

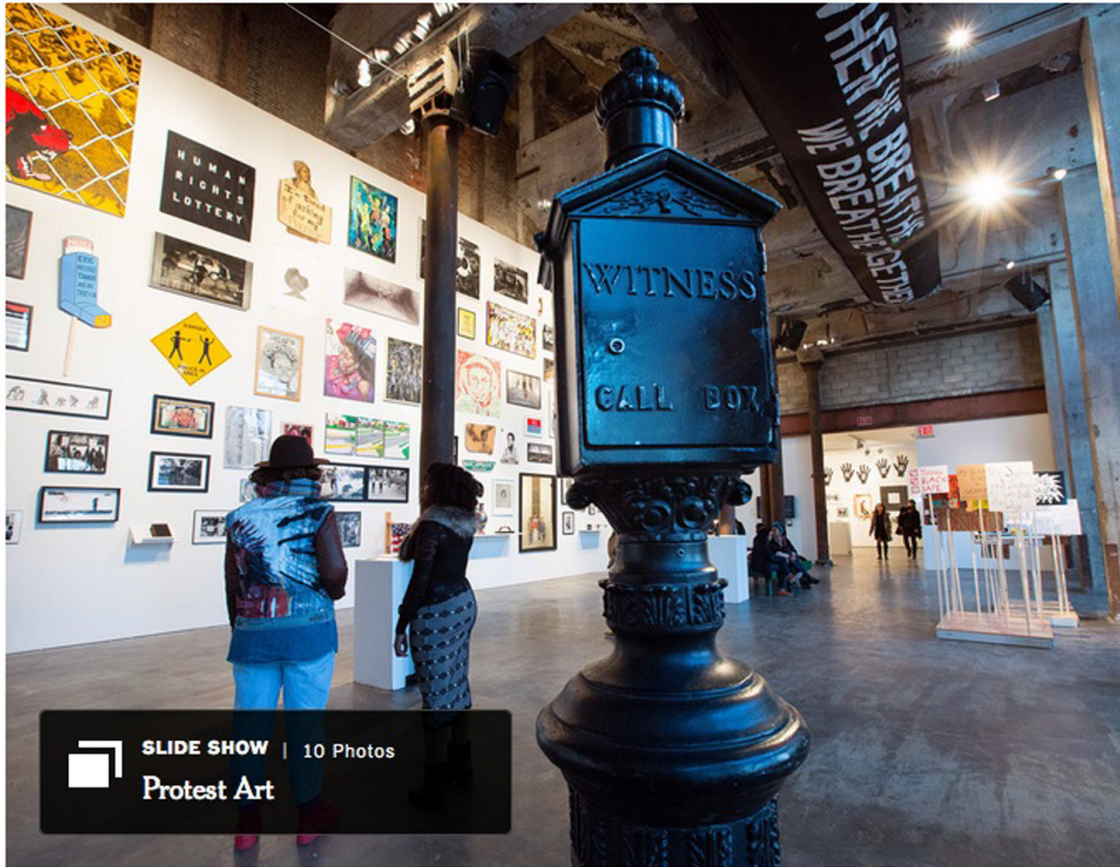
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ART & DESIGN | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Raging at Racism, From Streets to Galleries

Smack Mellon and Grey Art Display Art Sparked by Politics

By HOLLAND COTTER JAN. 22, 2015



SLIDE SHOW | 10 Photos
Protest Art

Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

On Dec. 3, a grand jury declined to indict a white New York City police officer for the chokehold death of an unarmed black Staten Island resident, Eric Garner. Anger at the verdict, particularly on the part of African-Americans, already stung by the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., was intense. Street protests flared across the country in perhaps the largest public display of resistance since the 1960s.

The same day the Garner judgment came down, one of the biggest contemporary art fairs, Art Basel Miami, opened in Florida. As accounts of demonstrations flooded social media, Art Basel posted breathless reports of strong early sales. For the next five days, dealers stuck to their booths; artists, curators and collectors schmoozed at pools and bars. The only protest came from outraged V.I.P.'s left off the guest list for a Miley Cyrus gig.

