

The Ideology of Color

► Fernando Castro

Many of the works of *The Ideology of Color* arose from Texas' history class when one of my Mexican students of Native-American descent asked me when white people first arrived. Any artist who ever painted people knows that white is perhaps the only color **not** to be used for human skin—unless you are painting dead people. Even the ghostly skin of Giovanna Cenami in Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage* (1414), is conspicuously different from the truly white headpiece she is wearing. After this two-second thought I blurted out, "There are no white people."

Noticing the skeptical expression on my student's face I took out a piece of white paper and added, "There is nobody this color." In order to show my young students how white people would look like if they existed, I decided to make photographs of truly white people. I went through my negatives to see which ones I could use for what would become the *White People* series. Back in 1988 I had taken pictures of people and their dogs in a canine competition in Peru. These images were fitting because some of the ideas behind the motivation of many people to call themselves "white" are connected to the project of selectively breeding dogs to obtain Dobermans, French Poodles, etc. I painted the skin in the black-and-white negatives with an opaque medium so that they printed totally white.

The *White People* series is made up of peculiar portraits of dogs and their masters at a canine competition. Each portrait bears the name of the dog's breed rather than their master's name: "English Sheepdog", "Komondor", "Great Dane", etc. In fact, I do not know the name of these dogs' masters. My yet-unfulfilled hope is to show these pictures in Peru so that people might recognize themselves in them—in spite of having had their faces whitened out—and come forth claiming, "That's my dog ergo that is I."

After my students saw these pictures of truly white people they were finally persuaded that people who claim to be white are not really white. Not trusting her eyes, one student asked, "What color are they then?" "They are usually

some shade of pink." "Are we pink too?" asked another student. "Some of us are pink and some of us are some shade of brown: light brown in winter, darker brown after we tan in the summer." "Are there black people?" "No, nobody is the color of my black shoe. There are only pink people and brown people." Realizing that we all had skins of slightly different colors, I went to Home Depot and picked up a stack of pink and brown color swatches of wall paints by designer Ralph Lauren. I brought them back to my classroom so that my students and I could match the color of our skins to the swatches.

The search for the color of our skins led me to produce collages about skin color using these paint swatches. I did a few about the color of my skin and about the color of my girlfriend's skin (She is Polish). *Group Portrait* is a depiction of Tupac Amaru, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Geronimo, Martin Luther King Jr., Benito Juarez, Cesar Chavez, Malcolm X, and Gamal Abdel Nasser. I did collages about larger crowds; like *Democratic Convention* and *Republican Convention*. I realized that a kind of system of representation had ensued from the conjunction of paint swatches and the handwritten text.

The paint swatches began to suggest to me more than just samples of skin color. Doing *Looking for the Color of my Eyes* and *Looking for the Color of her Eyes* liberated me from the self-imposed constraint of not altering the swatches. Real human situations took form: love, hatred, difference, power, etc. Seeing the

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English Sheep Dog, 1999. Black and white selenium toned print



Komondor, 1999. Black and white selenium toned print



Group Portrait, 2000.
Collage of wall paint samples

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9