

HYPERALLERGIC

At the Brooklyn Museum, New Research on Lynching in America Dialogues with the Art

The Legacy of Lynching is a collaboration between the museum and the nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative, presenting racial histories we've long been asleep to.

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Sanford Biggers, "Blossom" (2007), installation view (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

"Our silence is creating a burden," said civil rights attorney Bryan Stevenson at the launch of *The Legacy of Lynching: Confronting Racial Terror in America* at the Brooklyn Museum. "We've got to do something to get closer to freedom, and that means talking about some things we haven't talked about." The exhibit, which runs through October 8, is a collaboration between the museum and Stevenson's nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), and it reckons with racial histories we've long been asleep to.

For decades, Stevenson and his EJI staff have battled racial bias in death row and juvenile life imprisonment cases, operating from the racially freighted territory of Montgomery, Alabama. In recent years, they embarked on a project to document unprosecuted racial violence — or “terror lynchings” — in the 12 most active lynching states in the US. It’s an effort to commemorate the history behind the racial injustices they see daily in the courtroom. The organization has begun to erect public markers at lynching sites, with volunteers patiently shoveling soil from each into mason jars for a museum to come. They’re also designing an expansive permanent memorial to the lynching victims discovered by their research.



Bryan Stevenson introduces the impact of racial terror lynching on the patterns of the Great Migration in an EJI video that tells family stories of the descendants of lynching victims.

In July, EJI got together with the Brooklyn Museum to present this urgent history in an exhibition that strives to wake us to this country’s racial past. At *The Legacy of Lynching*, video installations tell the family stories of lynching victims. Archival works from the black art

world’s heavy-hitters — Sanford Biggers, Kara Walker, Dread Scott, Glenn Ligon, Titus Kaphar, Theaster Gates, Jacob Lawrence, Mark Bradford, Elizabeth Catlett, and others — trace the unseen links from slavery to Jim Crow-era violence to the crushing carceral policies that confront black America today. Writing on the experience of blackness, poet Ntozake Shange puts it this way: “We are the unconscious of the entire Western world.” This is the collection’s most important contribution: It lays bare the pain latent in that unconscious — at least America’s corner of it.

Dominating the museum’s lobby, on the way into the galleries, is “Blossom” (2007), a Sanford Biggers sculpture of a tree embedded with a player piano. Haltingly plucking out a version of “Strange Fruit” (the anti-lynching standard popularized by Billie Holiday) it makes a fitting introduction to the systems of trauma, injustice, and resistance coursing through the exhibit. The piano damages the lynching tree, but it’s also damaged by it. Its bench, kicked over like a bar stool in a saloon, summons both protest and the efforts to silence it. The tree is both menace and long-suffering witness.

In the first gallery stands a glowing digital map of 4,000-plus lynchings that took place across those 12 states between 1877 and 1950 — 800 more than the states themselves previously reported. Selections from Jacob Lawrence’s vibrant migration series mirror the map across the room, underscoring the reality that racial terror, far more than industrialization, drove the massive geographic movements of African Americans during the nation’s postbellum period. So many US citizens were refugees in their own country.



Installation view of the Equal Justice Initiative's map for Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror

The visual experience of this data was stunning when the map first appeared online this past June. But on the gallery wall, it felt incongruously empirical and a little clumsy. Far more compelling is the artwork itself. Like Biggers, the bulk of the artists on view operate in a postmodernist mode of black representation. Against

the Afrocentric realism of the Civil Rights era, they pose layers of irony; against the trope of black invisibility, they raise the modern specter of the hypervisible black body.

There's some mordant play in this dialogue between old and new. A performance still of Dread Scott from "On the Impossibility of a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide" (2014) shows the artist grimacing against the stream of a firehose — like the ones police used against Civil Rights protesters — with his hands raised in the now-famous 'hands up, don't shoot' pose of Black Lives Matter. The combination of images insists we understand a continuum of state violence against black citizens from Birmingham to Ferguson, to whatever comes next.

Other works confront us with a lacerating irony. Kara Walker's ghastly diorama of steel cutouts, "Burning African Village Play Set with Big House and Lynching" (2006), dramatizes a white vision of blackness: violent, exaggerated, hypersexual. A dizzying tableau of weapons wielded, belles protected, and black bodies assailed, the piece has the odd effect of skewering and serving its stereotypes at once. It's this phenomenon that makes Walker's work brilliant, but also stimulating nearly to the point of nausea.



Kara Walker, "Burning African Village Play Set with Big House and Lynching" (2006) installation view, with performance stills by Dread Scott in the background

In *The Black Interior*, poet and essayist Elizabeth Alexander, who also spoke at the exhibit's opening, argues for an art that explores the inner life of black Americans, "far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is." One part of channeling this inner life, writes Alexander, involves healing from the

trauma of the past: "Regardless of the artist's intent, he or she is painting against a history of deformation and annihilation of the black body."

EJI's family histories bring into focus the inner lives of lynching victims' descendants. Like the artworks, the videos are layered — mediated with still photos, preserved news clippings, and private scenes in yards and woods and living rooms. It's a hint of that "interior" space Alexander describes.



Dora Dee Johnson, a woman whose grandfather was lynched in South Carolina in 1916, displays family photos of her grandparents.

The videos represent just a few of the lynchings EJI's researchers reported. One testimonial, of a woman whose grandfather was lynched in 1916 after a disagreement with a white store owner in South Carolina, illustrates the unbearable injustice of lynching and its crass economic underpinnings. Her family fled North, abandoning their land to local

whites. No charges were brought. Only recently did she return with EJI to memorialize her grandfather. Then there's Anthony Ray Hinton, wrongfully convicted of murder after a racist detective framed him. His story illustrates one of Stevenson's central claims: that the death penalty, with its disproportionate use against black defendants, descends directly from lynching. "They took off the white robe and put on the black robe," says Hinton. With EJI's legal assistance, he was exonerated after 30 years in prison.



A video interview with Anthony Ray Hinton, a man wrongfully convicted of murder after being framed by a racist detective, makes the link between lynching and the death penalty.

It's striking to find no explicit photographs — no horror images, for instance, of police handcuffs on lynching victims' wrists — at *The Legacy of Lynching*, a choice the curators made to approach the topic respectfully, according to the Brooklyn Museum website. It's a haunting absence, one that resists the

spectacle that has historically conferred lynching with such power. Yet *The Legacy of Lynching* comes at a time when subtlety barely perks the ears of those who most need to hear and understand. Today, resurgent white nationalists are rehearsing their own unsubtle symbols, from the casually placed noose to the tightly clutched torch. One wonders whether we need stronger historical images as a counterpoint.

The project of *The Legacy of Lynching* seems altogether different. "Escaping from the compelling power of the imagery around us is no small feat," writes Alexander. Mainstream American culture, she argues, demands stereotyped images of "real" blackness, even while it denies black pain. "Where is our abstract space, our space of the real/not real, our own unconscious?" The exhibit is exceptional for honoring this space, along with all the suffering that has accompanied it. EJI's work animates what racial violence really *did*. To borrow from C.G. Jung, it makes the unconscious conscious. The point now is not just to rehash the past, nor even to see how it dominates the present, but to reconcile the two and move toward a less broken future.

The Legacy of Lynching: Confronting Racial Terror in America continues at the Brooklyn Museum (200 Eastern Pkwy, Prospect Heights, Brooklyn) through October 8.