

Peter Horjus: *David, A Series of Men #1*, 2015. Used men's shirts.

Louisiana Art 2016

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IDEALLY, AN ANNUAL open call exhibition gives us a summary of trends happening in the art world, and it can provide insight into current events as filtered through the eyes of artists. This past year has provided plenty of material: Alton Sterling and the cops killed in Baton Rouge, the Confederate Monuments being voted for removal, the massacre at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, the approaching end of Obama’s presidency, Hillary vs. Bernie, the rise of Trump. The “Louisiana Contemporary 2016” at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, open to artists over 18 years old who are living in Louisiana, pursues both avenues. In one example of political subject matter, James Billeaudeau’s *Salute (Fear of Fascist America)* (2016) resonates because of Trump and the debate surrounding him, despite the fact that he is not depicted in the piece. As for trends in the art world, the “Louisiana Contemporary” features such a wide variety of work that it could give

the viewer visual whiplash. Walking around the galleries, one might identify established painting movements (Op art, Hard-edge painting, Pop Surrealism, and Expressionism) as well as conceptual-based projects in untraditional media, video, photography, and sculpture. The variety is surely a sign of strength in the art community, but it makes for a schizophrenic installation, especially in the main gallery.

One genre stands out from this chaos: the portrait. They come in a wide variety of styles here. Susan Ireland’s *Jena and Annie* (2016) is a riot of pattern in a Pop art twist on the Nabis painter Vuillard, Troy Dugas’s *Francesco* (2015) gives us a frontal close-up of a face constructed out of collaged labels, and Aron Belka’s *Self Portrait* (2016) uses oil on canvas in an expressionist tradition, its effect coming from tonal contrast and expressive brushwork. Peter Horjus’s portraits are quilted depictions of male subjects, such as *David, A Series of Men #1* (2015) (awarded third place). The material is used men’s shirts, and Horjus adapts the feminist associations of quilting to the steely blue-eyed stare of a bearded young man with waving hair. Installed at the entrance to the exhibition, these portraits serve as an introduction to the



James Billeau: *Salute (Fear of Fascist America)*, 2016. Digital pigment print.

show's overriding theme of identity, whether pursued in personal styles or in relation to issues of gender, sexuality, and race. The installation of the show works a little too obviously to stage these thematic trends by grouping artworks dedicated to race in the small gallery near the elevator, and works related to gender identity in the hallway outside the main gallery.

Inside the small gallery by the elevators, I was drawn to *Amazing Grace (ft. Barack Obama)* (2016), a video work curated and directed by Margot Herster for the collective "Bureau of Change," a kind of think tank dedicated to using art to create institutional change. The video features an African-American man wearing a Statue of Liberty costume—the character, played by Jason Brye, is a walking advertisement for Liberty Tax Service. The pale green robe is simply thrown over his jeans and sneakers when we meet him on a random New Orleans street, walking towards the camera and presumably to his job, holding the tax placards loosely in his hand. We watch this black Statue of Liberty doing his work on St. Claude Avenue at the base of the bridge to the Lower Ninth Ward, and then we follow him as he walks past the Jefferson Davis monument—a subtitle refers to the City Council's vote to remove Confederate monuments from the city, listing this one as "scheduled for removal, date TBD."

The walking tour is interspersed with footage of other Confederate monuments in town and protests, beginning with a Jan. 2016 protest at Lee Circle and ending with a July 2016 Black Lives Matter protest at Lee Circle after the Alton Sterling video was released. In between we see images sourced from public records: a still photo of Water Scott in North Charleston, video of Tamir Rice, a historical photograph of the Emanuel AME church in Charleston, cropped photographs of the eyes of each victim of the Emanuel AME massacre. The graininess and poor quality of these last photographs is distracting, but it refers to their source in public records and the collective's commitment to using public sources to expose problems. The intentional strategy includes the title's reference to President Obama singing "Amazing Grace" during the eulogy for Rev. Clementa Pinckney, one of the victims of the Emanuel AME shootings in Charleston. Another performance of the song serves as a soundtrack to Brye's walk through this landscape of racial violence.

