

Molly Glentzer, "Art Exhibits at two Houston colleges tackle hot-button issues," *The Houston Chronicle*, October 30, 2020.

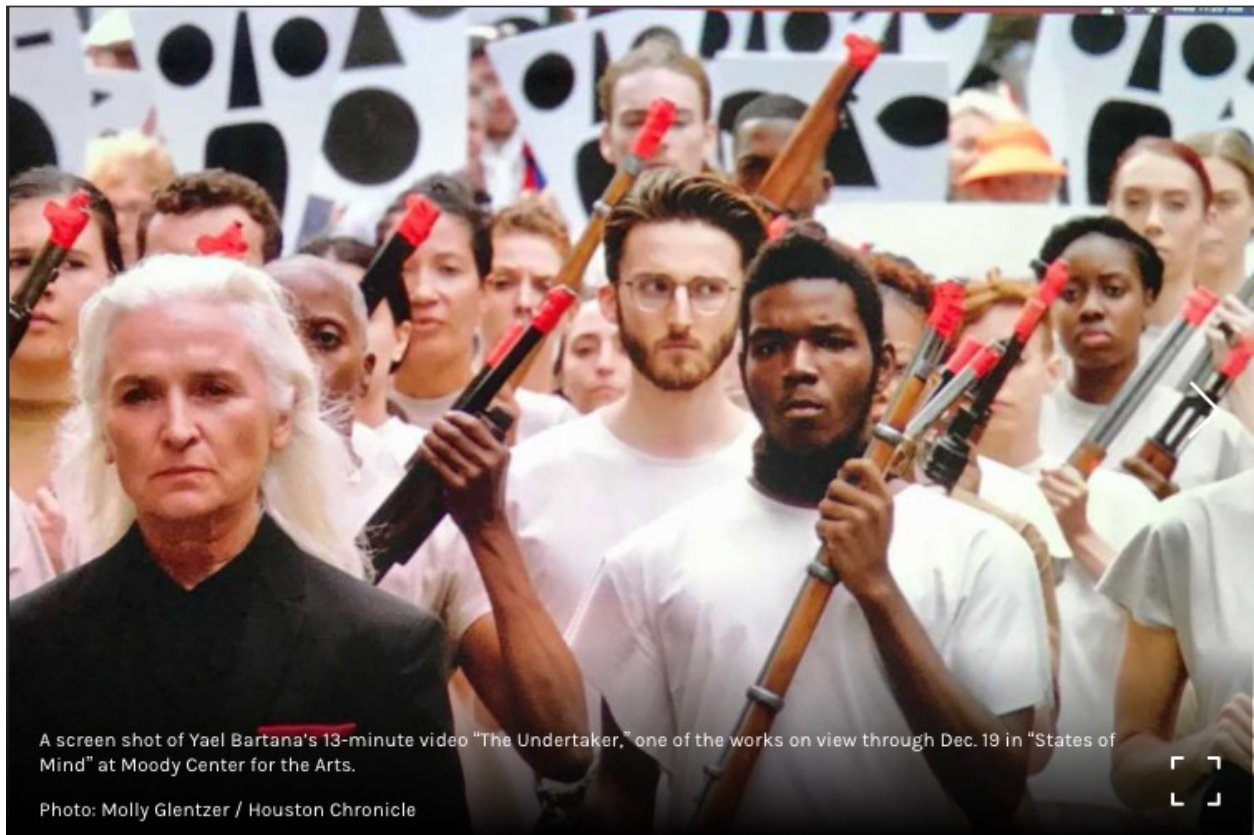


Art exhibits at two Houston colleges tackle hot-button issues

'States of Mind' and 'The Visible Invisible' offer timely food for thought.



Molly Glentzer | October 30, 2020 Updated: November 3, 2020, 12:43 pm



Art exhibitions on two Houston campuses are not politically timid affairs this fall.

"States of Mind: Art and American Democracy" brings works by 31 diverse artists to Rice University's Moody Center for the Arts. A solo show featuring one of those artists,

Petzel

Molly Glentzer, "Art Exhibits at two Houston colleges tackle hot-button issues," *The Houston Chronicle*, October 30, 2020.

"Stephanie Syjuco: The Visible Invisible," fills much of Blaffer Art Museum and extends into several other buildings at the Univ. of Houston.

Is it possible to present art about hot-button issues without polarizing someone these days? Curators almost always say they are simply putting things out there for discussion.

The Moody aspires "to create a platform for dialogue and look at these issues through art, hoping people will think about them in a different way," says associate curator Ylinka Barotto. "Art invites you to approach these things through another lens."

Both exhibitions pack a lot of material and drama into galleries that feel somewhat sparsely dressed overall in spite of their vivid mix of installation, sculpture, video, photography and/or works on paper and textiles. It's as if the curators knew viewers would need both mental and physical breathing room to digest the ideas presented.

'States of Mind'

Barotto focused on topics Texans find most important, based on research from the Texas Politics Project at the Univ. of Texas-Austin: Gun control, immigration and voter turnout. That's still a sweeping amount of ground to cover, with racial issues inextricably woven in.

The works span three decades, although the older pieces are still timely. Exhibition designer Aviva Rubin has divided the Moody's large spaces with deconstructed cube walls that hint at a metaphor: Democracy is not perfect. The lighting is bright but the mood is stark and mostly somber.

