



***SOCIAL JUSTICE: IT HAPPENS TO ONE,  
IT HAPPENS TO ALL***

Presented by Gutfreund Cornett Art  
at Saint Mary's College Museum of Art  
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## WHY

*“It is a big question, a question of the work we have to do to eventually get to place where there is freedom in the world. It is a huge question and it calls for a huge answer, but that huge answer consists of small steps and we can begin engaging in those small steps today . . . I have always discovered that it is artists who guide us into arenas that we have not necessarily known before . . .”* Angela Davis<sup>1</sup>

Small steps, all steps are needed to answer the huge and vital question, “How do we create a more just and free world for ourselves and future generations?” The list of issues, projects, actions and policies responding to this question, as outlined by Dennis McDonough in his White House Blog is overwhelming:

Gender equality, race equality, marriage equality, a livable wage, equal pay for equal work, voting rights, civil rights, reducing violence via guns, in domestic settings, and bullying, opportunities for people with disabilities, accessible and affordable child care, worker’s rights, expanding early education, improving K-12 education, healthier school meals, more affordable or free college options, cradle to college-career support, retirement savings, social security, reforming wall street, job training, strengthening the relationship between the US and tribal governments, immigration reform, refugee integration, clean energy, fuel economy standards, infrastructure, domestic manufacturing, equal access to and affordable health care empowering patients and their decision making, health security, veteran care, internet accessibility for all, climate policies, criminal justice reform, increasing trust and accountability with policing, preventing and ending homelessness, protecting consumers.<sup>2</sup>

The frequency, depth and intersectionality of the stories and tragedies related to all of these can be paralyzing, especially if we consider even a portion of this complexity when we are alone. And the sub-questions can easily find us wishing to retreat further.

What can we realistically do? Can we do anything? Can we contribute anything? How do we process our emotional responses? In anger? In action? In compassion? How much compassion can we give until we, ourselves, fall apart? How do we handle change as a constant and accelerating force? How do we avoid shutting down, pretending that these issues are not our issues, “I” am not “them”? How can we be truthful about our own views? Our own responses? How do we stay open to new ideas and solutions when our heads are seemingly too full to take in any more information? How do we as a society reverse the divisiveness that comes out of this helplessness and fear? How do we make our voices heard? Our votes count? What do we tell our children? How do we protect them? How do we preserve our humanity, compassion and empathy? How do we find comfort? How do we channel the myriad emotional responses into something worthwhile, meaningful, even cathartic?

None of the answers are black/white, either/or and they take time, energy and thought. Artists have many media into which to place these emotions, to process our distress, share our concerns and implore viewers to take action. Karen and I, through our curatorial partnership *Gutfreund Cornett Art*, are channeling our anguish, as well as hope, into the creation of exhibitions such as *Social Justice: It Happens to One, It Happens to All*.

### **SANCTIONED SPACES FOR CONTEMPLATION AND REFLECTION**

The art and museum galleries give us a permissible venue to which to process and meditate on the tragedies around us and in the larger world and to acknowledge the tensions about and visceral reactions to such horrors. A place removed

from the seemingly constant barrage of bad news. These works call to us to feel, to have sympathy and empathy, to recognize our own shame, guilt, fear and anxiety and, perhaps, examine where our own perceptions need tweaking.

During the opening for our *What's Right, What's Left: Democracy in America* exhibition in January 2016, a Turkish man introduced himself to me. He was visiting his daughter, who was studying in the city and, because he was so distraught about the state of democracy or lack thereof in his country, he needed the solace of being in a safe place where democracy was being talked about and analyzed. He was not an artist but told me how comforting it was that we had that space to share our concerns and feelings about what is right and what is wrong in government. That brief conversation made the world seem like a smaller, kinder place, where strangers feel safe enough to reach out to each other for a bit of solace.



Install shot, *What's Right, What's Left: Democracy in America*

In that show and in this one, artists present us with multivariate angles from which to look at social justice issues. Some works invite us in subtly, such as Jennifer Cawley's "For Darfur, for Sudan" while others present images not easily forgotten, such as Veronica Cardoso's *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky / La niña que se cayó del cielo*. They can startle us out of complacency and into questioning what we think we know.