As the video concludes, the screen goes black and transitions to Brye posed against a white background. Holding the plastic torch out in front of him like the actual Statue of Liberty, he slowly turns, as if shedding the light of liberty on his audience. There's a sad irony to Brye's character, performing



Margot Herster (Bureau of Change): *Amazing Grace (Ft. Barack Obama)*, 2016. Video installation.

the icon of liberty while we watch protests against the reality of a lack of equality. The hopefulness of the statue falls apart in face of this fake version, played as an advertisement, devoid of actual liberty or equality. And Brye's eyes seem vacant as well, his body going through the motions. There's an emptiness to the statues too, often ignored until protests this past year reinvested them with new emotion. The audio counters all of this coldness. The rap narration by K.G. fills in the blanks by expressing the lack of equality, while a beautiful rendition of "Amazing Grace" (credited to K.G.'s mom) counters that anger and frustration with a promise of redemption.

On first viewing, the impact wasn't as strong as a second viewing. The video would be more effective in its own space, where the audio could be much louder and where it would not have to compete with artworks on the facing wall. Instead, the viewer is forced to recognize connections between the video and Dan Tague's *Old Glory Holes* (2014) and Benjamin Diller's *The Great Shield* (2014), a carved wooden version of the Great Seal of the United States, as well as other works in the same space. Overcrowded installations have been an ongoing problem with the "Louisiana Contemporary" series, especially in this small gallery. One wishes that the museum would either give the exhibition more space or edit the selection more to fit the space that is available.

One of the consequences of the overcrowding is that the theme of race is so broadly used that it starts to fall apart. Chris Lawson's *Manifestation of a Coconut* (2016) seems to have been placed here because it uses a Zulu coconut, even though its glitter-covered forms betray a whimsical sensibility at odds with the rest of the room. More appropriate is the conceptual humor of Ernest Joshua Little's fake promos, but they are practically hidden on a corner wall. *Tracks Promo* (2016) imagines an app that tracks the user's movements in case police stop the user because, as the ad suggests, you "fit the description." The *Green Book Promo 2* (2016) is an alternative to the "Blue Guides," travel guides associated with expensive tastes and patrician culture. In

contrast, the *Green Book* offers "protection for the African American traveler." Both pieces use satire to question recent cases of police brutality. Ti-Rock Moore is an obvious choice for the gallery, as her work has consistently played with text and race. *Cracka House* (2015) builds an altarpiece out of Saltine boxes. It has a Warholian touch, evoking his Brillo boxes, but the boxes are intended here to evoke the visually absent associations of the term 'cracker' to whiteness and lower class.

Two works reflecting on female identity are also installed in this gallery. Kelli Scott Kelley's *Fighting Back* (2015) offers a mysterious dream-like scene of an army of nude female figures linked by blue lines to a blue cloud floating above. The crocheted border suggests that the substrate was a doily or a tablecloth, another nod to 1970s feminist appreciation of techniques traditionally practiced by women. Anonymous brown figures surround the women with pointed guns, and the title suggests that these women are ready to band together and fight back. The depiction of being targeted manages to capture the feeling of being targeted in today's world, resonating with the battle surrounding our first female presidential candidate or the ongoing battle for equal pay and reproductive rights. Kelley uses a Surrealist approach to express the frustration and indignation that women feel about continued attempts by men to control their bodies.

Jenna Knoblach's *Title IX* (2015) tackles the same theme from a very different artistic point of view. On view are digital c-prints and a letterpress print from a performance in which the artist took a group of seven female friends to a shooting range. The images are displayed in a grid of 3 photographs across and 4 down, and they are unified by a color palette that involved outfitting her participants in bright orange clothing, nail polish, and ear protection. The orange color symbolizes gun violence, and was used in the "Wear Orange" campaign for National Gun Violence Awareness Day. The color pops against the bright green landscape background as the women aim at the letterpress print, which displays the word "OTHER" in a circle. The performance enacts ideas from critical theory about attacking the "other" sim-



Jenna Knoblach: *Title IX*, 2015. Digital C-print.

ply because they are “other,” a defensive move used to shore up one’s own self-identity. The theory can be used to explain domestic violence, and the choice of the shooting range location and a female cast associates these weapons with self-protection. But these women are turning the tables, perhaps hoping to obliterate the damaging consequences of othering. Taking back power, they subvert the usual associations between guns and men. The title, *Title IX*, refers to the 1972 education amendment that prohibits discrimination based on sex in federally funded educational programs. Best known today for providing female students with more access to college sports, the policy is used here to suggest broader approaches to equality. In fact, Knoblach chose August 26 for the performance because it is National Women’s Equality Day.

