

***125 Years Later: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is still making waves***  
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Mark Twain's classic and controversial novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the title and the theme of the current exhibition at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco. The exhibit takes on the history of racism and race relations in the U.S. for the past 125 years. Walking through the Wattis galleries I was struck by the diversity of objects, artifacts and art at the exhibition. Racially loaded artifacts like images of Emmett Till, wood cuts of members of the Black Panther Party and a Jim Crow Bowling game...



...are displayed alongside art works by Hank Willis Thomas, Felix Gonzalez Torres and Andy Warhol among other artists.



Seeing all these different types of objects in one exhibition initially made me feel uncertain about calling the show either historical or artistic; but as I continued through the galleries it became more apparent that the curatorial strategy reflects the stance Twain took with his book – both sit somewhere between historical documentation and creative fiction.



The *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* a work by Kara Walker covers an entire wall illustrating a larger than life scene critiquing stereotypes and violence of Twain's time. Applying her usual M.O. Walker perverts and satirizes the 18th century form of the silhouette. Creating black paper cut out figures and landscapes her wall work confronts us with our nations history of

exploitation. Her figures exaggerate visual representations of stereotypes of African Americans, mutilations and sexual power struggles. Her work forces us to think about the dark side of human behavior.



Just in front of Walker's silhouettes suspended from the ceiling is Abraham Cruzvillegas's sculptural raft, *Jim Beam*.



Cruzvillegas's work almost exclusively uses discarded materials. His construction strategy reminds me of traditions of found object sculpture but perhaps more importantly it comes out of a tradition of self building or Autoconstrucción, a practice commonly used by folks living where Cruzvillegas grew up; in 'ciudades perdidas' or lost cities, on the impoverished outskirts of Mexico City. It's a process where people come together, use anything at their disposal and build homes and shelter for their communities.

Cruzvillegas often explains that while he may turn trash into treasure he seems to embrace the idea that his work may later be transformed into something else. Looking at Cruzvillegas's raft I'm struck by how the piece brings issues that Jim faced in Twain's novel into contemporary dialogue. I find myself wondering how many "escapes" have been attempted aided by vehicles much like the raft Cruzvillegas gives us in the Wattis galleries? But it's a flying raft. This suggests to me that with Jim Beam Cruzvillegas is hoping that we can imagine an intervention into history that compels us to transform the human rights abuses of our present.



On a pedestal between Cruzvillegas' rafts and Walker's silhouettes sits Kirsten Pieroth's Untitled (essence), 2010. At first the piece seems to be a mason jar of yellowed water. But in fact it's a boiled down and dissolved copy of Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. This work reminds me about the transformative power of creative practices. Thinking about how the Mississippi river is such a major element in Huck Finn it seems appropriate to turn the novel back to liquid.

125 years after its first publication the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is still making waves. In a time when it's increasingly popular to remake various forms of pop culture from movies to music this exhibition reminds us that when we revisit our cultural past it's important to approach it from a critical perspective in the present. We don't need to rewrite the same racist stereotypes we can intervene. We can and should re-imagine how things were and dream about how they can be. (Photo credit Johnna Arnold)

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