

'Inside the Wave' and 'Kara Walker' are politically charged exhibitions

by Robert L. Pincus

Joseph Beuys, one of the most influential German artists to emerge after World War II, declared "Art that cannot shape society and therefore also cannot penetrate the heart ... is no art."

SOCIAL ENGINEERING - The face on the screen poses as a guide to the bookless library of the future, in a multimedia installation by Adrienne Jenik, 'SPECCLIC: Welcum 2 the Infosphere' on display in San Diego. CNS Photo by Nelvin C. Cepeda. But as rich as his comment is, it raises more questions than it answers. How does art manage to alter society? And can't art touch the heart without worrying about the state of the government, of the economy or any other social issue?

Any answer to either question would be lengthy - the stuff of which careers in the aesthetics branch of philosophy could be made.

This isn't about to stop artists from making socially engaged art. They don't have to offer answers or arguments. They don't need to offer a rational explanation for a passion, an obsession or even a political position. They simply need to make art.

This is one of the beauties of being an artist, as opposed to a philosopher. Even classic works of conceptual art from the late 1960s, as philosophical as they seemed to be, often reveled in illogic.

Logic isn't the impetus, either, for costuming yourself as a giant barn with a loopy mask, as San Diego artist Brian Dick does in "Jeff City Mascot, Jefferson City, Missouri," a 2007 video. (It documents his day as a droll, kinetic sculpture for the town's art in the park program.)

Dick's performance was - and is - a form of social engagement, one that brought smiles to the faces of some children and even some adults. So, too, will be his random performances in and around the San Diego

Museum of Art that will debut his new SDMA mascot, part of a provocative, eclectic, sometimes amusing exhibition called "Inside the Wave: Six San Diego / Tijuana Artists Construct Social Art." He's long practiced the blurring of art and life.

Drawings of his equally loopy mascot are on view in the galleries. Humor also pervades other work in the show, including Adrienne Jenik's futuristic multimedia project (part film, part installation and part image display) about the disappearance of books from libraries. It's the darkly funny "SPECLIC: Welcum 2 the Infosphere." Then, there's the the Tijuana-based collective called bulbo, with "Tijuaneados Anonymous" a room that takes inspiration from Alcoholics Anonymous meeting centers. Bulbo's installation offers ironies while alluding to real social tensions in Tijuana, Mexico.

By happenstance, one of the most prominent creators of socially charged art, Kara Walker, has a major exhibition on view at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, its only West Coast venue. The show "Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love," originated at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, before appearing in Paris and New York.

In a sense, Walker has one grand obsession: the relationship between whites and blacks in America, particularly as slavery and 19th-century views of African-Americans have shaped it. And in Walker's impressive body of work, reaching back to 1994, she has given this theme a remarkable set of forms, the silhouette prime among them.

Looking at the two shows together emphasizes just how divergent the options are for "constructing social art": from the comic to the tragic, from the pictorial to the cinematic and the installational. Social commentary is a motive in much of this work. In Dick's, social engagement - pure and simple, droll and absurd - is the point.

CONSTRUCTING COMMENTARY

Muse d'Art Moderne, Luxembourg

Kara Walker's "Darkytown Rebellion," using cut paper and projected imagery, is part of her major museum show.

It seems fitting that "Inside the Wave" begins outside the exhibit, since this is art that often yearns to break free of the gallery space and enter other public spaces. Outside the museum's cafe - to the left of its entrance - is a big advertising display arrow on wheels, the kind of sign that might direct you to a small-scale auto dealer. Instead of offering text, Alison Wiese's "Untitled" outdoor project has flashing lights that offer a message in Morse Code, a language even more outdated than the style of the sign itself.

It's a big ambiguous object, though its proximity to the museum is a architectural-sized hint about its identity as art. Wiese's "Still No. 2 (West Coast Unit)" is inside, but you might think a tinkerer had placed it on view. Wiese has made a still for producing corn whiskey based on a hobbyist's instructions. The components are a small water heater and plumbing fixtures. (It's functional, but not functioning inside the museum.)

Wiese embraces the low-tech or the homemade tech: the sort of signage and machinery that gets created outside the corporate design laboratory. Jenik's art points to a future world, a few decades from now, which has little room for vernacular stills and signs - or even books. You sit on stools made of stacks of discarded books and watch the metallic-skinned woman's face on the screen tell you proudly about the bookless library. She dubs the book a "book-object," signifying its identity as an artifact of bygone days.

