

Cristello, Stephanie, "Behind the Grin: Unmasking the Political Aesthetic in Kathryn Andrews' Run for President," *ArtSlant.com*, Chicago, March 1, 2016

ARTSLANT Chicago



Run for President

Kathryn Andrews

Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA)

220 East Chicago Ave, Chicago, IL 60611

November 21, 2015 - May 8, 2016

Behind the Grin: Unmasking the Political Aesthetic in Kathryn Andrews' Run for President by Stephanie Cristello

Few things could be as topical. The image-culture created out of broadcast television's commoditized framing of electoral coverage is precise, yet entirely ubiquitous. Kathryn Andrews' *Run for President*, currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, pictures the hamster wheel of these aesthetic politics.

Under the premise of a fictive presidential campaign, Andrews uses Bozo the Clown as the central figure within her electoral landscape. The personas born from Bozo represent either the Left or the Right (his party is unclear—he is, after all, red and blue). Throughout the installation, the clown becomes caricature, a rarified political cartoon. The production of the political image manifests in a few ways; Bozo stands behind a branded cartoon podium. His security staff, right at hand, stand with arms crossed in front of their black suits. This scene from the campaign trail is familiar to us, though—as the clown noses worn by the men in black suggest—Andrews critiques these signals of familiarity. The construction of broadcasting is unrecognizable until it is displaced.

The exhibition is provocative, the surfaces of the work seductive, and its aims challenging, clever, and stimulating. While the work initially leaves viewers rallying (in a moment between excitement and temperance, I questioned titling this review "I Vote For Kathryn Andrews!"), its implications echo in our consciousness long after we see it, slowly fading from conviction to doubt.

The sensory decrescendo of *Run for President* asks: what are we racing for? This sort of baseless crisis at the foundation of the show is a purposeful mirroring of the current political conversation in America. Here, the basis of uncertainty is cloaked in what appears to be a very sure thing. As such, *Run for President* takes on different contexts, becoming more conflicted (and thus, more relevant) with each televised debate, each paradoxical development on both the Right and the Left throughout the course of the exhibition.

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Installation view, *Kathryn Andrews: Run for President*, MCA Chicago, Nov 21, 2015—May 8, 2016. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago

Bozo the Clown, purportedly played by some 200 actors over a half century, is one of the most recognizable examples of the “replica” on broadcast television. The history of franchise vs. syndication built into Andrews’ source material allows her to move fluidly through the political and aesthetic aims of the show. Chicago’s Bozo, debuting in 1960 on WGN-TV, was the most successful locally produced children’s program in television history; but there were multiple Bozos, in Boston, Washington, even extending to Brazil and Mexico. Unlike presidential candidates, Bozo was not a fixed persona pictured for the masses, but instead was an idea adapted by many. As an artist, Andrews works within a similarly flexible identity, inserting her humorous and off-the-cuff subject matter into pre-determined formal approaches—such as minimalism, conceptual art, and the camp iconography of pop art.

In *Lethal Weapon* (2012), a curved monolithic wall dissects the gallery, picturing in its enclave a black and white reproduction of a slightly distorted, pixelated interior of the oval office. In the center of the piece, a chrome-faced cylinder stands starkly, podium-like, its only feature a deep black hole staring into the face of viewers. The expectation of the work welcomes onlookers to peer into its darkness, that small but perfect abyss: stare long enough and you might see the barrel of a pistol. Bang.

An undercurrent of this derision flows through *Run for President*. Beyond its flashy displays, meticulously finished production, and grandiosity of scale, there is the sense that the exhibition harbors mistrust. If not mistrust, then contempt.

Structurally speaking, the clown is the perfect archetype for Andrews to engage her electoral subject matter; it is silly and sinister, puerile and sadistic. We need only look to Trump. The danger and recklessness of language built into Republican rhetoric has stakes. In a culture so easily swayed by image and opinion—where visibility and airtime have the power to supplant fact—you can believe the political Right is foolish at your own risk.

Despite all its vibrant appeal, the sense of isolation born out of the exhibition’s installation serves the content of the work well. When the idea of *public* is treated so anonymously in the broadcasting of American politics, little differentiates person from object. In a work titled *Kathryn Andrews, October 16, 2012*, multicolored plastic and foil balloons hang limply from a highly polished chrome gate. The work, named for the date of its “birthday,” is adorned with a new crop of helium balloons once a year. A visual pun, the piece seems to announce: *Welcome to the miserable party*. With their levity depreciating immediately, each day marks another step in the work’s wilted celebration, sinking subtly from amusement to sadness. Still we celebrate for it. The overt melancholy in the piece is paired with a more understated current in the work—its dumb sentimentality. This is one of *Run for President*’s finest strengths.

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If not for this melodramatic quality, *Run for President* would poke you and run away, taunt and prod you to make fun of its foolhardy aims, its seemingly daft foundation. Critique it in this way, and it sneers back at you. *Run for President* wears a mask. Under the façade, we do not know whether its expression is cynical or sincere. Like Bozo, the exhibition maintains a permanent grin. The clown is comfortable with the perpetual falsity of its own image. Are the aesthetics of politics any different?



Installation view, *Kathryn Andrews: Run for President*, MCA Chicago, Nov 21, 2015—May 8, 2016. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago