



Pretend, witness

New Work by Matt Shelton

November 1 - 30, 2022

Opening reception: Tuesday, November 1, 5:00 - 6:30 p.m.

Artists' talk: Tuesday, November 1, 7:30 p.m. Voney Art Center, Room 109, Principia College campus

James K. Schmidt Gallery
Voney Art Center, Principia College
Elsah, Illinois 62028



(above) *Interpreter*, 2022, 62" x 19" x 16.5". Inherited folding music stand, brass, cardboard from a frozen Trader Joe's chana masala entree, LaserJet print of a frame from Kid Rock's "Bawitaba" video, packing tape, masking tape, sharpie, paper pulp from ca. 1980 issues of *Civil War Times Illustrated*, aluminum tape.

(front cover) *a long, stupid story* (OK City), 2021, 13.5" x 13.5". Digital texture map of a photogrammetric scan of a stack of 1972-1985 *Civil War Times Illustrated* magazines

Introduction and Acknowledgements

By Paul Ryan

...people who cling to their delusions find it difficult, if not impossible, to learn anything worth learning.

--James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*

In his artist's statement, published on the inside cover of the back of this catalog, Matt Shelton describes his current work as "...animated by a curiosity about whiteness as a subject position organized around and emerging from the disavowal of one's formation from a past that is painful, incriminating, and unresolved." And toward the end of her discerning exhibition essay that immediately follows this introduction and acknowledgements, Marisa Williamson, multi-media artist and art professor at The University of Virginia, says that "[i]n this exhibition, Shelton hangs up his hang-ups, putting his worst impulses into some of his best work. He assembles an awkwardly inviting *mise en scène* with the broken shards of his cultural mythology. The work is about self-healing, contradiction, idleness, and care. It seeks the most merciful route from heaven to the earth—falling gracefully."

This exhibition and its accompanying catalog essay invite the viewer/reader to engage in the same kind of vulnerable and sometimes fierce dialogue that Shelton and Williamson are involved with—one with the significant issues of race, gender, and social positionality at its center. This conversation occurs within each of them as individuals, between themselves as colleagues and friends, and between others (for example, note the artists, critics, and theorists with whom Williamson is in dialogue). Shelton expresses the courage for and commitment to deep self-reflection—a desire to expose and shed his delusions, to hold himself accountable for this examination, and to do so at the risk of making mistakes. Williamson respects both Shelton as a person and his work and studio practice, and, understanding James Baldwin's warning about delusions and the circular paths they can take (as certainly Shelton does, too), pushes him harder in their incisive and vulnerable interchange.

As always, this exhibition would not be possible without the generosity of others. I want to thank Matt Shelton for his generous and graceful spirit in sharing his work with The Schmidt Gallery and the Principia College community. Much appreciation goes to artist, writer, and Assistant Professor of Art at The University of Virginia, Marisa Williamson, whose exhibition essay about Shelton's work makes insightful connections within and beyond the art world. The exhibition catalog and invitation were designed by Bruce Rea, who, as always, brought his discerning eye to the work. Thanks, too, to Michael McMullin for his expertise in printing technology and processes. And many thanks to Deb Wold, James K. Schmidt Gallery registrar, for her precision and support in every task; to Graham Littell, 2022-2023 post-graduate teaching intern for the Department of Art and Art History, for his assistance in installing the exhibition; to Studio Art major Olivia Skinner for her help with the gallery this semester; and, to Jon Hosmer, the College's Web Director, for his advice and work on the Gallery website. Finally, much appreciation goes to my colleagues in the Department of Art and Art History for their support of all of the Schmidt Gallery exhibitions as a key part of our educational programming.

Paul Ryan is Professor of Art and Chair of the Department of Art + Art History, and Director of the James K. Schmidt Gallery, Principia College



(above) *raft*, 2016-2022, 11.5" x 16.75" x 23.25". Pulp from October 1981 and January 1981 issues of *Civil War Time Illustrated*, Brita pitcher, velvet, plastic eagle, family photo from the birth of our daughter, ceramic bead, beeswax from used Moravian candles, plastic grocery bag scraps, marker on masking tape.

Psalm 43:2

By Marisa Williamson

Recently, a student in my *Conversation as Pedagogy* class reminded me that 'challenge' could be characterized as two objects leaning against one another and, in so doing, finding a sort of stability, structure, or integrity.

