

Black Santa

The Cranky Professor

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“Black Santa Coffee Pot,” a ceramic work by the artist Léopold Foulem, brought tears of pain to many and anger to at least a few late last Fall when it was displayed at the Art Gallery here at Saint Mary's. Happily, no one, so far as I'm aware, sought to have an authority remove it from the gallery. Some people did, though, ask the curator to remove it. (The curator, Robin Metcalfe, declined their request.) What upset people? Should “Black Santa” have been removed from the exhibition?

“Black Santa” is a standard Santa that has been coloured dark black all over, except for the lips. The lips are grotesquely enlarged, and they are coloured bright red. It's not easy to know what to make of this work. The lips are disconcerting, and they give the piece an aggressive, mocking character. There's nothing jolly about this particular Santa, and nothing playful or whimsical about the piece as a whole.

“Black Santa Coffee Pot” needn't be seen as a depiction of Santa Claus as a black man (the “black” in its title can refer just to its colour), but it's hard not to see it as one. As a depiction of a black Santa, its extended red lips embody a convention from those nineteenth- and twentieth-century traditions of representation that present black people as shiftless or venal buffoons, fit objects of white people's mockery and scorn. Portraying black people as such both expressed racist attitudes and helped to reinforce them.

“Black Santa” is not, of course, a piece from those traditions, one that could appropriately sit in a museum of history as an artifact of the past. It's a contemporary work of art. Though “Black Santa” is like the stuff that mocks and jeers at black people, it itself doesn't. Its history, the intentions behind it, the context in which it is situated are entirely different from those of what are now artifacts to us, even if “Black Santa” does refer to those artifacts. Nonetheless, “Black Santa” cannot be read as condemning a racist past, nor as goading us to face honestly the racism within our society or within ourselves, nor as inspiring us to overcome racism. “Black Santa Coffee Pot” is not, that is to say, a work that puts its references or the feelings it evokes to good social use.

Those who were upset or who asked that it be removed did not mistakenly claim that “Black Santa Coffee Pot” tells us that black people are buffoons or that it invites white people to jeer at black people (though a few did hold that displaying the work has the effect of perpetuating racism). They were upset, rather, first because of what “Black Santa” caused them to recall, and second because “Black Santa” was displayed in our art gallery *despite* what it caused them to recall. Encountering “Black Santa” brought people sadness and anger because it caused them to recall a

brutal history, one from which we have not yet emerged. It caused some to recall their own experiences of racist abuse. Walking among works of ceramics, enjoying them or not, one sees “Black Santa” and is suddenly put in mind of a painful history. And one is not put in mind of this painful history to any socially constructive end. Moreover, either the people responsible for the exhibition were aware that “Black Santa” would put people in mind of a painful history but displayed it anyway, or they were unaware, and so demonstrated their ignorance of or insensitivity to vile aspects of our history.

So should the curator of the exhibition have removed “Black Santa Coffee Pot,” as he was asked to do? No, Robin Metcalfe acted well in leaving the work in place. Mr Metcalfe had no reason for removing the work that had to do with the merit of the work as a piece of art.

The final point of an art gallery, and of any exhibition in an art gallery, is to offer people the rich and wonderful experiences that art can provide. Ultimately, the only necessary reason for displaying or not displaying a particular work is an aesthetic reason. A final point, of course, need not be the only point, nor need the only necessary reason be the only reason. Galleries and exhibitions can have many purposes and there can be many reasons to display or not to display particular works. To nurture artists and the local art community is a noble purpose; to educate taste is another. But nothing else that an art gallery or an exhibition might seek to do makes any sense when divorced from aesthetics.

That “Black Santa Coffee Pot” was included in the exhibition of works by Léopold Foulem tells us that the curator judged the work aesthetically important, either simply on its own or because of the resonances between it and other works in the show. To take “Black Santa” out of the exhibition would be to prevent us from experiencing it as a work of art. That experience might not be worth the trouble, of course. It might be a bad piece of art. Or we might not care to fight through our pain in order to experience it as art. But we ought not be denied the opportunity to have that experience.

One of the worst ideas offered in the wake of the hurt and anger caused by “Black Santa” was to create a panel of people from various cultural groups on campus to review proposed exhibitions. Leave aside that such a panel would be anti-democratic and paternalistic. More relevant is that it would not be a panel of people passionate about art for art’s sake. It would, rather, be a panel of people for whom aesthetic merit is just one consideration among others, and not the primary consideration. Should such a panel be formed, better we just declare that our gallery is no longer an art gallery.

Terrible idea though oversight by a panel of cultural representatives is, I won’t be surprised to hear that such a panel has been formed.