



The Color of Context by [Nikki Darling](#)

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What is much more important than any of these behaviorist or “moral” approaches are all the stories, poems, and testimonies, the theoretical and political works, that document the struggle to achieve embodied self-determination for individuals and for groups. What we need are poems that interrogate the world of pronouns, open up possibilities of language and life; forms of politics that support and encourage self-affirmation.

— Judith Butler

EVEN THE NONWHITE ARTISTS are kind of white. These are Sesshu Foster’s words in his September 7 review of “Made in L.A. 2014,” the Hammer Museum’s biennial art show, for the blog [East Los Angeles Dirigible Air Transport Lines](#). Foster is critiquing institutionalized racism within the established art world — a lack of artists of color on the walls and behind the scenes, a non-representative reflection of the city’s racial topography, and most importantly, a laissez-faire attitude toward solving these problems. Foster’s outrage, though, seems to hinge on apathy, a shrug-of-the-shoulders sort of acceptance of an unacceptable problem. He frames his critique as a poem, excusing each slight with a sarcastic “it’s okay”:

so it’s okay that all the official museums in l.a. show white art all the time

it’s okay because you can go to the “california african american museum” if you want to see art by POC or you can drive to long beach to the museum of latin american art, or the l.a. county museum of art probably has one or two frida kahlos or diego riveras and some great precolombian ceramics

so it’s okay

if the all the other museums like lacma and moca and etc. show white art at all times

asco had it's one lacma show "asco: the elite of the obscure, a retrospective 1972 – 1987" on exhibition from sept. 2011 to december 2011, so it's okay

they had that one

one is good, now we can go back to our regularly scheduled programming

like after a public service announcement

To be clear, Foster and I are in agreement that issues of gender, race, and sexuality need to be addressed in a more urgent manner, one in which larger conversations about capitalism, representation, class, and access come into play. In other words, a nuanced conversation must be had about a complicated issue. More artists of color, women and queer artists must be represented, integrated into the curatorial process, and given positions of power at these institutions.

What is complicated is how to make these changes within an established system — especially when the issue gets scrambled with unfounded, careless, and harmful claims.

How did Foster conclude that there were only two nonwhite artists in "Made in L.A."? Did he receive a museum guide that highlighted work made by artists of color? Did he see pictures of them online? Did he decide that the most ethnic sounding surnames were indicators of race? And once he had this magic number, what criteria did he use to determine that they are "kind of white"? These are serious questions.

Foster is essentially saying, "I didn't see art that explicitly addressed race," to which I would reply, "Perhaps you weren't looking in the right way." What makes his critique weak is that it doesn't take into account the role that abstraction and conceptualism can play. Lack of literal representation can act as its own critique. Artists often create a "lack" to bring attention to — not ignore — what is, in fact, lacking. Foster is right, however, to assume that this "lack" is often unintentional. Too much credit is given to artists or institutions for alluding to issues or problems within the art world without actually challenging these frameworks. [Joe Scanlon](#) and his vague, flimsy "it's complicated" defense of the "Donelle Wolford" project at the Whitney Biennial comes to mind.

"Made in L.A.," however, addressed the issue of race in one important way: by including artists of color and letting them display as they pleased. In essence, not expecting artists of color to produce work that explicitly addresses identity, not enforcing a double standard — being pressured to address race is something white artists don't have to contend with.

Any art made by an artist of color and brought into the Institution is automatically a radical work, by virtue of its authorship, regardless of how these artists define themselves or address issues of race and identity in their practice. That authorship, however, need not always be the focus of the work. It is for the artist to decide, not the audience — otherwise we risk policing identity and reaffirming marginalization. If Foster's beef is with these institutions and not with the artists themselves, why single out any artists as being "kind of white" at all?

