

My Noose Around That Pretty's Neck

Philip Crawford (John F. Kennedy Institute, Freie Universität Berlin)

This text and series of artwork are my attempts to reconcile the work and life of artist Matt Baker (1921-1959) with the sometimes deadly contemporary perception of black men as criminals and sexual aggressors. Baker is often considered to be the first African American comic book artist. But even more than his position among the ranks of the heroic Firsts in the black community, Baker is known best for his unique talent as a “good girl” artist. His pin-up styled comic book heroines captivated the imaginations and aroused the libidos of the predominantly white male readership targeted by early comic book publishers.

To be sure, there is an uncomfortable and undeniable irony in Baker's position. During Baker's life there were almost 400 reported cases of blacks put to death by white mobs, a figure which only includes cases that resulted in the victim's death and were publicly recorded by the press. This number pales in comparison to the estimated 3,446 blacks lynched between 1882 and 1968 for crimes ranging from homicide to “insulting women.” Alleged rape of white women became a particularly powerful justification for mob violence, building on existing stereotypes about the biological inferiority and voracious sexual appetites of black men.

How should we understand the heroism of a black man whose work is predicated on providing provocative images of white women during a historical period when he could have been beaten, maimed or lynched for simply speaking to them? Contextualizing Matt Baker's work in the formulaic wish-fulfillment function of comic books and extending that function to other media provides a useful lens for decoding the narratives which led to thousands of lynchings across the country and continue to hyper-sexualize and dehumanize black men. Within this context Baker's female heroines may serve as apt surrogates to visualize similarly objectified black male bodies.

Kurzbiographie

Philip Crawford (b. 1988, Dallas) lives and works in Berlin. After growing up in Atlanta, Philip spent time in San Francisco, Accra, Istanbul, and Prague. As a researcher and self-taught, multi-media artist, Philip works mostly in the mediums of painting, collage, printmaking and sculpture. Philip holds a B.A. in History from Stanford University and is completing his M.A. in American Culture and History at Freie Universität in Berlin.

Many of Philip's current projects appropriate text and images from comic books, dime magazines, movies, newspapers and autobiographies. He uses these documents as cultural artifacts and social-historical sources to understand and question contemporary conceptions of heroism, specifically as they intersect with our performance of race, gender, sexuality and religion. In using various mediums, Philip likes to manipulate distance, transparency, and readability to invite multiple and illusory readings, highlight simple personal revelations or prod skeptically at deep-seated “universal truths.”