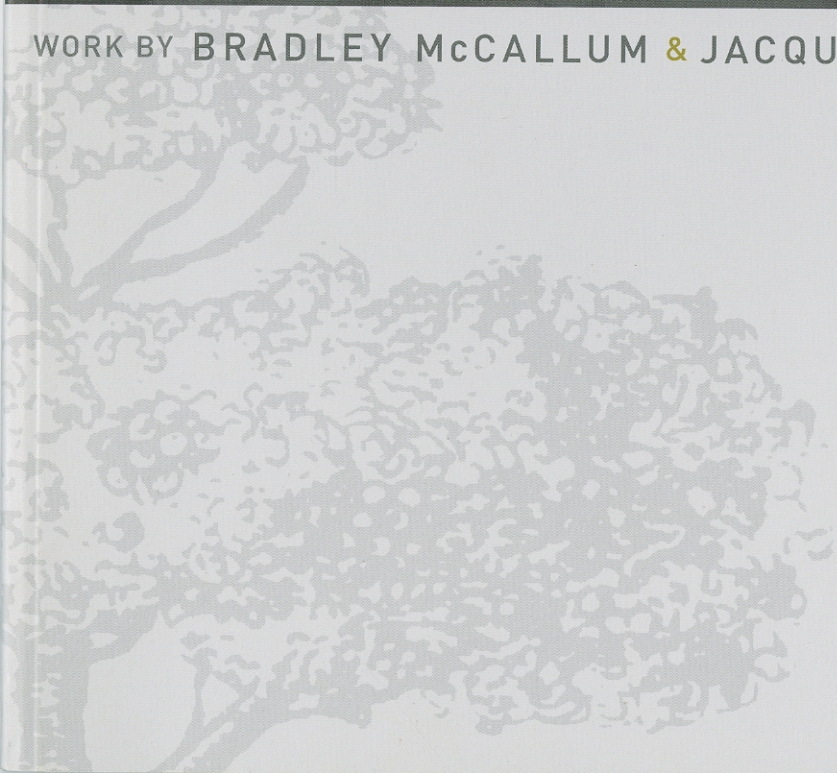


BEARING WITNESS

WORK BY BRADLEY McCALLUM & JACQUELINE TARRY





“THE SUBSTANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR, AND THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SEEN...” *Hebrews 11:1*

When I moved to North Carolina as a girl, my grandmother began taking me on road trips throughout the South. Born in Beaumont, Texas near the Louisiana border, she remains a deep partisan of the “Southern cause,” at times to a degree that you might scarcely imagine she was born in the twentieth century, not in a more august era of Southern glory. Our trips brought us to celebrated period homes, to antebellum plantations, and to the historic monuments and battlefields of the War Between the States, as she always called the Civil War.

Touring those mansions with groups of curious retirees and Daughters of the Confederacy types, a great deal of delight was given voice by visitors remarking on the opulence of these faultlessly restored spaces. I don’t know how enlightened such tours are today, but in the 1980s the narrative was of a genteel lifestyle of hospitality, taste and refinement—in short, “Southern Living”—brought crashing down by the War of Northern Aggression, etc., etc. As the plantation tours wound down in the breezes of lovely verandahs and under towering colonnades, the entire economic substructure of the lavish prosperity on display was dispatched with a passing gesture to the outbuildings in which “the help” had lived and cooked for the big house.

But even as a child, I knew that slavery was the elephant in the drawing room.

Karl Marx once famously said that capital comes into the world dripping with blood and dirt. Undoubtedly, the wealth extracted from human bondage has erected some of the most extravagant architectural fronts to mask its ignoble origin in the “peculiar institution” of slavery and its continuation in policies of racial segregation and Jim Crow.

