



EDWARD KIENHOLZ, *FIVE CAR STUD* 1969–1972, REVISITED

FIVE CAR STUD

Five Car Stud (1969–72) graphically depicts the hatred and violence expressed by many Americans toward racial minorities and interracial partnerships. With this work Edward Kienholz tapped into the long history of white-on-black lynching in the United States. Set during a period of white anxiety about black power and riots in numerous inner cities, *Five Car Stud* reminds us today of the violence that undergirds all racial hierarchies. It is undoubtedly Kienholz's most important work addressing civil rights.

In this horrifying, though invented, environment, four automobiles and a pickup truck are arranged on a dirt floor in a dark room with their headlights illuminating a gruesome scene. Four white men are in the process of pinning down and stripping a black man in order to castrate him; presumably they have accosted the interracial couple in the truck, and are exacting their punishment on the black man. The figures were cast from life; the faces are covered with rubber masks. The victim is a composite of parts cast from three individuals shoved up against a central pan representing the torso. This container is filled with water, which is periodically agitated. The letters floating in it can be seen to recombine within the torso, spelling out a racial slur. *Five Car Stud* has been previously seen only in Germany in 1972 and has since remained in storage in Japan for almost forty years. Given the strides towards racial equity, including the near-disappearance of lynching and the growing rates of interracial marriage, why should *Five Car Stud* still matter? And why is it still so disturbing? The reappearance of the piece uncomfortably expands lynching's audience, and forces us to reckon with lynching's legacy in the here and now. As Kienholz reminds us, "If six to one is unfair odds in my tableau, then 170 million to 20 million is sure as hell unfair odds in my country."

EDWARD KIENHOLZ AND LOS ANGELES

Born in Fairfield, Washington, Edward Kienholz grew up on a farm and learned carpentry, metalwork, welding, and mechanics from his father. Though he attended college briefly, he received no formal artistic training. After working many odd jobs and traveling throughout the western United States, he eventually moved to Los Angeles, where he began to construct art objects from wood and urban detritus. In 1956 Kienholz met Walter Hopps (then running the Syndell Studio gallery), and became involved with the emerging L.A. art scene. With Hopps he opened the Ferus Gallery in 1957. Kienholz's work often included figures cast from life—at times vulgar and gruesome—that confronted the viewer with a brutal realism raising questions about the condition of contemporary society. Kienholz believed that art should speak to everyone, not just the art-world elite. By 1961 he had left Ferus Gallery and begun to produce intense individual sculptures and large freestanding tableaux that addressed political and social issues. Such works attracted increasing national and international attention. In 1966 LACMA mounted Kienholz's first museum show, which proved to be enormously controversial. In particular, *Back Seat Dodge '38* (1964), a sculpture of a young couple's sexual encounter in an automobile, outraged the County Board of Supervisors, who condemned the subject matter and threatened to close the museum down.

HISTORY

In 1969 Edward Kienholz began work on *Five Car Stud*. LACMA curator Maurice Tuchman (who had organized a controversial 1966 show of Kienholz's work at the museum) planned to include the piece in an exhibition of Los Angeles artists at the Hayward Gallery in London in fall 1971. It proved too expensive to transport, and the museum decided to delete it from the show. Tuchman then made plans to show it at LACMA in spring 1972; however, the exhibition did not take place. Swiss curator Harald Szeemann, who was organizing the international contemporary art exhibition *documenta 5* in Kassel, Germany, learned of the piece and made a commitment to show it there beginning in June 1972. After Kassel, the work traveled to Berlin and Düsseldorf. It was then acquired by a Japanese collector and remained in storage for forty years. Only recently was *Five Car Stud* taken from storage and sent to the Kienholz studio in Hope, Idaho. There it was painstakingly restored under the supervision of Nancy Reddin Kienholz for the current display.

CONTEXT

It is significant that Kienholz made *Five Car Stud* in the turbulent period from 1969 to 1972. The civil rights movement had achieved a number of modest victories, but racial relations were no less volatile. The emergent Black Power movement expressed the needs and moods of African Americans caught between the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the urban uprisings of more than one hundred inner cities by 1968, including Newark and Watts. The power to vote meant little without truly representative candidates, adequate education, and basic economic security. Although we have witnessed the end of Jim Crow segregation and the extension of democracy to every US citizen, *Five Car Stud* reminds us of the violence inherent in all racial hierarchies.

ARTISTS AND CIVIL RIGHTS

After the Civil War, lynching became a regular practice in certain sections of the country. By the early 1930s, the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan spurred attempts to outlaw it. In 1935 several organizations, which included writers, critics, and artists of differing races and political persuasions, held exhibitions to further the anti-lynching cause. In that same year Aaron Douglas included a hanged man in a mural painted for the government's Public Works of Art Project. Anti-lynching images proliferated: Paul Cadmus, Philip Evergood, Louis Lozowick, and William Gropper were among many nonblack artists to attack such violence. Even the popular regionalists John Steuart Curry, Thomas Hart Benton, and Reginald Marsh contributed to the movement. Ed Kienholz's *Five Car Stud* is in a lineage of artworks depicting black victimization in three-dimensional form. In 1919 Meta Warrick Fuller created a bronze sculpture about the murder of a pregnant black woman. By the mid-1930s, a number of sculptors had conveyed the violence of lynching: Seymour Lipton and Octavio Medellin carved pathetic figures with ropes around their necks; Isamu Noguchi and Aaron Goodelman hung violently distorted figures in the viewer's space. Using a visual vocabulary similar to Kienholz, African American artist Noah Purifoy in 1971 transformed the Brockman Gallery in Los Angeles into an apartment cluttered with greasy furniture, heaps of clothing, and figures rocking underneath bedsheets. This piece was highly praised by the *Los Angeles Times*. More recently, other contemporary African American artists—including Ed Bernal, Pat Ward Williams, Adrian Piper, Carrie Mae Weems, Renee Cox, Alison Saar, and Kerry James Marshall—

have revisited lynching to memorialize the victims of past racial violence and to mobilize against its contemporary manifestations.