

Pitzer Exhibition Probes Racial, Gender Representations

By JULIA THOMAS DEC 5, 2014

A distinct heartbeat pulses in time with flashing black and white images on a screen, capturing a mix of faces, body parts and distorted portraits. Living flowers sit afront sepia military photographs, and a six-paneled cartoon lines the opposite wall. Each of these diverse visual forms explore conceptions of racism in the twenty-first century in Pitzer College's Racial Imaginary exhibition in Nichols Gallery.

The exhibition, which features the interdisciplinary work of fourteen artists, is an extension of a larger *Racial Imaginary* book project edited by Pomona professor of English and award-winning poet Claudia Rankine, author Beth Loffreda from the University of Wyoming and artist Max King Cap. *Racial Imaginary* examines representations of race, gender and culture in essays and poetry and aims to shed light on the challenge artists face in evoking meaningful representations of race as opposed to repetitive narratives.

"The *Racial Imaginary* came about because I felt writers weren't writing about race in ways that weren't stereotypical," Rankine wrote in an email to *TSL*. "I put out a call to writers and artists asking them to write about the difficulties they had encountered while writing race. Their responses were posted on a website I created, and the essays in the collection were chosen from the website."

Each selected piece of writing was later paired with a visual image, though the central focus of the *Racial Imagery* project is its written pieces. As the textual portion of such books can be overlooked with the presence of images, the exhibition places an emphasis on the book's essays in its very structure. Essays were printed and individually mounted on prominent shelves, ensuring both a strong structural presence and focus on each of the project's written pieces.

Rather than functioning as a repetition of the project, the exhibition aims to expand upon the images in the book, to be published in January 2015. As explained in a tour from Pitzer Art Galleries Director Ciara Ennis, the exhibition seeks to be, "another iteration of the project rather than illuminating [images in the book]."

Throughout the exhibit, visual pieces challenge conceptions of race through the use of sharp imagery and contrasting elements.

A series of photographs of social revolutions and military acts across the globe from 1817 to 1917 lined one wall of the exhibit, each paired with a delicate flower. The flowers act as a contrast to the violent black and white images behind them and are changed about once weekly throughout the time of the exhibition.

"I can't dissociate that image of a hippie putting a flower in a gun barrel," Ennis said. "It works as a contrast to those violent images. This whole piece became a representation of 100 plus ideals. It also says to me the importance of continuing to struggle, the importance of descent."

On Ennis' tour, students in Assistant Professor of American Studies Todd Honma's Visual Culture at the Margins class appreciated the juxtaposition of the crisp flowers with the threatening images.

"I really liked the idea that the flowers are real and going from the opposite process of life and death, juxtaposed to very political and violent images," Sachi Watase PZ '17 said.

Also exploring violence, albeit that of gender, race and class, the next installment in the exhibition featured a cartoon version of a Mexican novella. The characters were drawn according to heavy stereotypes, but they were accompanied by blank dialogue bubbles. Such purposeful voids leave viewers to imagine extreme stereotypes, creating an opportunity for viewers to transform their own conceptions of discourse on race and gender.

"In that way, it engages the audience more forcefully, whereas with other works it's more there for you," Ennis said.

The idea of racism is further discussed through a series of photographs of multi-racial people projected onto large screens, manipulated to have blue eyes. Commonly associated with white skin, the technologically produced blue eyes extend across racial boundaries to challenge conceptions of whiteness and race.

"It's a lighthearted way of calling attention to that standard that needs to be constantly questioned," Ennis said.

Like racial standards, the idea of gender is typically debated within societal framings. The exhibition expounded upon such notions through a number of black and white portraits depicting the artist (a white woman) and a man cross-dressing as a woman, provoking conflicting ideas about beauty and how it is contrived.

"Gender is more fluid than we allow it to be in our society," Ennis said.

This series of photographs is not alone in its lack of color. Rather, the black and white style runs throughout the exhibition to discourage observers from thinking about the works from

the perspective of any specific time or place.

Emma Tasini-Koger PZ '18, another student in Honma's course, had talked about how marginalized people use art as a form of self expression earlier in her class discussion and enjoyed connecting her knowledge with genuine pieces.

"It's really important to talk about race and to have it come up in conversation, so it's a good thing that we have this exhibit here," she said. "How do you marginalize people using a voice in our society if the government or mainstream white culture is constantly shutting others' voices down? Looking at visual cultures in art is another way to experience marginalized positions."

"Racial Imaginary" will be on display until Dec. 5 from 12 p.m. to 5 p.m. and by appointment.