Artists Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry brought their work *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (2008) to a similarly embellished plantation space in New Orleans, Louisiana, and have again installed it in an early nineteenth-century period home in Baltimore, Maryland. In its first incarnation as part of the exhibition *Prospect.1 New Orleans* in 2008, *Evidence* was sited at the African American Museum in the Tremé Villa, an antebellum mansion constructed in 1828. The work consists of 104 portraits, drawn from the available mug shots of a recently unearthed cache in the Montgomery County Sheriff’s Department of the nearly 150 civil rights protesters arrested throughout the 1955-1956 Montgomery, Alabama Bus Boycotts against racial segregation. McCallum and Tarry’s installation in New Orleans deployed brilliant chandeliers and regal claret—one could even say blood-colored—walls to dramatize the distinction between the criminalized protesters and the backdrop of opulent architecture. This contrast was heightened, indeed echoed, by the fact that each portrait is itself a split image: the sepia-toned, oil-on-linen paintings of arrestees are overlaid with a second, printed photographic layer. Rendered on the translucent silk scrim that is McCallum and Tarry’s signature process, this subtle, iridescent film reproduces the original photographic mug shot of the arrestee, including the police identification number. Accompanying the salon-style installation of these variously sized, rectangular and oval works was a sound component with two voices, call-and-response style, listing the names of those depicted. McCallum and Tarry’s portraits represent men and

The Evidence of Things Not Seen, 2008; *Prospect.1 New Orleans*; New Orleans, LA; installation view

women of all ages dressed in their Sunday best, along with men in military and ecclesiastic uniforms. Familiar faces—a sweet, boyish Martin Luther King, Jr., noted civil rights leader Ralph D. Abernathy and boycott-initiator Rosa Parks, with a flower in her hair—are recognizable among dozens of everyday citizens who also chose to present themselves at the Montgomery courthouse in the spring of 1956, after being indicted under the flimsy charge of violating a 1921 statute that prohibited boycotts “without just cause or legal excuse.”

From May through July 2010, these works will hang in the ground-floor rooms and hallways of the Charles Carroll Mansion in Baltimore’s Historic Jonestown neighborhood, adjacent to Little Italy and the Inner Harbor. This house, built between 1804 and 1808, was the winter residence of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the only Catholic signatory of the Declaration of Independence and one of the fledgling nation’s wealthiest men. Recognized as the nation’s largest slaveholder at the time of the American Revolution, Carroll owned between 400 and 500 slaves in the 1770s. Thus *Evidence* moves from one fraught site in the history of African American labor to another.

McCallum and Tarry are married and live in Brooklyn, New York; they have collaborated artistically since 1998. Tarry is African American, and McCallum is of European descent. Much of their work confronts the legacy of racism in the United States, sometimes by probing the history of *de jure* legislation, and later *de facto* prohibitions, against interracial relationships. In some instances, they build on specific circumstances about the locations in which they have been invited to exhibit in order to produce new work that considers histories of racial discrimination, incidents of legal injustice and patterns of economic inequality.

In a move of virtually unprecedented scope, twenty fine arts students from the Maryland Institute College of Art have collaborated with six of Baltimore’s institutions of arts and culture to mount the mid-career retrospective *Bearing Witness: Work by Bradley McCallum & Jacqueline Tarry*. These venues include the Contemporary Museum, Carroll Museums (comprising the Carroll Mansion and the nearby Phoenix Shot Tower), Maryland Art Place, Maryland Institute College of Art, Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture and The Walters Art Museum. In sum, *Bearing Witness* presents more than 150 individual works from seventeen of the artists’ different series.

Because the projects McCallum and Tarry undertake frequently relate to the local contexts for which they were commissioned and at which they were originally exhibited, mounting a survey of their work presents challenges. This citywide collaboration features locations that creatively juxtapose their work with aspects of Baltimore’s local histories, themselves rich with themes at the heart of the artists’ practice.

For example, McCallum and Tarry’s 2006 project *Bearing*, like *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, addressed a local context in its original conception. First created in response to the Medieval and Early Renaissance galleries of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, these seven silk scrim portraits of African American teenage mothers depicted before gold-leaf backdrops are currently reinstalled in The Walters Art Museum, along with an audio component featuring a sound collage of interviews of the images’ subjects.¹ Because The Walters contains a strong collection of Ethiopian Christian artifacts, hanging these larger-than-life portraits of women, alone or with their children, alongside historical religious images of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus makes for a compelling artistic conversation between different temporal periods and cultural events.