Jennifer Cawley, *For Darfur, for Sudan*



Veronica Cardoso  
*The Girl Who Fell from the Sky/La Niña que se Cayo del Cielo*

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIALOG

One of the main motivators for creating these kinds of exhibitions is the dialog that is engendered by the works and the communities that form in the process of developing and participating in them. Between the artworks and the viewers, between the artists and the viewers, within groups of viewers, within groups of artists. The informal comments and reactions while viewing works with strangers and the more formal "In Conversation" gathering with the artists and audience which is planned during the opening day events of this exhibitions.

Artists have an opportunity to be part of the discourse. They are shedding light on their personal experiences with injustice or those endured by others. Viewers have the opportunity to talk about their own experience, to voice their own imperfections and reflect on those in other people and, hopefully, rediscover patience and tolerance for those imperfections as they, through this shared dialog, work together to transcend polarities and rediscover our common humanity.

## CREATING COMMUNITIES

These communities may only be temporary or they might ripple outward from the gallery spaces into permanent bonds. But, they are born within the structure of activist-themed exhibitions, such as this one, and pull us back into our genetic need for connection, the comfort of a collective experience and the satisfaction of common-focused work and problem solving. They give us hope and reassurance that others in the world are concerned and evaluating and determining their next steps, along with us. They are also asking themselves and us how to best navigate through the world and be an engaged citizen. Interacting with others strengthens our beliefs in cooperation that may lead to better decision-making and policies from the local to global arenas. This sense of community can empower those least likely to speak out, to do so and to respond and take action with whatever skills and insights they have. We are creating a space from which action moves forth from these communities to larger ones. As Berthold Brecht has advised, we are showing the world it is capable of changing.



## HOW DO WE KNOW ACTIVIST ART AND EXHIBITIONS HAVE VALUE AND SOCIAL IMPACT?

Centuries of contemplation of art's value and the parameters within which we value art have certainly evolved. Socrates saw art as a mirror held up to nature. Aristotle believed art could provide a catharsis, a creation in the audience of emotions similar to those experienced when the artists created the piece. Nietzsche thought of art as a way to make life more bearable.

If we look at art as a sign of Hegel's *Geist* (mind, spirit, essence), the evolution of activist art is in line with where the human psyche is now, especially right now, with the potency in our society's questioning of social justice issues. The business of being an artist, according to R. G. Collingwood, is "to explore his own emotions: to discover emotions in himself of which he was unaware, and, by permitting the audience to witness the discovery, enable them to make a similar discovery about themselves."<sup>3</sup> Peggy Phelan, writing about the political purpose of feminist art, stated that it has "something of Hegel's *aufhebung* about it, a "simultaneously a lifting and renunciation . . . [and that the] 'raising' in consciousness-raising involves an elevation and lifting of awareness, even as it also entails a renunciation of passive acceptance, a new intolerance towards unconsidered 'going along'."<sup>4</sup>

Viewers at these shows are asked to not look away, but to, instead, spend time seeing the sometimes disturbing and upsetting works and perhaps take unfamiliar, uncomfortable, yet courageous and important steps by talking with others about their reactions. There are personal benefits in working out concerns with others, forming solutions, and creating a sense of solidarity. Our sense of powerlessness, pessimism, regret, shame and guilt can be transformed.

Jen Delos Reyes, Executive Director of the Open Engagement Conference, which is focused on socially-engaged art, posited, "In our work it is necessary that we enact what we value and what we want to see in the world." In fact, these annual conferences are packed with artists analyzing how they can do just that.<sup>5</sup> Angela Davis, a keynote speaker at the 2016 Open Engagement Conference, told us, "Nina Simone devoted her art to struggle. The power of art, the art of power can decolonize our minds . . ."<sup>6</sup>

I have seen this power of art. As the Chair of the International Caucus of the Women's Caucus for Art, I attended United Nations conferences where art was embraced as a way to present and create an entry point for difficult issues in ways that circumvent language and cultural barriers. Women artists in northern China, while participating in an exhibition and presentations of socially-engaged art projects that I directed with a team of U.S.-based women artists in 2014, shared, in interviews, how seemingly simple actions and reactions, by Western standards, to these events became powerful motivators to think more broadly about issues of identity, equality, domestic violence and rape and encouraged them to speak up and out in the future.

