

HYPERALLERGIC

In Richmond, Tracing the “Great Force” of American Racism

Taking a cue from James Baldwin, an exhibition considers the way that American racism moves forward — from the arrival of the first ship carrying enslaved Africans to the insidious ways it has trickled through the capillaries of American culture.

Jasmine Weber December 19, 2019



Glenn Ligon, "Untitled (Speech/Crowd #3)" (detail) (2000), Silkscreen ink, oil stick, ink graphite, glue, and coal dust on paper (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

RICHMOND, VA — In August of 1619, 20 enslaved Africans arrived on the shore of Virginia, at Point Comfort. They had been captured from their homes, separated from their families and cultures, and forcibly traversed across the Atlantic Ocean to be exploited and

abused in a slave-trading system which would grow into the pervasive, centuries-long peculiar institution of bondage. In the last year of this decade, awareness of 1619 as a historical marker has risen in public consciousness as we collectively ruminate on the four centuries that have passed, hoping to better understand that which has changed, and the startling amount that has stayed the same.

The occasion of these first enslaved Africans arriving on the shore of the British colony of Virginia in 1619 is inextricable from the sociopolitical context of *Great Force*, a group exhibition at Virginia Commonwealth University's Institute for Contemporary Art. The exhibition's home is in Richmond, Virginia; once the capital of the confederacy, it became a domestic slave-trading center in the Antebellum age. Today, the population of Richmond is approximately 50% black — and the city remains highly segregated.



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, "Exposure (_2000921) Exposure (_2000877) Exposure (_2000915) Exposure (_2000930) Exposure (_2000917)" (2017), Archival pigment prints, set of five

At the crux of *Great Force*, curated by Amber Esseiva, is a 1965 quote by James Baldwin, from his 1965 *Ebony* Magazine essay, "The White Man's Guilt."

History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past ... On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.



Sedrick Chisom, "Photophobia" (2017), Acrylic, spray paint, and airbrush on paper mounted to strips of canvas

For the exhibition, Esseiva gathered a group of 24 artists at varying stages of their careers to consider the way that American racism moves forward with this great force — from the arrival of the first ship carrying enslaved Africans to today — and the more insidious ways it has trickled through the capillaries of American culture, manifesting in mass incarceration, respectability politics, capitalism, and more.



The installation of Tomashi Jackson's "Monument of Color (Red, Black, and Green)" (2019); the white paper was later removed to allow view from the street.

Richmond is infamous for its Monument Mile, a grassy stretch of street dotted with statues in memory of Confederate veterans, all erected after 1890 — 25 years after the end of the Civil War. As we publicly debate and consider memorials to Confederate soldiers, the word “monumental” has been a recurring concept in the public imagination. In a city like Richmond, an expansive show like *Great Force* holds that quality of monumentalism for its philosophical undertaking, as well as its interaction with Richmond at large.

In the lobby, Tomashi Jackson has painted green, black, and red portraits of civil rights figures and Virginia heroes, facing outward toward the busy intersection on which the museum sits. On the ground-floor galleries, a video of Pope.L's “How Much is that Nigger in the Window a.k.a. Tompkins Square Crawl” faces the street, cars reflected on its low-to-the-ground screen. A few blocks away from the museum, Alexandra Bell remixes a *New York Times* article to address the ways that media outlets reinforce lukewarm language about white supremacy.



Paul Stephen Benjamin, "Let Freedom Ring" (2017), TV video installation (3 channel color and sound), 6 minute loop

Paul Stephen Benjamin's "Let Freedom Ring" echoes through the galleries with its amplification of Marian Anderson's 1939 performance of "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" before the Lincoln Memorial. Just before this concert, watched by millions, she had been turned away by the Daughters of the American Revolution to perform at DC's Constitution Hall, due to a "white-only clause" in their booking contract; a harsh reminder of maintained racial hegemony in the decades after abolition. The haunt incorporates the same intoxicating sonic loop that Benjamin is known for, with a stack of vintage televisions humming, buzzing, and glowing throughout the darkened space.



Xaviera Simmons, *"Capture (Say a butterfly had to die for you to get a gift-there must be some kind of prayer in that-I want to know how you feel about capture)"* (2019), Digital video installation

Xaviera Simmons's three-panel video does the visible work of understanding and interacting with beauty as it exists in a perennial tension with foulness. "Slavery happened in the most beautiful landscapes," she told press during a walkthrough of the gallery. In fact, specters of slavery infiltrate our scarred nation, but especially so in the contemporary landscape of a city like Richmond, still dotted with colonial architecture.

On the center screen, she trims flowers, creating a floral arrangement. To her left, she names the women and men who owned slaves during the last major census of Virginia slaveholders in 1860 — a class of people who are often privileged to be anonymous and amorphous, their memories and descendants often bereft of culpability.



Carrie Mae Weems, "Untitled (Colored People Grid)" (2009-10), 42 inkjet prints, AP 2/2 (ed. 5)

Carrie Mae Weems's grid of images, "Untitled (Colored People Grid)" (2009), offers tender portrayals of black youth awash with pastel hues. The double entendre of "colored" brings into the forefront shifting ideas about colloquial language as it involves race in the United States. While terms like colored, Negro, mulatto, quadroon, and Afro-American fell out of fashion, African American succeeded them, and considerations of Black versus black — distinguished by capitalization — continue to be hotly debated. In its glass, the works of Sable Elyse

Smith are reflected; the faces of cartoon children, copied from propagandistic coloring books intended for children of incarcerated people, join the faces of Weems's subjects.



