

"When We See Us" by Nia Brown  
commissioned for Faith's art notes.

Sept. 5, 2023

On my way to Faith J. McKinnie's preview of the exhibition "When We See Us," at her newly opened project space, I was compulsively scrolling on Instagram. I stopped at a post from a large art institution acknowledging that a painting in their possession, an idyllic portrait of an enslaver's white children, had at one point been manipulated to paint out the figure of a Black teenage boy the plantation cartel had enslaved. Of course, I said to myself.

It was a frustratingly topical sight. Of course, white supremacy has long tried to erase the very existence of Black people, let alone our meaningful cultural elements and artistic representations. It is frustrating to witness the surprise in response to this persistent erasure, especially when teachers in certain American states are being barred from recounting that very history. Critical Race Theory, which represents our quintessentially American effort to see the full picture of our nation's history. Some find comfort in denying the veracity of undeniable exploitation and violence committed by their forefathers.

In this country, simply documenting reality, and telling the truth has always seemed to be radical. Especially when Black people do it. Naming patterns, uncovering past events, exposing personal pain, calling out swaths of injustice, simply demonstrating your faculties, exhibiting joy, or any other signs of humanness - it upsets white supremacy.

The artists in this exhibition describe life and deftly capture the depth of reality with a satisfyingly wide range of practices and mediums, curated by McKinnie. They individually pull out personal narratives to display connective truths whole communities share. They bring both enormous events and intense truths into video frames, onto paper, in photos, and in paint. What is unique to these artists and ubiquitous in our nation cannot be erased - yet it has been attempted over and over again in our society and in the art world.

When We See Us is about sight and recognition, describing the complexity of your reality is powerful, especially when you are Black.

You have to be present for others to try to erase you. And here we are.

...cont'd 2 of 3

Nia Brown (b. 1995, CA) is a writer and artist currently living and working in California. [www.niabrown.com](http://www.niabrown.com)

Brown was commissioned to write for "When We See Us" a group exhibition curated by Faith J. McKinnie in September 2023.

Faith J. McKinnie is a critic and independent curator whose work spans visual arts, film, performance, and institutional critique.

[www.faithartnotes.com](http://www.faithartnotes.com)

@faithartnotes

...cont'd 3 of 3