It’s been one full year since the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage, another landmark case in equality, and now more attention is being paid to transgender identification. Even Susan Bowers’s ceramic urinal sculpture, *Sweet Mouth of Carcharodon Carcharias* (2016), obviously referring to Duchamp’s *Fountain*, reads differently in light of the recent North Carolina case of transgender bathroom rights. Other artworks that take on LGBTQ issues, or simply depict naked men, are gathered together

in the hallway outside the main gallery. Arthur Severio’s two photographs of male nudes romanticize the form, including one in which the blurred movement of the model’s arms resembles wings, turning him into an angel (*Angel*, 2016). Brian Barbieri’s untitled nude recalls the late 19th century photographs of Thomas Eakins. Two of Ronna Harris’s penis portraits, which have been shown before at Tulane University, are on display, and *Anonymous Male #3* (2015) was awarded first place. Harris’s choice to focus on the sexual organs seems an explicit retort to the sexual objectification of women. Rather than make her male subjects enticing, Harris’s detailed depiction of body hair reaches a level that is disturbing and squeamish.

Paul Rizzo’s mixed media works revel in chalky pastels that recall children’s clothing or Rococo paintings. The rainbow in *Surface Rainbow* (2016) reads as the symbol of gay pride in this context, and *Just Men* (2015) remakes a cover of “Just Men” magazine, featuring a shirtless hunk in jeans and an explicit view of gay sex in the upper right corner. The camp qualities of Rizzo’s work contrast with Maxx Sizeler’s reflections on gender fluidity. The monochrome triptych painting *Boyhood Dream (First Time at the Beach)* (2016) uses images of magic tricks and toys that Sizeler played with as a kid to express the childlike wish

to be transformed from a girl into a boy, fulfilled by the central image of Sizeler displaying his bare chest for the “first time at the beach.” In *Abracadabra (My Hand on T)* (2016), Sizeler imagines what his hand would look like if he started taking testosterone (full disclosure: I curated Sizeler’s work this past spring at the UNO St. Claude Gallery).

Of the three photographs by Chris Berntsen, *Flayr in the Blue Dress* (2016) repurposes the reclining female nude pose from art history for an African-American man wearing a blue dress, posed on a log bridge in a wooded landscape. This remake of Matisse’s *Blue Nude (Memory of Biskra)* (1907) queers the modernist canon, but its methods feel too obvious next to the more subtle *Xavier Cruising* (2015). The subject, Xavier, is framed in a lush green landscape with palm fronds hanging overhead. The red pattern on his shirt balances its complementary color in the background. Standing on a path, the subject gives us a blank stare while starting to unbuckle his belt for what must be a sexual partner. Hanging from one of his belt loops is a Betty Boop keychain, a small detail that individualizes the subject and reflects the artificiality of cultural stereotypes of sexuality. The hypersexualized femininity of Betty Boop seems to contradict the ambiguity of the situation, in which we don’t get to identify the gender of his partner but are asked to stand in that person’s place. That tension is what activates the image.

In the main gallery, painting takes over, with pride of place reserved for two large abstract paintings by Luis Cruz Azaceta. Viewers are immediately drawn to the bright neon rainbow colors of *Heroes Tale* (2016), awarded Best in Show by juror Bill Arning, Director of Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. The painting almost dances with a syncopated rhythm created by a series of interlocking vertical pieces, some of them falling on a slight diagonal. A bright red piece in the upper right keeps the slivers in place, while the lines of the surrounding shapes are so crisply drawn that they recall architectural diagrams. Each of Azaceta’s paintings is a square composition made up of four panels that bring together fragments of a shape. In *Green Square (Cairo)* (2015), the main shape is a pale blue and green with random black dots and drippy red and white lines. A square shape in the lower left tilts against the stable edge of the panel, and in the upper left, a grouping of brightly colored slivers creates tension with the otherwise open space. Here the negative space dominates, offsetting its companion, *Heroes Tale*.

Many of the installation choices in the main gallery seem to have been decided by color. David Colannino’s *Map 421F7* and *Map 80M7* (both 2016) happen to use colors that are similar to Azaceta’s, but the installation of his work downplays its more conceptual aspects (full disclosure: Colannino recently graduated from the program in which I teach, where I got to know those conceptual aspects). Placing Colannino next to the higher profile figure Azaceta demonstrates one of the strengths of the “Louisiana Contemporary”: its mix of established and new voices. In the main gallery, local followers of the art scene will probably recognize Shawn Hall’s organic abstractions, Kristin Meyers’s fetish figures, and Artemis Antippas’s absurdist obsession with glitter-coated fried chicken, presented this year in the form of two videos, *Eating Chicken (Mild)* and *Eating Chicken (Spicy)* (both 2015). But they might not recognize newer voices such as Colannino or Ryan Sartin.

