

White Lee, Black Lee

William Pope.L's *Reenactor*

What is Robert E. Lee? In the Confederate mythos, Robert E. Lee is the gentleman general. A cultured Virginian, graduate of West Point, gracious in victory and noble in defeat, Lee gave his saber to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse as a sign of the South's surrender. Lee also owned slaves, albeit "reluctantly," after inheriting his father-in-law's plantation. He freed them in December 1862—days before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. In the Reconstruction years, Lee became a symbol of reconciliation. Cities both North and South erected statues of the honorable General astride Traveller, his favorite horse.

What is Robert E. Lee? For a pair of mangled puppets (one Lee and the other Traveller) in William Pope.L's video *Reenactor* (2009/2012) (recently installed in Pope.L's exhibition at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA), the answer is less textbook. "A man," says the horse puppet, a booming basso. "A half man, a quarter, an eighth." And, "A hero sandwiched between the lettuce of what we know...and what we can never know." Lee's favorite slave was one Reverend Lee, according to the puppet Traveller, suggesting a sudden fellowship between "favorite" owned animals. What is Robert E. Lee? "An infinite guilt..." And, "Profundity—spread out...has the nutrients of a gruel." Indeed, Lee is a man of contradictions—genteel killer, sympathetic

slaver—and the further his legend stretches into the present, the less able it is to sustain whatever honor might attend the Civil War.

In *Reenactor*, the brooding Socratic puppet show punctuates a video composed mostly of lingering shots of normal folks going about their business. They bathe their kids or sit around tables—with the surrealist conceit that many of them are dressed as Robert E. Lee. Lee was a white man with a gray beard. Yet in the video, black, white, young, old, male, and female all don cheap faux beards, cavalry hats, and gray coats with gold trim: the costume of a Confederate officer. These clothes hold a spectrum of conditions or beliefs; from guilt, shame, and anger, to nostalgia and pride. In the modern South, they become first haunting, then mire.

Like the story of Robert E. Lee, all these Lees are a Southern Gothic fever dream. Bland, desaturated shots of roadsides and bridges deteriorate into extreme digital zooms; the video grain magnifies into baked heat waves. The frame inverts: a bathtub full of bobbing foam letters turns upside down. In another scene, a group of Lees enter a convenience store; one shakes a can of Spaghetti-O's near a baby Lee's ear. The frame racks in, and the shake loops, several times; a detail repeated into, or returned to, a sickening, cheap nauseum. Next, an exterior shot of Lees bolting from the store, running like they stole something. Cut to blurry drive-bys of a commercial strip mall. Pope.L's editing heaps emphasis on the horror of utterly everyday conditions: rearing a child, the weight of history, a can of crappy food.

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What is William Pope.L? An artist—an American artist—an artist with a bone to pick, and so renders the comically mismatched, mothballed Confederate costume a visibility, an anachronism, a fact. So many reenact the South; few react. Some characters are in fact professional reenactors of sorts. Against a backdrop of historic log cabins, a white man dressed as Lee plays a guitar through a portable Fender PA; the shot, though, looks milky and wrinkled, and as the camera pulls back we see the musician is literally inside an inflatable plastic bubble. His song ends, the bubble begins to deflate, and we watch it collapse, in real time, for over a minute, draping suffocatingly around the Lee, guitar dangling, standing stock still.

The muggy duration, the sweaty almost five-hour length of Pope.L's video, runs with no discernible suture, no beginning or end—only a sense of past. Within this wrapped span, his characters wander the South—shabby versions of Lee, bereft of Traveller, now simply travelers themselves. A red suitcase reappears throughout, a persistent symbol held by the same vagrant Lee as he walks along rusted tracks, unpacks or repacks in hotel rooms. The suitcase-wielding Lee dances across a wide municipal lawn; the camera captures him upside down, in reverse, the red suitcase flapping. Pans across freeways slide into trashed yards; billboards give way to low brick buildings. Here is movement with no progress. In another shot, a horse stands up, again and again, on loop. Stock digital filters chop the footage in a way that makes the animal's body look like mud.

The lingering Lee affliction seems invisible to other characters in the video. A man in modern dress, reading a newspaper from a convenience store rack, for example,

doesn't bat an eye as the pack of young Robert E. Lees streams by him into the aisles. Citizens lounge on the courthouse steps in shorts and t-shirts beside a group of Lees in battle dress. Not that some folks ignore history so much as they simply don't see or feel it. For others, though, the dynamism of the Lee myth is poisonous, no longer reconciliation but a festering division. White and black, old and young, Southern or Northern, Pope.L points out, Americans are saddled with and sweat under these martial gray coats, these cavalry hats stitched with the Confederate flag. This is true for those on both sides of the racism that bears that blood colored standard. And this is true of civilians who might think themselves neutral.

The Lee costume is an equivocal joke; unlike a saber, it cuts both ways. Can a general be a gentleman? Can a slave-owner? Can someone who waves the stars and bars? No, no, and no—inasmuch as each requires an embrace of barbarism—the systemic violence that fortifies rank, gentility, and pride. All these Lees, though, seem too weary to be recalcitrant. I write this from the porch of the house in a small North Carolina city where I grew up. To the east is the school where as a child I wrote a book report on Robert E. Lee. To the west, for as long as I can remember, a gigantic Confederate flag hung above a fallow field. So much for myth. In fact, Lee never gave Grant his saber.



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William Pope.L, *Reenactor*
(2009/2012), video still,
270 minutes. Image courtesy of
The Museum of Contemporary
Art, Los Angeles
(Photo: Brian Forrest).