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The Origin Story

Georgie Payne

Jenson Leonard (b. 1990) began making memes under the alias @CoryInTheAbyss in 2015 at the age of twenty-five.¹ Drawn to the immediacy of the meme format, Leonard was captivated by the ability to create and post content to various social media platforms and message boards almost instantaneously to reach audiences both far and wide. A [2017 Seattle Weekly article](#) recounts how he turned to memes after receiving his MFA in Creative Writing (with a focus on poetry) from Pratt Institute, New York. In the article, he states: "I felt frustrated with its [poetry's] ivory-tower elitism. With a poem, you might get published in a journal, and then a few people in academia might read it. When I make a meme, I post it, and almost right away it reaches thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands of people. It's immediate, and honestly, probably the most pragmatic way to reach people now."

The University of Oxford-trained biologist Richard Dawkins, in his seminal 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, coined the term "meme" to define a unit of cultural transmission or imitation.² An expansion of Charles Darwin's concept of genetic evolution, Dawkins's theory holds that humans evolved both through biological genes and through cultural memetics. Wide ranging in its definition, Dawkins's idea of a meme includes anything from ideas to behaviors that are passed from person to person.

By the mid to late 1990s, with the commercialization and introduction of the World Wide Web in homes across the world, a new concept of the meme was introduced into the public consciousness—the internet meme. The proliferation of the internet meme resulted in an evolution of the mainstream definition of the term "meme" itself, ultimately overshadowing Dawkins original concept. Today, "meme"

¹ manuel arturo abreu, "Still I Shitpost: Cory in the Abyss on a Communism of the Visual + Anti-Blackness in the Meme-o-sphere," AQNB, December 12, 2017, <https://www.aqnb.com/2017/12/12/still-i-shitpost-cory-in-the-abyss-on-a-communism-of-the-visual-antiblackness-in-the-meme-o-sphere-with-manuel-arturo-abreu>.

² Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 40th Anniversary ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

refers to content spreading online from user to user, most prominently on social networking sites, direct messaging platforms, and public web forums. Today's memes can take many different formats—a still image, an animated GIF, or even a video—but they are most recognizable as low-res images or screenshots paired with comedic text. Often created in response to specific events—whether stories from the global news cycle or bespoke inside jokes—internet memes are remixed and transposed to demonstrate a wide variety of takes on the original source material, information, or event.

As Leonard recounts in a 2017 interview with writer manuel arturo abreu for AQNB, entitled [“Still I Shitpost: Cory in the Abyss on a Communism of the Visual + Anti-Blackness in the Meme-o-sphere.”](#) he originally began making work in the standard “Twitter format”³ (the modern-day version of a caption contest, featuring an image or screenshot in a white box with black text above or below),⁴ but his format quickly shifted within the first year, evolving into a more ornate and heavily parodic style of the original content (OC) he is known for today. He states:

My work exists within the framework of meme and poor digital image,⁵ but it distinguishes itself from the herd through its thick pop cultural plaster. When one encounters a Cory In The Abyss meme, my hope is that they see something that looks like it was produced by more than one person (in a way it is). I want my work to look and feel like a microdose of big-budget Hollywood detritus. I want people to ask themselves why my memes are so extra, to question their production value, and the absurdism behind that (because the locomotive subsumption of creativity into capitalism is absurd). The aesthetic maximalism of my memes is my way of finessing on white meme bros, but it's also a means of grabbing the audience's attention through a visual language capitalism has already inundated them to pay attention to. Once I have pulled them in, finally, through that subterfuge, giving them my message. After that they're free to keep scrolling.⁶

³ Jenson Leonard, “An Interview with Jenson Leonard on the Intersection of Poetry and Memes,” interview by Eben Benson, *Juxtapoz*, June 30, 2017, <https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/collage/an-interview-with-jenson-leonard-of-coryintheabyss>.

⁴ abreu, “Still I Shitpost.”

⁵ Leonard refers here to artist and theorist [Hito Steyerl](#)'s idea of the “poor image.”

⁶ abreu, “Still I Shitpost.”

