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STOP USING KITSCH AS A WEAPON:
KITSCH AND RACISM
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A Case Against Kitsch

My discussion is formulated around a single question: What meaning does the idea of "kitsch," and high and low culture, have when considering art produced by contemporary African-American artists? This question has been instigated and informed by the latest round of debates surrounding the artist Kara Walker on the occasion of her mid-career retrospective and the ways in which she re-imagines racist imagery from popular culture in her work. Walker has been both praised as one of the most significant artists of her generation and, conversely, vilified as a race traitor who has revived negative stereotypes that have further concretized views of the black body as sick, deviant, grotesque, and complicit in the tragedy of slavery. In her works, such as Cotton Hoards in Southern Swamp, Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated), 2005 (Fig. 6-1), Walker uses the silhouette to play with notions of high and low art, kitsch, and popular imagery to dramatically evoke the legacy and continued currency of racist imagery. The conversation surrounding Walker and her art frequently is funneled into a debate about whether these images are good or bad, empowering or regressive for African-American artists and for ideas about race.

In past decade there has been a surge in scholarship mapping the ways in which racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities have been the subject and fodder for popular, mass-produced material culture typically defined as kitsch. From various objects in the shape of a Mammy or a Sambo to cast-iron images of a tomahawk-wielding Indian, the collecting and visual consumption of these images has been analyzed and well-documented. Yet in most of these discussions, the very definition of kitsch remains static and unacknowledged as a malleable and problematic term—problematic in large part because it denies race as an essential factor in assessing how culture operates. Using examples by artist Michael Ray Charles, I will argue that very idea of kitsch and the paradigm of high and low art are themselves sustaining mechanisms of racial hierarchy and apartheid. The art of Charles, and others such as Walker, suggests that all visual culture, high and low, no style or subject excepted, maintains racialized dialogues, and that all images speak race differently to various audiences. The imagined distinctions between the high and the low in American culture seek to verify a fiction of a unified viewing culture; in other words, despite the fact that no visual imagery can or could ever transcend race (or class, gender, or sexuality) categories such as "kitsch" or "art" promise to do exactly that. As a result, the idea of kitsch sustains a system that imagines racially "good" or "bad" imagery instead of appreciating the role of all visual culture in the production of a racist society. Part of my aim is to further deteriorate traditional uses of kitsch as an art historical paradigm and explore how this construct ultimately denies the ways in which all visual culture both activates and suppresses social agency.

Before I begin, a few caveats are in order. For the purposes of this essay I will focus on African-American artists, American visual culture, and kitsch. While I believe this argument is maintained when considering other U.S. racial minorities, race, like kitsch, is historical and culturally produced and I do not have space here to discuss many crucial nuances (just as one example, to consider the implications of the shifting definitions of whiteness) that would serve to give this argument more texture. Likewise, in focusing so closely on images produced by American artists for American audiences and consumers, I do not consider the racial implications and possibilities for subverting racial (and class and gender) paradigms of images in a global context, either as products that are exported, or, as objects produced abroad for American consumers. Finally, due to space constraints, and to achieve a provocative focus, I do not carefully consider class and gender with substantial depth in regard to either the producers the images or the audience. I hope that this will not prove crippling to the argument but rather will provide starting points to continue the conversation.

Kitsch has become the distinguishing characteristic that marks high and low art; it is the boundary between the realm of objects that are given serious and sustained museum and gallery visibility and academic
consideration and thus defined as “art,” and those objects that are relegated to the world of popular and disposable commodities. Of course there are works of art that utilize the style or substance of kitsch as an affect (most famously Pop Art), and people who knowingly and ironically appropriate kitsch but this only further defines and codifies the boundaries between notions of the high and the low. Although numerous theorists have considered kitsch, the foundational essay on the subject continues to be Clement Greenberg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” published in the fall of 1939. He begins his essay questioning how, “one and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a Saturday Evening Post cover.” Greenberg’s introductory premise is constructed around the notion that T.S. Eliot and Tin Pan Alley are fundamentally and elementally different. They come from the same place but do not share the same defining features; they are made of different stuff, and, as Greenberg will argue, these products produce divergent effects on the culture at large.

