

GALLERIES

After a Call for Change, Artists Respond

by Jillian Steinhauer on February 13, 2015



Nafis White, "Can I Get a Witness?"

What kind of painting do you make in the face of the killing of an unarmed civilian by a police officer? What type of drawing sums up the pain of more than a century of institutional racism? How do you form your anger into a sculpture?

These are the questions that artists, [writers](#), and others have been asking themselves with increasing urgency lately, as the political climate of the United States seems to seethe towards boiling point after each new episode — each act of racial violence, each non-indictment, each protest. And these are the circumstances that spurred the staff of Smack Mellon, a nonprofit gallery in Dumbo, to [postpone their planned exhibitions](#) in favor of a more timely one: [Respond](#), an open call show about police brutality.



Installation view, 'Respond,' with Jerry Kearns's piece, "Constructive Engagement" (1985) at top left and Dread Scott's "Sign of the Times" (2001) bottom center

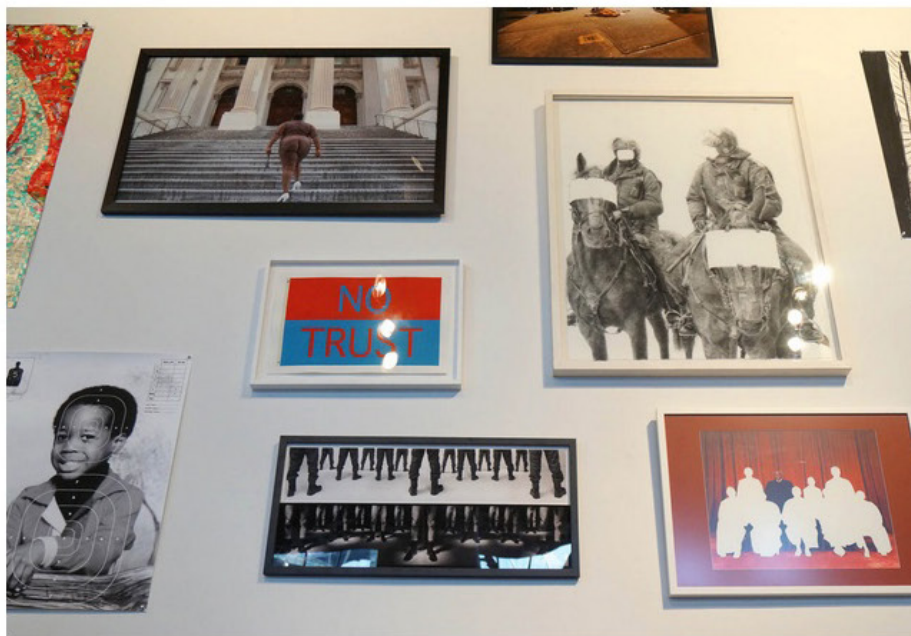
Smack Mellon's [statement](#) for *Respond* discusses using the gallery to "channel our outrage into actions that can facilitate systemic change." That outrage is the dominant emotion in the imposing gallery space, from the salon-style wall of 90-plus artworks that's bookended, in its top corners, with images of a snarling dog ([Jerry Kearns](#)) and a confederate flag (Joshua Peters), to the massive "Black Lives Matter" banner draped across the opposing wall. In the back gallery, a photograph of an eerily glowing young black man who looks like he's about to be lynched with a rope wrapped around his throat and penis ([Elliott Brown](#)) hangs a few feet from a crudely threatening, oversize spiky club, wonderfully titled "Fierce Rattle to Quell Anger" ([Kurt Steger](#)). As I made my way around the gallery, a white woman with work in the show struck up a conversation and told me, in a surprised tone, that someone had purchased Brown's piece. She wondered who would want to look at such a brutal artwork every day. I countered that maybe the buyer was eager to support someone making powerful imagery.



Installation view, 'Respond,' with Elliott Brown's "You & Me" in foreground at right and Kurt Steger's "Fierce Rattle to Quell Anger" (2013) in background (click to enlarge)

