

Stephanie Syjuco

Art in America

Stephanie Syjuco, New York, Ryan Lee Gallery

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Desperate times call for desperate measures. That seems to be the animating principle behind Stephanie Syjuco's recent work, as presented in her exhibition at Ryan Lee, "Citizens." In the past year, many artists have offered responses to the dystopian rightward lurch of the United States (one thinks, perhaps, of Rachel Harrison's bitterly satirical Trump piñatas). For most of them, explicit protest art is a side project. They continue their work as before, albeit with trouble in mind.

For Syjuco, by contrast, the situation seems to have

engendered a thoroughly new direction. She has long been a politically engaged artist, perhaps best known for organizing events in which teams of volunteers

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manufacture knockoffs of luxury products and artworks. These performances dissect fashion and art alike as elitist commodity systems in which the realities of production are willfully concealed. "Citizens," however, was much more explicitly grounded in the language of protest. The show looked and felt like a street action.

Since the election, Syjuco has been going to a lot of protests, and making a lot of banners. This activity furnished the raw materials for her exhibition. A red cloth emblazoned with RESIST hung in the third-floor gallery's window, admonishing passersby below. The show's largest work was another banner, this one reading, I AM AN AMERICAN . It's a direct quotation from a 1942 Dorothea Lange photograph, in which the statement appears on a sign hanging in a San Francisco shopwindow. The Japanese-American proprietors had just been shipped off to an internment camp, and thus their plaintive statement seems to end with a ghostly question mark.

Three banners featuring the phrase BECOME UNGOVERNABLE were draped precariously on scaffoldlike structures. The text was hard to make out, distorted and interrupted, and the banners were moved around during the course of the show, further interfering with their legibility. (When I visited, one was halfway on the floor, as if abandoned.) Syjuco seemed to be casting doubt on the slogan rather than simply declaiming it. This was a welcome note. The show could have felt too much like marching arm in arm, without offering enough of a space in which to reflect on the necessity of doing so.

Syjuco veered closest to agitprop imagery in a series of photographic portraits of recent graduates of the University of California, Berkeley, where she teaches. Each sitter is a member of a group—undocumented or queer, for example—whose rights are currently threatened. Syjuco shows the subjects in protest gear, anonymized by masks. They hold protest flyers and banners much as a

painted Renaissance princeling might clutch a symbolic attribute. The series is usefully complicated by the illegibility of these props—and by one portrait that shows a figure draped entirely in a gray-and-white checkered cloth. The pattern, recognizable as a default background in Photoshop, also appeared in a large wall hanging in the show. Finally, two further photographs depict discarded banners lying amid rubble, all rendered in the bright hue of a cinematic green screen.

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These visual references to easily manipulated digital imagery were essential to the exhibition. Everyone, these days, wants to have their voices heard. Syjuco is no exception, and her show was fired by conviction. But it also invited us to think hard about the stakes of political speech, the compromised contexts in which it appears, and the consequences of extremism. We may not want a fascist nation, but do we really want an ungovernable one?

Stephanie Syjuco: *CITIZEN (Portrait of B)*, 2017, inkjet print, 40 by 30 inches; at Ryan Lee.