

Forming American Identities: Our Southern Legacy

by Andrea Douglas

Seizing an Opportunity to Address Racism

In 2004, the United Northern and Southern Knights of the KKK distributed their publication *The Klansman's Voice* in middle-class neighborhoods in Charlottesville, Virginia, and in an interview with a local reporter, announced the establishment of a regional office in Gordonsville, a town just fifteen miles north of Charlottesville. One year later in September 2005, the University of Virginia appointed its first diversity officer. This hire came none too soon as *The Washington Post* reported nine racist incidents in the first few weeks of classes at the University. These instances included racist threats scrawled on a bathroom wall and racist graffiti written on Beta Bridge, a major landmark at the institution (Boorsten, 2005). In protest of such attacks students rallied on the lawn, and University President John Casteen spoke on the steps of the Rotunda, condemning such activities.

We at the University of Virginia Art Museum felt a strong desire to respond to what seemed to be increasing racial discord on the campus. We also wondered how such occurrences reflected the mindset of the nation given the escalating debate about American borders and identity. We felt an exploration of Southern culture and its impact on American identity would lend itself to these broader considerations. In December 2005, an opportunity to delve into our

topic presented itself when the Museum received a proposal for the exhibition ***The Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*** from the Gibbes Museum in Charleston, South Carolina.

Slavery, Segregation and the Ku Klux Klan: Exhibiting the Unexhibitable

The approaching anniversaries of two momentous dates in the history of Charlottesville and the nation also provided impetus for addressing race and identity issues. In 1807-1808 Thomas Jefferson signed the bill that ended the importation of new slaves into the United States. One hundred and fifty years later, Charlottesville was the center of the dispute around Virginia's program of "Massive Resistance," the group of laws supported by Senator Harry F. Byrd in 1958 to defy the Supreme Court mandated integration of the nation's schools. Over the course of the next year three exhibitions and their accompanying programs were joined under the umbrella title ***Forming American Identities: Our Southern Legacy***, and became the platform for acknowledging these events.

The Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art

Comprised of more than seventy-five works in all media, the exhibition contextualizes four centuries of plantation and related slave imagery within the history of American landscape painting. It also considers the way these images serve as social

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and political markers of race relations in this country. Works such as Winslow Homer's *Visit from the Old Mistress* (1876) and Carrie Mae Weem's *Sea Island Series* (1992) juxtaposed, are iconic representations of the complicated aftermath of slavery. Scheduled at the University January through April 2008, the exhibition later traveled to the Gibbes Museum in Charleston, SC as part of their Spoleto programming, and to the Morris Museum of Art in Augusta, Georgia. For more information go to <http://www.themorris.org/art/landscapeofslavery.html>.

William Christenberry: Site/Possession

As we developed the program, William Christenberry, an artist who had spoken at the University some years earlier, came immediately to mind. Working closely with the artist, Andrea Douglas, Curator of Collections and Exhibitions, developed *William Christenberry: Site/Possession*. Scheduled for October through December 2007, the exhibition presented 53 rarely seen drawings dating from 1953 to the present and examples of Christenberry's wall constructions, photography, and painting. The exhibition also included Christenberry's *Klan Room Tableau* which features works that examine the Klan's ominous social impact. Together these works describe the artist's interest in memory, perception, and improvisation. They also explicate his struggle with the complex racial history of Alabama's Hale and Tuscaloosa Counties. For more information go to http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/u_museum/exhibits.html.

The Dresser Trunk Project

Serendipity played a considerable role in determining the remainder of the exhibition schedule. William Daryl Williams, associate

professor of architecture at the University, contacted then director Jill Hartz to inquire about the cost of crates for his exhibition *The Dresser Trunk Project*. After hearing about the subject and format of his touring exhibition Hartz felt it would complement the deliberation on place that was at the heart of both *Landscape of Slavery* and *Site/Possession*. Featuring eleven trunks designed by architects from around the country, *The Dresser Trunk Project* addressed the way in which whites and blacks during Jim Crow occupied officially segregated spaces in locales along the Southern Crescent line, currently the Amtrak route that extends from New Orleans to New York City. The trunks reclaim the stories through photographs, maps, hotel registers, and computer-generated models of such places as the Glory Hole Club in Harlem and the Littlejohn Grill in Clemson. These sites, once owned by African Americans, have either changed use or, unable to achieve historical designation, have been demolished. After leaving Charlottesville, the exhibition travels to New York, Pennsylvania and Washington DC in Fall 2008. For more information go to http://www.williamdarylwilliams.com/Site/DTP_Gallery.html.

Public Programs

The Museum's goals for *Forming American Identities* were lofty. One objective, to influence the University's curriculum and engender conversations about race, was met in the fall of 2006 when twenty-five faculty members across disciplines agreed to use the exhibitions in their classes. We also wanted to diversify the Museum's constituency. Charlottesville's African American population had expressed little interest in the Museum's exhibitions and associated programs, with the exception of its

K-12 and Summer Arts programs. To rectify this the Museum worked with church groups and civic organizations to identify members of the community with shared interests who could participate in our Ambassador Docent program. We also wanted to increase student participation in the Museum by partnering with the student council and various fraternities and sororities. Our efforts were successful, with 17,000 visitors coming to the Museum between October and May, representing an increase in visitation of 15 per cent over the same period the previous year.

Colloquium Series

The main program for the year was an interdisciplinary series of colloquia that examined the ways in which Southern culture permeated American culture. The series began with a discussion of D.W Griffith's 1915 movie *Birth of a Nation* and its 1920 response *Within Our Gates* by African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. A second program featured conversations with three architects involved in *The Dresser Trunk Project* about the way African American performance spaces such as diners, and hotels became integrated zones. Faculty members and graduate students from the University's music department discussed various forms of Southern music and its impact on American music. And in March, in conjunction with the Festival of the Book, writers discussed the viability of the term Southern literature. In the spring, the colloquia were augmented by lunch box talks where visitors were able to partake in intimate conversations with University scholars about individual works in *The Landscape of Slavery*.

Preparing Our Audiences Staff and Docent Training

Early in our conversations with William Christenberry we were advised that extensive outreach was necessary if we were going to show the *Klan Tableau*. Recognizing the complexity of the topics addressed in each exhibition and wanting to encourage open dialogue about the Museum's goals for them, the curatorial team felt it important to provide staff with tools to respond effectively to

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Installation view of *The Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*. All photos courtesy of AnaMarie Lidell.

visitors who might accuse them of being racist or insensitive. Docents, students, curators, museum guards, development officers and business office staff came together with a multicultural trainer on three occasions to discuss the exhibitions' content, their feelings about slavery, segregation and the Ku Klux Klan, as well as strategies for addressing Museum constituents that might ask difficult questions. This was an important exercise for many of our staff who would certainly not characterize themselves as racist but who were unused to discussing or reflecting on the impact of living in a racialized society.



Installation of **The Dresser Trunk Project**.

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Community Outreach

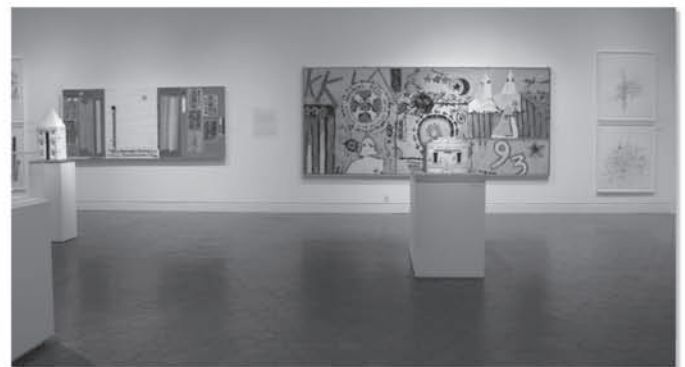
Our outreach into the community began with a telling meeting with the Community Resource Action Group (CRAG) of the University's Office of Diversity. In January 2007, the Museum presented its exhibition schedule to twenty business and social service leaders from the community. While most were supportive of our efforts, some were apprehensive about the effect the exhibitions would have on the University's image. One person expressed concern that we might read in national newspapers that the University was supporting the Klan. Another indicated that the violence perpetuated by the organization was still very real for some of the older members of the community who might feel offended by the Museum's presentation. During Massive Resistance, Alabama Klan members traveled to Charlottesville to help maintain order. In so doing, several crosses were burned on African American property throughout the city.