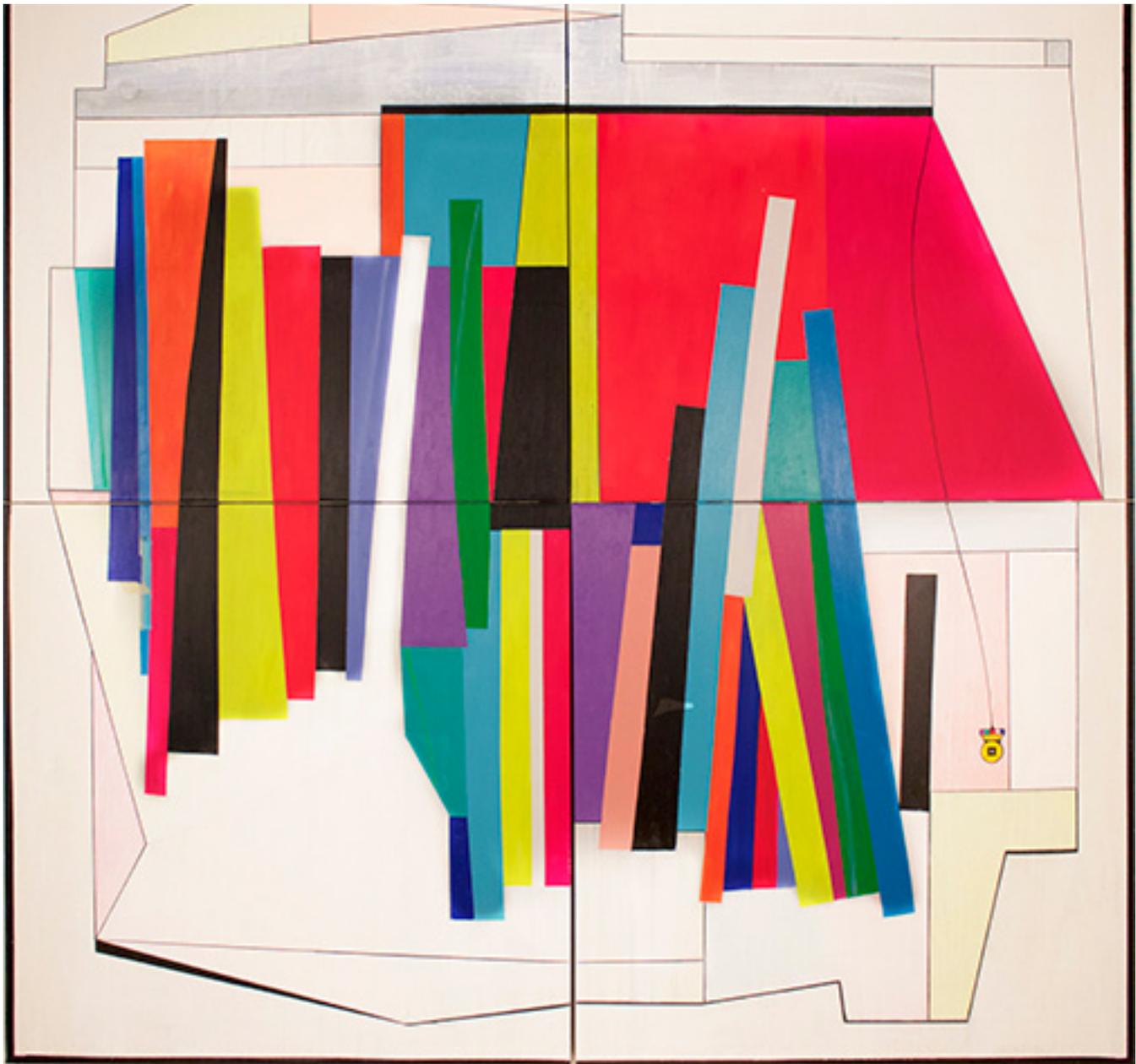
Deconstructed painting is a visible trend in the main gal-

lery. William DePauw’s *Frames with Images* (2016) invert the usual relationship between painting and frame by exaggerating the frame. The big ceramic frames surround small geometric blue paintings. Ryan Sartin’s canvases also depart from the standard by questioning the flatness of the canvas and treating the canvas as an object. In *Fleur de Lis Couple* (2015), two vertical canvases are propped against the wall instead of hanging from it. The canvases are bare, stamped with gold fleur de lis. The use of the stamp counters the expectation of expressive brushwork and nods to the omnipresent symbol of New Orleans, thus conjuring associations with the tourism industry and the business of logos. *Cosmic Ash Flower Bed* (2016) is a lumpy stuffed canvas, its title calling up Robert Rauschenberg’s landmark painting *Bed* (1955). Bright magenta flowers and purple palm trees stand out against a ground of black palm ash that has been smeared over a tropical patterned fabric featuring the flowers and trees. The kitschy fabric questions the high art associations of painting.

