

THE ROOT

Forget That White Lady's Emmett Till Painting; These Black Artists Are Truly Representing at the Whitney Biennial

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Cauleen Smith, In the Wake, 2017. Satin, poly-satin, quilted-pleather, upholstery, wool felt, wool velvet, indigo-dyed silk-rayon velvet, indigo-dyed silk satin, embroidery floss, metallic thread, acrylic fabric paint, acrylic hair beads, acrylic barrettes, satin cord, polyester fringe, poly-silk tassels, plastic-coated paper and sequins; 60 by 48 inches. (Collection of the artist; courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, and Kate Werble Gallery, New York)

Exhausted and disgusted by the constant stream of videos showing police killing unarmed black people, filmmaker and visual artist Cauleen Smith created a series of hand-stitched banners, which hang throughout the museum, with phrases like, "No wonder I go under," "We were not meant to survive" or "My pathology is your profit." On the back of each banner are a series of symbols that repeat, like guns, pencil and microphones.

In the audio guide to her exhibit, she explained, "The pencil, the microphone and the camera aperture are all to me these instruments of expression. They're apertures for a voice, for initiative, for articulation, and so the pencil becomes this very flexible tool that can even be a weapon, can be kindling for a fire. It can do a lot of different things, not all of them affirmative, or affirming."