The aesthetics of Leonard's work employs the visual language of American capitalism, already familiar to his audiences, to draw the viewer into far more complex theories. His imagery illustrates the paradoxes and complexities of the inner workings of meme culture, specifically in relation to the co-option and commercialization of Black culture and online vernacular which has been brilliantly and thoroughly theorized by scholars and writers including, but not limited to, [manuel arturo abreu](#), [Aria Dean](#), [Legacy Russell](#), [Lauren Michele Jackson](#), and [Doreen St. Félix](#). Furthermore, he illustrates what arturo has termed "[online imagined Black English](#)," which describes "the phenomenon of non-Black English speakers with no fluency using real or imaginary linguistic features of Black English"⁷—exemplifying how disembodied and essentialized versions of Blackness have been commodified and reappropriated by white and other non-Black bodies, both online and off.



Burnt Cork 2.0
2017
1080 x 1080 px



Gwan Online
2020
1080 x 1080 px

⁷ manuel arturo abreu, "Online Imagined Black English," *Arachne*, n.d., https://arachne.cc/issues/01/online-imagined_manuel-arturo-abreu.html.

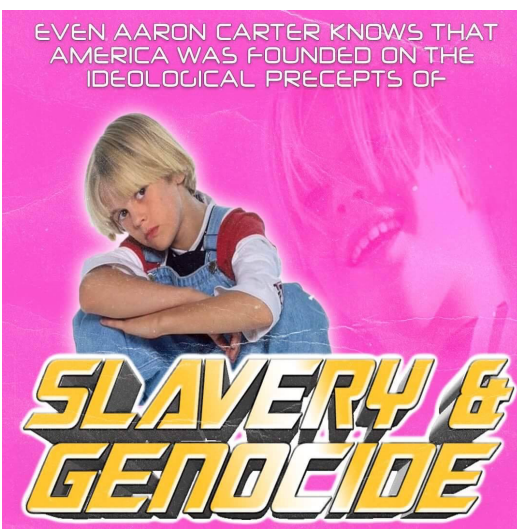
In the 2017 work *Burnt Cork 2.0*, Leonard employs DC Comics superhero Cyborg to orchestrate a direct confrontation with his audience, specifically his white and non-Black fellow meme creators, regarding their commodification of performative online Black affects for a certain kind of “cool factor.” Paired with an image of Cyborg’s half-man, half-robot body positioned at the ready to take on anyone who dares cross him, the work’s text states, “You wouldn’t last a week without digital Blackface.” Leonard again addressed this subject in 2020 with *Gwan Online*, an even more literal translation of the minstrel performance of a new era.

In many ways, Leonard’s work can be traced to several distinct histories within contemporary visual art that have used popular culture and mainstream media platforms to satirize and critique social structures and patterns of behavior, particularly in relation to race, class, and gender. The foremost connection is the culture jamming movement of the 1980s—a form of tactical media protest used to disrupt or subvert mainstream media and corporate advertising to expose their questionable modes of operation. The movement, which itself can be seen as an adaptation of the 1950s technique of *détournement* developed by the avant-garde artist-activist group the Situationist International,⁸ turned the capitalist system and its media culture against itself, subverting the original meanings of its advertising slogans and logos toward radical ends. Artists and collectives of this genre, including the Yes Men, Adbusters Media Foundation, and the Billboard Liberation Front, appropriated iconography from megacorporations ranging from McDonald’s to Marlboro to critically engage audiences to reflect on these industries’ corrupt production practices and the evils of the capitalist system.

Much like the work of the culture jamming movement, Leonard’s practice pits pop cultural icons and the mainstream media advertising universe against itself, subverting the original messaging to convey radical ideology. In the digital “abyss” in which Leonard operates, Y2K pop stars such as Beyoncé, Aaron Carter, and *NSYNC become comrades of political philosophers like Guy Debord, Karl Marx, and Angela Davis. Advertisements for iconic fast-casual American restaurants like Ruby Tuesday and Applebee’s become beacons for the impending race war, harbingers of radical race

⁸ Mark Dery, “Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Sign,” in *Culture Jamming: Activism and the Art of Cultural Resistance*, ed. Marilyn DeLaure and Moritz Fink (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 58.

