

A Perfect Union ... More or Less
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My Fellow Americans

There is no such thing as “political art.” Art certainly has its politics as manifest in a range of practices. But there are no singular characteristics that would allow for a distinct category of production called “political art.” If there were such a category, it would contain work of such a wide variety so as not to be a category at all. The denial of this category is at the heart of the statement “all art is political.”

But we live in turbulent times. We have before, and no doubt we will again. Under these circumstances, acknowledging that there is no such thing as political art is one thing, while acknowledging our desire for a so-called political art is another. Although we can deny “political art” as a category of production, it is all but impossible to resist the urge to look to the recent past for its artistic responses to a tense political climate. The 1960s and the 1980s certainly had their share of doubt, fear, arrogance and rage.

But to what extent does the past provide a template for engaging these sentiments now? Great is the pressure to invoke historical examples of what are considered politically engaged works of art, works that abide by the slogan “say what you mean and say it mean.” The last four years, however, have spurred convictions that have yet to find an adequate means of expression. Americans are still traumatized over the presidential elections of 2000 and September 11, 2001, not to mention the subsequent turns of events. The stakes in this last presidential election were greater than the sum of individual issues, for it was not a question of the politics but a question of the polity itself.

A Perfect Union...more or less will focus on the national fabric in light of the challenges the past four years have presented to core principles Americans use to define themselves. From a basic faith in the electoral system, to the United States’ role and standing in the world community, Americans have had to do some serious soul-searching about their social and political beliefs and values. The marshalling of strong convictions (religious, political and patriotic) has taken its toll on Americans’ ability to imagine the national fabric in any kind of whole or holistic sense, feelings no doubt, exacerbated by the 2004 elections. Over and above particular, heated issues, the artists in A Perfect Union...more or less have responded to this general sense of fraying by asking pointed questions of national identity through a variety of the means by which Americans recognize themselves.

Author: Hamza Walker