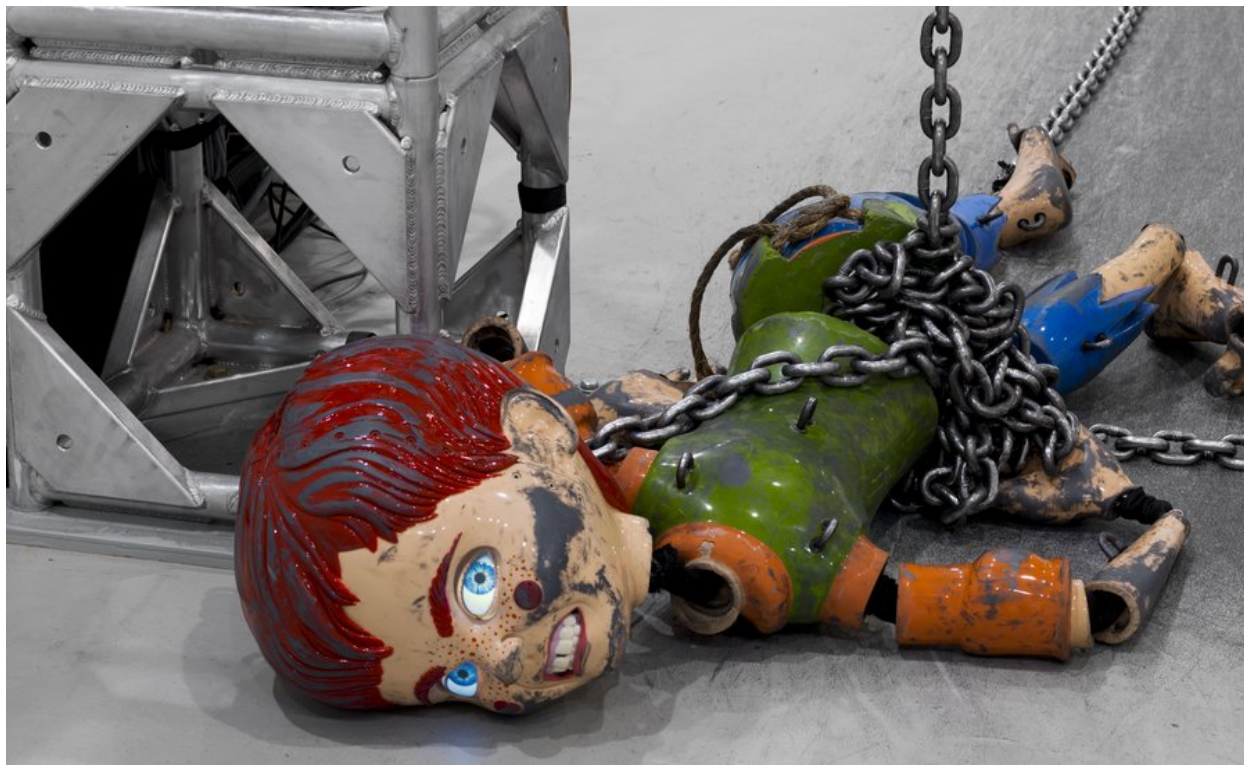


## Ajay Kurian on Jordan Wolfson and the universal body



For ArtSpace, Ajay Kurian writes about Jordan Wolfson's sculpture "Colored Sculpture" (2016). Recently shown at David Zwirner in New York, the sculpture attaches a menacing-looking redhead kid doll by chain to a machine that makes it flop and writhe on the floor. Kurian picks up on the rather charged title, "Colored Sculpture," and considers what it means to give that title to a work featuring a white body, and prompts him to think about the fallacy of the universality of the white male body. Read Kurian in partial below, in full via ArtSpace.

"This collective and unquestioned "we" got me to conjure a thought experiment. Let us imagine for a moment that Colored sculpture was precisely that, a sculpture of a person of color. Let us imagine that, rather than seeing a red-haired white child, we saw a black boy hanging from the rafters. What then? My guess is that the reaction would have been different. Instead of feeling an empathic queasiness, a kind of universal wretchedness, I would wager that many would say that the piece is too "obvious," too simple, too direct, too political, too "real." Here is my first real indictment, and it's not of Jordan Wolfson, but of the audience.

The white body, through its repetition in a history of art that is largely painted white itself, has become an easy and lazy signifier for a universal body, for a metaphorical body, one that becomes symbolic and slippery, that can always be more than its mere

representation. The non-white body, I believe, has greater difficulty in attaining this metaphorical bounty. Kerry James Marshall has fought diligently and profoundly against this tide and won, but examples are unfortunately rare. This, of course, does not mean that black and non-white artists have not achieved this endlessly throughout history, but that, by and large, their work is still ghettoized, simplified, and misunderstood.

Let us banish the idea that the body in action is universal in any way. That brings us to the baser fact that it is a Caucasian body that is being flailed around—a Caucasian sculpture that is called Colored sculpture. Like most racism of the current moment, plausible deniability works like a well-oiled escape hatch. To call the work Colored sculpture might simply be a nod to classical sculpture which was painted in its inception but time has stripped it of its color, allowing us to believe that they were never painted or “colored” in the first place. Similarly, Wolfson’s sculpture began “colored” but as it is battered, that color will wear away. (I have no interest here in interrogating whether the artist himself is racist or not, and do not believe that is relevant when speaking to larger structural problems.)

This is a convenient and obviously insufficient explanation. The title leads me to believe something more sinister is at work (intentional or not), and that the resentment of this figure’s gaze is particular to our moment—a moment where just days ago a misogynistic, racist, resentful, angry, overbearing, incoherent, unqualified, and profoundly dangerous man was voted in as our next president of the United States, defeating a problematic but infinitely more qualified and able female candidate. What this indicates in, among other things, is a moment where the resentment of a swath of voters said to be in the “flyover zone” of America has reached a boil. We, the liberal-minded frogs, did not notice the pot’s temperature rising and are now potentially cooked.”

\*Image: Jordan Wolfson, "Colored Sculpture" 2016