The Intersection of Art and Politics

By Ken Reker, Garry Harley, and Catherine Leisek

Editor’s note: In November 2016, one day after the presidential election, faculty at Salem State University’s Winfisky Gallery opened an exhibit called “THE STATE OF THE UNION.” Almost immediately, some students took to social media to complain about the art work on display. In particular, a digital painting titled, Meeting Under a Black Moon on the Plains of Despair, which depicted a ghostly assembly of Ku Klux Klan members, generated offense. In an open forum hosted by the university, students called it “painful” to see. Consequently, the university closed the exhibit, a move that prompted equal outrage from other community members. Discussions around questions of free expression and academic freedom ensued. In late November, Salem State re-opened the exhibit with expanded artist statements, a public comment board, and a drape around the painting that had provoked such powerful response. Here, we have gathered statements from the faculty member who curates and directs the campus gallery, the artist, and an observer of art and politics.

THE CURATOR: KEN REKER

Last year’s STATE OF THE UNION exhibition at Salem State began as a call for visual work that addressed concerns and hopes for our future after the 2016 presidential election. The artwork also reflected the feelings of individuals during the campaigns. The request for artwork

Ken Reker is a professor of Art + Design at Salem State University, where he also is curator and director of the Winfisky Gallery. Garry Harley is an artist in Lowell, Massachusetts, who works in various media, including OP-ART (archival prints on paper and canvas.) Catherine Leisek is a professor in the Visual and Performing Art Department at Broward College in Florida, where she has served as president of her campus union and faculty senate, a former NEA Board of Directors member and National Council for Higher Education director-at-large, and a visual artist whose works have been exhibited all over the globe.
went out in September, locally and regionally, with an October 26th deadline for submission. Artists could digitally submit up to two works, and were required to include a brief statement about how their work reflected their hopes and concerns. Eighteen artists submitted work; 13 were selected and 19 art works exhibited. STATE OF THE UNION opened on November 9, the day after the presidential election. While the exhibition constructed a climate of its own, student reactions also were predicated upon the climate that was evolving outside of the gallery.

I included most of the artists’ submissions in an attempt to assemble an exhibition that represented a wide breadth of issues. My intent was to establish an exhibition that would elicit a community dialogue. The following statement by art critic Roberta Smith sums up what I hoped this exhibition would provide: “The world is a mass of intractable ills on which art must shed light…. This is not the time for art as an object of contemplation or delight, much less a market commodity—certainly not in a public exhibition whose chief responsibility is to stimulate debate.”

A debate was indeed stimulated on our campus, but in ways that I hadn’t expected. Rather than generating a positive community dialogue, several of the art works in the exhibit alienated certain students. As an artist and educator, I am aware of the power that images have to communicate ideas and emotions, but still I was surprised by the extent of outrage and vitriol. These students seemed to be viewing and interpreting the artworks in such literal terms. Judgments were made without a critical assessment or historical context for the work. In a culture in which individuals are inundated with visual images daily, the response to this exhibition demonstrated the need for a broader application of visual literacy within our academic institutions.

The artwork that drew the greatest degree of condemnation was a digital image by Garry Harley titled *Meeting Under a Black Moon On the*
Plains of Despair, which depicts a group of Ku Klux Klan members. Inside Higher Ed editor Scott Jaschik describes it as such: “[Harley] took (with permission) a photograph of the journalist Anthony S. Karen and portrayed a group of members of the Ku Klux Klan, to show the kind of hate Harley believes has been given respectability by the Trump campaign. To Harley, portraying hatred is not the same thing as promoting hatred.”

After the opening, a student representative of “Black, Brown and Proud,” an on-campus movement, wrote a letter to the Art + Design Department, requesting a meeting between faculty and concerned students and, a few days before the Thanksgiving break, the meeting convened in the Winfisky Gallery. The gallery had never seen so many visitors, and the crowd filled the exhibition space and spilled into the lobby of Ellison Campus Center, the university student center where the Winfisky has been housed for more than 30 years. Students, faculty and administrators were present, including Salem State’s President Pat Meservy and Lisa McBride, its new vice president of diversity and inclusion. Artist Garry Harley arrived early and posted examples of art works by Goya, Picasso, and Lasansky, whose works opposed and committed to memory the inhumanity that they observed around them. In his presentation to the students, Harley positioned his work within this historical lineage of provocative art works. He also stated clearly his intentions for the work in the STATE OF THE UNION exhibition. Nevertheless, the anger that the image had originally elicited from the students remained the focus of the meeting as it unfolded.

