

Art in the age of Trump: Wisconsin artists respond to political tension

Mary Louise Schumacher, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel February 1, 2019

Artist David Najib Kasir envisioned a series of paintings related to the war in Syria, a place where he lived for a time, where his mother grew up and where he still has family.

In pencil, he sketched out a portrait of an exhausted mother, a refugee holding her infant. It would be a large-scale canvas, he thought. Mosaic designs that had been a familiar sight in the ancient city of Aleppo, before it had been devastated by the war, would be part of the composition, too.

Then, Donald Trump won the White House and, not long after his Inauguration, signed an executive order closing the nation's borders to many refugees and immigrants from around the world, particularly those from seven predominantly Muslim countries. Syria was on the list.

That effectively pushed the pause button on Kasir's painting. He wasn't sure if art making was the right response to what was happening in the world. The canvas sat untouched in his studio for about a year.

"My family, we joke about it now, that we went through a depression, but honestly I felt a little battered," Kasir says about Trump's election and the travel ban. "I just felt so bad ... I didn't start painting it again until this time last year."

Challenging political times have a way of changing art, sometime radically. This history of art is full of such turning points. It's too soon to characterize Trump-era art making, except to say there's been a resurgence in political art. But it is worth paying attention to the subtle and seismic shifts happening in artist studios in the meantime.

I talked to more than a dozen regional artists about their work, some of whom are making overtly political art while others are seeing less obvious shifts brought on by the fraught state of things, including our Tweetstorming president.

Questions have deepened. Ideas have been clarified.

As for Kasir, he eventually returned to the portrait, creating faceless figures that prevent viewers from connecting with or dismissing the subjects, who were inspired by real people in an Al Jazeera news report. It is part of a series of paintings on display at the Frank Juarez Gallery along with ceramic works by Allison Ruttan, who has created miniatures of devastated buildings in Syria.



Part of the "What is recorded, what is remembered" project, a collaboration between Nirmal Raja and Lois Bielefeld. (Photo: Courtesy the artists)

Issues of belonging interested many of the artists I talked to. It was Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan, as well as the debates over confederate monuments, that inspired artists Nirmal Raja and Lois Bielefeld to create a project that asserts the history of women.

When Raja discovered a timeline of Wisconsin history engraved onto the Riverwalk, she made a rubbing of it onto a long piece of fabric the color of gray stone. She experimented with performance and movement, wrapping herself in the cloth, creating something like a living monument.

"We are in a fight for our stories and histories," says Raja, noting that the Riverwalk timeline emphasizes the accomplishments of men. A three-channel film inspired by the project and including the stories of 17 women, will be a centerpiece of the "On Belonging" show at The Warehouse, opening March 8.

For Shana McCaw and Brent Budsberg, sculptors and performance artists who created characters loosely based on their northern European ancestors years ago, the nightly news brought new heat and focus to existing questions.

Their work has been, in some respects, a nuanced exploration of whiteness, of American stereotypes around terms like "pioneer" and "settler." They wondered if they should continue the work, including a film they've been working on for years. Had it become too sensitive amid a national reckoning over white supremacy? What does it mean to work in quiet metaphor when loud, oversimplified, blunt-force arguments are raging?



"A Mother's Subtraction of Home," 2018, by David Najib Kasir. (Photo: Courtesy the artist)

“As an artist, you sort of poke at something at first and then the themes start to percolate up and you try to do research and talk to people who know more than you,” McCaw says. “And you try to formulate the conversation. This work has just become so much more important ... it’s new territory a little bit now.”

Kitty Huffman, who has created arresting self portraits in the Wisconsin landscape over the years and now lives in Chicago and teaches at the Art Institute there, decided to shift gears and go into art therapy after Trump’s election.

“I never did protest work,” she says. “I have never been one to loudly express my opinions. But I think making works that are quiet and help people connect is a concrete way to be engaged.”

Huffman came to the U.S. from Romania in the early 2000s and had a rough time as an immigrant.

“I keep thinking about how tough it must be to go through that now,” she says. “So I am thinking of art therapy as something more helpful and active than just a gallery practice.”



An image from “The Inhabitants,” a film by Tate Bunker, part of a collaborative project with performance artists and sculptors Shana McCaw and Brent Budsberg. (Photo: Courtesy the artists)



An artwork by Fred Stonehouse. (Photo: Courtesy the artist)

pure anxiety and a form of self-portraiture, to be sure. But Stonehouse says the psychological terrain in his work plumbs the political, too.

“That political (expletive) all works its way into my art,” he says, pointing to a painting of cat-like creature biting down on a man’s ear with text that reads “Not if but when.”

Stonehouse says he has a privileged view of Wisconsin politics. He lives in a working class and deeply red neighborhood in Slinger, teaches art in the “leftie bubble” of the University of Wisconsin–Madison and considers himself “a Milwaukee guy,” he says. Like a lot of artists, he leans left, but he’s hip deep in conservative circles too, including family and the monied collectors who buy his work. It’s one of the reasons his subtext is subtle.

