

## **On Elizabeth Axtman: A New Portrayal of Race in Contemporary Art**

by Nicole Lattuca

Elizabeth Axtman's portrayal of race is one of critical investigation. She questions existing truths and events in American culture by placing them in racial context and presenting these cultural facts under a blanket of new questions. In *Ooga Booga* (2009), Axtman conceptualizes a sound proposal for the exhibition *In Anticipation*, with inquiries surrounding the famed American serial killer from the late 1970s and early 1990s, Jeffery Lionel Dahmer. Dahmer murdered and sexually assaulted 17 men and boys, the majority of who were African American or of Asian descent. Axtman proposes an exhibition about Dahmer's adamant denial that race mattered in his choice of victims with the hypothesis that the assaults were explicitly about race. She states, "although Dahmer denied the clear racial elements in his killings, the motivation behind his multicultural approach to cannibalism was driven by a desire for the black body. When seen in light of the racial statistics of his victims it becomes evident that the killings cannot be said to be neutrally conceived, and therefore media coverage, which does not interrogate this element of his case, knowingly suppresses these facts."

For *In Anticipation*, Axtman exhibits her proposal as a sound installation. This collage of news clippings, testimonies and detailed accounts of the rapes, murders, torture and necrophilia asks, "Who is the savage in our society?" When so much of contemporary mass media and historical narratives portray people of color as savages, and when so much of the information we receive is censored and doctored, when it is time to question the truths we are told?

Axtman is unapologetic in her pursuit. She situates her work within an intellectual framework offering truths that are difficult to reckon with, while also revealing methods of representation that are skewed and omit significant aspects of media depiction. By comparison Kara Walker's depiction of the antebellum south does exactly the opposite by perpetuating brutal racist imagery and preventing the viewer from the illumination of any new knowledge. While Axtman situates facts, placing them in front of her viewer; she doesn't make assumptions of her audience. Walker chastises her audience, of all races, for being the colonizer and for being the whore. Walker's *mise-en-scènes* are one story repeated over and over again of guilt and subjugation. Every exhibition is a replica of the last, beautiful and decorative finely trimmed silhouettes depicting horrid acts performed on a black person, by a white person. She is asking no questions, she is allowing no space for dialog, she simply condemns and shocks. Walker has stated that she is using humor and irony in her work, but at what point is that still true? How long does the art-viewing public have to be bombarded with racist imagery that does nothing but numb and bore her eye-rolling audience? Is that the accomplishment, ambivalence towards a history and the artwork that perpetuates it?

It is in the work of Elizabeth Axtman that we see a shift and a new portrayal of race in contemporary art. She replays for the audience events from our recent American history, pausing and pointing out how we as a society have overlooked certain interpretations of truth. Her intent presents evidence and reframes questions thus allowing the viewer their own conclusions without the deluge of blame and guilt.