Matt Shelton has been a challenge to me. He and I have used conversation over the years to support each other in difficult tasks, including those associated with parenting and artmaking through illness, confusion, doubt, and catastrophe. Shelton's work has also been a great challenge to me. It is, like the work of many of my favorite artists, time-based. It takes time to become familiar with it and it unfolds temporally. The work is intended to have lasting relevance to an audience-in-the-making.

Matt Shelton uses drawing, paper, expanded print and media to propose reading strategies for inherited ideologies. What is the legibility of any given ideology once it has been pulverized by everyday life and lost its integrity? I found his 2012 piece *The Revenant* to be particularly emblematic. The artist cut up a book of Civil War photos using a screw gun. The images, or 'lace,' produced by the gesture, were photographed against a black background. Using obliterated text, abstracted figures, smoking gun, and droll titles, Shelton asks fundamental questions about what it feels like to be white and male in America—that is, hanging on by a thread—both falling and frozen.

A precocious first-year student showed me an image of a painting by the French artist, Alexandre Cabanel. Painted in 1847, it is called *The Fallen Angel*. My student explained that Cabanel was expelled from academia for being too compassionate. 'He humanized the devil. People didn't like that. They didn't like the way his painting showed compassion for the bad guy.'

Shelton laments, or laughs at, or shudders at the fact that he left the spine of the Civil War photo book intact. You can see a video documentation of the work on the website of *Southern Cultures*, a literary magazine. Shelton works with a good sense of dark humor. It saves. It holds the work together despite its structural holes.

The Civil War is a rupture. It is a traumatic wound that might be best understood through the neurobiological idea of epigenetics. Epigenetics is the condition of trauma one inherits from ancestors by way of mutations in the expression of certain genes. While I find myself haunted by the traumas of my abducted, tortured, and enslaved ancestors, I wonder what ghosts lurk in the psychic man-cave/basement/garages of the descendants of my ancestors' oppressors?

In a sequence Shelton created for a special edition of *Monday Art Journal* I edited in 2020, he cut up clips from *Gone With the Wind*. He played some concrete poetry games with the script to produce a new caption for the image sequences. Watching the gifs and reading Shelton's *Gone with the Wind* edits I think about Eadweard Muybridge and his naked science-studio models. In Shelton's hands, white subjects are stripped of their dignity. They dance around in the nakedness of what the artist now knows. Scarlet and her coterie have sinned and should be ashamed. There is no redress for their whiteness.

Shelton understands that whiteness carries no special moral, spiritual, physical, or mental superiority. White men, just like everyone else, have been suffering from the impact of white supremacy on their lives and relationships.

We haven't talked explicitly about feminism, but Shelton's work benefits from the pioneering work of feminist Freudian theorists such as Laura Mulvey¹, Linda Williams, and Mary Kelly. Linda Williams mounts a tremendous take-down of Eadweard Muybridge². She looks at Muybridge from all sides, just as his studies of animal locomotion looked at the human body and animals from all sides. Williams' Muybridge is a man caught in the phallic state, preoccupied with sexual difference and rage. She and her colleagues argue that Freud's theories and Muybridge's images were so effective in framing sexist ideologies during capitalism's boom, that we can now use them to locate moments of subliminal sexism in our late-capitalist culture today.

Mary Kelly created a Freudian-responsive installation between 1973-79. In *Post-Partum Document* she recorded, with a psychoanalyst's discipline, the actions, secretions, habits, and idiosyncrasies of her infant and then toddler son. Some of Shelton's work looks like Kelly's. It appropriates her feminist Freudian gestures. He and I have discussed self-parenting while looking at our works; wondering in what ways we step into artmaking to assist the child inside, dry the child's tears, and wipe the shit from the child's butt.

Shelton's work appears scatological, but deliberate. Shelton enjoys putting found words and images together in works that sometimes look like signs or notes or vaguely familiar messages—like he is just learning to read. At the moment the artist is blending magazines that belonged to his grandfather in a blender. Does he want to kill his father and his father's father to have sex with his mother, or his



nothin' scarier than stupid ghosts, from the series *The Revenant*, 2012, 40" x 32" x 2". Archival inkjet print on Moab mounted on board, 2012



(fabel) (detail), 2021, 6'13", animated GIFs transferred to digital video

grandmother? Or sister-in-law? With Freud, it's hard to draw a clear line of intent between artist and the artwork. It's all unconscious, sexist, and unfair.

