The popular credo of identity in American culture is anything but self-assigned. Cultural identity is frequently equated to percentages of DNA and, inevitably, the dilettante stereotypes that are attached to each respective heritage. People of color living in a white-centric society are often stripped of the sense of being a whole. Whether it is through our community or media intake, society is sure to remind us time and time again that we are not white, and yet we’re also only half x or a quarter y—we are told that the numeric proportions of our bloodline determine the way we should identify ethnically. This method of implicit marginalization forces people to live in a seemingly inescapable chasm of belonging neither here nor there.

As the mainstreamed discussion of the fluidity of the self becomes pertinent, people of color are constantly contending with the dichotomy between drawing identity too tightly so that it acts as a boundary—a mode of separation tense enough to weaponize our differences—and rendering it loose enough that finding connections between people and places becomes unattainable. The importance of this struggle lies in the fact that people of color are asserting an active role in determining how we identify rather than following a pre-existing mode set upon us by society.
Dominique Carella, Maya Grace Misra, and Enzo Antonio Moscarella are artists making work that looks at identity as a product of living in American culture. Although from different cultural backgrounds, these three artists share the frustration of having their identities time and time again abridged and misinterpreted by others. Through techniques of appropriation and redirection of popular cultural icons and imagery, these three artists expose the power dynamics of acculturation and feel the edges of their own cultural existence and contributions.

In Misra’s and Moscarella’s work one feels these edges. Both artists take imagery from popular culture and take a critical stance on existing at the margins of history as “The Other.” In her 2016 *Forever* painting series, Misra takes the motif of the already-political postage stamp and negates the fetishized patriotism that often accompanies our every piece of mail. One painting, at the exact scale of a post stamp, shows the words “THANKSGIVING” and “FOREVER” accompanied by a bleeding cornucopia. On another, the words “I can’t breathe,” in cursive script, and “FOREVER USA” appear alongside an image of Eric Garner, a man who died in Staten Island after being put in a chokehold by police. The stamps are a striking body of work to encounter in the same year that Harriet Tubman was chosen to replace Andrew Jackson on the twenty-dollar bill, which sparked a debate that highlights the manner in which Americans continue to suppress minorities and their fight to survive in this country. Misra uses the stamp to remind the viewer that contributing to the historically and actively oppressive and violent aspects of our society is inescapable.
Like Mira, Moscarella interprets a symbol that is often used to promote the primacy of the nation and instrumentalized by nationalists. Made for ¿Qué Pasa, USA?, Moscarella’s DON’T TREAD ON ME (2016) borrows the image of the coiled rattlesnake depicted on the Gadsden flag—a flag designed in 1775 that has recently seen a resurgence in its use as a symbol of American patriotism. Moscarella is interested in the versatility of popular icons or symbols. The Gadsden flag and its motto, “Don’t Tread on Me,” have been appropriated by bands, sports teams, and anti-government organizations. Moscarella recreates the image three times as Mandala-inspired floor drawings. The drawings are made using dried black beans and long-grain white rice. Each of the three snake heads is replaced with a yellow face—one smiling, one neutral, one sad—allowing viewers to experience their own emotional responses to the politically-charged snake. Moscarella’s use of rice and beans as drawing materials along with his clip art aesthetic allows space for a critical analysis of patriotic symbolism through a satirical lens. Its installation on the ground entices the viewer to question the piece’s materiality while testing its precarious positioning.

Using bold capital letters, Dominique Carella’s That Awkward Moment When… (2016) cries out at the viewer, “THAT AKWARD MOMENT WHEN PEOPLE TELL YOU THAT YOU “SOUND WHITE” AS A COMPLIMENT.” The capitalization of the letters reads as a cry of desperation and anger. When a person makes a comment like the one referenced in this work, they offer you unsought approval—as if they’re saving you the trouble of thinking too much about how you come across. Borrowing the internet meme catchphrase “that moment when,” Carella mimics the vernacular and expression of social media. The length of the statement and the visual presence of the text translate the layered and complex experience of a microaggression into an instant, passing frustration. Telling someone that they sound like a different race, ethnicity, or gender from the one they are perceived to be inflicts the type of subtle yet lasting violence that those who are the “Other” in this country too often suffer. Carella recreates the nuances of experiencing a microaggression using both the passivity and presence found in language and communication on the internet, evoking the recurring nature of this type of violence.
That Awkward Moment When People Diminish Your Accomplishments Because They Can’t Imagine a Woman of Color Being Such a Success.


Misra and Moscarella make us question the symbols and emblems that surround us and that we are forced to consume—including our currency, decorated with the faces of men responsible for oppressing and exploiting people of color. Carella confronts us with the pervasive effect of cutting language that is masked in inoffensive tones and reminds us of the daily endurance people of color need to navigate their existence. These interactions—the racist comments and the skewed, whitewashed history of nationalist iconography—underline the problematics of acquiescing to cultural assimilation and internalizing dominant narratives based in whiteness. In his 2016 book Dark Space: Architecture, Representation, Black Identity, Mario Gooden states:

Culture is an understanding of one’s internal and external relationships to place (geography) and time (the order in which events occur), as well as an intimacy with one’s own existence (the materiality of presence and self).

This thinking highlights the danger of categorizing others’ identities and discourages the dependence on numeric logic to determine how one self-identifies. Comments such as “you don’t look x” or “you don’t sound y” are cause for further examination. When someone says that you “sound white,” they are not only implicitly saying that they have prejudices against what someone from a certain culture may sound like, but they are also showcasing their ignorance of the mental and emotional dexterity that comes with existing as a person of color in a Eurocentric society. We can find relief in Gooden’s words as we come to realize that there is not only frustration in the complexities of cultural identity, but also freedom.

There is a generation of young people learning that our existence is dictated by both internal and external sources. Once we understand this, we may find that there is a beautiful frustration that comes with seeking. We have leverage once we understand that we have the capability to be both historians and prophets when constructing our cultural identity—the sum of, and the discourse surrounding, the history of an individual and the aspiring future self. And we have every right to reject social constructs and replace them with our individual selves.