

HESSE FLATOW

Helguera, Pablo and Simmons, Xaviera. "Paradigm Shift." Modern Luxury. Online and Print. 2021.

PARADIGM SHIFT

Pablo Helguera And Xaviera Simmons

Marking whiteness within the social construct and in the artist's studio: Five artists offer their perspective contemplating male whiteness.

WITHIN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICES, even in the most critically minded of circles and like our structures at large, addressing the construction of race is often done with extreme caution and trepidation, with a strong emphasis on having Black and Brown artists, writers and thinkers be the ones to articulate the complexities of these systemic maladies.

White people are commonly set against a plane of all that is considered normal, regular and as to be expected. However, this extreme deference to Black, Brown, Indigenous and Latinx makers and thinkers to consistently form, shape or lead these conversations results in many consequences. One is that the burden of leading the difficult conversation is most always assigned to those who have suffered the greatest consequences of centuries of state-sanctioned disenfranchisement.

Second, is that precisely because of this, Black and Brown artists are, at times, not seen in the fullness of their practices and lives. This necessary focus on systems keeps us further away from our larger desires to imagine or visually articulate beyond.

Third, even as we articulate, argue for and make demands both in the linear and abstract senses, whiteness continues to ignore, dominate, co-opt, consume and avoid. It is as if we are speaking in tongues in a never-ending cycle leading the most brilliant of us having to craft within a loop of repetition while working creatively to secure the material, social and overall living conditions of the multitude of our communities affected.

With this in mind, and if, indeed, conversations regarding the histories of a race-based caste system and the long-standing results of white terror campaigns are indeed conversations, we feel it important to stretch a dialogue to include openings toward what some non-Black or -Brown artists are thinking with regard to the questions that these topics trigger.

We approached artists Matthew Day Jackson, William Powhida, Clark Filio, Ishmael Randall Weeks and Michael Rakowitz to think through a series of questions regarding the construction of male whiteness, alongside the dominant global narratives in art, and to share their thoughts on their own positions of

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privilege, power and the normalcy often afforded to them. We also asked them to expand on reparative justice frameworks.

Most of them we have been in and out of conversation with, so they understand the scope and are adept at articulating the systems they work in, are influenced by and benefit from.

These artists are no strangers to us and they are also malleable to the rigorous conversation and clear actions toward systemic changes that this moment calls for.

"Between us, there is critical engagement and also deep camaraderie toward systemic and art historical shift." –*Pablo Helguera and Xaviera Simmons*

How does whiteness (and male whiteness), or rather whiteness as a dominant social construct, play a role in your thinking as an artist? Is there a particular work of yours that you could share that you feel is a reflection on that thinking?

MICHAEL RAKOWITZ: The dominant social construct of male whiteness is something that I have always felt outside of, in large part because I was raised by my parents and maternal grandparents in the house they moved into once they fled Iraq in the 1940s. As Iraqi Jews, they were heartbroken to leave Baghdad as a result of the anti-Jewish riots that erupted early that decade, and my grandparents ended up in the US where they and their children were unwelcome as both Arabs and Jews. I therefore grew up with that term, Arab-Jew, being understood by my peers as an identity where one side was always consuming the other, and never being in harmony. This was a lot of work to reconcile as a child, since Arabic was the language my mother and grandmother spoke to one another. And, I always talk about how my grandparents were like the first installation artists I had ever known. Their house was an immersion in a Baghdad we could no longer access. What was on the floor was from Iraq, what was on the walls was from Iraq, what was coming out of the stereo during family chaglis or parties was from Iraq, and what was coming out of the kitchen was most definitely from Iraq. I am forever grateful to my grandparents as it must have been very hard to hold onto an identity from a place from which they were violently dispossessed, but they were defiant in their will to maintain whatever connection to that place despite those who said they did not belong.

It was because of the conditions I define above that I have always felt outside of whiteness. While the census forms I have filled out in the past may have defined me and other Arab Americans as 'white,' I know differently and I have made decisions to reject such imprecise and troubling efforts to flatten identities. We also know that whiteness does not accommodate difference, and I have been reminded time and again by those in that dominant group when I am 'a dirty Jew' or 'a fucking Arab.'

