The Art of Struggle

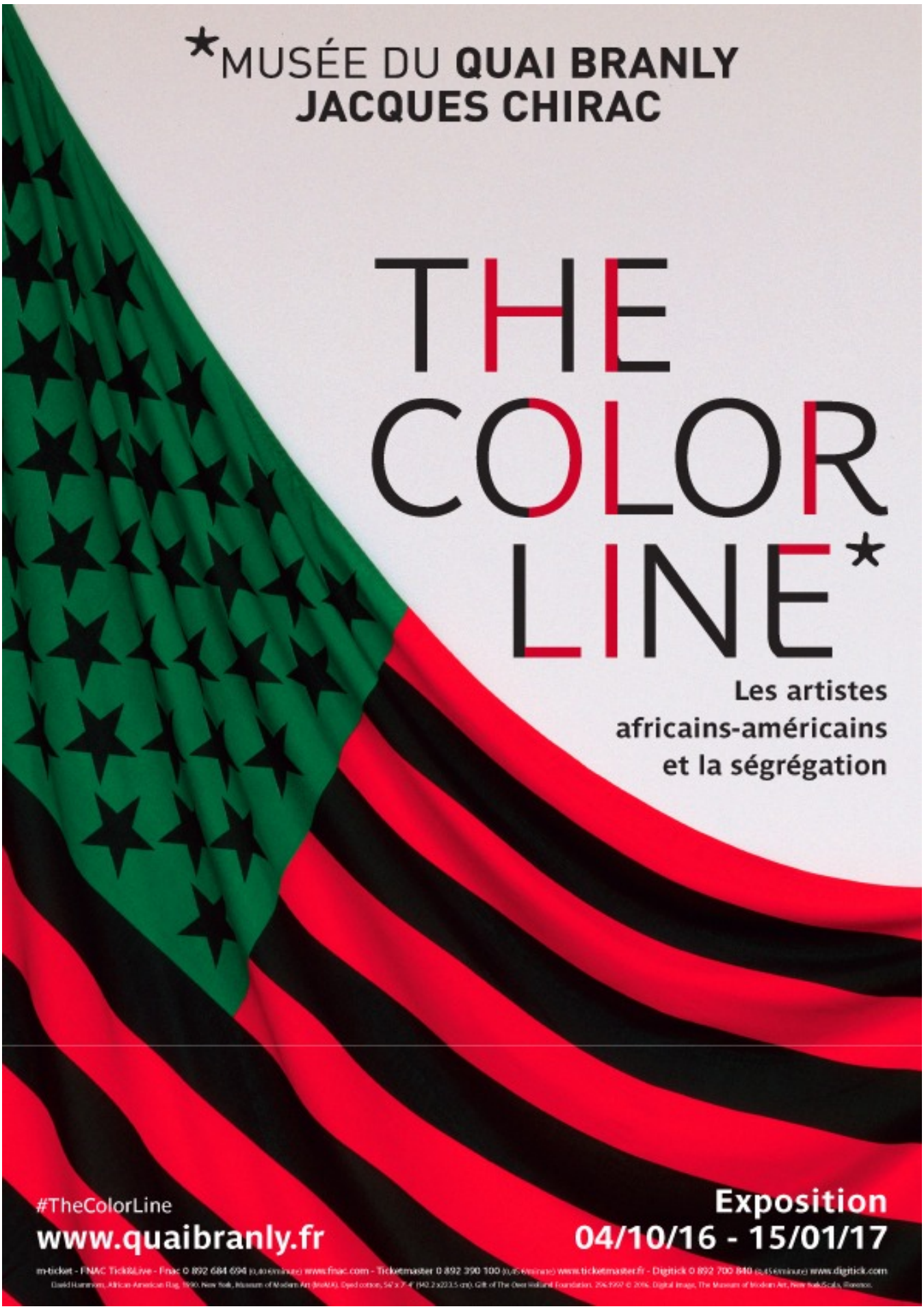
The exhibition "The Color Line: African-American Artists and Segregation" has gone a long way to illustrate the struggle for the civil rights of blacks in the USA, but at the same time, it traps the art on display in a conceptual prison. Revital Madar writes about the recent exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris.

