Zoe Beloff Parade of the Old New

A discussion with
Une discussion avec

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Hi Zoe! This exhibition is the first time you will show *Parade of the Old New*, so maybe we could start this discussion by asking you to tell us about how you came to make this series of paintings, both in general terms and also more specifically with regards to the form. Though it is related to formats you've previously explored, such as graphic novels, films and performances, this is the first time that you have created a panorama. Why did you choose this form?

Perhaps the panorama chose me. I certainly never made a decision to make a panorama forty meters long, how could I? I had no idea what was going to happen. On the morning that it became clear that Trump had been elected president, I, like many people, woke-up feeling ill and dazed. I felt I had to say something, so I posted Brecht's poem *Parade of the Old New* on Facebook. Written in 1938, it expressed much better than I ever could, my feelings about the dark times that lay ahead. The grand procession, an inauguration of the most hideous and reactionary ideas rising up from the grave, was one starting point. At the same time, indeed on the same day, I was making protest posters out of cardboard. I felt they were not big enough to contain my rage. I was desperate for a larger canvas. I have been interested in history painting for many years. Immediately what sprang to my mind was a fresco in the town hall of Sienna by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*. I was particularly inspired by the figure representing bad government, sitting on his throne with the body of a man and the face of a monster.

From the great murals by Diego Rivera in the National Palace in Mexico City to Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977* at the Museum of Modern Art, I had studied and thought a lot about how these works reinvented history painting for the twentieth century. So, I was ready to reinvent history painting for the twenty-first century, in my own way, in my own apartment studio, with what I had at hand. I really loved working at this large-scale, which is very close to theatre and to cinema, with figures that are almost life-size: I'm staging a drama. And I think of my panorama as a film, unspooling not in time but in space.

You painted forty paintings over the course of Trump's presidency, depicting the events that disturbed you most throughout those four years. What does it take to paint events without knowing what they might lead to next? Especially events that can have such a huge impact on your daily life?

In August 2016, Trump was on the campaign trail. People were still laughing him off as a buffoon. I was not. I was scared. I thought, "I have never witnessed a right wing demagogue in action. I need to do this. I need to be there and document the experience." It was one of those thoughts that, much as one might wish, one cannot "unthink". I knew it would be cowardly to back out. I decided to document by drawing: it seemed like a much more precise medium that phone photos. For me, documentary drawing is thinking and responding in action, in the moment. I was not interested in Trump but in the reactions of his followers. Not to draw attention to myself, I dressed as an "alt-right" housewife, in shorts, a polyester blouse and a red cap. Being white and middle-aged made it easy to blend in. What I witnessed was a very simple theater, you could call it "sloppy fascism": everyone knew the lines, the grand list of grievances.

Creatively, I love to work with materials that I cannot completely control, with images and stories that speak back to me. I think that is why I have always been

excited by found material: dreams, found films that have their own logic, images and stories that find me. As both an artist and a filmmaker, I am interested in setting myself in conversation with my materials rather than producing a well-crafted monologue. I had no control over the terrible events that I depicted in *Parade*. It was a tough and often literally heartrending dialogue. But I did not paint *Parade* continuously. There were many breaks while I worked on other projects: weeks, months, and at one point more than a year. When something happened that affected me deeply, like the far-right rally in Charlottesville or the detention of migrant children at the border in what can only be described as concentration camps, I would collect images from the news media. Then, in the space between these events and my depiction of them, I would have time to reflect.

The last part of the picture, which begins with the ambulance and the emergency medical workers, marks a turning point. All of a sudden these were events that were not out there but very close to home, and I no longer relied on images that I experienced second-hand through the media, but ones I saw with my own eyes. The people lined up for free food outside a school were directly opposite my apartment. I witnessed this scene every morning last summer. I took part in the George Floyd protests along with thousands of my fellow New Yorkers. The people painting "Black Lives Matter" along the road was one of the most beautiful public art projects I have ever known. I painted these images in a different spirit. I was no longer interested in politicians. There were no more monsters. My heart was with the ordinary people, and I wanted to paint them with great respect and celebrate their resilience.

The only incidents that I painted almost immediately after they occurred were those at the beginning and end: the inaugural parade and the insurrection on January 6th. Honestly, I thought that I had completed my work in November 2020 when Trump was finally voted out of office. I was very happy that my panorama would end with the young people painting "Black Lives Matter", leading the country in a new direction. But the insurrection was so insane, so horrifying, that try as I might, I realized that I could not ignore the most serious attack on the Capitol and on democracy in the US since 1814. *Parade* would not be complete without it.

