

EAHR @ ARTEXTE

Uncovering Asian Canadian and Black Canadian Artistic Production

Acknowledgements

The two exhibition and bibliographic projects which this catalogue accompanies could not have been completed without the attentive support of the knowledgeable staff at Artexte. Sincere thanks to the Artexte Research Residency Program and especially Artexte's General and Artistic Director, Sarah Watson, for her constant encouragement of these projects and for giving us the chance to use Artexte's space and resources to pursue this research. We also thank John Latour, Artexte's Head Librarian, who gave us an excellent tour of the collection and provided important insights on how to effectively conduct research in Artexte's holdings; and Jean-Philippe McGurrin, who helped us coordinate the early stages of our residency.

The publication of this catalogue was made possible with generous support from Artexte, and The Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art and the Department of Art History at Concordia University. EAHR acknowledges the additional funding and support of Concordia University's Faculty of Fine Arts Dean's Discretionary Fund for the presentation of student work. A special thank you to our catalogue designer, Bryan Jim, for his expertise, patience and enthusiasm for the project.

Finally, we would like to thank our Faculty Advisor, Dr. Alice Ming Wai Jim, for her earnest encouragement of our research and of our scholarly development. Dr. Jim's edits to the catalogue essays were insightful and her constant drive and passion to advance ethnocultural art historical scholarship is truly inspirational.





Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art





FACULTY OF FINE ARTS Department of Art History

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Introduction

The Ethnocultural Art Histories Research group (EAHR) is a student-driven research community based in the Department of Art History at Concordia University. Established in the summer of 2011, EAHR promotes research that engages with issues of ethnic and cultural representation within the visual arts in Canada. Acknowledging the existence of systematic racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and other forms of discrimination and oppression, EAHR endeavours to create safe spaces for discussions on ethnocultural issues. The group strives to push back against the pervasive impacts of these ideologies through responsible and ethical research practices. EAHR members include graduate students, undergraduate students, alumni, and faculty from different Montreal universities. EAHR distinguishes itself through its active engagement with members and the community at large.

During the winter of 2015, EAHR participated in a four-month research residency at Artexte that sought to promote the representation and visibility of artists from different ethnocultural communities. EAHR researchers completed two projects focusing on art works and artists from Asian Canadian and Black Canadian communities—two communities that have been historically marginalized and underrepresented in Canada. These projects culminated in the creation of two comprehensive bibliographies to be made available on the Artexte website, two alternating vitrine exhibitions displayed at Artexte and the Department of Art History at Concordia University, April 1-30, 2015, and an accompanying exhibition catalogue publishing two curatorial essays by the residency participants. The exhibitions showcased critical materials discovered in Artexte's collection and sought to identify dominant themes and artistic strategies that would create alliances between the two communities.



The underrepresentation of Asian Canadian and Black Canadian artists and art histories within art museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions is reflected in scholarly writings which have for much of Canada's history established a national identity and art historical canon perpetuating a singular representation of "Canadianness." The resulting exhibitions and bibliographies of Artexte holdings compiled during this residency are meant to serve as tools for future students and researchers to destabilize this cultural canonization and subvert the historical erasure of the narratives of Asian Canadians and Black Canadians. In order to strengthen cultural relationships between ethnocultural communities in Canada through the representation of art and artists, documenting the histories and trajectories of their art needs to go beyond the academy. Further research and an expanded discourse surrounding these art histories facilitate a more extensive, nuanced, and pluralistic understanding of Canadian identities. At root, the pervasive misrepresentations and misconceptions of Asian Canadians and Black Canadians in visual culture calls for continued pushback. The research and exhibition of these documents are EAHR's small contribution to an ongoing, larger narrative of resistance.

[Dis]Identifications: Challenging Dominant Narratives of Black People in Canada

Joana Joachim, Tamara Harkness and Tarek Lakhrissi with contributions from Gabrielle Montpetit, Cindy Colombo and Samantha Wexler

The colourblind perspectives enmeshed in the 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act, however well-intentioned and widely endorsed by many Canadians, perpetuates an understanding of human experience as being separate from or unaffected by race and ethnicity.1 Colourblindness to social, economic and political attitudes negates the lived experiences of many racialized individuals, as well as the historical fact of slavery in this country.² Further, colourblind ideologies obscure the existence of ongoing systemic racism and its pervasive impact on the lives of those affected by it. This dynamic forms the basis upon which many forms of exclusion, discrimination and oppression can masquerade as a form of multiculturalism and justify exclusionary practices in various social circles.3 In art history, a field that has traditionally been understood to mirror national narratives, this has resulted in the perpetuation of Canadian art history as an almost exclusively white discipline, replete with narratives that construct the Canadian artist as necessarily white.⁴ Colourblindness has become transmogrified into the invisibilization of artists, scholars and cultural workers of colour, except when they are depicted as subjects of art.

