

HYPERALLERGIC

An Unflinching Meditation on the Violence Perpetrated Against Black Americans

In addition to the centuries of trauma that artists are exploring and attempting to reconcile with contemporary reality, there is also an underlying solidarity that weaves itself into the fabric of *Non-fiction* at the Underground Museum.

Hyunjee Nicole Kim - November 11, 2016



Marion Palfi, “Wife of a Lynch Victim” (1949), and Robert Gober, “Sleeping Man/Hanging Man” (1989), installation view of ‘Non-fiction’ at The Underground Museum (image courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photo by Justin Lubliner)

LOS ANGELES — When I visited The Underground Museum in the summer, I began my visit in the backyard garden. Purple is the color of warmer months in southern California when the jacaranda blooms, falls, and carpets the pavement. Purple is also the name of this

patio garden, chosen by one of the museum's founders who died last year, artist Noah Davis, and where sweet-smelling lavender and thyme, petunias, and wisteria creep and grow tall. Monumental, seashell-like sculptures by Lianne Barnes mingle among the plants. A nubby textile that co-founder Karon Davis brought was spread atop the surface of a picnic table, which was also strewn with board games available to play.



The Purple patio garden at the Underground Museum (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The Underground Museum on Washington Boulevard has been around since 2012 — a collection of storefronts grafted together by Davis and first known as the “Inner City Avant-Garde.” The museum, now in a three-year partnership with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), is devoted to exhibiting quality work to the predominantly black and Latino populations of Arlington Heights, a neighborhood underserved by the arts community. Before his passing, Davis conceived of several exhibitions featuring works from MOCA’s permanent collection. *Non-fiction* opened at The Underground Museum in March 2016 and will run for a year.



Installation view of 'Non-fiction' at The Underground Museum (image courtesy The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photo by Justin Lubliner)

Upon re-entering the exhibition space from the garden, I noticed the jarring “Whites Only” sign affixed to one of the bathroom doors. The gallery associate, Justen Beans, told me that a white patron, happening upon the complementary “Colored Only” sign, noted that it was the first time that he had ever been denied access to a space. These historical markers from less than a hundred years ago serve to remind the audience how, explicitly or implicitly, we are made to feel welcome in certain environments based on our marked differences. *Non-fiction* itself is a meditation on the racial violence perpetrated against black Americans.

The exhibition stretches between two rooms, and a visitor will likely first encounter David Hammons’s “In the Hood (Gray)” (2016), which hangs from the ceiling instead of being nailed to the wall, as the original from 1993 is usually installed. In its own container unit, backlit, the hood floats like a ghost. The far left wall of the gallery is covered from floor to ceiling in Robert Gober’s wallpaper “Hanging Man/Sleeping Man” (1986). The alternating pattern of white man sleeping and black man hanging is interrupted by a single photograph of a woman, the wife of lynching victim Caleb Hill, Jr., photographed by Marion Palfi in 1949. I saw Gober’s wallpaper at his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art and, considered on

its own, the work is an impactful and studied consideration of racial violence in the US. When grouped with the other works here, a historical specificity is introduced, linking one tragedy after another in a horrific trajectory. Nearby, a Kara Walker etching presents a nightmarish sexual fantasy of the antebellum era, and a Kerry James Marshall sculpture, “As Seen on TV” (2002), filters the memory of witnessing the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, on television.

In the adjoining gallery, Deana Lawson’s photograph “The Garden, Gemena, DR Congo” (2015) illustrates a naked couple in the middle of a verdant landscape. The couple resembles Adam and Eve, featuring black actors placed in an African landscape. Lawson reinforces and complicates our understanding of Western art history. Marshall’s “Heirloom and Accessories” (2002) face Lawson — three works of layered found photographs that require the viewer to spend time contemplating what is being presented: inherited objects that carry weight, family legacies, and the sordid history of lynching and racial violence.



David Hammons, “In the Hood (Gray)” (2016), installation view of ‘Non-fiction’ (image courtesy) The Underground Museum, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photo by Justin Lubliner)



Henry Taylor, “Warning Shots not required” (2011), installation view of ‘Non-fiction’ at The Underground Museum (image courtesy The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photo by Justin Lubliner)

In addition to the centuries of intergenerational trauma that the featured artists are exploring and attempting to reconcile with contemporary reality, there is also an underlying solidarity that weaves itself into the fabric of *Non-fiction*. Local school groups, of all ages, are often invited to tour the exhibition, which features challenging and topical themes resonant in Arlington Heights and wider Los Angeles. “Warning shots not required” (2011) by Henry Taylor, a longtime Los Angeles-based painter, immediately conjures visions from the steady stream of news regarding institutionalized violence against black and brown bodies: a crowd of women gather in the background, providing a wall of support behind a muscled man with an Afro; a black four-legged animal gallops across the surface, which encompasses many planes.

The political climate in this country is only growing more volatile and divisive. *Non-fiction*’s extended run will proffer a perspective that many will attempt to repress and smother, providing a necessary reminder of what to fight for and against in the devastating weeks ahead.



Installation view of 'Non-fiction' at The Underground Museum (image courtesy The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photo by Justin Lubliner)

Non-fiction continues at *The Underground Museum* (3508 W Washington Blvd, Los Angeles) through March 2017.