

UNWIND

TIMES UNWIND | TIMESUNWIND.COM | Sunday, August 26, 2009

ARTS

Art and activism

Give a damn exhibit highlights work of socially engaged creators

By William Jaeger

The title gets right to it: Give a damn. Through art, art making and art looking.

As a rallying call to political action, you might expect some lithos and screenprints (political posters) and a little community collaboration. It's here. There are also waxy photographs of events

and protests (some by art photographers like Gerry Wisegrad).

And there is even the ability to do some protesting of your own with a series of computers.

But mostly there is meaningful content. There is no formal background, no art for art's sake.

Just look at the wall of Black Panther posters and photographs. No striking lines, just an open call to action, by any means necessary. Likewise, a glass case of waxy images shows press photographs of protests and demonstrations where people frankly give a damn.

Other poster designs are more subtle



Jeffrey Brown, "We Gonna Try Just a Little Bit More," 2008, acrylic on canvas

created, like the orange tape shape next to a photograph of Ronald Reagan, and big letters declaring, "He Kills Me." Of course the artist, Donald Moffett, meant it literally, and the pea is a painful

Sybil Carpenter, "Ellis and Anna Mae Thomas," 2009, earthenware, acrylic, graphite



pea. Look also for Moffett's glowing photograph of a tree, "Mercy," representing 1,000 lost to the AIDS virus of 100 years ago made in 1988. Do the work.

Photography is a core medium here, including one by Lennie Harrison that calls to the city of Houston's economy. This series of photographs of domestic objects with dolls' legs attached is now iconic domestic work. Less well known is a series of photographs called "Full, Winter, Spring, Dallas, Summer," by

Nancy Silverman with Wendy Red Star. These challenge ongoing stereotypes of what typifies an Indian by posing herself in positive circumstances as the (in)host of his nation of Lakota upon that one object only in official.

Some of the best works have more to do with interpretation and ambiguity. The example all from sculptors by Sybil Carpenter, "Ellis and Anna Mae Thomas," can be seen as just a beautiful and slightly

ILLUSTRATION BY TAND B



"Give a damn" installation view. The only word is "damn."

FROM THE COVER

Exhibit features socially engaged artwork

TANG

BY CONNOR O'HARA

encompassing aerial view of a farm and farmhouse. The surface undulates and seems to have a large, circular embossed of the land blast into the surrounding forest, which is glazed to look like bronze. But knowing that the title refers to African-American farmers, you are reminded of how that population has been betrayed on their land for centuries.

The largest work here is drawing. Measuring some 20 feet wide, this complex print by Larry Parrino is a large-scale work that can be seen as a 21st-century reimagining of 1980s government-sponsored murals. A network of plumbing and electrical fixtures create a maze of pink, through which circus performers swing and fly. Small, repetitive depictions of an older America contrast with large, blue city scenes, one behind a power line tower. Look more closely and find other details—birds, for example—that add to the lyrical escapism.

There is no shortage of art works over the centuries that are impressive only for their technical skills. Some of these are here, but the works that go beyond technical skills into a full-fledged social commentary are a special breed. The history of art includes true masterpieces that are political victories. M.C. Escher's "Unrest of War" and Picasso's "Guernica."

So I might end with a work by one of the great individualists, and your artists of the last 50 years. Cuban perfor-



Donald Vollet, "Mural," 1991, watercolor photograph on light box.

manor artist and sculptor Ana Mendeleta, who died tragically in 1988 before she was 40. Here we see a transfer of an X-ray film showing her in an untypical activity, creating an impression with her body in the earth, then letting the film fall with bright red liquid. The work itself is partly a lament at having been separated from her home country, but also showing if there is also a comment about the nullification of her work next to that of the man accused. Good acquisition of pushing her out a window for her death.

In my own small contribution to evening the score, I won't mention her name. But Mendeleta's work, and much of what is here, makes you feel to do something, anything. Now.

► William Sager is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.

If you go

Give a damn

- **Where:** Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College, 815 North Broadway, Saratoga Springs, New York
- **When:** Through Sept. 30
- **Hours:** Tuesday through Friday, noon to 5 p.m.; Thursday, noon to 8 p.m.
- **Admission:** Free
- **Info:** <http://tang.skidmore.edu/whats-on/give-a-damn> or 518-486-8200



Donald Vollet, "He Kills Me," 1987, offset lithograph.