

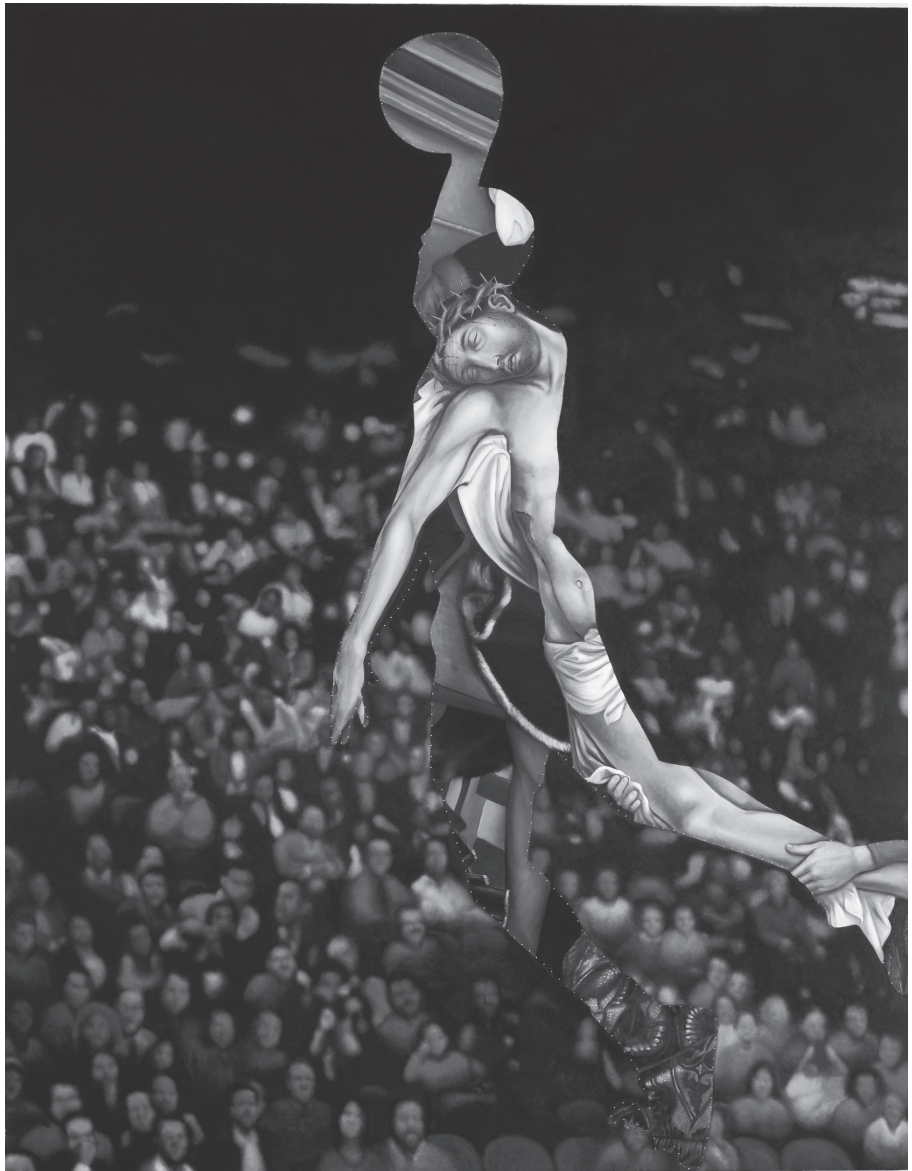
## Fragments of a Crucifixion

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago  
25 May – 3 November 2019

'Fragments of a Crucifixion' is a small but significant exhibition, curated by Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol. The exhibition takes as its point of departure the 'continuing relevance of the sign of the cross' in contemporary artworks that address difficult issues of race, violence, and mortality in contemporary American life. Featuring eleven prominent artists working in the United States over the past five decades, 'Fragments' gathers works that initially 'may appear to have more to do with race than religion' and carefully brings them into conversation 'to reveal the often-invisible religious and spiritual currents that animate these works of art.'<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of a profoundly polarised American public discourse, Praepipatmongkol advocates 'care, vulnerability, and sincerity', particularly at the fraught intersections of contemporary art, religion, and politics. In the online exhibition catalogue, he writes: "'Fragments of a Crucifixion' attempts to make room for another perspective, one that displaces the view through the crosshairs with a consideration of life and death through a religious lens.'<sup>2</sup> And this signals one of the most distinctive and surprising aspects about this exhibition: it is not *about* race and 'religion' as much as it explores the complicated and constructive ways artists are thinking about race *through* or along an inherited, particularly Christian, grammar. And, strikingly, here 'Fragments' doesn't limit itself to the categories of social anthropology (tracing the 'after-life' of Christianity in American visual culture), nor is it reductively political (collapsing all questions into questions of power). Rather, the exhibition also proceeds headlong into theological questions, repeatedly inviting the Christian references and allusions in these works to bring with them an inheritance of theological reasonings about life and death.<sup>3</sup>

