Aria Dean
Kevin Jerome Everson
Dave McKenzie
Martine Syms

With historical works by The Black Panther Party, Sutton E. Griggs, and the National Institutes of Health/ Getty Images
I SAW EMMETT TILL THIS WEEK AT THE GROCERY STORE

looking over the plums, one by one
lifting each to his eyes and
turning it slowly, a little earth,
checking the smooth skin for pockmarks
and rot, or signs of unkind days or people,
then sliding them gently into the plastic.
whistling softly, reaching with a slim, woolen arm
into the cart, he first balanced them
over the wire
before realizing the danger of bruising
and lifting them back out, cradling them
in the crook of his elbow until
something harder could take that bottom space.
I knew him from his hat, one of those
fine porkpie numbers they used to sell
on Roosevelt Road. it had lost its feather but
he had carefully folded a dollar bill
and slid it between the ribbon and the felt
and it stood at attention. he wore his money.
upright and strong, he was already to the checkout
by the time I caught up with him. I called
out his name
and he spun like a dancer, candy bar in hand,
looked at me quizzically for a moment before
remembering my face. he smiled. well
hello young lady
hello, so chilly today
should have worn my warm coat like you
yes so cool for August in Chicago
how are things going for you
oh he sighed and put the candy on the belt
it goes, it goes.

— Eve L. Ewing
MUNDANE FUTURES

“For me, the relationship of black communities, black feminism, and the temporality of futurity must be thought about through the concept of grammar. How do we conjugate our relationship of being to the future?”

—Tina M. Campt, Black Futurity in a Photographic Frame (2016)
There is something about the act of envisioning a time that will be that feels innately black. Once constructed as a commodity, we have always projected towards a moment in which our objectivity would be perceived as subjectivity. It is through the coerced labor and violence against black bodies that an American future has been able to unfold. Mundane Futures is the first chapter in the exhibition series Colored People Time and presents a small selection of black American projects that center the everyday within imaginings of a time that has yet to come. This exhibition is not a road map towards “justice” and does not provide one linear thread of thinking. It’s not even optimistic. Instead, it volleyes throughout time (1899–2019) and propositions—sometimes utilizing legal and political systems, while at other times insisting upon their destruction.

Language is a central tool in constructing identities and our understanding of time. I was struck by scholar Tina M. Campt’s notion of a future through the concept of grammar. To conjugate means to “give different forms as they vary according to voice, mood, tense, number, and person.” Campt’s reconsideration of futurity through the structures of language is a radical gesture that allows one to place oneself in a time that is imminent, urgent, and full of possibility. The handful of possibilities presented within Mundane Futures trace projects of future building across a changing American landscape—shaped by Jim Crow legislation, black power movements, the election of the first black president, and the white supremacist backlash that we currently live in. The ideas and objects that make up Mundane Futures are reminders that the creation of blackness itself has always been a means of producing a time that has yet to arrive.

—Meg Onli, Assistant Curator

“The challenge continues to be how to reconcile an ‘in time’ philosophy with the ‘on time’ demands of mainstream America.”


“The first object that engaged my attention was a watch which hung on the chimney, and was going. I was quite surprised at the noise it made, and was afraid it would tell the gentleman anything I might do amiss.”

—Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789)

In his 1972 article “Some Notes on the Blues, Style and Space,” Ronald Walcott wrote “time is the very condition of Western civilization which oppresses so brutally.” Published under the Johnson Publishing Company’s imprint *Black World*, Walcott’s essay examined the works of three prominent black cultural producers—author Ralph Ellison, playwright Charles Gordone, and poet Melvin B. Tolson—through their shared depictions of “Colored People’s Time” (aka CPT or CP Time). As Walcott observes, black people occupy and deploy CPT as a political performance to “evoke, frustrate, and ridicule” the enforcement of punctuality and productivity, key disciplinary structures of capitalism. For many, CPT is the time-space of the struggle. It emerges from conditions of ongoing oppression that stretch back to the beginning of Transatlantic slavery. CPT challenges and disavows the predominant opinion that being “on time” is the only way of being “in time.”