On my first go-round, the works about gun control resonated most viscerally, starting with three oversized police uniforms on hangers affixed to a wall. They're from the late Chris Burden's "L.A.P.D. Uniforms," an installation of 30 pieces that responded to the police beating of Rodney King and subsequent riots in 1992.

Measuring seven-feet-four-inches each, they have regulation belts, holsters, batons, handcuffs, 92F Beretta handguns and copies of an official badge. The arms are outstretched, as if the invisible bodies inside them are holding hands. Depending on your point of view, you might find them awe-inspiring or terrifying.

A visitor could also imagine someone wearing Teresa Margolles' elegant, black velvet capelets, which hang on dress forms looking like a mini-fashion show. But it would be a show about death. Shards of glass are embedded in the fancy hand-embroidery — glass collected at the sites of borderland homicides and assassinations in Mexico. The artist connects that violence to the international distribution of U.S.-made guns.

Petzel

Molly Glentzer, "Art Exhibits at two Houston colleges tackle hot-button issues," *The Houston Chronicle*, October 30, 2020.

The knock-out for me, for all kinds of strong reasons, is Israeli artist Yael Bartana's edgy-yet-meditative 13-minute film "The Undertaker." Looping in the Moody's media room, the film captures the solemn mood of a 2018 performance in Philadelphia.

White-haired Olwen Fouéré, looking dangerous in a perfectly tailored black suit with a red pocket scarf, leads a troupe of dancers in plain, loose, flesh-colored costumes. The dancers carry rifles and primitive mask-inspired placards in a protest-procession. When they approach an open gravesite at Independence National Historical Park, you half expect them to fall in; instead, they bury their weapons. The point of view seems clear, but I suppose even this film is open to interpretation.

A number of the objects in "States of Mind" are not what they seem, or more than what they initially seem to be. The jaunty red and blue lights flashing above a video of Aretha Franklin in Paul Stephen Benjamin's 2016 installation "God Bless America" suggest both a flag and police cars. Sandy Rodriguez' "Mapa de Los Angeles: For Those Killed by Police in 2018" is beautiful from a distance, painted with plant pigments; but contains a number of small, grotesque figures of victims.

Perhaps most provocative is Lynn Hersman Leeson's "America's Finest #2," from 1994-95, which repurposes an automatic rifle as a video installation. I'm not keen on its placement, aimed toward the police uniforms. But viewers who look through the scope will see themselves as the target as a voice in the video encourages them to fire.

'The Visible Invisible'

Some people find clowns creepy. For me, it's mannequins, which always seem passive-aggressive with their stiff bodies and blank faces. But anyway. What's on them is what matters. Clothes define us, and Syjuco hangs them on faceless white mannequins to question how we define ourselves and others during the age of digital image manipulation.

She sews elaborate period garments to examine how models of citizenry, immigration and identity are evolving — and being obscured or modified — with media technology. Some of her outfits feature fabric in Chroma key green, an unnatural color so saturated it creates an invisible canvas for super-imposing images. She makes others with a grey and white checkerboard fabric that mimics the transparent areas for layering images in Photoshop.

Syjuco's costumes also are politically symbolic. The 17th century pilgrim, 18th century revolutionary and 19th century Southern belle of the show's title work represent iconic eras of American history whose truths have been manipulated.

Petzel

Molly Glentzer, "Art Exhibits at two Houston colleges tackle hot-button issues," *The Houston Chronicle*, October 30, 2020.

The larger "Dodge and Burn" installation uses two mannequins in traditional dresses from the U.S. and the Philippines, where Syjuco was born, as the central figures in a diorama. They're surrounded by color calibration charts, skin tone grids and cardboard cut-outs in a mash-up of cultures and eras atop a crude stage. Named for a photo-enhancing technique, it captures the multitude of conflicting images that inform the artist's identity as a Filipino-American woman.

Syjuco also makes potent flags. "Phantom Flag" recreates the Stars and Stripes in black gossamer to suggest the death of American dreams. The colorful, pseudo-national flags of her "Rogue States" installation hang like symbols of otherness above a stairwell at the M.D. Anderson Library. In bold contrast, Syjuco's one-banner, black-and-white installation "I am an..." dominates the lobby of the Gerald D. Hines School of Architecture and Design; it recreates the World War II-era sign of a Japanese-American man who declared "I am an American" before he was sent to an internment camp.

Syjuco stages a virtual protest march with collaborators Jason Lazarus and Siebren Versteeg on a wall near the Blaffer's check-in desk. "Public_Public_Address" streams continuously, programmed to create an ever-evolving collage of images submitted by people from across the country. It's not clear what they are protesting; conceivably, it could be anything, from either side of the political spectrum.

Syjuco purposefully obscures her subjects in photographs that round out the show. Flowers died under layers of spray paint for the series "Neutral Orchids" and "Hard Light," while ethnicities are hidden behind fabric in the series "Cargo Cults" and "Citizens."

"Total Transparency Filter (Portrait of N)" unifies everything. Its subject sits in Rembrandt-inspired light under a drapery of gray check Photoshop fabric, which Syjuco thinks of as a "camouflage textile." Prints of the image hang at both the Blaffer and the Moody, also tying the two shows together.

Regardless of color or political persuasion, we might all picture ourselves in it.

molly.glentzer@chron.com

<https://preview.houstonchronicle.com/art-exhibits/two-houston-art-exhibits-tackle-hot-button-issues-15686842>