The whole country witnessed it live on TV, or online. The image that stuck with me was of a hideous swarm. And that's what I tried to convey in my picture of rats, flies, frogs and bats dive-bombing the building. I decided to end with the unfinished image of Amanda Gorman at the inauguration because, I guess, I do have hope, and because she embodied this – not just with words or with poetry, but with her beautiful gestures and her image, so that everyone could understand, even small children and people who do not speak English. It was very moving.

Most of your works before this one sought to retell minor histories or even invent them as a counterpoint to the way history was being told – for example the story of the patient known as Augustine at the Salpêtrière[1] or The Coney Island Psychoanalytic Society[2]. This is the first time you have worked on contemporary events that happened at the very same time that you were painting, events which, as you say, were all over the news. Do you think that being surrounded by representations of what you wanted to paint changed your process of making pictures?

My work indeed focuses on minor histories, histories from below. And it is true that *Parade*, with its monstrous politicians, is different. But at the same time, I also

wanted to depict those people whose names do not make the headlines: the protesters who fought back in Charlottesville, the undocumented people arrested in their workplaces, the ordinary citizens who stepped up to man the food pantries, the nurses who cared for COVID patients – all those people who should be recognized and painted, but who hold no interest for modern art and modern artists. Since the birth of abstract expressionism, modern art has abandoned the working class as a subject. There are a few exceptions, mostly African American artists. Do you know the work of Kerry James Marshall and Henry Taylor? I love their work. Kerry James Marshall had a big retrospective about four years ago – I think I saw it four or five times.

You made the panorama paintings in your studio at home. Perhaps this could be a definition of "minor art": an art made by yourself, in your home. Is this something you thought about? Even the choice to use cardboard clearly stands in contradiction to the idea of a monumental art and the conventional form of history paintings.

You make it sound like having a studio at home is a creative choice. The reason is simply financial. I cannot afford to have a separate studio. I make no money from my art. I've only sold a few drawings in my entire life. I do get grants, but somehow I always end up putting my own money into my projects. As it is, I have to pay $300 a month for a storage space in the Bronx just to keep the artwork that I have already made. Sometimes I think I will just throw everything out, but occasionally a gallery wants to exhibit something I have done in the past, so I think I'll keep my storage space for a few more years.

I am indeed a minor artist. And the definition of a minor artist as someone who works at home with what they have around the house is a good one. My grandmother was one such artist, although she was a dressmaker, because in the world which she came from, there was no space to be an "artist". My grandmother made my clothes and toys and just about anything I wanted as a child. She was my wonderful role model.

I live in a two-bedroom apartment. My husband Eric and I use the bedrooms as our studios and sleep in the living room. My studio is about 3.5 x 4.5 m. It is full of things, but it is amazing how much I can do in a small space. I painted *Parade* in here, two panels at a time. Sometimes projects spill out into the rest of the apartment. When we need to build a model, we do the woodwork in the kitchen, and get sawdust everywhere. Of course, working at home informs my art. I don't fantasize about what is completely out of reach. I could dream about having a million dollars to make a movie and getting to do incredible moving camera shots, or having an exhibition in a

1 Zoe Beloff created *Charming Augustine* in 2005. This 16mm film draws on archival documents related to hysteria at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. It focuses in particular on the story of Louise Augustine Gleizes, a patient of the doctor Jean-Martin Charcot who was made famous by a series of theatrical photographs taken during her "crises of hysteria". The film makes links between these medical documents and the beginning of narrative cinema.

2 "DREAMLAND: The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society and its Circle, 1926-1972" is an exhibition project that Zoe Beloff presented for the first time at the Coney Island Museum in New York in 2009. The project retraces the history of The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society, founded in 1926 by Albert Grass, and presented a series of films based on dream narratives recorded by the members of the society. It also featured maps and models of an amusement park to replace Luna Park and that was designed around Freudian methods of dream analysis. The project also resulted in a book that was published in 2010, *Adventures of a Dreamer*.

museum or major gallery – but why? I'm delighted you are about to show *Parade* at Treize. A true minor artist is happy to make work just for themselves. I am still egotistical enough to want to share it with an audience.