To dismiss the artists of color in this show, to objectify them without bothering to find out how many are in fact included (11), and to not even name them — [Juan Capistrán](#), [Danielle Dean](#), [Lecia Dole-Recio](#), [Magdalena Suarez Frimkess](#), [Jibade-Khalil Huffman](#), [Devin Kenny](#), [Jennifer Moon](#), [Tala Madani](#), [Gabriel Kuri](#), [Harsh Patel](#), [Wu Tsang](#) — erases and undermines their work. In an effort to condemn the way in which the curators chose to include artists of color, and how many they included, Foster enacts the very thing he seeks to critique. It's a logical fallacy in the way American Apparel's "We're not politically correct — But we have good ethics." billboard is. It's simply not possible; one quite literally negates the other.

What Foster does is reinforce the idea that, in order to achieve a level of relevance in the art world, marginalized artists must comply with a set of unspoken rules. In the same way that women writers like Elizabeth Wurtzel have been attacked for failing to live up to an unspoken definition of feminism — she is narcissistic and petulant — so too have artists of color felt a pervasive pressure to address certain issues of identity lest their work be ignored. Is the goal to include more artists of color in the city's museums, or is it to make room for a certain type of artist of color, while ignoring the ethnicity of others who don't outwardly fit this mold?

Another problem with this way of thinking is that it doesn't allow art to unfold naturally as a process of discovery. Often something that winds up being about race is discovered after many nights in a studio painting an umbrella in the rain, or making a sculpture out of street debris and plastic flowers. One doesn't always know what she or he is trying to say when one sets out to say it. This is what art does: it investigates, pokes, prods, and jostles, loosens the collective consciousness just enough to let new ideas in. Or it breaks the mind open. It is hardly ever a concrete point. It is a series of many points explored and contradicted, often speaking to each other across works. By dismissing two artists of color in the show as "kind of white" and not even recognizing the other nine, Foster denies them their potential to create a diverse and evolving oeuvre. This dismissal cheats Devin Kenny, a very young artist, of the opportunity to say what will possibly become his defining work in 30 years. It doesn't allow Jibade-Khalil Huffman the space to develop his own way to present work within mainstream infrastructures. It says, "hurry up, know now, arrive, show, sell and bleed."

While Foster's critique of the Hammer's biennial raises important and necessary concerns about institutionalized racism, it also doesn't take into account the contributions of other important people of color working in the Los Angeles art world, such as Rita Gonzalez, a curator at LACMA. It leaves out Jamillah James, assistant curator at the Hammer; Aram Moshayedi and Lily Gonzalez, also Hammer curators; and Gladys-Katherina Hernando who runs the online Light & Wire Gallery and is currently a curatorial assistant at MOCA. Foster further dismisses Rita Gonzalez's groundbreaking exhibition "Phantom Sightings" — and shows such as the Asco retrospective — as tokenism, as that "one show" or "that show."

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On the contrary, however, “Phantom Sightings” actively and openly fought to destabilize these sorts of “one show” myths. From the accompanying “Phantom Sightings” pamphlet:

The artists in [“Phantom Sightings”] use strategies that, at times, emphasize concepts and ideas rather than the art itself; they also resist single affiliations and simple answers to complex questions, including these raised by local and global politics as well as by cutting-edge art and popular culture. In this spirit the exhibition resists a linear thematic progression. We urge you to encounter each artwork on it’s own terms. And to come away with more questions.

I can imagine Foster reading this as a sort of deus ex machina, as an attempt to throw a bunch of artists of color under one umbrella and call it a show without having to explain the thematic connections between the work, other than the race of its creators. Foster then argues back against himself, however. You can’t both want the race to appear and disappear. This was, in fact, “Phantom Sightings” thematic G-spot. How should the show exist conceptually? *That* was the important question raised by “Phantom Sightings.” The show was both a critique of specialized shows around race and identity and a celebration of nonwhite artists pushing back against the trope.