Troy Michie, "This street long. It real long" (2018), Paper weaving collage, gouache, ink, acrylic, China marker, magazine pages, and photographs



Troy Michie, "This street long. It real long" (detail) (2018), Paper weaving collage, gouache, ink, acrylic, China marker, magazine pages, and photographs

One of two collages by Troy Michie, "This street long, It real long" (2018), centers the racialization of fashion and how the clothing of people of color has been used to demonize populations. In years past, there was violent outrage over zoot suits, worn by men of color deemed too audacious by whites; later, sagging pants and du rags became bullseyes for racist policing initiatives like "stop and frisk."



Kevin Beasley, "Slab III" (detail) (2018), Polyurethane resin, raw Virginia cotton, altered housedresses, altered kaftans, altered t-shirts, nylon fasteners



Kevin Beasley, "Emerging Block (Building)" (2018), Polyurethane resin, raw Virginia cotton, house dresses, kaftans, t-shirts, altered housedresses, altered kaftans, altered t-shirts

Two sculptures by Kevin Beasley — born in Lynchburg, VA — suspend forms of cotton in resin. At the root of modern American capitalism is the monetization of bodies as capital, traded and sold to support the plantation structure, and devalued as a means to an end: the production of sugar, cotton, and cash crops. In Beasley's resin-coated sculptures, raw and processed varieties of cotton mangle together, chaotic in their shape but physically structural and sound, fixed in time and space. They remind us of the permanence of history, and its effect on our modern imaginations and psyches.



Aria Dean, "(meta)model 3.1, (meta)model 3.2, (meta)model 3.3," (2019), security mirror, wood (foreground); Shani Peters, "17,195 Sunrises" (2019), Vinyl floor-to-ceiling photographic wallpaper and four plexiglass panels with CNC cuts (background)

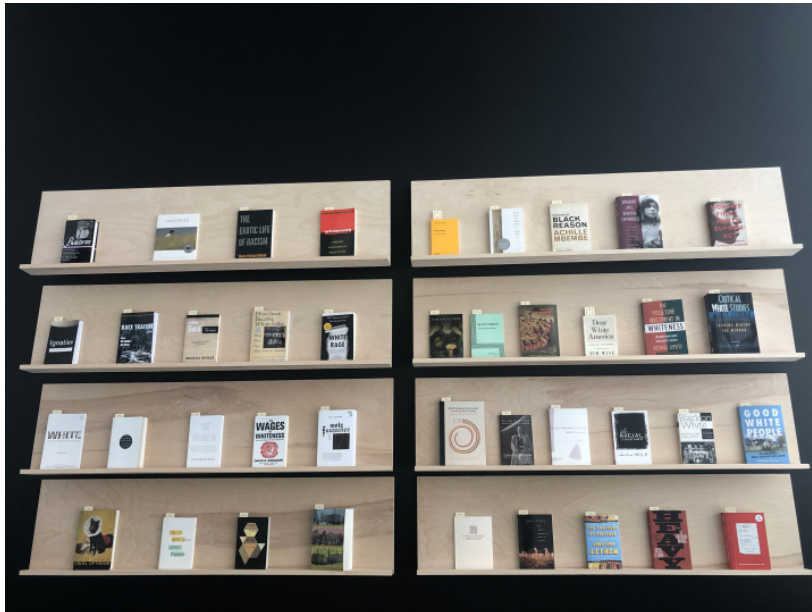
Upstairs, Shani Peters's installation, "17,195 Sunrises" (2019), makes reference to the number of times the sun has risen between the first utterance of the ubiquitous phrase "Black Power" by Stokely Carmichael in 1966, to the inception of the presently definitive Black Lives Matter movement, spurred by Alicia Garza in 2013. For their audacity to verbally champion Black life in the face of state-sanctioned violence, both movements have been subject to severe state surveillance. In 1969, the FBI investigated the Black Panther Party an "extremist organization." In 2017, with the Black Lives Matter movement now permeating mainstream media, leaked files revealed that the FBI's terrorism unit considered "black identity extremists" a violent threat to American democracy for their "perceptions of police brutality against African Americans." In front of Peters's work and dispersed throughout the second floor, Aria Dean's conceptual sculptures appropriate security mirrors to consider these notions hypersurveillance of Blackness that are encouraged and sanctioned by the state.



Radcliffe Bailey, Untitled (2019), Mixed media including paint on tarp, black glitter, and a photograph on canvas

To accompany Radcliffe Bailey's untitled 2019 tarp, a curatorial text explains, "Bailey has often used black glitter as a metaphor for the African American experience defined by slavery; a reality consumed by uncertainty and precarity still holds moment of hope and possibility." The artwork, which features an image of the ocean, immediately calls to my mind the haunting image used by the *New York Times* for its 1619 project — a monochrome photograph of the same body of water that floated the first enslaved Africans to the British colonies. 71 percent of the Earth's surface is composed of water, nearly the entirety of which includes the depths of our oceans, which have, over the centuries, also become the graves of many Africans who were captured and killed en route to the Americas. The image subsumed by black glitter flecked with blue, Bailey meditates on the vastness of the ocean — through triangle trade, the bodies of enslaved Africans engulfed by the sea, their lives lost to a brutal and merciless institution.

As a whole, *Great Force* concerns itself with the scars that have been passed on through intergenerational memory; the way that racism has proved relentless throughout history, and how the trauma of these inherited memories can be understood, stretched, and processed.



The Racial Imaginary Institute, Interdisciplinary classroom, library, and research Lab



Pope.L, "The Great White Way, 22 miles, 9 years, 1st street (Whitney Version #2)" (1990), video (color, sound; 6:35 minutes)

Great Force, curated by Amber Esseiva, is on view at ICA at VCU (601 W Broad St, Richmond, VA) through January 5.