

JANUARY 29,
2015

BY NICOLE
DISSER

With 'Respond,' The Anti-Police-Brutality Movement Reaches The Gallery



Smack Mellon in Dumbo (Photo: Nicole Disser)

Walking in to Smack Mellon last Friday, I was immediately overtaken by a sense of urgency. *Respond* is the current exhibition taking place at the non-profit space in Dumbo. It's brought together over 200 artists—working in a variety of mediums, from painting and sculpture to photography, mixed media, and film—whose contributions are all united by their concerns with police brutality and institutionalized racism in America.

Kathleen Gilrain, Executive Director and Chief Curator at Smack Mellon, described the show as “an immediate response” to the grand jury’s decision in the case brought against the Staten Island police officer who killed Eric Garner. “We’ve provided a platform for people to respond to this and previous situations that are similar,” she said.

Though it’s pretty clear what Gilrain’s stance is, I was curious if she’d participated in any of the protests in recent weeks. “I have not been to the protests, no,” she admitted. “But I feel this is my contribution.”

There's a distinct emphasis on the widespread reaction to recent events. One wall is plastered in flyers taken from all over the country: peace rallies, marches against racial profiling, and anti-police brutality demonstrations in Seattle, Chicago, San Francisco, and New York City. People across the country — college students, Black Panthers, anarchists, and average citizens alike — organized protests.

But *Respond* includes works that call attention to other stories of police violence, incidents that may not have received the same attention as the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, or perhaps were forgotten altogether. For instance a photograph by the artist Olivia Johnston, from her series *Unarmed* is a sitting portrait of a black man whose upper back and neck are covered in scar tissue. He is marked by thin, pale scars as if he was treated by repeated blows in a brutal beating. There's no explanation for his specific case, or even if the scars are connected to an incident with the police, but a few lines found below the image recount the story of Victor White III, a 22-year-old Louisiana man who was shot point-blank in the chest while being arrested for drug possession. He was unarmed.



(Photo: Nicole Disser)

Throughout the exhibition there's a thread connecting current events to the past, emphasizing the historical continuity of police brutality and the long history of racism in America. William Claps created a site-specific installation, covering a support beam in morse code and various quotes from figures throughout New York City history, including Chief Alexander "Clubber" Williams: "There is more law in the end of a policeman's night stick than a Supreme Court decision." Sounds like something that could be

uttered today, right? Well, Williams was chief of the 21st precinct in Manhattan back in the 1870s. Talk about entrenched attitudes.

If it weren't for one majorly unique aspect of *Respond*, a visitor might feel that the exhibition requires very little of its visitors, who it's safe to assume are politically or ideologically aligned with the participating artists. Not much squinting has to be done to figure out the message. Admittedly many of the pieces are blunt, see: Mel Chin's 1993 piece *Night Rap*, a night stick equipped with a microphone on display in a glass box. I found this to be one of the more jaw-dropping works in the exhibition, but it's rather obvious. It plays on the ultimate symbol of police violence: the billy club. But what saves *Respond* from being an "easy" exhibition are two things: first, it's the conceptual nature of it all — specifically, it's the works that call on people to participate. Rather than move through the space and take it all in, *Respond* requests, if not goes all the way and pleads with people to do something, anything.

A very literal approach to this is the designated reading area. A sign asking: "How will you respond?" sits atop a table of resources including a book on activist strategies, ACLU pamphlets that read "What to do if you are stopped by the police?" and a copy of the *Atlantic* issue featuring the standout article "[The Case for Reparations](#)." If most people can barely make it through their Twitter feed in a given day, it's hard to believe anyone would actually sit here and read through an extensive account of racism in America.

But there are forms of active resistance, however small, that I could see people happily engaging in because the tasks are easy, fun, and allow creativity to a certain extent. In the center of the smaller back room at the gallery sits a small white pedestal with stamps and a stamp pad, an installation by [Joseph DeLappe](#). Instruction request visitors to "stamp your cash" with an icon of a man holding his hands up, a symbol of the Michael Brown protests. Silly, yes sort of. But it's something that will actually contribute to some kind of strange permanency, however subtle it may be down the line.

Even the Climate March to some degree suffered from a monolithic ugliness— those Margaret Keane-esque big-eyed creatures with purple stringy hair who resembled humans not in the least, but rather Avatar things. And like, how are you going to create a unified human race under the guise of a cutesy, vaguely furry fetish-like blue nymph? None of this is to say that these movements were unsuccessful or flawed, but simply that their “looks” were less than... great.

But what’s fascinating about this renewed anti-racist, anti-violence movement is the inclusion of a much more diverse aesthetic vision. *Respond* isn’t completely without Guy Fawkes masks (in fact, Mary Henderson’s photograph depicts a crowd of people wearing them). But compared to other recent social movements, the exhibit makes it clear this one has the attention of people and artists with a multitude of views, perspectives, and styles. And many of them do their calling justice.

There is so, so much to see at *Respond*, and plenty of time to see it: it’s open to the public until February 22nd. Smack Mellon is also hosting a variety of events including performances, film screenings, art nights, readings, and panel discussion. “We knew this was going to be a big project,” Gilrain said.

Smack Mellon is located at 92 Plymouth Street in Dumbo. Gallery hours are Wednesday through Sunday, 12-6 pm. Events are scheduled throughout the exhibition period and can be found [here](#).