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Art in America

“Encoded”

ST. LOUIS,
at the Gallery of Contemporary Art

by [Gavin Kroeber](#)

Lyndon Barrois Jr.:
Stereotypography
(*Neuland, Neuform*),
2017, magazine
clipping, marbled ink
print, solvent
transfer, board, and
stained oak, 23 by 29
inches; in
“Encoded.”



It risks oversimplification to read the recent group show “Encoded” as a rejoinder to the racially charged controversy around Kelley Walker’s fall retrospective at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis—but it is also nearly impossible not to. Walker’s “schema” and “Black Star Press” series, which feature appropriated and digitally manipulated images of black subjects, ignited arguments over artistic intention and institutional responsibility that gained national attention and triggered a boycott of the museum. “Encoded” was assembled by a close circle of six black St. Louis artists, most of whom were prominent voices in the public debate. Opening at St. Louis Community College’s Gallery of Contemporary Art just as CAM’s exhibition came down, the show seemed timed to get in a few last words.

Some of the first works one saw when entering the gallery conveyed a spirit of protest in line with the boycott. Rendered in the same grayscale palette as the venue—which has white walls, a black ceiling, and a gray floor—the works produced the stark illusion of symbolically desaturated space. The most visually dominant of them was exhibition curator **Kahlil Irving’s** *Cortège (Martin, Malcolm)*, 2016, two large black-

and-white United States flags installed vertically, side by side, one upside-down. Printed on sheets of copy paper roughly seamed together, the flags hung down the length of the wall and curled onto the floor. Next to them was *The Elephant in the Room* (2017), a text-based triptych by the design duo WORK/PLAY in which the phrase YOU SEE COLOR is silk-screened on each of three faux-velvet panels in block letters, black on black. The word color fades increasingly into indiscernibility from one panel to the next. By invoking hallowed figures of black struggle and a stubborn trope of post-racial discourse, **Irving’s** and WORK/PLAY’s works situated “Encoded” in the same territory as the Walker protests, which challenged the artist’s use of civil rights imagery and his public refusal to address the racial content of his works. Unambiguous and confrontational, these pieces also reproduced the boycott’s tone, but without making explicit reference to it. Recalling but not necessarily dwelling on the events of the fall, they oriented the exhibition just as much toward the crises of post-Ferguson St. Louis and, moreover, the national crises that were deepening as a Trump presidency approached (“Encoded” opened on Inauguration Day).

As one moved into the middle of the single-room gallery, other vocabularies emerged through works with more vibrant palettes and subtler sensibilities that also grapple with questions of black identity. Kat Reynolds's theatrically staged photographic portrait and Jen Everett's images appropriated from old family photo albums show black subjects whose gazes meet the camera in nonchalant acknowledgment. Addoley Dzegede's beautiful alabaster sculpture *Strange Fruit* (2003), its evocative organic form more ambiguous than its title might suggest, is pregnant with suggestions of burgeoning life, physical trauma, and decomposition. Two works from Lyndon Barrois Jr.'s "Stereotypography" series (both 2017) consist of evocative framed groupings of found ethnographic photos of African tribal people, printed samples of the typeface Neuland (often used to convey an exotic quality: think tiki bar signage), and other elements, all set against chipboard fields.

The show's contributors are young, and many of their works, while promising, could have been pushed further. There was frequently room to develop concepts or refine technique. A consistent economy of means (disposable materials and rough edges recurred throughout) felt at times intentional, at others circumstantial, and at others simply hasty. What cannot be overstated, however, is the show's success in conveying the energy of a dialogue evolving among these artists (and throughout St. Louis's art scenes) in a city and at a moment where questions of blackness—its ontology, representation, and exploitation—have deep political urgency. Using tone and timing to evoke the CAM controversy and broader national issues while intermingling pieces that operate in varied registers, "Encoded" delivered a group statement: these artists have been energized by recent events, but they refuse to let their work be determined by them.