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Issue 10
FEZ



Interview with Hamza Walker

Hamza Walker is the Executive Director of LAXART, and he co-organized the Hammer Biennial *Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, through, only*. For 20 years, Walker was the associate curator at the Renaissance Society of Chicago. Here, Walker discusses his comprehensive approach to curating, how he navigates the density of artists working in L.A., and his feedback on the recent controversy over Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till in relation to his 2008 exhibition *Black Is, Black Ain't* at the Renaissance Society.

Julie Weitz: Your shows often resurrect histories or highlight artists whose work has been overlooked. How do you think about the past as a contemporary curator?

Hamza Walker: Contemporary art is a very heterogeneous affair. As a result, I don't have an agenda. The upshot of an exhibition might be an engagement with history or it might involve working with an "overlooked" artist, but that is never the intent.

As for the past, periodization as it applies to the contemporary, for better or worse is a construction and a necessary one. I'd like to think the divide is not so much the living versus the dead as much as it has to do with what is relevant at any given moment. Picabia is dead! Long Live Picabia! Death is a mere technicality when it comes to Picabia.

Or if we were to think of periodization along the lines of a particular medium, say, photography for example, even though there's the

internet and new media, you have to ask, is that a difference in kind or a difference in degree. To say that we're still at the origin of photography is to recognize that a nucleus can have a 150-year diameter. The advent of digital technology is just a continuation of the same narrative that's already been put into place.

JW: So considering traditional mediums in relation to new technologies, are you suggesting that the playing field is level?

HW: Right, you have to keep it level. I don't privilege a given medium. You want to see as much of what's on the cultural landscape as possible and not to just focus on the so-called new. What's the job? Looking at art, surveying cultural production of all kinds. There are different paradigms and separate strands but bundled together they create the field as a whole. A botanist doesn't simply look at the plants they like. Contemporary art is made up of various narratives, lineages, and trajectories.

JW: Was that something you understood from the beginning or did you have to reshape your notion of how to view art, given the fact that there's a lot of judgment in academia?

HW: Part of learning is the unlearning of taste.

JW: Do you think there's an element of, say, careerism that actually limits that broadening of perspective?

Julie Weitz is an artist based in Los Angeles. Her videos, installations, and photographs examine the experience of embodiment in the digital realm and consider the social, political, and psychological dimensions of virtual identity.



HW: The title of curator as a profession is interesting to me. I'm too young to use phrases like, "I'm the last of a generation," but the advent of curatorial studies programs is relatively new. That wasn't available to me. Part of the professionalization of curating is that it's now a discipline that you can learn in school. As opposed to before, when it was something you backed your way into particularly with contemporary art.

JW: Now that you're in L.A., how do you manage the density of artists working here?

HW: In addition to organizing exhibitions, curators survey cultural production. And in L.A. there's a lot to survey. It can be intimidating. But to use a quintessential SoCal metaphor, I think of cultural production as a wave, one

that you don't surf as much as you surf. And in L.A. the surf's always up, so dive in. You have to enjoy wiping out. Then you get up and do it again. You're either compelled by your own curiosity or not. It's like going into a record store where you've never heard of any of the bands. You can continue buying the same type of records, or you can go in and see what's there. Curating is largely self-directed.

JW: LAXART recently hosted a conversation between you and Darby English about the Emmett Till case and your 2008 exhibition *Black is, Black Ain't* at the Renaissance Society [for which Darby wrote the catalog essay, "Emmett Till Ever After"]. The talk took place within your exhibition *Reconstitution*, which was a recasting of the 1987 exhibition *Constitution* originally



organized on the 200th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution. Given the recent controversy around Dana Schutz's painting in the Whitney Biennial, your discussion offered up a very different perspective on the subject of Till.

HW: Totally, that was the whole point. Someone asked me, "What does this talk have to do with the exhibition at LAXART?" My answer was EVERYTHING. The Till case was the catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement proper. The Till case was about equality before the law, which is a fundamental tenet of the Constitution, a tenet of which patriots are all too eager to cite. Martin Luther King Jr. was pointedly aware of this when he said, "America doesn't have to change, it just has to be what it says it is."

In terms of the Whitney controversy, it's great that people want to have this discussion, but no one is talking about any of the other work that was produced about the case. *Black Is, Black Ain't* was ten years ago, and it featured two photographs that were radically different takes on Emmett Till. One was by Demetrius Oliver and the other was by Jason Lazarus. So we wanted to have a conversation about Till without recourse to the controversy. To have it be more constructive, more casual, and informal. To redirect the discourse.

Hamza Walker is director of LAXART. From 1994–2016, Walker served as associate curator and director of education at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. Walker co-curated (with Aram Moshayedi) the 2016 edition of the Hammer Museum's *Made in L.A.*

Hamza Walker

JW: You spoke about what the case meant to each of you personally and how your perspective changed over time. That was revealing.

HW: Exactly. Jason Lazarus is a white artist who made a work about Till to which Darby and I are completely beholden. For us, there's a kind of subjective engagement and entanglement with that piece. There's no right or wrong, or question of who's entitled or who owns this subject. The Till case is a socio-political event in the past, and we have to ask ourselves where we are generationally with respect to the case. What kind of shadow does the case cast in our lifetimes? I wanted to talk about it on wholly different terms, counter to the kind of militancy the Schutz painting invoked. It's art. Let's consider it an occasion to be reflexive about our lives and positions.

JW: For me, until the Coco Fusco article was published, I was at a loss for how the argument was being constructed.

HW: Coco's article was great.

JW: So what you refer to as militancy is the call to destroy art?

HW: Yes. Did you see the way *The View* handled it?

JW: I was excited that they took it on.

HW: Yeah, Whoopi Goldberg just being Whoopi Goldberg. You know, one of her early skits was this really beautiful piece on Anne Frank. She's sensitive to understanding that fascism and racial purity aren't simply a U.S. thing. Anybody calling for the destruction of an artwork, it's like, no, you just don't want to go there. Whoopi would know, she's got that

ethical orientation. Here's popular media using the case as consciousness raising. For those of us who remember the cultural wars, where people were like, "Burn this! Burn that!" You may not like a work, but do you really want to burn it?

JW: Right. I was surprised that many younger artists were in support of destroying the painting.

HW: It's misguided. There's no context, there's no perspective. If you have a context or perspective, then Dana Schutz is not the enemy no matter what happens. It's a painting. I felt bad when she said she wouldn't sell it. I was like, Dana, sell that shit and drop the money on the NAACP. Oddly enough, not selling it further fetishizes it. I couldn't understand why the protesters were giving that work so much power when Kerry James Marshall was up at The Met. Jack Whitten recently moved from Alexander Gray gallery to Hauser & Wirth; here's a senior black artist getting paid. Let's celebrate that. No need to pay Dana Schutz any mind. I say that as a fan of her work.

The issues raised by the painting and the Till case, in general, are important. Questions about the relationship between pain and beauty are at the core of theorizing the construction of African-American identity. Same with ownership. This idea of self-possession, the attempt to own oneself wholly and fully, what does that mean? I find these questions far more engaging than the politics of division.

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Jason Lazarus, *Standing at the Grave of Emmett Till, The Day of Exhumation, June 1* (2005). Archival inkjet print, 37 × 50 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago.

2

Demetrius Oliver, *Till* (2004). Digital chromogenic print, 27 1/4 × 36 1/4 inches. Image courtesy private collection.