and class consciousness. Tyler Perry's *Madea* film franchise is reimagined through the lens of the [Combahee River Collective](#),⁹ championing "Madea's Proletariat Uprising." Meanwhile, the poster for slasher film *American Psycho* (2000) is recast in a more honest light as "White Male Power Fantasy." Furthermore, Leonard continues in this lineage with an adaptation of one of his most iconic works, *ancient white proverb*, displayed on a billboard located on U.S. Route 9, in Tivoli, N.Y., from April 19 to May 10, 2021, hacking into public advertising to insert one of the artist's works both online and AFK (away from keyboard).¹⁰



Oh Aaron
2017
1080 x 1080 px



Kool Mutual Aid
2017
792 x 720 px

⁹ "(1977) The Combahee River Collective Statement," Black Past, November 16, 2012, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977>.

¹⁰ By using AFK, I reference Legacy Russell referencing social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson, who prefers this term in lieu of the more well-known shorthand IRL (in real life), which, as Russell and Jurgenson, argue " is a misunderstanding, an antiquated falsehood, one that implies that two selves (i.e. online versus offline) operate in isolation from one another, inferring that online activity lacks authenticity and is divorced from a user's 'real' identity, offline." Legacy Russell, "On #GLITCHFEMINISM and the Glitch Feminism Manifesto," Res., 2016/17, <http://beingres.org/2017/10/17/legacy-russell/>.

At the same time, Leonard's work is also the latest iteration in a history of net art practices, not only because of its location and circulation as a born-digital artwork on social media platforms and in its latest iteration as this artist-made, browser-based exhibition,¹¹ but also because of the ways it has used web space as a place for critique. Specifically, his work follows in the footsteps of artists who have used satire and the medium of the web to critique dominant white society and underscore social contradictions of Western society. Leonard's practice falls into a lineage of net art from the '00s that exercises similar elements of contemporary meme practices, subverting user-driven web platforms to stage interventions into web space. We can look at Leonard's work as related to works such as Mendi + Keith Obadike's [Blackness for Sale](#) (2001), Damali Ayo's [Rent-a-Negro](#) (2003), and Jayson Musson's [Art Thoughtz](#) (2010–12). All these artists exercise comedic prowess and digital know-how to satirize expected forms of racial performativity in relation to the white gaze and the essentialized version of Black identity that has been created and maintained by and for white audiences. While Musson's Hennessy Youngman persona refers to this as the “Jazz principle”—that is, white desire for “the exotic other”¹²—sociologist and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois introduces this concept as “double consciousness,”¹³ the long-held theory that Black Americans have developed a dual sense of self: the ability to see themselves both as they are and as they are perceived by a white viewer.

¹¹ See Ceci Moss, “Internet Explorers,” in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 147—which draws out this history, specifically looking at artists (between 2005 and 2010) who have chosen to forgo the traditional exhibition space, with its excessive limitations, and instead use digital space to exhibit their work, specifically following the rise of major social media platforms (Friendster, Myspace, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr).

¹² Alexander Iadarola, “What Up Internet,” *Rhizome: Net Art Anthology*, January 12, 2018, <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2018/jan/12/what-up-internet/>.

¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” *Atlantic*, August 1897, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446/>.

Furthermore, Leonard's practice, much like Ayo and Musson's works¹⁴, suggest a link to a history of Black comedy that has used humor to speak critically both to and about white audiences — drawing connections to the work of stand-up legends such as [Dick Gregory](#), [Godfrey Cambridge](#), [Richard Pryor](#), [Wanda Sykes](#), and [Dave Chappelle](#). As the late, great Gregory once said, "[You can't laugh social problems out of existence](#),"¹⁵ but you can use it as a tool—which is what these comics have done, using their comedy routines to confront and name the unmarked nature of white normative bodies, values, and social practices. This history exists in what literary and Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe calls "the wake" of the catastrophic violence of the American Atlantic chattel slavery system and its continued unresolved legacies. As media scholar Bambi Haggins outlines, Black American humor, from Civil War-era minstrelsy to stand-up comedy of the civil rights era and beyond, has always been a marker for race relations, both in "how much they have changed and how much they have stayed the same over time."¹⁶ Though the medium might change, the joke stays the same— a marker of the "progress" made.