Jenik makes this future seem more than a touch chilling. There is something ominous about the future she presents. So, too, is the present that Particle Group, another collaborative, suggests in "Particles of Interest: Tales of the Matter Markets." The group has assembled white rectangular columns with speakers; the voices within them come alive when you come close enough. If they seem to be sucking in air and sending out mechanized sounding words, that is true to their intent: to evoke how nanotechnology is at work in our everyday products and can read aspects of our organic nature.

In hushed tones, it utters phrases like "nano-graphite," as if sharing a secret with us. The tone is creepy,

hinting that as science outdistances the knowledge of most people, it can also do things to us without our consent.

Particle Group favors a sleek techy look in its project. Zlatan Vukosavljevic mingles the homemade and the technological in his sculpture "2 Endless Collapsible Columns," which refers, obliquely, both to a great Romanian predecessor among sculptors, Constantin Brancusi, and to the American military presence in Serbia during the late 1990s.

Bulbo's installation is cozy. There is even a table with fake cookies on it along with a podium, chairs and tables. The idea is to suggest a meeting room, mirroring an actual room that the group has set up in Tijuana where it was hosting public sessions during the show. Its 12 steps, written large in wall signs, mimic those of Alcoholics Anonymous, as does the logo.

The term "Tijuaneados" means rundown or decrepit. It's often used in classified car ads - as in this car is not Tijuaneados. Bulbo is broadening its use here to refer to negative views of the town. The idea of combatting them AA style seems more than a little ironic. Perhaps this is a cynical take on things. Or, perhaps, this is one big conceptual performance, no less theatrical than Brian Dick dressing up as a mascot of the museum.

Whatever the case, you can attend one of Bulbo's TA sessions and decide for yourself. It's another case of life intersecting with art, in this case artists interjecting themselves and their project into the socially charged arena of a city's condition and identity.

SHADOWS OF HISTORY

Is there any subject more socially charged in American history than slavery and the treatment of slaves? Is there any form more seemingly genteel than the silhouette, popular in the 19th-century Antebellum United States that lived with slavery?

It was Kara Walker's profound insight to wed the two, creating graphic images of plantation life in the Old South that mix charm with brutality. She created quite a stir with this work in 1994, when it appeared at The Drawing Center in New York. Even some older African-American artists objected to her uses of caricature and stereotype in the excavation of a sorry aspect of American life.

But a decade-plus later, it seems evident that Walker wasn't - and isn't - trying to be a provocateur for the sake of being a provocateur. Even the title of her nationally touring exhibition at the Hammer, "Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love," suggests the complexity of her views of the racism that governed American life two centuries ago - and persists.

Images of birth, violence and sex between master and slave exist against the backdrop of picturesque terrain, vegetation and architecture. She renders it all with such technical flair that if you are seeing her work for the first time you would be delighted first by its style and then unsettled by its imagery. Even when one has seen it repeatedly, the tension between picture and style remains.

Walker is a student of the history and literature of African-American imagery. She takes up Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in the panoramic "The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva In Heaven" (1995) - all made from cut paper installed directly on the wall.

She sets up a similar tension in her watercolors, which are handsomely rendered but present images that flirt with ugly racial stereotypes. Some of them have text, too, as in a modified Aunt Jemima-style picture in her series "Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk" (1997). The handwritten words read: "Demearing portraits should be seen and not heard."

She's given a cinematic and burlesque dimension to her vision in recent films that use silhouette figures in a stop-motion style, as if they are signboard puppets. You know it's pure illusion, but that only makes the violence and sex seem more chilling in her short movies like "Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions" (2004) and "8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture by Kara E. Walker" (2005).

Whether still or cinematic, Walker's pictures are moving - and painful to behold and ponder. They offer no position on the brutality of life for African-Americans under slavery. They simply give us a way to feel the tragedy of a place and time in which one race of people were considered subhuman and treated as such, but culture had a genteel veneer.

Though Walker looks deeply at the history and images of racism, that doesn't mean her art will lessen its presence in the United States, any more than the work of Particle Group will turn people against unregulated corporate nanotechnology.

Walker clearly explores her vision wherever it takes her, just as Dick can't let go of his relentlessly funny quest to mesh life with art, via the making of costumes and a project in which he has made his bed differently each day for years and photographed each manifestation.

An artist can't fully explain a grand obsession. It isn't wholly rational. Art emerges from it and we decide, as its viewers, if it ultimately has an impact on us and our culture - or not.

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