

BLACK MEMORABILIA – Chico Colvard

Long Program Summary

BLACK MEMORABILIA moves beyond perverse attractions and absolute objections to collectibles and antiques that serve as reminders of America's troubled racial history. The film combats a set of generalized stereotypes by presenting an intimate and poetic portrait of the people who consume, manufacture and assume the identities of these objects.

Our modern global economy connects disparate individuals in unexpected ways. At the intersection of international commerce, racial identity, and historical narrative, BLACK MEMORABILIA follows the propagation of demeaning representations of African Americans. From industrial China to the rural American south to contemporary Brooklyn, the viewer observes people and places that reproduce, consume and reclaim BLACK MEMORABILIA. This feature documentary takes us on a journey into the material culture of racialized artifacts and confronts us with the incendiary features of these objects. It also disrupts comfortable notions about narrative – and calls into question who gets to tell what stories, and why – by revealing the storytelling machinations. In the midst of roiling ethnic unrest in the US today, the film's confrontation of our feelings about these objects strikes at the heart of a pressing contemporary issue and opens a unique dialogue about the continuing legacy of racism in America.

The central questions in this film present one's relationship to black memorabilia as a moral decision. The issues raised are considered subtly in content and tend to abdicate judgment or a cathartic space for the viewer to relish. Most prominently, the inquiry into people's connection to black memorabilia – and the underlying feelings and motives that drive them – are intimately explored through the personal. In shaping this racial guise, certain film vectors are reimagined; leaving the viewer wondering whether it is possible to escape race – in the most positive sense of the term – while thoroughly investigating an alternative pathway toward racial reconciliation around deeply held fears and assumptions black memorabilia invoke. While avoiding a rude and catalytic approach in announcing the obvious injustices and racism that underlie the politics in contemporary America, it is, at times, necessary to provide the audience with a cultural context for the history of black memorabilia and an appreciation for the modernized reproduction and consumption of old stereotypes.

- Part I: Manufacture. This sequence takes place in the Hebei Province of Shijiazhuang, China at a factory that reproduces Jolly Nigger Banks and other cast iron products. This is the

starting point for introducing the viewer to the object in ways that are counter intuitive. The images are glamorous, poetic and nonjudgmental. The first section of this sequence is intended to create a “sensory experience” that allows the viewer to speculate, impose and draw their own conclusions about the images that unfold on screen. The images are intriguing and stand-alone without the burden of making a social or political statement.

- Part II: Consumption. This sequence takes place in Raleigh, North Carolina at the State Fairgrounds, where vendors and consumers gather to buy, sell and trade a variety of collectibles. The central character is Joy (and her husband, George), a Civil War and KKK antiques dealer. The form for this section of the triptych is more conventional in its unobtrusive style and use of classic oration. Here we get a sense of Joy’s southern roots, motivations and ties to the memorabilia, which she considers, “real Black history.” Although geographically and culturally diverse from China, the viewer is again confronted with the Jolly Nigger Bank. This thread of continuity is presented in somewhat of a comical light; making it difficult to condemn Joy for her proximity and association with the object.

- Part III: Reclaim. The last sequence transports the viewer to yet another diverse location and social-cultural space. The neighborhood is Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, NY, where the viewer is introduced to artist, Alexandria, her drawings and performance art. The artist’s visually alluring pictures depict scenes of young girls engaging in play that blurs the boundaries between sexual experimentation and innocence. The characters in her work also explore manifestations of race and social taboos.¹ In this sequence, the artist reveals a “secret body of work,” – a hidden box of photographs show her assuming the identity of one of her characters, “Marjorie.” She is seen dressed in children’s clothing: a white flowered dress, Mickey Mouse-sized gloves, and a pillowcase over her head. Behind the mask the artist can be seen in black face. Unlike the previous iterations of the Jolly Nigger Bank and what it is assumed to represent, the artist adopts this persona – not to perpetuate common minstrel show tropes, but instead to inspect and usurp any residual power these images may retain.

The distinct perspectives and structural ordering of the film into a triptych are equally significant because it allows the viewer to explore their own assumptions about the intrinsic value of this material culture – without vilifying or reducing those in front of the camera to one-dimensional characters. In BLACK MEMORABILIA I’m interested in understanding the accommodations and non-material relationships people have to these objects, images and messages.
