The Invisible Standard of White Skin

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I am a white, female artist-teacher working in the northwestern United States. My artistic inquiry investigates cultural contexts around women, mothering, and whiteness in the U.S. middle class. The artworks highlighted in this paper aim to guide viewers to more clearly identify the invisibility of whiteness and "white" skin. Through the artmaking process, which includes researching materials and paint, studying contemporary artists and scholars, and having discussions with colleagues, students, and friends, I have been able to more clearly see the normativity of white identity and privilege. These continued discussions help me decentralize whiteness from the platform where whiteness is presented as normative, default, and superior.

My artmaking began with research on oil paint. I attempted to gather a broad spectrum of Caucasian flesh tones, however, this only made evident the limited category of white. The narrow availability of products that represent the wide spectrum of races illustrates the iron-clad grip that the art supply industry holds on Eurocentric white normative standards. While the Crayola Company replaced "flesh tone" with "peach" in 1962, it took 30 years for the company to introduce multicultural flesh tones, which teachers deeply appreciated in 1992. Remarkably, to this day Gamblin oil paint company carries only one color for flesh and markets it as "Caucasian Flesh Tone." Many painters use Caucasian Flesh Tone as a base, adding other colors to it—which once again, centralizes whiteness. The glacial progress toward racial equity exhibited by companies that manufacture art materials illustrates how whiteness is still seen as central, normative, and as the prominent baseline. Said (2004) captures this assumed universality in his text *Culture and Imperialism:*

> What partly animated my study of Orientalism was my critique of the way in which the alleged universalism of the fields such as the classics (not to mention historiography, anthropology, and sociology) was Eurocentric in the extreme, as if other literatures and societies had an inferior or transcended value. (p. 44)

My art piece, "Caucasian Flesh Tone" (Figure 1) speaks to this Eurocentrism, as it highlights the limited racial awareness held by the

Gamblin paint company which centralizes whiteness in its production of skin tones. By only manufacturing one flesh tone, Caucasian flesh tone, the company sets a standard of holding Caucasian as superior and transcendent.

Figure 1: Caucasian Flesh Tone, 2008, mixed media, 12" x 12"

In my research on contemporary artists who consider the complexities of race, I discovered Korean American Byron Kim's painting "Synecdoche," a large grid of small portraits that solely depict varying sitters' skin tone. Using oil paint, Kim reduces each individual to the racial essence of the sitter. "Synecdoche" is an ongoing piece that now hosts over 400 portraits. Each portrait is on a 10 x 8-inch panel, a common size for portrait photography. By reducing an individual to their racial essence and choosing a size that references portraiture, Kim draws attention to the impossibility of identifying localized color and the trappings of essentialism. The viewer is faced with the reduction of individuals to their prospective races. "Synecdoche" intelligently addresses issues of identity and stereotyping, thus exposing the way representations of others have been deemed truths (Faruqee, 2004). Influenced by Kim's reductive approach, I painted dozens of skin panels, playing with the dynamic interaction of racial signifiers, as seen in 'Welcome to Portland" (figure 2) "Mixed Caucasian Flesh Tones" (figure 3) and "Gentrification I & II" (figures 4 & 5).

Figure 2: Welcome to Portland, 2008, oil on board, 10″ x 18″

Figure 3: Mixed Caucasian Flesh Tones, 2008, mixed media, 7″ x 18″

Figure 4: Gentrification I, 2008, oil on linen, 48″ x 48

Figure 5: Gentrification II, 2008, oil on linen, 48" x 48"

Next, I created "Identity Cards" (figure 6). This project was inspired by Peggy McIntosh's article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," which describes her understanding of white privilege by listing 50 everyday advantages from which she benefits as a white woman. Her motivation for writing this piece was to point out that in order for males to understand their place of privilege in patriarchy she needed to understand her whiteness in the schema of racial privilege. These "invisible" privileges in regard to race, such as shopping without being followed by security (#5) or working a job with without having co-workers on the job suspect that she was hired because of her race (#35), are simply and succinctly laid out in a list.