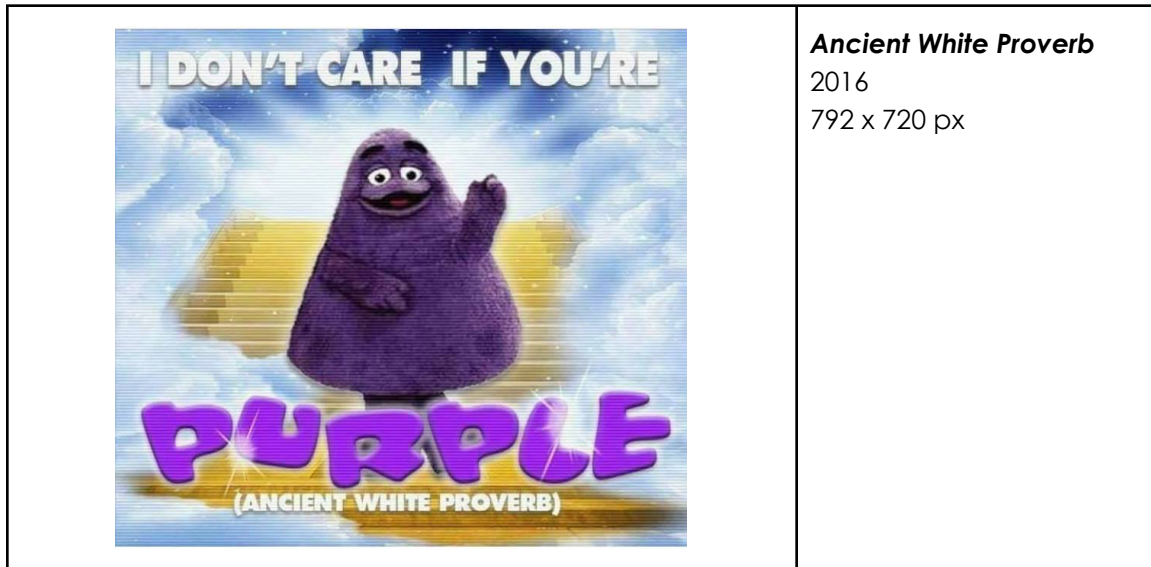
In *Ancient White Proverb* (2016), Leonard repurposes Grimace, a fuzzy purple character featured in McDonald's advertising, to playfully take on the evasive "[I don't see color](#)" trope. The text reads "I don't care if you're purple (Ancient white proverb)." Grimace, in this instance, is not in fact being used as a tool to reflexively critique the McDonald's corporation, but instead to call out the "I don't care if you're purple, green, or polka-dotted" platitude that often circulates in liberal-leaning white circles. Though the colors invoked might change, the result of uttering the phrase stays the same: it's a deflective attempt at the ever elusive racial neutrality that downplays the realities of how race operates in society, and a conflation of the very real histories and

¹⁴ Musson's Hennesy Youngman character is a reference to [Henny Youngman](#), king of the one-liners, and has reference *Def Comedy Jam* as a source of inspiration ; Ayo's work is an adaptation of Godfrey Cambridge's 1965 stand-up bit, [The Rent-A-Negro Plan](#), also similar to a bit Dick Gregory did around the same time.

¹⁵ Western Washington University, "KVOZ Special: Dick Gregory," YouTube, uploaded July 9, 2010, <https://youtu.be/75ajExLNU9k>.

¹⁶ Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 21.

realities of BIPOC¹⁷ lives with that of nonexistent purple, green, and polka-dotted people. Furthermore, the phrase implicates a flawed understanding of racism as simply the work of singular individuals and their actions—the “bad apple” mentality—rather than as a systemic function of society.



