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Only Skin Deep

How American photography creates and reinforces concepts of race and national identity

By Silja J.A. Talvi

The image around the corner stops visitors in their tracks.

Museumgoers come face to face with a hooded member of the Ku Klux Klan. An oversized photographic portrait, frightening on the one hand, disturbingly matter-of-fact on the other. The pointed and carefully stitched Klan hood is a starched, bright white; one eye peers out, surrounded by a halo of light skin.

This distant gaze comes from a person who looks to be no older than 30 years old. A cold stare? A lost look? A hint of sadness, perhaps? Visitors cease talking and gather around at a careful distance. Jarringly, it becomes apparent: The person under the hood is a woman.

"Klanswoman," a 1990 cibachrome print of a KKK Grand Kaliff is Andres Serrano's contribution to *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* a traveling exhibit most recently on display at the Seattle Art Museum.

In this groundbreaking photographic collection, nothing is as it initially seems. The powers of the individual photos are indeed in the eye of the beholder. But the collective power of the assembled images speaks to us as a society, raising questions about why we cling to the concept of "race" and pointing out that bigotry still lives and breathes in our midst, fueled in no small part by the media images that saturate Americans' day-to-day experiences.

Yet *Only Skin Deep* is emphatically *not* an exhibit about the evils of racism. A provocative photographic collection, the show bypasses easy targets and speaks complex truths about the construction of nation, race, selfhood and ethnic identity.

"We need to get away from the view that you make [art] shows about either racist depictions or triumphalist counter-narratives about anti-racist heroes," says co-curator Coco Fusco from her home in Brooklyn. "Nobody who is sensitive to subtleties is interested in such a simplistic [breakdown] of racial images."



Andres Serrano photographing a Klanswoman in Georgia,
by Richard Sudden

THE PROJECT

Fusco, a professor of visual arts at Columbia University, and Brian Wallis, chief curator at the International Center of Photography, embarked on this ambitious project three years ago, collecting more than 300 images for the exhibit and the accompanying 416-page catalogue, published by Harry N. Abrams Inc. Alongside the work of less celebrated artists, the curators included photographers such as Ansel Adams, Edward S. Curtis, Bruce Davidson, Dorothea Lange, Nikki S. Lee, Robert Mapplethorpe, Man Ray, Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol and Carrie Mae Weems.

To help viewers digest the material, the curators structured the exhibit around five themes: “Looking Up/Looking Down” explores the concept of racial hierarchies; “All for One/One for All” challenges stereotypes of the ‘ideal’ American; “Humanized/Fetishized” examines how groups and cultures have been represented as peculiar, bizarre or desirable; “Assimilate/Impersonate” compares subjects who possessed the proper “melting pot” characteristics and those mocked for entertainment value; and “Progress/Regress” demonstrates the connections between pre- and post-industrial landscapes and the concepts of authenticity and civilization.

With photographs that date back as far as 1840, *Only Skin Deep* encompasses an array of visual genres and styles, including photojournalism, anthropological photography, surrealist imagery, pictorialism, social documentary, video and computer imagery, portraiture and even private-collection erotica. Photos of lynchings and unflinching depictions of slavery and genocide hang alongside seemingly benign sexualized images, creating a jarring collision of pleasure and pain, fantasy and reality.

“The act of visualizing and looking at racial difference continues to seduce and enthrall American viewers,” Fusco writes in the catalogue’s introductory essay. “The sheer volume of racial imagery that has been and continues to be produced for private consumption, public education and entertainment, erotic stimulation, and aesthetic appreciation signals that America’s attraction to race exceeds the boundaries of a discussion of institutional racism. In that sense, it is possible and indeed probable that we like to see race even if we don’t consider ourselves racist.”

Fusco intends to, as she puts it, “break racial logic down” and thereby make the case that racial imagery should be a serious field of inquiry in the worlds of art and photography. The power and lure of such imagery is undeniable, whether in the form of *Life* magazine’s 1941 diagrammed photo illustration “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese,” or *Time* magazine’s infamously darkened O.J. Simpson cover photo. Palpable, as well, is the outrage and fascination the viewer experiences when looking at the 1996 photo by Max Becher and Andrea Robbins, “German Indians: Campfire,” which depicts a European subculture that romanticizes Native Americans à la Hollywood westerns.

The comment cards posted on the bulletin board at the Seattle showing indicate that the exhibit has gotten under viewers’ skin. Hundreds of handwritten comments speak to the heartfelt impact the exhibit has had on viewers’ understanding of race and racism.

“It’s about the images,” Fusco explains. “If I give you a million explanations, you won’t want to look closely enough at what you’re seeing.”