

# Non-Fiction at The Underground Museum

March 2016–  
March 2017

Marion Palfi traveled to Irwintown, Georgia in 1949, because the first reported lynching of that year happened there. Palfi, a socially-motivated, German-born photographer, sought out various members of the small community, interviewed them, and photographed them. She took a portrait of a KKK member and one of the lynched man's wife, Mrs. Caleb Hill (the only name used in photo captions and records), who looks more apprehensive and exhausted than legibly distraught.

The photograph of Mrs. Hill currently hangs in the Underground Museum as part of the show *Non-Fiction*, which was planned by Noah Davis, in collaboration with MOCA, before his death last August. The image hangs on top of wallpaper by Robert Gober, another American preoccupied with lynching, and the only other white artist in the show. Images of a sleeping white man and of a black man hanging from a tree repeat at regular intervals across the wallpaper, titled *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* (1989). It's unclear if the sleeping white man is dreaming of the lynching or altogether oblivious. But Palfi's photograph looks great on top

of those men, interrupting the pattern in just the right way. It's a tense and singular counterpoint to Gober's softly colored repetition.

This is an interesting conundrum in navigating *Non-Fiction*. The show is so tastefully installed—smooth and competent—that it's almost easy, at first glance, to undervalue the charged theme of violence against black bodies, which all of the work confronts in some way. The Palfi-on-Gober hangs in the same room as a Kara Walker black-on-white aquatint (in the style of her cutout work), in which a white man in a top hat holds a naked black girl by the throat. In typical Walker fashion, clean elegant lines make a terrifying scene appear almost decorative. Across from Walker's piece is an installation by David Hammons, in which a gray hoodie rests in an alcove, lit from above. Suspended from the ceiling, the hoodie almost resembles a KKK cloak, pointed at the top and mysterious.

These works too are minimal, well executed, and coexist nicely with the others in the room. But again, this aesthetic unity is so pervasive that it's almost insidious. It subsumes the violence present in so many of the works into a familiar curatorial system, which, whether intentional or not, is perhaps appropriate: systemic violence, systemic silencing, and deep, systemic bias is key to the show's content.

*Non-Fiction* opened at a moment when lynching was having a surreally disturbing resurgence, in news streams and conversations about activism. In June 2016, Jasmine Richards was convicted of a dated crime, called "felony lynching." Richards, an organizer of Black Lives Matter

Catherine Wagley writes about art and visual culture in Los Angeles. She is currently art critic for *LA Weekly* and frequently contributes to a number of other publications.

Pasadena, had participated in a march in August of 2015; she and her fellow marchers demanded that the Pasadena police be held accountable for the death of a 19-year-old named Kendrec McDade, unarmed and shot five times in 2012. Police claim that Richards attempted to stop them from arresting someone, leading them to charge her with a crime dating back to Jim Crow days. “Felony lynching” originally protected from mobs who came to jails to take people of color out of custody or interfere with arrests, to administer their own justice-by-lynching. Another black female activist had been charged with the crime in April 2015, leading to an online stew of confusion. Had these defiant women, exoticized in news photographs, actually lynched someone? Was a crime invented to protect from violence now being used to oppress protesters of violence?

*Non-Fiction*’s stated goal is to grapple with such seemingly absurd realities and to depict them differently than the media does: through art. “How we narrate that violence says a great deal about what we might be able to do to prevent it,” reads the press release, aspirationally. When Davis conceived of *Non-Fiction*, shortly before his death, he had already begun collaborating with MOCA. He knew he would have access to the museum’s collection and resources, which would make it easier to incorporate work by Kara Walker, Robert Gober, and other well-established artists.

Davis and his wife, artist Karon Davis, wanted the Underground Museum to display museum-quality work in 2012, when they first moved into their Arlington Heights storefront and began renovating. But, no institutions would lend to them, for obvious reasons: low budget, lack of security, artist-run status, big front

windows. Instead, for the museum’s inaugural show, Davis constructed replicas of iconic contemporary artworks—Dan Flavin’s lights, Jeff Koons’ Hoover vacuums. He called the show *Imitation of Wealth*, and built a bar in the galleries, imagining neighbors would wander in, look at art, and stick around to talk a bit. Sometimes this happened (a man with a guitar frequented at one point).<sup>1</sup> Later, in summer 2014, Davis staged an exhibition called *The Oracle*, which included West African sculptures from the 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries that were borrowed from a family friend. The sculptures co-existed in the exhibition with a video by Davis’ brother, Khalil Joseph, made to accompany Kendrick Lamar’s *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City* tour that same year. Magical in its grittiness, the video was surprisingly well matched with the sculptures; evidence of the untethered, experimental curating a small space like the Underground could pull off. MOCA’s chief curator, Helen Molesworth, visited to see *The Oracle*, meeting Davis and laying the groundwork for the current collaboration.

