

ARTNEWS

PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS AND OLD CAMP COUNSELORS: AT THE OPENING OF THE JEWISH MUSEUM'S 'UNORTHODOX' SHOW

BY [John Chiaverina](#) POSTED 11/04/15 12:55 PM



Tuesday evening, walking to the private opening of “Unorthodox,” the new 200-plus artist exhibition at the Jewish Museum, on display to the public starting this Friday, I encountered a good, old-fashioned presidential blockade. Obama was present on the Upper East Side, in town for a Democratic National Committee fundraiser at the Richard Rodgers Theatre, home of the hit hip-hop musical *Hamilton*. The play in question features Daveed Diggs, who, before making his Broadway debut, was a member of the noise-rap group clipping. How’s that for unorthodox!

“I felt that a lot of things you see in other museums and galleries are becoming more and more homogeneous, so this was really about trying to look for artists who have a unique, individual voice,” Jewish Museum deputy director Jens Hoffmann told me on the night of the opening. In line with what people tell me is a bit of a curatorial trend, the multigenerational show features everything from the artist Bunny Rogers (born 1990) to the Japanese psychedelic master Keiichi Tanaami and the ceramist Alice Mackler, both of whom were born in the 1930s.



Hoffmann wondered “how far can you go toward the outside, but staying in the inside” and pointed to the artist Boris Lurie as a key figure in the exhibition. A survivor of a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, Lurie often collaged pornography alongside Holocaust imagery, frequently with the phrase “NO!” written across the entire piece. “He was really the starting point for us to think about what unorthodoxy could mean,” Hoffmann said. “But of course, there’s also a pun in the whole thing.”

Speaking of puns, I asked the artist Naomi Fisher if she knew any good ones. “Usually puns just pop out of me like a fountain,” she said. “But you put me on the spot.” Sorry! She continued, saying of the show: “There’s a lot of interesting stuff by people I’ve never heard of, it’s exciting,” mirroring the sentiment of many that night. Fisher singled out some work by the painter Auste as a particular highlight. (It’s not a pun, but the artist Annie Pearlman suggested an abbreviation for the hosting institution: “JewMu.”)

It was around this time that I ran into the artist Ryan Kitson, who just so happens to have been a camp counselor of mine when I was a tween. “I remember all the counselors used to call you ‘Mack Daddy,’” he said. I assured Kitson’s confused girlfriend that it was a deeply ironic moniker. I was a nerd to end all nerds; let’s just say I listened to quite a bit of second-wave Midwestern emo music.

There was a time in the night when things got pretty packed out in the main gallery, which was broken up into a series of sections with names like Iconoclasm, Individual, Gaze, and Secrets. These titles felt like something you would see on a billboard for a steamy ABC prime-time show, but then again my points of reference are limited. In an attempt to seek some refuge, I sidled into a small screening room playing the South African artist Dineo Seshee Bopape’s 2012 digital video work *Why do you call me when you know I can’t answer the phone*. The piece featured some primitive Web 1.0–style Flash animation, twisting up clip art of sheep, gavels, and champagne in an ice bucket while an occasionally abrasive soundtrack blasted. At one point, I saw two women linger for a moment, smile at each other, and then immediately leave.

Outside of the opening, there was a man with a pretty involved steadicam setup following around the artist David Rosenak, who had one of his ultra-involved photorealistic paintings in the show. When someone asked the camera guy what was going on, he said, “We’re doing a documentary,” to which Rosenak cut in jubilantly: “About me!”

The painter Nick Payne—who has a series of his drawings and watercolors in the show—hails from Canada, which gave me a good excuse to talk to him about one of my only true passions in life: Canadian fast-food chains. Talk started with the legendary Tim Hortons franchise before leading to the less famous Pizza Pizza, where Payne told me



there were rumblings of nefarious activities on the part of some franchise owners. I never heard that, but it makes sense, considering Tim Horton's own sordid past. The chain was founded and named after a Canadian hockey player who died during a drunk driving accident in 1974. Payne himself currently lives in Hudson, New York, where he works as a farmer. He had a train to catch later that night.

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