes are sublime and mournful, a path also charted by Anselm Kiefer.

When visual art tackles issues of social and political history successfully, it delivers psychic change, propelling us further into imaginative space, anchoring us in an aesthetic of possibility. *Shadowboxing* is effective insofar as it points at both the material and immaterial — the historical facts and the artist’s emotional response to them. Other recent attempts to address the monument have delivered mixed results.



Kit White, “Open Field (Unidentified Civil War Battlefield)” (2019), photo transfer and oil on wood panel, 23 x 27 inches (courtesy of the artist and FreedmanArt)

Take Kehinde Wiley’s didactic and largely unsuccessful monument “Rumors of War,” (2019) in New York City’s Times Square. No amount of technical facility can make up for the one-dimensional inversion on display. In contrast, consider Kara Walker’s site-specific sculpture “A Subtlety,” (2014) at the former Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn. The material nature of sugar was transfigured into the skin of an oversized mammy, an uncomfortable image producing revelatory, contradictory effects.

The burden of history weighs heavy on painters and photographers. Both mediums have had to justify their autonomy. Rather than making an attempt to destroy an old world, which now seems utopian in character, or invert the monument as a corrective, these artists are contending with a specific strain of history and the implications of inserting their individual subjectivity into it.

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.

Shadowboxing continues at FreedmanArt (25 East 73rd Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through March 27.