Aesthetically, I was drawn to the advantage of having adhesive bandages reflect skin tones (#46). Therefore, for one of my artmaking projects, I placed adhesive bandages of the same brand and tone on 50 individuals at a Gay Pride rally on the capitol steps in Olympia, Washington, USA. This act highlighted the individual's skin color in relationship to the bandage. Then, I took photographs of the bandages on the attendees' arms and printed them for exhibition.In addition to comparing skin tones to adhesive bandages, the project also acted as a sampling of the racial makeup of the regional population attending the event. The pieces were then printed to the size of business cards,

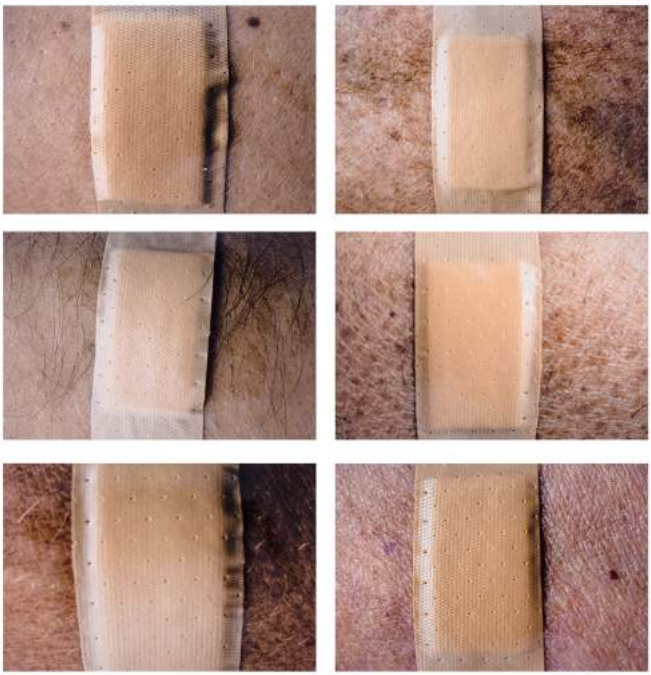

Figure 6: Identity Cards, 2008, archival pigment prints, 3.5" x 2"

suggesting a type of identification card, and stacked in the gallery for the viewers to take. I was surprised by the intimacy cultivated through this project, as I made physical contact with each individual to open the bandage and place it on each arm. Ultimately, the adhesive bandages signify care, but also a superficial covering up of the massive issue of white privilege and supremacy.

In a follow up project, "Adhesive Bandages I-IV," (figures 7-10) I created collages out of adhesive bandages. First, I purchased multiple brands of adhesive bandages in a five-mile radius from the high school where I taught. The source imagery of available bandages was a response to the failure of businesses to supply members of the community with appropriate hair, skin, and first aid products. The pieces reference minimalism as they act as the essence of whiteness, even when I was surprised to see that they were darker than I had predicted. The spectrum did not, however, include all of the races making up the local high school population. While simplistic, this project brought white privilege into dialogue in areas it might not have otherwise. Unwrapping the bandages in public places, such as my classroom and local pubs, and then showing the finished pieces to colleagues and students opened up dialogue around white identity, privilege, and culture.