David Bordett critiques the tradition of painting by using actual objects instead of representing objects on the canvas as images. He also rejects the canvas substrate, using instead an old door hung horizontally for *Secret Truth, Witches Brew, Blackberry Juice* (2016). Two plaster hands hold a string out in front of the surface, creating a curving arc instead of a drawn line, and at left a still life sculpture of a teacup rests on a little pedestal projecting from the surface. Blackberries are the theme: painted on the teacup, printed on the fabric around the cup, and offered in faux blackberries scattered around the cup. Patch Somerville’s *Redacted* (2016) is an X-shaped canvas that feels like the negative of *Stacks* (2016), triangular pieces resting against each other on a shelf, as if someone had cut the original canvas apart into four pieces. Of Somerville’s work, my favorite was the one that did maintain the traditional rectangular canvas. In *Overgrown* (2016), a black rectangular shape tries to obscure a landscape behind it. With circular shapes partially or completely cut out of the black shape, it plays with our desire to see what is behind—to see what is behind the curtain, figuratively speaking, or behind the picture plane.

In contrast to these meta-narratives about painting are gestures toward horror vacui in the more whimsical pieces such as Shawne Major’s curtains of found objects: beads and jewelry woven together to create a carpet that begs to be touched. Dixon Stetler’s giant basket is an entertaining mix of hoses, cords, Christmas lights, boa feathers, a Nintendo controller, tinsel, and earphone cords. Some of the paintings in the hallway nod to Pop surrealism. Paul LeBlanc’s visions fascinate, such as *The Bird of Hermes* (2015), in which a sour green monster stands on an orb and opens his mouth wide to capture his own twisting appendages. Bat wings connect the creature to its name, emblazoned above. Everything from the shape of the canvas to its iconography recalls medieval art, but read through the local lore of Mardi Gras and the theory of the carnivalesque. It’s actually based on a section of the Ripley Scroll, named after a 15th century English alchemist; Hermes Trismegistus was considered the founder of alchemy.

Joshua Chambers’s *Fragile and Much Less in Control* (2016) opts for a more minimalist approach. In the vertical canvas, against a background of sticky textured paint that transitions from a grey lavender at the top to a greenish grey at the bottom, are two main characters: a black bird flying above, connected by



Luis Cruz Azaceta: *Heroes Tale*, 2016.

a thin curving string to a cement block on the ground below, and a hooded figure lying flat on the ground, connected to an air tank. His hood resembles a diving helmet, making him into a failed Jacques Cousteau figure. The reduction of the scene prompts us to ask, what happened here? The word 'fragile' is barely visible, set into the paint using stencils, and below the figures is written in pink the rest of the title, "much less in control." Perhaps this ordinary guy in his black Chuck Taylors has realized his lack of power and ego, a moment of recognition that has flattened him.

Fragility is also at issue for Abdi Farah's mixed media pieces that subvert the victory obsession of sports by taking it too far. *Terrible Fans* (2016) overlaps multiple red satin banners dedicated to a local high school football team, the John Curtis Patriots. The phrase "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" is repeated over and over, so much so that we are prompted to question the connection between Christian faith and the skill of football. Farah deliberately messes up the letter-

ing and the form of the banner throughout the series, using an aesthetics of failure to get under the skin of our cultural assumptions.

One of the problems of the "Louisiana Contemporary" is that much of the work loses its power when crowded into small spaces like the hallway outside the main gallery, and when isolated out of its original context. The full presentations of Ernest Joshua Littles, William DePauw, and Abdi Farah at Staple Goods, for instance, were much stronger than their excerpts here might suggest. Given that the annual show allows work produced in the last two years, it might make more sense to move to a biennial format, or to use the annual to focus on how particular artists have developed themes over the last two or three years. Such an approach would provide more insight into our local scene, one that the Ogden's series has proven to be rich in content and diverse in scope. □

