

Enlivening Memories, Embodying Histories: Uncovering the Promise of *Whitewash*
David Spalding

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

--Milan Kundera

May your conceptual framework keep broadening.

--Betty Shabazz

In the sprawling archives of public memory, the photographs are beginning to fade. Covered in dust and scoured with fingerprints, their bent corners and worn edges suggest their age, but obscure the histories they record. As countless new images arrive daily, piled into heaps that spill out into the hallways, it becomes impossible to remember the moment that each photograph is trying to preserve, what it might have meant when it was taken, and why it's worth revisiting today.

Since the 19th century, our understanding of the past has been shaped by the photographic record. The photographs that have informed Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry's recent exhibition, *Whitewash*, reflect painful, poignant moments in America's turbulent past. They were taken during the 1950s and 60s, a time when images—both in print media and television—had the ability to steer political discourse and arouse protest. Seen in 2006, such photographs—of a Klan rally, or the aftermath of a political assassination—have a different impact than they must have had when first presented to the public. Of course, the meanings of all images change over time. But when photographs of crucial moments in history are no longer able to trigger the narratives they document, we risk becoming lost in a sea of images, an archive without meaning. Today, such images require that we work to recover their potential, that we make an effort to listen to the stories they transmit. For if we abandon this labyrinthine repository of photographs for the amnesia of a perpetual present, we lose so much more than images. We renounce our ability to construct our own histories, to position ourselves in relation to the past, and to advocate for our visions of a better future. We sacrifice our agency.

We also know that the histories evoked by photographs are subjective and incomplete, that an image is never a substitute for experience, and that photographs are just one of many ways of knowing. Any discussion of race in America—even one

focusing on representation—is not just about images; it’s about human bodies marked by notions of ethnicity that are rooted in a specific time and place; about the public and private interactions between these bodies, as they try to coexist. It’s about the texture of one’s hair, the shape of one’s eyes, the sound of one’s voice, and about how such things impact the distribution of power within social areas that we navigate daily, from the interpersonal to the geopolitical.

McCallum and Tarry are preservationists of endangered histories. Since 1998, a large part of their collaborative practice—which includes public artworks, community-based projects, multi-media installation, performance and video—has been dedicated to enlivening pieces of the past that might otherwise be forgotten.¹ These works engage the public by addressing specific instances of social and racial injustice, and are often connected to a site. Such projects refuse easy didacticism, instead incorporating a variety of artistic approaches and personal viewpoints to create dynamic, multifaceted experiences. For *Witness: Perspectives on Police Violence* (1999), McCallum and Tarry created five mobile memorials resembling New York City police and fire call boxes, which displayed photographs of places where violence occurred, and played audio testimony given by witnesses, police officers, activists, bereaved parents and survivors of police attacks. The call boxes were installed at sites where police brutality had taken place, and in front of the courthouses where officers were indicted. Like several of their other projects, *Witness* is proof that public artworks can revitalize a city’s collective memory. At the same time, McCallum and Tarry use their own relationship as an inter-racial couple—he’s white, she’s black—as the foundation for performance-video works and photographs that examine how the legacy of American race relations can be embodied, challenged and amplified through interpersonal gestures of intimacy and power.

By uniting two of McCallum and Tarry’s video works with a series of paintings and drawings based on archival photographs from the American Civil Rights movement, *Whitewash* forges irrefutable links between past and present, the body and history, personal narratives and national events. As the exhibition’s title suggests, *Whitewash* also raises questions about the gradual erasure of the historical record, and examines how the passage of time inflects a photograph’s ability to transmit pieces of our complex and difficult past.

A series of large-scale paintings form the exhibition’s core (all *Untitled*, 2006). Rendered with precision in the grayscale of black and white photography, the paintings

are reminders of a time when racial injustice threatened to rip the country apart, but they're much more than that. As if enacting the obfuscation of memory itself, each painting is overlaid with a vertical swath of translucent fabric that floats above the surface of a section of the canvas. These panels of fabric are printed with images of the paintings they cover, but are offset to interrupt the eye, creating a ghostly layer of visual information that both doubles and obscures the paintings. This unlikely combination of materials simultaneously evokes history and suggests that it is disappearing from collective memory.

