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Andrea Bowers Fights for Transgender Icons in New Chelsea Show

Ben Davis, Wednesday, February 24, 2016

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Andrea Bowers, *Goddess (Power of the Common Public)* (2016). Image courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

When activism finds its way into the art gallery, the house style is what Paige Sarlin calls "new left-wing melancholy," or what I think of as "post-radical chic:" neutralized and neutralizing, mining the paraphernalia of protest for historical pathos. This is *not* the way Andrea Bowers operates, as you can confirm for yourself if you visit the LA artist's show at Andrew Kreps Gallery in Chelsea, dubbed "Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?"

Bowers says that she makes her work by listening to "alternative media," finding stories that inspire her, and then figuring out how to relate to them using the tools of her art. Back in 2004 for the Whitney Biennial, she showed a video detailing the story of environmental activist John Quigley, known for physically occupying a tree to stop developers in LA (in 2011, she crossed the line from documentarian to participant, joining Quigley in

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another "treesitting" protest). More recently, Bowers's has done acclaimed, large-scale drawing installations about immigrant deaths at the Mexican border and about the Steubenville, Ohio high school rape case.

In terms of media, "Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?" is disparate, the works mostly connected to the theme of transgender liberation, a cause which *Time* in 2014 famously dubbed the "next civil rights frontier." It includes small graphite drawings, large scruffy marker-on-cardboard constructions, and an assemblage incorporating angel wings and ribbons with feminist and trans-rights slogans on them, such as "My Body, My Choice," and "Trans Is Beautiful."



Historical activist graphics at Andrew Kreps.  
Image: Ben Davis.

At this gallery show's literal center is a table piled high with cardboard-backed facsimiles of historical activist graphics that Bowers has spent decades collecting, with an eye to how images of women figure in left-wing culture. This reflects the topic of the show, inasmuch as "Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?" focuses specifically on images of trans women, and not of trans men.

But additionally, the fact that you are invited to rifle through these images nudges you to think about how Bowers herself approaches this historical material, as a resource library for present-day inspiration instead of a dead-letter office of soured dreams.



A historical activist graphic in "Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?" at Andrew Kreps.  
Image: Ben Davis.

The most eye-catching works in the show grow out of this approach, a series of vivid, large-sized photographic portraits of present-day trans activist icons, their poses and props inspired by Bowers's collection of graphics: CeCe McDonald, clad as the avenging angel of Liberty, with wings and a hammer, or Johanna Saavedra, striding down an LA street and ready to throw a brick à la a well-known poster from May '68.



Andrea Bowers, *Trans Liberation: Beauty in the Street (Johanna Saavedra)* (2016).  
Image courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

There is a particular significance, here, to these symbolic trappings. McDonald, for instance, became an icon after pleading guilty to second-degree manslaughter in 2012. After being physically attacked on the street, she defended herself with a pair of scissors. Her attacker ended up dead, and the state refused to accept her argument of self-defense.

"In the final analysis, CeCe McDonald is a transgender Black woman who had the courage to 'stand her ground' and defend herself from a hate attack," Ebony opined. "As a punishment for surviving, she has been sentenced to 41 months of torture inside of a men's prison."



Andrea Bowers, *Trans Liberation: Building a Movement* (Cece McDonald) (2016).  
Image courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

Jennicet Gutierrez, subject of another of Bowers's portraits, made the news last year when she interrupted President Obama in the middle of a speech about LGBTQ rights. "President Obama," she cried, before being forcefully ejected from the banquet, "release all LGBTQ immigrants from detention and stop all deportations." (Obama by far has the worst record on deportations of any recent president, Republican or Democrat.)

For her audacity and allergy to cant, Gutierrez received a condescending editorial in *The Advocate*, comparing her to Kanye West and saying "we should resist tossing aside our civility to fight injustice." To depict her, as Bowers does here, proudly brandishing a rifle, is to take a side in a living argument about tactics. The fact that the resulting image evokes canonical political imagery becomes a way for the artist to point out the historical provenance of Gutierrez's militancy.





