

“A Conversation: Hamza Walker with Kathryn Andrews,” *Kathryn Andrews: Run For President*, texts by Madeleine Grynsztejn, Julie Rodrigues Widholm, and Kristine Stiles, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2015, pp. 80-97

A Conversation
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Hamza
Walker

I'd like to start with the configuration of the show. Some of the work is older, some newer. It seems to be a very specific grouping under the title *Run for President*, while being a nice cross section of what you've done, something of a survey.

HW So the show is configured to talk about the issues suggested by the title through your vocabulary—your specific set of material choices and concerns as a sculptor, and the motifs that you've used?

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Kathryn
Andrews

Julie Rodrigues Widholm, the curator, thought that an overview of works from the last few years would be a good introduction for a Chicago audience. I began searching for a conceit large enough to be a catchall for possible inclusions. I’ve made many different kinds of objects addressing disparate subjects, so how to contain everything interested me as a problem.

In 2010 I began working with the birthday, exploring its imagery and symbolism. I later shifted to holidays and clowns, exploring their popular depictions and historical associations with poverty and violence. I then made works about death and brutality, dropping the clown reference entirely. All along I was also exploring other topics.

KA

Yes, I was interested in attaching a new concept to these things and seeing if it would stick. I was thinking about how to create a situation that might fall apart, and how to invite the viewer to reflect upon how he or she turns to context to make sense of art, and, in general, things in the world. I came to the idea of running for office as a backdrop.

In my experience, one of the first things that many viewers do is read the artwork’s wall label to see what it is and who made it. They then begin to form an idea about the artist as a rubric for a specific set of ideas: Who is this artist? How does the work differ from that of other artists? Is he or she interested in x?

At times I’ve chosen subjects and reused them because I thought some viewers would say, “This artist is using another clown. Here’s that artist that works with clowns.” I’m not so attached to clowns. I’m thinking more about how artists become associated with a use of specific symbols or materials or forms.

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HW From the inside out.

HW Could you talk about the objects you use as readymades in your work?

HW How do you see that way of thinking playing out in the exhibition?

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One of the things I’ve experimented with is: How many signifiers can an artist put into play without the exhibition or body of work devolving into nonsense? This is why I started with clowns and then made works about serial killers by way of clowns and now the presidency by way of Bozo, who ran for office in the 1980s, and so on. Basically I’m interested in how wide the thing can be exploded.

KA Yes. We could perhaps reframe the question this way: What does the idea of the artist or the artist’s signature have to do with coherency? Why is a correlation there a given?

KA Prior to 2007, I was making abstract sculptures that had a strong relationship to early twentieth-century constructivism. They were collage-driven and very colorful. To make them I would build something, destroy it, and then reuse the remnants in a new 3D assemblage.

One of the problems with these works was that they felt too dated. Some viewers responded, “This is familiar. I don’t need to look more closely.” Frustrated, I began thinking about how to rupture viewers’ recognition processes. I started turning away from abstraction and to pop culture—specifically to iconic relics from Hollywood and to licensable stock imagery—as a way of saying, “Yes, we all know this thing, but let me show you another side of it.”

KA The exhibition is structured with reveals or overturns. An object or an image is put forth, and then, after seeing it, you learn more about it. At the entrance, there’s a series of sculptures and a large photomural, all depicting Bozo (pls. 6–8, Rodrigues Widholm, fig. 1). A wall text nearby notes that Bozo launched a presidential campaign in the 1980s. For me that discovery was surprising. I associated Bozo with a history of entertainment but not politics. In the exhibition these histories are unmoored and comingled. For example, the Bozo photograph and sculptures together become an optical field that visually resonates with the other images in the room.

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HW The Depression-era race film.

HW Certainly. It's in the wake of Civil Rights, if we're going to say that the movement concluded formally—I hate to say that—with the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. That image is from 1972. But it still would have been read or understood in terms of that context.

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Nearby is a giant photo of Sammy Davis Jr. and Richard Nixon (Stiles, fig. 11). Viewers might assume it's included because Nixon was a president and this show is about the presidency. An adjacent wall label explains that Sammy Davis Jr., as a child actor in the 1930s, starred in a film called *Rufus Jones for President*.

KA Yes. This film was made by white Hollywood producers and played to black audiences, both satirizing and reinforcing the era's widespread racist stereotypes. It depicts the election of a young African American child to the presidency, postulating what that would be like. A short song and dance film, it concludes with the vision being only a dream.

For me, the image of Davis with Nixon, when understood in relation to that history, takes on another kind of weight. Davis was the first black man invited by a president to spend the night in the White House. Yet he acted in a role in which his character assumed that office only to have it yanked away. And then he dies before the United States elects a black president.

