

A lithograph titled *Ship* by Edward Ruscha used to hang here. In black and white tones, the looming, tall ship leans as though catching a wind, ominously bearing towards the viewer cloaked in shadow. For me, a ship like this is painfully associated with European colonists arriving in North America to take indigenous lands, or of slave ships crossing the Atlantic. It's chilling to look at considering the violence, suffering and death brought by ships like Ruscha's to BIPOC people.

Yet, what if I were to tell you that once the initial re-traumatization is felt, I recognize aspects of the lithograph I like or am attracted to? I then immediately question myself for liking art so emblematic of the trauma felt by my ancestors, and I'm left feeling conflicted and confused. Sometimes belittled. I wonder; do other BIPOC museum guests feel this way when visiting the European American gallery?

The European American gallery is the largest in the museum and contains gold framed paintings by mostly white artists hanging on walls painted in warm, neutral tones. But nothing about the last 400 years of American history feels neutral to me.

I often feel drawn to artwork created or representing the 18th and 19th centuries. As an artist I am deeply interested in the technical aspect of oil painting, light, shadow and perspective. Yet, such pieces of art so clearly representational of white colonialism give rise to complex shame. I question my own impulses and ask; am I supposed to like this? Am I allowed to like this? How can I enjoy a piece of art that so clearly erases my own history?

I invite you to think about absence. BIPOC artists and stories are often absent from museum narratives. Now, this lithograph is absent from the gallery as the Fleming Museum works to acknowledge our role in perpetuating whiteness under the guise of impartiality. As a BIPOC person, at times the flattening effect of intellectual inquiry takes away the subjective, lived trauma of my experience and replaces it with white-splained analysis. Viewing Ruscha's lithograph I hold the history of my ancestors; to do otherwise absents my identity as an indigenous person.

As you continue to explore the museum, look for other absences. What other narratives are missing, and what stories are one-sided? Moving forward, think about who has a voice, and who has been silenced? Who is absent?

-CYNTHIA CAGLE, Guest Services Coordinator

# Absence

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*Seeing and Unseeing the Fleming's Collection*