

THE ART WORLD APRIL 10, 2017 ISSUE

WHY DANA SCHUTZ PAINTED EMMETT TILL

The artist has spent her career using abstract and figurative images to tell enigmatic stories. But a recent work has made her an incendiary figure.

By Calvin Tomkins



Schutz's paintings resonate with the contradictions of contemporary life.

Dana Schutz's studio, in the Gowanus section of Brooklyn, may not be as catastrophically messy as Francis Bacon's used to be, but there are days when it comes close. Last July, she was making paintings for a solo show, in the fall, at Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin, and for the 2017 Whitney Biennial, in New York. Large and medium-sized canvases in varying stages of completion covered most of the wall space in the studio, a long, windowless room that was once an auto-body shop, and the floor was a palimpsest of rags, used paper palettes, brushes, metal tubs filled with defunct tubes of Old Holland oil paint, colored pencils and broken charcoal sticks, cans of solvent, spavined art books, pages torn from magazines, bundled work clothes stiff with paint, paper towels, a prelapsarian boom box, empty Roach Motel cartons, and other debris.

Schutz's paintings, in which abstract and figurative images combine to tell enigmatic stories, sometimes carry veiled references to what's going on in the world. "Men's Retreat," made in 2005, shows blindfolded members of George W. Bush's Cabinet pursuing strange outdoor rites; "Poisoned Man," painted the same year, is an

imagined portrait of the former Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, who barely survived an assassination attempt, in 2004. Schutz, thirty-nine at the time, with untamable hair and a radiant smile, said that she had been up until very late the night before, watching the Republican National Convention on television. “I remember the second Bush nomination in 2003 and feeling so angry, but this was depressing,” she said. “It was like a disaster you can’t look away from.” When I asked if the rise of Donald Trump might invade her new work, she thought for a moment, and said, “I want to make a painting about shame. Public shaming has become an element in contemporary life. You can take a picture of someone and post it online, and thousands of people see it. We’re so ashamed, about so many things, and I think for a candidate to be without shame, like Trump, is really powerful. His lack of shame becomes our shame.”

Schutz was also thinking about paintings in which people struggle with giant insects. “Every time that idea comes up, I decide I should give it more thought,” she said, laughing. “But my instinct is that bugs could be interesting in a painting. Anyway, right now it’s shame and bugs.” Somewhat hesitantly, she also said that she had been thinking a lot about Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old whose abduction, torture, and murder by white Mississippi racists in 1955 kept coming up in news stories about the killings of Trayvon Martin and other African-American boys. Two men, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, had been killed in separate police shootings two weeks earlier. In the current climate of political and racial unrest, Emmett Till seemed like a risky subject for a white artist to engage with. “I’ve wanted to do a painting for a while now, but I haven’t figured out how,” she said. “It’s a real event, and it’s violence. But it has to be tender, and also about how it’s been for his mother. I don’t know, I’m trying. I’m talking too much about it.” In a later conversation, she said, “How do you make a painting about this and not have it just be about the grotesque? I was interested because it’s something that keeps on happening. I feel somehow that it’s an American image.”

Basing a picture on a real event would be a departure from Schutz’s usual practice—and, as it turns out, an incendiary one. She had said early in her career that her

ambition was “to paint subjects that did not exist, or could not be painted from observation or photographed.” With a few notable exceptions, such as Yushchenko, the Bush Cabinet members, and Michael Jackson laid out on an autopsy table (four years before he died), this is pretty much what she has done, starting in 2001, when she was a graduate art student at Columbia, with a painting called “Sneeze.” It shows a girl with long golden hair, sneezing so explosively that the torrential discharge has turned her nose into a piggish snout. “I wanted to paint what it feels like to sneeze,” she said. The sneeze paintings (there were three of them) launched her career. Then came a group of works about the last man on Earth, a nebbishy character named Frank—in one, he poses naked on a beach; in another, he is turning into a proboscis monkey—and a gruesome series on “self-eaters,” an invented race of people who devour and then regenerate their own body parts. They set the stage for a decade of startling, vivid, wildly original, and masterly paintings of people doing weird things—using blood from a live shark to cure the plague, for example. In a 2005 self-portrait, she depicted herself as a thick-skinned human pachyderm.

Schutz occasionally appears baffled by her work—she tends to apologize for not explaining it better. “The thing is, by talking about it you can kill it,” she said. The Whitney curator Chrissie Iles described her to me as an artist who uses painting to bridge two worlds, the analog and the digital. “She emerged at a moment when the Internet was just beginning to affect how we experience images, and she anticipated what’s going on now,” Iles said. “It’s one of those moments of dramatic transition, like the sixties. Everything is fluid and interchangeable, and Dana is telling visual stories that articulate a different sense of what narrative is.”

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Schutz's 2015 show at Friedrich Petzel Gallery, her New York dealer, was called "Fight in an Elevator." A widely circulated surveillance video of Solange Knowles attacking Jay Z in an elevator had given her the idea of trying to paint "a high-action situation in a very compressed space," and this led to several paintings of frantically entangled body parts. The beginnings of a new elevator painting were marked out with black tape on a wall in her studio. This one would be twelve feet high by fourteen feet wide, she said. "At first, I thought, Nah, it's too big, but now I think it could be interesting. When something is more than ten feet high, it gets beyond being a picture. I want it to look like people trying to climb over each other, and bugs attacking them. But I don't know. I hope it won't just look like chaotic wallpaper."

Schutz's high, slightly childish voice and her inherent niceness can make her seem unsure of herself, but that impression disappears when you see her paintings. Schutz's pictorial logic allows her to build pictures that are simultaneously convincing and absurd, troubling and uncanny. Sometimes it's hard to figure out what's going on in them, but that doesn't bother her—she feels that there should be room for the viewer to complete the story. The private worlds that her bold, declarative colors and thrusting forms evoke can be inexplicable, but they resonate with the anxieties and contradictions of contemporary life.

The studio was nearly empty when I stopped by again, in early October. The paintings I'd seen in July had been shipped to Berlin. (The show was called "Waiting for the Barbarians," a title she'd borrowed from J. M. Coetzee's novel—"which I'm ashamed to say I haven't read.") A huge, newly stretched canvas hung on the back wall, with indistinct forms brushed on it in an orange-red primer. "It's

kind of like an expulsion scene,” Schutz explained. I couldn’t make out any recognizable images, and then suddenly I could: a man and a woman, close together, moving from left to right. Masaccio’s “Expulsion from the Garden of Eden” (circa 1426), one of the earliest evocations of shame in Western art and probably the most powerful, came to mind. “Yeah, I love that painting,” she said. “I saw it first in an art book when I was an undergraduate in Cleveland, and I’ve often thought I might do something with it. The expression on the faces is so intense. It’s an old theme, but I thought it could be experienced in a contemporary way.”

She had gone to Berlin in mid-September for the opening of her show, bringing along her two-year-old son, Arlo, and her mother-in-law. Her husband, the artist Ryan Johnson, arrived a week later (five of his sculptures were in a group show that opened in Los Angeles on the same day). She and Johnson met in graduate school at Columbia. When he applied for the program, Schutz, who was finishing her first year, was one of three student interviewers on the faculty admitting panel, and, because he sighed audibly before answering questions, she decided that he must be depressed. The applicants and their interviewers all went to a bar afterward, and she and Johnson ended up talking mostly to each other. They started living together soon afterward. In 2005, they moved to Gowanus with several artist friends, and Schutz and Johnson were married the following year. Johnson’s studio is around the corner from Schutz’s, and the building they live in is six blocks away. “I just like being in the city so much,” Schutz told me. “We never really had a home life before Arlo, and now we do.”

I asked Schutz if she’d thought any more about the Emmett Till painting. “That one turned out,” she said, sounding surprised. She had put it in the Berlin show, where it caused no controversy. She found the image on her iPhone, and showed it to me. Based on a widely reproduced photograph of Till’s mutilated corpse in his coffin, the painting was dominated on one side by a mostly abstract, thickly painted head in shades of dark brown and black, and on the other side by his white dress shirt. Till’s mother had dressed him formally for his funeral, and she had insisted on leaving the casket open so that people could see what the killers had done to his face. “This is

about a young boy, and it happened,” Schutz said. “It’s evidence of something that really happened. I wasn’t alive then, and it wasn’t taught in our history classes.” She was still uncertain about the painting. “I don’t know if it has the right emotionality,” she said. “I like it as a painting, but I might want to try it again.” All the Berlin pictures were sold (at prices ranging from ninety thousand dollars to four hundred thousand), but Schutz had kept two of them for herself: a painting of two men coping with oversized insects, and the Till painting, which was called “Open Casket.”

Schutz’s “Open Casket,” based on a photograph of Emmett Till, is in the Whitney Biennial.

Schutz grew up in Livonia, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. Dean, her father, taught social studies and doubled as a guidance counsellor at Dana’s high school, in Livonia; her mother, Georgia, was a middle-school art teacher in nearby Plymouth. Georgia had studied art at Michigan State. She painted expressionistic landscapes, and there were always plenty of art materials in the house to play with. Schutz, an only child, was naturally curious, independent, fearless, and popular with other kids. “I was happy, I think,” she said. “I thought at the time that my parents were very overbearing and protective, but they weren’t—a lot of the time, I was just out, away, walking miles to the pet store to buy some little animal to hide in the house.” As her father explained, “There was a back part to the closet in her room, another closet, and we discovered after the fact that she hid a rabbit there and showed it to her friends when they came over.” Her mother said, “Dana was never very tidy as a kid. I kind of gave up—shut the door on it.”

When Schutz was fifteen, she decided she was going to be an artist. Her mother let her have the entire basement and showed her how to stretch a canvas, and Dana took it from there. “It was like turning a switch,” her mother recalled. “She would be down in the basement for hours and hours, sometimes through the night. There was no direction from me. She had a very nurturing and encouraging art teacher at the high school, who one day opened up a storeroom for her to paint in, and said, ‘This is going to be Danaland.’ ”

At the Cleveland Institute of Art, which Schutz attended from 1995 to 2000, her love of painting never wavered. The contemporary artists she admired most were Cecily Brown, Laura Owens, John Currin, and Nicole Eisenman—painterly painters, who were in short supply at the time. She also looked closely at Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and other American painters who emerged in the nineteen-eighties; at the contemporary German artists Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen; and at a galaxy of earlier masters, from Pontormo, Goya, Manet, and Picasso to Diego Rivera, whose twenty-seven-part mural in the Detroit Institute of Arts, with its vivid evocations of Ford's River Rouge factory and its mighty workers, had enthralled her as a child. "I still like paintings of people doing things," she told me.

She entered the graduate art program at Columbia in 2000, and during her first year there she had an artistic crisis, the kind that afflicts gifted art students who can't decide what their work should be about. "I was so lost, I couldn't make any paintings at all," she recalled. Earlier, partly as a joke, she had made a number of oil paintings of imaginary partners for her unattached friends. The paintings were fairly small, with a lot of strong colors laid down in thick layers. Klaus Biesenbach, a curator at P.S. 1, the Museum of Modern Art's contemporary branch in Queens, put one of these portraits in a group show in October, 2001. Biesenbach, who is now MOMA's chief curator-at-large, told me that Schutz's paintings had struck him as being "different from anything I had seen recently—not exactly beautiful, but very true. I said at the time, here is an artist who bridges the cartoonist and the social realist, but she does it in a very American way that really captures the human condition."

The terrorist attacks on September 11th made Schutz's anxieties about what to paint seem trivial. She did the sneeze paintings that fall, in her second year. "I needed to make some decisions and not be stuck," she remembered. "I told myself I would just make sneezes, and see what happened." Zach Feuer, an art student at Boston's School of the Museum of Fine Arts who had started a tiny New York gallery as his senior project, put her first sneeze painting and a few other early works, along with minimalist still-lives by a young artist named Holly Coulis, in a two-person show, in January, 2002. "Sneeze" was bought by Erik Parker, an artist whose eccentric

abstractions Schutz admired. “I thought that was so cool,” she said. “It felt like a breakthrough. I had a sense of clarity and purpose, even if it was just an invented one.”

Feuer gave her a solo show in November, a few months after she graduated. Called “Frank from Observation,” it presented several views of the last man on Earth—clearly not from observation, although the eyes and mouth were based on those of people she knew. The show sold out. “I was amazed that people came who were not my friends,” Schutz recalled. “That was shocking and exciting, and it made life after school less difficult. I’d thought maybe I’d be a tour guide, because that was my job at Columbia, even though I have a terrible speaking voice and no one could hear me. I was really lucky, because now I had enough money to rent a studio.” Interest in her work spread rapidly after that—she was in the Venice Biennale in 2003 and the second Greater New York show, in 2005.

On November 9th, the morning after the election, Schutz said, “I didn’t sleep at all. I stopped watching, but I couldn’t sleep.” We were in the studio, and she looked exhausted. She and Johnson were about to close on a two-story building they were buying in nearby Sunset Park, where they would both have ample studio space. It was the biggest financial commitment they’d ever made, and now she wondered if it was a mistake. Her fortieth birthday was the next day—they planned to celebrate with a dinner at their favorite Italian restaurant, in Carroll Gardens. She had just found out that she was pregnant again, but I didn’t learn this until a week later.

On the studio’s back wall—the working wall—“Expulsion” glowed like a furnace. It wasn’t finished, but the two figures now stood out dramatically against a blue background—many shades of blue. To their left was a large white shape, which she said was a cloud; parts of it were tinged with gray, but one section was a pure, dazzling white, as though the sun were hitting it. A giant insect loomed in the foreground, a kind of dragonfly with translucent wings, delicately rendered. Petzel wanted to show the picture at the Art Basel fair in Miami Beach, which was opening in two weeks. “I thought the woman’s body would go a lot quicker than it did,” she

said. “Yesterday, I started to like it. You have an idea of what you want a painting to be, and then it goes another way and you have to accept that. This painting had a kind of sadness to it, even before the election, but now I guess there’s fear and anger.”

Four days later, when I visited again, “Expulsion” was still unfinished. The two entwined figures had a more physical presence, but there were no facial features. Schutz was still thinking about shame and Donald Trump. “I don’t think he has that connection to other people, that social, contagious thing,” she said. “Have you noticed that he never yawns when other people yawn? But what happens if a leader has no shame? Countries have shame—in our country, it’s always been there, connected to killing the Indians, and to slavery.”

When I went back again a few days later, the studio floor was littered with discarded paintbrushes, dozens of them, some still oozing paint—I got bright orange on one of my shoes. “I always go for a new brush when I start a new color,” she said. “I like the floor when it gets this way—it feels like a river or something.” She had managed to get a one-day extension of the deadline, and she’d been working all night. The faces were nearly there. The man’s was twisted upward and back, toward the sky; the woman was looking down. She had a helmet of straight black hair, and her features, in profile, seemed weighted by despair. A long white sash streamed out behind her in the wind.

Early success can derail young artists. The sudden demand for their work puts pressure on them to produce similar work, instead of stretching their talent and exploring new directions; and speculative buying, for quick resale, brings prices that may not hold up. With Schutz, the danger signals came almost immediately. Feuer told me that soon after her 2002 solo show he sold a painting called “The Breeders” to a New York collector for eight thousand dollars, and within a year the collector had sold it to Larry Gagosian for half a million—none of which went to the artist. “That was a kind of wake-up call,” Feuer said. (“I overpaid,” Gagosian told me recently. “But you couldn’t get a work of hers otherwise.”) From then on, Feuer tried to restrict sales of her work to people who promised, if they weren’t going to keep it,

to let him sell it for them, or give it to a museum—the surest way to solidify a reputation, and to ward off the stigma of being a “market artist.” Feuer had some success with this tactic, but it was hard to enforce. Charles Saatchi, the British super-collector, had bought two of Schutz’s early paintings from Feuer; when Feuer refused to sell him any others, Saatchi bought more than a dozen from other collectors, at hugely inflated prices—a million dollars for one, I’d been told. Eventually, he sold nearly all of them, not always at a profit. The hyper-inflated prices didn’t last, but her reputation kept growing.

Schutz tried to ignore her booming market, but in 2004 she started having panic attacks. Once, she passed out on the stairway at a gallery, and another time at an opening. That was in 2005, the year her self-eater paintings appeared in a show at Feuer called “Panic.” Some of them were pretty brutal—in “Face Eater,” a person has managed to ingest his (or her) whole face—but her subjects go about their gory meals with bland indifference. Although Schutz tends to dodge interpretations of her work, she has said that the self-eaters probably have to do with the artistic process, which cannibalizes experience and regurgitates it as art. Maybe so, but it’s interesting that Schutz, who is so self-effacing in her personal life, would choose self-effacement as a subject. Her fears and worries and contradictions get channelled into the work, and she works virtually all the time. The panic attacks eventually stopped. “Dana has a lot of self-doubt,” Ryan Johnson told me, “but not when she’s painting.”

As Schutz’s subject matter grew wilder, her technique became more assured. In “How We Would Give Birth” (2007), a woman in a hospital bed gazes intently at an old-fashioned landscape painting on the wall while a bloody fetus emerges from her vagina. (This was seven years before Arlo was born; she did a second birth painting, post-Arlo, that was less disturbing and more complex.) “Swimming, Smoking, Crying” (2009) depicts a young woman doing all those things at once, improbably and indelibly. In “Building the Boat While Sailing” (2012), two dozen people are hard at work (people doing things!) on what looks like another metaphor for the creative process. It also channels Géricault’s “The Raft of the Medusa.”

Schutz's work was appearing regularly, but for several years she was not happy with it. In 2005, a painting of hers called "Coma," of an unconscious man in a dream world of abstract color, was in a group exhibition at Greene Naftali Gallery, in Chelsea, along with works by Amy Sillman, Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, and other contemporaries. "It was a great show—I was glad to be in it—but I felt that my painting was like a brick, a stuffy little brick," she said. "Now I like it a lot, but at the time the other paintings in the show felt more expansive—there was air and gesture and fluidity in them. I didn't know how to do that, but I wanted to try." She thinned down her medium—until then, she had been using a lot of oil paint, building it up in impastos so thick they were almost sculptural. The new work looked more spontaneous, like drawing.



VIEW FULL SCREEN

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"Sneeze" (2001).

For the next few years, she kept on experimenting, not always successfully—a group of paintings with holes cut in the canvas and backed with black velvet now look errant and unconvincing—but by 2012 the power and solidity of her earlier work were back. Bold, clashing colors shape the composition in six paintings called "God" that she did in 2013; in "God 6," the deity wears flaming-red swim trunks. Why God? After explaining that she was not religious, Schutz said, "I wanted to paint a protagonist, someone who can go through a lot of different situations, but that didn't happen. They were just about painting."

Schutz and Feuer parted company in 2011. "We'd worked together for ten years, and we were kind of getting on each other's nerves at the end," Feuer told me. "We'd spend hours on the phone every day—she never needed my advice, it was just thinking out loud. She always wanted to remove the easy things, the popular things, from her paintings, and I'd say, 'I loved that, it's crazy.' At a certain point, it became clear that she needed to be at one of the top galleries, and we both knew I wasn't

going to be a Zwirner or a Hauser & Wirth.” (Feuer quit the gallery business in 2014. He now lives in Hudson, and teaches bike maintenance to people with special needs.) Instead of moving to one of the big-money galleries, Schutz chose Petzel, whose galleries in New York and Berlin represent Charline von Heyl, Maria Lassnig, Sean Landers, and other artists she likes. She had her first show at Petzel in 2012. Three of the paintings in it went to museums: two to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and one to the Nerman Museum, in Kansas.

When I went back to the Gowanus studio, in late December, “Expulsion” had been shipped to Miami Beach, where it was sold for more than two hundred thousand dollars, to a private collector from Toronto. A new, still unfinished painting hung on the left wall: Donald Trump, standing on a bright-yellow escalator, glowering balefully as he descends to the lobby of Trump Tower to announce his candidacy for President. I had never seen a Schutz image that was so instantly recognizable. The top of his head was cut off by the framing edge (no yellow pouf). The double-wide red tie extended below his crotch. Trump’s scowl was partly buried in a mass of livid, blood-red and bruise-purple brushstrokes. “I don’t really make super-topical paintings,” she said. “But I wanted to get that moment of suspense, when you know something is going to happen and there’s nothing you can do to stop it. In real life, he looks so dumpy, like a refrigerator. I’m happy with how the face turned out, kind of like a mask, with something guarded but threatening about it. He’s coming down, taking us to lower levels of everything.”

The painting was for a group show at Petzel of artist responses to Trump’s election, called “We need to talk . . .” The show was opening in about a week, and Schutz kept working on the piece until the last minute. She was two and a half months pregnant. “I feel like a cow,” she said. The elevator painting that I’d seen marked out in tape months earlier was on the back wall, the canvas brushed with the orange-red primer she uses to establish the basic composition.

“We need to talk . . .” opened on a snowy Saturday morning in early January. Schutz’s painting was among forty-seven works, including Sarah Morris’s “Liar”;

Rachel Harrison's sculpture of Trump as a dangling piñata; Jonathan Horowitz's photographic blowup of a bottom-heavy Trump mangling a golf swing (the title was "Does she have a good body? No. Does she have a fat ass? Absolutely"). Schutz and Johnson came to the gallery with Arlo, who wore a Batman cape and was not thrilled to be there. Schutz explained that Arlo dislikes rooms with a lot of paintings in them. "He says, 'No, Mommy, no. We go now.'" He's O.K. with sculptures, but "very negative about paintings." Her Trump painting sold quickly, to a collector in Connecticut. "That was a shock," she said, laughing. Like all the artists in the show, she was donating the proceeds to charity.

Mia Locks and Christopher Y. Lew, the two young curators of this year's Whitney Biennial, visited Schutz's studio in February to make a final choice of pictures for the show. They picked three: the huge "Elevator," which would confront viewers as they stepped off the elevator onto the Whitney's fifth floor; "Shame," a new painting, in hot, tropical colors, of a woman furiously scrubbing her face with both hands; and "Open Casket." I went to see the three canvases the day before they left the studio. It was my first look at "Open Casket," which had just come back from Berlin; seeing the image on Schutz's iPhone had barely suggested its cumulative power. Measuring thirty-nine by fifty-three inches, it is smaller than most of her recent paintings, and more abstract. The buildup of paint on the face is a couple of inches thick in the area where Till's mouth would be. Although there are no recognizable features, a deep trough carved into the heavy impasto conveys a sense of savage disfigurement, which is heightened by the whiteness of the boy's smoothly ironed dress shirt. His head rests on an ochre-yellow fabric, and deftly brushed colors at the top suggest banked flowers.

Schutz had worried that the appalling aspects of Till's murder might overpower any attempt to deal with it visually. I'd wondered about that, too. Violent images have appeared in a number of her paintings, but within a context of humor or irony or inspired sappiness that neutralizes the shock—her self-eaters clearly suffer no pain when they bite off a finger or two. Emmett Till's murder was implacably real. Trying to deal with this atrocity in visual terms had seemed almost beyond imagining, and

“Open Casket” is a very dark picture—but it’s not grotesque. The horror is conveyed in painterly ways that, to me, make it seem more tragic than the photograph, because the viewer is drawn in, not repelled. “There was so much uncertainty with this painting,” Schutz said, quietly. “You think maybe it’s off limits, and then extra off limits. But I really feel any subject is O.K., it’s just how it’s done. You never know how something is going to be until it’s done.”

The Biennial opened to the public on Friday, March 17th. A number of the works on view dealt with violence. At the press preview a few days before, there had been much talk, pro and con, about Jordan Wolfson’s “Real Violence,” an immersive, ninety-second staged video of a white man beating and stomping another white man to death, accompanied by an audio recording of a Hebrew prayer. I heard very little comment about Schutz’s paintings that day, but at the public opening, a young African-American artist named Parker Bright, wearing a T-shirt with “Black Death Spectacle” written on the back, stood for several hours in front of “Open Casket,” making it difficult (but not impossible) for others to view the painting. He was joined from time to time by other silent protesters. That afternoon, a British-born artist and writer named Hannah Black posted a letter to the curators Lew and Locks on Facebook, demanding not only that “Open Casket” be removed from the show but that it be destroyed. “It is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun,” she wrote.

Her letter quickly went viral. Reactions on Twitter and other social media ranged from fierce approval to incredulous opposition. (“Burn This Shit, Bitch.” “White person showing empathy toward blacks is now racist?” “Where are the images of Till’s murderers?” “why would you burn art what’s next? Books, people?”) There were also efforts to address deeper questions of black anguish, white guilt, and who does or doesn’t have the right to use certain sacred images in works of art. “Emmett Till died because a white woman lied about their brief interaction,” Josephine Livingstone and Lovia Gyarkye wrote, on *The New Republic’s* Web site. “For a white woman to paint Emmett Till’s mutilated face communicates not only a tone-deafness toward the history of his murder, but an ignorance of the history of white

women's speech in that murder—the way it cancelled out Till's own expression, with lethal effect.”

Arguments on the other side emphasized the perils of artistic censorship. “Hannah Black and company are placing themselves on the wrong side of history, together with . . . religious fundamentalists who ban artworks in the name of their god,” the performance artist Coco Fusco wrote on Hyperallergic. Whoopi Goldberg scolded Black on the daytime television show, “The View”: “If you're an artist, young lady, you should be ashamed of yourself.” *New York* and the Huffington Post both published excerpts online from an apology by Schutz, announcing that she would withdraw the painting from the exhibition, but that turned out to be a hoax. Chris Ofili, the British artist whose painting of the Virgin Mary so offended Mayor Rudolph Giuliani that he threatened to remove city funding from the Brooklyn Museum unless it was taken down, sent me an e-mail: “Seeing a painting and talking about a painting are two different things. One should not confuse sharp eyes with a sharp tongue.” The media circus waxed and waned, but I saw few references to what seemed to me the underlying issues on both sides. One was a deep frustration among black artists that a theme so central to their history should be explored, in a major museum, by a white female artist. The other was that artists, very often, do not consciously choose their subjects. Emmett Till's sixty-year-old murder took hold of Dana Schutz, and she struggled with (and against) the urge to paint it.

The artist Kara Walker, whose work has explored race, sexuality, and violence, composed an Instagram post last week that referred to “Open Casket” without mentioning Schutz or her detractors. “The history of painting is full of graphic violence and narratives that don't necessarily belong to the artists own life,” she wrote. “As are we all. I am more than a woman, more than the descendant of Africa, more than my fathers daughter. More than black more than the sum of my experiences thus far . . . art often lasts longer than the controversies that greet it. I say this as a shout to every artist and artwork that gives rise to vocal outrage. Perhaps it too gives rise to deeper inquiries and better art.”

The two Biennial curators met with Parker Bright, and listened to his concerns. They also replaced the wall label next to “Open Casket” with a new one, acknowledging the controversy it had caused, and including a statement by Schutz, which concludes, “This painting was never for sale and never will be.” Locks told me that she and Lew were well aware that the painting was challenging, like a lot of other works in the show, and that they would have some difficult questions to face, but, she said, “we didn’t think the response would be so absolutist.” To Lew, the impassioned response had a lot to do with the painting’s being seen in isolation, on Instagram, for instance. “When you’re standing in front of the painting, it’s a powerful experience—deeply sad, mournful.” The museum has been fully supportive of the curators and the artist, and the painting will remain on view throughout the exhibition.

“I knew the risks going into this,” Schutz told me. “What I didn’t realize was how bad it would look when seen out of context. Is it better to try to make something that’s impossible, because it’s important to you, and to fail, or never to engage with it at all? I just couldn’t do it any other way.” ♦

Calvin Tomkins has been a staff writer for The New Yorker since 1960.

This article appears in other versions of the April 10, 2017, issue, with the headline “Troubling Pictures.”

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