

DOO-DAHZ

The art of Mark Steven Greenfield is set in a world of opposites: good vs bad, black vs. white, beautiful vs. grotesque. Like a strobe-light flickering across an unfolding nightmare, his images reenact tableaux of revulsion, each brilliantly composed and calculated to provoke a visceral response from the viewer: to simultaneously seduce and repel, delight and disgust, and ultimately to exorcise and make plain the festering pathologies and absurdities of racial bigotry and injustice banked deep in the American unconscious.

In past work, Greenfield achieved his aims by appropriating (hijacking, really) and then reframing racist 19th century photographs of white actors dressed up like buffoons in blackface and tatters. These images were then overlaid with eye-charts encoded with mocking, ironical phrases like “Whatchoolookinatmuthafucka,” “Sometimeswebecomewhatwehate,” and “Mammysouldhavewhoopedyoass.” The phrases were couched in the smug, if truculent, voice of a Negro trickster, a modern Br’er Rabbit caught in polemical discourse with Ole Jim Crow. Each series was assigned a sarcastic title like, *Blackatcha*, and *Incognegro*, to complete their subversive effects.

“In order for this work to get under your skin, it means that on a subconscious level, you identify with it,” Greenfield observes. “I don’t identify with these images, and for anyone who does, it is completely understandable that they would have such visceral reactions to them. I’ve learned over the years that I can’t judge anyone who rejects this work; because everyone has different thresholds of tolerance.”

These works engaged our attention, not merely by their echoing juxtapositions of images and ideas, but because of Greenfield’s insistence on using his considerable craft and aesthetic to expose the hidden fault lines in American art and culture, where a cancerous new synthesis of racist iconography still takes shape between their mirroring surfaces. His works are notable for their technical efficacy and polish, their mastery of line, form, composition, color and tones, and for the boldness of their visual effects, but it is their repellent content which give viewers such trouble. It is invariably, provocative, controversial, unconscionable, maddening, coarse.

In *Doo-dahz*, the new suite of works created for the COLA exhibit, Greenfield turns his gaze away from the racist buffoons and conventions of the minstrel stage (the preeminent American popular art form of the 19th century), to focus attention on racist characterizations and content developed by the dominant popular art form of the 20th century -- American film. “The things I am doing now involve racist cartoon characters from the 1930s and 40s,” Greenfield explains, “The stereotype has never really gone away, it has just evolved along with the times. These cartoon images served the same dehumanizing purpose as did performers in blackface. My re-positioning of these characters from animation in alternate contexts is aimed at making them intentionally seductive, with the power to pull you in and then hammer you. For many years these images were buried with the popular convention being that they were unacceptable, and no one was willing to acknowledge their effect on the American psyche on any level, for any reason. That which is not acknowledged is never overcome.”

For *Doo-dahz*, Greenfield felt obliged to adopt new materials and techniques in order to more effectively proscribe, mimic and keep pace with the racist imagery and innovations of technique evolved by the latest targets of his polemical ire. These new works,

moreover, evince an aesthetic palette subtler and more intuitive than he used in the past. Rather than expand his palette to involve a wider range of color tones and hues, his new iconography is notable for its starkness and paucity of color -- the images are either black-on-black, or they comprise characters and forms rendered pitch black and set in minimalist fields of pastel. He no longer fixes his dissident images and rebuttals with printer's ink on photo-paper. He now renders them, by hand, in a swift calligraphic scrawl on Duralar, which, he explains, has a slickness and surface comparable to film.

A master of art, calligraphy and design, his works are still characterized by technical proficiency in both the thoroughness of his conceptual process, as well as the fluidity and elegance of their treatment and execution. But these works subject their formally racist images to a meticulous reversal of the process once employed by colonial slave masters to dehumanize their slaves and make them compliant and malleable -- Greenfield plucks his purloined Jaspers and Boscas, his shiftless blackbirds and scarecrows, his twisted black-wheat and his tar-covered cotton fields, and removes them from their celluloid homelands. He strips them of their identifying color and markings, their familiar contexts and meanings, and sets them to work like chattel in his own calligraphic landscape, a tendentious landscape as intuitive and expressive as jazz, yet as redoubtable, disconcerting and prickly as a briar patch.

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