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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Art as mirror of this dark moment

By Sebastian Smee GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 24, 2016

We are, evidently, in an angry moment. The repressed, factored-out, and thwarted sides of our psyches are spilling out, and it isn't pretty.

The terrible strain of pretending that that other person over there is just as important as I am, that we are equal, that love trumps hate, and all those other platitudes, those feeble fictions, is proving too much to bear.

Taunting is in. A female student in a hijab is surrounded and heckled by fellow students who call her a terrorist. Black students get on a bus only to be told by other students to sit in the back. Swastikas appear in the boys' bathroom at a school with a high number of Jewish students.

We have columnists and comedians on hand to make sense of this moment. We have edifying teachers and lecturers. We still have a political opposition.

But do we have artists?

Of course. And they've been speaking to this moment for a very long time.

The artists who feel most in tune with what is going on right now are not, by and large, overtly political artists. Political speech has a strange way of not really applying to anyone. (That, in a nutshell, was Hillary Clinton's problem.) The same, unfortunately, is true of most well-intentioned political art.

Great art is different. It applies to me, to you. The artists who speak most cogently to the present are interested in something deeper than truisms. They're not trying to check identity boxes. They're not trying to preach to the converted. They are interested in conveying what Francis Bacon called "the brutality of fact."

Bacon is in some ways exemplary. His portraits come out of a dark European tradition that includes Hieronymous Bosch, James Ensor, Pablo Picasso, and Max Beckmann. They dramatize the tension between the psyche's darker compulsions and the pressure felt in civilized society to conform, to repress emotions, not to lash out.

Bacon invented a whole new visual language for this tension. He drew on those forerunners in art, but also on photographs in medical textbooks, in the films of Luis Bunuel and Sergei Eisenstein, the stop-motion photographs of Eadweard Muybridge, and news images of 20th-century violence.

Think of the pinched and slightly blurred look in the president-elect's eyes when he is not getting his way or feels hard done by. His micro-expressions — the fleeting twitches, the flash of fury — hint at a mind incapable of composure.

They find gorgeous equivalents in the smeared, distended expressions of Bacon's portraits, which capture the human psyche at the very moment when composure breaks down and the animal — adrenalized, alert, ready to snarl — is revealed.

We are in a divided society. People are on a short fuse. They are looking for — and finding — like-mindedness. In some cases, for the reassurance of platitudes. In others, for permission to make those ugly faces, to express the contempt that burns beneath the scuffed veneer of civility.

In crowds, at protests, at rallies, these people feel an expanded license to say and do things they wouldn't dare elsewhere. Sometimes they hide behind a political placard or put on a mask. Given the right setting, they might even throw up a Nazi salute.

There is no shortage of artists who have been interested in this side of our psyches. Gillian Wearing, another artist from Britain, once made a series of 600-odd photographs called "Signs That Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say."

Members of the public were asked to pose for photographs while holding up signs on which they had written. Some were pitiful and funny — gorgeously English, like a song by The Smiths: "The last holiday abroad was nice but I can't afford it." Or: "Southwark Council hopeless." Others were just hilariously inappropriate, as in the two black girls holding up a sign saying: "I love the big willie."

One artist whose work I keep coming back to lately is the photographer Latoya Ruby Frazier, whose breakthrough book described her family's life in Braddock, Pa.

But the most famous showed a young, white, well-groomed man in a business suit holding up a sign on which he had written, "I'M DESPERATE."

In another work, called "Confess All On Video. Don't Worry, You Will Be In Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian. . . ," Wearing showed 10 people in succession wearing repellent masks: ugly wigs, a penis nose, and so on.

Liberated by anonymity, the participants who answered the ad found a bizarre new confidence in self-exposure. Sounding like a pervert, it seemed, could be something to be proud of if you weren't going to have to face up to the audience you were addressing.

Wearing's interest in doubleness, and in the permissions we grant ourselves to express primitive sentiments, feels incredibly apt at a time when social media and online comments threads — and, for that matter, secret ballots — have unleashed astonishing toxicity.

Another contemporary artist whose work I keep coming back to lately is the photographer Latoya Ruby Frazier. Frazier's breakthrough book, "The Notion of Family," described her family's life in Braddock, Pa., where she grew up.

Pennsylvania is one of the states that helped buck predictions and vote in the new president. The issues facing Braddock, a struggling steel town, can feel representative of many of the wider electorate's grievances.

"The Notion of Family" alternates between images of the most proximate, tender, breathing intimacies of life inside her family home and more distanced, objective views of Braddock.

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER/GALERIE MICHEL REIN, PARIS

Latoya Ruby Frazier's "Momme Portrait Series (Floral Comforter)."

Frazier, who is African-American, understands wider political realities and economic forces, and she rails against injustice. But nothing about her work feels vague or "generally applicable." It is incredibly specific. And it warns against any tendency to peddle in platitudes.

There is another photographer, Roger Ballen, who has been around a lot longer than Frazier, but who seems more relevant than ever. Ballen is a New Yorker who has lived and worked in and around Johannesburg since the 1970s.

When Ballen's mother died, he went off on a four-year "hippie trail" odyssey. He somehow got into geology and ended up in South Africa as a mining entrepreneur. At the same time he pursued photography. He began in a documentary style, but with acute formal and psychological sensitivities, which he ratcheted up over the years, letting the documentary impulses wither.

In "Dorps" and then "Platteland," he photographed the mostly white, mostly impoverished, and often inbred inhabitants of rural South Africa. This was counterintuitive, because — understandably — little sympathy was reserved in the public imagination for white Afrikaners in apartheid South Africa, no matter how impoverished, marginalized, or isolated. The images are electrifying.

In "Outland," "Shadow Chamber" and "Boarding House," Ballen turned toward more theatrical, psychologically probing photographs of interiors that contain disturbing combinations of worn-down human subjects, animals, toys, makeshift furniture and sculpture, and crude drawings on the walls.

These images are visual "fictions" in one sense. They have the look of anarchic rooms in darkened madhouses where the lights have been suddenly switched on. But, like the works of Goya and Bosch, they get at great truths about the darker recesses of our minds.

The world as we know it — unlike the worlds imagined by Roger Ballen — has not been upended; nor has what we want and need from art. We need the sunlight, the color, and the beauty of Matisse and Monet right now as much as we need these darker visions. Those justly celebrated artists were not peddling lies — they were sharing truths that are immune to cliché.

But it's good to remember that not all art is there to console us. More than any piece of investigative journalism, art can express fundamental truths about our circumstances and our natures. Very often, we would hesitate to put those truths into words — assuming we even could.