

# Dennis Delgado

Re'al Christian

Dennis Delgado  
*Do the Right Thing*, 2020  
Tagged image format file  
7 5/8 x 7 5/8 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



Dennis Delgado  
*Higher Learning*, 2020  
Tagged image format file  
7 5/8 x 7 5/8 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



Dennis Delgado  
*Training Day, 2020*  
Tagged image format file  
7 5/8 x 7 5/8 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



Dennis Delgado  
*Black Panther*, 2020  
Tagged image format file  
7 5/8 x 7 5/8 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



Dennis Delgado's multidisciplinary practice centers on the connection between technology and vision. His recent body of work concerns the history of surveillance technologies, from the eighteenth-century panopticon to modern-day facial recognition systems. In exploring the legacy of these systems of visibility, Delgado considers how surveillance tactics manifest as extensions of the colonial gaze and explores the consequences of policing technologies for people of color.

His current project *The Dark Database* (2020-) features composite images of facial scans of characters from canonical works in Black cinema: *Black Panther* (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2019), *Training Day* (dir. Antoine Fuqua, 2001), *Higher Learning* (dir. John Singleton, 1995), and

*Do the Right Thing* (dir. Spike Lee, 1989) (see pages 34-37). Delgado studied film theory as an undergraduate student—a background that has directly influenced his artistic practice. His formal studies, however, were preceded by a personal connection to these earlier films, particularly the work of Spike Lee. Lee's *Do the Right Thing* left an indelible impact on Delgado as a teenager growing up in the Bronx—in the artist's words, the film “never left [his] consciousness.”<sup>1</sup> He began his career working in the commercial film industry, but



Film still from *Do the Right Thing* (1989), directed by Spike Lee.

recognized the relatively limited resources in the field. He transitioned to a visual art practice as a means of directly engaging in the creative process. Even when he wasn't making his own films, his early drawings and paintings referenced the sequential structure of cinema.

One of his recent projects, *Mbye* (2013-), takes a historiographic approach in order to shed new light on a disturbing chapter in our nation's not-too-distant past. Combining elements of film, photography, performance, and archival research, *Mbye* focuses on the life of Mbye Otabenga (ca. 1883-1916), known widely as Ota Benga: a man brought to the United States from what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1904. Shortly after his arrival in the US, Benga began making international headlines when he was exhibited at the St. Louis World's Fair, the American Museum of Natural History, and eventually the Bronx Zoo. Tens of thousands of people came to see Benga, who was described

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Dennis Delgado. *Untitled (Ota's Cage)*, 2013. Archival inkjet print, 43 ½ × 65 ¼ inches.

as a “pygmy” in the exhibition’s inscription, standing at four feet eleven inches and weighing just over one hundred pounds.<sup>2</sup>

Delgado first learned of Ota Benga’s story in a lecture on the history of colonial display by interdisciplinary artist and writer Coco Fusco. With *Mbye*, he sought to create a visual narrative of Benga’s time in captivity. The artist’s photographs of the zoo’s façade depict elements of neoclassical, art deco, and gothic design. The architectural citation of European sources conjures up the violent history of colonial conquest and its usurpation of Indigenous cultures throughout the Americas. The large circular cage that housed Benga and several apes could be viewed from almost any angle. Benga’s body—his very existence—became a subject of scientific and eugenic study. Delgado’s footage of the zoo recalls a tableau vivant, with slow-moving images nearly absent of sound. A voice over a loudspeaker ruptures the silence of the film to announce the zoo’s closing hours. The disembodied voice acts as an intercessor for the zoo itself, determining the conditions of visibility.

There are no written accounts by Benga describing his experience at the Bronx Zoo. Instead, history has had to rely on the testimonies of those who were complicit in his imprisonment. Delgado considers how modern-day



structures—including zoos, libraries, and museums—reflect an impulse to not only categorize, but to take control of the unknown. Structures of this nature, according to Delgado, are the technology of panoptical vision, tools that serve to establish distance between the self and the Other.

Delgado's project *On Demand* (2013) explores the physical and psychological distance between the surveillant and the surveilled. The desire to see, the artist believes, has been fed by the "on demand" accessibility of images through modern technologies and the profusion of social media content. Such a desire can take on high stakes when seeing becomes a violent act. After hearing accounts by veterans of the Iraq War, Delgado became interested in the military-industrial complex, and how the use of recognition technology in warfare creates narratives of the self and the Other in the social imaginary. *On Demand* features a paper and foam-core model of a drone control room. At first glance the room looks uncannily realistic, from the large computer monitors with infrared imaging to the pale blue fluorescent lights illuminating the space. Images on the monitors presumably surveil specific sites, but their blurriness reads as abstract. The project's title references photographer Thomas Demand, whose work as Delgado describes, "helps to disrupt photography's indexical relationship to the world, putting into question our own belief in images and in their ability

to tell the 'truth.'"<sup>3</sup> In alluding to drone warfare and the indexical effects of photography, Delgado's work stresses how due to the infidelity of images, systems of mass surveillance do not operate in exactitudes.

What the artist finds particularly striking is that, in spite of their uncertainty, surveillance technologies have become deeply ingrained in our daily lives—so much so that the notion that privacy is a privilege and not a right is often taken for granted. As the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests demonstrated, there are myriad ways in which the Black body is policed in the public sphere. Images from social media labeled with the Black Lives Matter hashtag, for example, were reportedly used by local police to identify and ap-



Dennis Delgado. *On Demand*, 2013. Archival inkjet print, 24 × 36 inches.

prehend individual protesters.<sup>4</sup> Delgado's work often addresses how the Black image is similarly commandeered and used as a weapon against the very community it represents. The errors of recognition technologies are often disregarded—therein lies the danger. Delgado seeks to communicate the power of images, of controlling the limits of one's own visibility. For many, this control is a matter of life and death. Throughout his practice, Delgado breaks down the myth behind the supposed truth or indexicality of the photographic image. Technologies of vision, from museums to movies, are inherently subjective.

Delgado is based in Harlem. He received his M.F.A. in sculpture from the City College of the City University of New York and holds a B.A. in film studies from the University of Rochester. He has held faculty positions at the Cooper Union School of Art, New Jersey City University, the City College of New York, and Suffolk County Community College. Delgado's work has been included in exhibitions at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, El Museo del Barrio, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. His collaborative film and video projects have been presented at numerous venues including the Armory Show and the Dance Theater of Harlem.

- 1 Dennis Delgado, virtual meeting with the author, April 30, 2020.
- 2 See Pamela Newkirk, *Spectacle: The Astonishing Life of Ota Benga* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015).
- 3 Dennis Delgado, “On Demand,” <https://www.delgadostudio.net/on-demand>.
- 4 See Heather Kelly and Rachel Lerman, “America is awash in cameras, a double-edged sword for protesters and police,” Technology, *Washington Post*, June 3, 2020.