It is out of this initial distinction that Greenberg posits kitsch as standing against the avant-garde and its radical social and political possibilities. The avant-garde has social value because through its art “it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence.” This movement is what maintains the value of culture; it is the beginning and end of all artistic inquiry. The product, or the art, then is valued because it is “something valid on its own terms” or “something given, increase, independent of meanings, similars or originals.” This point is crucial in that Greenberg believes that meaning and value is inherent to the object and indivisible from it, rather than a characteristic that may be evaluated or debated. It is or is not art, and if it is art, it is then naturally, in keeping with its primal characteristic as art, progressive to the culture at large.

Kitsch, on the other hand, is “commercial art and literature” that was, like an avant-garde, born out of the industrial revolution as a way to satisfy urbanized masses “who, insensitive to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only the culture of some sort can provide.” Whether it be Hollywood films, music, or visual culture, kitsch manifests stable qualities:

Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.
Consider, for example, a saltshaker in the form of a Mammy, a common commercial object from the early twentieth century. It displays all of the typical elements of kitsch: a desire to be easily read, cloying visual strategies, and easy integration into daily life demanding nothing but participation. In this construct, racial commentary is just another surface feature that further deteriorates the object’s worth, but it is not the central disengaging quality; its “kitsch” factor is. Yet, if we displace kitsch as a category for consideration it is not hard to imagine that the essential quality of the object is its visual embodiment of the cultural needs and desires of white supremacy. The pleasure or disgust generated by the object is not at all predicated on Greenberg’s ideas of faked sensations or the object’s lack of intellectual or spiritual demand on the viewer. Instead, what speaks first and foremost is the racial narrative, which is not simply an aspect of the object—it is the object. That quality also defines the audience. Greenberg, revealing his Marxist roots, posits class as the binding mechanism in regards to who looks at what images. But racialized objects, like a Mammy saltshaker, speak to and about bodies. The “kitsch” aspect of this shaker is not acceptable or easily rejected along the lines Greenberg has imagined because people understand their positioning vis-à-vis the object in regard to their own racial identity. In this way, low or popular culture has been complicated for people of color as they are often set up, as in the case of collectibles, as the joke or the stereotyped body. Race binds nonwhite to popular culture and kitsch while never granting full acceptance or access. For the same reasons, it also ties white audiences and notions of racial supremacy to kitsch.

Similarly, while “art” is posited as oppositional to “kitsch,” it likewise participates in racial discourse in ways that disassemble Greenberg’s construct. Art emerges from the avant-garde, and its value is in its ability to “move” audiences. Greenberg and others assume a humanist—revealed as fundamentally white—narrative here, asserting that art has the ability to somehow transcend the particular manifestations of race, gender, and so on. Access to high culture, however, has been programmatically denied through political and social structures; institutional racism in corporations, universities, and cultural sites have historically silenced, maligned, or altered minority participation. There are countless examples of the ways in which black artists have been systematically alienated from participating in “avant-garde” art spaces and have been written out of the histories of modernity. Just as the Mammy shaker arguably speaks first and foremost to stereotyped blackness, avant-garde culture and its institutions presume, and thus embody whiteness. For African-American artists, alienation from the high and the low is inherent. Even more punishing is that the paradigm...
itself, with kitsch as the defining border between art and non-art, demands forced disengagement from race in order to accept the very notions of high and low. Black artists have had to “move beyond,” ignore, or manipulate these imagined categories of kitsch and art to find visual strategies that operate in spite of the fact that they are fundamentally alienated from both categories. The game, in other words, is rigged.

Art Interventions

Michael Ray Charles’s work suggests the brokenness of the kitsch/art paradigm in ways that also point to the need to radically reassess visual culture studies and artistic racial apartheid. Charles’s paintings manipulate the categories of fine art, kitsch, and popular culture through the use of stereotyped images of black bodies in ways that build upon and speak to the strategies of parody utilized by such artists as Robert Colescott and Betye Saar. Charles’s work pushes the viewer beyond parody, however, hovering on the stereotyped body and refusing to allow the viewer any easy or empowering resolution. Subsequently, his career has been marked by controversy. At a roundtable discussion in honor of an opening of Charles’s work in 1997, the African-American artist Elizabeth Catlett argued, “[His] symbolic impression is too weak to counter the immediacy of the image. Do we really want to take these images into the 21st century?”