¹ Augie Fleras, *Racisms in a Multicultural Canada: Paradoxes, Politics, and Resistance* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2014), 243-247.

² Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 26-27.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Timothy Stanley, "Why I Killed Canadian History: Towards an Anti-Racist History in Canada," *Social History* 33:65 (2000): 75-103.

For this exhibition, we are concerned with the ways in which exclusions and negations as a result of these ideologies have influenced the representations of Black Canadian identities.⁵ The curatorial premise draws from what the late cultural critic and queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz called "disidentifications" in his 1999 book by the same title. Muñoz defined disidentification as a survival mechanism, a performative process whereby oppressed individuals, such as queer people of colour and racialized minorities in general, recode assigned and imposed social markers in an attempt to negotiate spaces dominated by groups that punish non-conformity.⁶ Drawing from select materials in Artexte's existing collection, the exhibition thus seeks to explore the processes of identification and disidentification through Black bodies in visual culture, be they curators, artists or representations of Black agency. We understand these instances as political statements, as active resistances to erasure, and as reversals which invoke what bell hooks calls the "oppositional gaze." Many of the projects in fact address precisely the question of how to politicize disidentification, or as Judith Butler writes, the "experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong."8

[Dis]Identifications highlights the progression of race discourses in the Canadian art context beginning with acts of resistance through self-representation in the 1980s, moving towards fostering pride and love of Canadian Blackness through celebratory events in the early 1990s, to the present-day presence of Black Canadian scholarship in the academy. Early exhibitions such as *Women on Site* (1987) at A Space Gallery in Toronto and the large group exhibition *Fear of Others* (1989) at The Roundhouse in Vancouver, and the documentation that accompanies them are significant in marking the passage of Black bodies from the position of object to that of subject through acts of self-representation. In the early mid-nineties, the promotion and celebration of Black arts and culture was a crucial step towards Black Canadian agency in art history and culture. Organisations such as the *Canadian Artists' Network: Black Arts in Action (CAN:BAIA)* spearheaded the empowerment of Blackness in Toronto. In 1992, they organized *CELAFI: Celebrating African Identity*,

⁵ The term "Black Canadian" is used here to acknowledge the multiplicity of Black identities that the term "African Canadian" does not always encompass, such as Black people from the Antilles and Caribbean, Africa (recent immigrants) and the Black Atlantic or Diaspora (people whose ancestors were stolen from Africa and brought to the Americas/Britain/France but whose ancestry cannot always be traced back definitively) as well as Black-Asians and Black-Latinos people.

⁶ Jose Estéban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4-5.

⁷ bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-131.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 219.

an unprecedented city-wide series of international conferences and exhibitions focusing on Black Canadian cultural production.

The flurry of activities in the 1990s also introduced to the cultural scene what are now more widely known as intersectionality perspectives on identity politics.9 Works such as Toronto-based artist Syrus Marcus Ware's Self-Portrait #5 with Cotton Balls (2005) illustrate how identities are complexified through multiple oppressions by considering questions of gender performativity, queerness and race (fig.1). Included in the 1999 group exhibition Style Council at the Mount Saint Vincent Art Gallery in Halifax, the photographic work, Untitled (1998) by Halifax-based artist Jan Crick depicts an image of a branding iron spelling out the word "nigger," exploring the scarring and subjugation of Black bodies through the intersection of technologies of violence and language (fig.2). Style Council focused on the rhetoric of exhibition formats and their impact, particularly as they concern minority constituencies, and examined the multiple ways in which curators, institutions, and local "scenes" mediate the reception of contemporary art.¹⁰ Toronto-based artist nichola feldmankiss' 1999 solo exhibition Mean Body at the Carleton University Art Gallery in Ottawa, described by the artist as an "expanded performance of self-portraiture," deconstructs gender and racial hierarchization where everybody is classified according to their resemblance to the norm (fig.3)." Constantly defining and redefining themselves, re-writing their identities as they incessantly vacillate between invisibility and hypervisibility, nichola feldman-kiss' digital and sculptural pieces pay tribute to the beauty of Black female bodies. These representations push back against dominant societal beauty standards. Exhibitions such as Style Council and nichola feldman-kiss: Mean Body are spaces where Blackness takes center stage and claims its place in Canada.

The artistic, curatorial and academic production of Black Canadians over the past decades have made highly significant contributions to the pivotal process of disidentification in the struggle for self-definition. Black Canadian art and art history nevertheless remain consistently undervalued through continued marginalization and exclusion from dominant cultural institutions. Today, *CELAFI* remains an important precursor to more recent events such as the important interdisciplinary conference *The State of Blackness: From Production to Presentation* in 2014, which reflected on the histories, current situation, and future

 ⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43:6 (July 1991): 1241-1299.
¹⁰ Pamela Edmonds, Ingrid Jenkner, Robin Metcalfe, and Robert Zingone, *Style Council* (Halifax, NS: Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, 1999).