“Exotic,” Molesworth calls the space in a recently aired episode of KCET’s *Artbound*, referring to her initial reaction to it and its neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> In the episode, largely an advertisement for MOCA’s “outside-the-box” thinking, the curator also recalls Davis saying, “don’t ask us to come to you. You come to us.” She adds, “And that’s actually just better manners.”

Part of the Underground Museum’s appeal was that it did not treat its location—an area in the city where many artists have studios—as “exotic” or its mission as revolutionary. During the first few years, they barely advertised, and were slow to update their website. In truth, the Davises were struggling to keep the space afloat while raising a child and navigating

1. This information is based on past conversations between myself and Noah and Karon Davis, in early 2013 and the summer of 2014.

2. “MOCA: Beyond the Museum Walls,” *Artbound*, KCET, Los Angeles. May 31, 2016.

Noah's illness, but it also meant the space felt like an under-the-radar local discovery; a small operation.

*Non-Fiction*, the gallery's first exhibition this year, has some of that original experimental energy—the space remains non-descript and easy to stumble across—but it also has more time-honored, museum-quality seriousness than ever before. The works, made by artists with names recognizable to those who traffic in contemporary art worlds, have canonical value.

In its look and feel, the installation recalls an old-school notion that aesthetic continuity is valuable in itself. A trio of inkjet prints by Kerry James Marshall, from his *Heirloom and Accessories* (2002) series, features cameo necklaces with framed faces of three white women attached to long chains. The scene of a lynching is vaguely visible in the background, the women among those in the crowd, accessories to a crime long before Marshall turned them into accessories. The prints shine, as do Deanna Lawson's nearby photographs, sleek and full of intense contrasts.

One photograph by Lawson shows a couple seated in a field of high green grass, his hand on her stomach. Their pose and the image's title, *The Garden, Gemena, DR Congo* (2016), recall an Adam and Eve narrative. Neither man nor woman looks particularly happy to be playing these Biblical roles, but their reluctance becomes secondary to the poetry. The narrative of fertility, emphasized by both the nature and nudity, subsumes them and it's difficult not to appreciate the image's compositional virtuosity, even if appreciating means participating in a kind of oppression. Nearby, a painting by Henry Taylor depicts a different kind of field, a brown, dry one, with a

buff farmer in blue coveralls. A fish floats in the sky as does a black dog, a telephone pole, and a disembodied head. Stenciled black text running along the top could have been lifted from a police report post-shooting: "Warning Shots Not Recorded." The painting's components don't lend themselves to any comprehensible narrative. If the show itself were more like Taylor's painting, similarly charged and disjointed, with artworks positioned absurdly or controlled installations coexisting with uncontrolled ones, it would maybe convey more viscerally the haunting, layered, reactionary nature of racialized violence. Instead, the coloring in Taylor's work transitions nicely into the minimal all-black Theaster Gates painting beside it.

The tension between *Non-Fiction*'s tightly formal curatorial approach and the uncertain, ambiguous qualities of the artwork parallel so many other forces at play—attempts by a fledgling community institution to become sustainable and secure while maintaining its freedom, attempts by a museum to leave its comfort zone and, most crucially, attempts to understand and break down an inherently problematic social system. That the expressions and explorations of injustice seem limited by their context feels about right. They are, for now. But maybe in a place like The Underground, whose short history already includes deep loss and community urgency, those limits can eventually loosen.

1

Robert Gober, *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* (1989). Screen-printed wallpaper. Image courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Justin Lubliner.

Marion Palfi, *Wife of a Lynch Victim* (1949). Gelatin silver print. Image courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Gift of Sue and Al Dorskind. Photo: Justin Lubliner.

2

Deanna Lawson, *The Garden, Gemena, DR Congo* (2015). Photographic print. Image courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Collection of the artist. Photo: Justin Lubliner.



