Spike Lee addressed the student body as we sat in the chapel pews for all-school meeting: “400 years of slavery have not been wiped out by Obama’s election” and those who think that we live in a “Disneyworld post-racial climate” are incorrect. A white student stood up and asked Lee how he felt speaking at a school with predominantly white students and an upper class cultural bent. Lee reported “I’m happy I’m here. I’m grateful that you asked me to come. I hope there’s something I said today that will have a positive effect on people.” Spike Lee’s visit to campus inspired a positive effect, disguised by an exchange of polemics published in the newspaper. He stirred up controversy with several remarks, specifically his voiced beliefs that “race is a merit” and “black people cannot be racist.”[1] Racism, until this all-school meeting, seemed to be only dinnertime discussion for minority students until Andover’s cutthroat students realized that the America’s past injustice to African-Americans was now affecting transforming the college admissions landscape and impeding on their chances of receiving an Ivy League acceptance letter. Exposure to one of the most influential contemporary artist’s views on racism, through his films and his speech, alerted me to the complications of America’s racial environment today.

Two overarching themes span across two centuries of African-American art: society assumes that the role of all African-American art is to gain recognition as full and viable citizens and artists in America, and the African-American artist has been expected to create images that combat popular and prevalent stereotypes of blacks. These themes remain potent in contemporary African-American art. I studied the art as a primary source of the different ways people choose to approach racism in America. I traveled to several museums with race-related exhibitions and researched exhibitions that were geographically out of reach. I gleaned the artist’s conveyed perspectives on racism at face value and with follow-up research on what I had seen.

I came across several Kara Walker works in the Addison Gallery of American Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Williams College Museum of Art. In her series “Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War,” Walker uses silhouettes as they visually reduce a person to one dimension. She sees a likeness between the function of silhouettes and stereotypes, as they both limit the viewer to a boiled down perception. Her process embeds itself in the past, as a visual quotation of Winslow Homer’s Civil War illustrations. He published many drawings in newspapers to portray scenes from the ongoing war, on the brink of photojournalism’s inception, and employed silhouetted figures in his illustrations.

Glenn Ligon’s series *Runaways* fuses history with modern day perceptions of the black male. He found visual inspiration in nineteenth-century advertisements for runaway slaves in Southern newspapers. He created faux advertisements, but grounded the project in the present with the text. He quoted his friends’ descriptions of himself as if his friends were describing him as a missing person to the police: “very articulate, seemingly well-educated, does not look at you straight in the eye when talking to you. He’s socially very adept, yet, paradoxically, he’s somewhat of a loner.”[2] He found a peculiar similarity in the way his friends described him, and

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[1] Pak, Yerin. "Spike Lee Addresses Modern Day Racism, Provokes Debate." *The Phillipian* [Andover] 22 Jan. 2010. Web.

[2] "Glenn Ligon: Runaways." *MoMA | The Museum of Modern Art*. Web. 04 Dec. 2011. <http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O:AD:E:6902>.

the way slave-owners described missing slaves, and successfully makes the past and present feel like each other.

Andres Serrano's name has cultivated a degree of notoriety as a contemporary African-American photographer who creates artwork with corpses, feces and bodily fluids. I saw his photograph *Klansman Knighthawk of Georgia V* in the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College. Serrano, motivated by the urge to make a portrait of someone wearing a mask, photographed the profile of a Klansman's hood. His inclination towards these unconventional portraiture amounted in an intriguing discovery: he was shocked by the "surprising vulnerability of the sitters [in front of the camera] but they assumed a power once they put on the hood." Serrano himself assumes power in his dominant role as photographer while the Klansman is in the lesser position of subject. By photographing the sitter, he manipulates what the Klansman's hood stands for, uses it as a message for his own art and in that exchange the power shifts from the white man to the half-Honduran/half-Afro-Cuban. Serrano portrays the Klansman's hood as an abstract shape, therefore undermining its more grotesque symbolism.

Robert Freeman, a native of Ghana, worked as an artist-in-residence at Boston's Noble and Greenough School. The first work he painted during his residency, *Black Tie*, is exhibited in the Museum of Fine Arts' Contemporary Collection. The painting represents his takeoff as he began his focus on what W.E.B. DuBois called the "talented tenth," or the black middle class. The oil on canvas depicts a dinner table of African-Americans in formal attire, confronting and staring out at the viewer. I noticed a striking resemblance between Freeman's scene and a curated segment of Kanye West's full-length film "Runaway." Freeman exhibits with what specificity artists can focus on the racial identity, but he also serves as an example as a contemporary artist that even more contemporary artists can initiate a conversation with. The new generation of African-American artists, responding to their predecessors, has roused enough interest to become an exhibition of its own.

