

THE ROOT

Forget That White Lady's Emmett Till Painting; These Black Artists Are Truly Representing at the Whitney Biennial

Genetta M. Adams
04/06/2017

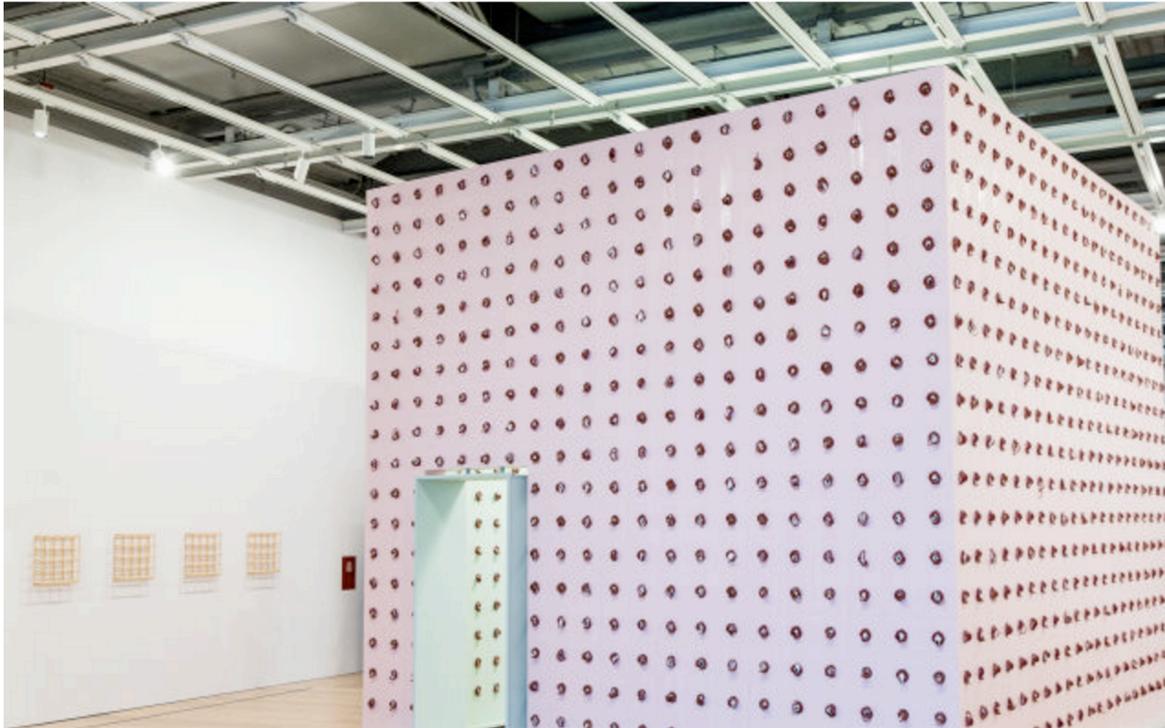
At this year's [Whitney Biennial](#), the award for the most discussed and [divisive piece of art](#) easily goes to white artist Dana Schutz's painting of the dead body of Emmett Till called *Open Casket*. The painting has provoked protests and sparked debates about white exploitation of black trauma, freedom of expression and censorship.

As a free-speech absolutist, I believe artists have the right to paint whatever they want, just as strongly as I believe that protesters have the right to protest said artists. But calls to remove or [even destroy](#) the painting are a [dangerously slippery slope](#). It reminds me of the time when then-New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani threatened to cut off funding for the Brooklyn Museum of Art if the museum didn't remove Christopher Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary*, which used elephant dung as one of its elements. And my goal in life is never to be on the same side as Giuliani on anything.

But overshadowed in the scrum about cultural appropriation and artistic freedom are the works of several black artists featured in the Biennial. Among the 63 individual artists and collectives are roughly a dozen or so well-known and emerging black artists, including Torey Thornton, Kamasi Washington,

Maya Stovall, Leilah Weinraub, Cameron Rowland and Lyle Ashton Harris.
The following artists have some particularly compelling work:

Pope.L, aka William Pope.L



Installation view of Pope.L, aka William Pope.L, *Claim (Whitney Version)*, 2017. (Collection of the artist; courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. Matthew Carasella/Whitney Museum of Art)

Multimedia artist Pope.L’s installation, *Claim (Whitney Version)*, features 2,755 slices of bologna pinned to its wall, and each slice bears a portrait of someone who is supposedly Jewish. The piece raises questions of collective identity and how people turn abstract when reduced to numbers. Within the structure is a typewritten statement, with copy-edit marks from the artists, that ponders whether the rotting, dripping bologna represents “the flesh returning back to world” or maybe the slices are “mourning a haunted order.”

In any case, no matter what you get from the piece, you’ll have to admit that using bologna as art is probably the blackest shit you’ll ever see at the Whitney.