The photographs that have inspired these paintings are familiar, but the circumstances surrounding the events they depict have started to dim, shrouded by the forty or fifty years that have passed since they were first published. I recognize the image of a primly dressed black girl being trailed by a sneering, vicious mob. I know that it has something to do with integrating in the American South, that she's clutching a notebook to her breast because she's afraid, and that the crowd following her (her classmates, their parents), whose faces are filled with hate, are trying to stop her from entering a high school in Little Rock, Arkansas. But I can't recall her name (which, perhaps, I never knew), and don't understand why the National Guardsman, seen standing behind her, is not intervening. The girl, coolly defiant behind her dark sunglasses, is no longer a person; she's a symbol of endurance and resistance.

Of course, she is a person, and, as *Whitewash* reminds me, her name bares repeating. It's Elizabeth Eckford, and she was one of the Little Rock Nine, the first group of African-American students to attend the city's all-white Central High School. The photograph was taken by Will Counts on September 4, 1957, as Eckford tried to enter the school, alone. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus refused to comply with a Supreme Court mandate to integrate Arkansas' schools, and called in the National Guard to prevent the Little Rock Nine from accessing the building. The other eight students had been warned by the NAACP not to attend school that day, because it was too dangerous. Eckford's family did not have a phone; she did not get the message. A crowd gathered at Central High's main entrance. They screamed and pushed and threatened to lynch the fifteen year-old girl. Remembering the events of September 4, Eckford said, "I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the mob. . . . I looked into the face of an old woman, and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat at me."²

Somehow, Eckford and the other students comprising the Little Rock Nine endured. Photographs like this one circulated internationally, and shamed President Eisenhower

into action.³ Photographs documenting the strength and bravery of the Little Rock Nine inspired others to fight for integration, to stand up to racism and hatred, even when this meant risking life and limb.

Seeing the image in 2006, in a gallery in Beijing, I'm startled by its violence, and awed by what appears to be Eckford's air of detachment. But I'm also saddened by what I don't know, by what I have forgotten about that historic day.⁴

A suite of paintings and works on paper included in *Whitewash* center around the assassination of Malcolm X. Several of these are based on crime scene photographs taken at the Audubon Ballroom, where he was shot and killed on February 21, 1965.⁵ One shows the empty auditorium filled with a chaotic arrangement of folding chairs; in another, chalk circles outline bullet holes in a podium. By focusing on the aftermath at the site where the assassination took place, these paintings function like film stills. Because we know (or perhaps don't know) what took place among the overturned chairs and the empty podium, the Audubon seems haunted, as if the residue of tragedy still hangs in the air. Due to the conflicting accounts of Malcolm X's murder, the photographs that inform these works have been the subject of much scrutiny. But in *Whitewash*, any promise that they might reveal what happened that day is broken by the panels of fabric that cover their surfaces. As if searching for the truth, I step from side to side, trying to get the images on the fabric to align with the painting. Dissatisfied, I move to the edge of the painting and try to see the canvas underneath the fabric. In fact, all the paintings in *Whitewash* inspire and foil such investigations: the truth is relative, and shifts with the subject's position.

The drawings of the Audubon (and other events of the period) have also been defaced, whole sections of them partially erased in a gesture that is reminiscent of the films of William Kentridge. But if, in Kentridge's work, erasure is the genesis for his narratives about South African apartheid (another *Whitewash* history), in McCallum and Tarry's drawings of the Audubon, it creates a gaseous haze that hangs over the auditorium, as though the ballroom is slipping into oblivion.

In *Whitewash*, images and iterations of the artists' bodies form a bridge between photographic evidence of the past and today's lived experience. Seen in the context of the exhibition, two large fabric panels, printed with enormous red blood cells, address the construction of race as a biological category. The platelets point to a belief system that defined race in early American history, when European settlers developed elaborate racial hierarchies, consolidating their power by excluding anyone with "black blood,"

including so-called quadroons and octoroons, from possessing civil liberties. Later, in the antebellum South, the “one drop rule” declared that anyone of mixed decent could be enslaved. The one drop rule has been so enduring that it largely remains the nation’s way of defining who is black, a mode of classification that does not apply to other racial groups.⁶

The inclusion of an extraordinary single-channel video work, *Cut* (2006), creates a space to contemplate how the histories evoked in *Whitewash* are projected onto the artists’ racialized bodies, and how we, as viewers, are active participants this process. In a large, nearly empty room whose peeling white paint, unadorned columns and scratched wooden floors evoke colonial America, the couple transforms a simple ritual—the act of cutting one another’s hair with an old straight razor—into an explosive, haunting mediation on the ways in which race and power intersect.