In an August 2020 online panel discussion entitled “[Race Jam: A Panel on Memes and Online, Imagined Blackness](#)”¹⁸ (hosted as part of Leonard’s residency at the Buffalo, N.Y.–based arts organization [Squeaky Wheel](#)), the artist addressed the many ways in which “Blackness, Black culture, Black affect, Black vernacular” has been “extracted, surveilled, and commodified down to the nearest Nae Nae.”¹⁹ Speaking with fellow meme creator panelists [Ashley Khirea Wahba](#), [Nicolás Vargas](#), and [Pastiche Lumumba](#), Leonard shared how his follower count rose following the state-sanctioned murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police earlier that summer. Acknowledging the harrowing set of circumstances that gained him over 2,000 followers in a week, Leonard stated:

¹⁷ Black, Indigenous, and people of color. For more information on this term, see Sandra E. Garcia, “Where Did BIPOC Come From?,” *New York Times*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-bipoc.html>

¹⁸ Squeaky Wheel, “Race Jam: A Panel on Memes and Online, Imagined Blackness,” with Jenson Leonard, Ashley Khirea Wahba, Nicolás Vargas, and Pastiche Lumumba, YouTube, uploaded August 20, 2020, <https://youtu.be/dOtgyW5i1LQ>.

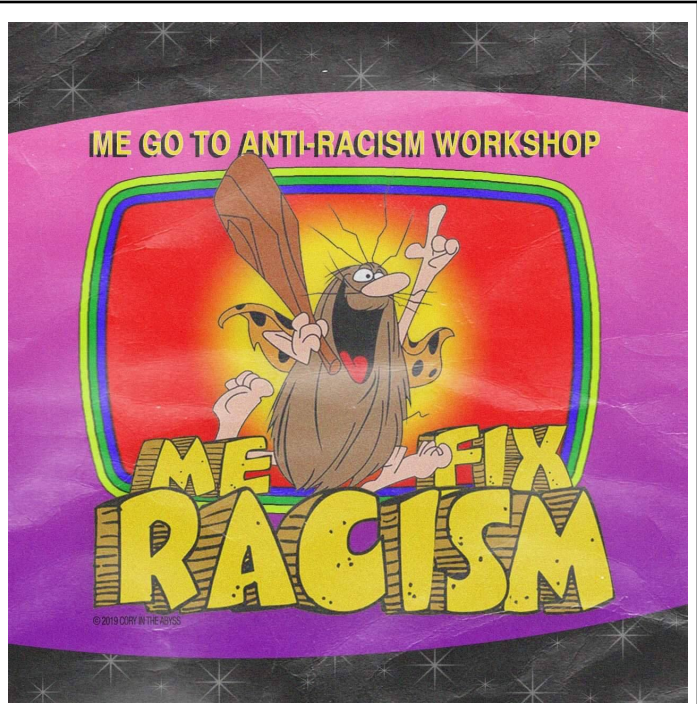
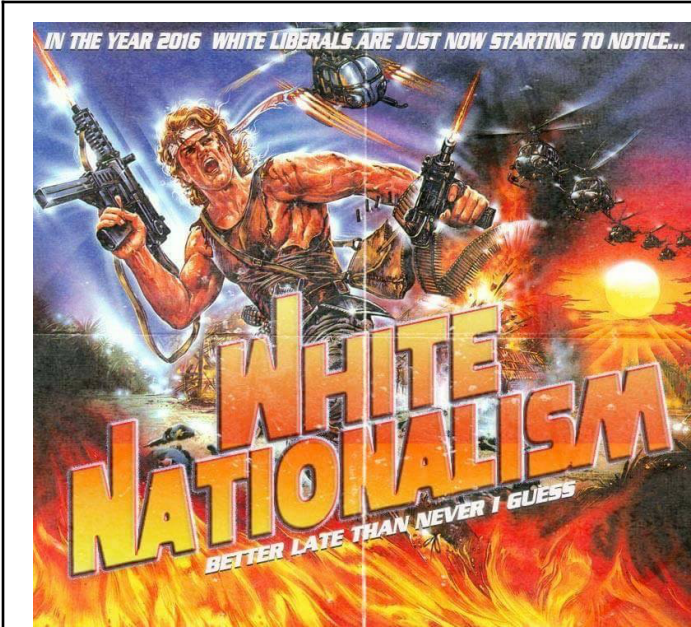
¹⁹ Jenson, in “Race Jam: A Panel on Memes and Online, Imagined Blackness.”