Critique / Revital Madar June 25, 2017

The struggle for blacks' civil rights in the U.S. is present already in the title of the exhibition "The Color Line: African-American Artists and Segregation" (The Color Line: Les Artistes Africains-Américains et la Ségrégation,) curated by art critic Daniel Soutif, at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. On the one hand, the title places the African-American artists in the exhibition in the context of the term "the Color Line," coined by the African-American statesman Frederick Douglass in 1888, and conceptualized as the central issue of the 20th century by the African-American writer and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the founders of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Du Bois has identified the relations between whites and people of color from the United States, but also Africa and Asia, as the root of various conflicts throughout the 20th century. On the other hand, the presence of these artists in the exhibition is stamped by the practice of segregation, which have determined the official American agenda from the middle of the 19th century until 1967. Right there in the title, the need to segregate African-American art, to imprint it with an unequivocal context, is present, as if the ethnicity and nationality of the artists were not enough to bring to the fore a certain history, which has always been bound in the US to the era of slavery.

Deviating from the universal ethnic and national categories of the West always involves political struggles and a sequence of historical events. From the outset, these categories are constrained and limited and lack the freedom of the transparent mainstream. Then why, despite this Gordic Knot, was the work of Glenn Ligon, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Mickalene Thomas, Aaron Douglas, Horace Pippin, Elizabeth Catlett, and David Hammons doomed to be constrained twice? Once because of their national ethnicity, and a second time due to their struggle, and the struggle of their community, as blacks in America?

Affiche Color Line Sans Logo 10ans.jpg



[1]The Color Line: African-American Artists and Segregation

January 15 – June 4, 2017

While the title attempts to reduce the black struggle in the U.S. to just one of its aspects – segregation – the exhibition's timeline goes through three centuries: it begins in 1865 and ends in 2014, the nearest present the exhibition (opened in October of 2016) could address. The tension between narrow, constricting borders and overly wide spaces is present also in the definition of art in the exhibition. The curator has stated two goals: one, to present the work of these artists to the French public, which has not seen them before, and thus to narrow the gap between the French and the American audiences in regards to African-American art; and the other, to present artistic and political perspectives side-by-side. Nevertheless, in ways that are not self-explanatory today, in its definition of "African-American art" the exhibition acknowledges more than visual art. African-American art, as defined by "The Color Line," includes poetry, cinema, and writing, i.g. what we might call 'culture' in the broad institutional sense, which is irreconcilable with the contemporary understanding of the term 'art.' While we might welcome the expansion of the term, the expansion in the present context becomes another brick in the continuous problematic approach of the exhibition.

Preview of "The Color Line: African-American Artists and Segregation"

The practice of categorization works well for whiteness, for patriarchy, and for various displays of hetero-normativity. It works so well that, in most cases, those who populate the categories are oblivious to the fact that reside in them – they do not sense their walls. However, women always find themselves split among several categories: gender and ethnicity, gender and class, gender and nationality. That divergence keeps getting wider as the individual assumes further identities: black, poor, migrant, lesbian, trans, etc. The difficulties that follow from this split or the feminine multiplicity of categories, show up often in the stipulations foundations put up for funding struggles. The foundations believe it is possible to conduct a struggle that is exclusively feminist, ethnic, national, or class-related. Thus, individuals with multiple, complex identities must expend their efforts in several courses. Since they do not occupy one single category, their struggles fail to populate the distinct categories of the various grants offered by foundations around the world.

Interestingly, in "The Color Line" a reverse move seems to have occurred, which ostensibly barely acknowledges the difficulty of black artists to fit in a defined art space, to separate the artistic from the political, and the personal and the public (long before these separations developed an archaic odor). If indeed this had been the reason for the expansion of the category of art in the exhibition, why the insistence on African-American artists and not on African-American culture with its many manifestations? Furthermore, why doesn't the exhibition address this absence of distinctions? Why, when African-American culture is the subject, the intended platforms becomes so inter-disciplinarian? In a country that jealously observes disciplinary divisions in art, as well as in Academia, why has the breaching of the boundaries occurred at this moment and vis-a-vis this object? Perhaps the curator prefered to avoid the whiff of colonialism that might emanate from the discourse about a specific culture. Still, it is hard to disregard the implication that the answers to all of these questions may be found in the artists' identities, as well as the topic under discussion – segregation.

