

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU MAKE the image in a studio setting?

What Are We Looking at?

We have moved from black and white into color and the studio. Glitzy and ineffective? I don't think so. I have included this image here to counter my own point in the prior chapter for two simple reasons. First, don't agree too readily with anything anyone says and, second, the proverbial rules can always be broken.

Identify the Elements

This image could also be said to consist of a very few elements: skin, paint, and an impenetrable dark background. For the image to be glitzy the lighting would have to be adjusted to fill in the shadows, to be "brighter"—the flag should be a near perfect replica, and the body would need to stand straighter.

Contextual Meaning of the Elements

Instead, we are confronted with a frayed flag, as if time and the elements have ravaged it. The painted flag immediately unleashes an onslaught of associations: the body has been branded; the stars and stripes, Old Glory; Black Lives Matter, the aftermath of disproportionate police shootings; incarceration, poverty and prejudice; life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; the first African American president; slavery, stolen lives and displacement, to name but a few.

How Can the Image Be Interpreted?

As in the previous image, this can be thought of as a portrait of an individual or of a culture. It can be thought of as documentation—a photographic genre that used to be well defined. Genres are increasingly morphing, changing, and becoming hybridized as never before. Other than for submission to a contest or juried show such labels seem increasingly irrelevant but are still worth knowing about because of the anthology that has defined photography for so long.

The American flag overwhelmingly labels the black torso. Black skin and the flag, elements around which many people experience great personal and social sensitivity, are simultaneously presented to the viewer. Some may respond by feeling the skin is being desecrated. Some may think it is the flag. Why? The photograph of the young man might merely symbolize support for a favorite sports team in a hot stadium. But the absence of other fans and more importantly body language contradict this notion. The light is somber, the body seems vulnerable, and although we can't see the hands, we know they are in front of the body and are visible. There seems to be more resignation than tension in the body, as if in capitulation. He, possibly, might be cuffed.

Of course we will have differing responses to what we see and the catch-all argument against anything mentioned above is that it is pure speculation or projection. In the

face of this image, speculate we must, and projection is what most likely connects us at the deepest level, if we do connect. This starts with the maker and ends with the viewer. The what, why, who, how, and when are already obscured, demanding introspection about the troubled history of our country, in particular with its citizens of color.

We have something to go by: whether we learned it in school, at home or later, the US flag should have its stars on the viewer's left. In this image the stars are to the right and for this reason alone something may seem off, whether we consciously realize it or not. During a politically polarized time, left vs. right is an almost unavoidable discourse asserting itself through the flag's reversal. The only way for the viewer to remedy this experience is by putting herself or himself into the body of the black young man and looking out. Now the flag is correctly displayed and the union stars are over the boy's heart, where we put our hand when we pledge allegiance. By showing us the flag as a mirror, LeRoy not only mirrors the flag for us, the image makes us feel what it might be like to have another body, how we may be looked at differently, and how the experience of the flag may feel different and therefore tell a different story (Figure 2.1).

This too is not snatched out of nowhere but contained in the painted flag itself. Rather than stars, the most recognizable shapes in the fifty white marks look like dolphins, whales, and gulls. The most

likely spectators of a departing ship to traverse the ocean from one continent to arrive at another. It is subtle but it is there. And if that is there then tarring and feathering, whipping to the white fat below the skin, mingled in red blood is not far behind. Now the flag is transformed from a symbol identifying a nation into a tapestry of personal and collective history with the kind of pain only the heart can know.

When I see this image that is what is happening for me. The plausible deniability of this interpretation only confirms fear, coded language, and the infinite power the apparently simplest of images can hold. If we stand in this other person's shoes, shoes that were not so recently even available to the other, what would our new perspective be, knowing that we came from somewhere else but often not exactly where on the vast African continent. We might want to rid ourselves of that history, and of the identity lost in the dust of violent abduction that we will never be able to retrace; not to deny it, but to insist on our rightful place at the American table so to speak. We are here now and have been for almost as long as anyone else, except of course, Native Americans.

Native, a word that is key, coded, and stigmatized. In the broadest sense, at worst natives have been colonized and sold. At best they are dismissed as regional, unsophisticated, betrayed by local accents and less than what? Those who have travelled the globe? Those who have shed their localized identity? Those who live everywhere and