

“Artists Engage the World” December 1, 2016 |

As we think about a way forward after the election, I want to introduce some artists who are already making a difference. They have committed their art practice to exposing issues that are kept invisible.

Now that so many core beliefs and accepted social practices may be systematically undone by the new administration, support for artists who engage issues with compassion and intelligence is more important than ever.

Part I

An exhibition that I co-curated with anthropologist Mark Auslander titled “Liberty Denied: Immigration, Detention and Deportation” is at the Museum of Culture and Environment at Central Washington University (until December 10; Wed to Fri 11-4 and Sat 10-3). It features fourteen artists who address the almost invisible detention and deportation system.

Currently, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) identify undocumented immigrants, often as a result of a minor traffic violation or racial profiling, and then put them in detention. Over 30,000 immigrants are detained at a time in 200 detention centers nationwide. With over 1500 beds, the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, run by the for-profit GEO Corporation under a contract with ICE, is one of the largest in the country. The detainees live in inhumane and illegal conditions with no privacy, poor health care and terrible food. They are forced to do the work of the center for one dollar a day.

Since lack of documentation is a civil offense, detainees have none of the rights provided by our criminal justice system. Deportees are taken to buses often in the middle of the night and returned to countries in which they have often never lived or left many years ago, leaving behind families in the US.

The artists in this exhibition explore some of these experiences starting with socio-economic and political forces that lead to migration, such as US government free trade agreements that bankrupt farmers, and globalized companies that steal land from indigenous people. Some address the terrifying border crossing. Eroyn Flynn details life inside a detention center in her fold out book. Others speak directly of the suffering of families.

In contrast, Blanca Santander's beautiful painting "Daughters of Immigration" celebrates the strength of women who survive immigration.

Three works were originally commissioned by the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian-Pacific Experience in Seattle when the old Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) building in Seattle was vacated for the draconian facility in Tacoma. Dean Wong's haunting photographs document the empty, eerie building. Robb Kunz provides interviews with immigrants about their experiences. Christian French gives us the "INS Game," the arbitrary process of acquiring legal status, still embedded in the floor of the INS building, made into a card game for "Liberty Denied."

We even had artwork from a detainee at the Tacoma Detention center. Pavel Bahmatov sent purses and other objects woven from ramen and candy wrappers and cut with dental floss.

Deborah Lawrence gives us the facts about the toxic location and toxic treatment of the detention center itself, in one of her incredible collage works called "Welcome."

Her one-person exhibition "Open Carry" at King County's 4 Culture Gallery just closed on December 1. One of the most political artists in Seattle, her art at 4 Culture addressed many issues including the Standing Rock protest, the problems with the Second Amendment, fracking and the exploitation of national parks, hate crimes, and even the Pledge of Allegiance.

Part II The Artnauts

On another inspiring note, I recently met the "Artnauts" a collective of about 20 artists led by the dynamic George Rivera, a Professor of Art at the University of Colorado, Boulder. The Artnauts have been traveling the world since 1995, going to zones of conflict and offering art, communication, dialog, and mutual understanding. In their words: "The collective uses the arts as a tool for addressing global issues while connecting artists from around the world." They have created exhibitions with local artists in Palestine, Bosnia, the Amazon, Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, South Africa, Russia, China and many more. As they go to these places, they are also immeasurably enriched by the experience.

They invited me to speak at their twentieth anniversary exhibition at Red Line Gallery in Denver, Colorado. In addition to the anniversary exhibition, which highlighted ten of their previous exhibitions, they held a special exhibition of new works, "Rally Round the Flag," curated by Linda Weintraub. All of the works are critiques, with the flag as an abstraction, a metaphor, a source of irony. Of course, we immediately think of the US flag as the subject, but there were many types of flags.

For example, Trine Buhmiller, inspired by her Artnaut exhibition in Sarejevo last winter, created a tent like shape with prayer flags to honor the nightmare of the Bosnians; on the flags she painted the image of the Sarajevo roses superimposed on photographs of the still visible ruins of the city. Red "Sarejevo roses" were painted on sidewalks where sniper's bullets landed.

Andrew Connor featured a queen size bed with the US and Israeli flags sewn together, "in bed together" and under the transparent sheet we could see the Palestinian flag barely visible. The group has visited Palestine many times, and collaborated with Palestinian artists, most recently this summer in "Art and Resistance," an exhibition for which I wrote a catalog essay.

We can look to these artists and others to inspire us as we plan our resistance to the national nightmare currently unfolding like a slow, long-lasting earthquake.

~Susan Noyes Platt

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