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KATHRYN ANDREWS

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KATHRYN ANDREWS

Employing props, costumes and other movie collectibles, the LA artist deconstructs presidential elections, gender relations, and the mechanisms of cultural desire.

By Jonathan Griffin

In Fall 2014, "Donald Trump For President" was less than a whisper on the wind. When, around that time, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, invited Kathryn Andrews to mount an exhibition for November of the following year, she hit upon the idea of using the US presidential election as a thematic narrative to structure a mini-survey of her sculptures, wall works and installations from the past five years. Clowns were to feature prominently.

It was not until March 2015 that Trump officially announced that he was exploring the possibility of running for president. In August, Kanye West promised that he would run in 2020. By the time November rolled around, Andrews' exhibition—which opened with a giant, wallpapered photograph of Bozo the Clown announcing his presidential bid in 1984—seemed strikingly prescient.

West and Trump, however, were only ghosts at the feast of "Run For President," Andrews' Chicago exhibition, which travelled this September to the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas where it will run until January 8, 2017, two days after the Vice President has formally announced POTUS #45. Rather, "Run For President" casts back to other entertainer-politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, as well as those non-white or non-male figures—Dick Gregory or Shirley Chisholm, for instance—who tested the American myth that anyone can make it to the White House.

None of these celebrities were present in the show, although many others were, either in pictures or represented indexically by objects that they had touched. A recurrent strategy for Andrews is to include props from films, costumes or certified movie collectibles within sculptural assemblages alongside elements she has found or fabricated. In an earlier work, *Ashton* (2010), a ring worn by Ashton Kutcher in the 2010 action comedy *The Killers* is threaded onto a polished stainless steel clothes hanger, dangling from a clothes rack.

In "Run for President," three new paintings appropriated 19th-century satirical prints by Currier & Ives, reproducing them as screen-prints on colored panels that sandwiched, behind them, costumes worn by contemporary Hollywood actors. In *WEE MAN FOR PRESIDENT aka Historical Campaign Poster Painting No. 1 (The Bird to Bet On)* (2015), a print of 1880 presidential candidate General W.S. Hancock with a gamecock's body hides a Captain America costume worn by Jason Acuña, aka Wee Man, in *Jackass: The Movie* (2002), which is narrowly visible along the painting's right edge. Elsewhere, the Joker's costume from *Batman* (1989) and Spiderman's costume from the 2002 *Spider-Man* movie appear in related works.

What is happening here? Many different things, things that can be understood separately or interrelatedly, depending on your requirement for coherence or your tolerance of interpretive looseness. (Andrews herself is of the latter persuasion, hence her willingness in this exhibition to recast old works within a new narrative.) The first, wide thread that runs throughout Andrews' work is to do with symbolic value, and how objects (not just artworks) are desired, capitalized and exchanged. Another concern, which extends from this, relates to authorship and identity; in *THE JOKER FOR PRESIDENT aka Historical Campaign Poster Painting No. 4 (An Available Candidate)* (2015), is it Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives, designers of the 1848 print appropriated by Andrews, who command the lion's share of the work's authorship, or is it Jack Nicholson, who played this version of the Joker, a character first created by either Bob Kane, Jerry Robinson, or Jerry Finger (its genesis is disputed) for DC Comics in 1940? Who supplies the art object with its value? Copyright, naturally, is an interest for Andrews, as is provenance and ownership. In certain works, such as *Gift Cart* (2011), Andrews' collectors do not buy the sculpture but lease it for a fixed term—in this case, 99 years, for a selection of gift-wrapped boxes rented from a Hollywood prop house, arranged on a polished steel cart fabricated for the artist. In another piece, titled *October 16* (2012), the owners of a chromed gate are invited by accompanying guidelines to celebrate the sculpture's "birthday" by replacing balloons tied to the bars.

