



## *Conceptions of White*

Too often, whiteness is just thought of as four walls enclosing the space in which art is presented and received, and as a result it stealthily evades viewers' active awareness. Curated by John G. Hampton and Lillian O'Brien Davis, *Conceptions of White* cut against this grain by putting the contemporary politics of whiteness under a critical lens.

The Art Museum's glassy entrance amplified the faux-corporate address of new media artist Jeremy Bailey's initiatory *Whitesimple* (2022), whose wall-mounted tablets enjoined visitors to check their privilege at the door as part of a tongue-in-cheek exercise in pay-per-view race relations. Having undergone this ritual of purification, visitors were confronted with the symbolic threshold of Robert Morris's *Portal* (1964), its white-latex-coated aluminum frame reflexively foregrounding their embodied relationship with the gallery space. In Hampton and O'Brien Davis's incisive recontextualization, Morris's minimalist architectonics also drew attention to the freighted meanings of the putatively neutral "white cube." Extending this interrogation of art's socio-cultural contexts, Deanna Bowen's *White Man's Burden* (2022) immersed viewers in a disquieting montage of archival materials constellating the founding figures of Canadian cultural identity, the institutions hosting *Conceptions of White*, and a network of white supremacist and anti-Indigenous ideologies and organizations. Anti-foundationalist grace notes such as Michèle Lalonde's *Speak White* (1968), a powerful rebuttal to Anglo-Canadian nationalists' habitual conflation of whiteness and the English language, deftly undercut the essentializing logic of racial taxonomies. Jennifer Chan's *Aryan Recognition Tool* (2022) carried this anti-categorical impetus to an absurd extreme by employing facial recognition and machine learning to facetiously quantify viewers' "Aryanness" relative to a databank of historical Nazi portraits. Chan's mock-scientism served a serious purpose by exploding the racial classifications embedded in contemporary algorithmic

vision systems and exposing their dark origins. A more oblique satire of classification and control, Ryan Kuo's *File: A Primer* (2018) gestures toward similar concerns through a parody of digital file-management protocols. Although contemporary formations of white identity occupied the foreground of Hampton and O'Brien Davis's investigations, the longevity of Classical archetypes defined a charged historical horizon. An important fulcrum of the exhibition was the curators' pointed juxtaposition of a 3D-printed replica of Hiram Powers's *Model of the Greek Slave* (1843)—an improbable icon of abolitionist politics depicting a white woman in chains—with Ken Gonzales-Day's *The Wonder Gaze* (*St. James Park, CA. 1935*) (2006–22), an altered photograph of a lynching whose atypically white victims have been digitally edited out. In a room adjoining this provocative historical-contemporary pairing, Fred Wilson's *Love and Loss in the Milky Way* (2005) placed Greco-Roman statuary in anxious proximity with representations of African Americans, including a found "Mammy" cookie jar. A microcosm of the exhibition's challenge to racialized genealogies, Nell Painter's *Ancient Hair* (2019) scrutinized the Greco-Roman pedigrees invoked by white supremacists through a ludicrous art-historical survey of—notably frizzy—"Classical" locks, from the *Apollo Belvedere* through portraits of Goethe and the founding father of art history itself, Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Hampton and O'Brien Davis succeeded in bringing moments of levity to some of the most troubling subject matter of our time.

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**Art Museum at the University of Toronto**  
January 11–March 25, 2023

**Deanna Bowen**  
*White Man's Burden*,  
installation view, 2023.

*Conceptions of White*,  
exhibition view, 2023.  
Photos: Toni Hafkenscheid,  
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