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So, as an artist, I felt rescued when I read a 1992 essay by Ella Shohat, titled *Reflections of an Arab-Jew*, less than a year after the Gulf War. Ella's family also emigrated from Baghdad, and she was the first person other than my mother and my grandparents who used that word: Arab-Jew. Ella describes the hyphen in this identity as a physical linguistic bridge that is also a suturing; a remembering and remembering of severed parts. I love this, as it also connects with what Toni Morrison says: 'In this country, American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate.'



Clark Fillo, *The Sack of Rome, after Sylvestre, 2020* PHOTO COURTESY OF ARTIST »

In my practice, I would offer *Dar Al Sulh* as an example of a work that demonstrates my rejection of whiteness, or more broadly, male whiteness. In collaboration with Shohat and Regine Basha, an Iraqi Jewish curator, we began this work as an extension of my project *Enemy Kitchen*. In 2013, the three of us opened the first Iraqi Jewish restaurant in Dubai; in fact, it was the first in West Asia in almost 80 years, since the Jews departed Iraq en masse. We cooked my grandmother's and my mother's recipes for seven days. So, we appeared as a ghost, and disappeared. How else can one haunt?

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The tradition of cooking the dishes we made—*mhasha* (stuffed vegetables), *kubba* (rice flour and meat dumplings slow-cooked in a stew), *tbeet* (a stuffed chicken slow cooked in rice, with fried eggplant and 24-hour cooked hard-boiled eggs)—was often relegated to the women in the household. Among the transgressions in the work that many participants commented on was identity in the form of the Arab-Jew as a rejection of Arab versus Jew and the rejection of cooking being a gendered craft. This was especially evident when, on a trip to London, I brought my great-aunt some leftover tbeet I had cooked for another event and she was quite troubled that a man would dare do such a thing.

In fact, learning these dishes directly from my mother and grandmother was a vital act of transmission through which our connection to Iraq could be seeded and grown. It is a refusal to let our identity be co-opted by nationalist ideologies as relegated to the past, as dead. It is over 2 millennia old and we survive with joy, with our feasts still being made full scale, despite our distance from 'home.' For me, this is the *sumud*, the steadfastness against 'becoming white.' And it continues: The most moving moment I have experienced in my life the past two years was when I taught my 7-year-old son—who against all odds identifies as '100% Iraqi'—how to make *mhasha*.



Matthew Day Jackson, *Depth Hoar*, 2015 PHOTO COURTESY OF GRIMM GALLERY »

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ISHMAEL RANDALL WEEKS: I was born and raised in Ollantaytambo, an Indigenous-mestizo village in the Peruvian Andes. My parents, a painter and a writer, moved to Peru in the early '70s from the United States. My father's work was based on research into Andean ethno-history and cosmology. I was acutely aware of my whiteness from a young age as my brother and I went to local public school where we were the only 'white' kids. I was blue-eyed and blond. I now live in Lima, with my wife and two daughters, where I am constantly aware of the color of my skin, being male, and the privilege that has come with this. I don't think that I directly address my whiteness in my work, rather, as a white male, I suppose that my work is built from that angle. The focus has been on the relationship between architecture and archeology and their social context. Within my research is an examination of the crisis and legacies of Modernism juxtaposed with the informal and Indigenous architectures of Latin America (including favelas, adobe structures and vernacular architecture). A close ally theme to this is the economy of scarcity, improvisation and a concern with ways of living within the landscape to preserve its environmental and cultural integrity. I would say that my work forms a critique of the abuses of power and self-interest of the political establishment, meanwhile highlighting alternative forms of community living, education and knowledge that exist in parallel. Thus, although not explicitly so, many of my projects have dealt with architecture and historical utopias where this is understood as systems deeply tied and constituted by male whiteness as a social construct given their shaping of relational dynamics.

MATTHEW DAY JACKSON: I celebrated Christmas and feigned a belief in Santa Claus until very late in my adolescence. This wasn't embarrassing because it was common behavior. When I came to understand that my parents were Santa, it gave me faith in both the myth and the 'reality' of the existence of Santa Claus. I just needed to participate in the illusion to make the effect real. I got gifts, I was a 'good kid' and although much of this illusion was paid for on credit... I felt safe. All of the systems worked for both child and parent alike. The insidiousness of this situation was that the role I felt I was meant to play was an unexamined and rote performance within the stage set of my suburban 'reality.' It was like living in a play and I (all of us) was an actor and willing participant.

