

LigoranoReese

Political Art in a Fractious Election Year

By Randy Kennedy

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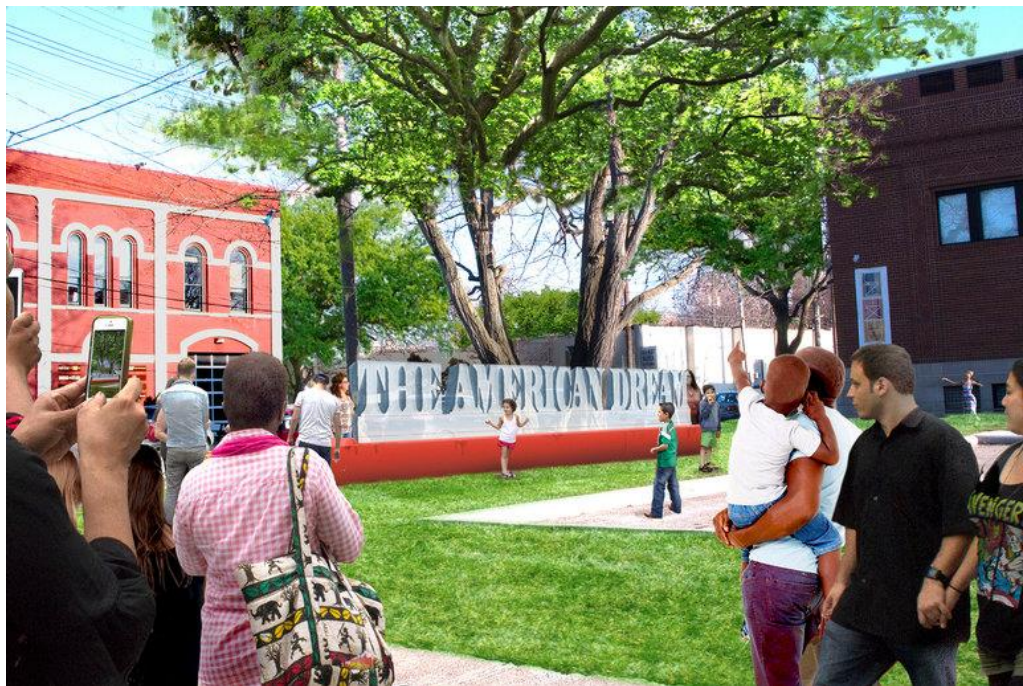
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A Rendering of "The American Dream," an ice sculpture that will reach its melting point in Cleveland this week during the Republican convention.

In 2008, when the artist Shepard Fairey created the [graphically striking "Hope" portrait](#) to support Barack Obama's presidential campaign, it seemed as if a rich tradition of American political imagery reaching back at least to the middle of the 20th century — on posters, buttons, bumper stickers — was still very much alive. The art critic Peter Schjeldahl [called the "Hope" poster](#) "epic poetry in an everyday tongue."

But as the 2016 campaign season enters the nominating stage — the Republican National Convention opens on Monday in Cleveland; the Democratic National Convention follows the next week in Philadelphia — no image even approaching the power or reach of Mr. Fairey's poster has emerged. (The [wordless](#)

[silhouette](#) of Bernie Sanders’s sensible glasses hovering beneath his rebellious white hair might have been the punchiest attempt.)

In just eight years, the very idea of an everyday visual language has fractured in the ephemeral, fast-moving worlds of Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. And the idea that epic poetry remains possible in American political discourse has fared even worse, made almost farcical by entrenched congressional deadlock and two presidential candidates [seen as dishonest and untrustworthy by large majorities of voters](#).

“The power of the iconic image is that it stood for one thing,” said Eric Gottesman, a photographer and political activist based in Massachusetts. “And as images circulate in more complex and widely distributed ways, the use of icons in political campaigns is going away, I think.



Shepard Fairey and his Barack Obama poster in January 2009. Credit Damian Dovarganes/Associated Press

“People distrust them more than they used to do,” he added, maybe because of cynicism “or maybe in a positive way.”

