Tucker Neel
Occidental College, 2003
*Whiteness 2*, 2003
30” x 24”, oil and encaustic on canvas
I made this painting in 2003 for my senior thesis show at Occidental College. The show was titled after a James Baldwin quote—“As long as you think you're white, there's no hope for you”—and was intended to present paintings, installations, and a video interrogating issues of whiteness.

This painting began when I saw a tube of oil paint labeled “Flesh Tint” at the art store. Flesh Tint seemed to be a rather loaded, presumptuous, and offensive name for a color. The paint in the tube looked like bruised spray-tan beige; it was so putrid that I had to buy it.

At the time I was painting with encaustic, which is pigmented and melted wax, and immediately knew that this Flesh Tint would play an integral part in my paintings. I felt that it let me further push my understanding of wax as a material with a long history of standing in for human flesh dating back to ancient Egyptian death masks and making an appearance in more contemporary realms, such as in Hollywood special effects.

Inspired by theoretical, historical, and personal writings about whiteness—primarily James Baldwin’s texts about lynching—I wanted to make abstracted images referencing burned, scarred, and eviscerated “white” flesh to signify the violence that the struggle for whiteness perpetuates. I wanted to make paintings that visually referred to the chickens coming home to roost, white people experiencing “blowback” from their crusade for racial supremacy.

My intention was to make the most repulsive paintings I could, unwieldy paintings that were so heavy, so undulating that they threatened to fall apart, the paint melting or peeling away from the canvas. I felt that through employing abjection—causing the viewer to project their own sense of corporeal fragility onto the painting, see their own flesh, their own body in relation to this implied violence—I would facilitate some sort of psychological transformation.

Looking back, I have mixed feeling about this work. I think my intentions were in the right place, and I am inspired by the idealism, activism, and historical research that sprang from this period. However, I fear that this work performs an unproductive catharsis for the viewer, allowing for ruminations on whiteness without inspiring, or demanding, real world action. That said, it is still an undeniably powerful image, and I am sure it inspires intense and visceral free-associations.

Since graduating from Occidental, my work has changed course. I rarely paint anymore and prefer to work with project-specific media. I am now much more invested in projects that critically question how images, objects, and events become memorable and shape nationalist and individual identity. I try to use my work to activate a larger discussion about how seemingly innocuous or overlooked objects or experiences contribute to individual and national memorial structures.

My earlier investigations into whiteness, and most importantly my readings of James Baldwin’s works, no doubt helped me to arrive where I am now. If anything, I think I carry my readings of these works with me wherever I go, with the understanding that they influence
how I see the world. I believe that studying these works helps me keep my eyes open and my critical mind active, allows me, on fortuitous occasions, to clearly call attention to the fantastic failures and lapses in memory that the dominant culture chooses to ignore.

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