And, for the duration of *Bearing Witness*, the Phoenix Shot Tower (sometimes known as the Old Baltimore Shot Tower) likewise houses a portion of a project concerning gun violence. The Phoenix Shot Tower was the tallest building in the U.S. until 1846; erected in 1828, it rises 215 feet 9 inches and was used to produce “drop” shot for small game hunting and other purposes. In its original incarnation at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, *The Manhole Cover Project: A Gun Legacy* consisted of 228 custom-designed manhole covers that together weighed 39,216 pounds. This was equal to the exact weight of the 11,194 guns confiscated by Connecticut law enforcement that were melted down as scrap between January 1, 1992, and July 31, 1996, the period preceding the display of stacks of the manholes on wooden palettes in front of the Wadsworth.² In its new version in Baltimore, a selection of the manhole covers, along with an audio component of the work including testimonies by Hartford residents affected by gun violence, sits inside the base of the Shot Tower. Together with many of the other McCallum and Tarry projects included in this retrospective, works such as *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, *Bearing* and *The Manhole Cover Project* pressure the notion of site into a temporal dimension activated by each new curatorial contextualization.



this and opposite page: *The Manhole Cover Project: A Gun Legacy*, 1996; detail

Using the installation of *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* as a case study—the piece using the civil rights struggle in 1950s Alabama as its source material, first exhibited in New Orleans and now displayed at the Carroll Mansion—one can see how art practices that have come to be known as “site-specific” may come to concern themselves with more than site alone. These works image and imagine narratives about the present and past in ways akin to the kind of civic and cultural representation that was once embodied in history painting. A better designation for these works might be historically-specific, or even memory-specific.

“Site-specific” has been used to describe art practices created in response to conditions particular to the location in which they are exhibited. Beyond that rather general definition, many have quibbled over how to be more specific about the term site-specificity. According to art historian Tom Crow, site-specific artworks are most compelling when they are temporary—that is, when they comment on the dynamic spatial and institutional parameters of the sites for which they are conceived and in which they are displayed.³ Widening this relatively narrow definition of the term, art historian Miwon Kwon extends the notion of site-specificity beyond the merely temporary, into what she termed “discursive” sites.⁴ In this, she means that the work participates in a longer arc of research and discussion connected to the socio-historical context of the work’s production and reception. I would like to push her definition of site further to understand how artworks represent events of the past, that is, how in this process they create historical memory and how they continue to do so after the works have been completed. Often, and this is particularly evident in McCallum and Tarry’s work, this effort of representing past events foregrounds not only the historical episodes to which the work topically addresses itself, but also emphasizes the time and site in which the work is exhibited, and makes connections to future contexts in which the work might be displayed. That is not to say that the element of space implied in the phrase “site-specific” is unimportant. Instead, I want to emphasize that the diachronic axis of time and process becomes ever more important as the works travel to various venues beyond their first.

To return to *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, a first, striking aspect of the work is the ghostly effect of McCallum and Tarry’s characteristic, two-part image processing. Only the overlaid, silk photographic portions of the compositions contain the police ID placards that logged a sequence

beginning with 6691 and continuing through 7133; the paintings resting beneath are free of any criminal markings. Because the painted underlayer differs only slightly from the photographic scrim, a nearly holographic dimensionality pushes the images far beyond the documentary evidence of their source imagery. Instead, the paintings-*cum*-photographs become spectral traces of the ever-receding history of Jim Crow. Each image contains a subtle scale shift between its top and bottom layers, producing a complex spatial projection into the viewer’s field of vision. This complicated image field triggers a temporal delay in apperception of the work, as the viewer tries to resolve how the image operates materially and visually.