None of these issues depends on the electoral narrative suggested in "Run for President" but they certainly play into it. As the curator of the MCA exhibition (and current director of the DePaul Art Museum), Julie Rodríguez Widholm has pointed out, Andrews' work is designed to appeal with its familiar imagery, bright colors and reflective surfaces, "while also making this investigation part of the work itself." Of all the arenas in which a contemporary artwork is likely to operate—including, but not limited to, art fairs, social media, commercial galleries, public institutions, art magazines and catalogues—the museum probably attracts the most diverse audience, most representative of the country at large.

Andrews, who was born in Mobile, Alabama, and who moved to Los Angeles to study at Art Center in 2000, seems to have relished

"Bozo"™ "THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS CLOWN" BOP BAG
WITH OCCASIONAL PERFORMANCE (BLUE VARIATION), 2014
ALUMINUM, VINYL, POLYURETHANE, CHROME-PLATED STEEL, PERFORMANCE
92" x 36" x 36"

COLLECTION OF JULIE MIYOSHI, SANTA MONICA
PHOTO: FREDRIK NILSEN, COURTESY DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES





the challenge of winning the hearts and minds of such a broad constituency. During a recent visit to her Highland Park studio, as assistants packed up for the night she told me about the Instagram selfie phenomenon that accompanied her Chicago exhibition, particularly amongst young people of color, who often pictured themselves against a large photograph of the Oval Office pasted onto a curving concave wall. (Andrews, who has probably never Instagrammed a selfie in her life, herself is a serious presence in large-framed glasses.) Another popular image was a 1983 photograph of Mr. T at the White House with a laughing Nancy Reagan on his lap. Lawrence Tureaud, the actor behind the Mr. T persona, is a native son of Chicago's South Side. He actually visited the show, and posed for pictures, but then called off the impromptu appearance, returning a week later with his trademark Mohawk properly styled.

