

Reilly Northington

ENGL 101

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### Provocation

My favorite pieces of art are usually disturbing. They challenge the way I see things, and they are difficult to forget. They spur thoughts of many possible interpretations, which I wrestle with for days. Whether it be a play, film, song, or visual art piece, my preferences lean toward the provocative. Recently, I was introduced to the Cafritz Foundation Arts Center at Montgomery College, a modern-looking steel and brick building on the outskirts of campus. As I cruised across the floor of *Materialist*, one of the building's art exhibits, I observed the stark white architecture that functioned as the backdrop to featured paintings, sculptures, constructions, and collages. Each piece of art was impressive; however, none drew my attention so much as *Untitled (Hall of the Bulls)* by Elzie Williams, a collage made of "magazines and ephemera."

*Untitled (Hall of the Bulls)* is visually overwhelming, and its construction seems erratic. Draped atop a glowing square lightbox, it is a large, irregularly-shaped collage constructed of various magazine cutouts and packing tape. It sits a few feet from each wall in its corner of the room and stands 48 inches tall. Straight edges define each of the collage's differently colored sections; black, white, and multicolored laminated shapes contrast one another. One section is composed entirely of black and white magazine photographs of white models, whose eyes Williams has purposefully cut away and discarded. In fact, not one pair of eyes can be spotted in the entire collage. Themes can be identified of each section; one portion is a mixture of eyeless

African American models, while another is a patchwork of various types of hair. Another seemingly intentional oddity is a hole cut into a section of solid black, white, and red paper strips; through it can be seen the collage's only section to include models of more than one race.

Upon reading that Williams's artworks "expose the underlying racial narratives built into contemporary culture through mainstream media," I was captivated. *Untitled (Hall of the Bulls)* is an extraordinary observation of racism in modern America. Nearly every one of its many artistic details symbolizes an aspect of American society that has long been infected with racism. The collage's defined sections of black paper represent the cultures and experiences of Black Americans, while sections of white paper symbolize cultural aspects particular to white Americans. The separation between sections of white paper and black paper symbolizes racial segregation's prevailing effect on the lives of modern Black Americans. Also alluding to racial inequity is a section near the center of the collage that is composed of different colors and types of hair: the only textured hair to be spotted is found in a small triangular space, isolated from the rest of the paper cutouts. Today, more than 50 years after the civil rights movement, Black Americans are still deeply affected by systemic racism and suffer disparities in employment, socioeconomic, and health statuses. Williams's exclusion of eyes throughout the collage characterizes the way in which racial prejudice dehumanizes both its perpetrators and victims. Racism's fixation on the color of one's skin reduces an individual's worth to that of their mere appearance. The eyes are often regarded as the windows to the soul and Williams's eyeless cutouts symbolize racism's reduction of soulful human beings to unfeeling body parts. The hole cut into a section of solid black, white, and red paper reveals the collage's only mixture of cutouts of white and Black models. Williams uses the black, white, and red paper as a visual metaphor for the struggle for civil rights in America. While the black and white paper represents

Black and white Americans, the red paper symbolizes the blood and violence with which the civil rights movement was fraught. The area featuring models of different races represents the triumphs of civil rights pioneers; thus, Williams suggests that it was not without pain and effort that America progressed in the area of racial equality.

Being both passionate about civil rights and a mixed-race American, I formed a personal connection to *Untitled (Hall of the Bulls)*, and found it to be simultaneously enlightening and disturbing. Born to and raised by a white mother and Black father, I have long struggled to understand how I ethnically and racially identify. When I was growing up, race was not something that was often talked about; I did not see myself in the context of any particular race. In fact, I rarely, if ever, thought about race. Perhaps this was in part due to my sheltered and privileged childhood; I did not encounter any situation at home or elsewhere that forced me to think about or in terms of race. It was only in tenth grade, when I stopped home-school and enrolled in a private high school, that I began to realize the large space that race occupied in the lives of most Americans. At my new school, students very often talked about race. I soon learned that my classmates saw me as a “lightskin,” which was both a new word to me and a label that brought with it a long list of stereotypes. To my dismay, I learned race was a social focal point in school; it decided beauty standards, athletic and academic expectations, friend groups, and more. Tenth grade was not a great school year; however, I have since learned to greatly appreciate the perspective on race that my upbringing has afforded me. I still struggle to understand how I racially identify, and I am proud to not know. I believe race is given too much importance in American society, and that the importance of the color of one’s skin is equivalent to that of their height or shoe size. Race is not a defining characteristic; one race encompasses many ethnicities and cultures. It is one’s soul, personality, and experience that truly defines them, and I believe

that while race is considered an important characteristic, racism will continue to be prevalent in America. My strong views on racism and my personal experiences as a minority have found an ally in Williams's representation of how racism alienates and dehumanizes.

I still seldom ponder race. Elzie Williams's art piece, *Untitled (Hall of the Bulls)*, is a call to action on a cultural issue and it challenges me to view myself as part of the problem. Despite my opinion that race should be of little importance, ignoring the impact of race on American society is not a cure for injustice. Inaction on the part of any individual allows for the disease of racism to fester. The self-reflection Williams's piece provoked has encouraged me to often examine race and how I can counter its centrality to the social circles and cultures of which I am a part.