

John Blair's "Blues for Jim Crow" opens one week after the Philando Castile verdict was announced, the shooter found not guilty on all counts. Blair's images speak to the America that produced such a verdict. Photography is a very political, a very real place to be this summer.

"Blues for Jim Crow" is divided into three series, depicting the black body in dangerous space of the American landscape. Images of lynchings, historic marches, and police brutality printed on paper in both black and white and sepia circle the gallery, the viewer becoming part of the exhibit as we ask *where were my people then? What is my part in all this now?* Whether ancestral signifier or signified, we are all in here somewhere.

The subject of Series 1 is the *ding an sich* of the body, deceased, soon to be deceased, eerie in foreshadowing. The bodies are anonymous, and the artist's face functions as the dominant identifier in each piece, at times visible next to the violence, at times invisible in the midst of it. Lynchings doubled as social events where the ladies would politely sip tea, the bodies swaying in the breeze just beyond them, evoking Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit": "Pastoral scene of the gallant south/ The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth." Blair's bodies are anonymous, the faces blurred so the subject itself is the position of the body as event. Perhaps the most striking image is No. 6 from Series 1, a photograph depicting the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike and subsequent march of 1968, the men holding signs with the words "I Am A Man" as a reminder of common humanity to those pointing guns two feet from them, pointed at them, raising the question of how language acts to contradict the power of bullets.

Series 2 features leaders from the Civil Rights era and beyond with Blair's goal being to present these people "to the ancestors" and to remind us that black history is more than just Dr. King in the text book. This series is more hopeful in subject matter, the clear portrait-like images leading seamlessly into Series 3, a visual response to WEB DuBois' Double Consciousness. Series 2 and 3 are a response to the reality of living under a Trump administration. The artist's image is less visible here, removed entirely at times, reflecting his response to the 2016 election and the hurtfulness, the paranoia, the betrayal of the election for people of color, women, the LGBT community, Muslims, the displaced, and his feeling that there "really was no place in the country for me." He continues with his own language of hope: "We have to survive this." Then asked, "How do we survive this?"

In part "Blues for Jim Crow" is a response to some white critics who have asked for less intensity in his work. As viewers we have to root into potential discomfort. Is it the graphic nature of the subject that makes it too much? Wasn't experiencing the graphic horror of these parts of history exactly what warrants the need for us to face them? How are artists of color to own their history, their reality without white reactivity? This exhibit is a reminder that to people of color their bodies are very much not something they need quiet or censor for another person's comfort, especially when these names are recent history: Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Sean Bell, Kathryn Johnston, Eric Garner, Rekia Boyd, Amadou Diallo, Mike Brown, Kimani Gray, Kenneth Chamberlain, Travares McGill, Tamir Rice, Aiyana Stanley, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile. If it makes you uncomfortable, keep looking.

Allison Cundiff