

The Lasting Power of Emmett Till's Image



There are few photographs more consequential in African-American history — and our nation's — than those of Emmett Till's mutilated corpse. The [images from 1955](#) are gruesome and emotionally devastating, coming as they did after the 14-year-old was beaten and shot by two white men. And while authorities in Mississippi tried to bury the teenager as quickly as possible, his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, insisted otherwise, allowing photographers to commemorate the ghastly scene.

"Let the world see what I have seen," was her brave retort.

Once again, this image has sparked controversy after its appropriation in a painting by the white artist Dana Schutz in "Open Casket," on view at the Whitney Biennial, has stirred up heated protest and debate.

Photo



Dana Schutz's "Open Casket," a 2016 painting in the Whitney Biennial. Credit Collection of the artist

Understanding the painting's historic source, a shocking black-and-white photograph evidencing the depth and depravity of white supremacy, provides a point of perspective. The murder of Emmett Till took place in August 1955 in Mississippi, where Emmett was visiting family. The teenager, from Chicago, was said to have either flirted with or whistled at a white woman in a store. Three days later, the woman's husband and his half brother abducted him in the middle of the night. They brutally beat him, shot him in the head, and shoved his body in the Tallahatchie River.

The killers' trial was a sham. An all-white, male jury acquitted both men of kidnapping and murder. In 2007, the woman at the center of the case, Carolyn Bryant Donham, recanted her original testimony in an interview with the historian Timothy Tyson, admitting that Mr. Till never made advances toward her.

Mrs. Till Mobley fought efforts to conceal her son's mangled corpse. The Tallahatchie sheriff ordered the body's immediate burial in Mississippi, arguing that it was badly decomposed. His mother demanded that her son's remains be returned to Chicago. "The main thing [the police wanted] to do was to get that body in the ground so nobody else could see it," she later recalled. Although the body was eventually released by the sheriff's office, it was on the condition that the coffin remain sealed.

Mrs. Till Mobley disobeyed the order. The coffin stayed open at his funeral so mourners could witness how Emmet's face was disfigured beyond recognition. His right eyeball rested in a mass on his cheek. His left eye was missing. The bridge of his nose was crushed and his right ear was severed in half. His temple was shattered by a bullet.

But it was another of his mother's actions that changed the course of history: She permitted several photographers to take pictures of her son's disfigured corpse and urged the publication of the gruesome images. "[People] would not be able to visualize what had happened, unless they were allowed to see

the results of what had happened,” she later said. “They had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this.”

Mrs. Till Mobley's entreaties went only so far. No mainstream magazine or newspaper would publish the photograph, deeming its graphic imagery inappropriate. But she was able to turn to the far more receptive editors of widely-circulated black magazines like *Jet*, *The American Negro: A Magazine of Protest*, and *The Chicago Defender*.

The publication of this image incited a revolution, rousing thousands of young African-American men and women — many who lived in parts of the country far removed from the de jure segregation of the South — into actively joining the civil rights movement. A single photograph was so powerful that it inspired what the sociologist and activist Joyce Ladner has called the “Emmett Till Generation” of black activists.

Photo



Emmett Till with his mother, Mamie Till Mobley. Credit Associated Press/Mamie Till Mobley Family

It is against this vivid historical backdrop that we should view the controversy around Ms. Schutz's 2016 painting. It depicts Emmett in his coffin, but it does so abstractly and in ways that are confusing, contradictory, and hurtful to many viewers. Mrs. Till Mobley loved her son, and it took immense courage to allow his disfigured body to be photographed, let alone circulated around the world. But she did so out of urgency and with a specific objective: to capitalize on the authority of photography to provide millions of readers with irrefutable confirmation of the gravity of the war against racism and segregation in 1950s America.

Unlike the original photograph, “Open Casket” is inscrutable and even grotesquely decorative. It lives outside of historical context. We live in another wrenching time, when young black men continue to be

endangered. But insensitively appropriating a complicated photograph with multiple layers of meaning from another era does justice to neither the image nor its historic role.

Ultimately, the white artist who chooses to explore issues of race has a responsibility to the history and content of work they appropriate. And while some critics have made Ms. Schutz's race the overarching issue — that a white artist should not traffic in black pain — the problem is not about her race. White artists should, and indeed have a responsibility to, examine the most vexing and intransigent issue of our time: white racism in all of its forms, from that of the complacent liberal to the neo-Nazi supremacist.

But cross-cultural work demands insight, respect, sensitivity and rigor. It also requires honesty about and self-inquiry into one's own racial attitudes. To be an artist, no matter how expressive or interpretive, does not give anyone license — or cover — to casually appropriate African-American history and culture.

But Ms. Schutz's enigmatic painting reads like it was made in a historical and cultural vacuum. It's missing the diligence necessary to grasp the original photo's cultural and social meaning. Instead, we are left with a painted approximation of it: Blurred features, frenzied brushstrokes, and painterly slashes that feel like another violation of Emmett Till's body.

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