STEPHANIE SYJUCO
MATRIX 190
IMAGE TRAFFICKING

OCTOBER 7, 2022 – JANUARY 8, 2023
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART
What does it mean for a museum to carry the weight of narrative history, and how does it become both steward and creative writer of art-historical legacy? How can this artistic legacy come to be known and examined as a sign of its times—a product not of neutral fact or history, but of a subjective and embellished product of Westward expansionism, Manifest Destiny, and a constructed vision of America itself?

By rephotographing the outdated and obsolete celluloid reproductions of the Wadsworth’s own collection of Hudson River School paintings, this body of work focuses on the institutional markings, notations, copyright notices, and image cropping to examine the museum’s hand in commodifying and circulating a story of America. Many of these images have been reproduced hundreds of times over for textbooks, articles, essays, and book covers. Over time these physical celluloid representations have also shifted in color, rendering the color calibration charts photographed on the margins of the paintings as inaccurate standards—an interesting metaphor for the potential for recalibration.

–Stephanie Syjuco
IMAGE TRAFFICKING

*Image Trafficking* is about photography. Using the materials and methods of photographic reproduction, artist Stephanie Syjuco researches museum collections and their archives to explore America’s colonial history and the construction of its national identity. At the Wadsworth—established in 1842 and America’s oldest continually operating public art museum—Syjuco studied the extensive object files and photographic archives of Daniel Wadsworth’s founding collection of Hudson River School paintings, as well as the bequest of Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt, heir and widow of gun manufacturer and Hartford native, Samuel Colt. These nineteenth-century core works of art symbolize the potential greatness of a young nation through exploration and expansion westward. But, over time, these grand portraits, romanticized landscapes, and dramatic history paintings have been recognized as playing a role in perpetuating racial and patriarchal narratives. Contrary to the idealized depictions, colonial settlement was realized through violence, war, and laws against native communities. President Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act (1830) required Florida’s Seminole Indians to move west of the Mississippi in the interest of colonial development. The subsequent Second Seminole Indian War (1835–42) provided Samuel Colt with the opportunity to sell guns to serve colonial ambitions.
Syjuco repositions such stories using various photography-based modes of dissemination and reproduction—color transparencies, black-and-white photocopies, scholarly publications, photographic murals, and new digital photography—that focus, reveal, confuse, and conceal imagery to produce new readings of well-known artworks. The artist’s documentary photographs in the conservation studio disclose the unseen maintenance, care, and repair of art objects that takes place routinely within museums. A tiny mold used to replace a baby’s missing finger on a marble sculpture is paired with a monumental photomural depicting a larger-than-life-size image of Hiram Powers’s marble bust *America* (c. 1860), a traditional female personification of the growing country. Perched on a tabletop for cleaning, the bust appears to face an expanse of Hudson River School landscapes across the gallery, beautiful representations of contested lands.

In another behind-the-scenes investigation, Syjuco explored the museum’s photography studio. She uncovered the tools and props used for the documentation and display of art objects—color charts, risers, mounts, foam blocks, and gloves—highlighting the supporting elements on their own as a traditional tabletop still life. Syjuco photographed the objects on a chroma-key green backdrop, more familiar as the green-screen technique used to project, combine, or superimpose images digitally in post-production. The artist uses the distinctive color to signal ideas about truth and falsehood in images, as well as to project ideas onto images.

Syjuco further explores these ideas through major paintings and their accompanying photographic reproduction through time. Black-and-white negatives of John Vanderlyn’s racially charged *The Murder of Jane McCrea* (1804), photographed and enlarged to the painting’s actual scale, offer ghostly alternative readings with reversed values of the figures’ skin tones. (Historically, the painting was noted to contrast dark savagery with fair innocence.) The photograph created by the same painting’s 4x5 color transparency bears a museum label that covers the top half of the painting, obscuring the crucial violent act of scalping. Over the painting’s long history at the Wadsworth, *The Murder of Jane McCrea* is among the most frequently...
requested images for reproduction. The image has been framed in myriad narrative contexts. Syjuco presents just two, rendered in monumental, low-quality photocopies: as the “Myth of the Bloodthirsty Savage” and (oddly) as an illustration for Mark Twain: Huckleberry Finn. Whether intended by Vanderlyn to be an accurate historical depiction or colonial propaganda, this presentation visualizes the painting’s more layered and problematic existence across time. By investigating the art collection through the lens of museum departments tasked with its administration and care, Syjuco considers how museum stewardship stands as a metaphor for the United States itself, a country in a constant state of invention.

