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Is American Art History Conservative?

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A colonial anxiety drives the question, "Is American art history conservative?" The question articulates a sense of dread—the suspicion that yes, it is—quite! But what do we mean by American art history? What makes us feel that it is conservative? Is it the American or the art history?

This kind of question worries at the study of American anything. To gather artworks under the name "American" is to participate in the fantasy of nation formation. The three terms—"American," "art," and "history"—are each sites of intense ideological contest. If we approach American art history seeking some kind of agreement between these three terms, we will find ourselves excluding the art of New Spain, Mexico, Cuba, and Canada. We will step around the Ohio Serpent Mound, and let anthropologists and folklore specialists take up all that looks less like art and more like artifact. Scholars working in American studies (note the shift of vocabulary) start from exactly these problems and challenges. It is not ethical to work with a model for American art history that reproduces these imperialist paradigms. Americanists know this. These problems, limits, and historical wounds define our work. But, of course, many of us did not train in art history departments and do not work in them. This is particularly true for scholars writing about African American, U.S. Latino, Asian American, and Native American art and visual culture. Few art history department hire in these fields and when they do they often exclude scholars whose disciplinary roots are closer to black studies or American studies than art history, for example. (It is also true that some emerging scholars who write about art, visual culture, and performance from these vantage points would not think of applying for positions in art history, since the field has such a terrible record when it comes to the reproduction of racist frameworks in its curricula.) This is to say that I do not think that it is a problem particular to American art history as a field of inquiry. It is, however, particular to a number of art history departments. Some are progressive, and many—too many—are not.

So, I was surprised by the question, "Is American art history conservative?" The problem of conservatism is not specific to the field itself. The question describes the effects of an art world that marks American histories and practices not articulated through New York and the avant-garde as local.¹ Everything that falls outside of that trajectory is read as regionalist and provincial, as either too American (e.g. folk, outsider art) or as not American enough, as if often the case with Mexican American, Chicana/o and Latina/o art histories. These terms — Mexican American, Chicana/o and Latina/o are all too poorly understood by art institutions, which use them more readily to describe an untapped demographic than cultural practices with specific, intersecting histories. Work by black and brown artists is viewed through a racial framework, as Darby English

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and Kobena Mercer have argued. This frame work is blind to the form, content, and historical contexts for the work.² Exhibition practices shy away from the viciousness of the colonial fantasies that make landscape painting attractive and mythologies about Mission life so enduring. Conservative approaches to those subjects displace genocidal histories which are, in fact, embedded in the objects we study and haunt the galleries in which they are displayed.

Defensive thinking about what counts as American is offensive because it is always xenophobic and racist. Defensive thinking regarding what counts as art history is haunted by that same colonial anxiety. The study of American art history and visual culture, as I know it through the work of scholars like Martin Berger, Chadwick Allen and Cherise Smith (to pick three very different scholars) is a resistant practice. It is articulated against the colonial pressures that shape our understanding of place and time (What is America? Which past counts? What histories are erased by disciplinary discourses?). For me, American art history is profoundly rewarding as an area of research and teaching because you cannot hide from those truths. The greater question for this scholar is whether art history departments and its disciplinary organs are committed to catching up with what American studies has to teach them.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, the critique of the tendency to narrate contemporary art history in the United States through a New York-centered history of the avant-garde by Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner, "The Counterculture Experiment: Consciousness and Encounters at the Edge of Art" in *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment, 1965–1977* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvii–xxxv.

² Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); See Mercer's introduction and his essay "Tropes of the Grotesque in the Black Avant-Garde" in Kobena Mercer, ed. *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 6–35; 136–59.