

Travis Somerville



EB/PN/WB Thursday-Sunday, March 14-17, 2013 | SAN

VISUAL ARTS

If you go

A Great Cloud of Witnesses: Through April 20. 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Catharine Clark Gallery, 150 Minna St., S.F. (415) 399-1439. www.cclarkgallery.com.

'A Great Cloud of Witnesses':
America's racial injustices just the starting premise

By Kimberly Chun

After the 2008 presidential election, references to a "post-racial" America littered the media landscape. But for Berkeley artist Travis Somerville, who was brought to bear witness on the front lines of civil-rights-era protests by his father, a Southern Episcopal minister, it remains a dream — albeit one well worth exploring in his polemically charged work.

"I think a lot of people think we live in a post-racial society, but we don't," says Somerville, 50, fresh from installing his current show, "A Great Cloud of Witnesses." "It's a lot better than it has been in the past, but it's far from being solved or dealt with in the right way.

"One thing that I found interesting was during the recent elections, friends and family that lived here thought (Barack Obama) might not get elected and that was traumatic to think that he wouldn't. But when I talked to relatives in Georgia who voted for him, they were saying that they were afraid that he was going to get assassinated because of the hatred that he was black."

Borrowing the words of the oft-cited passage from the Bible, "A Great Cloud of Witnesses" appears to take America's racial injustices as its starting point — busting myths and toying with horror-show grotesques in "Lincoln Log," which depicts Honest Abe with a Pinocchio nose, and taking slightly more subtle turns with the trussed-together chairs emblazoned with the faces of black men.



Travis Somerville's "Fall of Spring" (2013) features trussed-together chairs emblazoned with the faces of black men.

Catharine Clark Gallery

Next stop for those witnesses: the world, embodied by "Hamma Pahtada," which pairs an American flag with a 1942 cotton-picking sack bearing a drawing of a wistful child laborer.

The latter work, loosely translated as "everybody's gone cotton picking," is about government-enforced cotton picking in Uzbekistan and is, the artist says, a "good example of branching off Southern themes and into something more global. It's the best cotton because it's hand-picked, but children are being killed and beaten — it's a really horrible thing."

For Somerville, the world is wide open for exploration. "Prior to this show, the work was more centralized and dealing with American collective memory and issues of race growing up in the South, and there's definitely a thread in this work as well, but the new stuff deals with more global issues, though it's the same issues. It's not just an American Southern black-white issue as far as racism goes — it's multicultural."

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