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Site of Struggle

By P. Andrews-Keenan

The exhibition **A Site of Struggle: American Art against Anti-Black Violence** at the Block Museum in Evanston is both enlightening and disturbing. So disturbing that within the gallery space are areas where you can sit quietly should the images become too overwhelming. It includes 65 objects of art and ephemera created between 1895 and 2013.

A Site of Struggle, curated by **Janet Dees**, shows how African American artists, rather than being just victims of racial violence, helped to shape the discourse, and facilitate grieving, activism and healing. The exhibition of art and ephemera includes Ida B. Well's 1895 anti-lynching pamphlet **A Red Record – Lynchings in the United States.**

Featured also is the book, **Walter White, Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch,** the first-person account by White, the former president of the NAACP, of an especially horrific triple lynching in Aiken, South Carolina. White, who was able to pass for white, attended more than 40 lynching events documenting the violence for the country. The book was written to debunk the "big lie" that lynching punished black men for raping white women and protected the purity of "the flower of the white race."

In Kerry James Marshall's three works *Heirlooms and Accessories* he lifts photos of white women who are spectators at a lynching in Marion, Indiana in 1930. Each is turned to face the camera and Marshall recreated their photos as cameos dangling from chains in white frames embellished with rhinestones. This accessory is now an heirloom of violence and death passed down from generation to generation.

The weaponization of white women that Marshall explored in his art, and White in his book, continues today. Witness how the far-right have turned the death of January 6th insurrectionist **Ashli Babbitt**, into a recruiting tool.

The works run unabated across the decades. From **Dox Thrash's** 1930's work *After the Lynching*; 70's work by Black Panther **Emory Douglas** and **Elizabeth Catlett's** *Target Practice*; to a 2020 work by **David Antonio Cruz** entitled *anotherroadblockinourwaybutifwegowegotogether, the detroit kids* reflecting on homophobic and transphobic hate. The subjects in his work were killed in 2019. Howardena Pindell's 2020 work revisits the brutal slaying of the Four Little Girls. Other artists include **Theaster Gates**, **Carrie Mae Weems**, **Lorna Simpson**, and **Alison Saar**.



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Artists of all stripes used their skills to illustrate the horrors of lynching including the famed mid-century landscape architect **Isamu Noguchi** whose sculpture portrays the mangled body of George Hughes who was lynched in Sherman, Texas in the 1930's.

In speaking with one of the docents at the exhibit he said they had preparatory training about the harsh nature of the images. A guide for wellness and self-care was also created with Black visitors in mind. The exhibition is hard to look at, but impossible to turn away from, such is the reality of racial violence our country.

The show will be at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Montgomery, Alabama from **August 12th until November 6th, 2022.**