In one of our correspondences, Shelton wrote:

When I first read Roland Barthes' assertion that a photograph is a 'message without a code,' that the 'code' of mimetic representation was that it presumed to be objective, to have 'no code,' I thought about the role whiteness plays in our culture. Whiteness is coded to be invisible, to be normative, especially to people who identify as white. (The greatest lie the Devil ever told was to convince people he didn't exist, right?) So, like Barthes' formulation about the photograph, where the light recorded in a photograph is given the authority of objective reality, whiteness gets its valency from creating 'non-whiteness' and positing itself as 'normal' and standard in relation to 'Otherness,' as being Definitely Not Whatever That Is at any given time. And this is how it (whiteness) has historically adapted to absorb a diversifying population.

As a Black female artist concerned with the ways black and white are co-constituted historically (and still today), I'm challenged by and absorbed by Shelton's creative struggle with whiteness. Leading black feminist theorists examine the role of the unconscious or subconscious in the manufacture

of narrative around sexual perversions and archetypical dynamics within a gender binary complicated by race. Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Evelyn Hammonds, and Christina Sharp ask hard questions about life in the wake of the racialized sexual violence of slavery.

The conversation around ‘cancel culture’ emerges and re-emerged as hot stuff and hard to handle. At the same time, we talk about the problem of the binary. The cancellation binary is especially fascinating. Given the racialized sexual violence of slavery, can any of us decolonize ourselves? Cancel parts of ourselves? Do a white male artist and a black female artist cancel each other out? How do they challenge each other? Or rather, as Adrienne Maree Brown proposes: how do we ‘actually pull ourselves into more interdependence, relationality, accountability?’³

For some of us this pulling, jerking, self-stimulating gesture is empowering. For someone with Shelton’s profile, however, not knowing whether the *petit mort*, the moment of climactic darkness, is tomblike or womblike, must be terrifying. Shelton’s work documents through mostly subtractive gestures what it feels like to move through this darkness and out into the afterlife of white supremacy.

In this exhibition, Shelton hangs up his hang-ups, putting his worst impulses into some of his best work. He assembles an awkwardly inviting *mise en scène* with the broken shards of his cultural mythology. The work is about self-healing, contradiction, idleness, and care. It seeks the most merciful route from heaven to the earth—falling gracefully. Matt Shelton once asked me: Do you have an ideal audience? Can you describe it? Do you see your audience as another latent force in the given landscape that your practice must kind of conjure into materiality? Yes. I can. We do.

Shelton’s work frames and reflects a growing distance from one’s own condition or fate or life or meaning or greatness. Years ago—perhaps living in post-Katrina New Orleans or in the wake of white supremacist violence in Charlottesville—he exchanged greatness for transformation. His chosen narrative is one of surrender: ‘Goodnight nobody, goodnight mush.’⁴ The easy readers among his works remind me that the existential condition brought about by the decomposition of the self—watching your heartbeat leave your body as you sacrifice the self for the greater good, not the Civil War, not the Lost Cause Mythology, but something with futurity, not knowing whether it measures up, but continuing nevertheless to go at it—is the poetry of everyday life.

Why do you cast me off? Matt Shelton’s work asks of its maker. *How do you take it all in?* It asks an audience-in-the-making. Despite its heavy context, the work is agile and unpretentious. It invites you to lean in and look closer. It invites you to challenge yourself. This grace and fluency with words, images, and affect make Matt Shelton an artist to watch.

Marisa Williamson is a project-based artist who works in video, image-making, installation and performance around themes of history, race, feminism, and technology. She is an Assistant Professor of Visual Art at The University of Virginia with a research focus on Blackness. Her artist’s website address is: www.marisawilliamson.com



a long, stupid story (Morningside Homes), 2021, 13.5" x 13.5". Digital texture map of a photogrammetric scan of a stack of 1972-1985 *Civil War Times Illustrated* magazines

¹ Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, GRIN Publishing, 2008.

² Linda Williams, *Film Body: An Implantation of Perversions*.

