

THE AESTHETE



SHOULD BLACK ARTISTS RESPOND TO THE MOVEMENT?

In the aftermath of the recent killing of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, 148 artists showed work at the alternative art space Smack Mellon in a show entitled *Respond*. The show included a diverse group of artists who contributed a range of work that served to survey the national reaction to the black deaths that have incited the growing Black Lives Matter Movement.

Respond, in raising questions about the ongoing failure of the nation to protect its black citizens, also posed a question: Should black artists specifically respond to the historic, recent, and continued killing of innocent black men and women in this country?

We asked nine contemporary black artists to continue the dialogue that *Respond* started and to answer the following question: Do you think black artists should respond to the events surrounding the Black Lives Matter Movement?



Brandon Coley Cox, *Untitled*, 2014

Brandon Coley Cox

"I found it very difficult to create anything at all after the nearly simultaneous indecisions happened around the murders of Eric Garner and Michael Brown... I want[ed] to act, and not to react, but to proact, but I wasn't sure how.

So I decided to speak to Garner and Brown. The first paintings I made were dedicatory and, in that, free of any concern of critical gazing. This act of dedication caused me to understand how I wanted to communicate to audiences at large through my creations. I began to understand that it was important to me to create a densely black aesthetic for myself, however I might conceive of it. Following a path of black self-reflexivity was more important than not. I took out all of the white. And other colors. They had been causing too many problems.

I reconsidered everything in my work with one key element in mind: that blackness matters. I now use that as a groundwork to begin creating my work instead of focusing on the distractions. I am more interesting than the distractions. I am more necessary than the distractions. My response to the Black Lives Matters movement was personal celebration and investigation... all black everything!"



Hank Willis Thomas, Two Little Prisoners, 2014, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Hank Willis Thomas

"I don't believe anyone should do anything they don't want to do, unless they feel they must. I don't believe that having a specific hue of skin should obligate or validate what they make. I believe that the more voices that feel compelled to speak out against injustice, the better. The fact of the matter is that broad injustice takes place everyday and all the time. The question for me is, 'How do we find new and innovative ways to respond and call out when we are oversaturated with image, music, text designed to distract and nullify us?' I'm still in search of answers."



Titus Kaphar, 1968/2014, 2014, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Titus Kaphar

"I think that the problems of this world will be a natural outgrowth of some artists' practice and the celestial and ineffable will be the focus of others. Attempting to create mandates for the production of art in and of itself can be the death nail to creativity."



Jordan Casteel Galen 2014

Jordan Casteel

"Whether black artists should or should not respond to the events surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement feels irrelevant. Black artists ARE responding. Each of us, through our various forms of expression, are contributing to an expanded notion of what it means to be black in America today. The basis of the movement is to draw attention to the value we place on life – more specifically, black life. We can scrutinize society's value system by making a body human that has historically been seen as less than. It is the diversity of the Black artists' voice that helps to emphasize our worth.

For me, as an artist who has experienced the world as a heterosexual cis black woman, it has felt important to share the story of my relationship(s) to black men/masculinity as a daughter, sister, lover, friend, and family member. I hope that through my personal lens, I can draw a viewer into an intimate experience they might not otherwise encounter. My portraits engage a viewer through observation of color, texture, environment, and gesture.

To some, my work may be speaking directly to the Black Lives Matter movement through its emphasis on humanizing black bodies, however, I think the way black artists continue to give to the Black Lives Matter movement is by sharing their individual voices in order to bring power and understanding to a united goal – no one person is the same or should be judged as such.”



