TO MANY READERS, USING THE PAST TENSE ABOUT AN OUT-OF-THE-WAY PLACE

SUGGESTS NOT THAT PEOPLE ‘HAVE’ HISTORY BUT THAT THEY ARE HISTORY...
Colored People Time
MUNDANE FUTURES
QUOTIDIAN PASTS
BANAL PRESENTS

An exhibit in three chapters
April 26–August 11, 2019

“To many readers, using the past tense about an out-of-the-way place suggests not that people ‘have’ history but that they are history…”
—Anna Tsing, In the Realm of the Diamond Queen (1993) (emphasis in original)

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 that examined how a group of artists, activists, and 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.”

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

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Related Programs

Friday, April 26
Members Preview, 5PM
Introducing Tony Conrad: A Retrospective
Deborah Antinger: An Unlikely Birth
Colored People Time: Quotidian Pasts
Open Video Call

Wednesday, June 5, 6:30 PM
Film Screening with Mauri Karmael Holmes
Wednesday, June 19, 6 PM
Curator-led Tour

Please visit icaphila.org/calendar for more upcoming events.

Colored People Time: Quotidian Pasts

is organized by Meg Onli, ICA Assistant Curator and Monique Scott, Director of Museum Studies at Bryn Mawr College. A fully illustrated catalogue will be published in early 2020.

Project Space
Matthew Angelo Harrison

With objects from the African Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Quotidian Pasts, the second chapter in the three-part exhibition series Colored People Time, reconsiders the trafficking of blackness through the colonial practices of collecting, commodifying, and exhibiting people and objects from the African continent. This exhibition, produced in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, turns its lens toward early-twentieth-century anthropology and Western practices of observing black bodies. The long history of the exploitation of both African people and their cultures is told through the configuration of a few small objects—a photograph, a journal entry, a letter. Featuring a newly commissioned work by the artist Matthew Angelo Harrison, Quotidian Pasts questions: What happens when Black bodies are objectified, commodified and gazed upon from the outside? How does an object change when dislocated from its time and place within the context of the museum?

#quotidianpasts

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