

Redefining Race (2025)



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Shanshan Ma-Zhang

This piece depicts an old museum gallery, a space designed to preserve the past, but the center of this displays a glass artifact case that can no longer contain what it was meant to hold. The glass case contains an antique book with yellowing pages, growing out of the pages is a vivid green plant breaking through the glass to reach the outside world. In the background, there are three muted paintings of skulls, referencing the scientific displays once used to classify and divide human beings.

This work explores the tensions between knowledge from our past. The museum itself is depicted in browns and neutral colors, representing the history of scientific racism that categorized humans in rigid biological groups. The skull paintings in the background reference craniometry, lithographic illustrations, and the pseudo-scientific measurements studied throughout the course. These techniques were once used to justify inequality, and claimed the authority of science. Their muted tones and faint design emphasize how these ideas, although outdated, still cast long shadows in modern society.

At the center, the book symbolizes the body of scientific knowledge itself. The dark red tones reference both the violence embedded in this history and the potential for change. The plant emerging from its pages embodies the idea that our collective understanding can outgrow these outdated frameworks. Where scientific racism tried to place people in these fixed categories, the plant insists on movement, life, and resistance. Breaking the glass is symbolic, it represents breaking the idea that institutions and their narratives are static and unchangeable. It also suggests that we can dismantle systems that were once treated as natural or objective.

The green of the plant is important as it stands out as the only fully vibrant colour in the piece. It represents growth, healing, and the process of challenging inherited ideas about race, biology, and identity. The contrast between the living plant and the stillness of the museum emphasizes how modern understandings of human variation continue to evolve, even as old constructs remain in display cases, textbooks, and cultural memory.

Overall, this piece reflects my engagement with this course's central theme: that race is not a biological truth, instead it was invented and shaped by those in power, and preserved through institutions. I hope this art piece encourages viewers to consider what kinds of knowledge we choose to preserve, and what new forms of understanding we must allow to break through.

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The Candle (2025)



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This piece depicts a lone figure lighting an old, melted candle in darkness. The composition of this piece is intentionally minimal, with only shadows, highlights, and a single flame to create an atmosphere of quietness. The person's expression is steady and unfaltering, illuminated only by the soft glow of the candle. The eyes of the person reflect the flame, and become a focal point, suggesting awareness, vigilance, and the determination to continue moving through difficult histories.

The candle itself carries symbolic weight. Its worn, uneven shape shows that it has been lit many times in the past, as it passes through many hands, and relit in moments when the surrounding darkness overwhelms. This candle represents knowledge, memory, and resilience that persist despite systems built to extinguish them. The light stands against institutional and structural harms, environmental racism, policing injustices, stolen land and wealth, the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, linguistic racism, and the legacy of pseudoscience such as eugenics and race-based intelligence theories. The single flame becomes a metaphor for all the voices and communities who continue to speak, resist, and survive even when institutions fail to protect them.

The nearly empty background, filled only with gradients and shadow, emphasizes how much of this work is done in isolation, as it is quiet, unseen, and carried by individuals whose labour is rarely acknowledged. However the act of lighting the candle is deliberate and hopeful. Rather than portraying despair, this piece highlights endurance. The idea that even in darkness, someone continues the work of holding light, illuminating truth, and refusing to let histories of harm fade into silence.

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