IMAGINING WHITENESS IN ART

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

The inability to distinguish between skin color and culture, nationality and race, and the personal and the political, often makes finding whiteness in art difficult and furthers society’s inability to examine whiteness. Many non-white artists who examine whiteness through art are marginalized. However, many white artists also confront the issues of race, and their work is often not analyzed in a racial context. This allows whiteness to remain invisible. By examining Matthew Barney’s Cremaster 3, Sally Mann’s Deep South, and Paul McCarthy’s Class Fool, in terms of the artists’ white identity, one is able to see how these artists’ cultural representations align with society’s definitions of whiteness. In this essay, the purpose of identifying whiteness in art is not to determine “correct” meanings but instead to determine what meanings can be legitimately read in three artists’ work.
CHAPTER 2:

PAUL MCCARTHY AND THE PERFORMANCE

The performance art space has long been associated with the examination of powerful political issues such as gender, race, and sexuality. Paul McCarthy executed many performances during the early years of performance art in the 1970s and 80s, when this form of art was beginning to join the fine arts in gallery and museum spaces.

The theatrics of McCarthy’s 1976 performance *Class Fool*, staged at the University of Southern California, exemplify his early work. In the performance, McCarthy, wearing a blonde wig, undresses himself, places a doll between his legs, begins breathing heavily as if in child birth, and rubs ketchup over his naked body. He wildly stomps his feet and jumps up and down in a classroom of spectators (See Figure 1). He injures himself by constantly falling, vomits three times, and proceeds to insert a doll into his rectum during the 45-minute performance. The performance continues until the members of his audience can no longer bear witness to his self-destruction and leave.

For many, this performance and subsequent video can only be read as an abject piece of art that is nothing more than shocking or appalling. However, this performance has many symbolic and metaphoric meanings that allow it to be more than abject. The symbolism of McCarthy’s performances has been understood as referencing issues relating to masculinity and the body. However, *Class Fool* should also be understood in
relation to issues of whiteness and white masculinity. McCarthy acknowledges that his work is influenced by geographical location, especially his upbringing in Los Angeles and southern California. However, he has not acknowledged that his work can be understood as a commentary on whiteness. The behaviors that he performs in *Class Fool* continue to be performed by young, white suburban boys and men in movies like *Jackass* and endless viral Internet videos. Why white men in non-art contexts continue to reproduce aspects of Paul McCarthy’s self-destructive performances to the acclaim of large commercial audiences is a question that should be examined. The ritual of self-abasement having to do with bodily fluids and symbolic violence can be seen by a more limited group of women and black artists, such as William Pope L.’s *Crawl* series of videos and Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*. Unlike McCarthy’s performance, which eludes criticism and most associations with history, Pope L. and Ono’s videos and performances allow audiences and critics to quickly associate the symbolic violence to the history of violence done to both groups.

McCarthy and his critics rarely draw attention to the whiteness of not only McCarthy but also his early audiences at many different colleges in the southern California area. Concluding that whites were the majority of college students at the time, resulting in the performer and audience being white, would ignore racial identities. If McCarthy were not white, the symbolic meanings and messages would dramatically change and the reception of this piece would create a drastically different response. There would be far less humor taken away from this performance because of
Figure 1: Still from Paul McCarthy’s *Class Fool*
the self-infliction of violence. Paul McCarthy spoke about the violence in *Class Fool* during an interview with Marc Selwyn saying, “The violence is symbolic. It’s always acted on inanimate objects and when it involves performances with other people, it’s a ludicrous violence.”¹ If the violence is always symbolic within the performing space, then one must question its meaning. McCarthy gives some insight into the possible symbolism in his work:

> Ketchup can represent blood, it’s not necessary that it be blood. There were pieces that I made in the early 1970s where there was a sort of emphasis on concrete performance. Performance as a concrete reality, where you don’t represent getting shot, you actually get shot. That definition of performance as reality – as concrete – became less interesting to me. I became more interested in mimicking, appropriation, fiction, representation and questioning meaning.²