Patricia Hickson
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art

THE TRAFFIC IN PHOTOGRAPHS

“The discourse that surrounds photography speaks paradoxically of discipline and freedom, of rigorous truths and unleashed pleasures [...] In effect, we are invited to dance between photographic truths and photographic pleasures with very little awareness of the floorboards and muscles that make this seemingly effortless movement possible.”


When the daguerreotype launched the modern era of photography in 1839, art and science were combined in a way that would have been unimaginable to previous generations. Harnessing nature and human ingenuity, the early developers of photography—including Louis Daguerre in France and William Henry Fox Talbot in England—produced technologies that seemed full of creative, artistic potential on one hand, and on the other, capable of documenting the world with pure, scientific objectivity. In his influential 1981 essay, “The Traffic in Photographs,” American artist and theorist Allan Sekula argued that this paradox has haunted the medium throughout its history. In Sekula’s view, the medium’s positive (or what he called “honorific”) functions—such as providing greater access to images of the world, or empowering the masses to craft their own images—have always gone hand in hand with negative (“repressive”) ones, enabling surveillance, scientific racism, and other forms of social control. “[E]very proper portrait of a ‘man of genius’ made by a ‘man of genius’ has its counterpart in a mug shot,” he provocatively argued; “every romantic landscape finds its deadly echo in the aerial view of a targeted terrain.”

Photography was invented during a period of upheavals in American history. Three years earlier, in 1836, Samuel Colt’s revolving gun was patented here in Hartford; it would come to play a major role in the rapid expansion of the United States westward through a series of treaties, industrial projects, violent displacements, genocides, and
The term “Manifest Destiny,” describing the belief that it was American destiny to colonize the continent, was coined in 1845 and would soon be used to justify the Mexican-American War (1846–48), through which the U.S. seized land from Texas to California, among other conflicts. Thanks to pioneering photographic artists in the United States like Carleton Watkins, images of this “new” frontier reached the East Coast, inspiring more Americans to explore, resettle, and develop land, as well as second-generation Hudson River School artists like Albert Bierstadt to travel and paint romantic visions of the landscape. In the decades that eventually culminated in the American Civil War (1861–65), the debate was also intensifying around chattel slavery and in which of these new states and territories it would be legal. The abolitionist
movement gained momentum thanks in part to the publication of the anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) by Hartford native Harriet Beecher Stowe, as well as figures like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, whose iconic and widely circulated photographic portraits made them abolitionist celebrities of their day. Photography also contributed to emerging pseudoscientific ideas about criminal types and racial difference.

The Wadsworth Atheneum was founded amidst these developments. Stephanie Syjuco’s exhibition, which she has aptly titled *Image Trafficking*, brings new life to the issues of this pivotal period, asking timely questions about the connection between
photography, the museum, and America’s national identity. Syjuco draws our attention to how the Wadsworth’s early collections—including John Vanderlyn’s *The Murder of Jane McCrea* (1804), and Hudson River School landscapes—have been photographed by the museum, and how and where those photographs have circulated since. She invites us to think about the different roles these images might play. Certainly, they function as documentation, part of the museum’s larger mission to care for and preserve its art collection, and to educate the public. But what other narratives have been written into them, intentionally or not, over the past two centuries? What points of view made use of these images as illustration after they left the museum? Were some of these uses, in Sekula’s terms, more repressive than honorific? Open-ended rather than didactic, Syjuco’s work invites viewers to draw their own conclusions.

Jared Quinton
Jeffrey G. Marsted and Marcia Reid Marsted
Curatorial Fellow for Contemporary Art

**JANE MCCREA TODAY: EXHUMING HER RELICS**

Stephanie Syjuco’s artistic process inspired me to consider how the museum’s curatorial files inform and record the ongoing examination and contextualization of works of art for our visitors. Through her lens, several of the Wadsworth’s signature nineteenth-century American paintings and a sculpture aptly titled *America* come under scrutiny, and for good reason. *Image Trafficking* presents works made by artistic titans of the era such as John Vanderlyn, Thomas Cole, Hiram Powers, and Albert Bierstadt as problematic records of the nation’s colonial past. Just as Syjuco’s photography engages the visitor through the physicality of this imagery—enlargements, copies, framed prints—the curatorial research files similarly contain written ideas and information about these artworks and their shifting meanings through time.