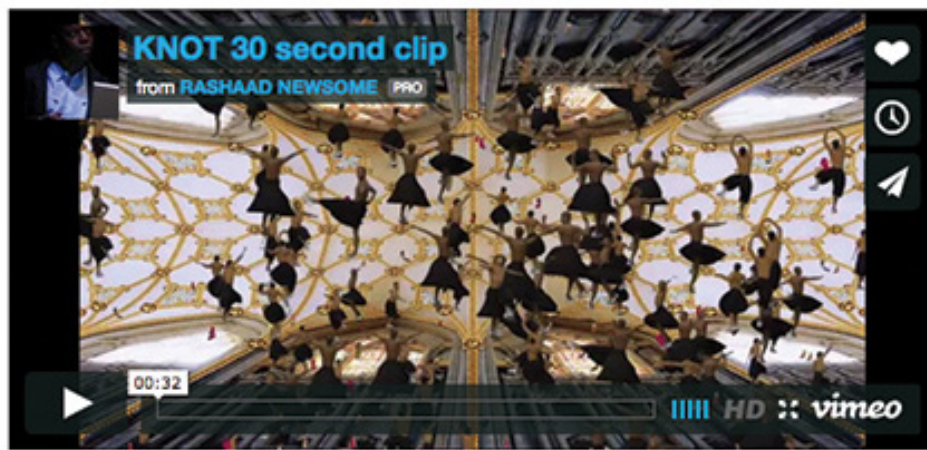
A still from the film #Blackmendment, Shikeith, 2014

Shikeith

“I recently was shared rare audio from a 1975 speech from Toni Morrison. During the speech, she states ‘Accurate artistry proves racism is a public mark of ignorance, but a fraud...’ The core of the Black Lives Matter movement is an expedition to extract the weeds of ignorance planted into the underpinning of America.

I realize, like many others, the humanity ascribed to Blackness has historically been determined through unenlightened, Manichean precepts that viewed Blackness as cursed. Addressing this neglect saw the Black populous of artists create written and visual art that speaks to and asserts a reality that blackness and humanity are not antithetical – a Black being realized on their own terms. My socially engaged, art film ‘#Blackmendment’, uses new forms of virtual communication to illustrate this historic response.

It is critical that I as an artist continue to respond to the historic tropes that follow me, just as they followed Trayvon Martin to his untimely death. As a collective, I encourage artists of all backgrounds to continue picking at the weeds of ignorance, and planting the flowers of truth.”



Rashaad Newsome

"I think all humans should respond to the events surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement. Given the fact that the dehumanization of black people permeates our society, I can't see how anyone could idly stand by. I think there are several ways that people can participate. I'm not [preaching] on how you should do it but find a way that works for you and like Nike 'Just do it.' Personally as an artist, a human and a black man, I felt an immense responsibility to say something."



Cameron Welch, Patchwork, 2014; Cameron Welch, Gaze, 2014

Cameron Welch

"My initial instinct is to respond with a resounding, 'of course'! But where does that sit in terms of how these objects are seen / where they end up? In my own practice, I've responded to these events in terms of how the work is constructed. Aspects of the paintings that were once highly considered and manicured are now distressed and aggressive. Marks are made with footprints and detritus materials and shapes are violently sewn binding them against their will. I'm angry about what's happened, I always will be. I feel that attacking parts of my practice allows for that to show in manners that can't be expressed vocally."



Clifford Owens, Performance Score: Rico Gatson, Five Minutes, performed on January 31, 2015 at Smack Mellon, photograph by Matthew McNulty

Clifford Owens

"It seems to me that the question should black American artists respond to "black lives matter" is a matter of one's own sense of social responsibility. "Black Lives Matter" was not a movement, it was a moment that has already passed. American black artists are vested in the "black lives matters movement" as an image, and it's a powerful image, a strong representation of blackness.

I'm deeply suspicious of and somewhat cynical about the function of art in the "black lives movement." I'm suspicious about what motivates some black American artists to appropriate representations of the "black lives movement." I'm cynical that the image of the "black lives movement" is a merely a signifier that has lost its signified."



Sanford Biggers, "Everyday a Sunset Dies (LKG)," 2014

Sanford Biggers

"No, not necessarily, but there are artists that have something to say about these events and they should. And therein lies the conundrum. To move beyond strictly race-focused conversations and allow for black artists to engage in more expansive dialogues around their work and practice is key.

In 2015, for us to still need to address the issues and importance of black lives in the first place, and to have to assert our very existence within American culture, is extremely problematic and actually quite shameful."