In some ways, it's kind of nuts to compare a real world of life-or-death crises with cash-machine art fairs. Yet there are things to be learned by placing them side by side. Our culture still encourages us to view art as a conveyor of higher values. The commercial art world has built a lucrative power base on that very myth of specialness, while shaping itself into a mini-version of American elitism: dominantly white; sealed off by privilege.

That, of course, is far from the entire art world story. On Dec. 3, Smack Mellon, a nonprofit alternative space in Brooklyn, heard the grand jury news and swung into action. The gallery's directors, Kathleen Gilrain and Suzanne Kim, rearranged their exhibition schedule, pooled mailing lists compiled by six artists in residence — Esteban del Valle, Molly Dilworth, Oasa DuVerney, Ira Eduardovna, Steffani Jemison and Dread Scott — and sent out an open Internet call for art that directly addressed issues of racism, police violence and social justice. More than 600 proposals or finished pieces soon arrived (more are still coming in), some 200 of which make up a knockout group show with a commanding title: "Respond."

Much of the work is installed salon-style, six pieces deep, in the gallery's two-story-high front space. And it ranges across generations, from a 1985 painting of a salivating police dog in South Africa by Jerry Kearns, and a 1993 Mel Chin sculpture that turns a nightstick into a rapper's microphone, to entries by young artists like Faith Briggs, Elliott Brown and Maya Mackrandilal, who are showing in New York for the first time. The large quantity of painting and drawing gives lie to complaints about the underdog status of these forms, while the predominance of figurative work is a welcome departure from the current craze for abstraction.

Needless to say, much of what's here is topically on point. (One of the few abstract paintings, by Anthea Behm, is done with pepper spray.) Several artists — Albert Areizaga, Mensa Kondo, Ashleigh Sampson, Rudy Shepherd — contribute portraits of Mr. Brown. Mr. Garner's recorded last words, "I can't breathe," and variations on them, circulate like a mantra. They appear as a headline in a newspaper tossed on a chair in an oil painting by Sandra Koponen; as written phrases layered to the point of obliteration in a digital print by Jessica Goehring; and in dialogue boxes in a fine multipart narrative drawing by Rashid Johnson, who sent the piece from a Texas prison where he's an inmate. Mr. Johnson's work, which goes back in time, opens the show to histories. Trayvon Martin's hooded face looms like a giant rose in a 2013 collage of Arizona bottle labels and Skittles wrappers by Amanda Barragry. And in a 2004 film still by Tami Gold the mothers of three victims of police assault — Anthony Baez, Amadou Diallo and Gary Busch — stand side by side with pictures of their children.

Politicized portraiture is also the focus of exhibitions elsewhere in New York. In paintings of male faces by Titus Kaphar at the Studio Museum in Harlem all the subjects are named Jerome but the images are of different people. When searching the Internet a few years back for his father's prison records, the artist came across a mug-shot site with pictures of recently arrested black men, all of whom had his father's name. He painted the faces against a gold ground, like Byzantine icons, then dipped them in tar just far enough to cover the mouth, obscuring the features, but also suggesting the crippling political silence imposed by the consignment of a high percentage of black men to prison.

Among the people who saw “The Jerome Project” at the Studio Museum was a picture editor for Time magazine, which then commissioned the artist to illustrate its 2014 “Person of the Year” cover. The “person” honored in that artwork, which eventually ran inside, was a collective one: the protesters who took to the streets in Ferguson. (One of them, the artist Damien Davis, is in the Smack Mellon show.) Mr. Kaphar rendered the figures as ghostly presences, hands in the air, faces swiped with white paint as if bandaged. He titled the painting, which is in a show at the Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea, “Yet Another Fight for Remembrance,” as if acknowledging in advance the likelihood that awareness of civil rights causes will soon be lost to the news cycle.

