BEDFORD + BOWERY

OCTOBER 18, 2016

BY NICOLE DISSER

GALLERY SCENE

Presidential Porn Portraits Are Just the Start of 'Why I Want to Fuck Donald Trump'

Last week's video of Donald Trump bragging about sexual assault threw a giant dildo into a campaign that seemed impervious to shame, just as the candidate had *almost* started seeming more presidential (at least, in light of the spotty track record of previous presidents). As screwed up as the whole thing is, nothing in the video was all that surprising. The "locker room talk" only confirmed Trump's image as a billionaire playboy who trades skyscrapers (his most phallic assets) like Pokémon cards, and gets whatever his little Trump desires.

"His whole image is vulgarly sexual in a way," agreed Alfred Steiner, the curator of a very timely new art show. "And he's played right into that the whole time."

Steiner's exhibition, *Why I Want To Fuck Donald Trump*, has been in the works for a while now, but the timing couldn't have been better when it opened Thursday at Joshua Liner Gallery in Chelsea. The basic thrust of the show, Steiner explained, is "how sex permeates electoral politics." And it's not just Trump who's been rendered in a less-than-flattering light. Steiner and the 22 other participating artists slapped Dicks and Virginias all over American political history. Candidates on both sides of the aisle, from Nixon to Clinton, were caught in the crossfire and no one, not even Old Glory, JFK, nor Reagan's beloved jelly beans were spared. In other words, this thing is *yuge*.

The vast majority of the work was commissioned by Steiner specially for this show, with just a few pieces made long before. But, really, the idea was birthed from a series Steiner started way back before the primaries: portraits of the candidates "made up entirely of genitalia," as he put it.

The show's centerpiece is a large diptych from this series, the left half of which is the titular Donald Trump portrait– on the right is a similar piece titled "Why I Want to Fuck Hillary Clinton." They're not the most centrally placed works or particularly colorful even, but together they're the stickiest eye-suckers in whole dang room. Personally, I was drawn straight to the Donald, and locking eyes with him was like coming face-to-face, eyes-to-sex-hole with a great blizzard of humanity– gushy balls, erect penises, dilated buttholes, and more shades and shapes of vagina than I'd ever seen all in one place. It felt a little bit like being dick slapped. I was spellbound.

The bits and body parts Steiner has painted into this onslaught are so lifelike that the two portraits feel more like collages than paintings. Only the slightest blur gives them away as watercolor on canvas, otherwise Steiner is a master of a particular kind of photographic lighting.

"Virtually all of the [source] imagery is pornographic, it tends to be lit in a certain way which gives you intense highlights, it's almost over-lit," he explained. "These are things that you're not normally seeing, even in recordings of these acts being performed."

Eschewing the obvious butthole reference, Trump's trademark pursed lips consist of inner and outer labia, unfurled at their grandest expression, gushing forward in a river of love goop. It's the Democratic contender who gets the (gaping) asshole for a mouth.

The context made me realize just how salacious Trump really is– his nickname, "The Donald," is a code word for ween, obviously. The way his name is slapped on everything from vodka bottles to casinos attests to a far-flung seed. But Steiner's work breaks all that down. There's a certain level of violence to the portraits which makes it so you can almost hear the skin-on-skin slapping and animal floppery we call politics, and then the darkest truth of all emerges: Most politicians aren't all that different from Trump– they're just better groomed beasts with a muzzle.

(Photo courtesy of Joshua Liner Gallery)

Most people might make the same mistake I did and assume (initially, anyway) that *Why I Want To Fuck Donald Trump* is a reactionary art show, possibly even the art world's well-crafted response to one recent, obsessively covered #DaddyWillSaveUs, which billed itself as a ~~total bullshit media stunt~~ "pro-Trump art show" with contributions from far-right wing figures and "Western Chauvinists" like Gavin McInnes (an increasingly active guy in the NYC cultural scene) and Milo Yiannopoulos (who was banned from Twitter last summer).

The parallels are all there– #DaddyWillSaveUs grew out of the sexed-up #Twinks4Trump campaign (one that, in turn, may have taken its name from another, actually funny Twitter parody account). Both made a big to-do of injecting some much-need sex appeal into the Trump campaign, referring to Big Blond as "Daddy."

Actually, Steiner said he started planning his show long before #DaddyWillSaveUs went public, and insisted that he's not running an "anti-Trump" art show anyway. "Of course, there are elements of it that are undeniable," he said, conceding that some artists might have negative feelings toward Trump that come into play in their work. "But I'd like to think it's a little more nuanced than that."

Things have changed in the race immensely since he started painting the portrait, but particularly in the last week or so. No fewer than 11 women have come forward with allegations of sexual assault. "It's made me feel a little more justified in making such a vulgar work," Steiner admitted.

After the opening, it was immediately clear that the art show is, well, just an art show, not a PR circus hellbent on manufacturing controversy. The only egregious blank spot was the lack of anything about Searcy Hayes, the Ted Cruz doppelgänger-turned-porn star whose stunning achievement in post-modernism is just begging to be included.

But there's already a whole lot going on– the show's name is a mouthful, which hints toward some bulging baggage. You might recognize it from an experimental short story written in 1968 by J. G. Ballard, *Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan.*

"It's an odd essay," Steiner said. "Well, not essay– it's more like a fictional scientific abstract where presumably these scientists are recording the results of these experiments conducted on patients with general paresis, which is the condition you have in late-stage syphilis, and they're finding the optimal car-crash death for Ronald Reagan." Some of the surreal "scientific" findings include the prevalence of "powerful erotic fantasies of an anal-sadistic," which participants seem to associate with the "image of the Presidential contender." The shadowy researchers hope to "construct a rectal modulus of Reagan and the auto-disaster of maximized audience arousal" in the near future.

Ballard basically deflates the largess of Reagan (who was a presidential hopeful back then) to the equivalent of a blow-up doll, and this same sort of objectification of the body politic is mirrored all over the exhibition.

Weirdly, Trump just happened to be the first candidate Steiner painted for a series of portraits he'd planned that would depict the primary contenders. "It's given me a perverse reason to root for Trump," he noted. "But I also have a sense of responsibility. If there was a magical genie who told me that whoever I painted first would become president, I might have reversed the order."

Below, we've included our own order– our top picks from the show, in no particular order.

(Photo: Nicole Disser)

4. *Leaving the American Sector (2016), Ana Wolovick*

This multi-layered work looks like it an apocalyptic newsreel that has jumped out of the time-space continuum and into the fourth dimension. Now, we can look down through a magic prism and a see a whole lot indeed– from the late 1600s when the Spaniards wiped out Mayan civilization to the post-World War II division of Germany, all the way up to now, when Trump Tower has taken on a whole new darkness. The painting seems to imply parallels between Nazi party imagery and American patriotic symbolism (are those Parteiadler at the top? or just eagles?) and there's a clever connection between the Berlin Wall and Trump's own plans to erect a wall.