

A Book on Art Protests Falters in the First Act But Deepens the Conversation

hyperallergic.com/447205/whitewalling-art-race-protest-in-3-acts/

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The subtitle to Aruna D'Souza's new book indicates that it consists of three distinct parts brought together by an overarching and compelling question that pulls the author through rigorous research and discerning analysis. The reader will feel the fervency of D'Souza's desire to answer her research query, but will need to be patient as the author stumbles a bit out of gate and then finds better footing in the latter two-thirds of the book.

There are many astute conclusions arrived at by Aruna D'Souza in her book *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts* — conclusions that come by way of what seems like careful and considered scholarship and a feel for the connective tissue that links distinct controversies around displays of art. The wishy-washy construction of the previous sentence is intentional: it mirrors D'Souza's own rhetorical approach to framing her analyses and reporting her findings. Take for example her read on how the contention over the placement of Dana Schutz's infamous painting in the 2017 Whitney Biennial; she writes on page 38: "The controversy did not play out as a starkly black versus white issue; in fact, on the contrary, at times it seemed that the divide was more generational than racial." In her specific analysis of the work itself, she offers (p. 47), "While Schutz may have imagined that she was channeling black pain in her work ... her artistic gesture was inevitably read through another lens: that of white lies."

Reading that first argument, I'm reminded of admonitions from my PhD supervisor that I needed to resist being mealy-mouthed and passive-aggressive. I want to ask D'Souza whether the divide was more generational than racial or *not*. Hedging her bets by using "seemed" doesn't help me develop trust in her assessments. (For the record, I think it indeed was.) She goes from direct to wishy-washy in the span of a sentence. In the second quotation, D'Souza absolves herself of responsibility for the critique by using the passive construction "was ...read," as though others were responsible for that reading and she merely means to report their feelings and arguments.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with taking the approach of letting others make their claims and mount their critiques, while acting as a kind of critical bundler who then shows the reader how certain contentions repeat and resonate among those who were deeply emotionally and intellectually invested in the controversy, those who felt like their own bodies were being callously displayed and used for entertainment and misplaced pity. However, one problem that occurs is precisely the one that my supervisor had warned me of: at times it's very difficult to tell who is speaking, D'Souza or someone else. This issue recurred several times in the text and made sussing out her conclusions unnecessarily difficult.

More, this rhetorical posture of hanging back away from the dispute feels mistaken because its deployment is so wobbly. This strategy would have been earned if the book were written as a truly birds-eye evaluation of the ways and means of arts protest convened around issues of race and power. Instead D'Souza sometimes slips into reproof that is just shy of condemnation. Again speaking about Schutz she declares (p. 48), "Schutz made Open Casket from an aesthetic and social vantage point that left a glaring blind spot: the complicity of whiteness, and of white womanhood, in those events." Here — before she introduces Pastiche Lumumba who makes the most forceful indictment of Schutz's deployment of white privilege in the book — she begins to make an argument that sounds very much like there is an unspoken "should" lurking in the background. Lumumba brings it to the forefront by describing Schutz's work as (p. 49), "lazy, shallow, and uncritical [and] ontologically linked to the tradition of white people reveling in Black death," apparently because she used the painting to depict Emmet Till's death instead of white complicity. This is an argument worth making, but to do so properly, one should respond to the obvious queries begged by this denunciation: what would a painting showing white complicity look like? How does one go about finding out how to properly express this? Once white art makers have dealt honestly and comprehensively with white complicity in the killing and dehumanizing of Black people what else might they turn to? How will they meaningfully engage in the issues that affect us all if this sector of culture is cordoned off? She doesn't deal with these questions, which makes her analysis rather one-sided.

Also helping to make her arguments slanted is that, particularly with the case of Schutz, D'Souza cites, but ultimately ignores one of the most trenchant insights into the meaning of the controversy given by Coco Fusco in Hyperallergic. According to D'Souza, Fusco analyzes Hannah Black's contentions given in her open letter, finding (p. 40) "problematic notions of cultural property," "the imput[ation of] malicious intent in a totalizing manner to cultural producers and consumers on the basis of race," and a kind of "cultural nationalism," that "presumes an ability to speak for all black people." Additionally, Fusco imagines that protesters such as Black who called for the destruction of the painting are ruling out the possibility of interracial collaboration or the development of an anti-racist consciousness that is not tied to one's race. These are all heavy contentions that require serious and strenuous engagement,

D'Souza gets a good deal right in her analysis. I particularly appreciated her finding that the Schutz painting became a flashpoint at least partly because people of color felt fed up with the

glaring failures of white liberalism and especially white liberal feminism because as the last presidential election showed, many people who were supposed to act as allies failed to do so. Unfortunately, a few times when she is clearly and forcefully direct, D'Souza gets it wrong. When she claims that "liberal culture *seems* consistently to value things over people," [emphasis mine] she is mistaken, at least if she means the liberal culture that exists in the domestic art scene. This culture clearly values the agency of the artist over people, which is starkly revealed in the second and third acts of her book.



Parker Bright, "Confronting My Own Possible Death" (2018) mixed media on paper, 19 x 24 in (courtesy of the artist)

What comes out of those acts is the most useful reportage and analysis in the work, for me. Here, the historian is on much more solid ground in showing how as she writes (p. 67):

There is a contradiction at the heart of our idea of open dialogue: while it seems to depend on the idea of leaving open space for ambiguity, uncertainty, and the contingent, it is grounded in — and perhaps even depends upon — de facto limits of who can speak and what can be said.”

This point is clearly and rigorously made in her examination of the “Nigger Drawings” exhibited at Artists Space in 1979. D'Souza shows how tools for understanding the use and import of language, such as semiotics, and the notions of artist's almost limitless agency fueled a backlash to the protests of what is now obviously a reprehensibly racist gesture pursued in the name of being provocative. It's instructive how what passes as erudition can fly in the face of

felt harm — and this is one of the key threads that runs through all the stories. Another crucial observation is how those who I tend to think of as sensitive, politically aware writers and researchers can so easily succumb to protecting white supremacy. Those who signed an open letter that claimed that (p. 89) “the protesters had ... cynically used the nonissue of racism to further their underlying nefarious agenda — to shut down Artists Space entirely” include: Douglas Crimp, Laurie Anderson, Rosalind Krauss, Roberta Smith, and Craig Owens. I wonder what answer any of them have ever had to the question (if it was indeed posed to them): *what* were you thinking?

For this clear and well-researched rendering of the history of New York City art protests of the last generation, ultimately, *Whitewall* is an important book. It provides historical context to our current and recent controversies, letting them be seen in less glaring incandescence. The book would have been a stronger effort if the author had initially, in very clear terms, set out her political positions and declared her concerns. They bleed through nevertheless, but in ways that make this reader feel that D'Souza has not done all her due diligence.