



Photo by Colin Doyle.



AUSTIN AMPLIFIED

Examining Whiteness at the Blanton's Latest Exhibit

Artist Lily Cox-Richard adds a splash of color and a new perspective with her work "She Wolf + Lower Figs."

By Candace Baker

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Last Saturday, patrons of the [Blanton Museum of Art](#) were finally able to explore the newest addition to the Contemporary Project space: Lily Cox-Richard's *She Wolf + Lower Figs*. A colorful reinterpretation of the museum's Battle Cast collection, the exhibit takes the classic image of Greek and Roman sculptures and recreates with the same color that was once integral to their images. But the purpose of that color goes far deeper than mere aesthetics. Beyond its visual appeal, it is an integral tool used by artist Lily Cox-Richard to make a poignant commentary on the perception of whiteness versus color in the Western world.

Central to the context of the exhibit are the Blanton's William J. Battle Plaster Casts (a collection of 19th century replicas of Greek and Roman sculptures). Sets like the Battle Casts have served as an integral part of artistic training since their creation, and it was common for museums and universities to collect them for the purpose of teaching drawing and art history. Looking at the Blanton's collection, it might be easy to disregard the fact that all of the replicas are white.

"People tend to think that because the copies are white, then the originals were white too," Cox-Richard says. "But we know that that's not the case, especially because Ancient Greece and Rome had people of all races."

The truth is that the original sculptures were polychrome, and simply lost their pigmentation over time.

According to Cox-Richard, it's a misconception that has much wider social implications. "The whiteness of these statues is really celebrated by white supremacists," she says. "Forgetting history and whitewashing these sculptures is really a way to flex white supremacy."

With that thought in mind during the beginning stages of the project, she knew that the Battle Casts were the point from which she wanted to start.

"I already knew about the Battle Casts and was interested in engaging with them," she says. "It was just a question of how. How do we return to that color in a way that makes us think critically about whiteness?"

The centerpiece of the exhibit is undoubtedly the *She-Wolf* (2019): a multi-colored recreation of the original Roman statue, and *Ramp* (2019), a thirty-foot-long pathway of concrete slabs that resembles a sidewalk on which the She-Wolf stands. Looking at the pieces together, it's easy to initially miss the smaller details, such as the 3D-scanned fragments of hair from the Battle Casts in the slabs, but with enough time, they become more noticeable.

"The gallery that people walk through here is a pathway, so the idea is to interrupt that pathway with another pathway," she says. "How do these systems of infrastructure show us a path? History shows us a path through the past and the future, but it's not always accurate."

The process of creating the pieces in the exhibit was a long and arduous one that included extensive research into materials and the process for scagliola, which was used in Ancient Rome to create a material that imitated marble.

“I had been interested in that process for a long time, and I had done a lot of experimenting with different recipes, but this is the first project in which I actually used it,” she says.

Other challenges that arose included issues with temperature control in Cox-Richard’s Richmond, Virginia studio, which would often get so hot that it would affect chemical reactions necessary for creating some of the pieces.

“The last two and a half months have just been hardcore production,” she says. “It’s been taking molds from 3D prints and casting them. It has certainly been a bigger endeavor than previous projects of mine.”

The exhibit will be on display until December 29, and for as long as it’s open, Cox-Richard hopes that patrons will feel take the opportunity to examine their own attitudes towards whiteness in Western society.

“When they see the wolf and other objects, for them to think about why they’re so colorful and examine their own reactions to color,” she says when asked what she hopes patrons get from her work. “It would be amazing if that question led to an unpacking of assumptions around whiteness.”