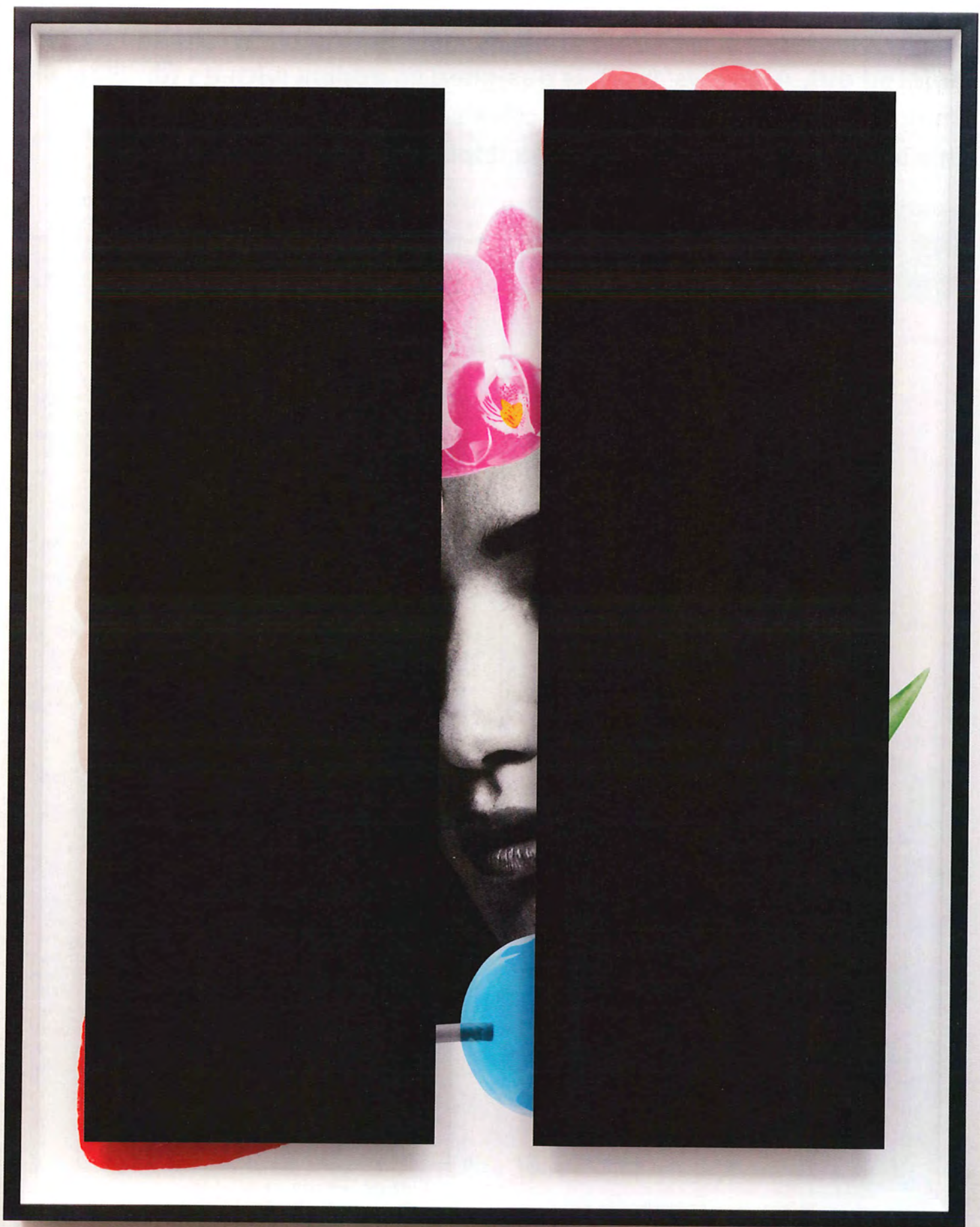
The photograph of Mr. T and Nancy is one of the ambivalent images in the exhibition of what Andrews calls "remarkable penetrators of the American political system." Tureaud realized, early on in his career, that he could transcend his working-class roots by using symbols of class and racial power: his heavy gold jewelry (reportedly valued at \$300,000), and his African Mandinka warrior hairstyle, which he saw in *National Geographic*. Erasing the distinctions between the characters he played on screen and off, Mr. T used his visibility to campaign for anti-drug and child welfare causes. He was invited to the White House to play Santa Claus, handing out presents to children at a publicity event for Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign. In the image used by Andrews, Tureaud, dressed as Mr. T dressed as Santa, presents the First Lady (also an actor, born Anne Francis Robbins) with a Mr. T "gentle giant" doll, which is itself dressed as B.A. Baracus. In front of the photograph was placed *Gift Cart*—a sculpture that here implied both a hollowness to the White House Christmas charade, but also an improbable symbolic value for its participants. What it means to get to the White House depends on how you get there, and what you're there for. Sammy Davis Jr. and his wife Alto- wise were the first African-Americans to stay overnight at the White

House, invited to a gala by Richard Nixon in 1973. A photograph of Nixon embracing Davis functions, in "Run for President" like the photographs of Bozo and Mr. T: not as a work in itself but as a ground for other works to bounce meanings off. When he was pictured with Nixon, as he had been at a youth rally in 1972, Davis (an avowed Democrat) drew harsh criticism both from his friends on the Left and from the black community, who felt marginalized by Nixon's administration. They felt Davis was being used. Nevertheless, Davis's aspiration to align himself with the ranks of the establishment was deeply founded. As a seven-year-old, his first film role had been in a Pre-Code Hollywood musical called *Rufus Jones for President* (1933), in which he campaigns for and then wins the presidency, only for his mother to realize that the entire episode had been her dream. For Davis to actually wake up in the White House, in 1973, must have felt to him like a dream come true. He did not live to see the US elect its first black President; Andrews notes, "Obama shifted the way we see blackness in relation to the presidency, but also the way we see images of blackness in general."