Finally, there was concern about the administration. The group asked if the President's office had been informed of our intentions and if they had sanctioned the

exhibition. We had never in the past had to inform the President's office about our intentions for exhibitions; it was certain from this meeting that this was our next step. Once apprised of our intentions however, it remained unclear if the University had reservations about the series until two days before *Site/Possession* opened when the newly appointed Provost and the VP of Diversity visited the exhibition. After their tour of the show, their primary interest seemed to be that the University's Office of Public Affairs receive adequate information to address public concerns. They did not return to tour the other exhibitions.

Community Responses to our Efforts

Over the spring and summer of 2006 the Museum curator visited various organizations hoping to recruit Ambassador Docents who would come to trainings and then work with members of their own communities addressing the issues relevant to themselves. Our most



Installation view of **William Christenberry: Site/Possession**.

meaningful partnerships were with Quality Community Council, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, and Sojourners United Church of Christ.

William Christenberry was invited to lecture at Quality Community Council in June 2007. The event was planned in relationship to the City's annual Festival of the Photograph with the idea that Christenberry's reputation as a photographer would encourage a diverse audience. However, one week prior to his lecture, the *Daily Progress*, Charlottesville's local newspaper, reported the Klan leafleting of yet another community. Publishers of this edition of *The Klansman's Voice* asserted that associations with the old Klan gave the organization "a bad rap." Contrary to popular belief, this new Klan had no problem with Blacks as long as they were hardworking members of the community (*Daily Progress*, 2007). Moreover, this new version had more in common with the NAACP as they advocated for the development of a Christian scholarship. As a consequence of this event, reception to Christenberry was guarded. Prior to attending his slide lecture, one participant who had been terrorized by the Klan as a young child declared that she had no interest in hearing anything about the organization. Many greeted the event with distrust, not completely believing that Christenberry's installation did not present the Klan positively. Conversation after the artist's presentation was heated, with much of the discussion centering on the idea that the Klan would find Charlottesville, typically considered a bastion of democratic idealism, ripe for their proselytizing. Fortunately, after nearly three hours of conversation, no one considered the *Tableau* to be pro-Klan.



Installation view of *Klan Room Tableau*.

In December 2007, twenty members from Sojourners Church led by our Ambassador Docents came to tour *Site/Possession* and *The Dresser Trunk Project*. Afterwards, they met in the Museum and held a two-hour discussion with a multicultural trainer. Most participants spoke about their various encounters with the Klan as well as the way in which their knowledge of racial unrest in the South affected their perceptions of life there. The generational differences in the group clearly defined the way the Klan was considered. For older members it seemed more visceral while for the younger ones, the discussion was more abstract and their sense of the organization bridged larger conversations about economics and immigration. The fact that the Charlottesville trunk described Beatrice Fowkles' Carver Inn was also discussed. While none of the group remembered the Inn, some felt the demolition of the building to make way for the City's expansion was just one of a series of slights to the African American population and symbolic of the ever widening racial divide felt in the City. Many participants in this discussion returned to the Museum for *Landscape*

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of Slavery, again taking part in similar conversations and attending the lunch box talks.

William Christenberry: Site/Possession—A Case Study

The exhibition opened in mid-October 2007. In its complete iteration the *Klan Room Tableau* occupied 500 square feet and was comprised of three hundred objects including drawings, dolls, photographs and building constructions. Upon completion of the installation, Christenberry met with Museum docents, Ambassador Docents, and staff to again describe his motivation for creating the *Tableau*. Faced with the body of work, the audience was visibly affected, with responses running a broad spectrum. Many members of the group believed the *Tableau* was not enough of an indictment of the xenophobic organization. One woman in particular felt the artist was not graphic enough in his negative depiction of the organization's symbols. However, most participants praised the artist for his courage in creating the body of work.

