

White people are _____

December 5–15

John Baldessari, Tina Barney, Vanessa Beecroft, Robert Longo, Bruce Nauman, and Pope.L

Curatorial Statement

White people are _____ is a multimedia exhibition that asks viewers to consider the implications of white identity. “White” in this context, refers to a socially constructed racial category with no biological foundation, and “whiteness” refers to a set of privileges granted to “white” individuals—a powerful structure with tangible, violent effects. Throughout the Western world, representations of white bodies and whiteness have historically dominated popular visual culture, literature, and mass media narratives. Yet, this disproportionate representation of white identity remains largely uninvestigated by dominant white society, affording it a privilege to consider white individuals to be neutral or non-racialized and rendering the overwhelming ubiquitous presence of whiteness “invisible” to those privileged by it but starkly evident to those oppressed and disadvantaged by this system.

White people are _____ is a framework to examine how whiteness has operated in the practices and biographies of a selection of artists from the Marieluise Hessel Collection: John Baldessari, Tina Barney, Vanessa Beecroft, Robert Longo, Bruce Nauman, and Pope.L. The exhibition considers how white identity has been implicated, or not, in discussions and readings of these

works. Focusing on pieces created between 1970 and 2000, the exhibition contextualizes these works within a complex sociopolitical history of race and class struggle in the United States that has been shaped by implicit biases, segregation, and structural and systemic inequality.

The exhibition takes its title from a text work in Pope.L's *Skin Set* series which playfully demonstrate a wry criticism of "neutral" racial phrases often stated in liberal white circles that oversimplify racism as an individual action, rather than a systematic and deeply embedded aspect of society. In this sense, *White people are* _____ seeks not to fill the blank, or to create an essential idea of whiteness but instead to underline the unmarked quality of white identity by examining the values and social practices that normalize and reproduce the hegemony of a white-dominated society.

White people are _____ is curated by Paulina Ascencio Fuentes, Georgie Payne, and Gee Wesley.

Artwork Descriptions

John Baldessari, *The Meaning of Various Photographs to Ed Henderson*, 1973. Video, black and white, sound.

In this work, Baldessari casts his student Ed Henderson to perform a series of exercises exploring identification, interpretation, and construction of meaning. The artist is interested in how truth can be manipulated when images are presented out of context, and the way the unconscious is projected in the process of interpretation. Henderson is introduced at the beginning of the video, which outlines how the subjectivity through which these images are read operates through particular conditions defined by race, class, and gender. This work is a prompt to consider how identities are implicated in this process of interpretation, both within the video and in the viewer's approach to the works in this exhibition.

Tina Barney, *The Graham Cracker Box*, 1983. C-print, ed. 3/10.

Barney is well known for large-scale color photographs that depict interior domestic scenes shot in upper-class American homes. She often includes subjects from her own wealthy, East Coast family and social circles. This exhibition invites viewers to read Barney's thoughtful meditations on affluence, status, and class through the lens of race. Consider, for instance, how *The Graham Cracker Box* might be discussed in terms of its subjects' white identity and privilege, and how the evolution of suburban US home ownership has been shaped through restrictions on Black home ownership ("redlining") and the retreat of demographic waves of white groups away from urban centers ("white flight").

Vanessa Beecroft, *VBGDW*, 2000. Digital C-print, ed. 2/6.

Since the 1990s, Beecroft has created photographs and large-scale durational performances with nude and semiclothed professional models flanked in rows or posed in exhibition spaces, and highlighted skin tones and the body as formal elements. This exhibition shifts attention on Beecroft herself by prompting viewers to consider how the artist's white identity has shaped the presentation and signature style of her work. *VBGDW* is a work depicting the artist's own wedding. Although Beecroft's recent work has shifted to increasingly present nonwhite subjects, these series nonetheless reduce race to the aesthetics of skin tone, fetishizing skin color without consideration for the political and social complexities of race.

