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Asking the urgent questions in 'Us Them We'

Exhibit explores the stories, traumas, and misunderstandings of racism and other forms of prejudice



By Cate McQuaid

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WORCESTER — You wouldn't expect an exhibition titled "Us Them We | Race Ethnicity Identity" to hinge on notions of abstraction. The show, now at Worcester Art Museum, has a clarion design that focuses on form, not story. It puts aside diving into artist's biographies. It sets no timeline against the endless churning of news cycles.

Rather, organizers Nancy Kathryn Burns, the museum's associate curator of prints, drawings, and photographs, and Toby Sisson, associate professor and program director of studio art at Clark University, take an atypically formal approach for a time when contemporary art is jam-packed with social content. Call it 21st-century modernism.

Traditionally, modernists focused less on subject matter and more on form, material, technique, and process. Some artists took it to extremes — minimalists such as Frank Stella and Donald Judd, for instance, can be seen as making art that was purely about art.

In times like these, that focus can feel like antiseptic navel-gazing. But such thinking forged a template for this exhibition, which features 47 artists and breaks down into four formal categories: text, juxtaposition, pattern, and seriality.

The content is still here, of course. There's no escaping it. But in focusing on form, the curators create a solid structure to explore the stories, traumas, and misunderstandings of racism and other forms of prejudice. Artworks breathe and converse. Many works inevitably fit into more than one category, but that tightens the narrative and thematic threads that run through the show.

The gaudy, declarative pattern section celebrates cultural hallmarks such as textiles from the Black Is Beautiful movement that appear in Mickalene Thomas's collage "Interior: Zebra with Two Chairs and Funky Fur" or ceramicist Roberto Lugo's lustrous funerary urn "2 Queens," emblazoned with historical photos of two unknown Black women, claiming royalty for people

long forgotten or erased.

Erasure is implicit in our American story. In the text section, Karlos Cárcamo strategically uses it in "Untitled (Study for 'Kase' Painting, Green)." Cárcamo reproduces the late graffiti artist Kase 2's tag, and then scrubs it out with the solvent many communities use to remove street art. He does it over and over, creating an illegible, lush surface like the fog of war.

Downstairs, in the seriality gallery, a deceptively quiet painting takes on fusty old typologies of race and personhood. It's Byron Kim's — long title alert! — "Synecdoche: Danielle Brunner, Dominic Shamyler, Ella Kim, George Gountas, Glenn Ligon, Jay Patrikios, Johannes Gachnang, Joanna Bossart, Joseph Benjamin, Konrad Tobler, Kyle Wilton, Louis Barney, Lourdes Mercado, Luciano Berti, Marc Pia, Marvin Siegel, Miguel Maldonado, Niki Hosig, Remy Pia, Roland Fellmann, Rosa Duran, Ruth Libermann, Sean Casey, Susann Bossart, Vijay Kapoor."

Kim painted monochromatic "portraits" of friends and family members he names in the title and assembled them in a grid. The color of each panel matches a patch of skin on the subject's forearm. "Synecdoche," a literary term meaning a small piece that represents the whole, here indicates one color representing a person. Or we could see this grid and its 25 different skin tones as a synecdoche for humanity — a fraction of the colors of the human race.

Across the gallery hangs Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's photographic triptych, "Byron, Lisa, Emmett" from his **Left: María Magdalena Campos-Pons's "When I Am Not Here/ Estoy Allá, Identity Could Be a Tragedy." Below: LaToya Ruby Frazier's "Momme" (left) and Byron Kim's "Synecdoche: Danielle Brunner, Dominic Shamyler, Ella Kim, George Gountas, Glenn Ligon, Jay Patrikios, Johannes Gachnang, Joanna Bossart, Joseph Benjamin, Konrad Tobler, Kyle Wilton, Louis Barney, Lourdes Mercado, Luciano Berti, Marc Pia, Marvin Siegel, Miguel Maldonado, Niki Hosig, Remy Pia, Roland Fellmann, Rosa**

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"Garden of Delights" series. The three images are digital scans of DNA samples from Kim, his wife, and son. The blots and squiggles appear to be pure abstraction, but they are ripe with stories of family and ancestry. Nearby, LaToya Ruby Frazier's "The Notion of Family" photographic series depicts her own kin struggling to survive in a working-class Black community in Pennsylvania. In a way, Frazier's work is an inversion of Manglano-Ovalle's. Both are serial works about family, but "Byron, Lisa, Emmett" forefronts form, "The Notion of Family" forefronts story.

Family resemblances appear in the juxtaposition section, too — in Lorraine O'Grady's "Progress of Queens (L: Devonia, Age 36; R: Nefertiti, Age 36)" pairing a photograph of her late sister with one of a sculpture of the Egyptian queen. Works like Frazier's and O'Grady's have roots in 20th-century Black American artists such as Jacob Lawrence or Boston's own Allan Rohan Crite, who spurned abstraction when it was the coin of the realm. Telling long-ignored Black stories was more important than abstract art's tendency to focus on art itself.

Now things have evolved. Burns and Sisson can apply modernism's cool-headed approach to hot-button themes — and not just to tell stories. The artists here ask urgent questions that "Us Them We" holds, respectfully, in formal containers. No answers are arrived at. Poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "I beg you, to have patience toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves." This exhibition's strict formal constraints engender that patience.

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ART REVIEW

US THEM WE | RACE ETHNICITY IDENTITY

At Worcester Art Museum, 55 Salisbury St., Worcester, through June 19. 508-799-4406, www.worcesterart.org