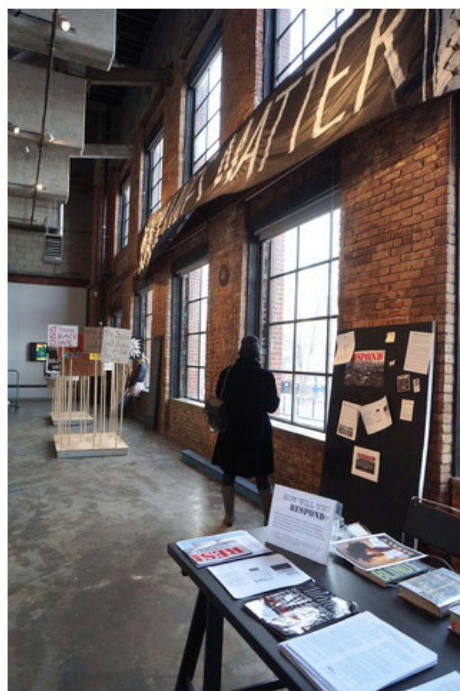
There are many ways to respond, and one of the strengths of the Smack Mellon show is that it creates a space for a work like Brown's, which, although it isn't the most original piece of art, is striking, deeply felt, and well rendered. The quality of the art on view here certainly varies, as would be expected of an exhibition featuring over 200 artists chosen from among the more than 600 who answered an open call. But in grabbing it all and mixing it together — work by [Dread Scott](#) and [Hank Willis](#)

[Thomas](#) hanging unlabeled alongside that of students and lesser-known artists — the curators seem to have captured a feeling and pinned down a mo(ve)ment; they've less invited people to respond than proven we already are.



Installation view, 'Respond,' with Nona Faustine's "Over My Dead Body" at top left

Amid this wave of energy, individual pieces do emerge, among them [Or Zubalsky's](#) "Invisible Library" (2013–14), which invites people to pick up a telephone and be recorded reading sections of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* aloud, "in a show of solidarity with the invisible"; [Nona Faustine's](#) photograph "Over My Dead Body" (2013), which shows the artist marching up the steps of New York City Hall wearing only a pair of white heels, her large, brown naked body imposing itself on the classical architecture; and [Bud McNichol's](#) "Easy Like Sunday Morning" (2013), a sparkly, colorful painting that stings with its darkly comedic punch. On the video screens, of which there are two, looping through more than 13 works each, [William Cordova's](#) "silent parade... or the Soul Rebels Band v. Robert E. Lee" pits a New Orleans brass band against a terrifyingly tall monument to the confederate leader, while Luba Drozd's "Humane Restraint" mashes up cheery instructional videos from mental hospitals and police forces that teach viewers how to properly restrain people. Though quite different stylistically, both pieces hinge brilliantly on the point at which humor quietly swings into seriousness.



Installation view, 'Respond' (click to enlarge)

These are among the stronger pieces on view in the gallery, but *Respond* offers much more than the art on the walls: performances, dances, poetry readings, and discussions have been taking place since the opening, and a table-sized resource library occupies one corner of the room. (On the afternoon I visited, nearly two dozen people had come for a conversation on the merits of violent vs. nonviolent activism.) It's these events, along with the collectivity generated from the display, that make the show feel so vital. Art remains, I believe, an important way to respond, but any response that's going to "facilitate systemic change" must add up to something bigger. In opening up the gallery and filling it with art, literature, protest objects, and people — who bring

with them anger, sorrow, experiences, and ideas — Smack Mellon is helping to create the conditions for change to happen. We need as many spaces like this as we can get.



Installation view, 'Respond'



Above: Alexander Dwinell, "There Is/ No Justice/ Just Us" (2014); below: SOL'SAX, "Dog on Dogon Protestors in Detroit" (2014)



Hank Willis Thomas, "to be titled" (2014)



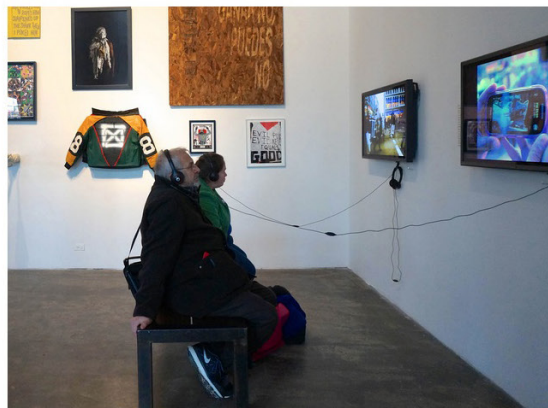
Installation view, 'Respond' at Smack Mellon



Cesali Scarola, "Vol. I Tome of the Silence Men" (2014)



Joseph DeLappe, "Hands Up Don't Shoot!"



Installation view, "Respond"



Bud Nichol, "Easy Like Sunday Morning" (2013)



Jean Seestadt, "M. Brown, How We Die" (2014)



The resource library at 'Respond'



Installation view, 'Respond'