CURATOR'S STATEMENT

BY JULIE JOYCE

Wheel about, an' turn about, an' do jis so; Eb'ry time I wheel about, I jump Jim Crow.[1]

Mark Steven Greenfield takes historic imagery from the heyday of blackface minstrelsy, a notoriously reprehensible white enterprise, and reclaims it, positioning it as his own and also front and center in direct confrontation with the viewer. His endeavor is the final act in a series of conglomerated appropriation—the ultimate form of reckoning. For the imagery that the artist repossesses and represents has not only been enacted, made popular, and eventually "owned," or rather appropriated, by a distinctively white enterprise in the early 1800's but had already in itself existed as an appropriation or rather an unmitigated exploitation and denigration of the entire black race. Right up there with swastikas and the "n" word, blackface comes in as a close third in terms of what is considered "taboo"--the "ne plus ultra of hate speech."[2] Greenfield's work is shocking and divisive, to be sure, but to leave it at that is akin to storming out of the theater before the main act. For the action that takes place from beginning to end, between black and white, among positive images and negative stereotypes, the accumulative acts of appropriation, or rather, in the turnin' about, is where the rigor and essence of this work exists.

Nowhere has such action been more evident than in Greenfield's most recent series of lenticular prints—works that combine two or more images with a lenticular lens to create a 3D effect or, in this case, to present alternate images that appear to transform into each other.[3] *Pinky* (2006), for example, features Topsy (a likeness the artists has used in previous works) as played by Rosetta Duncan, one of the famous Duncan sisters known for their popular early 1920s blackface vaudeville act, *Topsy and Eva*[4] (the latter played by Vivian), which was acquired (or appropriated) in name if not in spirit from two characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*[5] (the novel of the same name by Harriet Beecher Stowe that also became one of the most famous blackface performances). What may initially attract the viewer to this piece is its bright flush and shape, which, as an impersonation of the diamond suit in card games, provides an invitation to chance. What most certainly repels the viewer is the portrait image that occupies this piece, which shocks by its very nature, as images of white folk in blackface make-up tend to do.

Mimicking the push and pull dynamic that is inherent in Greenfield's work is yet another dynamic that comes into play with this and the other lenticular works: the unusual way that the image literally and relentlessly shifts between that of the blackface performer and that of her photographic negative, or "reverse." Such an effect also causes the viewer to physically change position, or "turn about" to experience the piece in full. This shift or movement between two opposing states points to a larger paradox: a rather convoluted and circular conflation of not just positive vs. negative or black vs. white but also "normal" vs. "abnormal." Greenfield's perpetual series of subversive acts not only

converts and destablizes the appearance of racial identity but also sabotages the "blackface myth" in the process.[6] This is the same myth that posits whiteness as the norm, or with the traditional, simultaneously preposterous yet unfortunately existent notion of a "white-unless-marked-otherwise society."[7]

In *Pinky*, the subject's "normal" image, the way we've become used to seeing her, as nauseating and infuriating as her iconic burnt cork make-up and contrasting toothy grin might appear to us now, is the image of her in blackface. And conversely, her "abnormal" image is the negative image, whereby blackface becomes "white," a type that appears colorless yet intensely toxic, like radiation. Among the seemingly endless suppositions turned upside down here is that of black face as "normal," which, as popular a form of entertainment as it was at one time, we now know as offensive at best; and that its reverse, the re-transformation of Topsy into "white," may be read as "abnormal."

Hotel Hostile (2005), another lenticular piece by Greenfield, calls to mind what may be perceived as another opposite of blackface: whiteface performance, a post-blackface form of parody that started with the 1965 off-Broadway production of *Day of Absence* by Douglas Turner Ward, and continuing into the near past and present with performances by Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, and the Wayans Brothers. While far and few between in comparison to the hugely popular cultural phenomenon of blackface performance, the practice of whiteface also implicates the historical foundations of blackface, which may have formed in part from an African tradition of mockery that included mimicry of white travelers, colonists, and plantation owners (that also included the use of flour as "whiteface" make-up).[8] So the turnin' about continues.

While the use of blackface is part of what makes Greenfield's work distinctive, it is also what positions his work in the company of artists who have also appropriated images used in racial stereotyping, most specifically the use of Negrobilia. Such collectibles are seen as "yet another kind of virtual blackface...relegating Blacks to the status of commercial mascots [which was] a way for whites to feel in control of them again after slavery was abolished,"[9] and more than a few of these icons from the past tread a path directly from blackface performance. In the mid-to-late 1990s several artists received critical attention for

works that utilized these "bizarrely heinous representations such as Sambos, Coons, Mammies and Jigaboos,"[10] which included Camille Billops, David Levinthal, Michael Ray Charles, and others. Most notorious of these artists was Kara Walker, whose silhouette-style tableaux derive from, among other things, sensational, 18th-19th century stereotype-laden fiction from the South. Before that came the work of Betye Saar, who used the image of Aunt Jemima as early as 1972 (albeit in a way that appeared to empower this figure – what she and others see as the main difference between her work and that of these younger artists).[11]