Andrea Bowers, *Trans Liberation: Ni Una Mas, Not One More* (Jennicet Gutierrez) (2016).

Image courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

It is perfectly possible to read these images as merely affirmative, not that much different from countless magazine covers celebrating newly minted transgender celebrities such as [Laverne Cox](#) or [Caitlyn Jenner](#). Even flourishes such as Bowers's hammers, bricks, and rifles can be recuperated according to the codes of fashion photography, which continuously mines radical signifiers for edgy frisson. They are more than fashion plates—but they demand an audience who is willing or able to relate to a larger argument outside the gallery.

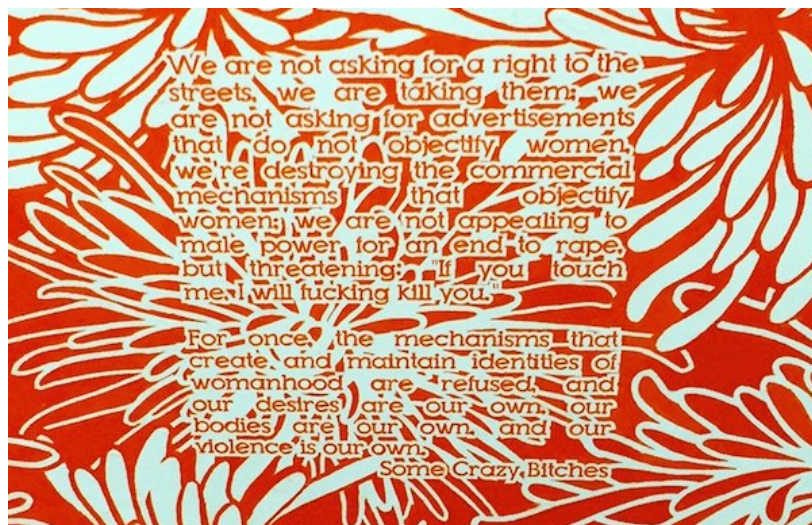
You can tell that Bowers very much means these photos to amplify the voices of her subjects—partly because elsewhere in the show, she does just that: Kreps's neighboring space features a video she shot of a discussion between McDonald, Gutierrez, and [Patrisse Cullors of #BlackLiveMatter](#) that the artist organized at Otis College of Art and Design. "The programming of these types of events in the curriculum of art acts as a reminder of art's compatibility with activism," a press release explains.

Yet there is a debate about that compatibility is worth flushing to the surface. "I was trained to believe that galleries were compromised institutions," Bowers [told Thomas Lawson](#) a few years ago. "I have a lot of guilt associated with my participation." In that interview, she talked about how different the gallery space was when activated for activist purposes and for what she called the "regular art crowd."

Will the "regular art crowd" side with *The Advocate* or with Jennicet Gutierrez? Will this crowd even see, here, that they are being asked to take a side in a debate about respectability?

This question hangs over the show, but Bowers doesn't seem to obsess about it either. She's using the space for what it offers.

At least one work here, though, can be read almost as an allegory of the uneasy fit between different possible communities: An eight-foot-long drawing in orange colored pencil, recreating the pattern of fancy wrapping paper. It's lovely, and you get so lost in its superficial craft that you almost don't notice that within its intricate expanse, a fragment of writing floats, incongruously small. Here it is:



Detail of Andrea Bowers's *Some Crazy Bitches* at Andrew Kreps.  
Image: Ben Davis.

This quote from a radical feminist collective could be a motto for CeCe McDonald's supporters. But the way the in-your-face message is buried here might also be read as a message itself: You have to smash through the show's superficial impression and discard the concerns of artistic fashion to arrive at its most urgent meaning.

Many artists have made careers "raising questions" about art and its relationship to politics; Andrea Bowers actually raises questions about art and its relationship to politics. That makes her work much more discomfiting and tricky to get a handle on, but also much more interesting.

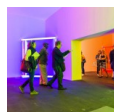
*"Andrea Bowers: Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?" is on view at Andrew Kreps Gallery, through March 26, 2016.*

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