



WHO SAYS WHO SHOWS WHAT COUNTS

THINKING ABOUT
HISTORY WITH
THE BLOCK'S COLLECTION

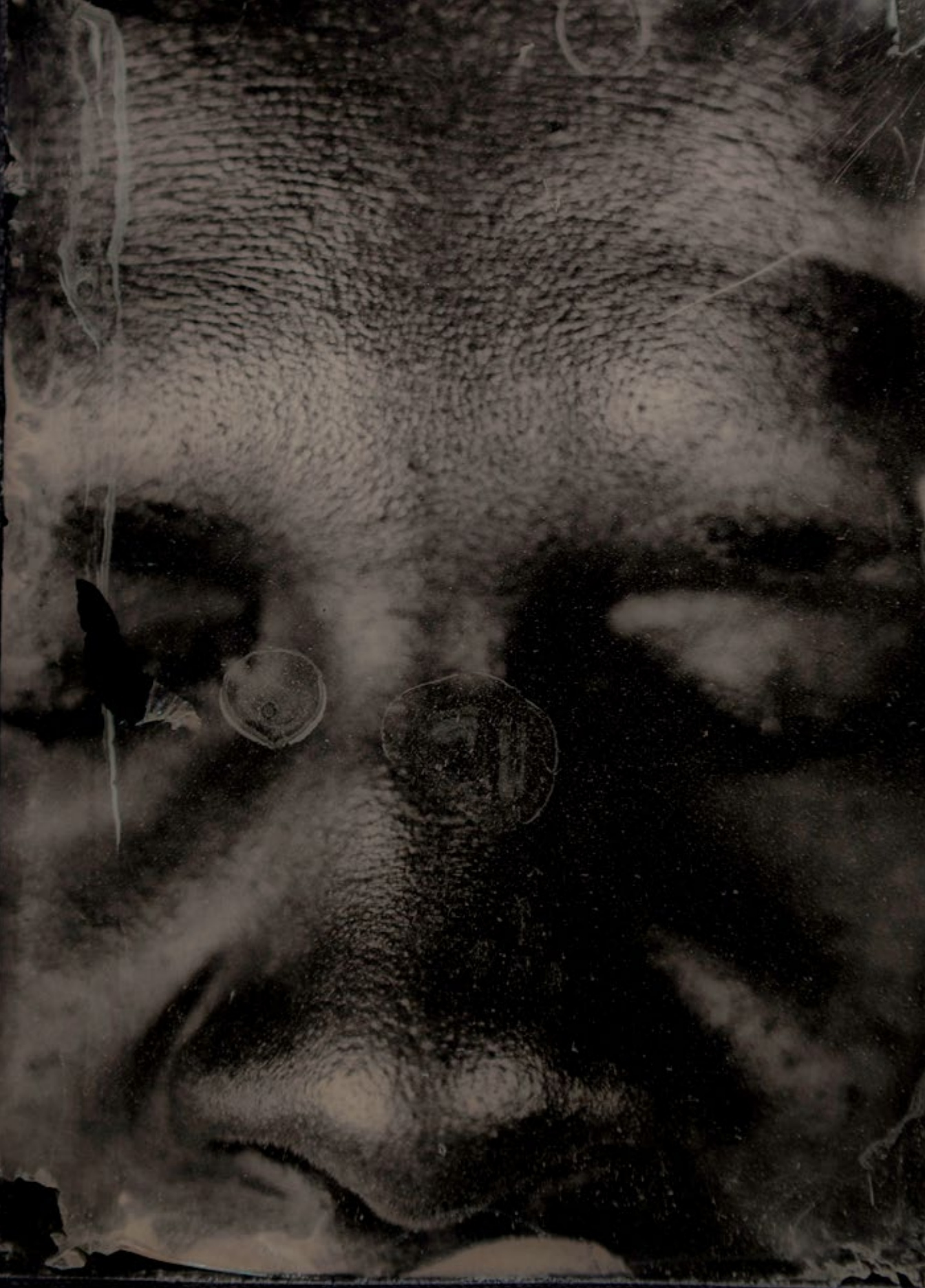


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Edited by Essi Rönkkö and Kate Hadley Toftness





STUDENTS DISCUSS MUSEUM COLLECTING

Hannah Feldman, Essi Rönkkö, and Kate Hadley Toftness

As an academic museum, The Block Museum of Art's collecting strategy is intricately linked to the culture and curriculum of Northwestern University. It was important, then, that a project that delineates future directions for The Block's collecting include input from students and faculty in a curricular setting.