"Myths and Facts of Rape"  
Call and Response during *Half the Sky:  
Intersections in Social Practice Art*  
Luxun Academy of Fine Arts  
Shenyang, China, 2014



## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Reach out.

Overcome that urge to hide and retreat.

Seek out community.

Visit museums.

Bring school children to these kind of politically amplified exhibitions. Listen to their reactions.

Create a space for children to be curious, where they can be understood and learn to understand others.

Don't assume every public official will ignore you. Call them, write them, email them with your thoughts and concerns and your art.

Create art that channels your reactions, emotions and concerns.

Create art that motivates viewers to make changes in their lives and communities, to do an act of kindness, to volunteer, to step up politically and create their own events.

Recognize the transformative power of your experiences channeled through art.

Take small steps. Or even magnificent ones.

**Sherri Cornett**

**Partner, Gutfreund Cornett Art**

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<sup>1</sup>Angela Davis, Keynote speech, Open Engagement Conference, Oakland, California, May 1, 2016.

<sup>2</sup>Denise McDonough, "Back to Work: What Comes After the President's Final State of the Union Address," blog, January 12, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2016/01/12/back-work-what-comes-after-presidents-final-state-union-address>, accessed July 28, 2016.

<sup>3</sup>R. G. Collingwood, "The Principles of Art." In *The Nature of Art: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas E. Wartenberg, (Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 133. Originally published in R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, (Oxford University Press, 1938

<sup>4</sup>Peggy Phelan, "Survey," in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt, (Phaidon Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>5</sup>Jen Delos Reyes, April 23, 2016, blog post "The Power of Love", <http://openengagement.info/jen-delos-reyes-the-power-of-love/>

<sup>6</sup>Angela Davis, Keynote speech, Open Engagement Conference, Oakland, California, May 1, 2016.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE: IT HAPPENS TO ONE, IT HAPPENS TO ALL

Social Justice, I feel we need it now more than ever! Every time I look at my iPhone, read the paper or listen to NPR, there is one heartbreaking, disturbing or enraging story after another. When injustice happens to one, it does happen to all. How can we turn our heads and harden our hearts to the cacophony of human tragedy and suffering in the world? The words from *American Pie* by Don McLean keep running through my head “with every paper I'd deliver, bad news on the doorstep, I couldn't take one more step.”



Still shot from *Power to the People*

With *Power to the People* by Leo Volcy and Brad Wong, one thinks that if we start screaming about injustice we may never stop. But rather than giving into despair, we need to collectively raise our voices for social justice and a peaceful world. What can we do and say to increase empathy for those around us and more importantly for those that are different from us? I recently heard someone say—there are no races—no black, brown, red, yellow, white race, there is just one—the human race and we are all a part of it.

So in this race (a pun as I'm a runner) that is a marathon rather than a sprint, we have to keep moving and cannot let ourselves become paralyzed into inaction—we can make a difference. This is my calling, to help change the world through art. The visual can often say so much more than words and be a catalyst to social change. Think of the lasting effect of iconic works that document war and suffering such as the *The Disasters of War/Los Desastres de la Guerra* prints by Francisco Goya or Picasso's *Guernica*.



South Vietnamese Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of the national police, shoots Vietcong officer Nguyen Van Lem, also known as Bay Lop, on a Saigon street on 2/1/1968, by Eddie Adams.

