

"Art and Racial Violence: *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock* (c. 1986) by Pat Ward Williams in Historical Context" (2005)

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Synopsis

This illustrated paper was inspired by a photo-based, mixed-media work of art by Pat Ward Williams, entitled, *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock* (c. 1986; below, *Accused*).¹ A macabre sort of postmodern, colorless collage, it evolved from the artist's inadvertent encounter with a 1937 photograph of a black male lynch victim chained to a tree in a *Life* magazine publication, identified only by a caption from which she drew her title. At the time, Ward Williams was exploring in her art photography the paradoxes inherent in documentary photography. In this connection she reacted with rage not only to the horrific *Life* image itself, but the lack of a credit line, which subtly glossed over its human production to suggest an autonomous appearance.

Accused is comprised of a row of four framed pictures, one, a tear sheet from the *Life* publication, the others, close-up photographs of the "original," mounted on a tarpaper backdrop approximately four by six feet. Scrawled in this surrounding area are the artist's apparent stream-of-consciousness reactions, including phrases like: "Who took this picture? ... How can this photograph exist? ... He doesn't look lynched yet ... How long has he been locked to that tree?" Viewers of the *Accused* are placed in a defensive ideological and spatio-temporal position just beyond the edge of her "voice," along with the photographer similarly eyeing the scene through a shifting camera viewfinder. Ward Williams' intention was to reveal the veneer of objectivity encompassed by journalistic photography in relation to the victimized black body, teasing

out its submerged tensions between naturalism and subjectivity, exploitation and information, activism and propaganda.

I first saw *Accused* over a decade ago in an important group exhibition in New York that suggested a broad turn in art of the 1980s away from prevailing postwar formal concerns to bodily and cultural (ethnic, racial, sexual, gender) identities as the locus of aesthetic content.² In 2005 *Accused* was included in a solo exhibition for the artist at the UCF Art Gallery,³ by which time it had accrued a broad scope of reference in an emergent interdisciplinary discourse on race and representation cross encroaching on recent American art, postmodern photography, African American art history, and American history.⁴ In the interim, an array of public events and developments in the arts and academia had affected its reception and meanings. My paper investigates these contexts in an attempt to deconstruct the aesthetic machinations and social messages of *Accused*. In this task, I identify art antecedents and anticipatory aspects of the work, so that, secondarily, I present a lineage of visual culture related to racial violence through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some prominent artists discussed within this trajectory are Jacob Lawrence, Norman Rockwell, Andy Warhol, Faith Ringgold, and David Hammonds.

To begin with, the 1990s, saw a rash of high-profile state and vigilante brutality against African American young men (building from the mid-1980s), most ubiquitously, the tragically momentous Rodney King episode (1991).⁵ One phrase clearly legible in the textual portion of *Accused*—"can you be black and look at this?"—led one art critic to an instant juxtaposition with the infamous videotape of the LAPD beating of King by George Holiday,⁶ which brings up the *topos* of "evidence" in relation to the history of the

photographic medium and its double-edged capacity to perpetuate and resist misrepresentation and oppression depending on who controls imagery, how it is manipulated, and the contexts in which it is presented. The King tape, made fortuitously without any conscious aesthetic consideration, was pulled into the contemporary art world directly in a bold move by curators at the Whitney Museum for the video program of the 1993 Biennial, where it related provocatively to some of the intended works of art in the show by African American artists (including another by Ward Williams). *Accused* prefigures these intersections.

At the same time, the reopening of a number of high-profile Civil Rights-era murder cases, including the 1955 Mississippi lynching of Chicago teenager Emmett Till (2004), about which two recent documentary films have appeared,⁷ have been the result of a long tradition of anti-racist activism in cultural as well as political spheres.⁸ Without being topical or narrative in a conventional sense, *Accused* has remained a politically charged work based on the layered, unresolved issue of past violence against African Americans that continues to resonate in American society.

The most significant event to bear upon subsequent viewings of *Accused* was a startling exhibition of "souvenir" photographs of lynching (most from the first half of the twentieth century), which opened in New York in 2000 and subsequently toured under the title, *Without Sanctuary*, for about five years.⁹ Attendant special programming and academic and popular press brought this clandestine history, almost incomprehensible to young audiences, to the forefront of contemporary American consciousness. Emory University (where the collection is housed) held an interdisciplinary conference in October 2002 entitled, "Lynching and Racial Violence in America: Histories and

Legacies," with over two hundred participating scholars.¹⁰ Noted was an abundant new discourse related to the anti-lynching movement and the arts, and close visual analyses of lynch photographs based on postmodern theories of photographic perception and the gaze.¹¹ Ward Williams' *Accused* was at the cusp of the flood of this new public awareness that *Without Sanctuary* precipitated.