If ketchup represents blood, this still does not answer the question of why someone would want to rub blood all over his or herself, as McCarthy does in *Class Fool*. One possibility is that McCarthy uses bodily fluids and violence to depict a visceral experience for his audience. This visceral experience may be symbolic of any number of violent historical moments. Rubbing bodily fluids all over his body and inflicting injuries on himself can be read as a self-destructive and terrorizing glimpse into the concept of white supremacy or dominance. bell hooks addressed such practices in *Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination*, an essay that describes the differences between the ways whites construct whiteness in their imaginations, and the ways in which it is constructed in the black imagination. She writes:

Socialized to believe the fantasy, that whiteness represents goodness and all that is benign and nonthreatening, many white people assume this is the way black people conceptualize whiteness. They do not imagine that the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life, most often as terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures, is a reality that disrupts the fantasy of whiteness as representing goodness.³

In hooks’ interpretation, whites imagine whiteness as being synonymous with goodness, while blacks imagine whiteness as being synonymous with terrorizing impositions and privilege. The notion of whiteness as terrorizing can easily be seen in McCarthy’s *Class Fool*. He is enacting violence on his own body in the same way one has historically seen the black body terrorized by whiteness during slavery and later in during the Civil Rights movement. McCarthy’s infliction of injuries not only metaphorically symbolizes history but also symbolizes the power structure of white male dominance.

McCarthy further emphasizes the relationship between history, violence, and power by remaining in control of the entire performance. He does not invite the audience to join in and injure him, but, instead, remains in control of the classroom. It may appear that he is breaking down the barriers of authority and subject by inflicting harm to himself, but instead of allowing the audience to participate in his performance, like other performing artists did in the 1970s and 80s, he remains in control.⁴ He remains in control and white masculinity ideology remains in control. McCarthy even continues


⁴ See, for instance, Vito Acconci’s *Claim*, Dan Graham’s *Performer/Audience/Mirror* and Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*
to perform until his audience leaves which shows the pleasure he receives from others watching him and reacting to his dominance in this situation.

The figure of the male patriarch has always been part of McCarthy’s work, and he willingly states that in most interviews that he has given. However, McCarthy fails to mention that the patriarchal figure in his work is not only male but also white. He subverts the binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality by inserting a doll into his rectum, but does not question white authority. Describing his relationship with authority McCarthy described a feeling of nothingness:

I mistrust a lot of what has been conjured up in this culture. At one point I mistrusted reality completely. It occurred in 1971-72, when suddenly the experience of being confronted with my existence was overwhelming. And that experience lasted for a year. I was confronted with nothingness, why was there anything, why was there something, an object, an inanimate or animate object?\(^5\)

He attributes his dissatisfaction with existence and reality to a sensation of nothingness. This nothingness seems to derive from his perception that he lacks identity. Tom DiPiero discusses the presentation of both whiteness and masculinity as not so much identities but as hysterical responses to a perceived lack of identity. He looks at the wryly comic construction of confused, ‘nice guy’ white male protagonists in films like *White Men Can’t Jump* (1992) and *Grand Canyon* (1992), arguing that these films endorse the position that white men are justified in asking others to determine their identity.\(^6\) However McCarthy does not play the role of the nice white man; rather


he plays the role of a man approaching white non-existence. He seems to be presenting the idea that white men can only feel individuality and identity through self-mutilation.

A similar conviction seems to animate the *Jackass* films (2002, 2006, 2010), the latest installment of which was premiered at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the same type of venue that Paul McCarthy uses for video installations such as *Class Fool*.

*Jackass* began as a television show airing from 2000 to 2002 on MTV. The idea for the series birthed from a skateboarding magazine article for *Big Brother* magazine where Johnny Knoxville, a struggling actor turned writer, decided to test various self defense devices on himself. Knoxville was convinced by Jeff Tremaine, writer for *Big Brother* magazine and director of the *Jackass* films and television series, to videotape being tasered, maced, and shot while wearing a bulletproof vest. At the same time, Bam Margera, Ryan Dunn, Brandon Dicamillo, and Raab Himself were performing similar stunts and videotaping them, releasing them under “Landspeed: CKY.” Tremaine, aware of these videos, brought together the “CKY Crew” and Johnny Knoxville, Chris Pontius, Dave England, Wee-Man, and Steve-O, contributors and employees of *Big Brother’s* magazine and film productions. In *Jackass*, these nine white men wreak havoc on themselves and each other through a series of pranks and stunts that are potentially deadly, crude, and often ridiculous. Unlike McCarthy’s *Class Fool*, the *Jackass* actors cause serious harm to each other and themselves. *Jackass* has also gained mass popularity, unlike the fringe appeal of McCarthy’s early videos.