During spring quarter 2020, twelve Northwestern undergraduates from four schools and representing nine disciplines took part in an art history seminar titled "Collecting|Critique: Who Says, Who Shows, What Counts?" We co-taught this course to introduce students to museum collecting strategies and their critiques, and to invite them to think about what criteria should be used for acquiring works of art at The Block. The course took place at a time when curators, directors, and museum board members—along with artists and educators—were rethinking what it means to collect and display works of art in societies that aspire to be integrated and equitable to all their members. Building from a history of critical museum studies, we read about and discussed the ideological underpinnings of inclusion and exclusion, the politics of museum finances, canon formation, and what it means to "decolonize" the museum in relationship both to the history it presents and the futures it maps. In addition to reading and discussions, the course included the examination of artworks from Chicago-based galleries, speaking with artists directly about their work, and culminated in the students' collective recommendation of a work of art to be purchased by The Block, published in this volume, and exhibited in its companion exhibition. The last weeks of the class also coincided with national protests against anti-Black violence, which affirmed the importance of taking stock of the ongoing impact of white supremacy in institutional decision-making and pedagogy.

This section presents the students' collectively composed final statement about the project and an essay on Myra Greene's *Undertone #17, #23, #51*, which they successfully presented for acquisition by The Block. This project lays the foundation for an ongoing commitment to including student perspectives in The Block's collecting.

Myra Greene, *Undertone #17, #23, #51*, 2017–18 (detail).

MYRA GREENE

American, born New York, NY, 1975

Undertone #17, #23, #51 from the series *Undertones*, 2017–18

Three stained-glass ambrotypes and acrylic shelf, 5 1/2 x 24 x 2 1/2 inches (overall)

Purchase funds donated by Richard and Susan Rieser, 2020.3.2

Three small stained-glass plates lean precariously against a wall on a transparent ledge. The glass surfaces display fragmented views of artist Myra Greene's facial features: her nose, lips, and closed eyes. In creating these plates, Greene used the technique of ambrotype, a photographic medium widely used in the 1860s. The longer exposure time required in this wet-plate collodion process leads to images that reveal darker areas of the subject in more detail than shorter shutter speed cameras, making it easier to represent darker skin tones.¹ Unlike ambrotypes in the nineteenth century, which were printed on clear glass, Greene's *Undertone #17, #23, #51* is printed on stained glass, enriching the work's play with color. The hues of the plates represent the spectrum of undertones that compose Greene's skin color: deep green, red, and blue. When light shines through each plate, it casts a distinct, tinted shadow onto the gallery's wall. This play with light makes the colors more prominent, suggesting an exploration of the complexities and pluralities associated with Black skin.

By choosing the ambrotype as her medium, Greene ties her work to photography's history as a tool of racial violence. The emergence of photography in the 1840s provided scientists with means to illustrate physical differences among people that they used to assert racial hierarchies and, therefore, further white supremacy.² Due to their ability to capture dark skin, ambrotypes in particular were frequently used to classify Black physiognomy, associating certain features with behavioral tendencies. This practice was embedded in essentialist ideologies that reduce individuals to their physiognomy, resulting in further stereotyping of and discrimination against Black people. The story of Harvard University ethnologist Louis Agassiz demonstrates the reverberations of nineteenth-century photography in the twenty-first century. In 1850, Agassiz commissioned photographer Joseph T. Zealey to make a series of portraits. As Christina Sharpe, a scholar of English literature and Black Studies, writes in *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, these photographs were intended to classify African physiognomy and make legible "an essential black inferiority and black monstrosity" as a means "to justify continued anti-black violence and subjugation."³ These photographs became part of Harvard University's institutional archives. In March 2019, Tamara Lanier, a descendent of Delia and Renty, two enslaved individuals who were photographed by Agassiz, filed a lawsuit against Harvard and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology to gain ownership of the images.⁴ Her legal claim relies on the argument that, because of their legal status as property, Delia and Renty could not and did not consent to having their images captured. Therefore, Harvard cannot claim to have lawful possession of their images. Lanier's lawsuit reflects a similar urge to reclaim past representations of Black



Americans that we find in Greene's appropriation of the ambrotype. In both instances, we perceive that we cannot move forward until we confront the racist actions of our predecessors.

In contrast to the images of Lanier's ancestors, Greene asserts personal agency over the production of her images by her unwillingness to turn her camera on any Black person but herself, lest their images enter art markets and become commodified, thereby further reinscribing historical pain.⁵ Thus, through self-portraiture Greene circumvents what theorist Ariella Azoulay has named the necessarily "extractive principle" of photography.⁶ This notion, first introduced to the authors by our Northwestern colleague, art historian Emma M. Kennedy, emphasizes how the photograph's subject is rarely an active participant in the process of photography itself. Greene's self-determination is a critical aspect of *Undertones*. By constructing these images of her own likeness, the artist allows for a visual analysis of Black identity and representation that comes from a place of consent. Her decision to focus on her eyes, nose, and lips prompts the viewers to connect intimately with Greene. As viewers, we engage with the features of her body most closely related to her senses. The small size of the plates, each of which would fit in the palm of your hand, further invites a need for close looking. Yet the fragmentation of her facial features across the three plates creates a separation.