On top of this, this image and others depicting an embrace between Davis and Nixon were quite controversial.

KA Yes.

Just next to Davis/Nixon there is a sculpture I made in 2013, *Coming to America (Filet-O-Fish)* (pl. 4). The top half of the sculpture is a giant pirate figure that came from a McDonald's playground. I found it, repainted it, and then placed it on an armature—a pole and a machined disc that supports two stainless steel arms that jut out into space. At the tips of each arm are small windows that frame coins from the film *Coming to America*. One of them depicts the film's protagonist, played by Eddie Murphy, Prince Akeem of a fictional African nation, Zamunda. When I made it, I was thinking about the ironies of Akeem's trajectory. He's about to be crowned, but he fears his future life, replete with luxury and an arranged marriage, will be lacking. So he looks on a map and sees Queens, New York. He goes there

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HW What’s interesting to me is how you deploy objects and images from popular culture to address deeper issues of not just identification but also identity. Could you talk about your use of popular culture as a means of talking about the self, and in particular, your use of shiny and mirrored surfaces?

I also want to get to the issue of gender and your work.

I think of you as a latter-day child—and there are many—of Warhol, in some sense, but run through a ringer that would include the likes of Jeff Koons and Sherrie Levine.

How are you using popular culture to get at a critique of subjectivity or identity in relation to us as consumers?

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to find a new queen . . . of course, ha ha. He also finds a society with different race and class hierarchies than his own. The film comedically critiques these hierarchies while using stereotypes and jokes that debatably reinforce them.

I was interested in what happens when you juxtapose that kind of social critique with an icon of American imperialism—McDonald’s Captain Crook—and then toss in a somewhat fetishistic material, polished stainless steel, and then the spectre of a woman, the object’s maker. And then, what happens when all of that is thrown against Nixon and Sammy Davis Jr.?

There are resonances in the exhibition. The meanings of these different gestures begin to complement one another and speak to questions of agency or individual freedom at large in the society.

KA Before we go there, I’d like to describe a process that I see as problematic. When viewers come to a work of art, they want to make sense out of the object. They may think, “Is this something that I should already know? Or, is this something I’m seeing for the first time?”

Viewers often study the physicality of the object and ask: “Does this painting gesture or that physical mark remind me of something I’ve seen before?” For example, when you see a Robert Motherwell painting you know it’s a Motherwell. It’s clear that very few people have done that kind of large gestural work with their body in relation to the canvas.

One of my interests was to make artworks that absented the

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HW And does that meaning have priority over other meanings?

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hand to such a degree that people would not immediately place the author. I was interested in stripping the works of such signs because as a maker, a woman, I'm interested in complicating that fact. What does it mean when a woman produces an artwork? How do we understand its ideas differently when we learn their origin? How do we subconsciously construct meaning and value around such difference particularly when certain groups—i.e., women, minorities, etc.—do not hold equal positions within the society? What I'm talking about is how we unwittingly accept and reinforce prejudicial social codes.

KA Exactly. So as I was exploring how to strip the object of signs of authorship I was simultaneously thinking about what happens when one tries to make every object diverge from one's previous objects, in content, form, material, etc. How can viewers follow the artist's project? If viewers come to an artist's works and there are few cues that these things come from one maker, how can the viewers construct meaning? I think of Martin Kippenberger and Sigmar Polke as perhaps dealing with these questions. There is a lot of shapeshifting in their work, but in both cases there is also a lot of recognizable handwork. Rosemarie Trockel gets at this. So does, more recently, Lutz Bacher. There are others.

I began thinking about working with a material repeatedly so that material itself would become a signifier for my gesture. I began working with polished metals. One of the interesting things to me about those surfaces is that while viewers could say, “Oh, here's a shiny silver thing, that has something to do with Kathryn Andrews,” the objects simultaneously reflect the viewer's presence. So from the outset they turn the viewer's gaze away from me and back toward themselves.

Simultaneously, I began thinking about things that I could include in the works, the presence of which would be so recognizable they would trump the importance that the object had come from one maker. If I used, say, an object that had a prior relationship to a celebrity, what would that do in relation to a construct of “Kathryn Andrews”? Would it render my presence in the work totally irrelevant? I'm talking about not just the Warholian gesture of using an image of a celebrity but using an actual object that had a physical relationship or history with the icon.

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HW And its aura.

