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Robert Hodge

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON



Robert Hodge, *Stand Your Ground*, 2013, acrylic, oil, and gold leaf on reclaimed paper, hemp thread, 57 × 97".

STAND YOUR GROUND. The words have been seared into the outermost layers of a thickly matted accumulation of reclaimed paper; brown scorch marks, residue of the burning process, radiate from the edges of the letters. This sobering piece by Houston-based artist Robert Hodge was made during the 2013 trial of George Zimmerman, who was charged but ultimately acquitted in the shooting death of African American teenager Trayvon Martin. Commanding a wall in Hodge's first solo museum exhibition, at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston last year, the work did double duty, both invoking the controversial "stand your ground" self-defense laws that Zimmerman's trial brought to national attention and adjuring its viewers to take a position, to not back down. Though Hodge—whose expanded practice mobilizes multiple media and invokes a variety of cultural forms, from hip-hop to performance art—rarely exhorts spectators so directly, his work is always just as insistently uncompromising.

Hodge grew up in Houston's Third Ward and returned to the neighborhood after attending art school in New York and Atlanta. Over the past decade, he has increasingly become a fixture in the city's thriving art scene, due in part to his ever-expanding constellation of collaborative projects, many of which use irreverent irony to address the concerns about race evoked so gravely in *Stand Your Ground*. For example, in 2013, with artist Phillip Pyle II, Hodge formed the Black Guys—a riposte to Houston's white duo the Art Guys (Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing). In a performance from earlier this year, the Black Guys challenged the Art Guys to a boxing match, but this was no Arthur Cravan—versus—Jack Johnson fight: Instead, Hodge and Pyle took a more literal approach, encasing Galbreth and Massing in cardboard packaging—a sly nod to the often unrecognized labors of art handling—and hauling them out of the boxing ring. With Pyle, Hodge founded the Beauty Box, an outdoor installation that transformed an abandoned space into a living-room-inspired site that hosted discussions, concerts, and events. He is also a music producer, having recently assembled a group of mostly local jazz musicians, spoken-word artists, and rappers to record tracks inspired by Juneteenth; fittingly titled *2 1/2 Years*, the resulting album makes direct reference to the fact that slavery in Texas was abolished a shameful two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation.

Hodge's ventures into collective production fit within a wider landscape of African American-run projects that have propelled artistic and social practice in Houston in recent years, most significantly Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses. (Hodge was a facilities manager at PRH, and his current studio is adjacent to the houses' community laundry.) Beyond Houston, one might point toward the practices of Edgar Arceneaux and Theaster Gates, artists who also engage traditions of what Huey Copeland, writing in these pages, has called "African American institutionality." But if Gates's objects can seem like afterthoughts within his larger critical reappropriation of the mechanisms of neoliberal patronage—such that his discrete artworks, per Copeland, at times "risk appearing as commodities cynically extruded by the circuitry of the artist's practice"—Hodge's commitment to painting is the fulcrum of his work, and he is invested in activating the medium's history as an oppositional institution in its own right. His formally arresting canvases build on several artistic antecedents, from the linguistic strategies of conceptual artists such as Glenn Ligon and Lorna Simpson to a lineage of *décollage* stretching from Jacques Villeglé and Raymond Hains to Mark Bradford. Hodge's first use of what he calls "pulled paper" occurred in 2008, for a work titled *Freedom*, in which he reused a poster for an exhibition of work by Otabenga Jones & Associates, another Houston collective of black artists. Peeled off walls and scraped from telephone poles, his scavenged flyers and posters refer not only to the ever-changing urban environment, with its detritus, ephemerality, and cycles of obsolescence, but also to the resilience—and erosion—of memory and to the invigorating traffic between

high art and popular culture. If the *affichistes* of postwar France intended their aleatory compositions of shredded mass-produced ads to be the antithesis of gestural abstraction, Hodge's deliberative process of reconstitution and enunciation targets politics at a more corporeal level.

The foraged materials for Hodge's paintings are prepared in a lengthy and labor-intensive process in which innumerable layers of paper are painstakingly built up, glued on top of one another or sewn together with hemp thread. During this slow accretion—which might include burying the posters or leaving them outside, exposed to the elements, to achieve a more weathered aesthetic—the fused paper takes on a sculptural presence, with richly textured surfaces. After this additive process is complete, the artist carves letters into the supports' surfaces, initially using an X-Acto knife and then upgrading to a laser cutter. Each cut reveals an intricate archaeology of paper strata.

That these works might be viewed as sondages of a sort, stratigraphic cores of history itself, is suggested clearly in Hodge's most recent pulled-paper paintings. In many of these works, the exposed bottommost layer is a copy of a historical painting featuring an image of a master and slave. In *No Man Is Safe*, 2014, a passage from Mobb Deep's 1995 song "Survival of the Fittest" has been incised over an oil sketch by John Trumbull of a white lieutenant in the Continental army fighting alongside a black slave named Key. With his careful composition of cutout letters, Hodge has obscured parts of the original image in order to emphasize the face of Key, who seems to utter the much-sampled lyrics: "There's a war going on outside, no man is safe from." As recent high-profile cases of police violence against black men have brought renewed attention to racial injustice and sparked important protests against the brutalities of racism, these words sound as pressing in 2015 as they did twenty years ago. Hodge's work reminds us that they implicate us all.

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