

THINGS TO DO

How Donald Trump presidency is fueling political art



Forty-seven artists' works comprise an exhibition called Dear President, which focuses on many political and societal issues and will be showing in South Bay Contemporary at the Loft in San Pedro. In addition to the artwork, each artist is writing a letter to President Trump along with a catalog of the artwork to be sent to him. Peggy Sivert Zask looks over the exhibit. Thursday, January 12, 2017, San Pedro, CA. Photo by Steve McCrank, Daily Breeze/SCNG

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The unexpected election of President Donald Trump has inspired a groundswell of political artwork.

At least, that's the opinion of Peggy Sivert Zask, South Bay Contemporary's director and curator.

"When Trump won and started pushing everybody's buttons, it brought out the passion in people who normally would have gone about their business," Zask says. "But this is a time when artists have really reacted."

Galleries across greater Los Angeles have been putting out a call for artists who explore politics in their works for a series of topical shows, including "Dear President," now open through Feb. 19 at the South Bay Contemporary at the Loft Gallery in San Pedro.

It spotlights the work of 47 artists who tackle issues born in previous presidential administrations and continue to be hotly debated, including climate change, immigration and military spending. A letter from the artist to President Trump accompanies each work, which will be collected in a catalog and mailed to the White House as a final performance art piece.

John Dinger, a Riverside-based artist who regularly shows in Los Angeles, contributes a piece from his "Ten Prosecuted Whistleblowers" series. It depicts the former CIA agent John Kiriakou, who served 23 months in federal prison for leaking the name of a covert officer involved in the agency's use of torture. The real-life whistle-blower joins Dinger from 3-5 p.m. Feb. 19 to discuss his new book due out in May titled "Doing Time Like a Spy: How the CIA Taught Me to Survive and Thrive in Prison," which features the "Whistleblowers" image on its cover.

In creating the work, Dingler describes toiling at his computer for bits and pieces of imagery from paper denominations going all the way back to the 1850s and manipulating them into Kiriakou's likeness. Why money?

"Money is the fundamental corruptor in political campaigns and in lobbying; it determines how Constitutional bills are written," he says. "Because money influences the way legislation is written, it also influences how these 'patriotic and heroic whistle-blowers' are prosecuted and under which laws. That's an injustice."

Irvine-based newcomer Elizabeth Hind's "Blessed Are the Poor" was featured in World of Wonder Storefront Gallery's "Surviving Trump: The Art of Resistance" pop-up exhibition in Hollywood.

There, President Trump loomed large.

"Trump is a uniquely unpopular and unsuitable president, and creative people are especially appalled by this and roused to action," says Fenton Bailey, one-half of the duo behind Wednesday's benefit for the ACLU. "People are galvanizing and organizing and saying, 'What can I do to make my voice heard?' This is what 'we' need to do."

Hind's piece is one of a series of mixed-media paintings created after a heated exchange with a Trump supporter about Christian values. In it, the first-time exhibited artist depicts the president's face along with one of his famous boasts, "Part of the beauty of me is I'm very rich."

As she puts it, "To me, that quote is very insulting, especially when we see so much poverty and the struggles of people in the U.S. or who come here because they want to help their families back home.

"It's arrogant and so out of touch that it rubs me the wrong way," Hind says.

Erin Adams, an established artist and owner of the newly opened Brainworks Gallery in L.A., admits the election has many of her peers exploring politics for the first time. She's not immune.

When the gallery's "State of the Union" show opens from Feb. 4-25, in addition to politically inspired knitting projects and traditional forms of art will be her collage, "Stop and Frisk."

It features a painting of her adopted African-American sons on a family picnic in the park surrounded by gun imagery and a backdrop of Adams' small business receipts, newspaper clippings and advertising art.

"Normally, I wouldn't choose to make political art, but both of my sons have been pulled over for racial profiling, and one of my sons has been pulled over three times at gunpoint," she says. "This sort of thing doesn't just happen in small cities where we're seeing it go completely out of control, but it happens here too. It just boggles the mind."

At L.A.'s BLAM, the works of eight artists create the conceptual show "FUtopia" that tells the story of a world spinning out of control.

Works in the show, which runs from Feb. 4-26, include Eben Goff's sculpture of river pollution, Lena Wolek's hole-punctured suitcase to represent disruption in one's life and Helen Chung's AK-47-shaped box sculpture. Brexit, mass immigration of Syrian refugees and the election results that co-curator Kio Griffith likens to a "horror story" also play a part.

"Originally, we planned to create a show about color, but after the election our show didn't seem appropriate," says Griffith, an international visual and sound artist in his own right. "Art needs to be more responsible to our times rather than just being a pretty picture. For me, I can't avoid any of this. I need to make some kind of meaning out of what I'm doing."

