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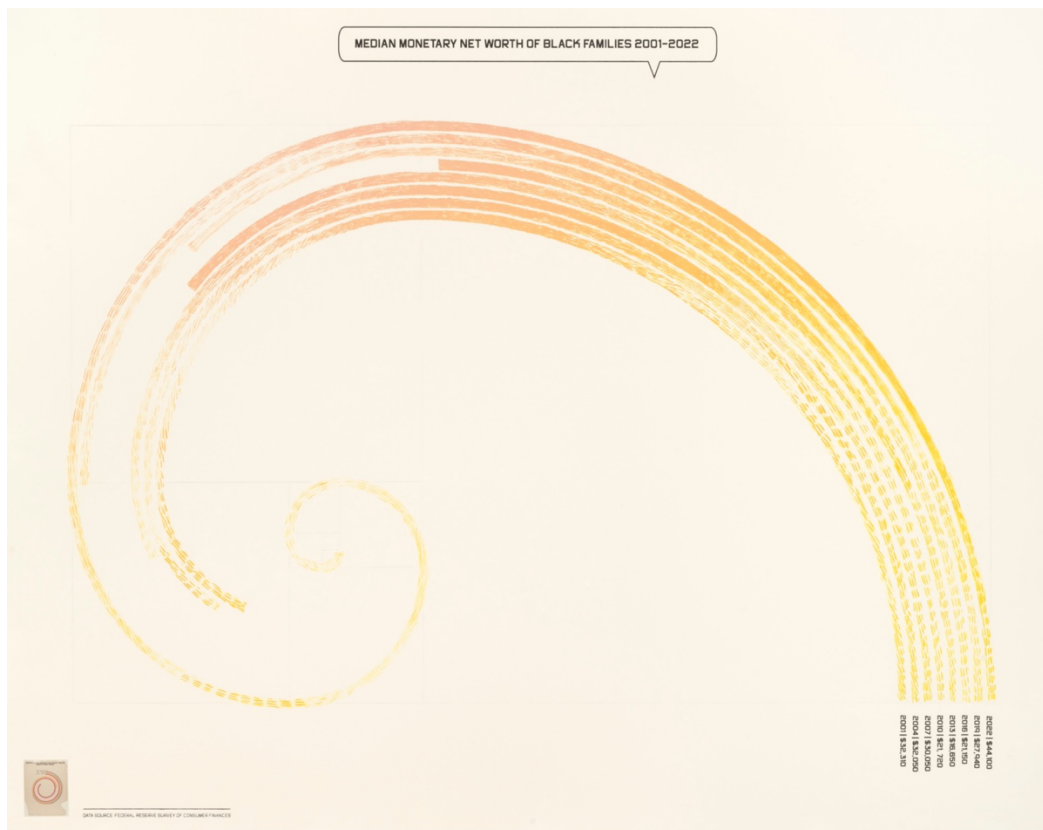
Art Review

The Propaganda Dilemma

Inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois's infographics about the lives of Black people after Emancipation, an exhibition at New York's Print Center complicates our reading of data.



Seph Rodney October 14, 2025



A dilemma is at the center of *Data Consciousness: Reframing Blackness in Contemporary Print* at Print Center New York. But first some background: The exhibition is based on and inspired by a series of infographics devised by W. E. B. Du Bois about the state of daily life for Black people after Emancipation, to be shown at the 1900 Paris Exposition World's Fair. What Du Bois termed his "data portraits" have been reimaged by artist William Villalongo and urbanist Shraddha Ramani more fully as an art project, rather than a primarily sociological one. They created a series of infographic portfolios using various printmaking techniques, but also updated their data by consulting Black scholars, social scientists, and activists working on research projects that pertain to the current lives of Black people in the United States.

Additionally, Villalongo and Ramani have added the sculptural, video, textile, and installation work of the artists Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Tahir Hemphill, Julia Mallory, and Silas Munro. The quandary is that the data that undergirds Du Bois's original project is meant to persuade its audience into agreement. In fact, Villalongo and Ramani quote Du Bois, writing in 1926, in a portfolio image (not in the show): "Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, ... I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy." But I find that the show wants to do *more* than convince. It means to complicate our reading of data.

Take Rasheed's installation, "Plot It/Point Moving" (2025), consisting of a video screen, framed schematics, and scattershot black and white images of things such as hands and shards of white paper with text. Almost no sentence on these scraps is complete. Instead, we see vagrant thoughts, as in "Rubbing: contradictions and ambiguities merging."

Villalongo and Ramani's charts similarly refuse easy understanding. I can't make sense of "Visualizando La Afrodignidad Skin Color & Race in Puerto Rico," which features a gradient field going from light to dark gray that's divided by undulant red lines. As stated in the image caption, this is supposed to show that systemic colorism in Puerto Rico has a disproportionately deleterious effect on those who are darker skinned, but I must take their word for it.

Other charts by the duo are spot on. An image of the continental United States that purports to show the distribution of Black people throughout is brilliantly chromatically keyed to presence, going darker where the population thins and brighter and more colorful with increased numbers. Other prints are *almost* too obvious, as in the infographic "Black Children Enrolled in Charter, Private and Public Schools," in which an enormous red tide beneath much smaller eddies of yellow and blue indicate that Black children subscribe to public education far more than other formal kinds (for instance, private or home schooling).

Obviously, the art on view accomplishes more than propaganda is able to. While the latter ultimately aims only to convince someone to take on a certain perspective, the show asks the viewer to think in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. Thus, the experience is like encountering an iceberg of meaning: seeing an enormous structure while realizing that most of its entirety I may never be able to perceive. This is what art does at its best — urge us to become more aware of the complexity of being human, even when this complexity bewilders us.