*Jackass* breaks down all the barriers and binaries that McCarthy could not. There is no authority in the *Jackass* films since there are so many people involved in the
production. There is no narrative or explanation other than an announcement at the
beginning of the film: “Hi. I am Johnny Knockville and welcome to Jackass.” Jackass
acknowledges cultural differences and similarities when performing skits in India and
other countries throughout the world without ever labeling their whiteness or American
identity. The actors do this through finding like-minded people performing similar stunts
or by trying to encompass every stereotype about a culture in a single stunt.

Like McCarthy’s performances, Jackass offers the concept of self-destruction as
the only way of asserting white suburban masculinity. In Jackass, violence is real and
acknowledged, unlike McCarthy’s performances, where violence is represented through
metaphors and symbolism. Jeff Tremaine wrote, “It’s unprecedented slapstick in the
sense that all of the violence is real.” 7 Tremaine’s emphasis on the violence being real
reiterates the importance of linking violence to white masculine identity, which can be
historically seen in the skits of Vaudeville from the late 19th century and early 20th
century. Historically, the jugglers and magicians of Vaudeville lead to many slapstick
comedy careers including Buster Keaton, the Three Stooges, Charlie Chapin, and the
Marx Brothers. All of these performers performed stunts such as hitting each other over
the head with bats or creating some kind of physical pain to their bodies. 8 Unlike the
early Vaudeville actors, Jackass does not just symbolically hit each other over the head
with a club. The Jackass actors go through great lengths to cause injury to themselves.


See, for instance, Keaton’s The General, the Three Stooges’ Moe, Larry and Curly,
Chapin’s The Tramp, and the Marx Brothers Duck Soup
Examples include Bam Margera attempting to fly like Mary Poppins by opening an umbrella and jumping off a two story house, Johnny Knoxville’s launching himself 60 feet into the air strapped to a rocket in a similar way seen in Warner Brother’s cartoons, and the entire group of actors enjoy driving open golf carts off of hills, falling out, and almost breaking their necks. An audience of any age, gender, race, religion, and sexuality can take pleasure in the spectacle of white men inflicting pain on themselves because as members of the group that hold the majority of the political, social, and economic power in America, white men inflicting pain and humiliation on themselves goes against historic tradition. However, Jackass, like McCarthy, remains in control of their audience by allowing the audience only passively watch the actors construct their own representations. The film’s directors eliminate the boundaries between authority and audience by allowing anyone to participate, whether it is the people starring in the film, the crew making the film, the audience watching an exhibitionistic entertainment or people that watch the film and decide to make their own YouTube videos. Also like McCarthy, Jackass questions issues of heterosexuality and homosexuality by performing skits involving homoeroticism and fringe sexual behaviors, such as when Bam Margera flies a kite attached to anal beads inserted into his ass while other cast members watch or when Chris Pontius drinks horse semen. However, the Jackass actors continue to hold the authority in the movie theatre because they know people will watch their films and not leave the theatres. This ultimately leaves them in control unlike McCarthy who

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Both skits can be seen in Jackass Number 2, 2006
performed knowing that he would continue to perform until his audience could no
longer watch. Spike Jonze, another creator of Jackass, wrote, “When we first started, I
knew that it was lowbrow comedy, but I also thought that we were doing conceptual art
in some way.”