John Vanderlyn’s *The Murder of Jane McCrea* (1804) figures prominently in *Image Trafficking*. Surprised by the large number of requests to reproduce this painting (as recorded and fulfilled by the imaging department), Syjuco asks what is it about this painting that fuels its steady consumption and intrigue, its *trafficking*? The story of McCrea’s death by the hands of Mohawk peoples in the then Province of New York, on July 27, 1777, was widely reported as fact, even making its way into international newspapers. Accounts of the event were never wholly substantiated, however, and the tale has since been “obscured by legend,” crossing into the realm of folklore. It was supposedly McCrea’s wedding day, and she went off to meet—in secret—her fiancé, a British officer. In 1803, Vanderlyn was hired to illustrate a particular scene in *The Columbiad*, Joel Barlow’s epic poem about America. Vanderlyn turned to this dramatic event, creating a sensational image that fueled rising anti-British sentiment in the era of the Revolutionary War and the previous French and Indian War. Vanderlyn’s
graphic style helped convey her death in romanticized terms: virtuous maiden versus the savage; white skin versus dark; good versus evil. In 2022, this fervent anti-British, anti-Indigenous, pro-white American male propaganda piece now appears as a cliché image marred by a graphic expression of racism, sexism, and chauvinism.

Not surprisingly, the curatorial file for Vanderlyn’s painting is extensive. Research gathered over decades is housed within conventional manila folders—many with frayed and torn edges from years of repeated consultation. The materials reflect a wide cross-section of inquiry, mirroring the painting’s layered meaning and significance. Letters dating to the 1980s from now-seminal American art historians, show them as burgeoning graduate students or emerging professionals, and in effect document the trajectory of the fields of American art and American studies. Tucked alongside scholarly inquiries are musings from outside the art world, such as the letter from Mrs. Mary McCrea Deeter, a relative of Jane, detailing her fate and requesting to buy a print of the painting in 1984.

McCrea’s death continues to engage historical and critical research which almost inevitably connects to Vanderlyn’s visualization of the story. In 2006, an article from Adirondack Life reported on a high-tech exhumation of her gravesite in Fort Edward and illustrated the Wadsworth’s painting. Led by a forensic anthropologist, in what the team dubbed “CSI: Fort Edward,” they were looking for answers regarding the circumstances of her death. (The process was ultimately complicated by the absence of some of her bodily remains.) With respect to Syjuco’s artistic process, her approach is similarly forensic. She examines the afterlife of artwork with deeply investigative tools. Image Trafficking has reaffirmed similar efforts at the museum to revisit the American collections and exhume mythical notions about America and American identity, especially in the face of recent devastating social and political upheaval. Taking Jane McCrea as a case study, the legacy of this painting requires a continuous effort to question its meaning.

Erin Monroe
Krieble Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture
Stephanie Syjuco works in photography, sculpture, and installation, moving from handmade and craft-inspired mediums to digital editing and archive excavations. Recently, she has focused on how photography and image-based processes are implicated in the construction of racialized, exclusionary narratives of history and citizenship. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Tiffany Foundation Award, a Joan Mitchell Award, and was a 2019 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow at the National Museum of American History. She has exhibited widely, including at The Museum of Modern Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian Renwick Gallery, and is featured in the acclaimed series Art21: Art in the Twenty-First Century. Born in the Philippines in 1974, Syjuco received her MFA from Stanford University and BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. She is an Associate Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and resides in Oakland.

**WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION**

**Back-End Still Life (Decommissioned Museum Display Risers), 2022**
Archival pigment print
15 x 21 in.

**Backdrop 1 (Rights and Reproduction), 2022**
Inkjet print
Approximately 88 x 68 in.

**Backdrop 2 (Rights and Reproduction), 2022**
Inkjet print
Approximately 88 x 68 in.

**Color Shift (Asher Durand, ‘View toward the Hudson Valley,’ 1851, oil on canvas, acc. no. 1948.119, collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art), 2022**
Archival pigment print
42 3/4 x 58 in.