One frequent characteristic of souvenir lynch photographs is emphasis on the haunting spectators, by whom and for whom the images were produced, which can evoke eerie, visceral associations with Crucifixion scenes of early Christian visual culture. These deeply internalized compositional underpinnings were mitigated by racialized genres that developed in the visual (as well as literary) arts in Europe and America through the height of the slave trade. Interestingly, similar imagery overlapped the service of abolition, stereotyping and oppression, as seen in representative examples. I explore how Christian hypocrisy was embedded in white society of the Jim Crow South, while concurrently usurped as a central feature of the anti-lynching movement.

In 1935 two major art exhibitions were organized in New York to support the anti-lynching cause, featuring a number of well known along with lesser known artists.¹² These shows generated a substantial amount of public and critical attention; and the theme extended to artists beyond their scope through the following decade. Allusions to Christian iconography and violent, ostensibly secular imagery abounded, sometimes intertwined. A range in style was produced by both African American and non-African American artists, leading to discussion about how subjectivity and agency are distinguished and evaluated in aesthetic terms that elide into ethical conundrums.

Of course, *Without Sanctuary* generated controversy among the public and cultural critics, not distinctly across racial lines. The collection was amassed by a white southern collector, whose explanation of his undertaking as a "gut-wrenching mission," was generally taken in good faith. But questions remained about "what exactly [was] to be gained by dwelling upon lynching and dragging such a terrifying part of our past into the present"; and, in terms of voyeurism and exploitation, whether it was worth sacrificing true sanctuary for the victims.¹³ While a range of responses ensued, they skewed towards positive reaction in terms of facilitating open discussion that had generally been suppressed. However, dissenting views focused on exploitation and the risks of normalizing such obscene imagery through repetitive exposure were prevalent.

It has been pointed out within this debate that violent photographs were employed sparingly in the anti-lynching movement in favor of literary descriptions and art illustrations. This can be interpreted as a show of respect for the victims in keeping with decorum in the pre-mass media era. However, in the communications explosion of the postwar war years, photographic images of racial violence were encouraged by African American Civil Rights leaders, climactic in the publication of photographs of the mutilated Emmett Till in an open casket at his funeral. It is widely agreed that photographs of violence against Civil Rights workers and African Americans in general the early 1960s were definitive for Civil Rights legislation.

Ultimately a parallel dilemma faces artists choosing to develop or appropriate images with traditionally negative associations. Ultimately, Ward Williams had to pursue the implications of her close re-working of a lynch image, like her predecessors of the 1930s and 1940s. There is no monolithic consensus for the boundaries of taste,

qualitative criteria and responsibilities of artists in this regard. I simply wish to point out that many *have* chosen to deal with related subjects bluntly; and to argue that their works have effected on some level and to varying degrees, opinions and behaviors within and beyond the art world.

Through *Accused* Ward Williams introduces another dimension of debates on contemporary "activist," or socio-politically committed art in her espousal of the work as primarily conceptual. While she has sold a version of the work, she asserts her ownership of the idea or content (or "text," in a Barthesian sense), which she has periodically re-presented. In this sense, she is building on the subversion of the fetishistic, "unique" art object explored by a previous generation of now canonical Conceptual artists, who, however, generally worked with more obscure subject matter. This also highlights and returns us to the milieu in which *Accused* was created and originally intended—the mainstream (traditionally white) contemporary art world. In fact *Accused* incorporates many tendencies that proliferated in art of the 1980s, including shock itself as a prevalent sensibility, and a fragmented approach to photographic forms undertaken by a number of African American women artists emerging in the same period. In the 1990s, a number of African American artists dealing with the historical psychological and physical mistreatment of blacks in the West received wide mainstream recognition as artistically valid and at the forefront of the contemporary avant-garde.

While it is obvious that I find *Accused* a compelling work of art, the purpose of this paper is not to argue for its artistic merit or quality per se as some sort of revisionist "masterpiece" (a contradiction in terms in any case). Rather, I acknowledge and examine its currency as a cultural production in which many developments in academia, politics

and art of the past two decades converge, in the process, elucidating an iconographical history of visual culture depicting racial violence.

