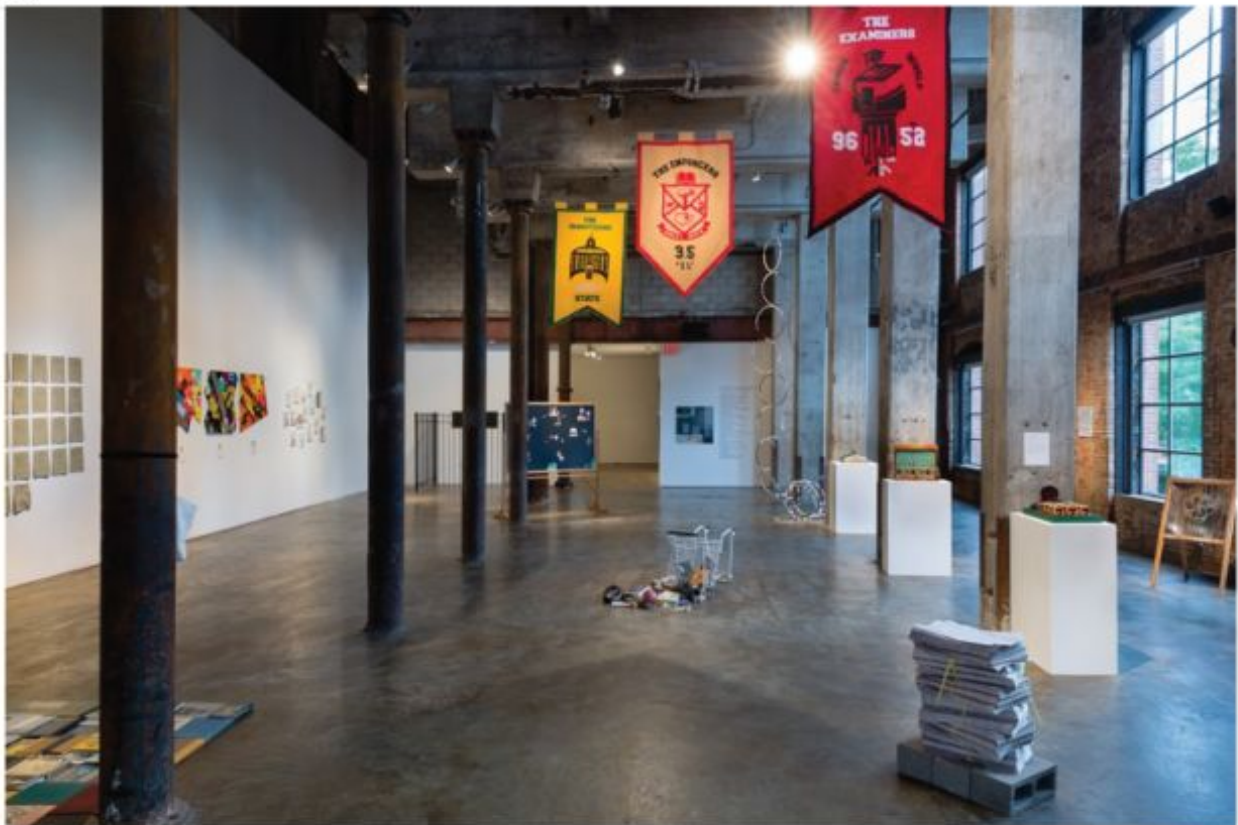


HYPERALLERGIC

Artistic Responses to the Systemic Inequalities in US Education

For this Smack Mellon exhibition, artists were given textual prompts regarding education, particularly how it relates to the historical struggles for social equity and justice.

Seph Rodney



Race and Revolution: Still Separate – Still Unequal, installation view (photo courtesy of Smack Mellon)

When I saw the previous iteration of *Race and Revolution* last summer on Governor's Island, I thought it contained exceptionally strong work, but the layout prevented the pieces from talking to each other coherently. The conversation faltered, though the conceit was provocative: historical documents that pertain to the treatment of indigenous people sourced from the time of the American Revolution. That exhibition was Katie Fuller's follow-up — *Race and Revolution: Still Separate, Still Unequal*, currently mounted at Smack Mellon — is much more cohesive and persuasive.

