

Grief and Grievance Honors the Weight and Wake of Racial Violence

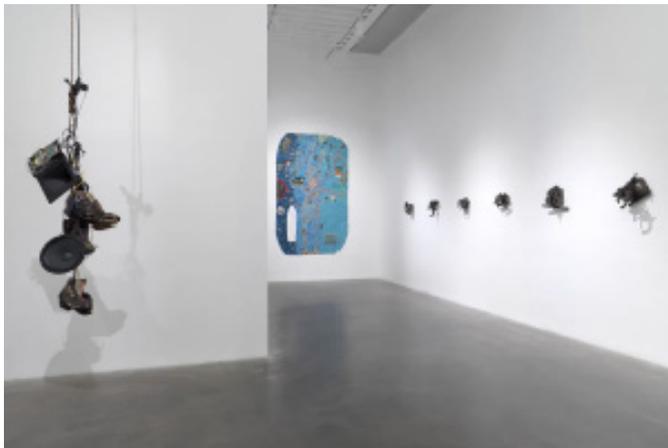
A prophetic document of our time, the New Museum exhibition calls attention to the weight of Black death not because it is new or salacious but because it remains urgent.



by Rachell Morillo
March 9, 2021

Several days after first visiting *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, I am still catching my breath. Originally conceived by the late Okwui Enwezor for the New Museum, and presented with curatorial support from advisors Naomi Beckwith, Massimiliano Gioni, Glenn Ligon, and Mark Nash, the exhibition connects artists working in traditional and new media, across generations and cultural contexts, presenting works that speak of loss, commemoration, and mourning in Black communities in the face of white supremacy.

Realized and interpreted by friends and trusted colleagues of the esteemed curator— itself a commemorative act — the exhibition conjures a procession at a jazz funeral, each nook imbued with a melodic sense of homegoing. Moving from gallery to gallery, I feel as if I am eavesdropping, privy to conversations between some of the contemporary art world’s most venerated artists, gathered here to mourn, celebrate, and think together.



Works by Kevin Beasley (left), Howardena Pindell (center), and Melvin Edwards on view in *Grief and Grievance* (photo by Dario Lasagni)

On the fourth floor, Rashid Johnson’s verdant, buzzing “Antoine’s Organ” (2016) is the gravitational center of a room focused on abstraction, spatial politics, and memory. The grid evident in the scaffolding of Johnson’s monumental installation reverberates throughout the room, cropping up in Mark Bradford’s “Untitled” (2020) which, through its abstract topography, signals the 1965 Watts Rebellion in Los Angeles. Jack Whitten’s gut-wrenching mixed-media painting “Birmingham” (1964),

as well as a selection of three layered and bustling paintings by Julie Mehretu, likewise serve as memorials to monumental losses of Black lives, referencing the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham and the 2018 Grenfell Tower fire in London, respectively. Collectively these works ask what it means to represent grief and those mourned while shrouding their likenesses, opting instead for the blur of their layers.

Works on the third floor are similarly invested in fragmentation and abstraction but shift their focus from the scale of the built environment to that of the body. In one gallery, Melvin Edwards's *Lynch Fragments* (1960s–present), Kevin Beasley's "Strange Fruit (Pair 1)" (2015), and Diamond Stingly's "Entryways" (2016) reference myriad histories of unrelenting brutality against Black bodies, national and personal. Yet each rejects any over-reliance on images of those vulnerable bodies to evoke in the viewer a sense of indignation at that violence. Found sculptural objects become evocative replacements, still able to speak to the residue of life and the impact of losing it.

Conceptual interplay continues on the second floor where works by Daniel LaRue Johnson, Sable Elyse Smith, and Jennie C. Jones freestyle on notions of bars and freedom. At the center of their shared gallery is a remaking of Nari Ward's "Peace Keeper" (1995/2020), colossal in both size and impact. Beyond incorporating literal bars, the caged, tarred and feathered hearse invokes the terror of mass incarceration, police brutality, and criminalization of Black life, so central to many of the works in the exhibition.

And the conversations continue on and on: works by Ellen Gallagher, Kara Walker, and Lorna Simpson huddle, speaking of myths and mythmaking. Dawoud Bey and Charles Gaines chime in to honor the legacy of Black churches and their role in facilitating both mourning and political movements. Tiona Nekkia Mclodden, Terry Adkins, and Garrett Bradley, meanwhile, remind us of the importance of archival work and memory, that the body and our objects also remember.

These conversations are not exclusive to the galleries they are housed in; each space riffs on another, from floor to floor, eschewing a singular, unified voice. Yet collectively, these conversations manage to speak coherently to the dimensions of grief.

Remarkably, although persistent, the steady call to mourning never feels overwhelming, due in great part to the inclusion of several artworks whose evocative audio set a beat for the exhibition. Johnson's "organ" reverberates throughout the fourth floor, while works by Gaines, Khalil Joseph, and Okwui Opokwosili fill the rest of the floors with steadying hymns and spirituals. Opokwosili's "Poor People's TV Room" (2017) astonishes in particular — the power of her vocals still audible

three galleries over. Referencing the Women's War in Nigeria and the even more recent kidnapping of young Nigerian Girls from Boko Haram, the installation speaks to the importance of song and physical action in mourning as well as protest, its ability to evoke the body and movement without flattening the experience of performance mesmerizing.

Themes of abstraction, corporeality, and ascension likewise coalesce in Arthur Jafa's "Love is the Message, The Message is Death" (2016) which serves as an excellent coda to an expansive exhibition. The video's fast pace and gospel vocals from Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam" shake the room, leaving me no choice but to surrender to the ride, to embrace all of these feelings as clear and present and true.

Grief and Grievance calls our attention to the weight of Black death not because it is new or salacious but because it remains urgent. As Enwezor writes in his forceful opening text, "With the media's normalization of white nationalism, recent years have made clear that there is a new urgency to assess the role that artists, through works of art, have played to illuminate the searing contours of the American body politic." Black people in the United States are perpetually in mourning, facing a constant threat of violence and potential loss due to insidious narratives of white grievance, which have morphed from the night rides of the Klan to the epidemic of police violence. Conceptualized before this particular moment of collective grief, the exhibition rings prophetic. It is a succinct document of our time: the age of Black Lives Matter and Donald Trump, Obama and Charleston, shifts towards equity and constant retaliation. Yet, what is perhaps most exciting is that it marks a beginning, and feels destined to birth new scholarship and artwork that does not shy away from grief, instead speaks to the process as a moulting.