Before creating and directing Jackass, Jonze was mostly known for
directing art music videos for artists such as Bjork, Sonic Youth, and the Beastie Boys,
conceptual feature films like Being John Malkovich, and street skateboarding videos
from early 1990s. Jonze links together the seemingly unrelated worlds of skateboarding,
performance art, and featured films devoted to slapstick sketch comedy. This shows
how the early performances of McCarthy and others played a huge role in the
conceptualization of Jackass. However, the continuum between the assertion of
whiteness and the assertion of violence, which both McCarthy and Jackass portray,
allows for whiteness to claim ownership to the representation of ordinary deviance
through its ability to be all encompassing.

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CHAPTER 3:
SALLY MANN AND THE LANDSCAPE

Unlike the performing space, the landscape holds a deep connection to memory and history. The landscape is of great importance to the way an individual structures identity, nationality, and the conceptual construction of history. Simon Schama wrote in *Landscape and Memory* that the landscape is not only idealized by Americans but also comes with cultural baggage.¹¹ The landscape is not only a place for religious experiences in artificial gardens but also a place that has a distinct and definitive history. Traditionally, Americans imagine the landscape cultureless and pure but on closer inspection the landscape is imbued with American mythology.

Sally Mann’s *Deep South* series of landscape photographs appear to be situated in between the 19th century and contemporary times. Mann employs the wet collodion process, a 19th century early photographic process that involves coating glass plates with toxic chemicals and making images on them before they dry. Mann purposefully emphasizes the imprecision of the process in order to allow for chance occurrences. The resulting images from this process are often blurry in parts, sometimes almost completely blank, and always have some sort of flaw that makes them appear to either

have been made in a different century or have suffered some kind of serious fire
damage (See Figure 2). Mann connects the creation of her landscape work to growing
up in the South and finding a collection of old landscape negatives in her childhood
home:

For Southerners, memory is most often an act of will – and once we conjure it,
we are unashamed to overlay it with sentiment. Our history of defeat and loss
sets us apart from other Americans and because of it, we embrace the Proustian
concept that the only true paradise is a lost paradise. But we know that love
emerges from this loss, becomes memory, and that memory becomes art.¹²

Sally Mann links the feeling of being from the South to the history of the south
losing the American Civil War, which grounds her work not only in a specific historical
moment, but also within white identity. The American Civil War is the deadliest war in
the history of America, leaving more dead than WWI and WWII combined. An event of
that magnitude changes more then the construction of southern identity.

Sally Mann writes, “To identify a person as a Southerner is always to suggest not
only that her history is inescapable and profoundly formative but that it is also
paralyzingly present.”¹³ She is suggesting that Americans that live in the North are not as
affected by the history of the Civil War because the North did not lose the war.

However, all Americans are and will continue to be profoundly affected by this history. It
can also be seen that Mann is dramatizing and singling out the issues of war, violence,

York: Edwynn Houk Gallery, 5.

York: Edwynn Houk Gallery, 6.
Figure 2: Sally Mann’s *Untitled* (Gettysburg), 2001
race and slavery as key elements for understanding the South and its people. Sally Mann’s images throughout the South were made on lands where not only American Union soldiers, Confederate soldiers, and slaves were killed, but where the Cherokee Indian population was forced off lands in Tennessee, Alabama, North Carolina, and Georgia. The Cherokee were marched through the South to Oklahoma, known today as the Trail of Tears, where many died on the journey to relocation or from the consequences of relocation. The same Southern landscape of Mann’s photographs witnessed the death of many Cherokees only 30 years before the American Civil War. Her lack of mention or assertion of deaths of Native Americans may show how the construction of history emphasizes the Civil War and end of slavery more than the genocide of Native Americans.

In the artist statement in her book, *Deep South*, Mann writes a story about ignoring “no trespassing” signs and photographing on private land when a man in a truck drives up and greets her, surprising her by saying “It’s a nice day to take a picture” instead of by holding a shotgun to the back of her head.\(^\text{14}\) She goes on to describe how she met a couple of strangers and they let her stay at their second home while she was photographing the landscape of Louisiana. This story is followed with this statement:

“...African Americans reading this will reflect with infinite weariness that no key would have been under the mat for them and that the gun would most surely

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have been pointed squarely at the center of the darkcloth had the protruding legs been black...”