³ *The Final Straw Radio*, Adrienne Marie Brown on Cancellation, Abolition and Healing, <https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/post/2021/02/14/adrienne-maree-brown-on-cancellation-abolition-and-healing/>

⁴ Margaret Wise Brown, *Goodnight Moon*, Harper Collins Publishing, 2007.



Reenactor, 2022, 49" x 22" x 16.5". Inherited folding music stand, pulp and single page from ca. 1981 issues of *Civil War Times Illustrated*, acrylic glass, fabric from used underwear, gouache, water putty, aluminum tape.

deserter (JEB), 2022, 12" x 13.75" x 2.25". Graphite and paper pulp from ca. 1972-1985 issues of *Civil War Times Illustrated* on archival paper; lid from a box of cling wrap



Artist's Statement

I have an image of my father in mind. I'm in the edge of the woods behind our house, facing south, towards the creek. I am looking slightly up, midday light speckling in through the canopy of trees, at a robust trunk that I recognize but can't name. One of its roots, thicker than me, leads to the left, creating an earthen trench that rises up like a small wave. At the center of my gaze, Dad's sweaty, dirt-smudged head and shoulders lift up, exhausted from trying to dislodge an object buried in the clay under the tree. Gloves on, shovel spiked in the ground to his back, he is digging up a 19th century household dump, looking for intact hand-blown medicine bottles to sell on eBay.

Memory, be it deep or recent, collective or personal, is a constructive, creative process. I am curious about how memory and the body bind the personal to the collective. What kind of sense of oneself as an historical creation emerges under the condition of compulsory silence or withdrawal regarding the past? My work is animated by a curiosity about whiteness as a subject position organized around and emerging from the disavowal of one's formation from a past that is painful, incriminating, and unresolved. While the work is rarely overtly figural, I consider it a figuration—a corporealization, an embodiment—of this fraught compulsion to escape history, and its attendant mythologies of grief and repair. Through the improvisational, heuristic, and playful deconstruction and assembly of found and inherited materials, my studio practice serves as a space of poetic language formation in which often overlapping anxieties, desires, veneration, contempt, despair and ambivalence find material homes, and thus become identifiable.

My approach alternates between protracted engagements with a single material and gestural, bricolage diversions exploring relative harmony or instability between materials and processes. The quick works form in the negative spaces within and between their more cerebral counterparts. They are seeking footholds like weeds in rocky soil, while the more refined, intensely focused projects are grounding, stubborn, and difficult to dislodge.

Neither method is more or less effective. It doesn't matter that one is fast and one is slow. One settles, one releases. They are siblings, interwoven, necessitating each other into existence. When a work articulates a needling, self-devouring emotion for the first time, I feel as though a curse has been lifted. Successful works are questions that have (at last) been allowed to form.

Matt Shelton
March 2022



as consciousness, 2019-20, 13.375" x 18.375" x 13.25". Inherited cardboard periodical folders, pulp from several issues of ca. 1972-1985 issues of *Civil War Times Illustrated*, duct tape, packing tape, inherited bronze paperweight, beeswax from used Moravian candles, zip tie

Artist Bio

Artist, writer, and teacher Matt Shelton (he/him) received a BFA from Guilford College in 2004 and an MFA in Painting and Printmaking from VCU in 2012. He has exhibited nationally and internationally in solo presentations and in recurrent collaboration with Trinidadian artist Nikolai Noel. His writing has appeared in *Burnaway*, *MONDAY Art Journal*, *Southern Cultures*, *Art Papers*, *Ext.1708*, *LOOKsee*, and the *Richmond Arts Review*. He is the recipient of a Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship and was a member of the inaugural cohort of the Richmond Critical Art Writers Workshop. Over the past decade, he has taught across 2D, conceptual, digital, and time-based mediums at Virginia Commonwealth University and at the University of Virginia. He lives with his family in Earlysville, Virginia. Shelton's website addresses: <https://matthewpshelton.com>
<https://o--o.us>



Studio view, summer 2022.

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This exhibition was initiated and curated by the James K. Schmidt Gallery.

James K. Schmidt Gallery / Voney Art Center / Principia College / Elsah, Illinois
<http://content.principia.edu/sites/jameskschmidtgallery/>

Gallery hours: M-F, 9 am - 5 pm; Saturday, 12 pm - 4 pm