

Introduction

The necessity to succumb to the white gaze has caused Latino and Black artists to have petite freedoms in the subject matter of their work. However, many colored artists worked around this obstacle through the theme or technique of absence to “show” the audience within the museum their work and accomplish their goals. Some of the artworks that exhibit this theme are *The Thankful Poor* by Henry Ossawa Tanner, *East First Street #1* by Ken Gonzales-Day, *Untitled (“Billboard of an Empty Bed”)* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and *Cabinetmaking, 1820-1960* by Fred Wilson. *The Thankful Poor* has an absence of family, specifically a father and mother figure within the home, only showing a grandfather and child figure next to the dining table. *East First Street #1* used the theme of absence through photoshopping and removing pictures of the lynched individual, leaving only an empty tree and a white crowd. Whereas, the *Billboard of an Empty Board* shows the absence of people on a white bed despite clear indications of the previous usage. Lastly, *Cabinetmaking*, by historical standards, lacks the action of an African American slave being whipped while white people spectate this event. Through the use of absence, these artists are able to inform and invoke curiosity within their audience to explore topics they have exhibited while still succumbing to the white gaze.

The Thankful Poor by Henry Ossawa Tanner

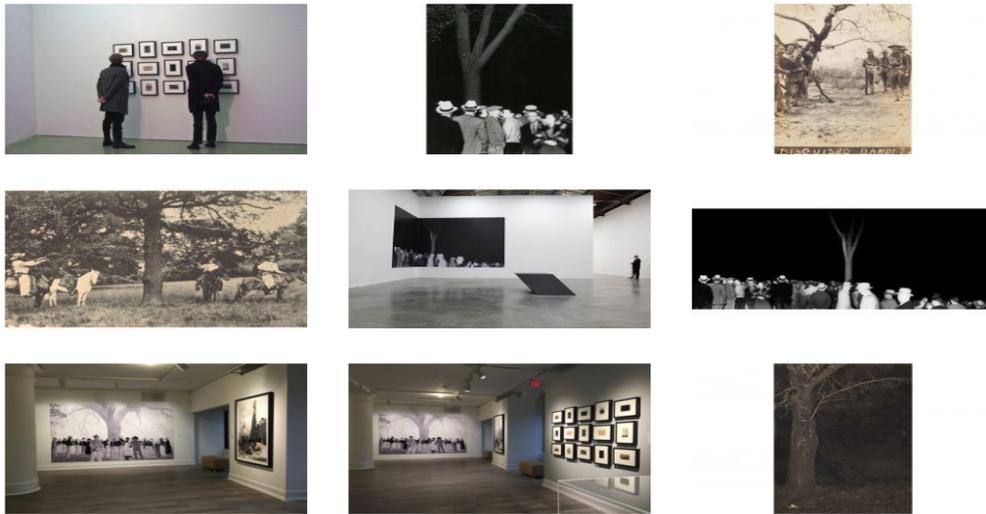


The Thankful Poor by Henry Ossawa Tanner was completed in 1894 and displayed as a 90 cm x 112.4cm canvas. The primary tool of coloring was t oils and the genre of this text is realism. This text shows an African American grandfather and child figure on the dining table praying with the coloring being consistently dark in nature. The room in which they are located lacks furniture, indicating that these figures are not of the wealthy class. This canvas was created as a result of the continued discrimination against African Americans before and after Tanner returned to the United States. Tanner originally left the United States to attend Académie Julian art school due to the growing discrimination against his kind. However, when he returned, the situation did not improve but worsened with the increasing number of lynchings across the country. Impacted by these horrors, Tanner would become involved with the civil rights movement and become the first African American artist to have his subject of genre painting be African American.

The Thankful Poor shows only an African American grandfather and child figure, lacking any other family members, such as a mother or father figure. This could possibly be a way for Tanner in attempting to address the issue of the increased lynching in the U.S. and how it is separating families. Furthermore, the action of praying might have been included to show to the white audience that African Americans are not any different than their white counterparts and to give humanity to the race. Previous artwork focusing on African Americans tended to be made by white artists and was degrading in nature. However, Tanner with this piece attempts to counter racial stereotypes. Lastly, the usage of a dark color tone could be symbolic of the dangers African American has to face in their daily lives as they can possibly be beaten or lynched for the most random of reasons. The minimal usage of bright colors in the background

of the painting could be attributed to how during the time, the majority of African Americans are not of high social standing.

East First Street #1, Erased Lynching Series I by Ken Gonzales-Day



The Erased Lynching Series by Ken Gonzales-Day is a series of photoshopped images from postcards and archived images that originally displayed lynching. However, Gonzales, through the usage of editing, removed the victim being lynched and left only the crowd. By removing the lynching, the viewer would be forced to only view the crowd, which tended to be treating this lynching as a social event. These photoshopped images were each framed in an 11 by 14-inch framer and consisted of only black and white coloring. This series began in 2002 as a response to the anti-immigration and anti-Latinx rhetoric sentiments. These sentiments lead to an increasing number of violent acts against these groups arriving along the border between the United States and Mexico. The Erased Lynching Series was able to increase the national awareness of lynching in California and nationwide and its impact on BIPOC communities.