“I love the idea of protest art, but generally it’s just obvious where the lines are,” says Stonehouse. “There’s value in that, but if you’re an assassin behind the lines you can kill important people. Or you can convert them. I like to think that’s what I do.”

Similarly, for Rafael Francisco Salas, an artist living in Ripon who explores the mythologies of rural life and country music, a simple painting of a horse conveys a lot about this moment, if obliquely.

“There is a darkness and a quality to it that feels like a walk through rural America ... or the opioid crisis or what it’s like for people being out of work during a shutdown,” Salas says of his nearly monochromatic equestrian work based on another painting by George Stubbs. “It just does what it’s supposed to do without doing anything obvious. You know, it’s just a painting of a horse in a snowy field – and yet the temperature is right.”

Salas, who grew up on a farm, says his studio has been a different place these last two years.



“I don’t wait up for days for your voice to answer to me no more - Matthew Houk” by Rafael Francisco Salas.

(Photo: Courtesy the artist)

Both subtle and subversive

For other artists, the political impact is more veiled and inexplicable.

Ariana Vaeth doesn’t have precise language for what the “Trump effect” means for her.

“I think it has subtly crept into my studio,” she says, surrounded by several just-started paintings of a monumental scale, including one with a bathtub that’s gaping, like a mouth. “I recognize that I am a woman of color painter. I think of that. I think about why I am trying to do new paintings, and I feel that I want to *try harder*.”

Vaeth, a current fellow with the Fellowship.art program who often paints intimate portraits of friends, hopes her paintings will be less predetermined, more expressive and more about *her* voice. That much she knows.

Her robustly heated studio is a also respite from politics in the basement of a political statement she holds dear, the Sherman Phoenix Building, described as “a model for healing our city.”

Fred Stonehouse is all about sharing politically subversive, in-the-works paintings on Instagram these days. It’s humorous online baiting, he says, what he calls “pulling the bull’s tail.” His elfin devils and misshapen creatures with plump tears and tiny teeth are

too.



A detail of Jill Sebastian's "4th Nature" project.
(Photo: Courtesy the artist)

on Earth time and the natural, global migration of life forms.

Is the in-progress work "about" current debates about immigration, the environment or the role of science? Not exactly. But you'd be hard pressed to think deeply about this work and not have it seep into your political perspective, and that's the point.

"We don't look at the world that way," says Sebastian, "we don't look at the world with knowledge."

Kim Miller, too, thinks of art as a long game and showing up to see it a political act unto itself. That means her work as a performance artist hasn't changed all that much since the election, though her seriousness about it has.

"After the election I believe more strongly than ever in culture – in art, dance, music, film, whatever – because the value of that can't be reduced to a dollar amount," she says. "Coming together around art says something. We're all in a gallery saying that we believe in this thing."

Recently, Miller has been working on a video piece about a world without postmodernism, democracy or capitalism. It's a meaty conversation between herself and an actress that takes the form of a public-access TV interview.

In the wake of the election, filmmaker Ben Balcom saw value both in films that court abstraction, that require a certain openness on the part of audiences, as well as films that are rooted in place and draw out more voices.

"I think it's important to have work that reinforces a state of uncertainty," Balcom says, speaking of the role of abstraction and quiet metaphor. "That it kind of destabilizes us so we engage with the world in a more open way." He's currently working on a film that explores Milwaukee's progressive past and imagines an alternative future for the city.

One of my favorite responses to our current moment came from painter Amy O'Neill. For her, and artists like her, being in the studio is about making space for what might happen. O'Neill is hyper-organized and creates little challenges and constraints for herself. Right now, she's painting inch-tall animals onto square canvases.

There is something so pleasurable about her wee bears and bison, with their tiny shadows, swallowed up in the space of an already small painting. If you ask O'Neill what she's doing, she'll tell you she's not sure yet. For now, just painting little llamas – and the like.

Giving over that time is its own act of resistance, she says, against the news cycle, the craziness of the internet, the political moment. It's about taking her job as an artist seriously and giving herself what she needs to do it.

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Amy O'Neill's one-inch llama. (Photo: Courtesy the artist)

"I can't pretend that I have my finger on the pulse of what everyone thinks or feels in small town Wisconsin, but I have a sense of how I feel ... and that has connected."

Art is a slow path

Jill Sebastian's work has always been political, and she bristles at the notion that the current White House occupant would have any presence in her studio. Tweets, news cycles and even the political process itself are on a faster RPM than Sebastian's ongoing artistic explorations, she says.

"Art is a slow path to cultural change," says Sebastian, a feminist sculptor and a recognized public artist who taught at the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design for years. With that said, the current climate and growing inequities in the art world, have had a low-grade, aggravating effect on her projects, she admits.

One of those involves inventorying plants she collected near RedLine, an arts center where she had been a resident mentor. Pressed between glass, the plants are arranged into interlocking groups, a schematic history in sculptural form. The piece, sitting in the heart of her studio, is inspired in part by Increase Lapham's herbarium. It's a meditation



Alethea Biles, left, and Kim Miller rehearsing for a new untitled performance piece. (Photo: Courtesy the artists)