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Art Exhibit 'Acts' Out First Amendment Issues

Transcending Partisan Politics in 18th Street Art Center's 'Patriot Acts'

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As you enter the 18th Street Art Center in Santa Monica, you are greeted by a colorful, cartoon-y, ostensibly cheerful wallpaper that might superficially evoke pop artist of the moment Takashi Murakami. But upon closer inspection, this work comments on our national obsessions and consumptions "war and food" in the form of hot dogs, pie slices, cookies, donuts and tanks!

Hillary Mushkin's 'Untitled (Junk Food Camo)' is one of a dozen works comprising the art exhibit 'Patriot Acts,' which runs through March 28.

Palisades resident Clayton Campbell, the Center's artistic director since 1994, devised four topics under the over-arching theme, 'The Future of Nations,' for the artists to frame their art: 'The Constitution,' 'Demographics,' 'Urban Environments' and 'War as a Way of Life.' He enlisted various curators and artists to create new works around these sub-themes.

Part one of four of a year-long, multi-pronged exhibit, 'Patriot Acts,' curated by Linda Pollack, represents the work of 13 artists spanning a gamut of styles and media, including installations, wall hangings, books, paintings, and a series of postcards.

'These themes are based around election-year issues and civic engagement' which 18th Street thinks is very critical "without being partisan," Campbell says. 'This is not political art where it's agitprop. There's not a piece in here where it's 'I hate Bush' or 'I love the Republicans.' It's more about the broader issues of citizenship and what freedom really means. These artists are really stretching it beyond the election, going deeper into these issues.'

Rebecca Ripple's 'Absolutely if you will,' executed in paint and graphite, literally presents shifting shades of meaning and gray area. The work consists solely of text: 'Absolutely' scrawled across a wall; 'if you will' across the counter opposite it. The phrases fade in and out. According to Pollack, the former comments on an overused vacant blanket term, while the latter can be interpreted as a somewhat passive-aggressive command.

The visual highlight of the show might well be Zeal Harris' folk/na'ive art mixed-media mural 'Devil's Rejects,' a colorful, surreal landscape inspired by an Iraq War vet's stories and peopled with characters in a circus-like atmosphere. Harris also has a piece titled 'Jody and Fee La Beau Haunting.'

Pam Strugar and Shirley Tse's 'AWOL AWOL' (some word play at work, as this installation utilizes a pair of false walls) is a mixed media, two-artist, two-parter that includes skiing champion John 'Madcow' Hembel's quote, 'Freedom to me is skiing at 150 mph,' across one of its panels. Nearby, a monitor features various people interviewed about the meanings of 'freedom.'

Another multi-media work, Vincent Johnson's 'The Ballot of History,' casts a voting booth as its centerpiece and illustrates various voting technologies both on a wall and in book form to make its point.

Projects such as Meena Nanji and Tommy Gear's 'Transmission from 'Alphaville' (a twin-monitor installation referencing Godard's 1965 future shock caveat which depicted a society controlled by an ominous master computer), are interactive (says Pollack, it comments on 'two different pulses that shape our intellectual landscape'), but none are as interactive as the 'Habeas Lounge,' created by Pollack herself " a red-and-white, all-purpose room with Valentine's Day-ready d'cor wherein various visiting guest speakers lecture on voting issues.

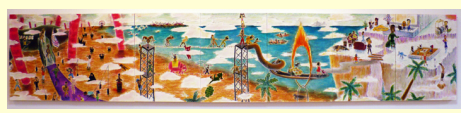
Performance art by Adam Overton, Susan Silton's offset lithography 'The Five W's,' and Sara Hendren's video 'Tools for Historical Imagination' round out the show.

'It's good art,' Campbell surmises. 'It creates a conversation instead of shoving a political view in people's face.'

'Patriot Acts' runs through March 28.

The next Habeas Lounge will begin at 1 p.m. on Sunday, February 3, featuring a round-table discussion with the topic: "How to Improve the World: Artist-Citizens on Hope, Apathy, Healing, and Piece of Mind [During Wartime]." The discussion, presented by Art Spa, will be followed by a group participatory performance of 'What Do We Do Now?'

The 18th Street Arts Center is located near the intersection of Olympic Boulevard at 1639 18th Street. Contact: (310) 453-3711 or visit www.18thstreet.org.



Zeal Harris

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