By creating a series of self-portraits based on a historical medium that evokes the era of American slavery, Myra Greene creates a sense of oscillation between the past and the present. In the present, she challenges the notion of racial identity as monolithic by using multicolored glass to point to the complexities and the undertones of Blackness as a physical and social construct. By inserting herself intimately in the work, Greene does not reproduce the violence that is engraved in the historical use of the ambrotype, but proposes a more nuanced reading of existing narratives surrounding Black identity. She shows that past and present are not disparate, but deeply dependent and interconnected; attempts to separate them deny and obfuscate Black pain.

—Students enrolled in "*Collecting|Critique: Who Says, Who Shows, What Counts?*" seminar, spring 2020

Samantha Baldwin '21, Art History and Journalism

Lois Biggs '20, Art History and Comparative Literary Studies

Cooper Brovenick '20, Art History and Economics

Meghan Clare Considine '20, Art History and Performance Studies

Ela Dayanikli '20, Communication Studies

Zoe Detweiler '20, Art History and Journalism

Kathleen Dewan '20, Materials Science and Engineering

Vitoria Monteiro de Carvalho Faria '23, Art History and Economics

Brianna Heath '21, Art History

Wenke (Coco) Huang '22, Art History and Performance Studies

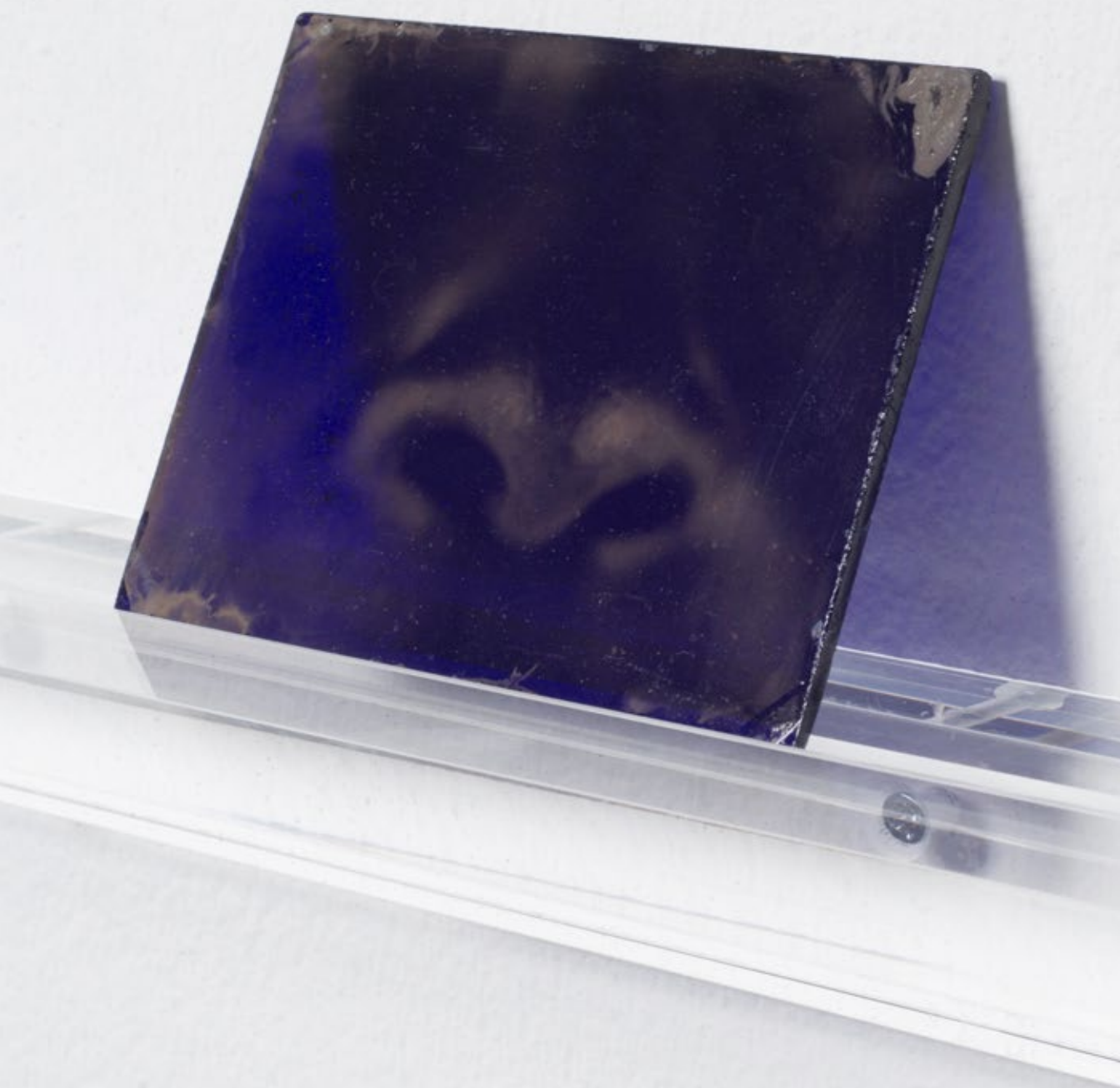
Mina Pembe Malaz '21, Art History and Psychology