Though the idea of a woman in office today seems somehow less momentous, until the nation votes in November it will remain a fantasy. Andrews asks, "How can we see as possible what we have yet to know? I suppose an inversion would be, 'How can men imagine inhabiting a place where men have never had power?'" Andrews sees "Run for President" as "a construct whereby any

ABOVE:
INSTALLATION VIEW, "RUN FOR PRESIDENT," MCA CHICAGO
PHOTO: FREDRIK NILSEN, COURTESY OF DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES, CA

OPPOSITE:
"BLACK BARS: DEJEUNER No. 2 (GIRL WITH TULIP,
ORCHIDS, SOFT SERVE, STRAWBERRY AND LOLLIPOP)," 2016
ALUMINUM, PLEXIGLAS, INK, PAINT, 92" x 73" x 4½"
PHOTO: FREDRIK NILSEN
COURTESY: DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES, CA



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individual could come to this thing and imagine inhabiting different subjectivities." She has deliberately avoided using, in her work, materials that might be interpreted as feminized, despite her Feminist position. For her, the question of gender, she has said, relates "to any group identified by gender, race, class or simply 'otherness'—folks basically not in a position of power."

In her forthcoming exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery, opening November 5, Andrews constructs a more overt male-female dynamic within her work, a dynamic that again widens to embrace more general notions of desire and consumption. The show's title, "Black Bars," refers to the silkscreened rectangles on the Plexiglas of large box-framed prints and assemblages. Beneath these redacting overlays, viewers glimpse printed images and affixed objects. The hidden subjects fall into two categories. For half of the works in the exhibition, Andrews paid homage to Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) using photographs of young female models that she cast, styled and directed herself alongside stock images of objects one might find at a picnic: a sun visor, a shuttlecock, a strawberry, ice cream, tennis balls, and so on. These young women, whatever our sexual orientation and despite their somewhat ridiculous accoutrements, become objects of desire because they are largely withheld from our sight. The black bars, which allude to the abstract iconography of Richard Serra and Barnett Newman, become doormen, blocking access. In the center of the gallery, two Storm Troopers (actually mannequins dressed in certified replicas of Storm Trooper costumes) face mirrored cylindrical columns; they too are guards and, Andrews suggests, doubles for the men in black suits in Manet's original painting. The mirrored surfaces—a trademark effect throughout her work—reflect not just the art in the gallery but us, the viewers; we too are trapped by the black bars.



Interspersed with the picnic works is a separate category of "Black Bars" painting, in which what Andrews calls "fetish objects" are fixed onto the surfaces of related, appropriated images. Behind the bars, male violence lurks. In one, *Wolverine Wolverton* (2016) a modified drawing by Basil Wolverton of men fighting is outfitted with life-sized Wolverine claws (again, certified replicas) from the *X-Men* movie franchise. In another, *Jaws* (2016), a flipper worn by Richard Dreyfuss in Steven Spielberg's 1975 film is fixed onto a screen-printed photograph of a Great White, jaws open, coming at you. As with much of Andrews' work, "Black Bars" exposes the promises, aggressions and disappointments of consumer Capitalism, slowing our reflex responses to certain triggers. But the dynamics are more complicated than initially they may seem. "You want the girl," Andrews says, "but you can never get the girl. You want the thing, but the thing gets you." This gets to the tragedy at the heart of Andrews' shiny, seductive but ultimately duplicitous propositions. "You both consume the thing and are consumed by your own desire."

FROM TOP:

"HOB0 (THE CANDIDATES)," 2014

INK ON PAPER AND PLEXIGLAS, ALUMINUM, PAINT, MIXED MEDIA
43¾" x 37" x 2¼"

"SPIDER-MAN FOR PRESIDENT AKA HISTORICAL
CAMPAIGN POSTER PAINTING NO.5,"

2015, ALUMINUM, INK, PAINT, PLEXIGLAS, CERTIFIED FILM COSTUME
96" x 108" x 3¾"

PHOTOS: FREDRIK NILSEN

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES, CA