

ISTHMUS

Signs of gentrification

Milwaukee exhibit gives a taste of the work of Wisconsin Triennial's first guest curator

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A metaphorical welcome mat consists of signs offering to purchase the homes of residents of the 5 Points neighborhood.

Fatima Laster is a fierce and unapologetic advocate. Three years ago she opened 5 Points Art Gallery and Studios in Milwaukee as a space focused on increasing visibility for underrepresented artists. Since then her gallery has expanded its scope and reach. Laster's ambition has brought her to the attention of the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art. She has been invited to be the first guest curator of the museum's much lauded, and equally critiqued, Wisconsin Triennial, opening in April 2022. Signs O' The Times, Laster's current project at 5 Points, may be a bellwether of her curatorial methodology and process.

The exhibit takes its name from the 1987 album and song by Prince. Like the dark mirror that Prince held up reflecting disparity in contemporary society, Laster here takes on the issue of gentrification, and indeed signs make up much of what we see in this raw exhibition.

As viewers walk into the gallery, they are met with a metaphorical welcome mat, a floor length aggregation of signs offering to purchase the homes of residents of the 5 Points neighborhood. "Considering selling your house? Call Sarah today!" and "Sell Us Your Home! Pay Cash! Any Situation!"

Residents are besieged with these signs on a daily basis. They are a harbinger of forthcoming development. Homeowners who do sell are often elderly or otherwise disenfranchised, and can subsequently be forced to rent, or become unable to rent, in their own neighborhood.

Laster and local residents gathered the signs and lashed them together to create this welcome mat, somewhat awkwardly titled “Displacement Welcome Runner.” Visitors are invited to walk on it, a form of tacit but still visceral protest. One cannot help but think of Carl Andre’s “144 Pieces of Zinc,” on view in the rarified halls of the Milwaukee Art Museum, a 10-minute drive from 5 Points. The now burdened legacy of Andre himself (he was acquitted of murdering his third wife, the artist Ana Mendieta, though doubts remain), connects the act of walking on both of these artworks. It seems political, a protest, a stomping, damning act.

Other signs flesh out this show. Laster herself has included a portfolio of handmade signs that were used in an anti-gentrification, anti-displacement protest that occurred in the neighborhood this year. Michael Copping, an Ohio-based artist, recreates traffic signs with the logo of a monkey. The intentionally ambiguous signage is placed on the streets to protest gentrification, the image translating to a mantra reading “No Monkey Business.” Sometimes residents in these neighborhoods see them as racially insensitive imagery, making the signs even more charged and contested.

Siara Berry addresses American housing systems and ideals in her work. Berry uses visual puns with a poignant minimalism. “Rent in II” is a wooden shipping crate whose open lid is cracked to reveal two white fence pickets carefully housed within. The premise and psychology of the entire exhibition seems contained in this reserved, poetic piece.

Admittedly, I remain conflicted about this exhibition. Is it good? I’m not sure I can say that. Many of the pieces embody a street aesthetic of DIY materiality and punk ethos, but remain caught somewhere between self-taught directness and contemporary art world savvy, not quite comfortable anywhere.

But the art world has also changed. Perhaps this critic needs a new way to view new art. For example, what do we call the now empty pedestals on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia, coated with spray painted slogans of protest? Unburdened by the racist sculptures that they were intended to immortalize, and covered with new voices and visions, they have become new objects entirely. A new art canon for a new age? Time will tell.

Laster has revealed that her background in art is self taught, and this is notable as she defiantly promotes art and artists with her own personal sensibility. The Triennial at MMoCA will be titled *Ain’t I a Woman?* referencing the speech by Sojourner Truth and book by bell hooks. The exhibition will include only Black women artists. Laster also mentions what inclusion means to her for this exhibition in terms of which designers will work on the show, which vendors and caterers will be utilized, and who will work to install it. Perhaps an entirely new category of contemporary curation may be emerging at 5 Points Art Gallery and thus also at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.

“Signs O’ The Times” is on view at 5 Points Art Gallery through Oct. 31.

[Editor’s Note: This article was changed to reflect that curator Fatima Laster has a background in art as well as finance and is a self-taught artist.]