

Another reactionary attack on artist Dana Schutz, this time in Boston—and a healthy response

David Walsh
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Another reactionary, racist campaign has been launched against white artist Dana Schutz, whose painting of black youth Emmett Till, murdered in Mississippi in 1955, came under attack in March when it was shown as part of the Whitney Museum's Biennial in New York City.

Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), which is staging a solo show of Schutz's work that runs until November 26, is the target this time.

To their credit, nearly 80 artists and architects, members or members-elect of the National Academy of Art, have defended the new Schutz show and praised the ICA for refusing to "bow to forces in favor of censorship or quelling dialogue."

During the Whitney Biennial, protests began the first day the show was open to the public, March 17, when one African American artist blocked Schutz's painting, *Open Casket*, from view. Others later took similar action.

This was followed by an open letter to the Whitney, written by British-born artist Hannah Black and signed by two dozen other black artists. The letter demanded not only that the painting be removed from the Biennial, but that it "be destroyed and not entered into any market or museum."

This communication contended that *Open Casket* "should not be acceptable to anyone who cares or pretends to care about Black people because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time."

There was a general feeling that with the demand that the Till painting be "destroyed," reminiscent of Nazi painting and book burnings in the 1930s, the identity politics crowd had gone too far. The *New York Times*, in the person of longtime art critic Roberta Smith,

intervened, as we noted, "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."

These reactionary, racist forces are now back in action, in Boston. There is no improvement in their arguments or witch-hunting methods, nor in the attitude of the *Times*. However, as noted, some artists have spoken out this time.

A group of self-described "local artists, activists and community members" decided to protest when they learned that the ICA was planning a Dana Schutz exhibition, at which, incidentally, *Open Casket* would not be displayed. Nine of their rank met with curator Eva Respini and ICA staff on July 20 for three hours.

Not satisfied with the results of that conversation, the group penned an open letter July 25 to the museum. The document is preposterous. It takes for granted everything it needs to prove and makes entirely unsubstantiated accusations.

This is a typical passage: "Hearing what you have had to say so far, we do not feel that the ICA is making a responsible decision as an institution of art and culture. At this point we are unconvinced that ICA has the will to challenge the egregiousness of continued institutional backing of this type of violent artifact. People's humanity cannot be up for debate. We must challenge directors and curators of cultural institutions to face the moral gravitas of reckless cultural insensibilities of artists in their charge and not waver due to the weight of their bottom lines."

What they apparently mean by a "violent artifact" is Schutz's entirely legitimate response to the mutilation and murder of Emmett Till, part of the history of racist brutality in the US. Till's killers were functioning to

enforce Jim Crow segregation in the South. The origins of that system were bound up in the late 19th century with the need of the American ruling elite to divide the white and black poor in the South, as well as to confront the emergence of the industrial working class in the North.

Just as the murders of Joe Hill and Frank Little of the IWW and Sacco and Vanzetti are part of the history of every section of the American working class, so too is the cruel killing of Emmett Till. Artists of every color and ethnicity have the right to represent these crimes in as honest and forceful a manner as possible.

The Boston open letter goes on, “In ‘Open Casket’ Dana Schutz paints over and erases the passion of a sorrowing, grieving mother, addressing the world with her truth. We were hoping to hear the ICA resist the narrative that Black people can be sacrificed for the greater good.”

What does this possibly mean? It is perfectly obvious to every person of good will that Schutz was paying tribute and bringing a terrible tragedy to the attention of a wider public.

The letter complains that the exhibition will do “grave, cultural harm,” without providing the slightest evidence. Even without *Open Casket* in the exhibition, the protesters claim, “the institution will be participating in condoning the co-opting of Black pain and showing the art world and beyond that people can co-opt sacred imagery rooted in oppression and face little consequence, contributing to and perpetuating centuries-old racist iconography that ultimately justifies state and socially sanctioned violence on Black people.”

There is a type of political disorientation and self-delusion here that borders on madness. Again, the letter does not provide any proof that Schutz, much less the ICA, is condoning “Black pain” and participating in the co-opting of “sacred imagery.” The assertion that Schutz is somehow participating in “perpetuating centuries-old racist iconography” is slanderous and absurd.

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The open letter authors do not represent the “Black community” in Boston or anywhere else. They represent a tiny layer of affluent, ambitious petty-bourgeois operators who want to monopolize images of “Black pain” for their own advancement and gain.

They make a series of provocative demands. They urge, “Please pull the show. This is not about censorship. This is about institutional accountability,” while still managing to suggest, presumably as the second best possibility, “The ICA should acknowledge publicly and in the text of

the exhibition that a white femme artist tampered with the intention of a grieving Black mother to humanely show in undeniable detail the brutality endured by her 14 year old adolescent child—that this is in line with a long tradition of white supremacy obscuring and ultimately erasing narratives of the continued genocide of Black and indigenous peoples.”

Why not insist the artist set herself on fire in the museum’s lobby?

One could go on, but why bother? This is a deeply reactionary campaign, and ICA officials have been far too polite in the face of this blatant attempt at censorship.

The *New York Times*, in its inimitable fashion, headlined its article on the Boston protest, “Outrage Follows a Painter from the Whitney Biennial to Boston.” Whose “outrage”? What “outrage”? The “outrage” of this self-serving crowd of racialsists?

If the facts were made public, the overwhelming majority of museum goers and ordinary residents, black and white, would be appalled, yes, “outraged,” by this campaign itself.

Dozens of National Academy of Art members or members-elect issued their own open letter August 3. It reads in part, “We would like to voice our unequivocal support for Dana Schutz, who was recently excoriated by a group of Boston artists who were demanding that her current exhibition at the ICA in Boston be canceled, a demand meant to penalize Schutz... We support the ICA-Boston and its decision to exhibit the works of Dana Schutz, and to maintain programming that fosters conversations between people with different points of view, especially given our current political climate of intolerance.”

The list of signatories includes Marina Abramovic, Chuck Close, Ed Ruscha, Dread Scott, Jack Whitten, Cindy Sherman, Catherine Opie and Kara Walker.

The artists should be congratulated. There needs to be far more vocal and public opposition to this type of rotten, repressive activity.



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