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The Push Back: *Black Pulp!* and *Woke!* at USF CAM
Getting to the roots of black print imagery to get to liberation.

Caitlin Albritton – June 13, 2017



Walking amongst a bustling opening reception at USF's Contemporary Art Museum, through the noise a visitor's voice stated clearly: "This is an important exhibition." And that it is.

By now, we all realize the importance of #BlackLivesMatter, but *Black Pulp!* puts the grassroots nature of this movement into historical perspective. Artists-curators William Villalongo and Mark Thomas Gibson (who have a two-person exhibition *Woke!* simultaneously at CAM) have dug up the past to share an unprecedented compilation of graphics and image-making by black artists and publishers from the last century.

Curation of the show came about as Villalongo and Gibson (longtime friends with ties to Cooper Union and Yale) were discussing figuration, specifically regarding Kara Walker's exhibition *A Subtlety* at the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn (a.k.a. *The Marvelous Sugar Baby*).

"It [the sculpture] was so audacious and I was trying to understand why Kara Walker's work was so hard to talk about," Gibson says during the artist talk led by Margaret Miller, the Director of the Institute for Research in Art at USF, last Friday night.

From there, the two artists discussed the roles of humor, satire, appropriation and how to approach these difficult conversations surrounding black representation in contemporary art. By focusing on illustrative and print-based work instead of painting, the topic of discussion shifts to accessibility, as well as affordability, and how these factors play into mass audiences' ability to connect with the work.

Showcasing historical works in cases at the center of the room while featuring contemporary pieces on the surrounding walls, Villalongo and Gibson have traced the lineage of pulp works based in artist-run magazines, comics, books, vinyl covers and posters (as well as fine art prints and other works on paper). From Black Panther Party memorabilia to black poetry, all of these methods of underground publishing serve as pushback against outside representations of the black experience, to turn image culture around and combat it by flooding it with their voices.

Billy Graham's *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* comics provide a springboard into many of the contemporary works by making black figures not as inferior sidekicks to white companions, but heroic protagonists in their own right. From these examples you can see the influence on current artists like

Kerry James Marshall or Trenton Doyle Hancock as they create their own characters, mythologies, narratives and realities.

Renee Cox's "Chillin with Liberty" feels even more powerful than ever. Dressed as her heroic character (or perhaps alter ego) Rajé, she's relaxing in a quiet moment between battling crime (like saving Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben from their oppressive food stereotypes). Sitting atop Lady Liberty's crown looking out with a stoic expression, it makes you wonder if she already sees the hardships ahead. Regardless, she serves as a symbol of black emancipation by providing positive forms of self-representation.

On the other side of the gallery you'll find *Woke!*, a selection of work by Villalongo and Gibson that deals with American atrocity and the black body in a physical way. Both artists say their worlds changed after Eric Gardner and the Ferguson protests.

If there's a must-see exhibition this summer, it's undoubtedly *Black Pulp!*, a show worth repeated visits. From early black newspapers and 'zines to the current use of social media hashtags and graphics, everyday forms of aesthetics can be subversive sites of resistance, recontextualization and representation for the black community to capitalize on for self-definition and self-expression.