



International Center of Photography

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news release

White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art



Barbara Kruger
Untitled, 2003
Billboard
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On view from
December 10, 2004
through
February 27, 2005

Media Preview
Thursday,
December 9, 2004
9:30 -11am

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What would it mean to look at race in relation to the concept of whiteness? Until recently, discussions of race in America have focused exclusively on the experience, history, and representations of people of color. By contrast, the implications, power, and construction of the racial category termed “white,” are largely invisible and unconscious. *White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art*, an exhibition at the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street), on view from December 10, 2004 through February 27, 2005, proposes that considering whiteness—white skin, white privilege, and even questions about what constitutes whiteness—is crucial to a fundamental shift in the way we think and talk about race.

“In mainstream American society and culture, whiteness remains an ever-present and unexamined state of mind and body, a powerful norm so pervasive that it is rarely acknowledged or even named,” says guest curator Maurice Berger. “By refusing to mark whiteness—to assign it meaning—we are also refusing to see a vital part of the interpersonal and social relations of race. In the end, any discussion of race that does not include an analysis of whiteness will be, at best, incomplete.”

The works represented in *White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art* make whiteness visible and thus available to examination and discussion. Some tackle the subject head on; others handle it more subtly. No matter the approach, they offer refreshing and thought-provoking ways of thinking about race. At the same time, the exhibition affords viewers the opportunity to see work by major contemporary artists through a new and provocative lens. The exhibition features works by Max Becher & Andrea Robbins, Nayland Blake, Nancy Burson, Wendy Ewald, Mike Kelley, William Kentridge, Barbara Kruger, Nikki S. Lee, Paul McCarthy, Cindy Sherman, and Gary Simmons.

In *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, a major exhibition that was presented at ICP one year ago and is now touring the country, co-curators Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis demonstrated how powerful myths of race have been constructed and reinforced through photography. *White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art* continues that discussion in a focused exhibition that is both engaging and necessary.

Works in the exhibition

Max Becher and **Andrea Robbins**'s *German Indian Series* (1997-98), portraits of Germans who attend festivals dressed up as Native Americans, examines fascination with and appropriation of racial otherness. **Nayland Blake**'s *Invisible Man* (1994) addresses the mutability and complexity of race, drawing on the artist's biography and children's tales. In *Untitled (Guys Who Look Like Jesus)* (2000-01), **Nancy Burson** set out to create a photographic portrait of contemporary conceptions of Jesus Christ. Including both portraits of men who answered a casting call for people who look like Jesus and a composite of representations of Christ in Western art, Burson investigates the meaning of the white, European-looking version of godliness. **Wendy Ewald**'s *White Girl's Alphabet—Andover, Massachusetts* (2002), a project created in collaboration with teenage subjects, represents a poignant, humanistic exploration of the vulnerabilities and ambivalence that underwrite both whiteness and femininity. **William Kentridge**'s *Drawings for Projection Series: Johannesburg - 2nd Greatest City after Paris; Monument; Mine; Sobriety, Obesity, and Growing Old* (1981-91) is a series of short films that explores the complex and often fragile realities of white power and black subservience in apartheid-era South Africa. **Barbara Kruger**, in a work specifically commissioned for the exhibition, creates a large-scale photomural on the arbitrary and provocative nature of the words we use to define race. In **Nikki S. Lee**'s *The Yuppie Series* (1998), the Korean-born artist infiltrates and documents the world of mostly white, economically privileged Wall Street professionals, meticulously adopting her colleagues' code of dress, behavior, and living habits, revealing them as definable and anomalous. **Paul McCarthy** and **Mike Kelley**'s *Heidi* (1992), an hour-long video, challenges the myth of the wholesome white middle-class family. **Cindy Sherman**'s early series of photographs *Bus Riders* (1976/2000), depict the artist masquerading as bus passengers, in a range of racial and class "types" that include some of the earliest attempts by a visual artist to see whiteness as both a racial category and a stereotype. In another series, *Untitled* (2000), Sherman fixes her lens on white women, moving through a range of often stereotypical character types, from female executive to WASP matron. **Gary Simmons**'s *Big Still* (2001), an enormous, whitewashed moonshine still, is a monument to the world of white poverty — the hillbillies and "white trash" of depression-era America — that has been erased from mainstream history and culture.

About the curator

Maurice Berger is a Fellow at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics of the New School for Social Research in New York and Curator of the Center for Art and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. His articles have appeared in many journals and newspapers, including *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *Wired*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. He is the author of the critically acclaimed *White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), which was a finalist for the 2000 Horace Mann Bond Book Award from Harvard University. He is the author of eight other books: *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s* (Harper & Row, 1989), *How Art Becomes History* (HarperCollins, 1992), *Modern Art and Society* (HarperCollins, 1994), *Constructing Masculinity* (Routledge, 1995), *The Crisis of Criticism* (The New Press, 1998), *Postmodernism: A Virtual Discussion* (Georgia O'Keeffe Research Center/CAVC, 2003), *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum* (Yale, 2004), and *Museums of Tomorrow: A Virtual Discussion* (Georgia O'Keeffe Research Center/CAVC, 2005).

Catalogue

White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art is accompanied by a 117-page catalogue edited by Maurice Berger, published by the Center for Art and Visual Culture, and distributed by Distributed Art Publishers (DAP). In addition to a curatorial essay by Berger, the book contains essays by Wendy Ewald, Artist in Residence, John Hope Franklin Center, Duke University; David R. Roediger, Babcock Professor of Afro-American Studies and History at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign; and Patricia J. Williams, James L. Dohr Professor of Law, Columbia Law School.

Film Festival

In association with *White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art*, The New School will host the first film festival devoted to the issue of whiteness. *White: A Film Festival*—organized by exhibition curator Maurice Berger—will explore the ways that whiteness as a racial concept has been represented in American films over the past half-century. Like its companion exhibition, it will examine work that focuses on white attitudes, sensibilities, and behavior in relation to such issues as racial purity, interracial love, economic class, masculinity, power, and racial prejudice. The Center for Art and Visual Culture (in cooperation with participating institutions) will publish a brochure that will include film credits and synopses, as well as an essay by the curator. Among the films to be shown are: *Imitation of Life* (1959), *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1962), *The Watermelon Man* (1970), *White Dog* (1982), *Hairspray* (1989), *Bamboozled* (2000), and *Far From Heaven* (2002). The festival is scheduled to take place at the Tishman Auditorium of The New School, from Friday through Sunday, February 18-20, 2005. It will be co-sponsored by the Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland Baltimore County, as well as The Vera List Center for Art and Politics and The Wolfson Center for National Affairs at The New School.

Acknowledgments

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