HW There is you, the author, and the decision to try to displace yourself with a reflection of the viewing subject. That displacement is complicated by the introduction of a celebrity actor with whom viewers are familiar. So these modes of identification, not with you, but with a celebrity, an icon, began to charge the work for you.

HW You mentioned constructing meaning as it relates to the gender of the artist and your efforts at removing yourself from the work, knowing all the while that, of course, you would be present by virtue of your name.

HW Well, made by a woman. But I guess I don't think of your work as gendered along those lines as much as I think of the work as being gendered along the lines of a critique of subjectivity just by virtue of asking questions of the self.

Of course, the question of gender is quite important. We could even ask: How is the question of gender gendered? [Laughs]
So the question is inherently one belonging to feminism.

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KA Exactly. So a lot of the works come out of that exploration.

KA Yes. And the question then becomes: What is the subject of the artwork? What are we trying to consume from this thing? Are we seeing ourselves in the work? How do we prioritize these different subjects to construct meaning?

KA It's not possible for an artwork to be understood as an event existing separately and apart from the artist's existence. The second I make something that's industrially produced in a factory where only men work and for good reason—only very strong, large men can physically perform certain actions—it now becomes connected to my name. That thing, those circumstances, become feminized.

KA Yes. But I see the question as extending to any group identified by gender, race, class, or simply “otherness”—folks basically not in a position of power. I don't see it as a question about femininity per se. That said, I've consciously constructed the works to borrow from aesthetic codes that are not typically identified with the feminine. But I am a woman, so even if I make something that looks not feminine, it will never be understood that way.

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HW It isn't a question of identifying with any one group, but more a challenge to the notion of the universal subject.

HW Could you talk about the ironies and then perhaps the not-so-ironic place we find ourselves, now that a woman is about to run for president—and stands a good chance of getting the office—in the wake of having a black president? Do you have any thoughts about the larger social context behind the context you've chosen for the artwork? Are you a pessimist or an optimist? Do you see us as working toward that point right now, with the number of women in elected office? Do you think we'll get there?

HW I think we are at a point where women holding elected office is unremarkable. But that's not to belittle the need for change.

In the exhibition are you accentuating the negative? The exhibition definitely has a whole other subtext through the figure of Sammy Davis Jr., not to relegate the black man to the subtext. [Laughs] Why can't the black man be the text? He's always got to be the subtext. If you want to discuss the political imaginary, "Imagine yourself as president," could you have chosen a more uplifting gallery of figures that may have included even Geraldine Ferraro or Jesse Jackson?

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I’m not interested in making a proposition that’s so much about inhabiting different positions as a gendered event. It’s much more open for me. It’s more about an experience of being an individual and having any kind of identification. How could I set up a construct whereby any individual could come to this thing and imagine inhabiting different subjectivities?

KA Yes. Take the question: What does it mean to be president? I can imagine that is something many American women would want to entertain because in this country it has not occurred. But in a way, I guess I’m asking, at a very basic level, how can we see as possible what we have yet to know? I suppose an inversion would be: “How can men imagine inhabiting a place where men have never had power?” There are certain positions that are hard to understand because of how subjectivity has been constructed by the society.

KA What do you think?

KA The selection of who is depicted in the exhibition is very specific. I was looking for highly recognizable individuals with hidden or unknown connections to the White House. Bozo’s

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HW Right. It would have been a more flattened reading relative to the way that we were talking about it earlier. It was a way of deflecting because you actually didn't want to flatten out the question of feminism.

HW It hasn't even begun to soak in yet and register as an impact. It's like there's the meteorite as it hits, and then there's the impact. The kinds of surface ironies that you are beginning to point out have yet to have their fill, which gives the show resonance.

When these events become realities there is an impact on the collective conscious, and I agree with you: I don't think we fully understand that impact yet, nor can we yet take such events for granted.

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relationship to politics is obviously not quite the same as Mr. T’s or Sammy Davis Jr.’s, but each was an entertainer and through that achieved a degree of social mobility. Mr. T and Sammy Davis Jr. in particular were remarkable individuals overcoming enormous challenges to rise to a place of influence within society. For me, they were and remain heroic figures.

But more to the question, why not create an exhibition with images of women in that role? I avoided this directly so as not to be categorized as a “woman making woman art,” or a “woman dealing with women power problems.” The work would be understood categorically in relation to a simplistic feminism. It would be lumped into “that feminist camp.”

KA Yes. I also found it challenging to find an image of a woman that could be unquestionably read in relation to the idea of being president because we haven’t had that yet. We can’t look at images of women and take for granted that that’s possible. The election of Barack Obama has allowed for a new reality along race lines. This hasn’t come to fruition yet fully along gender ones.