

Letter to the Editor *Artforum*, October 1998

© Artforum International Magazine Inc. 1998

Response to "Crimson Herring: Ronald Jones on 'Black Like Who?' [Harvard University symposium on stereotypes in art]," *Artforum International*, vol. xxxvi, no. 10, Summer 1998. Letter published as "Poison Ivy," in *Artforum International*, vol. xxxvii, no. 1, October 1998.

To the Editor:

After the initial shock of seeing "our dirty linen" washed in public (by an outsider, no less), I found Ronald Jones' "Crimson Herring" in the Summer issue (on "Black Like Who?" the Harvard symposium on stereotypes in contemporary art) quite brave. At the same time it was a bit confused—how could it not be?

Before going further, let me confess: I'm of the pox-on-both-your-houses school myself. The Kara Walker attackers and defenders have so occupied the floor that mere *examiners* of the work have no room.

One reason the audience was so "snow-packed," as Jones put it, is that beyond the brutal demographics of the art world, many black arts professionals were not informed of the symposium, or if they were, they decided not to attend: they feared they might get angry (not at white people, but at the conference organizers) and lose their cool.

The warning signs were there, in the choice of panelists and the framing of issues—all crimson flags that this was one symposium that would not have the intellectual weight one expects from Harvard. When so many who have pondered long and hard on the issues as they affect the art world (bell hooks,

Michele Wallace, and Judith Wilson, e.g.) are conspicuously absent, while so many with axes to grind are there, even the pretense of reasonable discussion seems abandoned. Not to mention the shameless imbalance in the opposing sides: three lonely "attackers," most out of their depth (Florence Ladd is an academic dean recently turned novelist, and Bettye Saar, while a good artist and nice person, is not an academic heavyweight)—against the combined market power of the most currently certified names? I ask you. Even the symposium's sponsorship by two of Walker's biggest collectors hinted at agendas unnamed. However serious the intentions of the organizers may have been, they could only be undone by suspicion that this was a market maneuver in masquerade.

Jones was right to point out the unfortunate timing of the debate "at a moment marked by the withering life of affirmative action on certain upscale campuses" —or, for that matter, in the mainstream art world. And his use of Anselm Kiefer's example was apt, I feel (though I'm not sure it's an exact equivalent). But it was disappointing to see someone so perceptive adopt the simplistic casting of the disagreement as a generational dispute: i.e., between younger and older black artists. This furnished one more example of what Jones himself rightly identifies as the ignorance that verifies "the real effect of multiculturalism in the academy as hovering a few degrees above zero." Part of the problem, of course, is the lingering truth of the folk wisdom of the black art world, that there is only room for one or two blacks of either gender to be successful at a given time. Add to that the further restriction of age, and the odds become astronomical. But while there is a "market" reality to the generational war (so that it is not too difficult to see who is sponsoring it, and why), its intellectual reality is almost nil. Outside the questionable parameters of the Harvard symposium, it comes as no surprise that many older black artists are thrilled both by the aesthetic bravura and by the sheer personal gumption of Walker's work, and that, equally, many younger black artists are appalled by its seeming lack of psycho-political reflection—nor is it any surprise that most black artists, of whatever age, are thrilled and appalled at once.

I agree that we need "refined beliefs in racial and cultural equality," but we need lots of variety in the refinement. What we don't need is the kind of unitary vocalization—one right point of view, one hip generation, that white culture seems to demand of us, so that it doesn't have to think about us so much, so that we're not too *complicated*.

—Lorraine O'Grady
Senior Fellow, Vera List Center for the Arts