

Once again on Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till: The New York Times intervenes to preserve identity politics

David Walsh
31 March 2017

There are significant historical and social questions raised by the campaign to censor and even suppress *Open Casket*, artist Dana Schutz's painting of murdered black youth Emmett Till.

The article by *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith, "Should Art That Infuriates Be Removed?" (March 27, 2017), is illustrative of the manner in which the American media evades or conceals most of those questions.

The 14-year-old Till was murdered by racists in Mississippi in 1955, and his mother insisted on an open casket at his funeral, so that the world could see what savagery had been committed against him. Till's killers were acquitted by an all-white jury, although there was little or no question about their guilt.

The inclusion of Schutz's painting, inspired by a photograph of the mutilated Till in his casket, in the current 2017 Whitney Biennial (at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City), provoked protests. Various African American artists complained that Schutz, who is white, was illegitimately exploiting black suffering and death for her own profit or advancement. An open letter from video artist Hannah Black demanded not only that the painting be removed from the Biennial, but that it "be destroyed and not entered into any market or museum." An online petition making that reprehensible demand, and signed by two dozen or more black artists, has apparently been taken down.

The American media establishment clearly senses that in the case of the Schutz painting, the identity politics zealots may have overstepped the bounds. As far as sections of the ruling elite are concerned, the insistence that white artists have no right to represent black experience, and that a work daring to do so ought to be *physically destroyed*—with its echoes of fascist book- and painting-burning in the 1930s—dangerously exposes the right-wing character of these forces and may diminish their political and ideological usefulness.

The *New York Times* and its veteran art critic intervened to perform a type of intellectual damage control. The heart of Smith's article lies in her effort to simultaneously register disapproval of the most strident arguments of Hannah Black and company while affirming and reinforcing the basic tenets of identity politics and racialized thinking generally.

Smith begins her comment with this observation: "We all encounter art we don't like, that upsets and infuriates us. This

doesn't deserve to be exhibited, our brains yell; it should not be allowed to exist. Still, does such aversion mean that an artwork must be removed from view—or, worse, destroyed?" After explaining the details of the Whitney controversy, she continues: "The artist, Ms. Schutz, is white, and her use of the images has struck many in the art world as an inappropriate appropriation that, they argue, should be removed."

Smith's approach is defensive and equivocal: who is being "infuriated" by the painting and is their sentiment in any way warranted? To identify the "aversion" toward Schutz's work as legitimate is already to accept a retrograde, racialized framework. The painter is not "appropriating" images that belong to someone else, but responding as an artist and a human being to an atrocity committed against another human being.

Black's open letter asserted that "it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun." Of course, "fun" was simply added out of malice, but the use of the word "profit" was not accidental (although Schutz has made it clear the painting is not for sale), nor is Black's later reference to the issues in the Whitney case as involving a "high-stakes conversation." In effect, the open letter signatories and their allies are insisting that they be granted the ethnic "franchise" or monopoly on such imagery, with all the money and prestige that might entail.

Smith carries on in her March 27 article: "The discussion was upsetting, bracing, ultimately beneficial. Is the censorship, much less the destruction of art, abhorrent? Yes. Should people offended or outraged by an artwork or an exhibition mount protests? Absolutely. And might a museum have the foresight to frame a possibly controversial work of art through labels or programming? Yes, that, too."

The idea of destroying art is "abhorrent," according to Smith, but those who proposed it had every right to be "offended or outraged." But there is a *necessary connection* between the reactionary character of the "outrage" and the sinister appeal for the work to be destroyed. No one with a serious concern for either the elementary right of freedom of artistic expression or historical truth would advance such a demand. The Nazi-like proposal arises inexorably from the exclusivist, right-wing program of ethnic communalism and chauvinism. This is one of the central issues—the profoundly anti-democratic character of affluent middle

class identity politics—that Smith wishes, above all, to avoid.

(The Bolsheviks, after the 1917 revolution, proposed to *retain* statues and other monuments devoted to the tsarist regime, a regime responsible for mass misery and death, that were of historic or artistic value—and those that had no such value, they put in storage.)