Regarding the cardboard, it is really important to the meaning of the work. I feel strongly about this. We do not live in a heroic age of masterpieces painted with oils on canvas. We live in an age of fast food and online shopping. Today cardboard is the medium of global commerce, the shells that encase billions of dollars of merchandise. It is also the medium of last resort, the shelter for someone living on the street who has simply nothing else to cover themselves. And it is also the medium of agitation, of protest posters. For me to have painted on canvas would have drawn *Parade* into the world of fine art, of the commodity. It would have felt self-aggrandizing and pompous.

The truth is that I also love cardboard. I started working with cardboard when I staged *The Days of the Commune*, Brecht's play about the Paris Commune, in solidarity with Occupy Wall Street in 2012. We worked outdoors in public places, going through the play scene-by-scene over three months. Because we had no permits, we could not put anything down. So, I decided to make all the props and the scenery out of corrugated cardboard. It was a huge task. I created not just bottles of wine, hunks of cheese, dead rats and rifles out of cardboard but also a cannon and of course the barricades. I came to really love the medium. The color of cardboard is beautiful. It is a very nice ground. I like to paint not too thick, so the viewer is always aware of the cardboard surface.

As you might have guessed, I am a great admirer of Thomas Hirschhorn, who makes installations out of cardboard and many other things. They are amazing, but they do not last more than a few weeks or months. They are there to inspire people in the present, not to drag themselves into the future. Did I ever tell you that I took an art class with Hirschhorn when he was staying in New York to oversee his Gramsci Monument? He taught an art class on Friday mornings, and anyone could join. Each week he would look at what I had done and declare: "No energy, no ideas!". But nonetheless, I learned a lot – especially about what it felt like to be at the bottom of the class.

Cardboard is just a kind of paper. So as long as it does not get wet, it will last a long time. But will my panorama last? It is clearly not something for the affluent collector. I imagine *Parade* will end up back in my storage space in the Bronx, like all my artwork, and eventually I will toss it out. I have always thought that the most important thing is to make work that speaks to the moment, not to some imagined eternity. Yet at the same time, I did paint *Parade* to give a form to terrible events, so that they would be remembered beyond the twenty-four-hour news cycle. I wished to preserve a record in images. Indeed, I went as far as to contact a conservator from the New York Historical Society to see if this venerable institution might be interested in including *Parade* in their archive. I had met the conservator very briefly at a demonstration where she was looking for protest posters to add to their collection. I said, "think of *Parade* as material culture, as a record of a time." When the picture was completed, she brought one of the directors to look at it in my studio. We talked for a long time then they thanked me and left. I have not heard from them since.

We will have to come back to the concept of "material culture" that you just brought up here as it seems like an important one. But first, since you mentioned Hirschhorn, it seems like a good moment to ask you about

popular audience. Walter Benjamin did a series of radio shows for children, Brecht made plays for amateurs, Constructivist artists illustrated children's books, just to name a few examples. Their work is my inspiration. I think the hardest thing – but also the most important thing – is to make difficult ideas accessible. And though I certainly don't always succeed in that, I always want to make sure that some aspect of my artworks will appeal to children. I think humor is important.

I have been lucky enough to have spent my career teaching diverse working-class students at CUNY. When I teach my undergraduate art class, I sometimes quickly discover that some students have never been to a museum or an art gallery. I am thrilled to be the person to take them to a gallery for the first time or to introduce them to an artist they never otherwise would have heard of. I try and find ways for them to express themselves. For example, they make graphic novels about their own lives. I show them work by graphic novelists but also by artists who incorporate narrative – there is no hierarchy in my class between popular and fine art.

And you are right, I am a disciple of Brecht and Benjamin. It is true I have learned a lot from them, and their writing and their ideas helps me figure things out. But when you write it down, the idea of being a "disciple" also sounds terrible and stultifying. It brings to mind the "great man" theory of history, where "great artists" are like religious leaders with their followers, the lesser artists, as "keepers of the flame". This is so disheartening, especially for women. I remember when I was a student at art school, where, of course, all the professors were men. And some of them would have their "disciples", male students who would drink with them after class and paint in the same style. I remember when Stan Brakhage became head of a film school in Boulder Colorado and hired professors who made films like him, his disciples. How completely discouraging. That is one of the many reasons that I never discuss my own work with my students. I don't want them to feel even the slightest pressure to be like me.

