

Painting of Emmett Till by a white artist: For and against  
March 2016

**Summary**

*From Wikipedia:*

Schutz's 2016 painting *Open Casket* was inspired by the photograph of the mutilated corpse of Emmett Till, whose mother, Mamie Till Mobley, insisted on an open casket at his funeral because she said she wanted the world to see what had happened to her son. . . . It prompted pushback when it was included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, including vigorous online debate and protests by black artists who physically blocked the work from view.

**Against the painting**

*From "This White Woman's Painting of Emmett Till Belongs Under the Definition of Whitepeopleing, Not on a Museum Wall" by Michael Harriot on The Root:*

In the latest case of habitual boundary overstepping and appropriation, painter Dana Schutz's work *Open Casket* has sparked controversy and outrage at the Whitney Biennial in New York City. . . . The artist used smudges of paint and cuts in the canvas to reflect the brutality of Emmett's death mask, because *obviously* what the commentary surrounding a 62-year-old brutal murder of a 14-year-old needs is the voice of a white woman from Brooklyn. . . .

Whitepeopleing is the privilege and dismissive confidence that you have not only the right but also the permission to do whatever the fuck you want. Whitepeopleing is the audacity of believing that your white hands are gifted with the skill, soul and empathy to transmute the horrific spilling of black blood into something passersby can contemplate before they move on to another sculpture or painting. It is either not knowing or disregarding the difference between a mother saying, "Look what these monsters did to my boy" and a New York paint-slinger saying, "Look what I did." Whitepeopleing is this.

Just because someone *can* say something doesn't mean he or she should. There are some spaces, subjects and times where white voices are not needed.

*From the petition by Hannah Black:*

It is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time. Although Schutz's intention may be to present white shame, this shame is not correctly represented as a painting of a dead Black boy by a white artist—those non-Black artists who sincerely wish to highlight the shameful nature of white violence should first of all stop treating Black pain as raw material.

## For the painting

### *Comments on the Root:*

BlakkNicholson: As to this painting, I see you point. I do understand that it makes people (like me, for instance) uncomfortable. But, as an artist, myself, I know that MY GOAL has always been to create pieces that assault people's senses, to confront their comfortability, and force them to think about issues in a way that challenges their preconceived notions about a particular topic.

TrumpsTinyHands: The death of Emmett Till is a national tragedy, national disgrace. If an artist of any color feels the horror of that disgrace, feel the shittiness of whole shitty story and wants to remind the national ethos of what happened and how far we have yet to go, then I applaud them and their effort . . . especially if the effort is sincere and doesn't minimize in any way the depth of the horror of his death.

Random1Guy: The stance that she's not allowed to produce works of art and should only stick to doing white people art, or whatever, is limiting and foments a sort of separation, not a bringing together. I can't abide that.

ColonelHotDog: Counterpoint: Wypipo only listen to the opinions offered by other wypipo. To block people from seeing this because the artist presenting wypipo with uncomfortable truths prevents them from broadening their perspective.

It's like taking Macklemore to task for his shitty "White Privilege" song. Sure, you can hate on it for sucking, but it wasn't written *for you*. It was written for his white fans in white suburbs telling them to wake the hell up. It's not (necessarily) Performative Wokeness, it's "Hey, fellow white person - I, too, am white! Did you know that we done some *awful goddamn shit*? Maybe we shouldn't!"

It's disturbing because it's supposed to be - and it's aimed at wypipo, because it's supposed to be.

Bwleon7: The whole point is to get people of all races to see how wrong and shameful racism and hatred are. If a white person paints a picture that tries to bring more attention to that fact then IMHO it is not a bad thing. . . . Right now we need a bigger spotlight on the treatment of non white, Christian, males in this country. So I'll take all the help I can get.

In a Mazda (Formerly In a Fiat):

I don't really have a problem with the painting. I understand why it's problematic, and I have no problem with it being denounced, but I'm also wondering about the characterization of it being painted for "fun". Can a white artist never create a meaningful expression about non-white subjects? Should the message be that they shouldn't even try? That they should censor themselves before they even get started.