Joely Simon '21, Journalism and Art History

NOTES

- 1 Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Frederick Douglass’s Camera Obscura: Representing the Antislave ‘Clothed and in Their Own Form,’” *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (Autumn 2015): 31–60.
- 2 Amy Louise Wood, “Delia’s Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America (review),” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 41, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 660–61.
- 3 Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 11.
- 4 Jennifer Schuessler, “Your Ancestors Were Slaves. Who Owns the Photos of Them?,” *The New York Times*, March 22, 2019. Erik Ofgang, “Tamara Lanier is suing Harvard over photos of her enslaved ancestors,” *Connecticut Magazine*, April 15, 2020.
- 5 Conversation with the artist, May 13, 2020.
- 6 Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 147. This thinking is indebted to Emma M. Kennedy’s method in “The Appropriation of a Visual Logic: Myra Greene’s Character Recognition” (unpublished paper, last modified December 2019).





COLLECTING AND CRITIQUE: A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

WHO SAYS?

Every work of art speaks. Between the artist creating the work and the viewer perceiving it, many others have a say as well. Galleries, auction houses, and collectors speak through the monetary value they assign to works of art. Museums communicate their judgments and institutional motives by making decisions about what gets included in or excluded from collections and exhibitions and how much light is shined on it.

WHO SHOWS?

The question of agency is closely related to the question of whose work gets displayed in museums. Museums should work toward expanding the art historical canon: female artists, artists of color, and artists of diverse backgrounds must be given their rightful space. It is time that museums' collecting practices and curatorial decisions more frequently reflect the contemporary moment in which they exist, not only the historical moment in which they were founded. This includes acknowledging privileges and insights, as well as omissions and missteps.

WHAT COUNTS?

Museums are not insulated from oppressive systems that shape our everyday lives. We must reckon with this and think critically about the institutions in which we participate. This self-reflexivity is essential for institutions that seek to become more inclusive. As the artist Andrea Fraser reminds us, "We are the institution. It's a question of what kind of institution we are, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to."¹ It is important to count the currency—both social and economic—that fuels curatorial and collecting practices within museums to expose its violent roots in capitalism and colonialism. In our class conversations we imagined different ways to count, new ways

1 Andrea Fraser, "From Institutional Critique to the Institution of Critique," *Artforum*, September 2005, 283.

to acknowledge histories unaccounted for, and how to reassess our priorities. We thought about The Block's mission, discussed museum decolonization, and developed the following set of criteria for curatorial practice:

- We, as the institution, must be transparent regarding our connections to oppressive systems. We must recognize the museum's capacity to harm.
- We must also recognize that, as part of a social world, we have the capacity to intervene.
- We must develop a critical curatorial practice that holds us accountable to our communities and a critical collecting practice that focuses on works that, through their form or content, challenge the dominant, teleological notions of history that are often highlighted in museum spaces.
- We must think critically about museum space and our efforts to "decolonize" museums. To quote Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor"; it is inextricably tied to the land.² We can acknowledge the history of the land we occupy and make our institutional history visible, but we must accompany these moves with material actions.
- We must meaningfully dedicate museum space and attention to marginalized voices. As we do so, we must work directly and build relationships with local communities and with the communities we represent. We must seek feedback and dialogue from these groups, as well as provide support through purchases and employment as we develop exhibitions. We must form and support a museum staff that brings diverse perspectives to their work.
- Altogether, we must curate with reciprocity. Reciprocity doesn't have to mean harmony or accordance. It can look like dissent, like a challenge, like a rupture. A reciprocal curatorial practice is defined by equitable exchanges that move us toward something mutually beneficial—in this case, toward the institution we aspire to be.

— Students enrolled in "Collecting|Critique: Who Says, Who Shows, What Counts?" seminar, spring 2020

² Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.