This statement shows how Mann feels white guilt for being able to do something that she knows others would not be able to do because of skin color. It is an apology for taking advantage of the privileges of whiteness. Mann makes it clear that she is thinking specifically of African Americans, not any other non-white racial group who might have, in theory also have suffered from a white property owner’s belligerence. The apologetic guilt of a southerner is inherently part of her photographic works and the construction of her whiteness.

Sally Mann not only photographs the more anonymous features of the southern landscape; she also photographs the landscape of Civil War battlefields like Antietam in Sharpsburg, Maryland. In an interview with Charlie Rose, Mann said, “I went to Antietam because I was looking for a battlefield where a great number of deaths had occurred...Sculpted by death.” The resulting images are dark and blurry and have the illusion of a layer of skin on top of them because of the wet collodion process. This skin like appearance emphasizes the connection between battlefields, flesh, and death. These features can be seen in Mann’s Untitled (Antietam) photograph [fig. 2]. The image has scratches on the surface that appear like scars on not only the surface of the image but also the landscape. However, the question of whether these bodies were black or


white brings up the question of the reasons for the Civil War. Whether the Civil War happened because of slavery alone makes little difference because slavery was a major motivation for the war. The bodies were white and black and they died because of a war. Sally Mann is not searching for answers to these questions but instead just looking for the metaphorical imprint of dead bodies. Ultimately it is not the land that is imprinted with bodies, but the artist and the people visiting these sights, who care about the marks of war being preserved in an ever-changing landscape.

Most of Mann’s Antietam landscapes do not show physical relics of the battle, but instead the trees and the fields that bared witness to the war. These battlefields are, however, now artificially landscaped gardens that are made by and for people. These lands hold the memory of not only the relocation and death of Native Americans and battles of the Civil War, but also the occupation by land conservationists. During the Civil War, an act of Congress in 1864 established Yosemite Valley as a place of sacred significance for the nation, marked the beginning of large government land conservation in the U.S. During the same time as the Civil War, a white American Congress was staking claim to large pieces of land in order to preserve them from mining companies expanding west, and Native Americans who were currently living on the land. Wealthy white American aristocrats were less amused by the picturesque gardening of 18th and 19th century Britain, which were designed to showcase the artificial production of the picturesque landscape to the artificial production of the landscape myth.\textsuperscript{17} In contrast to

the British tradition of fusing nature and culture, the Hudson River School was painting images of the fantasy of untouched American wilderness at the very moment when mining companies and settlers were destroying the landscape through expansion to the West. Creating national parks through the American West allows the landscape to be a natural process or object instead of being constructed and represented by artists. This false sense of naturalism within the landscape is what continues to create a paralyzing feeling of Southern identity and possibly truth within Sally Mann’s images.

This use of landscape myth is an inherently white ideology because of its connection to imperial tradition of conquest. In her photos, Mann creates a world where “mother nature,” or the land, is scarred from what man has done to it. However, her usage simultaneously creates an alternative myth about what man has done himself. Richard Dyer wrote in White, “Whites often seem to have a special relation with death, to yearn for it but also to bring it to others... Within Western art the dead white body has often been a sight of veneration, an object of beauty.”

Sally Mann treats death and the southern landscape as both romantic and beautiful by allowing it to be untouched of direct human presence or obvious human interaction. Her works suggests that the only way to deal with one’s whiteness is through searching for death. Her search for death comes through an association with guilt and sorrow as well as obvious feeling of disconnection from the historic events that happened on these southern lands.

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The conjuring of spirits seen through the flaws of Mann’s wet collodion images, ghost like stains or swirls of tonality which are inherently part of the process, can be read as letting go of her photographic control. At the same time, they may seek to conjure the sensation of a quasi-religious salvation. The absence of actual dead bodies in Sally Mann’s photographs allows the viewer to conjure up their own bodies and violence.