“Still photographs are the most powerful weapons in the world.”<sup>1</sup> Eddie Adams, the AP photojournalist who took this image, once wrote. This photograph went a long way toward souring Americans' attitudes about the Vietnam War. Have we as a society become hardened to imagery of this sort? I think of the heartbreaking image of the drowned little Syrian

boy washed up on the beach. Since 2014 over 4,600 Syrian refugees have died by drowning trying to reach Europe with an account of 470,000 having died as a result of the war. Is this not preventable, can we not do more in assisting these refugees? Americans have created a NIMBY (not in my backyard) response to these poor peoples. After WWII there was a huge distrust of the Jewish people let out of the concentration camps and many had to remain there for almost five years afterwards due to a media induced of a fear of the Jew. Are we not creating another hysteria over the Muslims?



Source : Reuters/Handout



Flight by Maru Hoerber

*Flight*, 2015 by Maru Hoerber perfectly captures the plight of the refugees and she says “This boat is inspired by my concern for current events, as displaced people from all over the world continue thousands of years of migration to escape violence, poverty, persecution, and natural disasters, in search of survival and a better life.” page 58.

These works have the power to move people to reflect on the horrors of war. Now with digital media we can instantly see atrocities occurring in real time. I am hopeful that in viewing in real time what is happening with police violence towards people of color, terrorism and wars that we collectively will rise up and demand justice.

*Social Justice: It Happens to One, It Happens to All*—I came up with this title and idea for this exhibition a number of years ago after hearing a story of Tanya McDowell who used the address of her babysitter in order to be able to enroll her son in a better school for him to attend kindergarten in Connecticut. She was sentenced to 12 years in prison, although it was cut back to 5 and must pay back up to \$6,200 to the city of Norwalk for “stealing” her son's education. Her lawyer said “She used an address to give a five-year-old boy access to good crayons and books and you arrest her for that?” Then the Housing Authority then evicted the babysitter for fraud for her involvement in the case, her two young children were removed from her custody by the Department of Children and Family Services and the family was then left homeless. All McDowell wanted was for her son to go to a better school, to give him a leg up in life and instead more lives are destroyed.

With the *Social Justice* exhibition we asked artists for work in all media that speaks to and illuminates the ongoing conversation around race, conditions of the working class, disparities in global wealth, power, education, shelter, access to food, water and health services, immigration issues, criminal (in)justice, women's rights, subjugating ethnic groups and the gender queer in the modern world. We have 43 artists in the Museum galleries and an addition 46 in a slideshow that will be played on a monitor in the gallery and all is available online.



Sherri Cornett and I look to employ artwork as weapons in the fight for human rights against violence and the ongoing wars. Human rights can no longer be thought of as separate and belonging to a privileged few, but rather that these rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible for all. We believe the artist's voice will help to foster these important dialogues worldwide and invite artists to add their voice. Art can inspire change and bring people together, crossing the borders of cultures and languages. Artists challenge the norm, imagine the potential and inspire social change. For some, the United States is a true manifestation of the "American Dream", yet, for many individuals both nationally and globally, basic human and civil rights are abridged and jeopardized with a judicial system that has eroded confidence and trust, and with racism propagated through groups that have systemic power to institutionalize prejudice in the forms of laws, policies, and ideologies that exclude and oppress others.

The art we received was phenomenal and it was a difficult task to narrow down the works, there were so many timely, powerful works that showed the artists perceptions and experiences related to injustice, freedom, rights and privileges in America. I have a special affinity for narrative artwork that tells a story, and I am sure, you the viewer will agree upon viewing the work in this exhibition is powerful indeed. To write about them all would create a book, so I'd like to highlight a few.

Joanne Beaulieu Ruggles, *The Wages of Sin*, 1995, speaks to our actions or lack of action and the consequences. Beautifully rendered with her unique painterly style with many hands together, the piece reflects that the reality of the world that is shared by us--all humans have a hand in either making things better or making them worse. We have blood on our hands if we stand by and do nothing.

*Can You Hear Me Now* by Gary Aagaard, 2009, could not be more relevant. With everyone on their smart phones and more interested in Pokemon Go, a host of world tragedies are unfolding around us. Are we desensitized to world hunger, violence and wars?