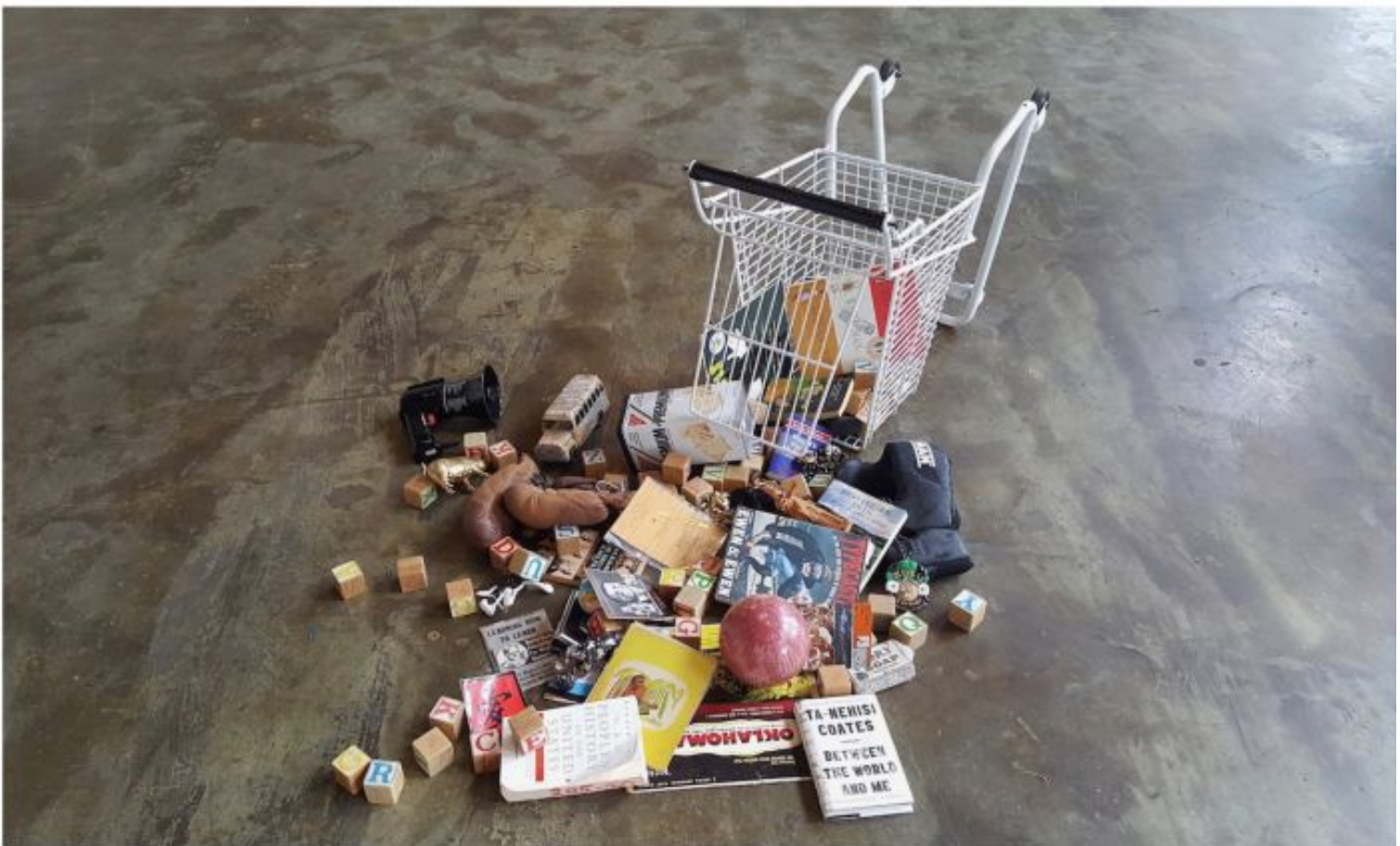
Fuller co-curated this show within a similar framework, and she had an experienced and knowledgeable partner in independent curator and critic Larry Ossieh-Mensah. As she did last year, Fuller asked the artists to respond to particular textual prompts (which are tacked up on walls and pillars in the gallery) regarding education, particularly how it relates to historical struggles for social equity and justice. This topic flows from the strengths Fuller developed in her 11 years as a high school English teacher, during which she sought to impress upon her student the historical dimension of literary works. The show features strong responses that range from exasperation to strident advocacy to cold, hard irony, though the best for me were the pieces that were poignant without being sentimental, and the one piece that let me observe the lives of secondary school students.

