

SHADES OF WHITE

32 Steel Boxes with Silk Panels Boxes

Boxes range from 4" x 20" to 10" x 30"

Mild steel, 18 gage, bent, welded, buffed and coated with matt finish

100% silk from Uzbekistan and China, natural dyes.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Shades of White, an installation created for the Artist Project Space at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, is the result of years of research. The work represents the "Gates Skin Color Chart," a tool used by geneticists and anthropologists in the mid-20th century for racial classification. It is based on the research of Dr. Alexandra Minna Stern, a medical historian at the University of Michigan. Stern researches the history of eugenics and its attendant genetic and racial discrimination as practiced in the United States from 1900-87.

Stern's books, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (2005) and *Telling Genes: The Story of Genetic Counseling in America* (2012), explore racially discriminatory practices—such as the forced sterilization of individuals supported at the public's expense, including children in orphanages, patients in mental health facilities, and prisoners—in the United States (and in the American West especially). I felt it was important to create a work that would make these events visually accessible. Just as Stern's work exposes the deeply problematic charting of physical and mental anomalies and skin color by medical professionals in her books, this installation visually critiques the results of eugenics. I reproduced the "Gates Skin Color Chart," a tool created by geneticists at the University of Michigan that attempted to typologize race by color, with labels ranging from "African" to "Caucasian." These charts had practical and material effects, as they were used to determine the adoptability of children in the care of the state. These inequitable practices haunt us today. In fact, it was not until 2002 that Governor Kitzhaber asked forgiveness from the victims of discriminatory sterilization in Oregon's orphanages and other state institutions.

Although I have done similar genetic research-based projects, I have not previously taken on such racially controversial material. This project exposes the genetic discrimination at play in the United States beginning in 1900 and links it to the practice of eugenics aimed at achieving racial hygiene in Nazi Germany. As Stern points out in *Eugenic Nation*, the top eugenicists in the U. S. collaborated with and followed the same practices as their Nazi counterparts in 1930s Germany. In fact the "Gates Skin Color Chart" is based on a similar chart dating to 1905 created by Felix von Luschan, which the German Society for Racial Hygiene utilized in selecting the victims of the forced sterilizations performed in that country.

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|---|----|----|----|
| 1 | 10 | 19 | 28 |
| 2 | 11 | 20 | 29 |
| 3 | 12 | 21 | 30 |
| 4 | 13 | 22 | 31 |
| 5 | 14 | 23 | 32 |
| 6 | 15 | 24 | 33 |
| 7 | 16 | 25 | 34 |
| 8 | 17 | 26 | 35 |
| 9 | 18 | 27 | 36 |

Felix von Luschan's Chromatic Scale (pictured above) was used to establish [racial classifications](#) of [populations](#) according to skin color. Named for its inventor, [Felix von Luschan](#), the equipment consisted of thirty-six opaque glass tiles that were compared to the subject's skin, ideally in a place that would not be exposed to the sun regularly, such as the underarm. Source: Institut für Kulturgeschichte der Antike der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften Institut für Klassische Archäologie der Universität Wien.

R. Ruggles Gates, created a skin color chart used from the 1940-60 to determine the racial identity of new born at American medical instructions and Adoption agencies a. His chart was nine squares ranging form dark skin tones to white. That using a more sophisticated method of skin color determination, created his own version in the late 1950s to be used by American medical and adoption agencies.[4](#).

Using organic natural dyes on a variety of silks, Shades of White recreates the genetics of skin color as determined by melanin. The work is a very direct critique of the von Luschan and Gates skin color charts as determinist systems of measure. Although we use the words black and white to describe human skin color (and people), no one is actually black or white. The pigmentation that makes up our skin color comes from our genetic heritage and the geographic location of our ancestors, which gives each of us various types and levels of melanin.

The [melanocortin 1 receptor](#) gene (MC1R) is primarily responsible for determining whether pheomelanin and/or eumelanin is produced in the human body. Pheomelanin produces the light skin values, which are reds, pinks, yellows, and blues. Eumelanin, which produces the darker skin values, is a blend of black, brown, and red. Because so many of us represent a mixture of ethnic backgrounds, it is not uncommon for individuals to have a blend of both pheomelanin and eumelanin. This work is meant to point out the astonishing variety of "shades" that comprise each of us and to point to the fact that no one is pure white or pure black—we are all a spectrum.

Working with the architecture of the Artist Project Space at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, I designed twenty-four thin steel boxes of various sizes to encase the different shades of silk. As a whole the piece looks like a matrix of grids. As one looks through the layers of steel boxes reflecting the silk colors and moves deeper into the space, one experiences a blending and buildup of tones or pigmentation. In mixing the chemistry for the dyes and timing the silk dying, I made sure that no two pieces of silk are the same, just as no two people are the same.

Materials and Process: Using steel and silk was of particular importance for this project. These two materials had enormous effects on the global economy and human relations and as a result, our genetic inheritance for centuries. All silk are 100% pure. The dyes used were all natural dyes. Boxes: Mild steel, 18 gage, bent, welded, buffed and coated with matt finish.

Silk Aurora Silks, Portland Oregon

Illusion, 100% reeled natural silk. Source China

Peace silk, 100% hand reeled silk filament. Source, Uzbekistan silk production is all done on micro family farms with Mulberry trees up to 400 years old.

Dupioni Organza, 100% natural raw, reeled silk. Source, China

Cleopatra, 100% silk, reeled and especially tightly twisted for the weft. Source, China

Luninera Ahimsa, 100% Ahimsa TM Peace silk; long staple spun silk, plied warp and weft. Cultivated Bombyx mori, mulberry silk. All the Ahimsa TM silks are certified organically grown. Source, Silk raised in rural India on small family farms. Yarn is spun and fabric is woven in small mills in India. Aurora Silk is partnered with the patent holder in India.

Natural dyes: Aurora Silks, Portland Oregon

Brazilwood, saw dust from Violin bow manufacturing, Brazil.

Colors: various shades of Red, add iron mordant for purples.

Indian Lac, from the cochineal bug, India.

Colors: deep shades of red.

Longwood, saw dust from milled Longwood, Mexico

Colors: Full range of purples, shades vary according to the amount for alum and or iron added. Black, prepared with tannin and iron.

Fusticwood, fallen branches, Caribbean Islands and Dominica Republic.

Colors: yellow, golds, oranges.

1. Fred Hogue, "Social Eugenics," Los Angeles Times (Sunday Magazine), Jan. 19, 1936, quoted in Alexandra Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 83.
2. "Full Text of State's Apology Regarding Eugenics," (Oregon) Statesman Journal, Dec. 3, 2002, quoted in Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 1.
3. Dr. Alexander Stern, *Genetic Counseling in Modern America: Gender, Race, Risk and Biomedicine in the Twentieth Century* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012)