Yet it is precisely this visual reinvigoration that Walker’s critics react to with the claim that this vocabulary of racist imagery and negative stereotypes have defined African Americans in popular visual culture for long enough. Scholar Michael Harris writes, “for African Americans to appropriate the visual language of derision, even for inversion, is to keep alive the ideology of race just by using its language, and, significantly, reinscribing an imposed, mythic racial identity while helping to maintain white ethnicity.” Inversion is for Harris and indeed Catlett, a political and artistic dead-end, one that like kitsch, dwells in nostalgia and entertainment (here in the mask of controversy) but demands no complicated engagement with the audience.

This argument about the political value of the images is endlessly circular because it is premised upon the limited paradigm of art as progressive and kitsch as regressive. I would offer that both Charles and Walker argue through their work that there are no “safe” or “non-racist” images or motifs that African-Americans can utilize to confront political and social realities. What these artists suggest is that both high and low art are defined by race with each side defending and reinventing the other. The very notion of kitsch with its attendant high/low binary perpetuates an imagined safe space free from the concerns or effects of race and racism. These artists turn this premise on its head, interrogating both the high and the low to show that neither holds respite for black America.

An example of this strategy can be seen in Charles’s (Forever Free) Home Training, 1993 (Fig. 6-2). This painting is part of a multi-year, multi-object series where all of the images include the phrase “Forever Free” in parentheses as part of the title. In this painting, a send up of a Saturday Evening Post magazine cover, Charles’s masthead has been replaced with the words “The Forever Free Post” and we see a horrific joker/harlequin figure, with a black mask, red lips and white teeth, lifting a hammer to swing. In his arms is a screaming black child, who is having a

with the Wind,” plantation imagery caressed by moonlight and magnolias, and hoop-skirted belles and faithful slaves, all combined with grotesque and disturbing sexual acts create a caustic and troubling commentary on race, visual culture, and the genocidal violence masked in dominant narratives of American history. In Cotton Hoards, (Fig. 6-1) for example, Walker reinvigorates the illustrations of Harper’s Weekly by inserting a silhouetted nude male figure, draped with swamp foliage. The result is that two figures in the boat are reoriented to appear to be looking at this swamp specter, thus radically reorienting the meaning of the original image to engage with an erotic narrative and terminally inhibiting contemporary audiences from reflexively viewing popular images of slavery.

This is the same kind of criticism leveled at Kara Walker’s work. For many, her use of the nineteenth-century technique of the silhouette and visual motifs associated with the fictionalized Old South, such as “Gone

Fig. 6-1. Kara Walker, Cotton Hoards in Southern Swamp, Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated), 2005. 1 from a portfolio of 15 prints, each offset lithography and silkscreen; 39 x 53 inches (99.1 x 134.6 cm). Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.
shoe hammered into his head. The image is a direct reference to one of Norman Rockwell’s illustrated advertisements for Interwoven socks from the 1940s that featured the same triangular composition but with a man spanking a child on the bottom with his shoe and a masthead that reads “Father’s Day.” Rockwell’s “father” is dressed in colonial style; he looks a bit like a thin Benjamin Franklin meting out discipline. The child is not facing us, as in Charles’s piece, and instead we see his legs kicking to escape the grip of his father and his toys, such as a slingshot, fall from his pocket. But while Rockwell’s image is meant to evoke the humorous irony of celebration of Father’s Day with the trials of parenting, Charles’s image twists into a scene of grotesque violence. This effect is highlighted by reversing the position of the child who is now face-forward and screaming as a nail is hammered through his head and by replacing the stern look of Rockwell’s father figure with the maniacal grin of the harlequin.

Charles has written that with this painting he sought to speak directly to Rockwell: “For me the Saturday Evening Post depicted a version of American life that was foreign to me, yet I knew existed, at least in some folks’ minds…. For as long as I can remember I have been a huge fan of [Rockwell]. The images he created seem unbounded by time.” This quality of being “unbounded by time” is highlighted by Rockwell’s use of eighteenth-century dress on the figures inhabiting his 1940s advertisement. Rockwell’s nostalgic use of costume highlights the imagined unbroken quality of parenting and fatherhood and links them to notions of nationhood. In Charles’s re-imagining of this ad, the black harlequin replaces this mythic figure and substitutes the humorous paternal discipline of Rockwell into a frenzied, perverted performance of obscene violence. This is all the more menacing because of the displacement of time, signaled by the masthead reading “Forever Free.” The white shoe for Charles is also symbolic. He writes, “The shoes signify the idea of being inferior, being underneath someone, a white person…. The white shoe became symbolic of white male oppression.” This black child is thus literally having whiteness nailed to him, ”forever” becomes a threat, and “free” is revealed to be ironic and unobtainable.

