

Armillaria and Art

written by Guest Contributor | April 5, 2017



Artwork: "The Evidence of Things Seen" / [Chris Barnard](#) / 2016-17 / Oil on canvas over panel / 81 x 54 in.

Armillaria, more commonly known as root rot, is an apt metaphor for the particular and corrosive American affliction that is Whiteness.

Parasitic and affecting hundreds of species of plant in every one of these United States, armillaria's impacts depend upon the severity of infection and the susceptibility of its hosts. Passed from generation to generation, or from tree to tree when roots approach under cover of soil, it is most potent to those weakened by competition, pathogen, or climate stress. While some symptoms evade the eyes, for many a middling or still-majestic tree, they will sometimes manifest in yellowing and dried leaves, shriveling fruit, stunting of height, defoliation and dieback. They will almost always and readily reveal themselves at the tree's base, where the disease earns more evidently via clusters of whitish mushrooms its colloquial name.

Being human, we have much in common with trees. We, too, are upright, limbed, crowned. We, too, need water, sunlight, air. The branching of our lungs, which keep us breathing on this planet, is both delicate and resilient all at once, resembling in form and function the root systems keeping trees anchored and alive.

We are also humbled by trees, which carry deeper meaning for us, or at least they should. Not only do we rely on them—for oxygen, shade, shelter—in ways they do not rely on us, but they have borne witness to much of our brutality.

There were trees watching in Ferguson. Trees in along the last path Trayvon walked. Trees shading those front yards in McKinney, Texas. Trees planted into the Bay Street sidewalk on Staten Island, and larger ones in Thompsonville Park across the way. Trees in Cudell Recreation Center, trees

along University Drive in Prairie View, Texas, trees beyond the car windows in Falcon Heights. Just as there have been trees in Mississippi ("[goddamn!](#)") and just about everywhere else, well before the kind of documentation and dissemination that technology allows.

I remember visiting the Art Institute of Chicago [years ago](#) and feeling the immense weight of a Steve McQueen video; it was not the one McQueen, a British artist, made of himself wrestling naked with another Black man (Bear, 1993) or the one where he stands impassive while the facade of a house falls around him (Deadpan, 1997), or what came later, in *12 Years a Slave*, all of which were profound. It was sparse, shot upwards, capturing mostly just branches silhouetted against sky. An installation neophyte, I didn't understand exactly what I was watching, but I remember Billie Holliday's [Strange Fruit](#) coming to mind and then becoming unshakable.

Just branches can bring us to the heart of American history, everything from lynchings to tire swings to timber, the crimes and coverups, and the racialized exploitation throughout. This is what art can do: with just branches bring us right to "blood at the root," and at its root, the rot of Whiteness.

In the years since watching that video, my partner—a White, hetero, cisgender painting professor—and I—and I a White, hetero, cisgender teacher educator—have thought a lot about what is and isn't depicted, what is or isn't seen in artwork. When wrestling with racial violence, what paths might be forged to illuminate without fetishizing, lay bare without lecturing, own up without self-congratulating? What does taking responsibility for Whiteness in order to renounce it even look like, rendered in oil, on cotton cloth, stretched on trees? Is it even possible?

Every attempt fails in some ways and succeeds in others. Some, like the much-debated Dana Schutz [debacle](#), should never make it out of the studio and into the marketplace for personal enrichment, [I agree](#). That they do, however, is a telling indicator of the armillaria so deeply rooted in American art and its institutions.

Prolific twitter presence Son of Baldwin asks, rightly, "[Why do these white artists always want to depict black suffering, but never the white malice that causes it?](#)" It's a question not just for White artists but for White people to answer. It's a question with which my partner and I have been wrestling in his work, attempting to place the perpetrators of racial violence where they often are—exonerated, unindicted, in the middle of the frame, up on the pedestal, predators in plain sight.