In her essay *Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination*, bell hooks writes about whiteness and memory stating:

“Michel Foucault posits memory as a site of resistance suggesting that the process of remembering can be a practice which ‘transforms history from a judgment on the past in the name of a present truth to a ‘counter-memory’ that combats our current modes of truth and justice, helping us to understand and change the present by placing it in a new relation to the past.”\(^1\)

The transformation of the history of landscape, the southern battlefield, allows the viewer to combat the past through current modes of truth and justice. However, Sally Mann only gives one conceptual side through her writing, a lineage of Civil War memories instead of presenting the many possible ways of seeing whiteness, the landscape, and memory in her work. The alternatives to seeing just the history of the CivilWare would be to include all historical events that happened on the landscape as well as the history of claim land by white people in the name of preservation or colonization.

Matthew Barney has made a name for himself through his 5 part film series, The Cremaster Cycle. Barney operates primarily as a filmmaker making sculptures and photographs to further develop his films’ mythology. Barney has been ironically labeled the “The Great White Hope” by Laura Cottingham in her book Seeing Through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art. This title is a reference to a Howard Sackler play from the 1960s, about a racist and segregated society that needed a white boxer to beat an African American world heavyweight champion.\textsuperscript{20} This title references the unusual ability to obtain institutional funding from museums like the Guggenheim early on in his career, as well as Barbara Gladstone Gallery’s incessant need to market his work as both heterosexual and white.\textsuperscript{21} Barney not only attended Yale University but was also a fashion model, allowing him to be further categorized within the athletic educated white male construction. As a white male dealing with identity, Barney’s work becomes an attractive alternative to various minority perspectives of the same issues. This attraction not only expresses society’s white male privilege but also identity politics


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
potential benefits to whites. Barney’s films constitute an autobiographical, biological and mythological narrative project that explores the notion of creation, gender, and sexuality. They were filmed out of order, and Barney says that they can be viewed in any order. *Cremaster 3* was the last one filmed, the longest in length, and at a rumored $8 million, the most expensive.

The vivid, eccentric, and often ambiguous narrative begins in Ireland with a mythological tale of giants. The theme of Ireland and Celtic traditions continue throughout the entire film and is fused with a sprinkling of freemasonry mythology. Barney and his character, the Apprentice, appear to be grasping for a white identity through the adoption of Celtic traditions. The desire to profess an affinity with an “old world” heritage culture has been a popular idea among white people in America. Many recent publications including Steve Garner’s *Whiteness: an Introduction* and Nell Irvin Painter’s *The History of White People*, have written about the history of working-class European immigrants, such as the Irish and Italians, and their ability to achieve access to white identity and privilege. This need to latch on to foreign nationalism in America is grounded in the concept that American culture is inadequate. Chela Sandoval wrote about the problems associated with white identity in America in her essay *Theorizing White Consciousness*:

The tragedy for the good citizen/subject is that this estrangement also creates and encourages a type of passivity-in-consciousness. This is because any dominant ideological system serves its population as a kind of ‘ideal servant,’ [Roland Barthes] writes “It prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the
master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from."²²

Sandoval and Barthes allude to the emptiness of the dominant ideological system. The person partaking in the dominant ideological system is usually unaware of its control and power, which may eventually lead to feelings of disconnection. Barney’s questioning of the binary understanding of male and female allows him to challenge a dominant ideology but his lack of questioning whiteness strengthens and reinforces its dominance and invisibility. Not only does he question where the human body literally comes from, he examines the history of his own whiteness. However, instead of directly engaging with the issue of whiteness as a recoding of American identity, he adopts Irish nationalism. Throughout the film, he tries to connect his character to Ireland by exploiting that country’s mythology. He does this many different ways, including featuring songs sung in Gaelic, the Irish language that only about 60,000 out of 4.5 million people in Ireland speak. He also wears a kilt and red wig throughout the dream sequence at the end of the film because both kilts and red hair were historically more likely to be found in Scotland. The way that Barney blends Scottish and Irish identity into a single form is historically similar to how these very different identities were compounded in the United States.