Though less the four minutes long, the video unfolds slowly, embracing the audience in a languid series of gestures that slip fluidly between sexual intimacy, dominance and submission. The sound of the blade against hair heightens the sense of danger, as the camera, rarely still, pans and zooms between inter-cut scenes of McCallum and Tarry, each bringing the razor dangerously close to the other’s scalp. Like blood, hair is a primary marker of racial identity, both a material reality and a locus for racist fantasies. While many artists have explored the cultural coding of African American hair (from Lorna Simpson’s early text-and-photo works and the sculptures of David Hammons to Kori Newkirk’s pomade murals and pony-braid paintings and Meshac Gaba’s recent architectures of synthetic hair), *Cut* cinematically elides the distance between the artists’ bodies and the histories that frame them, implicating viewers in the process.

Watching *Cut* is uncomfortable, because while each artist enacts and endures a similar ordeal, the balance of power never seems equal: the legacy of racism and slavery nullifies this possibility. As I view the video, the shifting dynamics between a black woman and a white man seem inherently skewed. If, at times, her image evokes a slave been shorn by her master, this role is reserved for her alone, and can never be occupied by a white man, who seems a willing participant in the exchange. It’s an arresting discovery, disconcerting because McCallum and Tarry’s performance cues and confronts me with my own assumptions about race, leaving me to consider their origins.

As art historian John Berger has written, “If the living take the past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of people making their own history, then all photographs would re-acquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time,

instead of being arrested moments.⁷” In *Whitewash*, McCallum and Tarry take the past upon themselves quite literally, using their bodies as screens onto which viewers can project the fading, urgent histories of American race relations. If the details of these histories are eroding, their power continues to mediate even our most intimate relationships. As *Whitewash* suggests, if we actively recover the past and consider the ways we embody it, we can begin to forge the futures we imagine.

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¹ For excellent documentation of the artists' various projects, see <http://www.mccallumtarry.com>.

² See <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAlittlerock.htm>

³ President Eisenhower addressed the photographs taken in Little Rock in a telecast on September 24th, 1957: "At a time when we face grave situations abroad because of the hatred that communism bears towards a system of government based on human rights, it would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence and indeed to the safety of our nation and the world. Our enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent our whole nation. We are portrayed as a violator of those standards which the peoples of the world united to proclaim in the Charter of the United Nations." For complete materials detailing Eisenhower's role in Little Rock, visit <http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/dl/LittleRock/littlerockdocuments.html>

⁴ As a white critic in my early 30s, my impressions of these events are constructed almost entirely through my impressions of the photographic record of the period.

⁵ In an email dated May 12, 2006, McCallum explains: "The images of the Audubon Ballroom were the catalyst for the exhibition. In particular, the images of the empty room with the chairs turned over and the podium marked with the bullet holes were the first images. We saw them in an exhibition that the Shomburg Center did on Malcolm X in December of 2005. The images are part of the collection of the NYC Municipal Archives, and I understand that they were used as evidence in the trial, but I do not know for certain. We received our copy of the images from the archives. These images were the inspiration for our proposal for the Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz memorial that is planned for Harlem on the north edge of Central Park. We will recreate the scene of the chairs in the public plaza, as one of the central elements of the memorial. We also discovered several images of Malcolm X in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, which received the collection of the NYC paper "World Telegram and Sun" when they went out of business. The images of the ballroom, such as the detail of the floor, the "police line do not enter," as well as the line of people waiting for the funeral and the double image of the police surveillance of the funeral hall came from this collection.

The other images in the show come from public library collections in NYC and San Diego. Jackie did not want the show to be a documentary of Malcolm X, but wanted to expand from his story to explore related stories of race in the 60's, Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination, images from the Detroit Riots, the KKK, all took place with in 10-years of each other. These images were all taken from newspapers or tear sheets from magazines.

⁶ I am relying here on Lawrence Wright's thoughtful essay, "One Drop of Blood," *The New Yorker*, July 24, 1994. <http://www.afn.org/~dks/race/wright.html>

⁷ John Berger, *The Uses of Photography* (London: Writers' Cooperative, 1980) p. 57