The Rubell Family Collection (RFC) was founded on the principle that the Collection only shows art that the Rubell family owns. The RFC exhibitions reflect the family's perspective of what they are most excited about in art at that moment. By focusing solely on contemporary art, the family collects and curates without the luxury or constraints of historical preconceptions. With the principle in mind that they must own all of the works they display, the RFC incentivizes their own process of collecting while naturally narrowing their own scope of art to work with, in order to create thematic exhibitions. The Rubell family has always collected works by African-American artists, in support of their mission to accumulate the most compelling art of our time. The contemporary art realm recently flourished with up-and-coming African-American artists, and the Rubells began to conceptualize a movement based on contemporary artists and the previous generation of African-American artists who inspired them. The Rubells had been collectors of this older generation, which included names like Lorna Simpson, Robert Colescott and David Hammons, and thus this conceptualized movement became an exhibition within the RFC. The exhibition, "30 Americans," showcases African-American artists, where the previous generation acts as a muse for the younger, and addresses the subjectivity of racial identity (purposely not nationality, which is considered an objective fact). The exhibition includes images of African-Americans depicted in orange jumpsuits, sexually subservient positions with white males, clown make-up, pimpsuits, prostitute garb and positions that invoke memory of the old minstrelsy caricatures, like Sambo and Mammy. Other pieces, like *Ode to Joy (European Anthem)* by Robert Colescott, *Soundsuit* by Nick Cave and *Whore In The Church House* by Mark Bradford evoke the perplexity deeply rooted in racial identity's ties with double standards and

discrimination. Glenn Ligon's essay "Untitled," published in the exhibition's catalog, which prefaces the art, reveals his own struggles with racial identity. He writes:

> *"for years I imagined that blackness was like a shell of a hard boiled egg, which, if tapped frequently and methodically, could be peeled away; or that blackness be scraped off like the surface of burnt toast."*[3]

These struggles form a thread that carries through the entire exhibition as the artists' engagement with their art reflects their own inner dialogue with racial identity. The RFC's location in Miami, in close proximity to the Caribbean islands, is prime for an audience that identifies with the African-American nationality or wants to learn more about the African-American culture that surrounds them. However, despite Ligon's involvement in the show, he laments its curatorial objectives:

> *"…every five or 10 years, [a museum does] some sort of big group exhibition and they put a lot of black folks in it. But there's not any spin-off or follow-up show from that. There are no monographic exhibitions organized by that institution of a black artist's work, or black artists are not included in any other kind of museum programming. So the only time you get to be in that major institution's space is in a group show—the ethnically specific group shows."*[4]

By showing African-American artists in exclusively ethnic exhibitions, curators only allow the oeuvres to be considered within the context of the 'African-American contemporary art' label. Although society (a.k.a. the white portion of America that is predominantly in power) associates African-American artists with the effort towards gaining recognition as full and viable citizens and artists in America, African-American art is still segregated from other shows. This regulation of African-American art further propels the cycle of African-American artists working towards recognition, because it is rarely bestowed upon them. These curatorial limitations serve as a direct example of today's definition of racism, past the preliminary explanation Merriam-Webster provides:

> *"Racism involves the subordination of people of color by white people. While an individual person of color may discriminate against white people or even hate them, his or her behavior cannot be called 'racist.' He or she must be considered prejudiced against whites and we may all agree that the person acts unfairly and unjustly, but racism requires something more than anger, hatred, or prejudice; at the very least, it requires prejudice plus power. The history of the world provides us with a long record of white people holding power and using it to maintain that power and privilege over people of color."*[5]

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[3] Ligon, Glenn. "Untitled." (2008). *30 Americans*. Print.

[4] Cudlin, Jeffry. ""30 Americans" at the Corcoran Gallery Has Little to Say About Its 31 Artists." *Washington City Paper - D.C. Arts, News, Food and Living*. 7 Oct. 2011. Web. 04 Dec. 2011. <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/articles/41567/30-americans-at-the-corcoran-gallery-has-little-to-say/>.

[5] Rothenberg, Paula S. *Racism and Sexism: an Integrated Study*. New York: St Martin's, 1988.

By this definition, the predominantly white curatorial practice joins the list of American circumstances where the white majority has mixed the lethal cocktail of prejudice and power: slavery, disenfranchisement, segregation, steering housing practices, bank redlining practices, police brutality, and the unequal funding of public schools.[6] While society should not impose standards on African-Americans' oeuvres, artists like Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, Robert Freeman and Andres Serrano elucidate the prevailing nature of America's racism in the 21st century. America's contemporary racism causes the pain apparent in these artists' works; and snippets of these sources of pain and prejudice's continuum in America is outlined by Peggy McIntosh in her essay *White Privilege*:

> *"3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me…20. I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race…25. If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones. 26. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin."*[7]

These African-American artists assume a dual occupation as artists-cum-strategists: they take the struggles McIntosh spells out in words and translate them into an experience that confronts a viewer. Visual probing, with entire walls covered in political commentary in the shape of silhouettes, functions as an effective way to force these racial struggles to leak into collective conscious.

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[6] Jones, Christopher L. "Letters to the Editor." *The Phillipian* [Andover] 4 Feb. 2010. *The Phillipian Online*. Web. 04 Dec. 2011. <http://phillipian.net/node/106820>.

[7] McIntosh, Peggy. *White Privilege and Male Privilege*. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College, Center for Research on Women, 1988. Print.

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