

18 Artists Tackle America's "School-to-Prison Pipeline"

ARTSY EDITORIAL
BY ZACHARY SMALL
JUL 3RD, 2017 8:00 PM



L. Kasimu Harris, *War on the Benighted* #6, 2015. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

We tell young American students that working hard will inevitably lead to college and, from there, a lucrative career in the future—that academic success translates into socio-economic mobility.

But an exhibition at Brooklyn art space Smack Mellon tells a different story: that of poor students of color who face consistent disenfranchisement more than 60 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. Curated by Katie Fuller and Larry Ossei-Mensah, “Race and Revolution: Still Separate – Still Unequal” has the difficult task of illuminating the subtle, pernicious tactics used to separate underprivileged minority students from their white peers.

A major focus of the exhibition--which brings together the work of 18 artists, many of whom work as public school teachers around New York City—is the infamous “school-to-prison pipeline,” wherein children stuck in a failing public education system are funneled into the juvenile criminal justice system (and beyond). Along the way, students are subject to a lethal cocktail of resegregation policies, from redistricting to overly harsh disciplinary measures.

Many high schools decorate their hallways with banners advertising plum universities, an aspirational nod to the future. Olalekan Jeyifous’s colorful banners in “Still Separate – Still Unequal” give this familiar sight a sinister spin, replacing college crests with icons of surveillance and punishment.

Statistics surrounding resegregation appear on the banners themselves. *The Enforcers* (2017) focuses on police presence within public schools, and how black and Latino students are 3.5 times more likely to be suspended from school than whites. (That might actually be generous: The Civil Rights Data Collection at the Department of Education suggests that they are actually 4 times more likely.)



Installation view of “Race and Revolution: Still Separate – Still Unequal” at Smack Mellon. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

On the verso of his banners, Jeyifous unfolds a series of cartoon images depicting a cop forcefully grabbing a student, evoking the disturbing 2015 video of a South Carolina cop body slamming a female high school student to the ground for ignoring an order. That final image of violence occurs on the back of Jeyifous's banner *The Panopticons* (2017), a banner ironically celebrating the architectural similarities between schools and prisons.

Elsewhere, artists express their disillusionment with how students and teachers become objects of the education system rather than active participants. Uraline Hager's *Like Feeding a Dog His Own Tail* (2014) is an installation inspired by her 11-year career as a special-education teacher in the Bronx; it features a tiny desk and chalkboard surrounded by cell bars, and is meant to comment on how administrators exploit special-education programs to marginalize students of color.

During her career, Hager said she has witnessed countless black, Latino, and immigrant students shuffled into her classroom without actual cause. "Implicit bias is the common thread between the school-to-prison pipeline and the heavy racial representation of POCs in special education," she commented via email.

Hager's hypothesis is supported by the data. According to the 2016 annual report on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), black students were more than twice as likely to be placed in special education programs as a result of "emotional disturbance" or "intellectual disabilities" than anyone else. (Looking at additional data, there's also cause for alarm when black students are only about 15% of the general population, yet account for about 20% of the special education population.)



Installation view of Aram Han Sifuentes, *US Citizenship Test Sampler*, 2012-Present.
Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

Other artists here also find ways to visualize social ills. In Dennis RedMoon Darkeem's *Hoops* (2017), the artist hangs black-and-white hoola hoops from the gallery's ceiling, allowing them to trundle down to the floor and spread across the cement. It's a deadpan metaphor, a reference to the proverbial hoops parents jump through to send their children to better schools. Cities like New York rely on tests and lotteries to determine a student's eligibility to attend certain selective high schools. Yet this process often fails to weigh socioeconomic factors like access to test prep, distance from home to school, and the cost of transportation.

Other artists in the exhibition indict the institutionalized racism of the United States, where knowledge can be a barrier as often as a ladder. Aram Han Sifuentes focuses on the civics portion of the American naturalization test for her artwork. *US Citizenship Test Sampler* (2012–present) is a series of colorfully threaded linen cloths created by undocumented immigrants. Each linen cloth contains an embroidered question and answer from the citizenship test. A quick scan makes it becomes apparent that most Americans wouldn't pass the test (in fact, studies find that one in three current citizens would fail). How many citizens know their House representative's name? And how

many others can explain the electoral college? For Sifuentes, the prevailing public's lack of knowledge about their own country should avail non-citizens of taking a test about American history.

Artist jc lenochan also addresses the imbalances of education by critiquing the shortage of textbooks written by people of color. His participatory work approaches the topic with blunt force. *Unfinished Business* “What You Think Matters Too.” (Part III) (2017) is composed of a pile of history and visual arts textbooks spilled across the floor. Past this minefield is a chalkboard where visitors are asked to share memories of when they first became conscious of their own race or class.



Installation view of JC Lenochoan, *Unfinished Business* “What You Think Matters Too.” (Part III), 2017. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

And as *Unfinished Business* suggests, school textbooks themselves, often written by white academics, can occasion these revelations. Not seeing oneself reflected in scholarship can have a negative effect on students of color. “What’s missing is critical inquiry,” said lenochan in a brief comment. “How do we create independent thinkers? This is our time to reshape, redefine, and redirect the history of psychological conditioning, which includes the pedagogical desegregation of curricula that instill colonial ideals.”

Accordingly, lenochan has curated a very specific selection of books to step over. Many of them address colonialism, slavery, or Nazism. But most of the visual arts books are hilarious subterfuge; a volume on Minimalism is simply titled *White Art*.

“Still Separate – Still Unequal” asks a lot of viewers, and rightly so. The curators of this exhibition want to shine a light on resegregation, transmitting weighty statistics and histories through the more accessible conduit of art—and hopefully mobilizing viewers in the process.

If art reflects society, then the vicious cycles of resegregation and disenfranchisement we see in the education system also exist outside of it, including within the art world. That’s the underlying but unspoken message of “Still Separate – Still Unequal”— we can’t begin to preach about inequality before first addressing it within our own community.

—Zachary Small