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Exhibit on being Black in America a gut punch

by William Jaeger
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**Coco Fusco, A-K-A Mrs. George Gilbert, 2004. Video. Photo William Jaeger
William Jaeger**

What is there not to like about a show on three floors of a massive gallery that includes almost 60 significant artists and a theme about being Black in America to make you cry? Maybe just being devastated?

The emotional tremors of “This Tender, Fragile Thing” at Jack Shainman’s Kinderhook gallery, the School, were a gut punch I didn’t expect. Conclusion: Good art, great show. Go now.

I wish I could leave it there and call it a wrap.

There are layers of history here, from the core of the civil rights movement and the Black Panthers in the 1960s and early 1970s, to a specific exhibition from 2005 at Jack Shainman in New York called “The Whole World is Rotten.” And then there is this latest response, which creates a further cascade down the rapids of recent Black history in the U.S.

You don't need history to feel the trauma of a scary traffic stop recorded on a police car dashcam, projected as a 2016 video by Arthur Jafa in one of the little rooms. Or to get the stark 2012 statement by Glenn Ligon and Matt Dilling, who literally scorched the word America in all caps onto paper, upside down. Only slightly more distanced are the four large silvery silkscreen on mylar works by Adam Pendelton that mash together images and text with vitriolic fervor.

The best of the show is its best art, if you are able to separate the parts from the whole. The Carrie Mae Weems-tilted appropriation of Charles Moore's 1963 photographs of protesters being attacked by police is not just a reminder of the brutal facts (much as Warhol's related appropriations were at the time) but also an integration into her own storied work, with pieces of the images tinted pink or blue. Among Hank Willis Thomas' many works is a huge blue flag, an elongated cascade of cloth embroidered with over 15,000 stars marking the number of deaths from gun violence in the previous year.

There are many newly minted prints of classic Gordon Parks photographs depicting, with a seasoned professional's eye, civil rights leaders and the movement they led in the '60s. A conceptual counterweight can be found in several key works by David Hammons, covering decades of rebellion and an ambiguous questioning of norms and stereotypes.

There are original Black Panther newsletters (with artwork by Emory Douglas) and two more recent Time magazine covers by Devin Allen that end up tying directly into Panther radicalism, as well as many other key photographs of protests and protesters. In the largest room you'll find naturally epic works: a huge tire work by Jafa, adorned with chains and called "Big Wheel One" as a metaphor for labor rights, a wall-hung Paa Joe coffin in the shape of one of Africa's slave-holding fortresses, and a library of books newly rebound in black, the titles in gold letters creating their own poetry from spine to spine.

The many parts of this show are not, to be sure, separable from the whole. The exhibition is the real artwork here, a mounting drumbeat with sounds and reverberations permeating every floor, viscerally and by association. Words and photographs dominate, almost inevitably, since these connect us to facts, but the paintings and sculptures are in many ways the aesthetic glue that lifts the whole—the show—into a realm of curatorial artistry.

“This Tender, Fragile Thing” is not a history lesson of civil rights from MLK to BLM. It’s an art show. And that only compounds the impact and the fury. Something as simple as the wall-sized vinyl text work reading “8m 46s” by Nick Cave and Bob Faust drives home how much recent events have changed us. (Or changed me. If you don’t know what those numbers mean you really are obliged to see this show.) In the same way, we spot Malcolm X in photographs speaking, wordless in the gallery but audible anyway. We know his message, and we are reminded of true activism, by any means necessary.