The *Times* has spearheaded the broad campaign by the US media and important sections of the political establishment to frame every important feature of social life in terms of race or gender. At a time when a handful of corporate billionaires have a stranglehold on American society, and every section of the working class is suffering, the *Times*'s editors would have us believe that the only burning questions are those related to personal identity. The newspaper's culture pages have contributed mightily to this effort.

In 2014, for example, Smith gave her critical blessing to Emma Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*, the Columbia student's self-promoting protest against an alleged rape. The male student involved was cleared of all charges, despite the anti-democratic character of the Office of Gender-Based and Sexual Misconduct proceedings at Columbia, where the mere "preponderance of evidence" standard holds sway.

Smith, in her review, "In a Mattress, a Lever for Art and Political Protest" (September 21, 2014), argued that Sulkowicz's "Carry That Weight"—during which the student carried a 50-pound mattress wherever she went—was a "succinct and powerful performance piece that is her senior art thesis as well as her protest against sexual assault on campus."

The *Times* critic accepted virtually without question Sulkowicz's version of events, writing that "'Carry That Weight' might be called an artwork of last resort. It is the culmination of two years of pain, humiliation, frustration and righteous anger that began in 2012," and "It is so simple: A woman with a mattress, refusing to keep her violation private, carrying with her a stark reminder of where it took place."

Smith and the *Times* have absolutely no credibility on these issues. They form a heavily invested party.

Christopher Benson, co-author with Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, of *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America* (2003), offered a more humane and democratic approach March 28 in an op-ed column ("The Image of Emmett Till") in the *Times*.

Benson writes: "The death of Emmett Till was more than an isolated act of race hatred by white terrorists. It was enforcement of a social hierarchy in which place, privilege and power are maintained through intimidation, threat and violence.

"For Emmett's mother, what happened to her son was not just an African-American story, it was also an American story, mapping a national journey to fulfilling the promise of freedom, justice and equality for all."

He further notes, "She welcomed the megaphone effect of a wider audience reached by multiple storytellers, irrespective of race," before raising questions about "the dangers that exist in the framing and representation of black people by others who lack the cultural connection."

The other critical question that Roberta Smith chooses to ignore is the reactionary pedigree of national and racial particularism.

She cites a few examples of what she refers to as ethnic "crossovers." The *Times*'s art critic points to the series of paintings by "Ben Shahn, a white Jewish artist," devoted to the persecution of immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in Massachusetts during the 1920s. She further notes that "it was a white Jewish schoolteacher and songwriter, Abel Meeropol, who wrote the wrenchingly beautiful 'Strange Fruit,' an anti-lynching ballad made famous by Billie Holiday."

In the interest of being even-handed, Smith then refers to the presumably legitimate "hostility" with which a number of black writers greeted white novelist William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* after its publication in 1967.

But this all begs the question. Even to suggest that such work as Shahn's, Meeropol's or Styron's is a "crossover," i.e., an oddity, is an insult to the artists and to their art. They likely would not have thought of the matter in those terms. The significant artist, as much as he or she is shaped by particular conditions, must have the principle of universality in his or her blood.

The claim that there are insurmountable differences between nationalities and ethnicities, as we have noted, has been the program of reaction since the time of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Historian Jacques Godechot, for example, explains that for the Anglo-Irishman Edmund Burke, a ferocious enemy of the 1789 revolution, "There is a British people, a French people, a German people, who are fundamentally different from each other, and each of them evolves according to its own law." Another arch-reactionary opponent of the French Revolution, Joseph de Maistre, the man who once charmingly argued that "Humanity only survives through the hangman and religion," commented that he had seen "Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, and so on ... but I must say, as for *man*, I have never come across him anywhere." In more recent times, notorious Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt put it simply, "Whoever says humanity lies."

A considerable section of what passes for the intelligentsia in America today is so saturated with backward and foul racialism or gender obsession, takes this "identity" outlook so much for granted, that the desire of artists, past or present, to treat life honestly and with compassion appears surprising and exceptional.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact