

Beyond the Whitewash: Exhibition Abstract

Proposed by:

Shelby Head

Project Type:

Traveling Exhibition

Focus Areas:

Contemporary Art · Public Humanities · Social History · Interdisciplinary Practice

Proposal Summary: *Beyond the Whitewash* is a traveling exhibition bringing together Native, Black, and White artists to examine the enduring structures of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and racialized silence in the United States through contemporary art and collaborative scholarship.

Exhibition Description

Beyond the Whitewash is a traveling, interdisciplinary exhibition that confronts the historical construction and contemporary persistence of white supremacy in the United States through collaborative artistic inquiry. Bringing together Native, Black, and white artists, the exhibition centers visual art as a site for reckoning—one that resists erasure, destabilizes inherited narratives of innocence and progress, and invites sustained engagement with the lived consequences of colonization, enslavement, and racial hierarchy. Rather than presenting a singular thesis or didactic account, *Beyond the Whitewash* unfolds as a dialogic framework: a constellation of artworks that hold complexity, contradiction, accountability, and care in tension.

At its core, the exhibition asks how histories of violence are normalized through silence, how whiteness operates as an often-invisible infrastructure of power, and how art might create conditions for ethical attention across difference. The project emerged from artist Shelby Head's long-term research into her own ancestral relationship to colonial settlement and racialized systems of privilege. This inquiry materialized initially in *An Infrastructure of Silence*, a body of work examining how whiteness is sustained through absence, avoidance, and the refusal to name complicity. From this starting point, *Beyond the Whitewash* evolved into a collaborative curatorial model in which invited artists—each grounded in their own cultural, historical, and aesthetic lineages—respond not only to Head's work but also to one another, generating a layered, relational exhibition structure.

Exhibition Themes and Conceptual Framework

Beyond the Whitewash engages several interrelated themes: the construction of race as a colonial tool; the material and psychic afterlives of settler colonialism and enslavement; intergenerational trauma and memory; and the ethics of witnessing across difference. The exhibition foregrounds whiteness not as an identity alone, but as a system—one that shapes land ownership, labor, language, archives, and visual culture itself. By placing Native, Black, and white artists in conversation, the exhibition resists binaries of perpetrator and victim, instead examining how power circulates unevenly and how responsibility can be acknowledged without collapsing into guilt or defensiveness.

The artworks span painting, sculpture, installation, textile, photography, and archival intervention. Together, they create a visual and spatial experience that slows the viewer down, encouraging reflection rather than consumption. Silence, absence, and restraint function as formal strategies that mirror the mechanisms by which histories of violence are often obscured. At the same time, acts of repair—through material labor, storytelling, and communal presence—emerge as counterpoints, offering possibilities for re-seeing and re-relation.

Intended Audience and Public Engagement

The intended audience for Beyond the Whitewash is broad and intentionally inclusive, encompassing museum-going publics, students, educators, scholars, artists, and community members who may encounter these histories from different positionalities. While the exhibition is grounded in rigorous research and critical theory, it is not aimed solely at academic specialists. Instead, it is designed to be accessible without being reductive—inviting viewers into a shared space of inquiry rather than instructing them on what to think.

Public programming is a central component of the exhibition and includes artist talks, facilitated dialogues, workshops with local educators and activists, and partnerships with community organizations. Each iteration of the exhibition is conceived as site-responsive, with programming adapted to local histories and contemporary contexts. This flexibility allows Beyond the Whitewash to resonate across regions while remaining grounded in place, making it well-suited to a national touring model.

Cultural and Scholarly Significance

The cultural and scholarly significance of Beyond the Whitewash lies in its refusal of simplification. At a moment when debates over history, race, and representation have become increasingly polarized—and when educational and cultural institutions face mounting pressure to sanitize difficult narratives—the exhibition offers a model for sustained, ethical engagement. It aligns with scholarship in critical race theory, Indigenous studies, memory studies, and visual culture, while extending these conversations through embodied, material practices.

Beyond the Whitewash does not position art as an illustrative supplement to historical discourse. Instead, it asserts artistic practice as a form of knowledge production—capable of holding ambiguity, affect, and contradiction in ways that traditional academic forms often cannot. By centering collaboration and shared authority, the exhibition challenges hierarchical curatorial models and proposes an ethics of co-authorship and accountability.

Curatorial Viewpoint and Methodology

The curatorial approach of *Beyond the Whitewash* is grounded in relationality, transparency, and care. While Shelby Head serves as the lead artist and initiating curator, the exhibition is not conceived as a singular authorial project. Curatorial responsibilities are distributed among collaborators, with distinct leadership guiding engagement with Native and Black artists. Decisions around representation, interpretation, and resource allocation are made collaboratively, with attention to equity and respect.

This methodology extends to practical considerations such as artist fees, contractual clarity, and adherence to best practices, including alignment with W.A.G.E. certification standards. By embedding these values into the project's infrastructure, *Beyond the Whitewash* models the systems-level thinking it seeks to critique.

Timeliness and National Relevance

The timeliness of *Beyond the Whitewash* is underscored by ongoing national debates around voting rights, Indigenous sovereignty, racial justice, and historical memory. As efforts to restrict discussions of race and colonialism proliferate across the United States, the exhibition insists on the necessity of facing these histories directly—not as an exercise in shame, but as a prerequisite for collective understanding.

Why the Exhibition Should Travel

As a traveling exhibition, *Beyond the Whitewash* gains depth through movement. Its core themes—land, memory, power, and silence—manifest differently across regions, allowing each venue to activate the project in dialogue with local histories. The exhibition's modular design accommodates a range of gallery sizes and institutional contexts, making it viable for university museums, mid-sized contemporary art spaces, and regional art centers alike.

The first iteration of *Beyond the Whitewash*, presented at Living Arts of Tulsa in 2023, demonstrated the project's capacity to engage diverse audiences, drawing significant public attendance and fostering sustained dialogue. Building on this foundation, the exhibition is envisioned as a multi-year national tour.

Exhibition Catalogue

A fully illustrated exhibition catalogue is proposed as an integral component of *Beyond the Whitewash*. The publication will extend the exhibition's impact beyond its physical presentation, serving as a scholarly and pedagogical resource. Proposed essays include a lead curatorial essay; contributions by scholars in race, visual culture, and Indigenous studies; critical writing on memory and repair; and artist statements with visual documentation. The catalogue will be designed for academic use, with accessible language, robust citations, and thoughtful design.

Curator Qualifications and Project Viability

Shelby Head (pronouns: fluid) initiated *Beyond the Whitewash* as an artist-led inquiry grounded in research and lived experience, while intentionally not serving as the exhibition's sole curator. The project was structured to support independent curatorial leadership: Welana Queton (Osage, Muscogee,

Cherokee), a museum professional with extensive experience in American Indian ethnographic collections, curated the Native artists and art workers; and Marlon F. Hall, a Fulbright Specialist and social practice artist, curated the Black artists. Curatorial decisions were developed collaboratively through sustained dialogue and ethical review, emphasizing accountability, care, and mutual support.

Beyond the Whitewash's viability is supported by its scalable design, clear touring logistics, and alignment with the priorities of major cultural funders. Prospective support includes national foundations committed to arts and humanities, racial equity, and public scholarship, as well as regional arts councils and university partnerships.

Conclusion

Beyond the Whitewash is not a static exhibition but an evolving conversation—one that asks viewers to remain present with discomfort, complexity, and responsibility. By bringing together diverse voices and centering art as a space for ethical inquiry, the exhibition offers a compelling model for how museums might engage the most pressing questions of our time. As a traveling project, it has the capacity to foster meaningful dialogue across the United States, connecting national histories to local contexts and inviting more honest and expansive ways of seeing.