Greenfield began using blackface in 2000, at about the same time that the debate among African-Americans and others about the use of negative stereotypes to "out" them, or rather to challenge their significant role in perpetuating prejudices, subsided. Once past the initial alarm and debate that several of these works generated, many began to realize that this phenomenon was by no means new to contemporary conceptual practice. From Pop art through Political art, feminist art, and performance art, and continuing into the present, artists have used images that provoke in order to draw our attention to socio-political issues. While those using racial stereotypes may indeed reach a heightened level of shock, this may also be the best and only way to bring diversity into the realm of critical discourse. The continuing presence and relevance of such progenitors remind us that "the impulse to censor cultural product that makes us uncomfortable is a fascist one that should always be resisted."[12] Yet also, as Greenfield's work suggests, there is not only more to be said about racial stereotypes, but there are also many other nuances within the inherent complexities surrounding such socio-political issues that can and need to be addressed.

Perhaps the most significant way that Greenfield's work brings the ongoing debates forward is to keenly investigate the tropes and failures of what Tara McPherson has coined a "lenticular logic," or a scenario in which "histories or images that are actually co-present get presented… so that only one of the images (or histories) can be seen at a time." The certain danger in this scenario (which is here referring to race issues in the South, i.e. black vs. white, that also can be perceived in a much broader sense), is that it "represses connection, allowing whiteness to float free from blackness, denying the long historical imbrications of racial markers and racial meaning…"[13] Greenfield's work, which may be seen in terms of polar opposites on first glance, is on second and third glance suggesting that such imbrications are indeed significant. This is work that conscientiously and confidently delves into the gray areas that many of us tend to naturally or habitually glaze over. The history of blackface, like the history of Negrobilia and other racist apparatus, is a history, albeit an uncomfortable one, that is part of the vast, sublime gradations that make up a large part of who we are. Greenfield's particular use of blackface performance, a genre that has influenced a range of other genres in American popular culture that include everything from literature and film to advertising and Rap, brings a continuously contemporary set of weighty issues to the fore, positing it within conceptual practice as firmly as the realm of Pop. This work, as it explores the depths of the areas between the black and white, the back and forth, the humor and horror, in the hub of the wheelin' and turnin', not only reminds us of the injustices of the past, but that this history, like it or not, is ours.

1. *Jump Jim Crow* chorus as performed by Thomas Dartmouth Rice (aka "Daddy Rice"), Bowery Theatre, New York, 1832. From John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 59-60.

2. Strausbaugh, *Black Like You* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006).

3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lenticular_print

4. *Topsy and Eva* bombed as a silent film in 1927, but the Duncan sisters continued the act in various forms until Rosetta's death in 1959. See John Sullivan, *Topsy and Eva Play Vaudeville* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2000)

5. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was another popular theatrical production played by T.D. Rice at the Bowery Theater in 1954. See Strausbaugh, *Black Like You* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 160.

6. See Manthia Diawara, *The Blackface Stereotype* (blackculturalstudies.org, 1998).

7. David R. Roediger, "*I Came for the Art*: Exposing Whiteness and Imagining Nonwhite Spaces," in Tyler Stallings, *Whiteness: A Wayward Construction* (Laguna Beach: Laguna Art Museum, 2003).

8. Strausbaugh, *Black Like You* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 37-38.

9. ibid, 275.

10. Henry Louis Gates in "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," *The International Review of African American Art* vol. 14, no. 3 (Hampton: Hampton University Museum, 1997), 3.

11. For an expanded discussion of the use of Negrobilia (by most of the artists mentioned here) in art, see *The International Review of African American Art* vol. 14, no. 3 (Hampton: Hampton University Museum, 1997).

12. Strausbaugh, *Black Like You* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 31.

13. Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

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Ms. Joyce has curated numerous exhibitions at the Luckman Gallery, where programs feature contemporary art in a variety of media by emerging to established artists who are local, national and international. The Luckman is also committed to presenting works by Los Angeles' large and fertile generation of mid-career artists, which include critically acclaimed solo exhibitions with catalogs for Patrick Nickell, Marnie Weber, Todd Gray and Daniel Douke. She has organized several nationally touring exhibitions, including: *Kim Jones: A Retrospective* (2006-08) (co-curated with Sandra Firmin); *Sean Duffy: The Grove* (2007) (co-curated with John Spiak); *Hew Locke: House of Cards* (co-curated with Helena Reckitt) (2004); *Charles Garabedian Works on Paper: 1965 – 2001* (co-curated with Nevin Schreiner) (2003-2004); *Patrick Nickell: Built for Speed.*

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