Autour du Monde.jpg **[2]**



[3]Whitefield Lovell. Autour du monde, 2008
Conte on wooden boards, with balls. 102X189X171 cm

© Courtesy of S.D. Moore Gallery, New York

Moreover, the absence of any direct allusion to the curator's not-quite-obvious choice to call culture art makes the exhibition bewildering. A visitor who comes here to get acquainted with African-American art cannot but feel that the artworks have been turned into artistic anecdotes that accompany the historical story. Hammons's work, *Air Jordan*, for example, is perceived as an introduction to the place blacks occupy in the American sports culture, while Whitfield Lovell [4]'s *Autour du monde* illustrates the exhibition's discussion of WWI and the enlistment of black soldiers into the European and American armies.

The promise of African-American art in literature, cinema, photography, and the fine arts (the French *beaux arts*) goes unrealized, since most of the art on display, within the wide historical story surrounding the exhibition, is, in fact, "fine art." The ratio between this kind of art and the other disciplines is far from being equal, and it seems that, in the end, the promise of a generalized definition of art as culture disappoints as well. Even in the final space of the exhibition, which is

devoted to contemporary black art (and not to any historical or sociological subcategory), nothing but the extensive timeline – 1964-2014 – binds the works together.

African-American Flag by Hammons, *Deluxe* by Ellen Gallagher, and Thomas's *Origin of the World* are presented side-by-side, in a relatively intimate space, but even here nothing suggests a link beyond blackness. As its title hints, Thomas's works alludes to Gustave Courbet's well-known painting, substituting a black female body for the white and the universe for the world, thus echoing the question of the feasibility of the Western world without the exploitation of blacks in the colonies and the US.

GALLA 2004.0027-30 DeLuxe, cropped.jpg **[5]**



[6]Ellen Gallagher. Deluxe. 2004-2005
A series of 60 prints done in various techniques, laser cutting, laser peeling, silkscreen, lithography, painting, and sculpting in Plasticine.

© Ellen Gallagher. Courtesy of Gagosian and Hauser Wirth Galleries

There are several possible explanations to the move undertaken here, which has stolen the birthright from the African-American art and trapped it between two ideas, as evident right in the title. First, there is the French context, in which showing African-American art is a new thing. There is a need, perhaps an obligation, to tell a larger story through the exhibition, to make it educational so it could serve students in France, where the critical use of the term "race" is not yet ingrained into the consciousness. Second, there is the context of the museum: Musée du Quai Branly dedicates itself to the arts and cultures of Asia, Africa, the Pacific Islands, and America. It is unaccustomed to showing "fine art," as it were, but rather anthropological–historical exhibitions[1]. Beyond the concrete,

materialistic reasons that underlie these two answers is the object, "The color Line." Disregarding it and the consequences of the attempt to deal with it necessarily involved disregarding the burden of the black people, and how the black existence and struggle are not a trifle that can be left alone. The struggle envelopes black people, whether they wish it or not, and any reading that is unrelated to the struggle and to black history and politics becomes futile.

The exhibition explains, though, in a variety of accompanying texts, that the heritage of the struggle is present throughout, but it fails to create a balance between the description of the struggle and the artworks on display. In other words, there is less room for the works of the artists, with their various meanings, and most of the exhibition space is given to placing them only in the context of the black struggle in the US. In most of the galleries, the works are hung next to other objects, from Du Bois's infographics to the books of James Waldo Johnson, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, and Douglass, through magazines with covers featuring "Black Lives Matter" and the Obamas. These objects convey the context of the struggle in a way that does not allow stopping and thinking about the artistic act of the artist, only to read their work through its lens. It seems the artworks' function is to ornament the struggle, just another brick in the wall of an exhibition that has wanted to talk about color, to tell the story of blacks in America, but has searched for another angle to present the narrative beyond the historical objects.

Proclamation of the Abolition of Slavery in the French Colonies, 27 April 1848.jpg **[7]**



[8]François-Auguste Biard. Proclamation of the Abolition of Slavery in the French Colonies, April 27, 1848
Oil on canvas. 392X260 cm. Versailles Palace, Versailles, France

The problems do not end here. The treatment of racism as part of the same lesson about color the museum is teaching us is no less disturbing. Thus, for example, we encounter, early in the exhibition, a whole wall of blackface caricatures that ridicule the black subject, and are present here for pedagogical reasons, as an object we are to look at. How did black visitors feel when they confronted caricatures of black men, and images of white men heavily made-up as blacks? Did they feel that these perceptions were a thing of the past, or rather that the provocative racism of those years allows the hidden racism of today to continue to be vigorously active?

