

Physical exhibition. Alicia Henry, *Analogous III* (detail), 2020. Acrylic, thread, yarn, and dyed leather, variable dimensions. University Art Gallery, UC Irvine © 2021.



The Black Index

LOCATION University Art Gallery at the University of California, Irvine (host museum)

DATES Traveling January 14, 2021 to April 3, 2022

ONLINE Ongoing at www.theblackindex.art

Pointing Back to the People: Curating Space to Celebrate and Mourn Black Lives

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The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 in response to the acquittal of the murderer of unarmed Black teen Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. Since then, more and more cases and incidents of police and other violence against Black people have been recorded through photos and videos that are often posted on social media. While anti-Black violence is hardly new, the intensity and accessibility of images and live-coverage footage have increased exponentially over the past nine years. Depictions of mutilated and murdered Black bodies have been dispersed across the Internet, the news, and into our daily lives so often that a 400-year legacy of Black bodies being anonymized and linked to violence and suffering has extended into the digital world. The dissemination of these images has been exacerbated by the pandemic and the murders of Ahmed Aubrey, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and many more at the hands of the police.

The Black Index presents an alternative to the bombardment of images of Black distress. While the exhibition does not stray away from the collective and individual traumas experienced by Black people, it creates space to reaffirm Black personhood and find moments of beauty within Black existence, Black histories, and even Black mourning. The exhibition,

The critique is a writer's assessment of an exhibition, shaped by their professional expertise and their own visitor experience, and formed without (or with only minimal) consultation with the exhibit's creators. Its audience is the profession.



curated by Bridget R. Cooks, Associate Professor at the University of California, Irvine, was originally planned to travel to the Palo Alto Art Center and museums at the University of California Irvine and the University of Texas at Austin; however, COVID-19 closings led to its production in digital form. It is ironic that a curator interested in examining the limitations of online imagery had to, out of necessity, place her exhibition online. Nonetheless, the initiative succeeds by taking audience members on reflective and emotional journeys.

Entering the digital exhibition, one is placed between two large black walls. On the screen viewer's right are small, seemingly unassuming ink drawings of the spirits of lost and murdered Black ancestors, which are channeled and depicted by Kenyatta A. C. Hinkle (fig. 1). These drawings are so many in number that they engulf the wall on which they are displayed. On the left are four small iPads® presenting David Delgado's *The Dark Database*, a digital art piece that portrays the limitations of facial recognition on Black people by surveillance technologies (fig. 2). Directly in front of the visitor, at the end of a hall, one glimpses Alicia Henry's *Analogous III*, a collection of unique distressed black leather faces beckoning the viewer to venture deeper (intro image). Though you are able to catch a glimpse of the artworks on each wall, the room feels empty. There are no chairs, benches, or signage within the virtual exhibition space. The room is photographed in such a way that it feels large, quiet, and still. While it is online, the viewer moves around the exhibition space as if they were walking. No other people or distractions are present within the gallery and so one is left with nothing else but the art and their thoughts.

While coming from vastly different practices, all the artists use portraiture as central to their work. While some portraits are hyperrealistic, others are abstracted and difficult to recognize at first glance. Moving through an empty gallery space that surrounds you with the likenesses of people and families encourages you to reflect and ask: where have all these people gone? What do we wish we knew about them and why? Who *should* be here? Through the digital representation, it is hard to discern the artworks' details and what they depict. To see the images, the digital viewer must rely on the zoom feature which often requires several clicks. Like the digital images of Black bodies online, through the virtual tour, most of the artworks feel anonymized. The viewer's dependency on the zoom feature is not necessarily a flaw or a critique of the virtual design. This act of having to look deeper and wait for the images to be revealed makes hypervisible to the viewer the sort of work that may be necessary to identify and "un-anonymize" the Black people who have been displayed across the Internet. Some may think that "#SayTheirName" is enough to reconcile the distribution of Black victims' images across the Internet. But this act of zooming serves to remind us that one must overcome levels of separation, get closer, and spend time with each individual person to see them more fully.