After inspecting the 104 images, the viewer recognizes that every face is of an African American. This was not an easy struggle, nor was it a victory conceded with grace. People fought for their rights and suffered for their labors. They organized carpools and walked for nearly a year, even in rural areas. King’s house and those of other boycotters were bombed, and each arrestee faced fines and legal fees. The portraits on display memorialize actions of immeasurable courage, as everyday people mobilized against the seemingly intractable prejudices of Jim Crow. And so the experiential delay in viewing these works is a metaphor that memorializes another kind of delay: the *longue durée* of the fight for racial justice in the U.S.

As *Evidence* enters a new phase of its existence at Baltimore’s Carroll Mansion, it is worth asking how this new site affects the work and how the work affects the new site. In its original iteration, the work not only addressed the history of racial discrimination in the South, but also responded to the sumptuous architecture of antebellum mansions and the histories of slavery, segregation and Jim Crow that were masked by that splendor. Obviously, the current location of *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* in the former home of the largest slave owner in the U.S. is no coincidence. How does the work, installed in response to specific social, historical and geographical circumstances of Montgomery, Alabama, and the Tremé district of New Orleans, continue to adapt to new sites two years after it was first shown?

If we can telescope from the particular to the general, it is clear that *Evidence* addresses much more than the 1955-1956 arrests of African Americans in Montgomery; that *The Manhole Cover Project* moves beyond a strictly local context and extends into broader debates about gun



this and opposite page: *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, 2008; detail

control and violence in the U.S.; and that *Bearing* concerns wider issues of urban poverty and the prevalence of teenage pregnancy among minorities beyond Philadelphia. Yet answering the question I posed about the shift in sites from originary to successive ones might require tracking the "life" of an artwork differently from how the work has been traditionally understood—to identify how a work is redeployed to reflect on new and future sites, even after artists have completed their initial intervention. In short, this demands a consideration of the choices and arguments that go into curating a work for and at any potential site. In a certain sense, "white cube" art galleries were conceived as spaces where numerous unrelated art works could be assembled together, thereby conventionalizing such sites as neutral so that the contemplation of the visual elements of the art object could be foregrounded. Of course, no museum or art gallery is ever neutral; but in their unadorned uniformity, modern and contemporary art galleries aspire to a certain placelessness: a generalized space of cognitive reflection.

But what about works that insist the viewer think about not just the geographical place in which she finds herself, but also the historical place too; about relationships among viewers, works, institutions of display, and local areas and larger communities? *Evidence* provokes pressing questions about how a curatorial process can extend the life of site-specific works by transplanting them to new contexts. In this sense, historically-specific art practices represent a process of using sites as an aid to memory and other things that are experienced but rarely seen.



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1. See Crow, "Site-Specific Art: The Strong and the Weak," in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996): 131-150.
2. Kwon makes this argument in "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity" in *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 85-110, and later expands upon it in her book *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).
3. Originally installed at the FUEL House in Philadelphia, *Bearing* was sponsored by the Philadelphia Mural Arts Project.
4. *The Manhole Cover Project* (1996) is a work that predates the partnership between McCallum and Tarry. The curators of *Bearing Witness* decided to include this work, generally credited solely to McCallum, in a retrospective of both artists as a nod to the generative conversations the work triggered that resulted in McCallum and Tarry's decision to collaborate.

PARTICIPATING VENUES

Contemporary Museum

Evenly Yoked, 2010
Projection, 2009-2010
Whitewash, 2006-2009
Bloodlines, 2007
Exchange, 2007
Cut, 2006
Otis, 2004

Maryland Institute College of Art

Endurance, 2003
Witness, 1999-2000

The Walters Art Museum

Bearing, 2006

Carroll Museums: Carroll Mansion

The Evidence of Things Not Seen, 2008

Carroll Museums: Phoenix Shot Tower

The Manhole Cover Project: A Gun Legacy, 1996

Reginald F. Lewis Museum

Sacred to the Memory of..., 2010

Maryland Art Place

Silence, 2001
Looking For: a slave named..., 2003
Topsy Turvy, 2006
Whitewash, 2006
Within Our Gates, 2003