But the shift has not kept artists and visually minded activists from trying to say something meaningful during a fractious campaign season. In Cleveland and Philadelphia, art installations and performances — taking the form of neutral civic forums, partisan provocations and everything in between — will be cropping up all around the convention centers.

The “Truth Booth,” a roving, inflatable creation by a group of artists calling itself the [Cause Collective](#), will appear at the Transformer Station, an alternative art space, and other places in that city after traveling to Afghanistan and across the United States. The booth, in the shape of a cartoon word bubble with “TRUTH” in bold letters on its side, serves as a video confessional. Visitors are asked to sit inside and finish the politically and metaphysically loaded sentence that begins, “The truth is ...” (The collective has compiled more than 6,000 recorded responses and hopes to gather hundreds more at the conventions.)

“One of the major things limiting our democracy is the narrow way we now frame our values,” said Hank Willis Thomas, a New York artist who conceived of the booth with the artists Ryan Alexiev and Jim Ricks. Mr. Thomas, an African-American artist whose work often delves into advertising and race, added: “There are a lot of false dichotomies out there. This piece is about trying to get to common denominators.”

Another piece bound for the conventions will also use words not quite taken at face value: giant ice sculptures spelling the phrase “The American Dream.” The work of the artists Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese, the sculptures will be left outside to melt, and the dissolution will be [live-streamed](#) (starting in Cleveland on Tuesday) while poets and writers compose short pieces near the sculptures.

The artists, who call the installations “temporary monuments,” have previously melted down “Middle Class,” “Economy,” “Future” and “Democracy,” a version of which made it about six hours on a steamy day during the 2008 Republican convention in St. Paul.

“Part of this is to examine an overused term in political discourse,” Mr. Reese said, adding that discussion around their pieces tends to be about stagnant incomes, concentration of wealth and dwindling opportunity for working-class people. “We’ve found that these types of events and installation suspend disbelief. They break a hole in things, and people talk and think while they watch the words go away.”



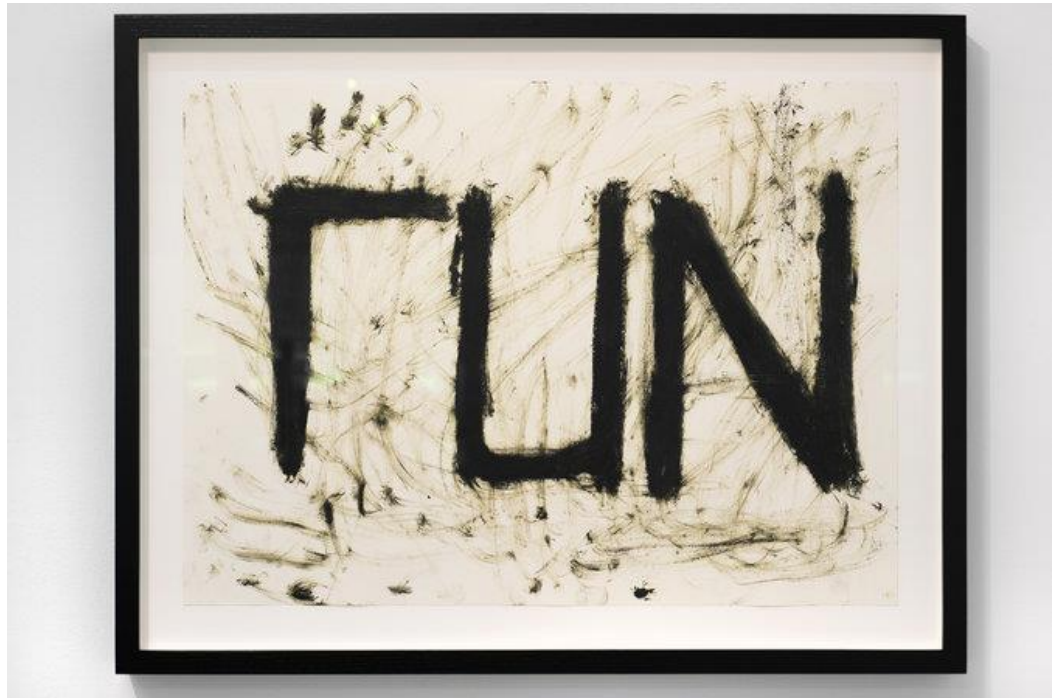
"The Truth Booth" by the Brooklyn Bridge. The booth, by the Cause Collective, is heading to Cleveland for the Republican National Convention. Credit Ben Pettey