The installation by jc lenochan, “Unfinished Business: ‘What You Think Matters Too.’ (Part III)” (2017) evokes one of the exhibition’s latent themes: how the ability to read both empowers and damns us at the same time. The work consists of a chalkboard wall on which the artist has written questions to solicit handwritten responses: “What was your race moment?” and “What was your class moment?” On the floor beneath the wall, lenochan has lain out several old books, the kind you might find at a library sale. I was much less interested in the element comprised of the public’s answers, which feels like its been done a great deal in the last few years. (I had the same response to Mona Kamal’s vox populi piece, “I was an Adjunct,” 2017, also in the show, which listed anonymized stories of horrendous treatment as an instructor-for-hire). However, the titles of the books read like a sly and crafty deconstruction of the status quo of our social status hierarchy: *The American American Encyclopedia*; *The Greatest: My Own Story*; *Colors and Crafts*; *White Art*; *Lost Empires*; *How Things Work Today*; *Art of the Times*. This seems like a way of saying that being able to read (that is, to decode, interpret, and make connections among both textual and visual signs) makes me aware of the ways that race and class structure our relations, but reading doesn’t allow me to change the script. I can only recognize what it’s doing and turn away.



jc lenochan, “Unfinished Business: ‘What You Think Matters Too.’ (Part III)” (2017), 9 x 7 feet, chalkboard with book tiles (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Another brilliant piece is lenochan's "Melanin Chronicles: 'Everything My Kids Need to Know by Grade 4,'" (2016-present), which consists of an overturned shopping cart that has disgorged its items onto the floor: old leather boxing gloves and head guard, books by Ta-Nehisi Coates and historian Howard Zinn, Premium crackers in a tin, a megaphone, alphabet blocks, an old Ivory Soap package. I wondered at first about the use of the shopping cart — whether it had a consumerist angle — and then thought of how the homeless and indigent in New York City and other cities tend to keep their things in shopping carts, which function as makeshift lockers and suitcases. Thus I grokked that the owner of the cart has no home but still wants to preserve these critical items to hand down to his child: tools to fight, both physically and ideologically, and other items necessary for bare-bones survival.



jc lenochan, "Melanin Chronicles: "Everything My Kids Need to Know by Grade 4" (2016-present), objects with shopping cart, 26 x 50 x 30 in. (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Shervone Neckles, "Primary I" (2004), mixed media with found miniature school desk and 1940s *Dick and Jane*

Book, 14 x 10 x 12 in., from the *Tales of Red Rag Rosie* series (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