¹ I thank Dr. JoAnne Stephenson, Director of African American Studies at UCF, for the opportunity to present an early draft of the recently completed paper represented by this synopsis in the 3rd Annual James Weldon Johnson Lecture Series (2005); and for the opportunity to teach an African American Studies course, which has facilitated and motivated this work. (Due to copyright issues, illustrations cannot be included here.)

Accused was first exhibited in Baltimore in 1986; for background see, *Pat Ward Williams: Probable Cause* (exh. cat.); Philadelphia, 1991; accessible at www.thegalleriesatmoore.org. (The work was purchased by the Whitney Museum of American Art some time before ca. 1994; however, the artist has exhibited other versions, an aspect of her project discussed below.)

² See Marcia Tucker, Nilda Pereza, and Kinshasha Conwill, eds., *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, (exh. cat.; New York, 1990).

³ *Road Trip: the Art of Pat Ward Williams*, UCF Art Gallery, Orlando; Jan. 18 – Mar .11, 2005, organized by Kevin Haran and Theo Lotz. Ward Williams is currently a Professor of Art at USF.

⁴ Beyond numerous periodicals, publications in which *Accused* appears include: Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York, 1990); Maurice Berger, *How Art Becomes History* (New York, 1992); Thelma Golden, et al., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art*, (exh. cat.; New York, 1994; in the exhibition, Williams was represented by another work); Michele Wallace and Gina Dent, eds., *Black Popular Culture*, Seattle, 1998; Sharon Patton, *African-American Art* (Oxford and New York, 1998); Barbara Bloeminck, curator, *Re/righting History* (exh. cat.; Katonah, 1999); and Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis, 2004).

⁵ Other major cases that immediate come to mind are the NYPD incidents involving the stationhouse abuse of Abner Louima ([1997) and fatal shooting of Amadou Diallo (1999); and the truck-dragging death of James Byrd in rural Texas (1998).

⁶ Elizabeth Alexander, "Can You Be BLACK and Look at this? Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," in Golden, et al., 91-111.

⁷ Stanley Nelson, dir., *The Murder of Emmett Till*, 2003 (PBS); Keith Beauchamp, dir., *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*, 2004 (Velocity/Thinkfilm).

⁸ Convictions have been forthcoming in several major cases including the 1963 Medgar Evers murder (1994); the murder of four girls in the 1963 Birmingham church bombing (2002), and the 1964 Neshoba County murders of activists James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman (2005).

⁹ See James Allen, et al., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (New York, 2000); also, www.withoutsanctuary.org. The show opened at the Ruth Horowitz Gallery, New York, with the title, *Witness* (relevant for a discussion in this paper). The expanded version, titled after Allen's publication, opened at the New York Historical Society immediately following the gallery show; see Stewart Desmond, "Risk & Reward: the Story of 'Without Sanctuary,'" *Museum News* LVIII/2 (2001): 42-47. Other venues included: The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; The American Museum of African American History, Detroit; Chicago History Center; Jackson State University, Jackson, MI; University of Georgia, Athens; Emory University and The Martin Luther King, Jr. Historical Site, Atlanta (in joint programming).

¹⁰ See Peter Rachleff, "Lynching and Racial Violence: Report from a Conference," *Z Magazine* XV/12 (2002), at: <http://zmagsite.zmag.org/dec2002/rachleff1202.htm>. A conference program is posted at www.emory.edu/withoutsanctuaryexhibit/conference.html.

¹¹ Reported in Rachleff.

¹² See Helen Langa, "Two Anti-Lynching Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints," *American Art* XIII/1 (1999): 11-39, my main source for this discussion. Langa draws on, Marlene Park, "Lynching and Anti-Lynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s," (1993) in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg, et al. (University Park, 2006). See also, Margaret Rose Vendryes, "Hanging on their Walls: an Art Commentary on Lynching, the Forgotten 1935 Art Exhibition," in Judith Jackson Fossett and Jeffrey A. Tucker, eds., *Race Consciousness: African American Studies for the New Century* (New York, 1997); Stacy I. Morgan, *Social Realism in African American Art and*

Literature, 1930-1953 (Athens and London, 2004), 140-144; and Francis K. Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art*, New York, 2002, 408-411.

¹³ Markovitz, 138; pp. 137-141 gives a summary of the critical positions.