My awareness of my whiteness runs in line with this narrative. My education, sports, family and the community where we lived mostly fell in line with a god and country script. It was a well-written production, and all of us (white people) worked together to set the scene. My life as an artist has been primarily concerned with the reclamation of my education, and the rebuilding of family and community. Regardless of my efforts, the unveiling/awareness of the armature that supported this illusion is like watching a morbid strip tease where the dancer is not human but rather a horrible monster, and beyond that... a horrible monster that looks just like me.

Whether my work is about our military, our country as a religious cult, or the fact that American English is spoken through intonations of violence toward anything that is a threat to our illusion, I am always

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present in the thing that I critique or shine light upon. I am part of the problem, and part of the answer. The trick, as I see it, is to recognize whether I am an impediment or an assistant in the creation of positive change. This is where it is particularly dark. I see most of what I have experienced in my life and the systems that I exist within, both large and small, as ideologically bankrupt.

The image that I am including depicts the Matterhorn's construction, the centerpiece attraction of Disneyland in Anaheim, California. It is printed on 'Space Blanket,' which was invented to protect spacecraft parts that are sensitive to ultraviolet light. This material is also used for survival as it is an excellent insulator and extremely light. As I write this, it is protecting Voyager's sensitive parts as it propels further outside our solar system. It is also likely keeping someone warm, injured somewhere in the wild, somewhere on Earth.

CLARK FILIO: I find or create images that when presented together form something like a constellation of subjects that synergize into more than the sum of their parts. Whiteness, as a historical event and social construct, plays a large role in how and what kinds of images I bring into the practice. The images that aren't directly containing whiteness are always asked to contend with whiteness in this ecosystem of subjects that they cohabitate. I hope this instigates a practice of processing that the viewer can bring into their own experiences, toward the loose end of outsmarting the ways that narratives are mediated in everyday life.

Regarding whiteness as a subject, I often depict images from historical settings from before the 17th century (when the white race was invented) or from fantastical and mythological settings that exist outside of real world racecraft. When I bring these images together, I notice how not only do they assume whiteness that they don't possess in their world, but they tend to assume a heightened level of whiteness; they are whiter than normal life. I find this really exciting and informative for life in the mediated visual world.

This is a challenge as a contemporary figurative painter because the industry norm has been to aggressively ignore whiteness as a subject, or to mask it with diversity measures. Not only am I asking you to see the whiteness and notice its contrived nature, I'm also asking you to appreciate something else about sex, life, death and so on, all while enjoying a painting!

Do you contemplate undoing whiteness? What does that look like inside of your practice? What about repair, reparations and land back? How can artists help to advocate for and advance these forms of transformation? What do each of these words mean to you in the context of your practices?

IRW: I would very much like to see a massive change in the political and cultural dynamics of my home

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country (and South America as a whole) that have been dominated by colonial/patriarchal thinking. For the Cuenca Bienal, my work was geared around questioning and dismantling the idea of the monument and monumental within UNESCO World Heritage Sites. I worked with the third-generation street vendors, photographers and shoeshine stands around the main square, and with them built a new monument out of the same pink marble (without the statue) but that was cast and built with their carts and stands as part of that base, and where their recorded voices and narratives could be heard talking about important factors of their lives what they believe constitutes the monumental. While this may not particularly be 'undoing whiteness,' I do believe that it reflects on a way that art can attempt to question those colonial, white and male figures that we have so often in history put on a pedestal.



Matthew Day Jackson, *Subject-Object-Environment-Problem (Red)*, 2014 PHOTO BY GENEVIEVE HANSON »

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CF: Yes! Inside my practice, as I've sort of explained above, I hope to develop a sense in the viewer to notice the constitutive relationship between representation and meaning, and to see how whiteness is mediated in the discourse and exchange of imagery in art and culture. I do believe that the vast majority of work that has to go into undoing whiteness happens outside of the studio and in an engaged political life.

I think reparations and land back are integral to the undoing of whiteness, in that they give white people opportunities to place their other interests (i.e., family, labor, environmental, community) above their racial interests. The reliability of people with white skin to prioritize their racial interests is the main reproductive function of whiteness. When people with white skin no longer behave predictably in this way, whiteness will be considered abolished, and so any opportunity that we can create for white people to act against the interests of whiteness is something that is incredibly important. I put it this way because I do not believe that reparations or land back without the abolition of whiteness would be the kind of transformation that the world needs to develop beyond the barbarism of racial capitalism.

Artists can advance this struggle by bringing a coherent political analysis of whiteness into their life and practice. For many, this starts with dislodging the notion that race, class and gender are somehow equivalent vectors of oppression.



