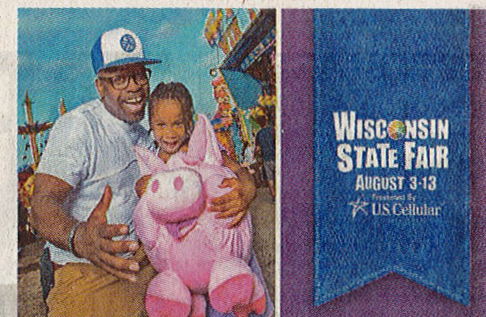


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**4E** Sunday, August 6, 2017 **Milwaukee Journal Sentinel**

## REVIEW

# 'Taking Sides' a timely exhibit of art as a tool for activism

**RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS**  
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL SENTINEL

To name the unnameable, to point out frauds and to take sides. These sentiments were expressed by novelist and essayist Salman Rushdie as a catechism for creative thinkers, that they be compelled to stand up in the face of social and political injustice.

The Madison Museum of Contemporary Art has compiled a collection of works predominantly from its permanent collection that addresses the role of art as activism. The exhibit comes at a time of political upheaval and social and environmental unrest in our world. It is a powerful examination of how art functions as a mirror to inequity and as a voice against oppression.

The exhibit begins with images produced during the 18th-century Enlightenment. These were some of the first artworks produced in Europe to engage with social and political critique. Seminal works depicting the disasters of war and morality tales by William Hogarth, Francisco Goya and Honoré Daumier greet visitors. In 1834, Daumier depicted the free press as an iconic, allegorical figure of a man standing in profile with clenched fists. He is built like a boxer poised for a fight. As our current political climate openly antagonizes the free press, this image emerges from history

with strident conviction, renewed in its power to protest.

German artist Käthe Kollwitz utilized an expressionist style in the early 1900s to create arresting images documenting deprivation, war and the stoic heroism of women. "Outbreak" depicts a peasant revolt. A mob of workers raises sickles, rakes and hoes as weapons. They issue forth like rushing water. In the foreground, a lone woman drives the mob onward, her arms raised like a conductor compelling an orchestra into a feverish crescendo. It is powerful, a fever-pitched drama of defiance.

A stark, black-and-white woodcut shows a man turning to aim his shotgun at an unseen enemy. His long hair streams from a cowboy hat and frames a lined face housing steely, tired eyes. "Split, White Man!" was created by Bruce Carter to bring attention to political injustices by the federal government that culminated in the siege of Wounded Knee, South Dakota by AIM (American Indian Movement) in 1973.

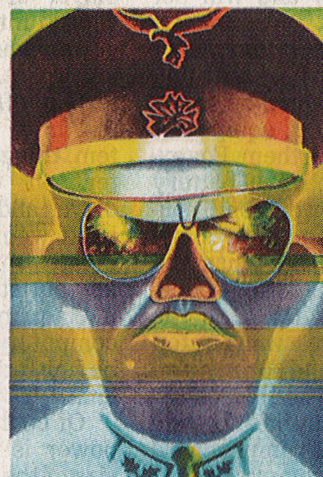
The man's frustration and determination are felt in his steady gaze and in the iron grip of his hand on his weapon. I was

struck by the ferocity of this image. The sentiments of those protesting the progress of the Dakota Access Pipeline today seem to emanate directly from this artwork, created now so many years ago.

This reminded me of an artistic dilemma – the difficulty in communicating a universal significance from a particular event. It is one of the most pernicious traps for artists who make topical art. Work that is created to protest or bring attention to a specific moment in history can quickly become dated and lose its power. Artists must find a way to speak in a timeless

language about moments of timely specificity. It is a balancing act that all of the artists in this show must navigate.

In addition to the artwork on display,



MADISON MUSEUM OF  
CONTEMPORARY ART

Ed Paschke's lithograph "Kontato" (1984) is part of the "Taking Sides" exhibit at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.

quotations from cultural and political leaders are fixed onto the walls in authoritative lettering. The young Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai says, "When the world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful." Rushdie's quote is present along with Albert Einstein, who declared, "If I were to remain silent, I'd be guilty of complicity."

Not all of the work in this exhibit speaks as powerfully. Some have tripped into the pitfalls I mentioned earlier and become a bit quaint. Others have been repurposed for other exhibits at MMOCA often enough that they appear overworked.

This exhibit marks the swan song for MMOCA curator Richard H. Axsom. He is succeeded by Mel Becker Solomon, previously exhibitions manager and registrar of the museum. Axsom seems to have left it all on the field. His exhibit is strident and unapologetic in conviction. The curator makes a compelling case that the art of social critique is perhaps the most important art for our time – and that our time is most in need of it.

"Taking Sides" is on view through Oct. 15 at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, 227 State St., Madison. For information, visit [mmoca.org](http://mmoca.org).

Rafael Francisco Salas is an artist, an associate professor of art at Ripon College and a regular Art City contributor.