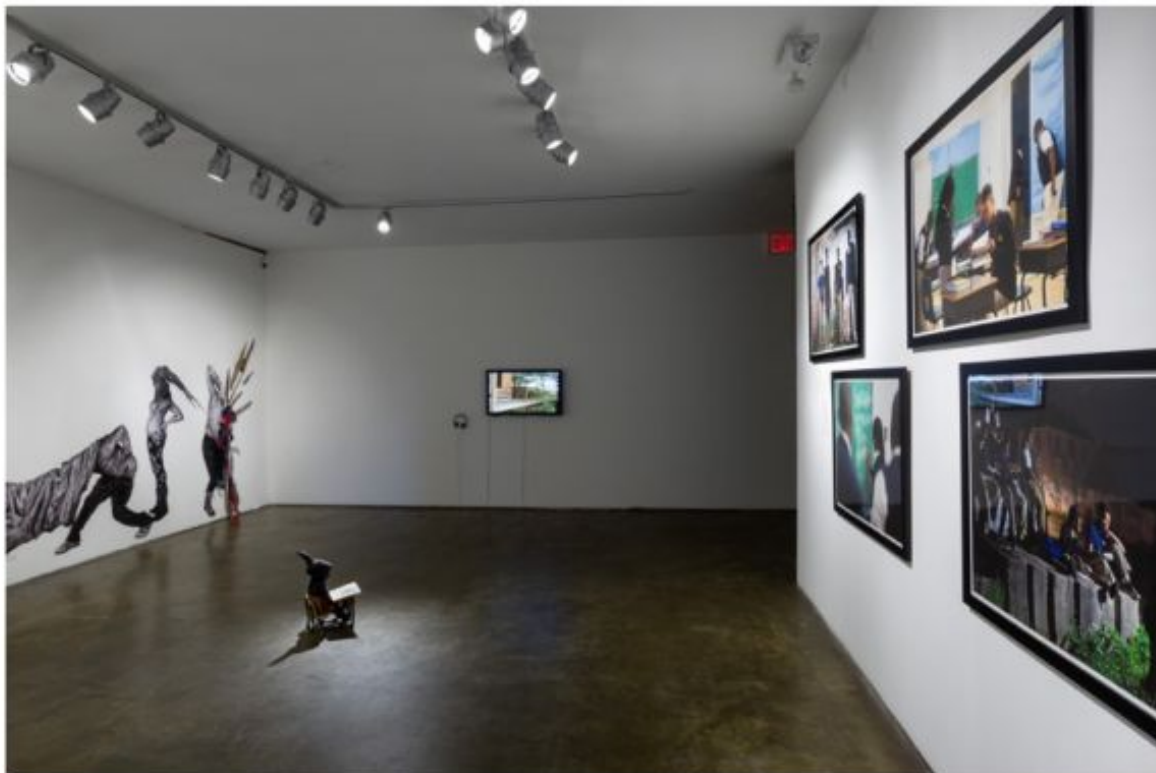
I was also profoundly affected by two pieces by Shervone Neckles. First is "Blackboard" (2004), a black board with narrative scenes represented by cut-out paper figures in which white characters brutalize darker figures by hanging them, drowning them, dragging them by the hair, selling them, and hunting them. But on the other side of the board is an image of a lone black girl reaching up with a piece of chalk to write on the now blank space — prepared to manifest her own story and promise. There is something heartbreaking about being poised in the moment of expressing all that potential — perhaps because I don't know whether she'll ever achieve it. Her other work, "Primary I" (2004), is a small black puppet, a combination of a jigaboo figure and a faceless S&M character, with a horn extending out from the back of its head. The figure is small, perhaps the size of a two-year-old, with an open book in front of it. It's a caricature that nevertheless feels like an accurate representation of how some see black children through racist and fetishistic lenses.





L. Kasimu Harris, four images from the *War on the Benighted* series (all 2015), digital photography, each 30 x 45 in. (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The only artist in the show who gave me insight in the world young students occupy, rather than commenting on that world or its consequences, is L. Kasimu Harris. The photographs from his *War on the Benighted* series show groups of teenagers in private school uniforms studying or watching each other, caught at fleeting moments when it feels like something momentous might happen. The work captures that time when the students are on the verge of becoming who they will be for the majority of their lives. There is something otherworldly about these images, which can't help but feel alien to me because I am so far removed from that time and place.



Race and Revolution: Still Separate – Still Unequal, installation view (photo courtesy of Smack Mellon gallery)

The show does not mean for me to arrive at a conclusion about how race and class relate to education; rather it gives glimpses of the internal monologues provoked by individuals' reactions to that mix. Formal education is losing its potency, and this show demonstrates how and why, as the transformational potential of education wanes, the issue will only become more fraught. We might have a social and political revolution when enough of us realize that becoming educated enough to perceive the institutional impediments to social progress isn't sufficient. Being empowered to remove these impediments is another objective entirely.



Uraline Septembre Hager, "Like Feeding a Dog His Own Tail" (2014), 7.5 x 5.5 x 6 feet (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Race and Revolution: Still Separate, Still Unequal *continues at Smack Mellon (92 Plymouth Street, Dumbo) through August 6.*