

Chronogram

“This Tender, Fragile Thing” at The School in Kinderhook

The Latest Exhibition Explores Our Legacy Civil Rights & the Slipperiness of Social Progress

By Sparrow | Last Updated: 02/01/2022 12:02 pm



An exhibition view of “This Tender, Fragile Thing” at The School in Kinderhook.

“A thing of beauty is a joy for ever,” quoth John Keats, but each beautiful object was created at a particular juncture of history. “This Tender, Fragile Thing” at The School in Kinderhook directly addresses historical struggle through art. One text piece by Hank Willis Thomas announces: “HISTORY IS PRESENT.” The show continues through April 30.

Who knew that the Republican Party once campaigned against lynching? A 1920 poster from the Women’s Division of the Republican Party announces: “Lynch Law Must Go,” and continues: “Vote for Harding and Coolidge and Help to Forever Stamp Out Lynching.”



Michael BPP (Black Panther Party), Barkley L. Hendricks, 1971, oil and acrylic on linen canvas, 48 x 34 inches © Barkley L. Hendricks. Courtesy of the Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

“This Tender, Fragile Thing” includes fragile leaflets and posters handed out at demonstrations decades ago, which somehow survived. Some of these pieces are important historically, some are visually enticing, some are both. One poster from 1971 incorporates Christian imagery, announcing a “Revival for Survival” in Cairo, Illinois, led by the Rev. Charles Korn. A rather geometric drawing depicts three white crosses—two of them tilted, one lying face down—on a hill labeled “Amerikkkan Justice.”

From the moment I heard of the Black Panthers, I loved them: leather jackets, berets, afros, submachineguns, and fearless pride. (Nowadays they are best known as the inspiration for the hit Marvel movie.) Numerous pieces of Panther ephemera appear at The School, including flyers, photographs, and three vintage copies of their newspaper. Over and over we see their symbol—a lithe, ebony stalking feline. “We demand land, bread, education...” is an (undated) Panther poster in black ink on red paper. In the center, a confident woman in a striped dress holds a book in one hand and a revolver in the other. She looks like she has just made a decision. Four vignettes around her represent dangers to African-Americans: prison, lynching, a taunting cop, an electric chair. She strides forward into a new day.



History is Past, Past is Present, Hank Willis Thomas, 2017, lenticular, 57 x 43 inches (print) © Hank Willis Thomas. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

As we mark the anniversary of the January 6 attack on the US Capitol, it's nice to remember that revolutionaries in America once fought against racism. The title of this show, which was suggested by artist Carlos Vega, refers to the tenuousness of social progress. "These works create linkages to the past while referencing present-day civil rights movements, showing the fragility in how social change is created and preserved," associate director Jaci Auletto wrote in an email.

The School, which was founded in 2013, is a project of the Jack Shainman Gallery; it fills a former high school in Kinderhook. One purpose of The School, fittingly, is education—in particular, instruction that’s missing from a typical American curriculum. Critical race theory has certainly not been banned here. This is a vast exhibition showcasing over 50 artists, and everything is worth seeing. There are pieces by Kara Walker, Glenn Ligon, Carrie Mae Weems, and Margaret Bourke-White.



All Power to the People, Hank Willis Thomas, 2015, fiberglass and aluminum, 36 inches diameter © Hank Willis Thomas. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Contemporary works pick up the thread of 1960s militancy. Rodney Ewing’s hand-colored silkscreen (2020) is a portrait of Bobby Seale, cofounder of the Black Panthers. Melvin Edwards’ 2019 abstract welded steel sculptures, suggest, through menacing chains, the legacy of slavery. Arm Peace (2019) by Nick Cave—featured on this month’s cover—shows the radiant power of a raised fist.

Rashid Johnson's *Stay Black and Die* (2005) consists of those words spraypainted on a six-foot wide piece of felt. Dread Scott's 2015 banner reads: "A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday." (Scott's own name is part of the gruesome irony of this piece.) A 2020 photograph by Ada Trillo shows a demonstrator in a black COVID mask with a sign: "I Want to Matter." One undertone of these works is the power of words—often simple words—to convey fury.



Peaches, Liz, Tanika, Elaine, Carrie Mae Weems, 1988, silver print, 15 x 15 inches (image), 20 3/4 x 16 5/8 x 1 3/4 inches (each, framed) © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.