This is not to say that artists of color who explicitly address race are less transgressive. Their work is necessary and a vital part of the art world, a voice of disruption in a monologue of uniformity and blind privilege. The work of Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle routinely confronts viewers with the ugliness of racism; Kara Walker’s show at the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn this past July, “A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby,” exposed via Instagram the crass unawareness of the white privileged gaze. Foster is right that the voices and faces of these artists are still overwhelmingly absent.

There are, however, other ways in which race is present in a work by an artist of color, even if it is not explicitly addressed. For example, [Lecia Dole-Recio](#), a self-described “gay, Mexican, goth,” paints bright geometric shapes in dynamic color combinations. She cuts and reconfigures, creating a third space of dimensionality, where the eye can get lost and wander, where things are inherently more abstract. One could make a case that Dole-Recio’s practice investigates the notion of what sits beneath a surface, what each layer means, and how color shifts when juxtaposed with an intrusion or, in this case, a cut out. That’s the point: there are many ways to interpret Dole-Recio’s work. As an artist who acknowledges the multiple ways in which she herself can be classified and understood by labels, this freedom to create something that is not easily understood, explained, justified, or made apparent at first glance could be one of the things that excites Dole-Recio about being an artist — the freedom to inhabit ambiguity on the canvas.

By addressing “Phantom Sightings” as “that one show,” and the 11 artists of color in “Made in L.A.” as “kind of white,” Foster traps these artists in a cycle of continuous failure in which these questions of racial ambiguity or frustration can never be explored or addressed. Artist Adrian Piper, whose work historically deals with the ambiguities of race, raised important questions about representation and the pigeonholing of artists of color in 2012 when she pulled out of the “Radical Presence” show at Grey Art Gallery, claiming that it marginalized African-American artists. In response she “retired” from being black. Piper’s work confronts the history of African Americans passing as white. If Adrian Piper were 30 years younger, I wonder how Foster might

respond to her work had it been in “Made in L.A.” Would he have even noticed it? Would she be one of his elusive two artists of color? And if Foster himself were included in the show, what would his own name, Foster, have signaled about his ethnicity?

What is to be made of an artist such as Dawn Kasper, who was not included in “Made in L.A.,” but has a complicated racial identity? As a Colombian woman adopted as a child by a white family and raised in rural Virginia, how would Foster define her? Kasper’s name doesn’t signal her race, and the body of her work would never be automatically thought of as following a racial narrative. The magical and electric quality of Kasper’s work, however, engulfs you, slowly pulling you into a moment of anxiety and uncertainty, one in which the self feels jostled and uprooted. The result is a loss of control and autonomy in which outside forces, beyond one’s own power, propel a further fracture of identity.

I would argue that conceptually Kasper does deal with the issue of race, albeit from the perspective of someone discovering her story as she grows, that of an artist struggling to balance two identities — a reading that requires looking into Kasper’s past as well as looking at her entire oeuvre and spending time with it. I wonder how much time Foster spent with each work that he dismissed, with each artist he arbitrarily decided was not Brown enough. The simple truth is Kasper must use the tools of her experience if her work is to remain honest and authentic. If her tools are the memories and experiences to which she had access while growing up, possibly those of a middle-class white girl, then what Foster has issue with is actually something Kasper cannot control. In other words, he would condemn Kasper’s work for not being a certain kind of Brown, which would be dangerous and theoretically unethical, just as his words erased nine very real artists, for any readers who took his words as truth.

The 11 artists of color who did participate in the “Made in L.A.” show deserve to be celebrated on their own terms and not corralled into a pen of “kind of white,” especially by a writer whose own powerful and important oeuvre, to use Foster’s math and logic, has probably meant something to one or two(?) of those 11 artists.

At the very least, Foster has sparked a long overdue conversation and, by my own reasoning, can engage with the institution however he sees fit, whether all parties involved agree or not. In the meantime, with regards to Foster’s claim that “it’s okay that the white artists who are queer artists don’t have anything to do with POC (people of color),” I recommend the artwork of Wu Tsang.

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