The exhibition opens with Titus Kaphar's *Ascension*, 2016, a large oil painting in which a fragment of Rogier van der Weyden's dead Christ from *Descent from the Cross*, c. 1435 is cropped into the silhouette of a leaping basketball player suspended in mid-air. It's an arresting, troubling image,



Titus Kaphar *Ascension*, 2016

colliding vitality and deathliness – spectacular athletic ascent and catastrophic kenotic descent – into a single figure. In her catalogue essay, Xiao Situ reads *Ascension* in Christological terms, drawing upon black theology (citing James Cone, M Shawn Copeland, and Kelly Brown Douglas) to elucidate how 'a Gospel physics of crucifixion and resurrection' operates across the political logic of the work.<sup>4</sup>

Andres Serrano's photo-dptych *Untitled (Knifed to Death I and II)*, 1992 occupies the main wall of the gallery as the show's central, painfully fragmentary crucifixion, depicting the lifeless outstretched hands of an anonymous body in a morgue, fingers stained with fingerprinting ink. In the hermeneutical space of the exhibition, the almond-shaped gashes in the wrists (presumably stray lacerations from a more devastating attack on the unseen torso) evoke the wounds of the crucified

Christ. Indeed, running throughout 'Fragments' is the suggestion that the image of Jesus, executed outside the Holy City under Roman imperial authority, will always bear more resemblance to those who suffer violence than those who wield it.

The terrible implicit violence of Serrano's *Untitled* crucifix is contrasted with the slow mortality of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (The End)*, 1990, a large stack of black-bordered sheets of white paper in the centre of the gallery. As with many of his works, the individual units (sheets of paper) can be taken by visitors – the block daily depleted and replenished and, implicitly, always in danger of being consumed altogether. This grey plinth is a psalm of lament (made as the artist's partner Ross was dying of AIDS, in a state of general forsakenness), which is visually and conceptually rhymed in Rashid Johnson's *Self Portrait Laying on Jack Johnson's*

*Grave*, 2006, depicting the artist lying face-up, seemingly lifelessly, on the grave monument of the famous boxer – the first African American heavyweight champion, who won the title at the height of the Jim Crow era. Rashid’s arm hangs down from the top of Jack’s tombstone (nearly touching the weathered lettering of their shared surname, JOHNSON) in the manner of all great Pietà images (including the one in Kaphar’s *Ascension*).

Jason Lazarus’s photographic record of *Standing at the Grave of Emmett Till, day of exhumation, June 1st, 2005 (Alsip, IL)*, 2005 brings us to the gravesite of the 14-year-old African American who was brutally murdered in Mississippi in 1955, in one of the most notorious acts of racial violence in twentieth-century American history. Lazarus’s photo marks a moment fifty years later, when Till’s case was reopened and his body exhumed for evidence. It takes a conspicuously anti-romantic view of the sparsely populated, green-grass cemetery bearing its own reopened wound. The nearby wall label is given entirely to a quotation from Emmett’s mother, Mamie Till-Mobley (abbreviated here): ‘And I

saw Emmett and his scars. Lord, I saw the stigmata of Jesus. The spirit spoke to me plainly as I’m talking to you now... If Jesus Christ died for our sins, Emmett Till bore our prejudices’. Indeed, the labels throughout ‘Fragments’ are unusually bold not only in bringing Christian points of reference into view but allowing them to speak in their own voices.

These themes reverberate around the room in works by Kerry James Marshall, Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, Glenn Ligon, and Paul Pfeiffer, whose small boomeranging video *Fragment of a Crucifixion (after Francis Bacon)*, 1999 supplies the show title. Hovering over the exhibition as a kind of benediction is Deana Lawson’s *Messier 81, Return of the Dove*, 2018), a large scanned image of the Messier 81 galaxy warped into a dove-like form. Tucked into the golden frame, supplementing and grounding this cosmic imagery, is a found snapshot of five African American women seated in church pews, cheerfully conversing before or after a service. As ‘Fragments’ carefully surveys life-and-death issues of race in contemporary art, it finds Christologies refracted throughout – concentrated languages

for speaking not only of cruelty and suffering but of hope for the redemption of even our cruellest histories.

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1. Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol, ‘Introduction: The Medium of the Cross’, in *Fragments of a Crucifixion*, online exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2019), <https://mcachicago.org/Publications/Websites/Fragments-Of-A-Crucifixion>.
2. Ibid.
3. In this respect, this exhibition joins a growing body of scholarship. For two studies especially relevant to this exhibition, see Kymberly N. Pinder, *Painting the Gospel: Black Public Art and Religion in Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); and James Romaine and Phoebe Wolfskill, eds., *Beholding Christ and Christianity in African American Art* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2018).
4. Xiao Situ, ‘Titus Kaphar’s *Ascension* and Colin Kaepernick’s *Kneel*’, in *Fragments of a Crucifixion*, <https://mcachicago.org/Publications/Websites/Fragments>

Fragments of a Crucifixion’ installation shot

