Colored People Time
MUNDANE FUTURES
QUOTIDIAN PASTS
BANAL PRESENTS

An exhibit in three chapters
February 1–March 31, 2019

THE CHALLENGE CONTINUES TO BE HOW TO RECONCILE AN “IN TIME” PHILOSOPHY WITH THE “ON TIME” DEMANDS OF MAINSTREAM AMERICA.

Dave McKenzie
Futuro
61 × 61 × 2 inches
Inkjet print mounted on aluminum
Collection of Ben and Aileen Krohn

Kevin Jerome Everson
IFO
10 minutes
16mm film
© Kevin Jerome Everson
Courtesy the artist; Trilobite-Arts DAC, Picture Palace Pictures
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 “evade, 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, Henrietta Lacks, 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.

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Meg Onli, Assistant Curator