Barney also uses the Irish flag’s colors of green, orange, and white as recurrent elements in the film’s color scheme, which can be seen in the carpet of the Chrysler

Building’s bar and the ribbons of the maypole scene at the end of the film. In an essay in her book, *The Cremaster Cycle*, Nancy Spector writes “Introduced in 1848 as an emblem of the Young Ireland Movement, the flag symbolized a fusion of perceived opposites: the green represented the older Gaelic and Anglo-Norman faction of the country; the orange signified the Protestant population; and the white between them an everlasting peace.” The idea of whiteness or white representing everlasting peace is not only part of the mythology and conception of the Irish flag but also part of the mythology of Barney’s *Cremaster*. *Cremaster’s* use of an elaborate, personalized symbolic matrix that draws elements from Freemasonry, Celtic history, and Art Deco symbolism mystifies ideologies and identities in an attempt to create a middle territory that is free of labeling and associations. In *Cremaster 3*, Barney complicates the simplistic understanding of gender as a binary opposition, but he also simplifies and reinforces other forms of ideology. Richard Dyer has written, “Any dominant ideology in any society presents itself as the ideology of that society as a whole. Its work is to deny the legitimacy of alternative and oppositional ideologies and to construct out of its own contradictions a consensual ideology that will appear to be valid for all members of society.” Barney works hard to show the contradictions between binary constructions of male and female anatomy, but does not present any alternatives to whiteness, and instead proposes it as an alternative to all binaries.


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Barney allows whiteness to encompass everything without any opposition by allowing whiteness to be the only race represented throughout *Cremaster 3*, and also by only representing whiteness within a personally invested positive historic tradition. The Irish immigrants’ access to “white” status and privilege was dependent on their ability to assimilate to the norm and shed all overt markers of identity. Whereas by the 1990s, the rise of identity politics had changed the cultural landscape, making it desirable for people of Irish descent, and descendents of other ethnicities as well, to attempt to reclaim that previously unwanted cultural legacy. Barney ironically reinforces white society’s need to reassert difference by using the Irish culture as his historical marker, and further allows this view of whiteness to reinforce white dominance through the exploitation of the myth of the American dream. It shows a relationship between equality and inequality, and how some groups have the ability to achieve equality. However, it obscures the fact that this “dream” is not attainable by all, and allows whites to believe that all non-white people would want to achieve assimilation, not just equality. In *White*, Richard Dyer has written about the claims of whiteness:

> The combination of extreme whiteness with plain, unwhite whiteness means that white people can both lay claim to the spirit that aspires to the heights of humanity and yet supposedly speak and act disinterestedly as humanity’s most average and unremarkable representatives.\(^{25}\)

Barney allows his white viewers to feel that they can stake a claim in the historical achievement of whiteness. In *Price of the Ticket*, James Baldwin wrote about

the disconnect between Americans and their belief that everyone wanted to live in America:

The price the white American paid for his ticket was to become white.... This incredibly limited not to say dimwitted ambition has choked many a human being to death here: and this, I contend, is because the white American has never accepted the real reasons for his journey. I know very well that my ancestors had no desire to come to this place: but neither did the ancestors of the people who became white and who require of my captivity a song. They require of me a song less to celebrate my captivity than to justify their own.26

Barney’s literal growing of a kilt (See Figure 3) in Cremaster 3, a scene where Barney’s character the Apprentice is laying on a operating table as his skin slowly grows, forming a kilt, shows his needs for historical marking and to represent new whiteness through historical whiteness. The growing of a kilt of skin suggests that whiteness is not only historical but also biological instead of being cultural. This kilt later morphs into an elaborate plaid, conventional kilt made up of the unconventional color hot pink. This kilt mystifies the simple understanding of gender identity by having a male wear a hot pink skirt. Barney exposes the historic contradiction between skirts and kilts and whether men or women wear them. However, he also reaffirms his identity within a culturally confusing blend of Scottish and Irish traditions.

Later in Cremaster 3, Barney connects whiteness to Hardcore Punk music. In a scene where young white men and woman are thrashing and moshing to the music by two real New York based Hardcore Punk bands, one ironically named after a colloquial phrase from Irish folklore, Murphy’s Law.