The figures in Mr. Kaphar’s Time spread are anonymous. The people in Bradley McCallum’s “Portraits of Justice” series at Kinz & Tillou Fine Art are not. The dozen men seen close-up are, or have been, on trial for crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. They include Kang Kek Iew, former leader of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, who oversaw prisons notorious for the torture there. He is now in prison for life. And there’s Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, leader of lethal armies of child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who was sentenced to a mere 14 years. Trials of other defendants are still underway.

Mr. McCallum, of Brooklyn, has supplemented — you could say softened — these subtly monstrous portrait paintings with photographs in a small group show, “Post Conflict,” which he has organized at the gallery. Most of these pictures — by Pieter Hugo, Alfredo Jaar and Lana Mesic — are of two people standing side by side or embracing. These are survivors of the 1980s civil war in Rwanda, though from different sides of the conflict — one member was the victim of violent assault; the other was the perpetrator. Through a long, intensive process of contrition and forgiveness, they have, impossible though it seems, learned to live with a horrific shared past.

Reconciliation is a tone seldom struck in “Respond,” where a sense of anger and grievance feels fresh, even when projected back into history. A deftly brushed painting by Nicky Enright evokes an example of quietly and persistently furious protest art from the past: the black banner emblazoned with the words “A Man Was Lynched Yesterday” that the N.A.A.C.P. used to fly from the window of its Fifth Avenue headquarters between 1920 and 1938, whenever reports of racially based murders came in.

Mr. Enright’s picture, a reminder of how far we are now from such public gestures of accountability, would fit right in to “The Left Front: Radical Art in the ‘Red Decade,’ 1929-1940” at [Grey Art Gallery](#), New York University, a carefully researched traveling show of political art assembled by the Mary and Leigh Block Museum at Northwestern University, with the scholars John Murphy and Jill Bugajski as curators.

The works were made during the Depression, by artists, many of them European émigrés, dismayed by racism and poverty and confident of left-wing solutions to these wrongs. Maybe because so much of what they did was by-the-book ideology driven — as most of what’s in “Respond” is not — a certain consistency of style and tone prevails: realism and indignation. These features are often cited as political art’s inherent limitation, the reason it’s doomed to look dated, flat-footed and aesthetically second-tier.

As a genre, it does have problems. It easily can be too obviously on-message, seeking agreement followed by action. Even a fair amount of the work in "Respond" is of this sort. It isn't in the business of giving you sigh-over beauty, though there are some surprising delicacies here. (Look, for example, for an ethereal text piece by Colin Chase; Ann Johnson's portrait of a singer, Michele Thibeaux, hand-printed on a feather; and SOL'SAX's shimmery transformation of protesters in Detroit into African dancers.) In the end, it's the show as a whole, its massed voice, that is so impressive, and heartening.

The take-away message from seeing it and the Grey Gallery show together is how little has changed: Economic inequity, class division and racism are as potent and intransigent as ever. A 1932 print by Prentiss Taylor protesting the trial, on false charges, of nine black teenagers in Scottsboro, Ala., and Shani Jamila's 2014 photo of a "No Justice!! No Peace!!" placard in Ferguson tell the same basic story. Maybe the big variable lies in attitude. For the art world of the 1930s, social progress hadn't happened yet; the mainstream art world of 2015 doesn't believe in progress. It only believes in recycling cycles and tweaking them.

"Respond" doesn't come from that world, and it takes a fundamentally different position on the subject of what is and can be. It is asserting, in a very old way, that there's a proactive link between images and ethics, between art and life, studio and street. That link isn't the be all and end all of art, but it's real and may, as Mr. Kaphar hopes, sustain a now-aroused hunger for change. If nothing else, it has produced a soundtrack of shouts, cries, chants and whispers to set against the wall of insulating white noise that enwraps the art world at large.

"Respond" runs through Feb. 22 at Smack Mellon, 92 Plymouth Street at Washington Street, Dumbo, Brooklyn; 718-834-8761, smackmellon.org. "The Left Front: Radical Art in the 'Red Decade,' 1929-1940" runs through April 4 at Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village; 212-998-6780, nyu.edu/greyart/.