¹¹ Kim Sawchuck, *nichola feldman-kiss: Mean Body* (Ottawa, ON: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2006).

state of black diasporic artistic practice and representation in Canada within the past two decades. These scholarly undertakings are crucial and significant platforms for Black Canadian academics and thinkers to theorize and respond to this country's historical up-to-present day refusal to address the virtual absence of Black Canadian Studies within universities and colleges in Canada.¹² This lack of infrastructure has made it profoundly challenging for students to graduate with degrees in African Canadian or Black Canadian Studies, and many scholars struggle to gain institutional support, funding and recognition.¹³ In the fine arts, the representation of faculty and students of colour is even less. Dr. Charmaine Nelson at McGill University is the first (and currently only) Black professor within the discipline of art history at a Canadian university. As Nelson incisively points out, the need to document and account for plural narratives in art history is absolutely crucial not only within the academic realm but also in all spheres of Canadian society.¹⁴ It is precisely within this narrative that [Dis]identifications inscribes itself.

Issues regarding the misrepresentation of Black people remain as relevant today as they were during the protests against the exhibition *Into the Heart of Africa* at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto twentyfive years ago. It is through being open to collaborative projects such as its *Of Africa* Project, a three-year multi-platform project exploring African experiences through exhibitions, lectures, performances and events that include curators, artists, authors, educators, and academics from across Africa and the African Diaspora, that cultural institutions such as the ROM can begin to dismantle colonial legacies and mend relationships between community and institution.¹⁵ Sadly, other cultural platforms such as Théâtre rideau vert in Montreal, remain antagonistic to progress through the justification of an instance of blackface in their year-end production, "Revue et Corrigée" (2014), as an homage to star Black Canadian NHL player P.K. Subban.¹⁶ Such a dubious motive is indicative of a deep-seated internalisation of racist hegemonies which hark as

¹² Charmaine Nelson, *Black Canadian Studies* website, accessed November 2014, http:// www.blackcanadianstudies.com.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Charmaine Nelson, "Resisting Invisibility: Black Faculty in Art and Art History in Canada, "*Ideas Can*, March 2, 3012, accessed February 2015, http://www.ideas-idees.ca/blog/resisting-invisibility-black-faculty-art-and-art-history-canada.

¹⁵ Royal Ontario Museum, "*Of Africa*," press release, October 7, 2014, accessed March 2015, http://www.rom.on.ca/en/about-us/newsroom/press-releases/roms-of-africa-project-explores-historical-and-contemporary-african.

¹⁶ Rachel Zellars, "Troubling Question of Blackface in Quebec," *The Star*, February 16, 2015. Blackface minstrelsy has a longstanding history in Canada and Quebec as a site of nostalgic memorialisation of slavery and violence against Black bodies. Charmaine Nelson, "Blackface' Is Not Quebec-Bashing," *The Huffington Post*, May 28, 2013, accessed March 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/charmaine-nelson/blackface-in-quebec_b_3348561.html.

far back as to, and even earlier than, the highly criticized conflation of French Canadian oppression under English hegemony with the oppression of Blacks in the American South by notorious author and leader of the Front de libération du Québec, Pierre Vallières in his controversial 1968 polemic *Nègres Blancs d'Amérique [White Niggers of America]*.¹⁷ These incidents in the public sphere, not isolated by any means, are clearly problematic insofar as they perpetuate a misconstrued understanding in the dominant cultural imaginary of Canadian and Quebec identity as being monolithic rather than multifaceted and respectful of cultural diversity. Institutional racism is but one iteration of the issues enmeshed in Canada's colorblindness. As such, the curation of this exhibition is a conscious act of disidentification, of simultaneously negotiating, recoding and contesting this very context in which Black Canadians are inscribed.

¹⁷ David Austin, *Fear of a Black Nation: Race, Sex, and Security in Sixties Montreal* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2013), 256.

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Figure 1. Syrus Marcus Ware, *Self Portrait #5 with Cotton balls,* 2005, acrylic on canvas, shown in the exhibition *I Represent,* 2006, at A Space Gallery, Toronto.