As the atmosphere grew more heated, Harley offered to remove his image to allow the exhibition to continue. But students rejected this offer.

As the atmosphere grew more heated, Harley offered to remove his image to allow the exhibition to continue. But students rejected this offer, pointing out other art works in the exhibition that they also found objectionable. The meeting ended abruptly, a formal apology from the Art + Design Department was posted on the gallery doors, and the Winfisky Gallery suspended operation until after the Thanksgiving break, giving
everyone involved an opportunity to step back and take a breath. Immediately after the holiday break, 15 students, Art + Design faculty, and university administrators met in a closed-door meeting to determine how to move forward. In this final three-hour meeting, Vice President McBride thoughtfully navigated the group through very difficult discussions and negotiated concessions that resulted in the reopening of the Wininsky Gallery in late November for the artists’ reception. The opening was well attended by both advocates and detractors of the artwork in the exhibit.

Upon reflection of these events, there seems no clear blueprint for the application of artistic and academic freedom toward its most equitable benefit for all involved, especially in a climate where conversations about race and ethnicity are utilized in divisive ways. A concession that was especially difficult for me to accept was the demand to curtain Harley’s work for “intentional viewing only.” But it was this modification to the exhibit that brought back the ostracized students to the gallery and started a new dialogue about the exhibition that, at that moment, seemed to be moving forward.

THE ARTIST: GARRY HARLEY

It is often difficult and unnecessary to offer overly detailed explanations of one’s art, as the language of emotion in the painting can be different than that of the spoken or written word, and the word can fail to fully explain the heart.

I have had many discussions with viewers of art who struggle to explain their emotional response to a work of visual or performance art, and who sometimes end up saying, “I just like it,” or “I hate it,” or “my child could do that.” Sometimes tears or a smile reveal a viewer’s reaction. Other times, the reaction is silence. I have attended major museum exhibitions, crowded with visitors, with nary a comment uttered as the many of us walk around viewing artwork by the masters. Yes, it is the “rule of
the place,” but we often are thankful for the quiet, as we are not certain if it is really necessary to speak to feel.

Pablo Picasso, when asked to explain his painting Guernica, said, “this bull is a bull and this horse is a horse... If you give a meaning to certain things in my painting it may be very true, but it is not my idea to give this meaning. What ideas and conclusions you have got I obtained too, but instinctively, unconsciously, I make the painting for the painting. I paint the objects for what they are.”

For the Salem State exhibit, my artist statement was: “These digital paintings were stimulated by the various ‘fringe groups’ attracted to the message of the ‘Trump Campaign’ and the use of violence and intimidation of immigrant and minority citizens as one of the central organizing principal by the candidate. These paintings have been created, at this time, since I feel artists have a special capacity and opportunity to offer social commentary to our fellow citizens as to our observations and fears or what some might call presenting the ‘brutal truth.’”

In creating They Came for My Brother and I Turned Away, Then They Came for Me on a Sunny Day in October, I had two things very much on my mind. The first is a poem by Pastor Martin Niemöller about the cowardice of intellectuals during the rise of the Nazi Party in 1930s Germany.

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out— Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out— Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out— Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”
They Came for My Brother and I Turned Away, Then They Came for Me on a Sunny Day in October, 2016, 30” x 36”, pigment ink on canvas, by Garry Harley.
Meeting Under a Black Moon on the Plains of Despair, 2016, 32” x 42”, pigment ink on canvas, by Garry Harley.
The second is a quote from Adolph Hitler: “By the skillful and sustained use of propaganda, one can make a people see even heaven as hell or an extremely wretched life as paradise….”

The poem and this statement of Hitler’s lingered in my mind, as I watched a presidential candidate preach division and, yes, even hate, while using the body and verbal language of the street. What I saw were the techniques of 1930s propaganda being employed before my own eyes and in my time.

This painting, which was created using historic photographic sources, was intended to raise a cry and objection from my studio, from my memory, from my heart. When this painting was first displayed in 2016 in a gallery in Denver, Colorado, some viewers suggested I was over-reacting, exhibiting a lack of patriotism, and using visual reference not worthy of the actual meaning of Trump’s promise to “ban” or “count” entire religious populations. Yet, very recently, I have seen Donald Trump halt the Syrian refugee program and block entry to our country by Muslims.

I will not raise my arms in defeat, will you?

