

AMERICA NOW & THEN

Art in times of crisis

By Edgar Allen Beem

The American presidential election of 2016 produced a triumph of ignorance, prejudice and fear that has sent paroxysms of anger, anxiety and dread through much of the American population. Nowhere is that anguish felt more strongly than in the art world. Artists are sensitive to the timbre of their times, so post-2016 their antennae are trembling with outrage.

America Now: a dialogue is an exhibition that gives 26 Maine artists and opportunity to register their responses to the social and psychic turbulence of the moment. The artists selected by curator Bruce Brown and painter Leonard Meiselman include some of the most political activist artists in the state as well artists whose work would not ordinarily be seen as topical.

Those of us who have been around for more than half a century understand that 1968 was a much more tumultuous year in the life of America than 2016 was. So it is useful to refer to 1968 when thinking about how artists respond to crisis. In that terrible year, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated, police beat demonstrators at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, cities burned with riots and protests as the civil rights and anti-war movements came together violently as an unjust war raged in Vietnam, taking a toll on the Vietnamese people and the American psyche. 1968 was also the year that Andy Warhol, America's most famous artist, was shot twice by an angry woman who regarded him as a sexist.

Despite all this, however, the best art of the 1960s was not protest art. It was not even overtly political. Pop Art stars such as Warhol, James Rosenquist and Roy Lichtenstein were busy simultaneously celebrating and critiquing consumer society by appropriating its means of production. Warhol's 1968 image of the revolutionary Che Guevara looks as much like a celebrity portrait as it does a political statement. And Jasper Johns' 1968 *Moratorium Flag*, created in response to a massive anti-war protest, turned Old Glory orange and green, suggesting America was sick, but it is doubtful viewers would get that political judgment today.

The point here is simply that protest art and political art easily become dated. Then, too, it is difficult for a luxury object such as a painting by a major artist to

pack much of a political punch in the rarified air of white-walled museums and art galleries. The context of high culture and crass commercialism strips most works of art of political impact.

With *America Now* we can see that the most direct reflections of social concerns are photographs. But a photograph *of* a protest is not itself a protest. It is a document, a visual record.

Several of the photographers in this exhibition take the witness approach to the issues of the day. Joanne Arnold and Nicholas Gervin document drug addiction and homelessness. Brendan Bullock records street protests, as do David Wade and Ed Zelinsky. Jack Montgomery sheds light on the transgender experience. Derek Jackson portrays minority identity. Hans Nielsen asks us to consider the dispossessed.

In more subtle, indirect ways, socially-concerned photographers Judith Allen-Efstathiou and Judith Glickman-Lauder reflect upon immigration and ethnicity in constructed images of exclusion and oppression, much as Gail Skudera uses photo imagery to evoke social and historical fragmentation. Mary Becker Weiss uses photographs in mixed media assemblages to deal with issues of personal identity and gender, while Deanna Witman responds to climate change in a series of images entitled *Melt*. Perhaps the most arcane issue addressed by a photographer in *America Now* is the problem of super-weeds created by over-use of pesticides as seen in Susan Smith's *Botany of Sacrifice*.

Some of the painters and printmakers in the show offer art as a form commentary. Nancy R. Davison takes on the oil and gun industries in symbolic fashion, while Roland Salazar Rose offers a catalogue of discreet images inspired by the fall of the Roman Empire that begs the question of whether America, too, has now fallen. In terms of sheer expressions of despair, there are Leonard Meiselman's hauntingly flagged faces being torn asunder and Ed McCarten's troubled figure.

The conceptual core of *America Now* is formed by three of Maine's veteran artist-activists – Robert Shetterly, Natasha Mayers and Alan Magee. Rob Shetterly has managed to find a positive way to use conventions of art making to address his social, environmental and political concerns by creating a portrait series entitled *Americans Who Tell the Truth*. Rather than just complain about what's wrong, Shetterly celebrates people who are trying to do what's right, such as CIA whistleblower Edward Snowden and Barefoot Artists founder Lily Yeh, who uses art to build community in some of the poorest places on Earth.

Natasha Mayers comes as close to any artist in the show to depicting the gorilla in the room. Mayers has a long-running Men in Suits series of paintings that skewers the men who hold all the money and power in America. If that lonely figure with the red Republican tie in *Chairs, All Alone*, is not an isolated and alienated Donald J. Trump, it is some similar pathetic powerbroker.

Alan Magee employs one of his signature mutant figures to register just how he feels about *America Now*. The title *Trauerarbiel*, which means a work of mourning or a process of grieving, says it all.

George Mason, Claire Seidl, Abby Shahn and Ken Eason each internalize the pains of modern life and then express themselves abstractly. The creation of art in times of trouble is a form of coping and catharsis for many artists. In Mason's *North Wall*, I read a barrier, in Seidl's *Heart* an embrace, in Shahn's *Stumpage* a condemnation and in Eason's *Congressional Chaos* a contempt.

Kim Bernard, an artist known for her kinetic aesthetic, offers crocheted bicycle tire inner tubes that speak at one and the same time to our throw-away society and to the way matter warps and morphs as it is manipulated.

Erin Johnson created the most lyrical work in the show, an audio-visual piece in which two women sing eerily beautiful songs of exile and homecoming as the Kennebec River flows peacefully along.

Finally, we have Mathew Peirce O'Donnell's agonizing, apocryphal *Waiting for Thoreau*, a bitterly satiric tableau that depicts Native Americans celebrating the 1983 Maine land claims settlement as an indictment of the dominant white culture that first destroyed the native and natural people and then tried to pay them off.

That was then, this is now. What comes around goes around. All things old are new again. Pick your favorite cliché. The corruption at the dark heart of the American Dream is deep and ancient. The art of *America Now* tells us that unless we can live in harmony with one another and with nature we are doomed. Since scientists, writers, religious leaders and a few enlightened politicians have also been trying to tell us this to no avail, we probably are.

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