In her essay "Exhibiting Slavery," Francoise Vergès, the slavery, post-colonialism, and museology scholar, criticized the way in which slavery is presented in various museums2. Following an exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly in 2011, whose title had become the name of Vergès's essay, the text opens with a discussion of François-Auguste Biard's *Proclamation of the Abolition of Slavery in the French Colonies, April 27, 1848* (L'Abolition de l'esclavage, 27 avril 1848). According to Vergès, this painting repeatedly appears in France as a representation of slavery, even though the scene is actually about the heroism of the white man as the freer of slaves – the same slaves that moments ago have been employed by him, and to whom he had denied every basic right reserved for humankind. Vergès wonders why, regardless of Biard's choice to describe this scene, had this image, which is not quite an exposé of the economic, cultural, and social system at the foundation of slavery, become its visual representation? How did this particular image, which shows slavery as a concluded matter, as a thing of the past, become the one the West turns to when it chooses to show slavery?

In addition to Biard's work, Vergès criticizes other representations of slavery as they are introduced into the museum, among them the achievements of slaves' descendants and the various tools of torture and oppression, alongside consumer products which are a product of slavery, such as sugar and coffee. In the context of the current show, Vergès's question echoes the absence of those who are to blame, who have imposed segregation, subjected blacks to violence, patronized and ridiculed them, as well as hanged and killed them. Those faces were left out of the exhibition. Their names are seemingly (and inadequately) replaced by images of blatant, direct racism, such as the blackface caricatures, that today we find difficult to digest, and we prefer to view it as an attribute of a dark past. Placed in this arc of images with no guilty parties (which might have revealed to us the bitter truth: that racists are not monsters), in another representation of the same violence, dissociated from current context, and alongside countless other objects – the works, many of which have arrived in France for the first time, do not succeed, in the course of their visit, to be displayed first and foremost for what they are – works of art.

The exhibition The Color Line: Les Artistes Africains-Américains et la Ségrégation [9], curated by Daniel Soutif, was on display at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris between 4/10/16 and 15/1/17.

- 1. Since its opening in 2006, the museum has devoted only four exhibitions to visual art: a solo-show of the artist Greg Semu [10], a New Zealander of Samoan origin; an exhibition of the work of Paul Jacoulet, a French artist who lived in Japan from age 3, traveled to China, Korea, and Micronesia, and painted the locals; an exhibition dedicated to Aboriginal painting [11]; and a solo show of the New Zealander photographer Anne Noble [12]. Except for Noble's, the three other shows, despite their preoccupation with visual art, have been adapted to the museum's anthropological-historical framework, as evident from their stress of the ethnic-cultural background of the artists and their perception of the other, in the case of Jacoulet. The exhibition "Picasso Primitif," which opened at the museum of March 28, 2017, shows Picasso's work through the prism of the influence of the non-Western world on it.
- 2. Vergès, F.rançoise Vergès (2013). "Exposer l'Esclavage" [13], Africultures 91(1), pp. 37-40.

Source URL: https://tohumagazine.com/article/art-struggle

Links
[1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Affiche%20Color%20Line%20Sans%20Logo%2010ans.jpg
[2] https://tohumagazine.com/file/autour-du-mondejpg
[3] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Autour%20du%20Monde.jpg
[4] http://www.dcmooregallery.com/artists/whitfield-lovell
[5] https://tohumagazine.com/file/galla-20040027-30-deluxe-croppedjpg
[6] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/GALLA%202004.0027-30%20DeLuxe%2C%20cropped.jpg
[7] https://tohumagazine.com/file/proclamation-abolition-slavery-french-colonies-27-april-1848jpg
[8] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Proclamation%20of%20the%20Abolition%20of%20Slavery%20in%20the%20French%20Colonies%2C%2027%20April%201848.jpg
[9] http://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/expositions-evenements/au-musee/expositions/details-de-levenement/e/the-color-line-36687/
[10] http://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/expositions-evenements/au-musee/expositions/details-de-levenement/e/greg-semu-36610/
[11] http://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/expositions-evenements/au-musee/expositions/details-de-levenement/e/aux-sources-de-la-peinture-aborigene-34702/
[12] http://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/editions/les-publications-du-musee/les-catalogues-dexpositions/photographie/anne-noble/
[13] http://www2.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=11522