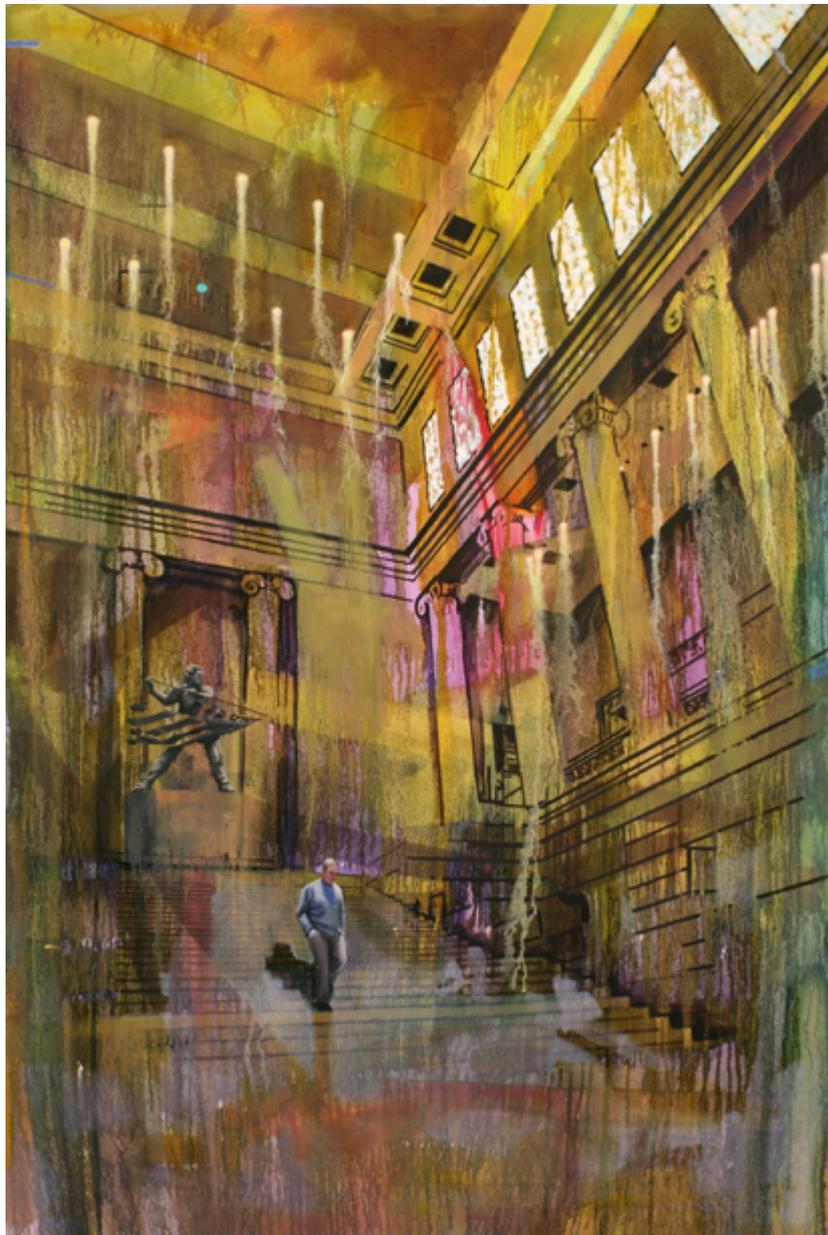
These are imperfect efforts to paint some of the evidence of [things seen](#) and ["not seen"](#) and to situate that evidence in ways that points back to our personal and institutional complicity with racism.

By its nature, it is and will remain an unfinished project and an open question: how to honor the likes of [Nell Irvin Painter](#), [Kiese Laymon](#), [Michelle Alexander](#), [Craig Steven Wilder](#), [Kerry James Marshall](#) and others for their hand in getting any of us to these imperfect places that

demand so much more from White people than we have yet to muster.

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“White Flight” / [Chris Barnard](#) / 2016-17 / Oil on canvas / 81 x 54 in.