

Creators

How Delano Dunn Uses the Rainbow to Explore Racial Progress

The artist uses the whole spectrum to rethink the results of Reconstruction.

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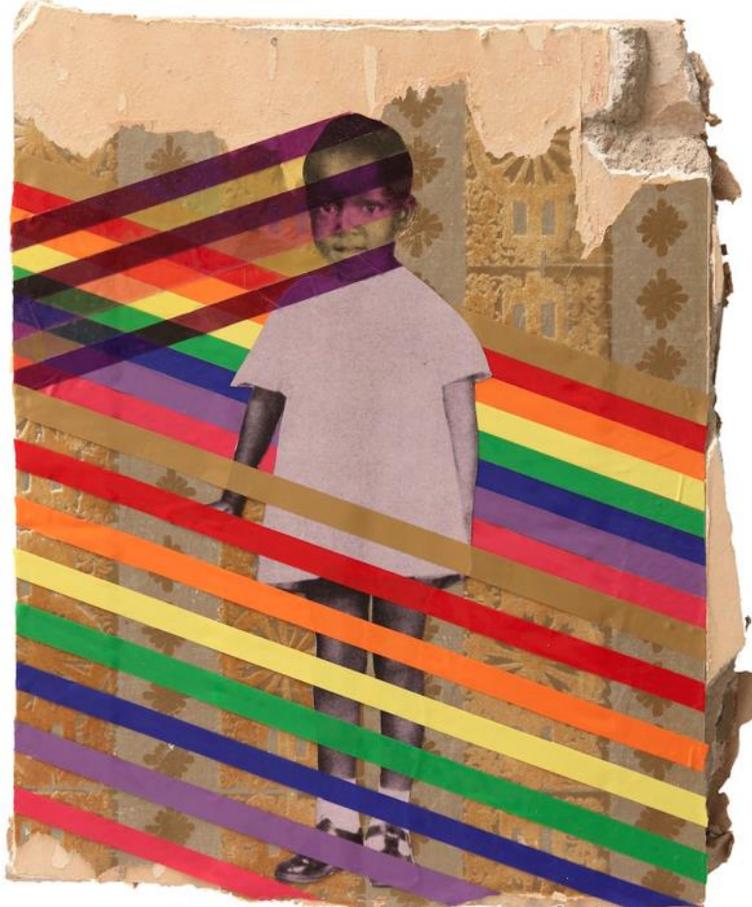


I'm That Much More Sure. All images courtesy of Long Gallery Harlem and the artist.

The rainbow, that multicolored spectrum of white light's refracted parts, has become a symbol for gay pride, Skittles, luck, and justice in the form of the

rainbow coalitions that surfaced in the United States and South Africa after each country's civil rights movements. In new solo exhibition, *No One Can Be This Tomorrow*, curated by Jasmine Wahli, the artist Delano Dunn uses the symbol and promise of the rainbow to measure racial progress by exploring, through collage, the history surrounding emancipation, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement in America.

"I was working on a project before this called, *In Our Time*, an examination of how the space race and the Civil Rights movement were happening at the same time, and after I wrapped up the project I thought I'd really like to go even further back and examine the events that preceded emancipation," Dunn tells Creators.



The Ways of White Folks: The Things I Say Are All Sincere, Delano Dunn, 2017, Wall paper, vinyl, Mylar and paper on plaster, 16 x 13 in.

In doing the research, the artist read books by W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, and found photographic images and cartoons from magazines like the 1860 issue of *Harper's* in the archives of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the New York Public Library's Picture Collection. "In all of the depictions, African Americans are illustrated in the usual child-like [manner], not really ready to handle the responsibility of freedom. You won't think a Northern publication would depict African-Americans this way because they

were pro-emancipation, but they did because [freedom] had to do with economics and people's desires to sustain and think about themselves first."



The Ways of White Folks: I Was Thinking of You, Delano Dunn, 2016, Wall paper, vinyl, Mylar and paper on plaster, 16 x 13 in.

The images depicting derogatory caricatures of black people, and Du Bois and Washington's scholarship, compelled the artist to consider the dueling ideas of what emancipation would mean for African American communities. As he dug deeper, he started thinking about rainbow coalitions and how the symbol of the rainbow is an ironic symbol to latch onto because it is an optical illusion, something that can not attained.

"I thought the rainbow really speaks to the struggle of a lot of minority groups that have been trying to achieve something greater," says the artist. "The rainbow in most of the works symbolizes this optimism that is an illusion." In works such as, *A Brief Moment*, *Beach Side* and *Half Moon Bay*, the rainbow is used as a symbol to measure the progress of race relations. When paired with the images, it pushes the viewer to ask how much racial progress has the U.S. really made?



Big FUN, Delano Dunn, 2017, Paper, wallpaper, Mylar, cellophane, vinyl, shoe polish and resin on board, 49 x 40 in.

The 29 colleges in the exhibition feature black figures representing different views of the antebellum south and Reconstruction positioned to be in "dialogue" with each other, discussing their anticipation and fears of emancipation. In one collage, *I'm That Much More Sure*, a Civil Rights-era image of a woman sporting an afro, daydreams and looks out to a cartoon image of a woman during the emancipation period. They are separated by a geometrically shaped rainbow. The juxtaposition questions the pace of equality and freedom for the black community. In many of the images, the rainbow, the visual representation of freedom and optimism, obscures the physical bodies of the figures. In *The Ways of White Folks: I Hate To Be So Emotional*, a group of seven works depicting mothers and daughters, "captures, for me, the essence of this series," writes Dunn in the exhibition catalogue. "The rainbow belongs to another, not the mother and daughter pictured—and it destroys them." He adds, "The prosperity it brings is not for them."



Half Moon Bay, Delano Dunn, 2017, Mylar, cellophane, vinyl and paper on wood, 57 x 49 in.

"When I was making it, I thought I was making this super positive body of work but as I dug into the history, I realized that [racial progress] is so much more complicated and in that complicatedness lies a lesson," explains Dunn. "We live in a world now where the immediate is much more important than history." He says, "I want people to understand that so much can be gained from having a base and knowledge of what has come before. It will put us in a position to pursue an agenda of progress that brings everybody along not just a few."

No One Can Be This Tomorrow continues through April 16 at Long Gallery Harlem. [Click here](#) for more information.

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