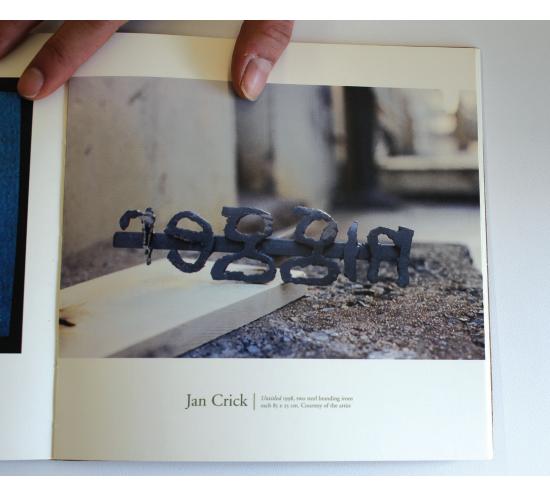


Figure 2. Jan Crick, *Untitled*, 1998, photography, shown in exhibition *Style Council*, 1999, at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax.



Figure 3. nicola feldman-kiss, *mean body* \ *a crowd of oneself*, 2001-2006, twelve 3-dimensional body laser scans, rapid cast bronze (solid), patina, 12.5 inches x variable, 11 unique figures. © CARCC 2015

List of Items in Exhibition

- 1. Ascencao, Teresa. Fleeting Face: Sandra Brewster, Erika DeFreitas, Joyce Lau, Ritian Lee, Fariba Samsami, Shiva Shoeybi. Toronto, ON: A Space, 2007. DOSSIER: 351 - A SPACE (Toronto)
- Blomley, Nick and Derksen, Jeff and Oleksijczuk, Denise and Ritchie, Christina and Shier, Reid and Smith, Neiland Sommers, Jeff. *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings*. Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press; Vancouver, BC: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2002. DOSSIER: 410 -DOUGLAS, STAN
- 3. Bowen, Deanna and Carr-Harris, Ian. *Deanna Bowen: Stories to pass on....* Chatham, ON: Thames Art Gallery. DOSSIER: en traitement
- Creighton-Kelly, Chris and Egan, Susanna and Spence, David and Alonso, Juan and Solomon, Wilfred and Carew, Claire. *Fear of Others: Art Against Racism = La peur de l'autre : L'art contre le racisme.* Vancouver, BC: Arts in Action Society, 1989. DOSSIER: 390 - ARTS IN ACTION SOCIETY (Vancouver)
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- Edmonds, Pamela and Jenkner, Ingrid and Metcalfe, Robin and Zingone, Robert. *Style Council.* Halifax, NS: Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, 1999. DOSSIER: 343 - MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY (MSVU ART GALLERY) (Halifax)
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- 10. Fatona, Andrea. *Busejé Bailey: Making Connections across Art Forms*. Halifax, NS: Eye Level, 1994. DOSSIER: 410 - BAILEY, BUSEJE
- 11. Fatona, Andrea and Hudson, Peter James and Walcott, Rinaldo. *Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora*. Lennoxville QC: Galerie d'art Foreman de l'Université Bishop's, 2006.
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- Fernie, Lynne and Tuer, Dot and Silvera, Makeda and Khayatt, Didi and Golding, Sue and Brand, Dionne. *Sight Specific: Lesbians and Representation*. Toronto, ON.: A Space, 1988. DOSSIER: 351 - A SPACE (Toronto)
- 14. Fischer, Barbara. *Re-Enactment: Between Self and Other: Carl Beam, Panya Clark, Stan Douglas, Janice Gurney, Barbara Lounder, Lani Maestro.* Toronto, ON: The Power Plant, 1990. 20-12. DOSSIER: 351 POWER PLANT, The (Toronto)
- Gagnon, Vicky Chainey and Cronin, Ray. *Lucie Chan.* Lennoxville, QC: Galerie d'art Foreman de l'Université Bishop's, 2008. DOSSIER: en traitement



Lucie Chan, *Remember? Are we close?* 2004. From the publication *Lucie Chan* for the exhibition *Tears and in Between* and *Between, and in tears,* 2006-2008, p.29.



Lucie Chan, Detail of the installation *Between, and in Tears,* 2006-2008. Image courtesy of the artist.



Justin Augustine, *Faith Catchers*, oil on canvas, cover image for the exhibition catalogue of *Within Boundaries* exhibited at Dalhousie Art Gallery, 2001.

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Buseje Bailey, Untitled, from exhibition catalogue, Picture Theory, 1995.

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- 22. Shirley, James R.. *Lucie Chan : Something to Carry.* Halifax, NS: Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, 2002. DOSSIER: 410 CHAN, LUCIE
- 23. Whiten, Tim and Jodoin, André and Frenkel, Vera and Marozzo, Carmine and Lake, Suzy. *The Fifth Dalhousie Drawing Exhibition*. Halifax, NS: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1980. DOSSIER: 343 - DALHOUSIE ART GALLERY (Halifax)
- 24. Wood, Natalie. *I Represent*. Toronto, ON: A Space, 2006. DOSSIER: 351 A SPACE (Toronto)
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