

“A Perfect Union...more or less”
The Renaissance Society, Chicago, Illinois
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Mary Gustaitis Beyer, Panel House

Now that the election has passed and we know the dim outcome given to the next four years of our country, the exhibition “A Perfect Union...more or less” takes on a new meaning. On a grim, rainy day at the Renaissance Society, I wondered how I would view this exhibition if the outcome of the election were different. But as I watched Van McElwee’s projection “Flag and Its Shadow” I wondered if these artists had some foresight that I had not.

An eerie wind accompanies this ominous work, where we see an American flag in color and its reflection in black and white, vigilantly swinging in a forceful gale. Engulfing the entire gallery is the foreboding sound of this video and it colored my entire interpretation of the exhibition in a grim way. Not only did it reinforce the desperation of recent events but it lent a grim outlook on the current state of our country.

The windows of the gallery are tinted and on a rainy day they make the gallery appear even darker. Immediately when you enter the space you see Mary Ellen Carroll’s photo installation “Federal, 2004”. Carroll has taken photographs of a federal building at each hour for twenty four hours and the installation features three rows, eight photos each. Together they remind one of the impersonal condition of bureaucracy, but also its sheer inevitableness. By looking at the building over a 24-hour period of time the randomness and pattern of lights turning on and off in the window seems almost natural and the multi-storied building becomes an impersonal and faceless mountain.

Directly in front of this is a stack of royal blue prints out on which in white Arabic letters is the word Democracy. Along with the stack of papers is accompanying royal blue neon letters which hang on the front of an overhead balcony. This piece is a collaboration between Adam Brooks and Matthew Wilson and they make good use of a rather odd element of this gallery since the larger potentiality of this piece is the placement of these letters. The balcony recalls a great orator’s podium from where beliefs are espoused high above a crowd. Bringing to mind a dictator, I could see where the artists were coming from. They title the piece “Industry of the Ordinary” demonstrating the capitalization and dissemination of Democracy to disguise motives of greed and power.

Moving further into the gallery on the right are ten photographs (five on one side of a wall and five on the other) by Joeff Davis. Davis has taken photographs from both the Republican and Democratic conventions. The works are quietly intriguing yet poignant and depending on who you support they reinforce your existing feelings about each disparate group. Upon closer inspection, the figures and places in the photos come across as average and ordinary, not historic or heroic, as if all the emotion of the election is overblown.

One piece that I found interesting didn’t seem to fit within the exhibition as a whole.

“The Evolution of the Negro Political Costume, 2004” by Rashid Johnson shows three different forms of a political costume worn by African Americans. This piece very much fits in with Johnson’s oeuvre and it is very powerful on its own but it seems that it was selected in order to lend a nod to the position of the African American in the political scene. This is a definite issue that needs to be addressed but not in a way that seems like a token. Perhaps this work does not fit since it is the only personal piece in the show – everything else instills distance from the viewer, whereas Johnson’s piece is introspective.

This exhibition is expertly executed and really well worth a visit to the Ren. It is comprised of pieces that require us to reexamine our country and how divided it is at this time. As Chicagoans, we live in a blue city and while this is more or less a perfect union the United States finds itself in the midst of a severe division for at least four more years and the effects of this might be tremendously damaging.

(Mary Gustaitis Beyer is currently pursuing her masters degree in art history at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She works as the gallery assistant at Thomas McCormick Gallery. She grew up in Brooklyn, New York.)