I began thinking about CPT while developing an exhibition that examined how a group of artists, activists, and writers have considered how white supremacy and the legacy of chattel slavery have existed so insidiously in our current moment(s).
I was drawn to CPT as both a living and liberatory phrase. It has provided a linguistic tool for black people to navigate their own temporality, within and against the construct of Western time. Not surprisingly, white supremacist logics have attempted to distort and co-opt CPT, constructing a dual meaning through racial stereotype. In spite of this, CPT has remained part of the vernacular of racially marginalized groups, to think and act differently in time.

Colored People Time, structured as an experimental exhibition in three chapters—Mundane Futures, Quotidian Pasts, and Banal Presents—unfolds over the course of 2019. Within the exhibition, I want to explore the plural and malleable nature of the term. CPT connects to the tradition of black expressions grounded in counter-language, ones performed as part of “resistance discourse, created as a communication system unintelligible to speakers of the dominant master class.”

Like the constructs of race and gender, time is an experience and subject that escapes the limitations of language.

The artists represented within this exhibition include: Aria Dean, Kevin Jerome Everson, Matthew Angelo Harrison, Carolyn Lazard, Dave McKenzie, Cameron Rowland, Sable Elyse Smith, and Martine Syms; accompanied by historical objects from the Black Panther Party, Sutton E. Griggs, the National Institutes of Health / Getty Images, and the African Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. It is through these works that we are invited to reconsider the singularity of Western time and bear witness to the everyday disruptions that restructure and reorganize black being in the past, present, and future.

—Meg Onli, Assistant Curator

EXHIBITION WORKS

Martine Syms
The Mundane
Afrofuturist Manifesto
2013
Acrylic paint
Courtesy of the artist, Bridget Donahue, NYC, and Sadie Coles HQ, London

Sutton E. Griggs
Imperium in Imperio
1899, 2018
Paperback books designed by ELLA with a new forward by Meg Onli
Courtesy of Project Gutenberg www.gutenberg.org

Kevin Jerome Everson
IFO
2017
16mm film, color, sound 10 minutes
© Kevin Jerome Everson Courtesy the artist; Trilobite-Arts DAC; Picture Palace Pictures

Dave McKenzie
Futuro
2013
Inkjet print mounted on aluminum Edition 1 of 5 + 1 AP Collection of Ben and Aileen Krohn

Aria Dean
Notes on Blaccelerationism
2017
Digital video, color, sound, 75 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and Chateau Shatto

Black Panther Party
April 1 and May 13
1972
Newspapers
Courtesy of the Kislak Center at the University of Pennsylvania

National Institutes of Health / Getty Images, Scanning electron micrograph of just-divided HeLa cells
Purchased 2018

Stock image
SUGGESTED READING


Related Programs

Friday, February 1, 5:00 PM
Members Preview

Friday, February 1, 6:30 PM
Public Opening Celebration

Friday, February 22, 6:30 PM
Reading and conversation with Columbia University professor Saidiya Hartman and ICA curator Meg Onli
Penn Book Center, 130 S. 34th St
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Friday, March 1, 6:30 PM
Screening and conversation with artist Kevin Jerome Everson and curator Maori Karmael Holmes

Wednesday, March 13, 6:00 PM
Curator-led tour

Wednesday, March 20, 6:30 PM
Performative lecture with artist Dave McKenzie

Credits

Colored People Time: Mundane Futures is organized by Meg Onli, Assistant Curator. A fully illustrated catalog will be published in early 2020.

I saw Emmett Till this week at the grocery store appears with permission from the author and Tin House.

Major support for Colored People Time: Mundane Futures has been provided by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage. Additional support has been provided by Arthur Cohen & Daryl Otte, Cheri & Steven Friedman, and Brett & Daniel Sundheim.

Institute of Contemporary Art
University of Pennsylvania

118 S. 38th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104
(215) 898-7108, icaphila.org