#### PRICE OF FREEDOM

Jenny E. Balisle in *American Red, White and Blue*, 2016, with paper peppered with bullet holes questions what it means to be American at home and globally. At what price do we secure freedom?

#### BORDERS & BOUNDARIES

Eric Almanza, *In Search of a New Home*, 2012, witnesses the harsh reality of families trying to cross the border to create a better world and a better life for their families. I wonder, if I were in the same situation, what would I do to protect and help my family have a better life? The larger issue concerns racism. With the xenophobic culture in the US and abroad, I would like to pose the question that is, were we not all immigrants at one point, unless you're a Native American that is. These borders and boundaries both physical and metaphorical--who belongs where and who belongs to what "group" is a highly contested question worldwide.

#### CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

With the seemingly epidemic of police shootings of people of color, the work by Justine Fisher is extremely timely. Her piece *The Sunshine State*, 2014, is from the series of "Social Memorials" that "represent unjust events involving unarmed Black men and boys. *The Sunshine State* highlights Florida's backward practice of "strange fruit" or modern day lynching's through gun violence against Jordan Davis and Trayvon Martin. White men stand their ground, Black boys get gunned down."

I saw *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky/La Niña Que se Cayo del Cielo, 2009*, by Veronica Cardoso at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago in an exhibition about the women of Juarez. The image of the young child girl dismembered into pieces on the desert floor has haunted me for years. The violence perpetrated towards women around the world is astounding. Are these women not your mothers, sisters, wives? So many women are left without a voice and no one to protect them.

#### MARGINALIZED PEOPLE AND SOCIETIES

Rhonda Brown, *JustUs is not 4all, 2015*, in a clever lenticular print, expresses the disparity between affluent white college graduates and the lock up of the young people of color, into our federal prisons. Leaving the question, is this another form of Jim Crowe in trying to keep down the black race?

Xian Mei Qlu, *The Birdcage, 2013*, and Priscilla Otani, *Pleasure Quarters, 2010-2013*, raises questions on self-imprisonment, self-empowerment and on violence against women and sex trafficking. Otani's installation "represents the world of women who ply their flesh for a living and survive in the lowest rounds of society."

Sinan Revell, *COLOR/BLIND-Prisoner, 2008* reveals the tendency to not see and ignore unpleasant things around us like the homeless a prisoner a refugee. Sinan says "When we turn a blind eye, to injustice, we are complicit."

#### HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Sibylle Peretti, in this dreamy and delicate work, *Making Birds, 2014*, communicates freedom, unity and seeking release from self-imposed restrictions and from societal and cultural expectations. Sibylle says "The two girls in this piece are obsessively knitting and creating birds in their on-going search to abolish their limitations and thus achieve a unity with the birds. It's about equality, despair, and our longing for individual freedoms."

Sarah Friedlander with *Stonewalled in Jerusalem, 2012*, develops a narrative of thought provoking images from both sides of the Palestinian Israeli conflict. It illustrates the need to build bridges to create peace. Now is the time for us all to reflect on what we can do to make a difference in the world and help create a peaceful and just world.

It took a community to realize this project through the collective work of the artists, the museum staff, the college, our friends in social media, those who believe in this kind of work. The registrar, volunteers, students, staff supported this exhibition and programming that, in other institutions, might have been left to educational outreach, but, here, begins within the gallery spaces.

We'd like to say a big THANK YOU to the participating artists, our Special Recognitions Juror, Sandra Fluke. The staff at the Museum, Kyla, Robin, John and Patrick, have been fabulous to work with and we are deeply appreciative for the opportunity to showcase this important body of work at Saint Mary's College Museum of Art. Thank you to Rona Spears with administrative assistance in helping with the details of the exhibition. And lastly—thank you, the greater public for being interested in social justice and social change.

**Karen Gutfreund  
Partner, Gutfreund Cornett Art**

<sup>1</sup> Eddie Adams (1998-07-27). "*Eulogy: GENERAL NGUYEN NGOC LOAN*". *Time Magazine*.