

# White Columns

## Matthew Schrader: M. Obultra 3

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

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Installation view: Matthew Schrader: M. Obultra 3, White Columns, New York, 2021.  
Courtesy the artist and White Columns. Photo: Marc Tatti.

Matthew Schrader's solo presentation at White Columns explores the complex symbolism of an iconic piece of American flora. Symmetrical pairs of curved leaves give *ailanthus altissima* an instantly recognizable silhouette, but Schrader's work also speaks to the ways that this plant is actually a thriving immigrant entangled in the matrix of race and power that structures this country. The exhibition consists of many small color photographs, two inconspicuous sculptures with building materials, a slender woodblock print, and a tabletop vitrine displaying dozens of *ailanthus* seed pods on white paper. Most of this work is from a portfolio produced for Éditions Michel Obultra, a Philadelphia-based press run by the artist Aaron Gemmil. Schrader has expanded the portfolio into a taut exhibition installed in the entrance to White Columns. With a disciplined focus on his subject, Schrader's restrained formal vocabulary unlocks complex connotations of deceptively straightforward images and cultivates their enigmatic allure.



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28 small unframed photographs form a horizon line on the wall that faces the gallery entrance. These C-prints all feature hazy silhouettes in which the shapes of the ailanthus appear as bits of high-contrast visual information, like zeros and ones of the plant world. The dark shapes of leaves hover amid fields of luminous grays. Some of these gorgeous neutrals show hints of purple while others glow with a faint aura of sienna. Three of the prints have been overlaid by rectangles of transparent yellow PVC, heightening the alienation of these already stark images from the archetype of lush, verdant nature. Many of these pictures are similar and some appear to be duplicates, but it took me several minutes to investigate this suspicion. My gaze shuttled back and forth between two similar images, checking their corresponding details for confirmation. As I approached a place of certainty with regard to a seemingly identical pair, I began to reflect on the implications of conflating identity and appearance. What constitutes a meaningful difference between two members of the same species? In the case of human beings, this question is at the root of systemic racism—whether it's consciously articulated or implicitly assumed.

Schrader's high-contrast silhouettes accentuate the orderly pairs of oval-shaped leaves that nestle tightly against each other along the stalk of an ailanthus branch. The resulting pattern echoes those in diagrams that slave traders used to pack human beings into the cargo holds of their ships, with Black bodies fanning out in long rows. In 1784, William Hamilton introduced ailanthus specimens to America after mistaking them for another type of tree from China. Hamilton's seedlings likely traveled on a ship from Europe, over a hundred years after similar ships had begun transporting enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. Since ailanthus thrives in recently disturbed soils, these tenacious plants spread across the land alongside the agricultural and industrial activities of European colonists and their descendants.

The transformation of the American landscape during these centuries cannot be separated from the institution of slavery: American flora holds a collective memory of this violence and subsequent fugitivity, as captured by Dawoud Bey's virtuosic series of photographs, "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" (2018). Schrader's work belongs to this tradition, and the play of shadows and harsh artificial light in a six-photograph collage titled *Ailanthus* (2021) gives the impression of a mysterious nocturnal pursuit. Obscurity has at least two meanings in this work: the shadows cast by ignorant habitual assumptions, and the camouflage used to disguise structural power under white supremacy.

Schrader also focuses his attention on an understated emblem of the American empire: *Measures* (2021) is a woodblock print of a 2x4. Two perpendicular cuts interrupt the swirling pattern of the woodgrain, dividing this three-foot-long piece into even intervals resulting in an image that feels slightly procedural, like a fingerprint at the police precinct, evoking the intrinsic bond between structures and bodies. David Hammons's iconic *Body Prints* (1968–79) visualize oppression as physical pressure; similarly, Schrader's print evokes the infrastructure of racism from housing policy to credit scores.

Certain dimensions of this work require patience and sustained attention to detail, and this will necessarily preclude some viewers from engaging with the substance of the exhibition. Schrader's portfolio contains a chapbook by the poet Omar Berrada, a compelling text that enriches the objects on display. And while apprehending the full scope of Schrader's project takes time, there are many discoveries that await curious viewers. *Untitled* (2021) is an elemental proposition that consists of two six-foot lengths of thin steel rod leaning against the wall with black thread dangling in between them. The space between these narrow sticks of metal appears to be the same as the wide face of a 2x4. The thread makes several precarious passages across this gap, sagging downward between the few points where it clings to the rods. This exceedingly fragile gesture feels as poetic as it is political. While the steel will always be harder and stronger, it sags noticeably under its own weight. The little wisp of thread remains free to improvise its way downward, sensitive to even the softest currents of air from passing bodies. -PETER BROCK