Charles’s image exposes his complex relationship to Rockwell, The Saturday Evening Post, and mainstream visual culture. Charles writes that Rockwell was foreign to him and that he believed that the world Rockwell created did in fact exist, but not for him. Yet the images clearly stuck to Charles, educating him about the nature of visual authority. In this way the harlequin figure can be seen as a vision of the artist Rockwell, but also a paternalistic American culture embodied in the gross caricatures of blackness literally hammering whiteness into the head and mind of a young Charles. The bottom banner of Charles’s painting reads, “Hometraining” which reveals how the very act of looking at visual culture, in this case the kind of culture many would perceive as kitsch (remember Greenberg himself calls out the Post as emblematic of the kitsch problem), is in fact a form of social training. This piece denies the isolation of popular culture or kitsch as merely lazy and easily satiating, as Greenberg and other would argue, by foregrounding the violence in the training imbedded in these images. Charles’s demands that the viewer recognize that even images that do not speak of blackness directly, such as Rockwell’s advertisement, do the work of racial oppression.

Charles does not stop at merely implicating low culture, or kitsch, in his critical focus; high art is pulled into the conversation with another painting in his “Forever Free” series: (Forever Free) American Gothic, 1994 (Fig. 6-3). Given Rockwell’s new recognition as an fine artist and not...
Fig. 6-3. Michael Ray Charles, *(Forever Free) American Gothic*, 1994. Acrylic latex and copper penny on paper, 40 x 26 inches (101.6 x 66cm). Collection Ron Meyer, California.

just as an illustrator (reborn perhaps, with his show at the Guggenheim Museum) and that Grant Wood’s iconic image is parodied repeatedly, it might be hard to see the difference in the two objects in regard to high/low art. Yet, Wood’s *American Gothic* was purchased and installed at the Art Institute of Chicago shortly after the artist completed it in 1930 and has been understood subsequently as a Regionalist masterpiece. In Charles’s work, he replicates the positioning of Wood’s man and woman, but replaces key aspects of the painting. The figures in Charles’s work are defined by features such as bright red lips and blank-white eyes like those commonly seen in racist images of African Americans in the popular culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The male farmer in Charles’s painting has been redressed in Mammy-styled clothes, the stern and austere gaze of Wood’s farmer replaced with a wide grin, and the figure holds a broom instead of a pitchfork. The female figure is a harlequin, but not the menacing figure we saw in *Homecoming*. Instead, her mouth is a circle that is matched by round eyes communicating blankness. Her dress, which in Wood’s depiction signifies her tasteful and reserved middle-class status, in Charles’s work is patterned with a repeating shoe motif, with Charles’s symbolic meaning intact. Finally, the gothic home that speaks in Wood’s piece in both sentimental and gently humorous ways to the American-ness of homeownership is replaced in Charles’s image with a giant watermelon. With each displacement of form and detail, Charles works to alienate the viewer from Wood’s piece and reorient audiences to the racial narrative of this most American of American paintings.

Charles declares that his intention “was not to paint a black version of a well-known painting. I wanted to use something familiar and change it into something strange.” In this sense Charles pulls back to Wood’s intentions with his original work. Wood looked in this image to gently tease audiences by embodying American-ness in these two figures. The painting’s success lies in the fact that Wood’s two figures are familiar enough to recognize and yet removed enough to be laughed at. Charles’s painting, on the other hand, uses familiar racial stereotypes to make this image strange and unnerving, or making it strangely familiar. In doing this Charles highlights not the universalizing aspect of art, but instead its alienating and dislocating qualities. This image is not about inserting blackness, but rather about highlighting that Wood’s image was perhaps always about whiteness. When Charles writes that he wanted to use something “familiar” he may not be referring to Wood’s painting so much as he is to black caricature. What becomes truly strange is the black figures’ presence in Wood’s world, rather than the strangeness of Wood’s world being corrupted. In this way Charles infers that the stability of high culture is maintained by this imagined boundary of low culture that does not permit Mammy figures and giant watermelons, but that in fact both worlds maintain racial segregation and alienation.