Once the image is completely visible, the viewer is forced to focus on one point, on one moment, with no space for escape or reprieve. The images consume the screen and challenge those who gaze upon them to engage one-on-one, alone, in silence. These elements – the stillness, the portraiture, and the focus on the artworks – makes the online experience

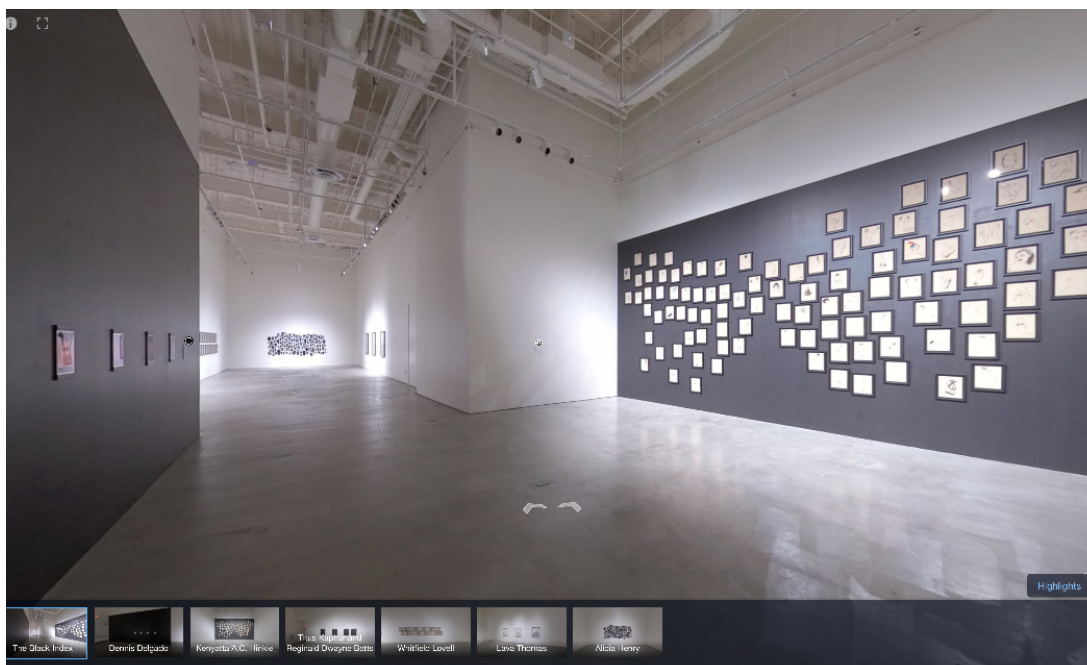


Fig. 1. Digital exhibition. Left: Dennis Delgado, *The Dark Database*, 2020. Tagged image format file, 7-5/8" x 7-5/8". Courtesy of the artis. Right: Kenyatta A. C. Hinkle, *The Evanesced: The Untouchables*, 2020. 100 drawings, India ink and watercolor on recycled, acid-free paper, 12" x 9" each. Courtesy of the artist.

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Fig. 2. Physical exhibition. Left: Dennis Delgado, *The Dark Database*, 2020. Right: Whitfield Lovell, *The Card Pieces*, 2020. Charcoal pencil on paper with attached playing card, 12" x 9" each. Courtesy of the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York. University Art Gallery, UC Irvine © 2021.



Fig. 3. Physical exhibition. View in *The Black Index*, University Art Gallery, UC Irvine © 2021.



deeply personal and gives the viewer space to privately contemplate, not just the artwork, but the feelings of this exhibition.

As alluded to earlier, the digital was not at all the intended platform for these works, so after the end of California's government-mandated museum closures, *The Black Index* took its intended tour and opened at the Palo Alto Art Center. When you first arrive, early in the morning, as the only person to inhabit the space, you feel the same deep connection to the artworks as you had in the virtual space (fig. 3). But in person, the size and incredible details of these pieces fill you with awe. Within the exhibition, you can hear the faint voices of Black musicians gently engulf the gallery in immersive sound as you walk through, peering at the images. Online there is a playlist option, but in person, the music comes standard and fills the room in a way a speaker cannot compare.