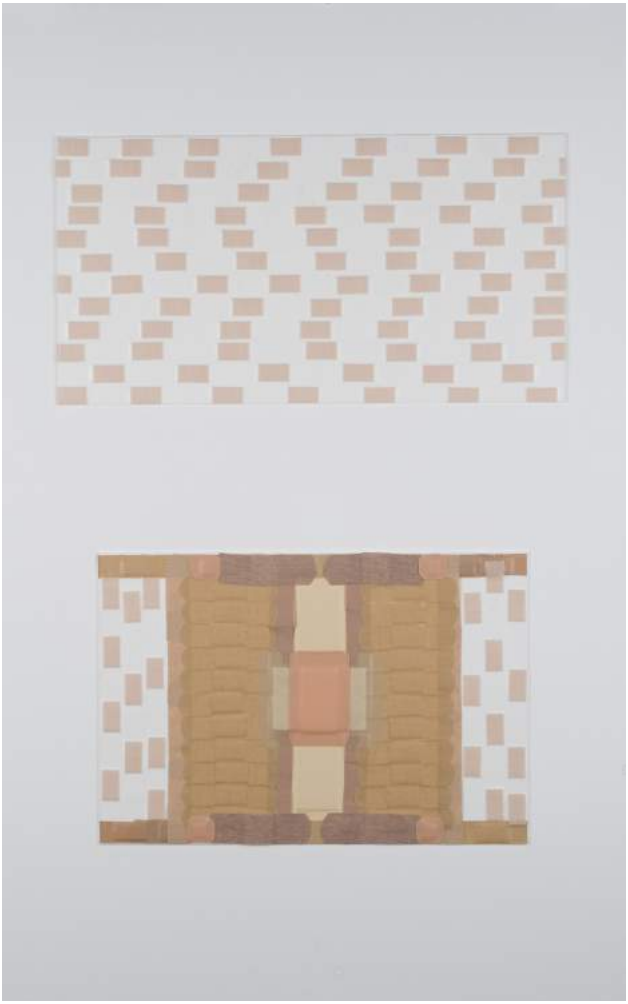

Figure 7: Adhesive Bandages I, 2008, Adhesive bandages on board, 32″ x 20″

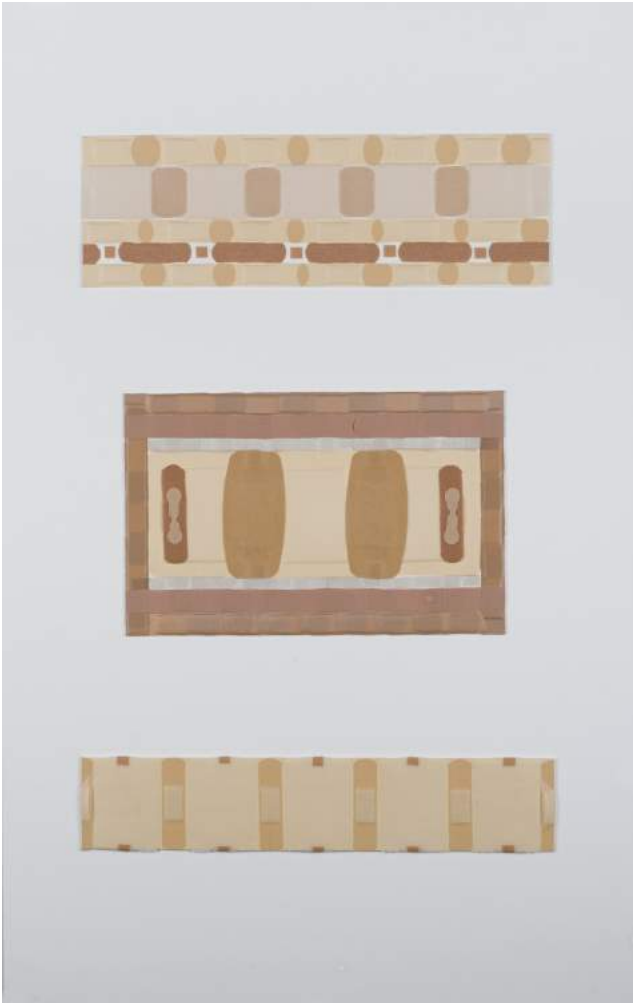

Figure 8: Bandages II, 2008, 2008, Adhesive bandages on board, 32″ x 20″

Figure 9: Bandages III, 2008, Adhesive bandages on board, 32″ x 20″

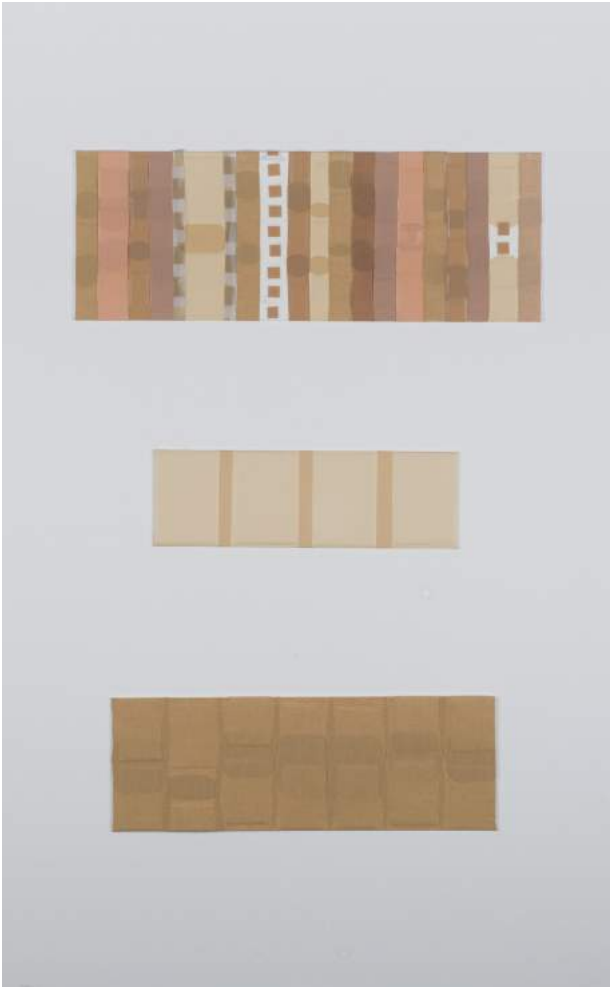

Figure 10: Bandages IV, 2008, Adhesive bandages on board, 32″ x 20″

As white people in positions of power, positioned in a classroom or a gallery, we can continually work to illuminate whiteness as one of the many races, not the universal, natural, standard, or norm—and bring light to its invisibility. Patricia J. Williams (2004) speaks to the silent standard of whiteness:

> (Racial categories) …don't exist in the rational world in any coherent, consistent, or scientific sense, but nevertheless have great power over us…Whiteness is the site of privileged imagining, the invisible standard. It is whatever it wants to be. And blackness has been for too many generations whatever was left over. Race is a careless, deeply unconscious, and highly aesthetic phenomenon, even if that aesthetic ultimately deprives us of greater vision. (pp. 19-20)

My experiences as a white art educator and artist living in primarily white town with primarily white students places me in a critical place to interrogate whiteness with peers, faculty, and students. Educators and artists can make the careless aesthetic structure of race visible by decentralizing the whiteness as a normative standard. In my artmaking, I explored the construct of race and the unexamined culture of whiteness, bringing the invisible standard more clearly into focus.