Robert Longo, *Untitled (White Riot Series)*, 1982. Charcoal, graphite, and ink on paper.

Part of Longo's iconic *Men in Cities* series (1977–1983), this monolithic drawing depicts an archetype of success and money-driven young white urban professionals,

more commonly known as “yuppies.” Though the series has been exhibited widely since its debut in 1980, it has gone largely uninvestigated in terms of the racial implications of the figures and their role within the city spaces to which the title alludes. Within this exhibition, Longo’s figures and their unmarked white identities are drawn out for consideration, for instance, how they might be implicated in waves of gentrification across major metropolitan centers in the US.

Bruce Nauman, *Good Boy, Bad Boy*, 1985. Two-channel video installation (color, sound), ed. 31/40.

In Nauman’s *Good Boy, Bad Boy* two figures, one a white female, the other a black male, read the same series of one hundred phrases, five times each. As they read, the performers’ deliveries grow increasingly emphatic and intensified, varying in tone, cadence, and speed, creating moments of synchronicity and dissonance between the two monitors. By focusing on the dichotomy set up by the artist, this exhibition asks viewers to consider their own projections and implicit bias within the racialized and coded implications of the two performers’ delivery of the identical scripts.

Bruce Nauman, *White Anger, Red Danger, Yellow Peril, Black Death*, 1985. Neon tubing and wire with clear glass tubing suspension frame.

According to its exhibition history at the Hessel Museum and external loans since its acquisition in 1992, this work has been contextualized in relation to light, color, and neon. However, these categories pay no attention to the text itself and render the language subordinate to the form in which it is presented. This work’s reception has disregarded the literal meanings of the phrases that flash before the viewer. By distancing from the formal and material aspects in favor of a reading focused on the words themselves, this exhibition foregrounds the

work's relation to specific social dynamics based on racial prejudice.

Pope.L, *Old Time Saying*, 2003. Vinyl and PVS.

Old Time Saying is a work from Pope.L's *Skin Set* series. Made between 1979 and 1994 the works form a wry criticism of "neutral" racial tropes commonly used in liberal white circles through a playful take on evasive "colorblind" phrases. Directly addressing the social constructions of language and race, Pope.L's work demonstrates the absurdity of how these phrases function within a flawed understanding of racism in terms of individuals and actions rather than a systemic function of society. The phrases to which he refers thereby downplay or degrade the realities of how race operates in society.

Checklist

All works from the Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, unless otherwise noted.

John Baldessari, *The Meaning of Various Photographs to Ed Henderson*, 1973. Video, black and white, sound.

Tina Barney, *The Graham Cracker Box*, 1983. C-print, ed. 3/10. 47 3/4 in. × 60 3/4 in. (121.29 cm × 154.31 cm).

Vanessa Beecroft, *VBGDW*, 2000. Digital C-print, ed. 2/6. 51 1/8 in. × 62 1/2 in. (129.86 cm × 158.75 cm).

Robert Longo, *Untitled (White Riot Series)*, 1982.

Charcoal, graphite, and ink on paper. 98 in. × 181 1/2 in. × 4 1/4 in. (248.92 cm × 461.01 cm × 10.8 cm).

Bruce Nauman, *Good Boy, Bad Boy*, 1985. Two-channel video installation (color, sound), ed. 31/40.

Bruce Nauman, *White Anger, Red Danger, Yellow Peril, Black Death*, 1985. Neon tubing and wire with clear glass tubing suspension frame. 80 in. × 86 1/2 in. (203.2 cm × 219.71 cm).

Pope.L, *Old Time Saying*, 2003. Vinyl and PVS.

Pope.L, *White People Are Black People Are Good*, 1997–2010. Acrylic on paper. 23 1/2 in. x 18 in. (60 cm x 46 cm).

Reading List

Baldwin, James, and Toni Morrison. *Collected Essays*. New York: The Library of America, 1998.

Berger, Maurice. *White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999.

DiAngelo, Robin J. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. London: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2019.