Before this moment, I had assumed that all exhibitions are best experienced face-to-face, in the flesh. What I have come to realize, though, is that there are many uncontrollable variables that impact the in-person experience. As your journey through the gallery continues, more people begin to trickle in. As a viewer, your deeply personal and private moment is interrupted by cell phone calls, disgruntled teenagers, and the occasional groundhog guest – who pops in and out multiple times but never stays more than a minute. Ordinarily, these types of interactions are not much of a distraction, but with an exhibition like *The Black Index*, where so much of the work is about bearing witness, it could feel disheartening and upsetting to see such flippancy. This is not to critique the other guests, but instead an attempt to make visible the value of the

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digital space. Digitally, the viewer is able to construct their experience and define their personal connection to the exhibition. With the privacy of your computer neither you or the other viewers of the exhibition are competing against the attention of the artworks. As a result, the exhibition becomes exactly what it was intended to be – a space to have a personal connection to our lost Black kin and the art.



Fig. 4. Digital exhibition. Titus Kaphar, *Redaction (San Francisco)*, 2020. Etching and silkscreen on paper. Courtesy of Titus Kaphar and Reginald Dwayne Betts.



Fig. 5. Physical exhibition. Titus Kaphar, *The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) XV & The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) XI*, 2015. Chalk on asphalt paper, 49" x 36". Museum of Modern Art, Fund for the Twenty-First Century. ©Titus Kaphar. Digital Image ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/ArtResource, NY.

With that said, the in-person experience does facilitate a different type of presentation that helps the audience understand the power of the images. Digitally, the exhibition beautifully conveys the emotion and gravity of the pieces, but in person, the viewer captures minute details and interacts with the artworks more, which transforms the exhibition experience into something different (figs. 4 & 5). Cooks' decision to incorporate diverse portrayals of Black people across time guides the viewers to build a relationship and a genuine interest into each person's life and history. In *Mugshot Portraits: Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott*, for example, the viewer is compelled to follow each delicate stroke of artist Lava Thomas's pencil (fig. 6). Near the right

eyebrow – a mole; in her left hand – a piece of paper; wrapped around her arm – the string of her placard. These moments encapsulate the humanness of each person. The more you look at the images of *The Black Index*, the more distinct and personal aspects of the depicted people begin to reveal themselves.

While the viewer has not witnessed the creation of any of these images, the act of looking at different sized, various stylized, but equally cared for artworks gives the viewer a chance to practice witnessing and searching for intimacy between themselves and others. What makes this exhibition so powerful is its dedication not just to social equity or a recognition of anti-Black violence, but its commitment to care and love for

Black community members who have been lost across centuries. In many of the works, through their sheer number of images and the arduous practice of constructing them, the artists are activating care and imagination as a medium to give people who we have lost a second life. Through the selection of emotionally and physically demanding artworks that channel the lives and stories of murdered, lost, and disappeared Black ancestors and displaying them in the physical, *The Black Index* is performing acts of reverence for those that are missed.

The Black Index is not about bringing attention to anti-Black violence, though it does. Rather the exhibition serves as a moment of stillness in the chaos of racist systems, to remind those who witness it, that Black loss is in fact a loss and that we are allowed and must take time to experience human emotions and rituals to process and cope with this loss. *The Black Index* helps the viewer find blackness beyond just pain and suffering; it points back to Black personhood, Black joy, Black spirituality, and Black imagination. ■

Fig. 6. Physical exhibition. Lava Thomas, *Mugshot Portraits: Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott*, Addie J. Hamerter, Alberta J. James, Jo Ann Robinson, 2018. Graphite and Conté pencil on paper, 47" x 33-1/4". Courtesy of Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco. Image courtesy of the artist and Rena Bransten Gallery.

