

The Meaning of "The Presidency"

By Sandra Ogle | Oct 20, 2004

A 12-foot high cracked, plaster bust of George Washington—a copy of the image on the \$1 bill—sits in the center of Exit Art, a mid-sized Manhattan gallery founded in 1982. Crumbled bits and flakes of plaster litter the surrounding cement ground. The piece, "Champertous Connivance" by Timothy Blum, will eventually fall to pieces as the plaster dries and stretches on the supporting steel wires. The iconic imagery is ephemeral in construct and destined for decay.

Months ago, Exit Art placed an international call for artists to visualize their idea of "the presidency." From over 400 submissions, 41 works were chosen by Exit Art's curatorial team, headed by co-founder Papo Colo. The responses were varied in style and medium, but spoke of similar themes: corruption, sexism, greed, and dishonesty. The resulting group show, entitled "The Presidency," is a sharp, left-leaning critique of the head of state in the U.S.

Distortion increases with time in Jonathan Allen's series of 42 digital prints entitled "Portraits of Corruption."

Replicas of presidential portraits from George Washington on are lined one after another in slim black frames, each distorted according to a 1-10 corruption level. George W. Bush, a 10, is an undistinguishable swirl, except for a visible U.S. flag pin in the lower right corner of the print. In Allen's series, no image is left undistorted.

Other mixed media pieces include Francis Michael Palazzolo's overtly denunciatory "White-Shit-House #17 and White Shit House," a simple image of the white house rendered with brown feces, and Arbuzo Virtmanis's more subtle "Remote #1 Emperor's Bedroom," a life-size replica of the President's bedroom on Air Force One made from corrugated cardboard.

Perhaps the most impressive of the handful of video projects at the gallery, Rutherford Chang's "Dead Air" reduces President Bush's 2003 State of Union address to pauses and gasps of air. In absence of the actual speech, Bush's slight breathes and quirky mannerisms are comical; followed by the thunderous applause and standing ovations they take on an eerie tone. In a statement the artist wrote that the piece comments on the "meaningless and absurd political theater centered on the role of the presidency." In another video project, Bonita Makuch's "Oh Beautiful," explicit excerpts from the Starr Report, voiced by two porn stars, loop over images of a U.S. flag fluttering in a clear blue sky.

For these artists, to imagine "the presidency" was to construe images that were for the most part wholly male, fully lacking integrity, and steeped in hidden agendas. And whether the pieces were grounded in the present or referencing the past, the artists' main goal is to provoke future change.

"The Presidency" runs until November 21st. A series of public programs are also being held in conjunction with the exhibit, including a taping of Meet the Press on October 24th and an election night party on November 2nd. More information can be found at www.exitart.org.

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Timothy Blum's "Champertous Connivance," a crumbling plaster bust of Washington, and Arbuzo Virtmanis's "Remote #1 Emperor's Bedroom," a cardboard replica of the President's bedroom on Air Force One, are on display at Exit Art until Nov. 21, 2004. Photo courtesy of Exit Art