

2021

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Recommended Citation

Red Klug, Riley (2021) "Forman Analysis of Caged in the Circus of Civilization," *Clio: WVU Art History Research Journal*. Vol. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/clio/vol1/iss1/10>

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Formal Analysis of *Caged in the Circus of Civilization* by Stefanie Jackson

By Riley “Red” Klug

Caged in a Circus of Civilization is a 1995 work by Stefanie Jackson. Jackson is an African American artist and printmaker representing African American culture and themes in her works. This work was done using a printmaking technique of lithography and is currently located in the West Virginia University Museum in the Deem Print Gallery. Through her use of formal elements and principles of design such as movement, line, color, and pattern, the artist shows us of her thoughts, feelings, and experiences of living as an African American in an unforgiving, white America.

This work is a lithograph depicting African Americans in gruesome scenes such as being hung, decapitated, jailed, and controlled which expand upon the past experiences and thoughts of African Americans in the United States during and before the 1990's. Patterns cover the work as well; bullets, barbed wire, and other such patterns cover the clothes and rooms in which the depicted African Americans are seen. Each scene is compartmentalized, and the entire composition takes place within a building showing that the racism and hatred that African Americans felt at this time would happen mainly behind closed doors. The windows in the door open only to the African American being controlled as a puppet, possibly marketing them as some sort of entertainment.

The implied movement within this piece depicts many of the African Americans within the composition as limp and surrendering themselves to the torture they are enduring rather than fighting against it. Many of the bodies look almost lifeless, showing the most severe of consequences that can arise from the dominant culture's treatment of African Americans at this time. The African Americans depicted within the cages are seemingly turning a blind eye to the

suffering of their peers that is happening just beside them, perhaps depicting the helplessness of themselves and their cause. Others are actively embracing loved ones as this is just about the only thing they can do. The movement of the figure in the center is graceful, almost as if they are dancing; this can be used to depict how whites believe African Americans are supposed to look, feel, and act within society, as if they are playing a part they have little to no control over. One can see the weak silhouette of the character's actual face to the right of her controlled face, obviously saddened by the control she is facing. The vertical composition of the piece can be used to delineate the social hierarchies that African Americans were forced into at this time. The compartmentalization of different groups of African Americans show how they may have been pitted against one another, separated, and forced to stand by as their peers were being subjected to physical and psychological torture in different social circles.

The complex color choices of dark blues, browns, and reds for the work forces the viewer to look deeper into the composition and truly see what is happening. The color choices muddle the composition, almost covering all that happens to African Americans in America, just as the media and others cover up the horrors that happen to Black Americans every day. The colors of choice could also symbolize the dirtiness of American actions towards African American people as shown through the red, white, blue, and added brown of the composition.

The extremely dense patterns within the composition also shadow the events that are taking place within it. This shines light on how many of the issues that African Americans face are overshadowed by the other social issues of the time. The covering up of different elements within the composition tell completely different stories in and of themselves that delve even further into the African American experience. The tied-up woman in the center of the composition has a large red blob covering her pelvic area; this can be seen as a way to depict

rape, forced pregnancy, and genital mutilation that often occurred as an act of terror against African Americans. The bullets of the garments of those being hanged in the upper right of the composition also show the repetitive and senseless killing of African Americans for their skin color. Motifs of barbed wire in the background of the composition allude to the imprisonment and caging of African Americans throughout American history as well.

From the formal elements and principles of design used in *Caged in a Circus of Civilization* by Stefanie Jackson, one can see the experiences of African Americans through the eyes of an African American. This composition was made to allow people to have a deeper look into the perils of African Americans in an unforgiving and racist political climate and begin to understand all that African Americans were forced to go through during their lifetimes.



Figure 1: Stefanie Jackson, *Caged in a Circus of Civilization*, 1995, lithograph, 50 x 37 in., Deem Print Gallery, Morgantown, WV, West Virginia University Collection.