Organizing the exhibition's tour was no less challenging than navigating the Museum's various constituents. A primary goal for the tour was to have the *Tableau* shown at a Southern institution with a significant Civil Rights history. This was particularly important to us, as this may be the last time that Christenberry is actively involved in installing the *Tableau*. We directed our solicitations to University museums, believing they would bring the necessary inter-disciplinary resources to the exhibition and were more free to engender conversations about race. However, many of the institutions we contacted did not take the exhibition, citing reasons such as fear

of alienating donors; fear of branding the organization as controversial; or an inability to do the extensive community programming that seemed to be required. In the South it seemed that displaying the *Tableau* could cause one to lose one's job. Those that expressed interest in Christenberry's work instead chose to program one of the other two less-controversial traveling exhibitions featuring the artist's work. Nonetheless, at the time of this writing the exhibition has traveled to the American University Museum, and the University of Mississippi Museums, Oxford Mississippi. It will also be shown at the Asheville Art Museum, Asheville, North Carolina, the Staniar Gallery, Washington and Lee University in Lynchburg Virginia, and the Samek Art Gallery, Bucknell University, Pennsylvania.

When *Site/Possession* opened at the American University Museum in February, *Washington Post* staff writer Teresa Wiltz reviewed it in the Style section and described the *Tableau* as too abstract to engender any strong feeling. For her, the installation seemed dated and lacked relevancy since it was devoid of any direct reference to the victims of the Klan. Without these realities she asserts, "Christenberry's twisted dolls just feel like make-believe"(2007). The American University Museum did not do extensive outreach; Christenberry's reputation in DC and the Museum's own reputation of presenting difficult exhibitions seemed to negate the need.

However, when the show traveled to Oxford, Mississippi in July the response was quite different. The University Museum intended to partner with the William Winters Institute for Racial Reconciliation but they were unable to accomplish this goal, opting instead to



Christenberry docent talk at the University of Virginia Art Museum.

present their public programs in September. During July and August, African American faculty and staff protested against the *Tableau*, finding it offensive, the artist's intentions notwithstanding. The curator reported that one woman asked why he would embarrass the University in this manner. Others wondered about the timing of the exhibition given the impending Presidential debate scheduled one week after the close of the exhibition. The most interesting exchange was with a white faculty member who had been prompted to see the exhibition by his black colleagues. He was so disheartened by its content he could not remain in the installation. Later when he was questioned about its details, he admitted he had not seen the objects that suggested the artist's position on the Klan. Ultimately, the disquiet surrounding the exhibition prompted the intervention of the University's Vice Chancellor and an emergency meeting between faculty and Douglas, the exhibition's curator, was called. As of the writing of this paper, the meeting has yet to occur.

The Importance of Trust

It is clear from reactions to *Forming American Identities* that the sentiment of racial distrust engendered by the legacy of slavery, segregation, and Klan terror endures. In Charlottesville in particular, the program challenged a social history that still affects race relations in the city. The aestheticizing of politics and the politicizing of aesthetics inherent in each

exhibition created a level of ambiguity that resisted the dogmatism and historical specificity demanded by some viewers. It also increased the possibility that each exhibition's content and purpose would be misread. We ran the risk of embarrassing the University and adding to the racial divide in the City. We were determined to proceed nonetheless, driven largely by the sense that the Museum could play a role in bridging the gap amongst its various constituents.

While much of our activity centered on the Christenberry exhibition, it laid the groundwork for the other shows, establishing a constituency that would participate in our other programs. In presenting *Forming American Identities* our greatest lesson learned is that one cannot begin a dialogue about American identity and race without a high degree of trust amongst internal as well as external participants. This finding appears to be supported by the very different response on the campus of Ol' Miss, where the necessary community dialogue and outreach has yet to occur. The extensive partnerships and educational programming developed by our Museum created a level of expectation that fostered open discussion and the possibility for continued collaboration. Our success is gauged by the noticeable increase in African American attendance, the breadth of scholarship brought to the exhibitions, and the burgeoning sense of the Museum as a forum for community dialogue. ☀

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