

Whitney Biennial: Emmett Till casket painting by white artist sparks anger

Dana Schutz's depiction of the mutilated body of a 14-year-old African American boy has been accused of using black death as racialized 'spectacle'

[Oliver Basciano](#) • Tuesday 21 March 2017 16.56 GMT



"Many in the black art community are upset by the work" ... Parker Bright protesting Emmett Till painting at the Whitney in New York. Photograph: Twitter (provider has asked not to be identified)

A painting included in this year's Whitney Biennial in New York is being protested for perceived racial insensitivity.

Open Casket by American painter Dana Schutz depicts the mutilated corpse of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old black boy murdered in 1955 after it was falsely claimed he flirted with a white woman.

"Many in the black art community are upset by the work," says Parker Bright, who has been spurred to picket the painting daily since the exhibition

opened at the Whitney Museum of American [Art](#) on Friday. Standing, barring museum visitors' view of the work for up to four hours a day, Bright wears a T-shirt on to which he has written "No lynch mob" on the front, and "Black death spectacle" on the back. "I wanted to confront people with a living, breathing black body."

Bright's complaint is echoed on social media, with [one Twitter user](#) posting that Schutz was a "white woman profiting off of black murder caused by a white woman".

Hannah Black, an artist who has previously taken part in a residency at the Whitney, has gone so far as to claim the painting should be destroyed. [Black adds in an open letter](#): "The subject matter is not Schutz's; white free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights."

Schutz countered in an emailed statement: "I don't know what it is like to be black in America, but I do know what it is like to be a mother. Emmett was Mamie Till's only son. The thought of anything happening to your child is beyond comprehension."

Emmet Till was visiting family in Money, Mississippi when it was alleged he grabbed shopkeeper Carolyn Bryant, made sexual comments and whistled at her. On hearing of the incident, Bryant's husband, Roy, together with his half-brother, JW Milam, kidnapped Till, killed the boy and left his body by the side of the Tallahatchie river. Roy Bryant and Milam were acquitted by an all-white jury. In January, Carolyn Bryant, now 72, [admitted she had made up much of her testimony](#).

Till's mother had insisted on an open casket to demonstrate the extent of the injuries that befell her son. Schutz's painting is drawn from photographs of this.

Schutz has won critical acclaim for her semi-abstract, lyrical works. While

her paintings, which have fetched up to \$482,500 at auction, are not typically as overtly political as *Open Casket*, previous subjects include Michael Jackson's autopsy and the 2014 altercation between Solange Knowles and Jay Z.

Christopher Y Lew, one of the curators of the exhibition at the Whitney notes that Shultz made the work in response to the number of African Americans killed in by US police in recent years.

"It comes at such a polarized time in America," Mia Locks, Lew's co-curator, said when asked on the issue of whether Till's murder was an appropriate subject for a white artist. "Groups are getting caught up in their own bubbles, speaking only to each other.

"We were aware that this was sensitive work on some level. The horrific murder of Till is something we all have to confront, regardless of race."

"It is easy for artists to self-censor" Schutz said. "To convince yourself to not make something before you even try. There were many reasons why I could not, should not, make this painting ... (but) art can be a space for empathy, a vehicle for connection."

The artist added that the work will not be for sale.

This is not the first time the Whitney Biennial has been embroiled in a row over racially insensitive work. The YAMS collective, a group of musicians, poets, actors, writers and artists, pulled their participation in 2014 in response to the inclusion of artist Joe Scanlon's work. Scanlon, who is white, makes work under the pseudonym "Donelle Woolford", a black woman.

Black warns in her open letter that the concerns of black artists on Schutz's painting will be "derided by many white and white-affiliated critics as trivial and naive".