I'm not encouraged by that. I'm deeply disturbed by the fact that the increased visibility of my meme page and my content is intimately tied to Black death. And it took a succession of Black people dying for white meme pages to be like "Hmm, well, maybe this might be a good idea," and that really fucks with me and makes me not want to participate in this thing. Because now it's tainted. My page growth is now associated with that fuckshit.²⁰

Here, Leonard is articulating what critic, artist, and curator Aria Dean reminds us of in her 2016 essay "[Poor Meme, Rich Meme](#)": "These videos proliferate alongside memes, brushing up against each other on the same platforms. Further, black death and black joy are pinned to each other by the white gaze." While his viewership went up following Floyd's death, Leonard's drive to produce content went down, specifically in response to not wanting to appease his new white viewership and pushing back against the infinite scroll of the internet and the tireless production of online content.

In a work entitled *BLTN* (read: Better Late Than Never), a muscular white Rambo-esque man lets out a roar as he runs from a swarm of helicopters quickly approaching behind him. He holds a machine gun in each outstretched arm while a blaze of fire engulfs the bottom of the frame. The text on top reads: "In the year 2016 white liberals are just now starting to notice . . . White Nationalism. Better late than never I guess." The artist describes the work as being "spurred by [his] amusement in the uptick of newfound political awareness amongst white liberals about the nationalist elements that have always permeated American politics, but became more legible when the president was explicitly white supremacist, as opposed to prior, more tacitly white supremacist administrations." Following in the same vein, *Yacubian Cave Trickery* (2019) depicts Captain Caveman from the 1970s Hanna-Barbera cartoon shouting, "Me go to anti-racism workshop, me fix racism!" While made the year before, the work remained relevant in the summer of 2020 as performative allyship spreading online reached an apex. Leonard, through addressing the "marketized logic of the anti-racism industrial complex," notes how these topics remain relevant within his work yet fade in and out of algorithmic fashion within the larger culture. While anti-racist resources, training workshops, and readings lists were the dominant topic of conversation on influential social media platforms this past summer, they slowly began to fade out of our timelines, almost entirely gone by the time the first leaf fell in autumn.

²⁰ Jenson, in "Race Jam: A Panel on Memes and Online, Imagined Blackness."



BLTN
2016
800 x 735 px

Yacubian Cave Trickery
2019
1080 x 1080 px

While it's hopeful that for many white people this moment was a powerful "wake up" call about the existence of systemic oppression and racism, these works point to the fact that "the work" is not over after one workshop, one book, or one Instagram post. In his 2009 book *Black Is the New White*, Paul Mooney, legendary comedian and frequent collaborator of Richard Pryor, writes: "For white people, watching the Rodney King video is like a world premiere movie. 'Oh, I didn't know the nice policemen did that.' For Black people, it's a rerun. It's been in syndication for a long time. We've seen it all before."²¹ This apathetic white attitude perpetuates across time, and was more recently satirized by filmmaker Chester Vincent Toye's comedic short *I'm SO Sorry* (2021) and personified by *Saturday Night Live*'s Beck Bennett in a satirical commercial advertisement for [5-Hour Empathy](#) during an October 2020 episode. Given the opportunity to drink "five full hours of complete intimate understanding of systemic oppression and ever-present racism," the white male main

²¹ Paul Mooney, *Black Is the New White: A Memoir* (New York: Gallery Books, 2010), 341.

character (and later his white wife) find every possible excuse to delay accessing the knowledge they claimed to desperately want to know, exposing performative forms of activism for what they are—all talk and no action.

In recent months, rather than working overtime within the tireless production cycle to create work that appeals to his newfound audience, Leonard has directed his practice to become even more intentional. The *Yacht Metaphor* exhibition is designed to enable viewers to engage longer and deeper, and to consider the works' continued relevance and messaging, particularly within extended histories of artistic expression and critique. Offering an experience that is distinctly separate from algorithmic mediation, the exhibition frees the memes from the grasp of the dominant social media platforms on which they typically circulate, inviting viewers to stop the scroll and explore the significant layers of history, reference, and knowledge hidden within the abyss.