

Whitney Biennial: Emmett Till casket painting by white artist sparks anger

Dana Schutz's depiction of the mutilated body of a 14-year-old African American boy has been accused of using black death as racialized 'spectacle'

Oliver Basciano THE GUARDIAN Tue 13 Nov 2018



“Many in the black art community are upset by the work” ... Parker Bright protesting Emmett Till painting at the Whitney in New York (the slogan on the tee shirt reads “BLACK DEATH SPECTACLE”).

A painting included in this year's Whitney Biennial in New York is being protested for perceived racial insensitivity.

Open Casket by American painter Dana Schutz depicts the mutilated corpse of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old black boy murdered in 1955 after it was falsely claimed he flirted with a white woman.

“Many in the black art community are upset by the work,” says Parker Bright, who has been spurred to picket the painting daily since the exhibition opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art on Friday. Standing, barring museum visitors' view of the work for up to four hours a day, Bright wears a T-shirt on to which he has written “No lynch mob” on the front, and “Black death spectacle” on the back. “I wanted to confront people with a living, breathing black body.”

Bright's complaint is echoed on social media, with one Twitter user posting that Schutz was a “white woman profiting off of black murder caused by a white woman”.

Hannah Black, an artist who has previously taken part in a residency at the Whitney, has gone so far as to claim the painting should be destroyed. Black adds in an open letter: “The subject matter is not Schutz's; white free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights.”

Schutz countered in an emailed statement: “I don't know what it is like to be black in America, but I do know what it is like to be a mother. Emmett was Mamie Till's only son. The thought of anything happening to your child is beyond comprehension.”

Emmet Till was visiting family in Money, Mississippi when it was alleged he grabbed shopkeeper Carolyn Bryant, made sexual comments and whistled at her. On hearing of the incident, Bryant's husband, Roy, together with his half-brother, JW Milam, kidnapped Till, killed the boy and left his body by the side of the Tallahatchie river. Roy Bryant and Milam were acquitted by an all-white jury. In January, Carolyn Bryant, now 72, admitted she had made up much of her testimony.

Till's mother had insisted on an open casket to demonstrate the extent of the injuries that befell her son. Schutz's painting is drawn from photographs of this.