

POLITICS, VISIBLE

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

2012 ARTISTS OF THE MOHAWK HUDSON REGION

UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY, THROUGH SEPT. 8

THIS YEAR'S REGIONAL EXHIBITION—the 76th in a robust tradition—feels different from those of previous years. It's not that some familiar names don't reappear; it's that this exhibition held together more and felt like a timely thematic exploration rather than a hodgepodge. The connective tissue is the ethos of politically engaged curator Nato Thompson, who works for Creative Time, an organization commissioning major "temporary interventions into public life" through art projects in New York City and abroad; before that, he worked as a curator for MASS MoCA and put together exhibitions such as *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* (2004), a survey of political art in the 1990s.

Thompson chooses works showing collective life under hostile pressure—from the powers that be, from the environment, even from our own twisted dreams. Thompson calls for an antidote in his inspired catalog essay, referring to the Occupy movements: "Occupy your body. Occupy everything." It's not that every work here is a militant call to arms. Rather, Thompson gives prominence to works that speak directly of power and catastrophe, and these works shed their light onto other, quieter works.

Those who speak outright of justice or war include Penny Perkins, who photographed the Occupy movement with an iPhone, and Nathan Meltz, who juxtaposes horrifying scenes from 1983's TV movie of nuclear apocalypse, *The Day After*, with his own collaged, animated robots in *After the Day After*. And *A Pakhtun Memory*, a

video by Yaminay Nasir Chaudhri, crystallizes the basic conflict between expression and repression at the root of so much political strife: While the artist and cohorts try to stage a dance in Karachi, a policeman says, "This is not a place to celebrate happiness." These searing words knit together works that give testimony or hint at rebellion, and are as disparate as Peter Crabtree's photos of small-town America and Allen Bryan's photographs of trucks on the road, Mimi Czajka Graminski's playful crocheted chess pieces and Philip Palmieri's oil portraits of people with wounds.

Like Chaudhri, Tatana Kellner, in her *Blue Line* series, draws the map of power from a line of plastic blue crocheted *New York Times* bags snaking into the gallery from a coil in the vestibule that also appears in photographs of the woods and Washington, D.C. In another of Kellner's works, ticks—yes, real ones—some of them bloated, some of them just nymphs, are laminated on clipboards representing

seasons that her dog was out in nature.

Nature is not safe and it certainly doesn't hold still: In Pooh Kaye's mesmerizing *Spring Cleaning*, woman and nature enact a dance both slapstick and profound as the landscape changes through the start-and-stop of time lapse. Performer Alexandra Clack plays a role I'd like to call "salad lady": Frolicking and gathering weeds, she eats dandelions, and as she attempts to alter the environment, chasing a giant tumbleweed, it is clear that nature is calling most of the shots.

The environment is a big preoccupation: in Sarah Haze's *Microscapes*, nature becomes no less mysterious as it becomes microscopic. And in Linda Pinkans' haunting digital photo, *Lion 2*, nature, in the form of a magnificent female lion behind glass, is both inaccessible and too accessible to gawkers below. Other paeans to endangered animals are Colin Boyd's two striking sculptures: *American Bison* clanks and clatters on wooden wheels, a fragile shadow behind a lit screen, while his *Mysticeti*, a disemboweled prehistoric creature, seems to utter a death cry.

If nature is under assault, the self is ever more confined and conflicted.

Abraham Ferraro's *Signature Piece*, spilling out pages of the artist's signature through an industrial contraption, is the self-as-machine, or the artist as reproduced id. Warren MacMillan gives us selves in digital images in thrall to S&M urges that seep out of tired suburban landscapes. More optimistically, Sandra Wimer thrives by blogging about creative breakfasts, while Mark McCarty's portraits of his wife, whose skin in the shower becomes a translucent surface and the most felt human presence of anything here.

As at all big groupings of art, visitors will find things here that delight as well as those that puzzle or disappoint, and other works that, engaging as they are on their own, don't fare as well under Thompson's ideological umbrella. But the large space of the University Art Museum makes it possible for everything to breathe and the regional benefits from its foregrounding of politics. ■



Making the connections: Kellner's *Blue Line in Washington, D.C.* (2011).