In the final image of Charles’s that I will discuss the artist again moves against notions of both the high and the low simultaneously, taking on both Elvis Presley and Andy Warhol. Elvis has become synonymous with the notion of kitsch and commodity culture, specifically as he is embodied in oft-cited black velvet portrait paintings. Warhol, on the other hand, epitomizes both a challenge to Greenberg and the apotheosis of the kind of elite knowing he cultivated. In his *(Forever Free) Elvis Lives!*, 1997 (Fig. 6-4), Charles takes Warhol’s series of prints of Elvis from 1963–64 (Warhol’s image itself was taken from film stills of Elvis in cowboy costume from his 1960 film *Flaming Star*) and reimagines Elvis in blackface with Mickey Mouse-styled white gloves. Instead of pulling out a lethal gun, Charles has replaced the weapon with a microphone, making the image even more ludicrous than before. Charles confronts the history of Elvis’s borrowing/stealing of African American musical culture in this
image, but his target is much wider. In his analysis of Warhol, art historian Richard Meyer suggests that for queer audiences this image in particular speaks to issues of sexuality through the language of kitsch and the ironic reserve of high/low culture. But Charles denies the viewer the ability to move with and through the image so easily and refuses to speak in codes. Elvis is in blackface, his disguise is not the cheeky whisperings of desire but the more blatant language of cultural theft. He no longer holds a gun, instead a microphone, but the results are in many ways just as lethal. In claiming African-American musical traditions for lucrative white commercial youth culture, Elvis has also killed it. Charles likewise challenges Warhol here. Warhol’s images worked to dislocate the viewer from their own sense of history and corporeality. His image, Race Riot, 1963, for example, blanks out any possibility of feeling the indignant rage or pathos of this historical moment by repeating an image over and over until it dissolves in pattern, color, and form. This is, no doubt, clever as Warhol pulls apart the power of popular culture and comments on the glory of the superficial. Yet, this cleverness, many argue, reveals Warhol’s callous and entitled core; he is manipulating a photograph of real bodies fighting for real rights that have been systematically denied in a racist society. But Charles can play visual games as well—with one color change in Elvis’s face he has reengaged history by evoking the legacy of blackface minstrelsy. In doing so Charles collapses simultaneously Warhol’s high art games and Elvis’s low art popularity. Both have been lethal to black people and black culture and Charles unmasks the deceptive mechanisms on both sides of this imagined binary. To Charles, Warhol and Elvis prop up the same system that denies African-Americans a place at the visual table, and yet demands participation in the imagined divide between the high and the low.

Conclusion

Where does this leave us? Arguably, we are left with the task of eliminating the notion of kitsch from our critical vocabularies because it perpetuates racism. This is not such an outrageous prospect. Twenty-five years ago scholars used terms such as “primitive” or “Orient” with unquestioned abandon in a way that is inconceivable today. Why not let go of this modernist paradigm in our postmodern moment? I can hear the argument: that kitsch creates in its wake moments of resistance, counter-narratives, the potential for subversion, and the very art of Charles and Walker is born from these fissures. Yet, I would ask that we start listening to the colloquial and academic use of the term “kitsch,” and easy evocations of “high” and “low” and then consider what the cost of this language really is. Kitsch is a weapon, but not of the low against the high, or of banality against radicalism, but instead it is a weapon of a racist regime.

Notes

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2 This exhibition, “Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love,” was curated by Philippe Vergne in 2007 for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The show then moved to the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, the UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and the ARC/Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.


I would also argue that this static notion of kitsch has also not fully considered the implication of gender in its construction. For a brief discussion of women and kitsch see C.E. Emmer, “Kitsch Against Modernity,” Art Criticism 13, no. 1 (1998): 58. In terms of issues of sexuality, Susan Sontag and others have collapsed the ideas of kitsch and camp together in ways that demand more consideration. See Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” in Against Interpretation (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1966), 275–292.


Greenberg 1986, 6.

Greenberg 1986, 8.

Greenberg 1986, 12.


For just one example, see Ann Gibson’s detailed account of the challenges non-white, non-male artists faced in the 1940s and 1950s in Ann Gibson, Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). While this has shifted slightly in the past twenty years, minority artists are still underrepresented in American museums, in biennials, and as faculty and students in academic art programs.


Harris, “Memories and Memorabilia,” 28.