In creating *Meeting Under a Black Moon on the Plains of Despair*, I was placing a personal marker of complaint, an expression of rebellion, disgust and mutiny against the recent legitimization of David Duke and his racist followers.

As for technique, the predominance of black and grey were intended to create a somber and forbidding mood. A lack of sharp line and the presentation of elongated figures is intentional. The presence of a black sky (under a black moon) with bright sunshine on the landscape, plus the elongated figures with transparent legs and no feet, conveys that this is not a normal scene. The central and most imposing figure has rings on most fingers and his wife is ready to subscribe notes of the meeting, a very normal and real life situation. The round hay bale is a distinct reference to
the everyday view that one might see while driving down any country road in the American Midwest or South. These figures are taking a pose somewhere between reality and mystery, somewhere between yesterday and today, somewhere in the Twilight Zone of hearing and seeing but not wanting to believe that hate is in front of us, that hate is of us, and that the past is again and in the open, where it has been blessed by media attention and back-slapping from a major political party.

This digital painting is based upon the work of photojournalist and humanitarian Anthony Karen and has been used as a source with permission.6

AN OBSERVER: CATHERINE LEISEK

The intersection of art and politics is occasionally explosive, but more often creates a chain reaction, a multi-car pileup. It has been both the bane and the delight of those in power. Portraits and landscapes of idealized, bloodless battles are accepted and revered, while art of political dissent—art that provides a window onto societal truths—is not so accepted.

When colliding with politics, modern art has historically carried the message and the outrage of the suppressed, the unrepresented, and the disenfranchised against the authoritarian tactics of governments. Art remains a means of protest and resistance based on its immediacy to communicate with the viewer on a visceral level.

In times of censorship and suppression of speech, art can rely on symbolism, iconography and metaphorical narratives to push home the underlying message. In democratic leaning societies, art can be used as a blunt instrument to shock the viewer through realistic and expressionistic content into questioning reality, personal morals or values, and views of the status quo.

Quite often the reactions to political art can range. It may provoke an immediate urge to censor, out of a sense of morality, fear or political outrage,
or it may invigorate and motivate a course of counter-action. Unfortunately, the power of art in museums and galleries is usually contained and defused by its privileged settings. At present, there is more artistic freedom in social media.

In totalitarian or Fascist takeovers of free societies, the arts and the press almost always are the first forms of expression to be suppressed and controlled, as seen in Nazi Germany or Stalin’s Soviet Union. This also can happen in liberal democracies. Examples range broadly from Daumier’s imprisonment for political cartoons by a fearful 19th-century French government, to the realm of the absurd efforts by the U.S. Congress in 1990 to withhold $1.6 million from the University of the District of Columbia after it received a gift of Judy Chicago’s feminist Dinner Party, to ongoing efforts by Republican lawmakers to remove from the U.S. Capitol a high school student’s Congressional Arts Competition prize-winning painting of police violence in Ferguson. Such examples show the power images have to challenge repressive political ideology.

Like free speech, freedom of artistic expression is protected by the U.S. Constitution. But unlike free speech, much of the art consumed by the public is subject to defunding by governments and wealthy patrons. When political powers and wealthy interests oppose freedom of expression, the barriers to censorship in art, as in life, can quickly be blurred and dissolved.

Above all, art is a reflection and a forecast of the society and culture in which it was created. As in the art of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, and countless other politicized artists, art does not change political reality. But art that provokes thoughts of a political, progressive or radical nature has its dangers and virtues. All intersections of art and life are political when made public.
END NOTES
1. Smith, “Review: Art for the Planet’s Sake.”
2. Jaschik, “When Art Offends (And Isn’t Understood).”
4. Multiple versions of this statement were created by Niemöller during the late 1940s and 1950s. This text is the one shared by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in its Holocaust Encyclopedia.
5. Falls, Ordeal by Battle.
6. For more from Anthony Karen, see www.anthonykaren.com.
7. See Mahler, “The Battle of Chicago: Art: Feminist Artist Judy Chicago Fires Back at Critics who call her ‘Dinner Party’ Obscene and Withdraws her Gift of it to a University.” The painting mentioned here, Untitled #1, is by former Missouri high school student David Pulphus and it is a colorful, chaotic landscape that depicts police as uniformed pigs. First displayed in June 2016, it was removed in early January by Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-CA. Weeks later it was rehung by Rep. William Macy, D-MO, who said, while flanked by members of the Congressional Black Caucus: “This is really not about a student art competition anymore. It’s about defending the Constitution.” For more, see Davis.

WORKS CITED