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## jc lenochan: *UNDOING WHITE MESS*

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By *Billy Anania*



Installation view: *jc lenochan: UNDOING WHITE MESS*, Smack Mellon, New York, 2021. Courtesy the artist and Smack Mellon.

**On View****Smack Mellon***UNDOING WHITE MESS*

March 20 – May 2, 2021

Brooklyn

jc lenochan's latest exhibition is a play on words. In a literal sense, text forms the basis of nearly every drawing, sculpture, and installation in *UNDOING WHITE MESS*. The title is a pun on resolving the problems of hegemonic whiteness—how white identity allots certain privileges at the expense of nonwhites. lenochan addresses the long reign of colonialism and racial capitalism in the humanities, pointing to gaps in historical memory and ways that elite institutions de-radicalize political struggle.

In the back room of Smack Mellon, lenochan and curator Gabriel de Guzman set up a workshop for deconstructing obsolete paradigms. Books are stuck together, torn up, and charred, but not in the style of Bradbury. Instead, works by controversial writers appear with classics of Western literature to expose the pitfalls of canonical sanctity. The artist sneaks radical language into each piece, using the cut-up literary technique to repeat and repurpose phrases and create new meanings. *UNDOING WHITE MESS* is thus a semiotic study, hinting at language's ability to persuade and dissuade.

lenochan is a teacher and activist in New York, and his commitment to anti-racist education shows in his rhetorical artworks. One gallery wall displays *What time you got (RACE)* (2017) and *It's about time (class)* (2020), two school clocks marked "Race" and "Class" with respective black and white cords leading to one outlet. The "Race" clock is situated higher, emphasizing its urgency and perhaps critiquing class reductionism. Nearby, a punching bag hangs solemnly from the center of the room, composed of torn-up journal pages and overlain with concrete. Their juxtaposition calls attention to the training necessary for breaking ingrained ideology, and time running out.



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Sculptures like *Get smart again* (2021) conjoin several books with concrete, resulting in bulky, weathered masses. Nonfiction works by Woody Allen and right-wing propagandist Dinesh D'Souza appear with classics by the likes of Jane Austen and Plato. Richard Armour's *It All Started with Columbus* (1961) faces the gallery entrance, making it hard to miss. Written from the perspective of a European immigrant, Armour's nonfiction satire pokes fun at the ways Americans recall their national history. It's a glaring mid-century time capsule of white chauvinism that helps contextualize why so many Americans approach racialized violence with a sort of detached irony. For many, that subject has never been much of a laughing matter.

Another wall displays dozens of black postcards with tiny chalk sketches. These pieces recall the narrative ink drawings of Raymond Pettibon or Roy Lichtenstein's monochromatic acrylic paintings. Unlike those artists, however, lenochan portrays scenes of brutality, queer love, and protest. On the opposite wall, another chalk piece titled *Center for decolonization of racial epithets* (2019) portrays an industrial waste center on an expansive black tarp. A mess of chicken-scratch handwriting, some half-erased, floats above the structure like smog. Only a few words are legible, such as "whitewashed," "society," and "the undercommons"—the latter a reference to the foundational text by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney.

In his artist statement, lenochan argues, "Everything we see has the potential to become inexplicably something else in terms of social justice and trans-pedagogy, wherein concepts dictate materials and process." This feels like an appropriate summary of the last year in the US, when major institutions with histories of racism and abuse attempted to repair their public image with anti-colonial programs and exhibitions. It also speaks to the kinds of selective diversity permitted in museums and universities, and the stringent hold of the nonprofit-industrial complex on cultural studies.



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While this critique is highly relevant, some works send mixed messages. In *To rethink the experiment* (2018–2019), stenciled text reads, “IN THIS COUNTRY AMERICAN MEANS WHITE EVERYBODY ELSE HAS TO HYPHENATE.” Indeed, many white Americans do believe this racist principle, but not everyone has to hyphenate. Black and Indigenous identities are largely detached from national association—unless, of course, a workplace or government entity forces them to claim otherwise.

*Things people ask that they themselves must answer* (2018–2019) poses an important question with no easy answer: “What does post-whiteness mean?” While white Americans will soon become a minority, a reactionary neofascist movement is working to maintain white dominance. Black revolutionary theorists like Robin D. G. Kelley have argued that colonialism never really ended, thus making the term “postcolonialism” seem meaningless. As such, “post-whiteness” could be another academic term to cover up continued exploitation, or possibly a call to consider alternatives.

Much of lenochan’s work is very on the nose, and thus succeeds in making its case. It’s easy to feel that contemporary political discourse is a vast wasteland, and that we are racing against time, both individually and communally. But we should be aware of the kinds of oppression that purely diagnostic political art empowers. lenochan teeters the line between abolitionist critique and liberal abstraction, showing us the waste but leaving us wondering where to go. Nonetheless, more artists should be openly denouncing whiteness as a social construct.

## Contributor

Billy Anania

**Billy Anania** is an art critic, editor, and journalist in Brooklyn.