He added: "Even though they're very ephemeral, they do have meaning for the people who see them. I don't think we'd be spending so much energy to organize this project if we didn't feel that way."

But the works' fragile nature seems to nod to an underlying wariness about political language and symbolism that has grown more prevalent. [Sheila Pree Bright](#), an Atlanta photographer documenting the Black Lives Matter protests with support from the public art organization Creative Time, said one reason the movement has produced few memorable visuals is a general distrust of the idea of logos or graphic identities.

"The movement wants to be faceless, not to have a group of leaders or to have something you see that boils it all down to one idea," she said.

Mr. Thomas and Mr. Gottesman explore a similar conviction in a joint project that will be hinted at during the Republican convention but gain more visibility in the fall leading up to the election. Called "[For Freedoms](#)," a riff on Norman Rockwell's all-American series "Four Freedoms," the conceptual art project is a nonpartisan "super PAC" that has raised about \$100,000. It plans to place works by contemporary artists in spaces typically reserved for advertisements — billboards, transit stations, bus stops — in cities around the country.



Rashid Johnson's "Run" (2016), part of the conceptual art project "For Freedoms." Credit Rashid Johnson

The works, by artists like Alec Soth, Carrie Mae Weems, Fred Tomaselli and Pablo Helguera, are for the most part not politically pointed but suggestive and open-ended.

"What we're hoping to do is reintroduce the idea of nuance into some very polarized conversations," Mr. Gottesman said. "We started a super PAC because we didn't just want to be cynical about the process but to be involved, to have skin in the game."

Ad space in Cleveland and Philadelphia is beyond the PAC's budget, but one of the [project's most provocative pieces](#), the artist Dread Scott's update of a 1930s N.A.A.C.P. flag — from "A Man Was Lynched Yesterday" to "A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday" — is scheduled to fly in Cleveland outside [Spaces](#), a civically engaged art gallery that is planning a spate of convention programming.

Mr. Gottesman added, "Marketing and advertising govern politics now, so our conception is that advertising is really the most potent way to reach people."

If there is any common ground left in America, it might be that belief, shared even by those who do not share the artists' hopeful conviction that the system is salvageable. Recently, bumper stickers and T-shirts began showing up around the country with a logo not for Hillary Clinton or Donald J. Trump but for a long-shot campaign: ["Giant Meteor 2016: Just End It Already."](#)

The graphic, by Preston Whited, a production planner at a kayak-paddle company north of Seattle, was a lark that grew out of a Facebook chat among Mr. Whited and his friends. “We have a pretty dark sense of humor,” he said in a phone interview. “We came up with it, and I just took a Bernie ad and redid it on Excel and put it out there.” He added that, besides having no real graphic art experience, “I really don’t have any political faith in anything.”

A few weeks after he put the logo on Facebook, enterprising souls elsewhere on the web picked it up and began selling it on bumper stickers, shirts and hats. “Which is cool with me,” Mr. Whited, 30, said. “If I’d tried to copyright it and claim it, it never would have had the exposure it’s had. Now I see it all over. And I can go buy it and put it on my car.”

Correction: July 19, 2016

An article on Monday about political art during the current campaign season misidentified a location of the “Truth Booth” in Cleveland during the Republican National Convention. The booth — a video confessional where visitors finish the sentence that begins “The truth is ...” — will be at the Transformer Station alternative art space among other sites, not at the Cleveland Museum of Art.