

Cultural Daily

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Black Like Who?

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In the past week, we have seen a racist gunman take lives in a black church, a white woman claim black identity, and the Confederate flag fly full-staff while the US flag draped in half-mast sorrow. Our country is still fighting the Civil War.

The question of blackness has long troubled American art, too. Now a museum in Birmingham, Alabama is exploring the depiction of blackness in American art by looking at *who* renders imagery of blackness and contemplates the various reasons *why*.



The image of the “loyal slave,” self-justifying to white Southerners after the Civil War, is perhaps no better depicted than in “To The End” by William Gilbert Gaul (United States, 1855—1919)?, 1907-1909. Oil on Canvas, Dimensions: 33 x 21 ¼in, courtesy Birmingham Museum of Art.

Drawing on the Birmingham Museum of Art’s collection and select loans from Birmingham private collectors, the exhibition surveys a variety of historical and contemporary works by both white and black artists, and explores how various representations of blacks in American art have been influenced at particular moments by specific political, cultural, and aesthetic interests, as well as the motives and beliefs of the artists. At a time when audiences are openly questioning and challenging mass media outlets regarding biased visual representations of African Americans, *Black Like Who?* demonstrates that concerns regarding the depiction of African Americans have been debated and highly contemplated subjects for artists and viewers alike for many generations.

The examples discussed in *Black Like Who?* range from a romanticized Civil War scene completed in 1909 by the painter Gilbert Gaul (1855-1919) that glorifies the deeply rooted myth of the “loyal slave,” to contemporary photographs by Atlanta artist Sheila Pree Bright that blend imagery of Mattel’s Barbie doll with photographs of real black women to visualize how the biases of white beauty standards distort understandings of race and natural beauty.



Untitled 10 (from the Plastic Bodies series) by Sheila Pree Bright (United States, born 1967)?, 2003, C-Print, Dimensions: 12 x 20 in , Loan from Paul Barrett, courtesy Birmingham Museum of Art

The exhibition does not seek to provide a comprehensive discussion of blackness in American art, but instead hopes to provide a platform for meaningful conversations by considering 28 works by 19 artists in five distinct sections: Old Times There Art Not Forgotten; Historical Representations

of Race in the South and Beyond; Black Like Me: African American Portraits; Brown Skin Ladies: Picturing the Black Woman; Body and Soul: Rhythmic Representations; and From Mammy and Mose to Madison Avenue: Advertising and the Black Image.

Black Like Who? runs July 11-November 1, 2015 at the Birmingham Museum of Art. Information here: <http://www.artsbma.org/exhibition/black-like-who/>

Top image: Detail from the Series "Blackface" by David Levinthal (United States, born 1949), 1998, Polaroid Print, Dimensions: 30 x 22 in, courtesy Birmingham Museum of Art

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