

Reflection on "Holding A Mirror to Race" - Manal Murangi
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Holding a Mirror to Race is an exhibit meant to emphasize the act of reflection when presented with art. Indeed, it even notes how art can be an avenue to safely observe the implicit bias, and not feel attacked or recoil, but rather absorb it and reflect on how they themselves might participate in racism unintentionally in their everyday lives.

As an artist, especially a black artist, every decision I make is intentional. I think about how casting a person of a certain race may play into a narrative, or shed light on an issue not known to the public. That reflection is a part of my everyday life. It comes into play during conversations, the way I present myself in class. The assumptions that people make about art, are the same they make about people. Thus the reflection I experience everyday comes through in my art, which I view as an extension of myself. It means that everytime I look at art I am thinking about intention, and how my experience with the art compares to how the artist intended me to view it. When you have to consider how the world perceives you, it changes how you perceive the world, and art.

Mirror to Race is an exquisite piece, as it is collected and displayed by a black man, meaning that it is shown by someone who has experienced racism and is seeking to share his story. So often in museums, we find ourselves looking at exhibits created by outsiders, discoverers, people who have gone into a culture, and wanted to keep it and display it with no further knowledge of it. We have to wonder how much of our knowledge of the world has been skewed because of the information (or lack thereof) that we have been presented. How many statues of generals have we seen, and how many memorials dedicated to the lives lost by slavery, or the Native Americans who fought for the land, or the commemoration of those who died in internment camps in the United States. Museums, statues, artifacts, and exhibits, are all meant to expand our minds, and understanding of the world and its history. But when that history is displayed by those wishing to dismiss the uglier parts of history, or ignore the existence of histories altogether, we get a version of reality that props up racism, and the continued existence of prejudice and racial bias. If schools do not teach that Columbus came to the United States and committed genocide, and museums don't then where are students to learn it? It is exhibits like this that hold the stark reality of how commonplace and celebrated racism was that can truly allow people to reflect on their roles. Otherwise, people are simply being given a curated version of reality to respond to, one that fits comfortably inside the reality taught.

The question of implicit bias versus racism, and whose job it is to educate is one that has plagued artists, specifically artists of color for generations. It comes down to what is the purpose of the artist? Are we supposed to create art for the benefit of the public or the benefit of ourselves; and what happens if the two don't happen to intersect? It seems as though there is an additional pressure on artists to tell stories and create work that is not only beautiful to them but can also inform the world on struggles, and to tell stories of strife and hardship rather than celebration and joy. Race and art are not necessarily separate. The question we must ask ourselves is where does educating fit into the schedule of an artist? And why does the burden fall to the artist to explain and portray? If the artist spends all of their time working to educate,

when do they get to live? There isn't a direct answer to this question, but it needs to be talked about and brought up, when people talk about setting aside time to learn about racism and its place. The information is at our fingertips, and yet people don't want to educate themselves. The only places I have seen frank conversations about the emotional and mental labor done by black people and people of color when explaining racism is in a class titled Black Socio-Political Thought taught by Christopher Vorlack who unfortunately, no longer teaches at UMBC. If we are going to talk about the need for labor to be done, we also need to talk about the impact of these conversations on the laborers, activists, artists, politicians, people that we expect to educate the world on their reality, and the world that has been created for them by oppressors. This exhibit takes that pressure out of the hands of the educator, and places it directly into the students. It says "Here." "This is reality. This is the world you live in. Do with it what you will." There is a strength in that statement. Though the creator provides the material, there is no context, no explanation, and in contrast to what the article says, no safety. Material is presented, and then left, for the person to reflect on their version of reality, and the world at large.