

Creators

Art School Exhibition Explores the Politics of Pop Culture

29 students from the School of Visual Arts display political works through painting, sculpture, performance, and installation.

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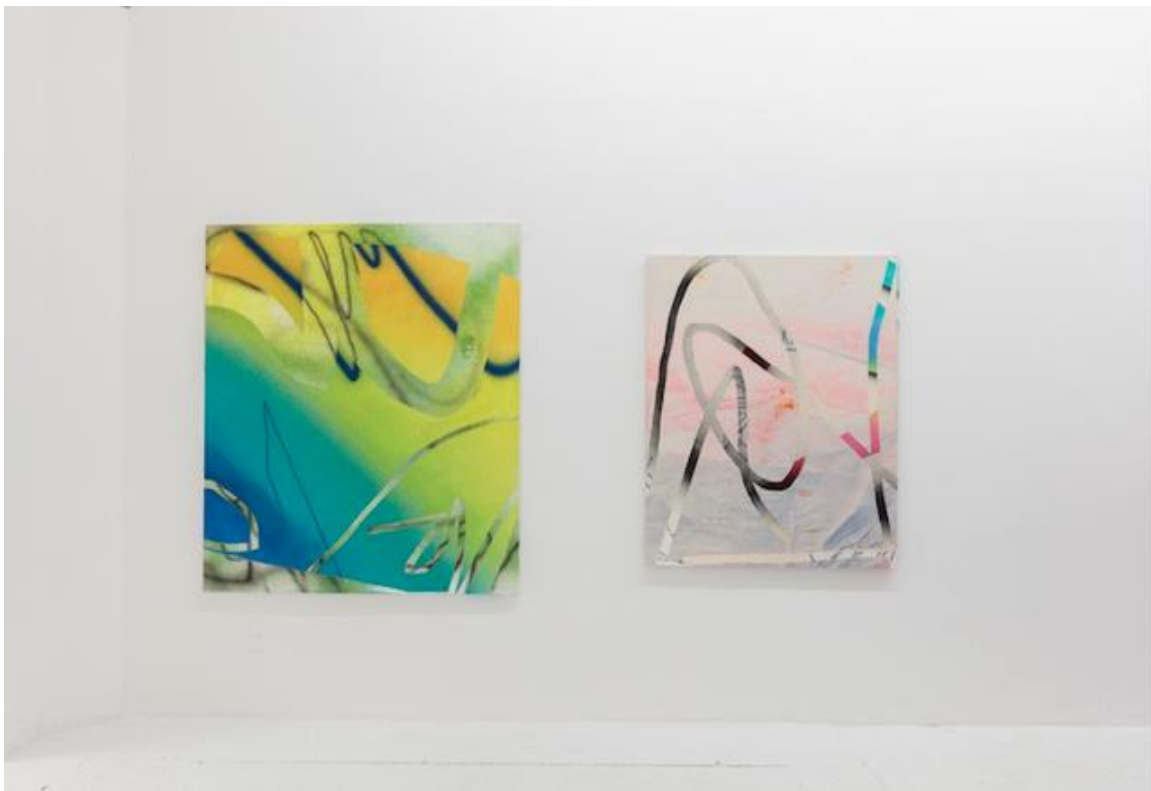


Installation view: Popular Culture IS Where The Pedagogy Is, 2016 SVA MFA Fine Art Thesis Exhibition.

Any MFA thesis show provides a glimpse into the concerns of a new generation of artists. Second-year fine arts students at the School of Visual Arts recently

mounted the group exhibition, *Popular Culture Is Where The Pedagogy Is*, featuring a set of emerging artists who are actively thinking about the pervasive politics and power dynamics present in American pop culture. The 29 artists, who were on display through June 5, used painting, sculpture, performance, and installation to explore observational aesthetics, active engagement, and new takes on formalism, via identity politics.

“The concept that popular culture informs everything is particularly relevant within the discourse around art making,” explains the show’s curator and SVA professor, **Jasmine Wahi**, to The Creators Project. “This exhibition deals with various types of sociopolitical and art histories.” Wahi pulled the show’s title from scholar bell hooks’ interview, “Cultural Criticism and Transformation.” The curator says, “Whether the work is responding to a moment in social history, contemporary circumstance, or aesthetic formalism, they are all pulling from a very human and very specific set of cultural prompts.” She adds, “The idea is more prosaic than it is prolific—we make culture and culture makes us.”