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Exploring Manifestations of White Supremacy Culture in Art Museum Education and Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks specifically at Afro-Caribbean art and culture and explores White and Afro-Caribbean experiences and the impact of Whiteness on the ways that knowledge and practice of the arts in museums have been considered, interpreted, and characterized. Written by co-authors offering an Afro-Caribbean and White perspective, this paper offers various examples from our experiences as art museum educators of the ways Whiteness impacts our work.

KEYWORDS:Whiteness, Caribbean, museum education, colonialism, anti-racism, White supremacy

Introduction

This paper is co-authored by two art museum educators and art education scholar-practitioners; one is a Black biracial Trinidadian and the other a White American. This paper looks at Afro-Caribbean art and culture, and explores the impact of Whiteness on the ways that art and material culture from this region has been considered, interpreted, and characterized in art museums. We first share the definition of Whiteness that we use to analyze the cultural assumptions and ideologies that underpin exhibition displays and interpretation of Caribbean art and cultural content. This analysis reveals important ethical questions of the museums' role in historical revisionism, the development of Afro-Caribbean cultural identity within museum spaces, and how Whiteness negatively impacts pedagogical choices that White art museum educators (WAME's) make when teaching from this content.

We use a qualitative research methodology utilizing two case studies in order to explore our research question that asks how White supremacist culture, over time and geographical location, has impacted contemporary interpretive practice in museums of Afro