Figure 3: Still from Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster 3*, 2002
Barney connects current white culture to a feeling of organized chaos by only representing younger white culture as being bodies moshing and moving chaotically. However, the dress attire and shaved heads of the musicians and audience begins to appear more like a white supremacy event than a connection between current and historic white cultures. The connection between Punk music and white supremacy has always been historically present. Early on, artists like Sid Vicious wore shirts with Nazi swastikas on them for shock value. Similarly, Punk music has always floated outside of mainstream culture, allowing it to be claimed by left and right wing politics. Outside of a few subgenres of Punk music, such as Nazi Punk, Punk music has been overwhelmingly allied to progressive issues of race. Many Punk musicians, like Minor Threat and the Fugazis, as well as Afro-Punk bands, such as Bad Brains and Pure Hell, have made anti-racism a major part of their agendas. Punk music’s connection to racism and anti-racism has been long and mostly positive. However, the musicians playing on a stage in Barney’s Cremaster create a scene of chaos that would be terrorizing to anyone that is unfamiliar with this musical tradition. Barney also does not contextualize the importance of linking Punk music to anti-racism; instead, he allows it to be only visually misleading.

The connection between whiteness and hardcore punk music also brings into question issues of whiteness and class. Barney simplifies whiteness into binaries by only portraying white extremes of the wealthy, represented by architects and freemasons with expensive clothing and offices and important jobs, and the working
represented by punk musicians and their audience, who wear ripped up clothing and behave violently and chaotically. These issues of class are inherently part of racial ideologies. Making only the distinction between upper and lower class simplifies and limits the representation of whiteness.

Barney’s creation of an elaborate narrative about the archetypes of macho, white American artists and culture shows only a portion of the average white male’s dilemma. Dyer wrote, “Some of us may think that to be neurotic is the condition of the average white male. It is certainly a common strategy of the representation of white males to offer them as at once typical and individualized, and humour about their mistakes and failings can also seem to render them all the more representative of average humanity.”27 Barney represents both of his main characters, the Architect and the Apprentice, as neurotic white males by only allowing them to be obsessed with the task of stacking metal plates in the shape of a building or filling an entire elevator with cement. The representation of white masculinity as neurotic shows Barney’s ambivalence towards issues of whiteness.

CHAPTER 5:
CONCLUSION

Barney, Mann, and McCarthy engage with white identity issues in different ways. McCarthy does not label or mark his whiteness in any of his performances or writings, Mann recodes her whiteness into Southern identity, and Barney mystifies and adopts a foreign nationality to bring whiteness into line with the new racial or cultural specificity sanctioned by identity politics. Ruth Frankenberg wrote, “Whiteness emerges as a process, not a ‘thing,’ as a plural rather than singular in nature.” Each of these artists shows whiteness as a process, either obtained through history or historical investigations. These artists also allow whiteness to be all encompassing. The process of being or becoming white is complex, and these artists’ works create new definitions of what it means to be white. Many white artists working with issues of race continue to go unlabeled. Not naming whiteness as a discourse within art allows the dominant societal discourse to go unquestioned. Far too often art and racial politics are labeled as neutral or invisible instead of as white. Dyer has written, “In a white supremacist nation, whiteness secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular.”


However, white is something and it is not the “the human race” or the bench line. Its meaning can be understood by looking at the boundaries of not only whiteness but also non-whiteness. Reading whiteness into art is a way of disrupting whiteness as an unchallenged racial norm. Whiteness cannot only be defined as a marker of privilege and as the absence of race, but instead needs to be recognized as something that is complex and unstable. Richard Dyer writes in *Stars*, “…ideology works better when we cannot see it working.”³⁰ White ideology works best when one does not see it working, but this is all the more reason why white ideology should be examined in the arts.

McCarthy represents whiteness as potentially terrifying, innocent and ignorant, all at once. Mann’s work shows the audience a historically scarred representation of whiteness that hints not only at death, but also at white guilt. Barney, however, reinvents whiteness through the creation of a new mythology and allows whiteness to become more powerful by letting it escape the horrible events of history. History plays a role in how each of these artists works with whiteness and how audiences now examine them. An expansion of the critical analysis of art through examining whiteness could not only benefit artists directly engaging with racial identity issues; it could also provide a new avenue for the reexamination of art history. The appropriation of racial discourse in relation to white subjectivity is not meant to restore whiteness to the center, but instead to call into question the practice of allowing whiteness to remain invisible.

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