Ruth Freeman R to L: *Is That The Way You Paint?* 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. *Fingered*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches.

Delano Dunn's mixed-media painting, *Weary: A Morning Song* 2015, features Ruby Bridges, and hints at social history and racial identity. “My work explores the previously overlooked simultaneity of the 60s American space race and the

Civil Rights Movement,” writes Dunn in the exhibition catalog. Dunn’s works, which combines imagery of astronauts and other civil rights activists as a way to confer superhero status onto black Americans, is grouped in the show’s observational aesthetics art section. Ali Shrago-Spechler’s installation, *A whole new megillah does amerikuh*, 2016, insists that the audience interacts with large-scale Donald Trump piñatas and Bernie Sanders masks as active engagement art represents. According to the artist, “hybrid actions force viewers to question their own narratives, self-imposed alienation, and the source and effect of memory.”

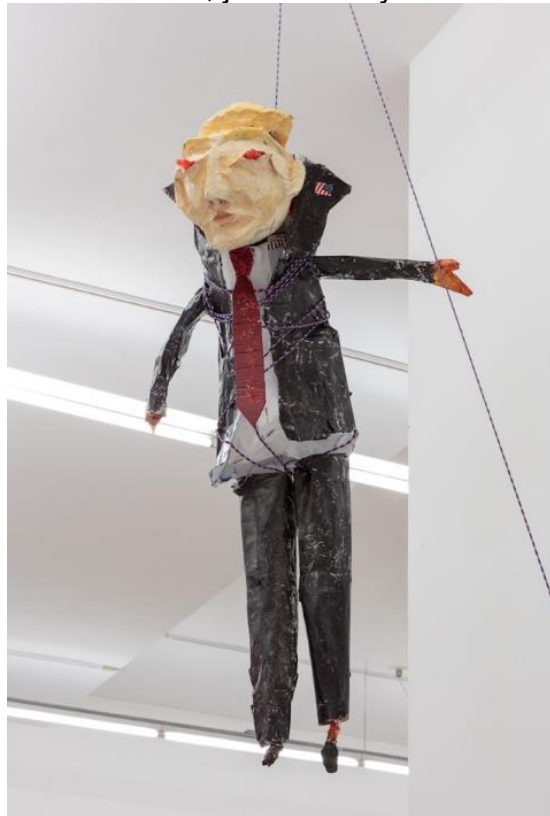
Ruth Freeman’s *Is That The Way You Paint?*, 2016, explores how traditional concerns over how color, materiality, shape, and the very idea of traditional painting are being renegotiated as they converge with digital painting. “My paintings play upon these ideas and glitches, utilizing the same physically obsessive processes of perfection and detail that parallel the digital functions we use daily,” Freeman explains in her thesis statement. The politics in Freeman’s paintings reside within her formal aesthetics.



Ali Shrago-Spechler, A whole new megillah does amerikuh 2016, Mixed Media. Dimensions Variable.

The exhibition presented both artistic and political freedom. It was, in general, much more overtly political than most shows in and around New York City. “As a curator, I think that MFA programs are meant to push artists socially, mentally, and conceptually. And, they should push students to embrace that intellectual, political, and social freedom,” Wahi says. “The SVA MFA Fine Arts Department does a really great job in encouraging students political, social, interdisciplinary, and intersectional explorations.”

“One of the realities of the art industry, particularly with respect to commercial galleries and larger institutions, is that there is an underlying component of commerce and what may appeal to buyers,” states Wahi. “This is not to say that artists aren't creating political work that isn't commercially successful. However, I don't think it's necessarily encouraged in the same way that it is in a more 'experimental' environment.” She says, “Collectors and boards do have a lot of influence in what is shown in these types of spaces, and the truth is that many people in these positions are not avidly interested in a political discourse in a visual arts space. It's not a criticism, just a reality.”



Ali Shrago-Spechler, A whole new megillah does amerikuh 2016, Mixed Media. Dimensions Variable. All images courtesy of SVA.

For Wahi, the artists in the show represent a generational shift. “The next generation of strong artists are multidimensional, multidisciplinary, and very multitalented,” she explains. “The bounds of an artist being strictly a formalist painter, or a feminist sculptor are rapidly evaporating.” She adds, “Basically, I’m saying the next generation is going to make us think. So get ready.”

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