**Conservation Surrogates (Baby Fingers), 2022**
Archival pigment print
18 x 24 in.

**Conservation Surrogate (Ornamented Fragment), 2022**
Archival pigment print
15 x 20 in.

**Conservation Work (Hiram Powers, ‘America,’ c. 1860, marble, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, acc. no. 1914.6, collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art), 2022**
Vinyl wall mural
Approximately 120 x 190 in.

**Full Transparency (Mural Wall), 2022**
Vinyl wall panel
Approximately 120 x 732 in.

**Inverse Color Shift (Charles Elliott, ‘Mrs. Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt and Son Caldwell,’ 1865, oil on canvas, acc. no. 1905.9, collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art), 2022**
Archival pigment print
32 x 26 in.

**Inverse View (Thomas Cole, ‘Scene from “The Last of the Mohicans,” Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamenund,’ 1827, oil on canvas, acc. no. 1868.3, collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art), 2022**
Archival pigment print
37 x 43 in.

**Lossy Compression (Charles Loring Elliott, ‘Colonel Samuel Colt,’ 1865, oil on canvas, The Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt Collection, acc. no. 1905.8, collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art), 2022**
Black-and-white laserjet print, blue painter’s tape
11 x 8 1/2 in.

**Master, Photographed (Albert Bierstadt, ‘In the Mountains,’ 1887, oil on canvas, acc. no. 1923.253, collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art), 2022**
Archival pigment print
39 x 50 in.
Born in Manila, Philippines, 1974
Lives and works in San Francisco, CA

Negative Transparency 1 (John Vanderlyn, ‘The Murder of Jane McCrea,’ 1804, oil on canvas, purchased by subscription, acc. no. 1855.4, collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art), 2022
Archival pigment print
45 ½ x 39 ½ in.

Negative Transparency 2 (John Vanderlyn, ‘The Murder of Jane McCrea,’ 1804, oil on canvas, purchased by subscription, acc. no. 1855.4, collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art), 2022
Archival pigment print
44 ½ x 32 in.

Obsolete Transparency (John Vanderlyn, ‘The Murder of Jane McCrea,’ 1804, oil on canvas, purchased by subscription, acc. no. 1855.4, collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art), 2022
Archival pigment print
42 ½ x 34 in.

Red Inversion (Asher Durand, ‘View toward the Hudson Valley,’ 1851, oil on canvas, acc. no. 1948.119, collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art), 2022
Archival pigment print
46 ¼ x 57 in.

All works courtesy of the artist, RYAN LEE Gallery, and Catharine Clark Gallery.

The artist wishes to thank the staff of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, in particular Imaging & Publications Manager Allen Phillips, whose collaboration made this project possible.
ARTIST TALK
with Stephanie Syjuco
Thursday, October 6; 5pm exhibition preview; 6pm artist talk – in museum

Syjuco will discuss her process of working with the museum’s registration, photography, and conservation departments to produce her exhibition, bringing to light the complexities of collection stewardship and the role art plays in shaping our view of history. Free with required reservation.

MATRIX PAST AND PRESENT
Stephanie Syjuco and Byron Kim in Conversation
Thursday, November 10; 6pm – virtual program

Stephanie Syjuco and Byron Kim (MATRIX 125) engage in a virtual discussion surrounding their respective MATRIX exhibitions, their creative practices, and how they approach themes of identity, representation, and history in their work. Free virtual program. Visit thewadsworth.org to register.

CURATOR TALK
with Patricia Hickson
Thursday, November 17; 1pm – in museum

Curator Patricia Hickson explores how representations of American history and national identity are reframed in Stephanie Syjuco’s exhibition through the artists’ engagement with the Wadsworth’s collection. Free with museum admission. Meet in front of the Museum Shop.

GALLERY TALK
with Erin Monroe and Jared Quinton
Friday, January 6; 1pm – in museum

Curator Erin Monroe and curatorial fellow Jared Quinton will discuss the shifting narratives surrounding the works of American art addressed by Syjuco’s photo-based installation, including John Vanderlyn’s The Murder of Jane McCrea (1804). Free with museum admission. Meet in front of the Museum Shop.