

DART Design Arts Daily

Racism: An American Family Value

By Peggy Roalf Monday July 13, 2009

Since last Saturday, the subject of racism has figured prominently in my daily news. Between Frank Rich's recent [Op-Ed](#) on Sara Palin (he points out that she stood for the "real America") to the horrific news of the defilement of Emmett Till's coffin at Chicago's [Burr Oak Cemetery](#), racism again surfaces as an essential subject for reflection and debate. And my DART calendar for today was marked with a postcard that reads, "Post racial is the new RACISM. an American family value," a reminder of the second show that just opened at The Center for Book Arts.



Left: *Spread from Freedom: A Fable* by Kara Walker. Center: *Primary I* by Shervone Neckles. Right: Installation at The Center for Book Arts.

Organized by Amos Paul Kennedy, Jr., an artist, teacher, and independent curator, and Alexander Campos, Executive Director of the Center, the show addresses this challenging problem through the eyes of artists using printed matter as a means of expression. Packed into the small and beautifully installed space are works by nearly 30 artists who represent a spectrum of viewpoints: Black, White, Asian, Native American, Latino, and possibly more, are present. Wit and humor evenly balance piercing observations and subversive intent expressed in works created using wide variety of materials associated with broadcasting the printed word.

In Shervone Neckles' *Primary I*, an aggressively envisioned black child-sized doll sits at a miniature school desk reading from a beautifully printed copy of *Dick and Jane*. Here, Red Rag Rosie, the character, is introduced to language and image in a stylized setting. The piece creates the kind of "playful and painful exchange" the artist has found in common stereotypes of blacks in popular culture.

In *Freedom: A Fable*, Kara Walker has created a pop-up book using 18th-century style silhouettes to frame pages of text that tell of a slave who envisions herself leading her people to freedom in the newly founded nation of Liberia. Walker skewers both black and white stereotypes through her highly codified profiles of the heroine, N, and her master, a plantation owner.

Maureen Kelleher, when reading a biography of James Baldwin, was reminded of her father's advice to her when she was a teen: "Do anything you want but don't bring home a nigger." *James II Reprise* is an icion-like assemblage combining photographs of Baldwin as a young radical and text fragments from his books; photographs of the artist's father as a young man; miniaturized *New Yorker* covers of Barack Obama and Sara Palin and other present-day ephemera. Keller says, "I couldn't help but wonder what my father would think of our president and how he would advise me if I were 13 years old in November 2008."

Jason Lujan is one of many Native American artists who seized on the concept of a Department of Homeland Security to communicate his struggles with the takeover of native lands by the federal government. "Whose homeland?" and "Who defines terrorism?" are just two of the questions posed in his pamphlet, *The American Indian Activist*. In it Lujan has appropriated pages from government publications such as *The U.S. Army Ranger Handbook* to offer another perspective on U.S. policies, both foreign and domestic.

That's just a small sampling of what's on view in this highly readable and engaging collection that continues through September 12 at [The Center for Book Arts](#). 28 West 27th Street, 3rd Floor, New York, NY. Please visit the website for information, and a list of upcoming public programs.

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