The East First Street #1 was part of the Erased Lynching Series I and displayed a group of white people gathered around a tree. It could be clearly seen that these people are of high social standing as the majority of them are in suits and are treating this as a social gathering. It can be noticed that something is absent from the image due to the positioning of how the picture was taken. The positioning of the picture does not zoom in on the crowd nor the tree and the majority of the crowd are facing upwards, hence, it is reasonable to assume there is something that was between the two. With the name of the series in mind, it can be assumed that the lynched victim was photoshopped out of the image. This action could be a result of Gonzales not wanting to revictimize the lynched and his desire to redirect attention to the crowd, the root of the problem. This text conveys a sense of dread, whereas, but also a sense of normality. It was as if the event occurring within this image is a norm as it can be seen with the couple seemingly on a date in this location. This could be a play on how “normal” white people originally thought lynching was and how the lynched victims were not even treated as human. The facial expressions of those in the crowd are those of neutrality, jeering, or smiling, opposing the fact that a horrendous crime has been committed. Through the usage of absence and the expressions of the crowd, viewers of this art would be confused and want to know why the crowd is showing the expressions they are. Hence, led to the exploration of America’s history of lynching, as intended by Gonzales. In general, this piece is directly asking the viewer if what is being done is humane by directly exposing them to lynching and potentially decreasing the number of violent

acts against groups of people during the time by reminding people of what was done in the past



and to learn from it.

Untitled ("Billboard of an Empty Bed") by Felix Gonzalez-Torres



Untitled (“The Billboard of an Empty Bed”) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres shows an image of an empty, disheveled bed with two dents on the pillows. The Billboard of an Empty Bed was first exhibited in 24 locations on billboards in Manhattan with varying sizes in 1991. Overall, the billboard had a white and grey coloring, whereas the bed was only white and grey was the background color. This art was created during the time when the AIDS pandemic was at its height and there was political suppression of anything related to AIDS and gayness. However, a few years ago in 1987, gay activism ignited and gay artists began to examine the relationship between art and politics, in this case, the social perspective of gay people. Due to this pandemic, there was an increased hatred against queer people, like Gonzalez, as it was believed that they started the pandemic. 1991 also marked the year when Gonzalez’s lover, Ross Laycock, passed away due to AIDS. The Billboard of an Empty Bed could have been created as Gonzalez’s desire to correct the public’s misconception regarding gay people.

The Billboard of an Empty Bed shows an unmade white bed with two dented pillows. The dented pillows represent two individuals enjoying each other’s presence while laying on the bed, potentially by hugging or cuddling, a note to Gonzalez’s experience with his lover. However, the lack of presence on the billboard represents the separation between Gonzalez and his lover due to death. The unmade bed can be interpreted that if one individual dies before another, the living one might not want to return to the bed where they had many sweet memories. Furthermore, the unmade bed can be symbolic for showing the difficulty it is for AIDS carriers to perform daily activities. Gonzalez’s choice of displaying this image through billboards could be to show the public more about gayness and for it to gather a large audience. Overall, this billboard is different than other billboards as it is not commercial in purpose and humanizes queer relationships by showing the similarities between queer and normal couples.

Cabinetmaking, 1820-1960 by Fred Wilson



The Cabinetmaking, 1820 - 1860, is an installation by Fred Wilson for the Mining the Museum: An Installation Confronting History, which had a high audience due to Rodney King's case. This installation along with other of Wilson's installations was displayed from April 2, 1992, to February 28, 1993, at the Maryland Historical Society. This installation consisted of an armchair of wood, an armchair of rosewood, a side chair with the logo of the Baltimore Equitable Society, a chair made of walnut, and a whipping post with a wooden platform. These chairs were of differing sizes, but they were dark in color and all faced the whipping post. Furthermore, each chair was representative of the following classes: clergy, bourgeois, blueblood, and businessman. The primary purpose of the Mining the Museum was for Wilson to create installations that confronted previous perceptions about history, culture, and race and to correct historical amnesias. He meant for his installations to invoke curiosity amongst his viewers and allow them to slowly piece together what he is trying to show them. Wilson was challenging the museum's role as an objective arbiter, hence pressuring the idea of a master narrative.

With the positioning of the chairs in *The Cabinetmaking, 1820-1860*, it could be assumed that the people seated within those chairs were viewing an African American slave being whipped. The positioning of the chairs is similar to how a family would gather around the television to watch something. Hence, Wilson might be passing along the message that the torture of African American slaves was often treated as entertainment for the privileged white class. Additionally, with the variety of classes represented within the chairs, it could be said that everyone was involved in this horrendous act, and no one did anything about it, but all should be helped responsible. Therefore, confronting any previous ideas that white people were civilized and gentle by showcasing how cruel they could be. In the last note, the background at which this installation was placed had a deep red color, which enforces the idea that the African American was being tortured and his blood was spilled all over the room. These small hints and commonalities of the design of this installation to daily life allow those who pay attention to realize the horrific truth that Wilson is trying to display.

After Thoughts

The theme of absence resonated with me because I believe that individuals have internalized the idea of absence in their life. People move on with their life even if they see something horrific or in need of help in front of them. An example of this could be the homeless people on the streets. People see them in their rags and their raised cups, asking for money. Yet, people ignore them, as if the homeless are absent from their artwork, which is their life. This seemed cruel to me, but I was not any better. Hence, the theme of absence spoke to me. We are viewing too much negativity in society as absent within our individual lives, which prevents improvement. These artworks used absence to shine a light on social issues they deem important.

I believe to reignite the need for societal improvement, this theme should be reused in current artwork as it is a timeless theme.