

You Can't Win: Jack Black's America

Curated by Randy Kennedy

FORTNIGHT INSTITUTE

60 East 4th St. NYC

July 10 - August 18, 2019

Opening Reception: Wednesday, July 10, 6-8pm

I don't remember that I was shocked or pained when she was buried .. A few days later father sold our little cottage home and furnishings and we moved into the only hotel in the little town. Schools were few and far between for poor children then .. It seems to me that I was blown here and there like a dead leaf .. Before my twentieth birthday I was in the dock of a criminal court .. At twenty-five I was an expert house burglar .. At thirty I was a respected member of the 'yegg' brotherhood, a thief of which little is known. He is silent, secretive, wary; forever traveling, always a night 'worker' .. never coming to the surface.

This is an art exhibition lying within the penumbra of a book. The book is the 1926 underground classic *You Can't Win*, whose title was devised by its publishers as a moral: Crime doesn't pay. Don't try it or you'll end up like the author, Jack Black, drifter, grifter, opium addict and house burglar who spent much of his adult life behind bars. But to those able to read between the lines, the title has long meant much more; William Burroughs picked up a copy as a boy in St. Louis, his priggish hometown, and its pages reordered his moral universe. "Well, who can?" he wrote of the title. "Winner take nothing." Like many readers since, Burroughs saw the book as an essential unmasking of the lie of the American dream, told by an oppressed protagonist who, being white and male, served at least in part as a yardstick against which to measure how much worse so many others had it. (Not long after Black's book was published, the share of wealth owned by the top .1 percent of Americans reached nearly 25 percent, its all-time high before the collapse of the Gilded Age; the share is once again approaching that level. The top 1 percent now hold more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined.)



Black had roamed the West as the frontier was closing, as the last Native American tribes were being forced into reservations and as the United States ascended to imperial power. In a land of plenty, he saw inequity, privation, brutality, and isolation. Carl Sandberg observed astutely of *You Can't Win*: "Much of this book is about loneliness." To ply his trade, Black disappeared himself from conventional society: his name was a fiction; his associations were clandestine, even from each other; his location was as fixable as a quantum particle. He wore anonymity as an outcast's crown, much like his more immorally poetic French counterpart Jean Genet, who wrote in *A Thief's Journal*: "Solitude is not given to me; I earn it." Black was also a firsthand witness to the barbarism of the American penal system, where he was subjected to solitary confinement and the straight jacket. Unlike Genet, who found erotic exaltation in confinement and punishment, Black emerged from each successive stint more broken, enraged and bent on self-destruction.

Black's America is not historical. We live in it today, in ways that he foresaw and ways he could not have imagined, or would not have wanted to. What Faulkner said of the South applies equally to every part of the country, especially in the Trump era: "The past is never dead; it's not even past." Black's alienation and evocation of life on the lam trace two interrelated kinds of disappearance: chosen and enforced. Between them lies a third: that of people born into American society already disappeared, socially and economically, because of race, gender and other fundamental aspects of their being.

The spirit of *You Can't Win* continues to radiate through contemporary literature and art. For many who came to it in the 1940 and 1950s, it was the original Beat book—Burroughs based characters in *Junkie*, his first novel, on Black's federation of roving criminals—and it was later adopted by the punk revolution. Black became a patron saint of addiction and its depths, as well as its glories and its exploitation by the power structure. The book remains a classic of ex-con literature and also one of the most personal portraits in the 20th-century canon of the end of the conception of the Old West, of the country as limitless open stage and natural paradise.

The works in the show could be regarded as unindicted – or perhaps indicted – co-conspirators of Black's deep anomie and solidarity with the subjugated. Beverly Buchanan's *Miz Hurston's Neighborhood Series - Church*, from 2008, locates her beloved shack sculptures in a specific milieu, the Florida of novelist Zora Neale Hurston, where Hurston's life ended in obscurity in a welfare home, her body buried in an unmarked grave. The self-taught artist Pearl Blauvelt (1893-1987), made her phantasmal drawings—discovered accidentally, years after her death—in a house in northeastern Pennsylvania where she had lived alone without electricity or plumbing; neighbors called her the village witch. Martin Wong's prison paintings, often depicting his friend, the playwright and activist Miguel Piñero, shimmer with tenderness and carnality for the cellmate. Selections from Luc Sante's folk postcard collection double as the incriminating pictures of a feral young nation that Black himself never had time to take, between jobs. The 1991 painting by Burroughs and poet John Giorno encompasses all-American violence as if it were made yesterday, bringing to mind Burrough's sleep-troubling malediction in *Naked Lunch*:

"America is not a young land; it is old and dirty and evil before the
settlers, before the Indians. The evil is there waiting.
"And always cops."

After the success of *You Can't Win*, Black headed for the first time in his life to New York City, to try his hand at a career as a playwright. The failure of his first play left him adrift and his contact with his closest friends and supporters back west, in San Francisco, diminished. Around 1932, he simply disappeared. Cora Older, the wife of Black's patron, the newspaper editor Fremont Older, wrote that she was of the firm conviction he had done what he always said "any down-and-outer should do, 'fill his pockets with rocks and take a header into the bay.' Sometimes when I'm on the subway crossing the Manhattan Bridge, I look over New York Harbor and think of Black out there late at night in a rowboat, wearing his last good suit, taking himself far enough from shore to guarantee no possibility of return.

-- Randy Kennedy

Pearl Blauvelt
Beverly Buchanan
William S. Burroughs & John Giorno
Balarama Heller
Larry Krone
Susan Lipper
Jack Lueders-Booth
Ray Materson
Christian Patterson
Luc Sante
Martin Wong