

Johnson, Steve, "The 2016 campaign and the arts: more action, less talk," *ChicagoTribune.com*,
March 14, 2016

Chicago Tribune

The 2016 campaign and the arts: more action, less talk

By Steve Johnson
March 14, 2016



Bozo the Clown's 1984 presidential bid and a photo of Sammy Davis Jr. and President Richard Nixon are featured in Kathryn Andrews' "Run for President" exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art. (Nathan Keay photo)

Bozo the Clown announces his bid for the highest office in the land.

It sounds like another absurd moment from the 2016 presidential campaign, which has spent an inordinate amount of time on the precipice between ridiculous and menacing.

But the Bozo announcement is a historical document, the giant photograph documenting a real-life occurrence that greets visitors at the outset of "Run for President," Kathryn Andrews' conceptual exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Scattered throughout the show, along with the Los Angeles artist's own fabrications alluding to the similarities between American presidential politics and manufactured entertainment, are more real photographs: pictures of President Richard Nixon and entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. at the White House, and of first lady Nancy Reagan sitting on the lap of the actor Mr. T, who is dressed as Santa Claus.

And now the circus to which Andrews almost presciently refers has come to Illinois, where voters Tuesday will, for the first time in many primary election cycles, have an important say in the national election. At stake in Illinois, even beyond the high delegate count, is whether the Democratic and Republican front-runners will gain or lose momentum on the paths toward their parties' nominations.

"Run for President," which opened in November, is but one of the artistic responses we have seen to the presidential campaign. Indeed, the arts have had more to say on this presidential race than vice versa.

Here are a few examples. Television auteur Shonda Rhimes and her leading ladies recently endorsed former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton; they ought to, as Clinton's biography is mined for the Rhimes series "Scandal." Meanwhile, Funny or Die enlisted Johnny Depp to star in a hurried-up satirical biopic on the life of Donald Trump, the business mogul, lifestyle brand impresario and Republican front-runner.

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The realm of satire, of course, is where most of the campaign commentary takes place. "Saturday Night Live," the late-night shows and John Oliver's "Last Week Tonight" have been finding the comedy in this exceptional campaign season since the beginning.

In the past two weeks, for example, "SNL" has shown a mock ad for each front-runner. The Trump spot showed people talking about why they backed the Republican candidate — and then revealed them to be Nazis, white supremacists and Klansmen in an ad from "Racists for Trump." Treating the Democratic leader, the show depicted Clinton slowly morphing into her opponent, continuing "SNL's" theme of Clinton as a political chameleon.

But these jabs have, thus far, seemed ineffectual. Yes, Oliver a couple of weeks ago did a 20-minute rebuttal to Trump and the reasons people say they vote for him. It was the talk of the Internet, which used typically hyperbolic Internet words such as "devastate" and "destroy" to describe the piece. But then the passel of Super Tuesday primaries came and went, and Trump was several steps closer to securing the nomination.

The lack of impact is reminiscent, in a way, of "Bel Canto," the opera based on the Ann Patchett novel that had its world premiere in late 2015 at Lyric Opera. In the work, rebels take over an embassy building on the night of a swanky affair. The opera singer who is among the hostages contributes moments of beauty and human connection. But, in the end, her gorgeous notes are unable to hold back the dark and deadly realities of politics.

While the arts have had plenty to say about contemporary American politics, they have had almost no role in the discourse from the candidates, which has centered on issues of economics and security. This is perhaps surprising considering that one candidate has a Grammy Award (Clinton, for reading her book, "It Takes a Village"), one recorded a spoken-word album of protest songs in the 1980s (Bernie Sanders, not a Grammy winner), and the most-talked-about figure in the campaign spent more than a decade as the star of a reality TV show.

But Trump has, wisely, emphasized the business mogul side of his resume rather than the part that mentions "The Apprentice" or, indeed, his flirtation with show business in the form of professional wrestling.

Meanwhile, none of the remaining candidates' websites mentions anything about artistic endeavors or arts funding in the official list of issues they address. It's just not front burner or even on the stove really, so far in this cycle, although a Sanders campaign video on YouTube features him proclaiming that he wants to be an "arts president."

When ArtsVote2016, a program of the Americans for the Arts Advocacy Fund, broke down the candidates' records on the arts last year, the division was mostly among party lines.

Clinton and Sanders have very strong pro-arts and pro-arts education records, according to the group's summaries. They have repeatedly backed the National Endowment for the Arts and spoken up for the essential role of the arts in society.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich, fighting to stay alive after disappointing results so far in the Republican race, comes closer to the Democrats in his views and actions on the arts, according to ArtsVote2016.

Meanwhile, the other Republican candidates, Trump, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, have been less enthusiastic.

While Trump has no legislative record to study, several assessments of his philanthropic efforts have found them to be scant in support of arts organizations compared to others of his reputed wealth.

Of the two senators, neither is a member of that body's Cultural Caucus, nor did they sign "Dear Colleague" letters in 2013 and 2014 requesting increased arts funding.

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Rubio has criticized President Barack Obama for apologizing after the president disparaged the economic value of an art history degree, although it is hard to know whether that criticism was more about Obama or art history.

Cruz has called for the elimination of the NEA as part of a philosophy, currently dominant in his party, that seeks a diminished federal presence.

It's too bad that none of the candidates, during their visits to Illinois ahead of Tuesday's contest, found time to visit the MCA and see Andrews' show.

Reviewing the exhibition in Art in America, Mashinka Firunts called it "a looping funfair that burlesques the political/entertainment complex ... while pointing to the ways in which political candidates' lives are translated into filtered, Technicolor public biographies."

The show informs us that Bozo, played by Larry Harmon, announced his presidential bid in 1984. But it was a different time, and he did not come close to securing the nomination of a major party.