Ishmael Randall Weeks, *Voces Monumentales (Monumental voices)* PHOTO COURTESY OF ISHMAEL RANDALL WEEKS AND THE FUNDACION BIENAL DE CUENCA »

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MDJ: To say that 'undoing whiteness' has been something that I have been contemplating for a long time would be a lie. The perspective and understanding that this concept implies is something that has required a reeducation. The way race has been discussed and framed within the culture tailored to me has given me a feeling of distance or separateness from both race and racism. I believed that I was different and unaffected from the culture that I come from, that I had been immune to the effects of an ideology that pushes a narrative that centers on whiteness. The process of relearning involved an understanding that who I am is directly connected and supported by the same systems that maintain control through racial capitalism.

The job of an artist is to illuminate and interpret the things unseen, hidden or forgotten. The blurring of boundaries, the connectivity of disparate things, the ability to represent and to create proof of our existence are all ways that artists can be impactful. To what effect is left to interpretation. It is our responsibility to create positive working environments, to care for and engender community, and, in some cases, reimagine systems of commerce and its beneficiaries.

The redistribution proposed by reparations and land back are a compelling way to reframe accumulation in a way that could supersede borders or concepts of nation-state, especially when considering the flow of wealth that has occurred globally, not only within the confines of the US. Much like climate change, these concerns are nearly incalculable in their magnitude and as it relates to our solitary small lifetimes, but what I hope to express is the necessity to create avenues for repair, and to bear witness to the effects that our shared history have brought forth.

Do you consider artmaking/art practice to have a transformative ability? If so, what is the transformation you believe it has? And what is the transformation you would like to see in 2022?

MDJ: I know that the life I have and the relationships with many of the people I know and love would not have been possible without this pursuit. Being an artist transformed my life. As for an external transformation, we are caretakers of Art, and part of our responsibility is to leave it better than we found it when it was given to us. I have faith that many of us will continue to add to what we expect from Art and that someone we don't know will pick up where we left off. For now, Art is ours, so our duty is to turn this thing into something better while respecting each other and finding better ways to work together. I want to see more kindness, more openness. I trust that there will be amazing things to see and experience.

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Cuenca Bienal XIV, 2018-19, curated by Jesús Fuenmayor. PHOTO COURTESY OF ISHMAEL RANDALL WEEKS AND THE FUNDACION BIENAL DE CUENCA »

WILLIAM POWHIDA: *[general answer to all the questions above]* Over the last several years, decolonization and Black Lives Matter have pushed my thinking about the limitations of my work, which I'd situate uneasily in the narrative of institutional critique. I've aspired to the kinds of critical inquiry that I admire in Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser, Mark Lombardi, David Hammons and Cameron Rowland. When I think about whiteness as an artist, first I have to acknowledge that naming it is a step toward awareness. It's hard to articulate what I mean by awareness, but I think that lack of it looks like reading bell hooks and discussing race as an undergraduate in a room with one Black female student and not acknowledging the whiteness of our space of learning.

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Many years later, as a professor, I observed a colleague shut down this awareness by saying 'whiteness?! That's not a thing!' in response to a student. Whiteness is indeed a thing and must be named by white people before substantive work defining its contours as the dominant social construct in US society. It is the frame around a patriarchal, heteronormative, colonial-settler state built on Indigenous genocide and displacement, chattel slavery, racial capitalism and imperialism. To undo whiteness is to pull apart an old garment handed down from a distant relative while you are wearing it.

This imperfect metaphor speaks to the relationship between the past and present where I can draw a direct connection in my own family between chattel slavery to benefits I received from my grandparents' inherited wealth.



William Powhida, Relational Wall, 2009 PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF MELVA BUCKSBAUM »

My thinking about whiteness is filtered through class, and I have redirected a lot of my own guilt and self-loathing onto wealthier, white people. Isabel Wilkerson's recent book *Caste* is important here because it points out that class dynamics are not enough to account for the systematic oppression of Black Americans. My own impulse to divide up whiteness along class lines is also insufficient and the dangers of relying on satirical mockery or contempt have been made clear. As Hito Steyerl writes in *International Disco Latin*, the efficacy of satire lies in the target. While I've felt on safe ground poking fun at the rich and powerful, the all-encompassing presence of whiteness makes all white people, including myself, subject to critique. There is no punching up or down when interrogating whiteness.

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Michael Rakowitz, *Enemy Kitchen* staff comprised of Iraqi refugees and American veterans of the Iraq War, outside of Milo's Pita Place, an Iraqi restaurant in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood, 2018
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST »

This is a point that Xaviera [Simmons] has brought forward in my consciousness as an artist and organizer over the last three years. Trying to actively undo whiteness requires different ways of working and thinking. The work I've done collectively with activist groups may be more impactful than my previous approaches. This kind of work can use art-related skills against the interests of those responsible for harming vulnerable populations. This kind of collective work done with groups like the (De)Institutional Research Team or MoMA Divest contains the liberatory potential for art beyond individual expression. Laura Raicovich captures some of this in her recent book *Culture Strike: Art in an Age of Protests*.

My thinking about whiteness has changed my own thinking about what whiteness looks like in the artworld, and I've realized that holding up a mirror to it or reflecting it in artworks does not go far enough. My 2009 painting *Relational Wall* could be titled *How White is the Art World?* and reflects something of my hesitancy to implicate many Black artists whose work I know and respect in the rigid hierarchy of the artworld. The structure of the painting, which ended up on the cover of Ben A. Davis's 9.5 *Theses on Art and Class*, captures some of the values and interests that define whiteness as a perspective: wealth, authority, competition, aspiration and property.

Looking at the painting with a different level of awareness in 2021, I can see the exclusion and omission of Black artists, dealers, curators and critics from my critical representation of the networks of relations

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that defined my experience of the artworld filtered through Artforum and Artnet photo archives. While I may have insulted a whole lot of people with the painting, the painting's collector told me people were often relieved to find themselves in the work or upset at the lack of recognition, even in a negative context. That speaks to something of the pain of exclusion that BIPOC artists and arts workers may have felt in their lived experience of navigating such a space of whiteness. Shifting from an awareness of whiteness in all its dimensions to undoing it also involves repair for things like race that have been left unaccounted for.

Any questions about what repair looks like can only start to be answered after the awareness that whiteness has created conditions of systematic oppression. It is clear that the commercial gallery system and museums have begun to address the problem of representation, and a new version of *Relational Wall* in 2021 would look very different and also very much the same. For artists and American society to begin to repair harms that continue today, white people have to take responsibility for terrible decisions and see the debts that we owe beyond opportunities to participate, including monetary reparations and land back programs.

These are big federal, state and municipal policies with huge implications that artists can help support by bringing them further into the mainstream through culture. The emergence of land acknowledgments has spread beyond activist and organizing communities into many institutions. Still, I remain skeptical about the power of individual artists and their art to do this. As Andrea Long Chu observed, 'If the protesters had wanted to be open to interpretation, they should have tried being paintings.' This is a short way of saying that political art may not be as useful as clear public policy. When our individual practices as artists are allowed to overlap in the fullness of writing, organizing, collaborating and speaking to each other, more transformative things can happen.

In 2019, I reached out to Xaviera to quote her essay calling for whiteness to undo itself. This outreach led to new and ongoing opportunities to talk about that means in different ways with more artists and arts workers. In my own studio practice, I saw her call for white artists and critics to 'do the cultural autopsy' of examining whiteness happening in works I was making for my show 'Complicities,' where I outlined the flow of extractive capital to white cultural institutions.

Xaviera and I have continued that dialogue as part of the core work of a developing arts union. Her participation in this collective work has grounded it with a critical perspective on whiteness that has become part of the acknowledgments we open each general meeting with. One of the transformations that I would like to see in 2022 is the public emergence of the arts union to function as a progressive, political representation of the collective cultural power artists and arts workers hold. As a nontraditional union, we want to hold each other and our industry accountable for the debts we owe, not just what we

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may be owed. I have hope that such a group can advocate for and advance socially reparative transformations through the entire fabric of what we do as arts workers in a system built on exploitation and inequality. We know there is much more work to be done internally to address anti-Blackness and bias that comes with confronting whiteness, so that we can be ready to meet people where they are and see how they respond to the ethical and moral demands of an anti-racist, decolonial political organization grounded in the labor that connects us.

To come back to *Art Basel* magazine and how my thinking as an artist has changed on what whiteness is, I will share documentation of my ongoing project, 'Possibilities for Representation.' In its fourth iteration at Charlie James Gallery in LA, it includes an acknowledgments panel that introduces my thoughts for the image-based narrative. I think the work is precisely about your prompt, 'How is the contemporary historical and how is the historical contemporary?'