Dyer, Richard. *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Fanon, Frantz, Charles Lam Markmann, and Paul Gilroy. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press, 2017.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., 2015.

Painter, Nell Irvin. *The History of White People*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2011.

Pope.L, Helen Anne Molesworth, Iain Kerr, and Dirié Clément. *Black People Are Cropped: Skin Set Drawings*, 1997–2011. Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2013.

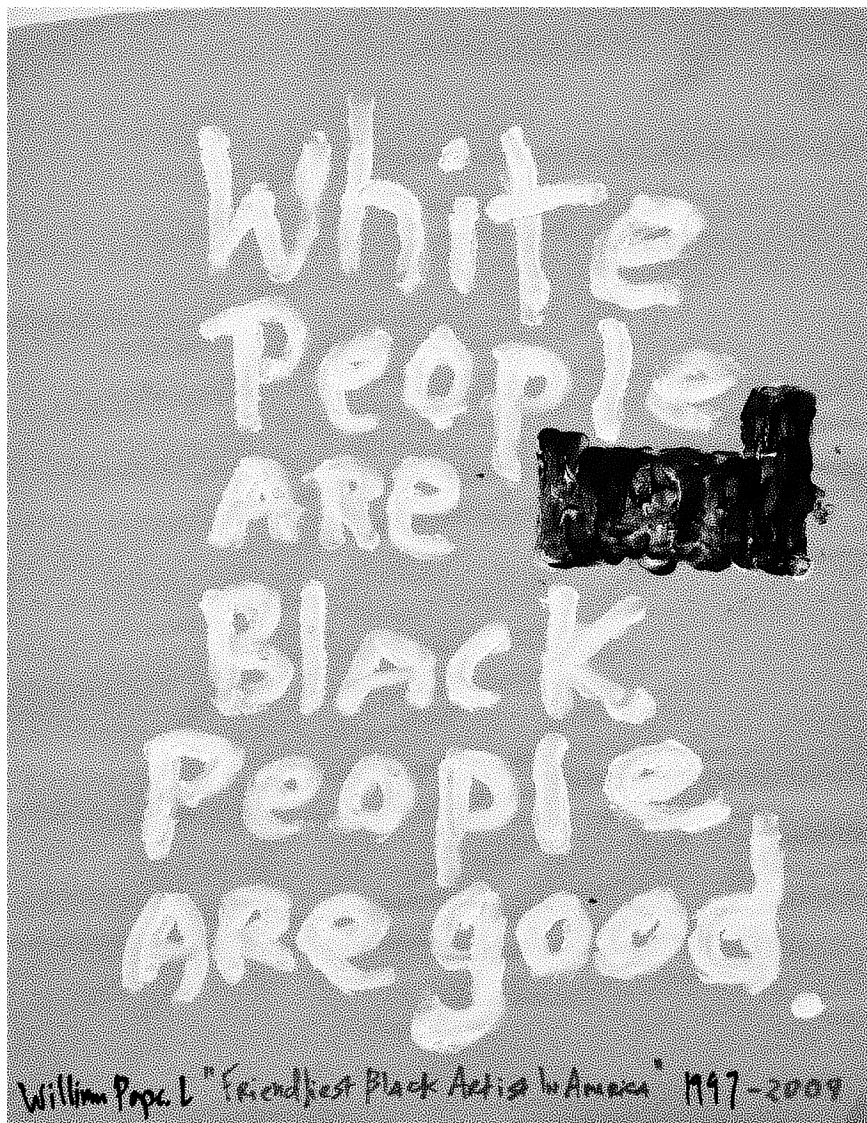
Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. London: Penguin, 2015.

Wise, Tim J. *Colorblind: Barack Obama, Post-Racial Liberalism and the Retreat from Racial Equity*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2010.

Yancy, George. *What White Looks like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*. New York: Routledge, 2004.



Tina Barney, *The Graham Cracker Box*, Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.



Pope.L, *White People Are Black People Are Good*, Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

