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Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America, New Museum, New York

Giovanni Aloi

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Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America

Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America, currently at the New Museum in New York, is the last show organized by Nigerian-born, Germany-based curator Okwui Enwezor who died of cancer in 2019 at the age of fifty-five. A collaboration with curators Massimiliano Gioni (New Museum), Naomi Beckwith (MCA Chicago), Mark Nash (independent), and artist Glenn Ligon, the exhibition features ninety-seven works of art in different media by thirty-seven Black artists living in the U.S.

The title of the exhibition encapsulates the essence of the curatorial proposition: grief is about loss and grievance speaks of retribution. In Enwezor's words, the exhibition explores "the crystallization of black grief in the face of a politically orchestrated white grievance." Together, grief and grievance imply the condition that has defined Black lives as mourning in the context of the law, its tragic shortcomings, and the perpetual state of emergency it perpetrates. It seems therefore particularly cunning that the exhibition should begin with Arthur Jafa's *Love is the Message, the Message is Death*, a meticulously edited seven-minute collage of found footage set to Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam." Reclaiming media's representational tropes, strategies, and clichés, the video at once embodies and represents the alienation, fragmentation, and collective multitude making up Blackness in the United States today.

On the second floor, the exhibition takes on an intentionally monochromatic aura. Nari Ward's *Peace Keeper*, (1995) comprises a rusted, burnt-out hearse covered with peacock feathers. Trapped in a metal cage-like structure, the hearse is stuck. Unable to move forward, it symbolizes the state of unfinished mourning the Black community is condemned to as a hostage of history. Nearby, the black-and-white photographic series by LaToya Ruby Frazier and Dawoud Bey ground the exhibition in specific sociohistorical milieus in which trauma is either rooted in the extractive exploitation of capitalist systems (Frazier) or the outright racist violence of groups like the KKK (Bey). Both series, in their own distinct ways, explore different conceptions of loss, and personal and collective devastation as defined by an overwhelmingly relentless sense of powerlessness. In front of these images, it is hard not to sense that photographic realism can take on a new political agency that by far exceeds the dialectics of indexicality. These clearly are "Black and white" images in the sense that they visually embolden Black grief and grievance in the context of a white-defined world. The context in which contemporary Black artists think and work realism takes on a powerful new role, as further confirmed by Kerry James Marshall's painting *Untitled (policeman)* from 2015. Through his distinctive synthetic realism, Marshall summons the culturally ambivalent figure of a Black cop. Sitting on his cruiser, his eyes point outside the frame, to something we will never see. This deceptively simple image is charged with hope and sorrow. Victim or perpetrator; plausible hero or villain? The race/power relations inscribed in this historical moment, as this painting suggests, are never clean-cut and easy to grasp.

Unstraightforward narratives in which Black and white prescriptive roles appear problematized are also central to Lorna Simpson's painting *Night Light* (2019). The painting is part of a recent series informed by the work of Matthew Alexander Henson, an often-overlooked African-American Arctic explorer. While researching Henson, Simpson came across a poem by Robin Coste Lewis titled "Using Black to Paint: Walking Through a Matisse Exhibit Thinking about the Arctic and Matthew Henson" in which a passage reads: "The unanticipated shock: so much believed to be white is actually—strikingly—/blue. Endless blueness. White is blue. An ocean wave freezes in place. Blue./Whole glaciers, large

Ellen Gallagher
Dew Breaker, 2015.
Photo : courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Kerry James Marshall
Untitled (policeman), 2015.
Photo : courtesy of the artist & Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Nari Ward
Peace Keeper, 1995, installation view, *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, New Museum, New York, 2021.
Photo : Dario Lasagni, courtesy of the New Museum, New York

as Ohio, floating masses of static water. All of them pale/frosted azuls. It makes me wonder—yet again—was there ever such a thing/as whiteness? I am beginning to grow suspicious. An open window." Simpson's work taps into multiple registers of sublimity and purity while questioning the construction of whiteness, its implied naturalness, and the subjectivity of colour.

The aesthetic strategies deployed by some of the artists in the exhibition also explore the edges of the unrepresentable—they prod the boundaries of grief at the point at which words begin to crumble. More than others, the large canvases of neo-abstract expressionist artists Julie Mehretu and Mark Bradford seem to emotively map territories of unspeakable grief. Here too, as was the case for realism, abstraction seems to take on a dimensional depth that exceeds the concerns of previous abstract expressionist artists. In the context of Black art, this contingency powerfully shifts abstraction and the spiritual connotations it has inherited from its modernist roots into a politically charged field. However, the result is not one filled with anger, rage, or resignation, as one might expect. Ellen Gallagher's abstract paintings explore conceptions of communication and isolation through the idea of the archipelago. The artist's mythology of regeneration envisions a pan-African borderless interdependency born from the bones of drowned African slaves. Personal mythologies and searches for alternative, not-white defined, identities are also central to Rashid Johnson's monumental, plant-filled, structure titled *Antoine's Organ* (2016). In this work Johnson uses plants and African plant-based products, like shea butter and black soap, to reflect on his African-American identity, registers of individual and collective vulnerability, and capitalist exploitation.

Grief and Grievance could not be more timely. It is undeniably powerful, well curated, and impactfully staged. Social media have time and time again proved detrimental to the discussion of topics as serious and urgent as these. The speed and limitation they impose denies the time, care, and thinking-depth they deserve. Political art of the kind seen here can give us the opportunity to slow down, pause, truly reflect, and sincerely empathize as a step towards a fairer future.

Giovanni Aloi

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