But rather than the word "discipline", I would like to substitute the word "friend" or "comrade". Let's get rid of the hero worship and the pedestals, and imagine Brecht and Benjamin as people we can have a conversation with, perhaps even in a bar. I think I said this before, but some years ago a history professor from Harvard asked me what my methodology was, and taken aback by this question, I blurted out, "Oh, I speak to people from the past." But it is true. I do this. I walk around the apartment talking to imaginary people. In my new film *The Tramp's New World*, we see James Agee writing a screenplay for Chaplin. He has many imaginary conversations with Charlie, who is just a projection on his desk, a phantom he knows from the movies, not a real person at all. This is my methodology, too – I talk with people who are not there.

My class with Thomas Hirschhorn was a very particular situation, and I think there was a lot of projection going on. His *Gramsci Monument* was set in what we call public housing or "the projects" – city housing for low-income people. When, on day one, I was the only student who showed up for art class, I'm sure he was very disappointed. It was clear that he saw me as a middle-aged, privileged, white lady who was coming to the projects for the first time. I stood in for the kind of art lover he despised. Of course, he was stereotyping me. But then again Black people get stereotyped by white people all the time, so who was I to complain? Gradually the class developed. Week after week, more people from very different backgrounds joined in. At the end

of each class, the participants were required to judge everyone's work – "energy yes" or "energy no" – and to give a reason for what they said and be prepared to defend their ideas. It was really great, because everyone was encouraged to speak their mind. But for me, and this is where my projection came in, Hirschhorn's judgement always seemed to carry the greatest weight. He came to stand in for all the older male professors who had looked down on me in art school and who I had never dared to openly contradict. So, each week I would get up my courage to face him and defend the other participants' work as articulately as I could. You could say that perhaps there was a lot of psychoanalytic working through, definitely some transference on my part. It was a struggle, but hopefully I learned something about standing up for people.

You said art should not be pedagogical, but that it still has to educate people. Do you see any differences between *Parade* and the cardboard paintings you did for the street protests you took part in over the last five years? You spoke earlier of "material culture"; is there any hierarchy between, let's say a category we could call "artwork" on the one hand and these kinds of historical, cultural materials on the other?
No hierarchy at all – they are all one thing. *Parade* grew out of the paintings I made for protests. I think of the protest placards as small versions of the cardboard panorama, split-off parts. In a lot of ways, they were more successful. Vivid, witty signage makes a protest more exciting and fun. It invites attention from the press. People loved my pictures and wanted to have their photos taken with them. They were definitely a magnet for cell phone cameras and of course those pictures go on social media and spread the word. *Parade* is more complicated. I really wanted to do it, but I had to ask – why? I just felt that someone, some artist, should chronicle these times. Brecht did the same thing with his amazing *War Primer*. Over the long period of the Second World War, he put together photographs of the conflict cut from magazines and newspapers with short poems that interrogated these images. It took him years to get this work published because the book did not make the government of any country look good. Finally, in 1955, the first edition was printed in Berlin, but the East German government censored twenty of the image/text pieces. I am very happy to have been able to make *Parade* into a book, a very, very long accordion book. I am excited about this. It will be something that people can own, and it can also live on in libraries and archives as a record of a time and a place.

In the past, your projects have often become artist's books (or films). Beyond documenting your work, does this help you to think about other ways for it to circulate and live? Does the idea of the book, of its form, come early on in the process, at the same time that you are painting? And finally, do you see the book and the paintings presented in an exhibition as equivalents to some extent?
I stumbled into making books thanks to Christine Burgin. I met her twenty years ago when she had a gallery. She exhibited very interesting work and always had time to show you around and to discuss things. But she did not like the business of art. So, she decided to give up the gallery and become a publisher. She is particularly interested in archival material that is out of the mainstream, and the kind of dialog my work created with the archive made sense to her. I was so lucky to have the opportunity to do four books with her. I consider her an incredible mentor. She is not just a publisher,

she is totally hands-on in terms of the contents of the book and its design, right down to the last detail, and she has the means to produce very beautiful editions. I have now done a number of publications with other resources, but she is still very much a mentor.

I make images and I write. I tell stories. My ideas become films, or exhibitions and books, or just picture books. Some of my installations are very conceptual, and there I think the book is actually the heart of the project. I'm thinking of *The Infernal Dream of Mutt and Jeff*[3] which is about labor, and cinema as a tool for the instrumentalization and optimization of the body, or *Emotions Go to Work*, which focuses on how corporations turn our emotions into valuable assets. In these works, the text can be a guide to the juxtaposition of disparate objects and images in the gallery, enabling people to dive deeper into my research.

The book is always the last part of the project. It is a way of pulling everything together. Are the book and the exhibition equivalent? That is a hard question. They are different. Christine taught me to make a book as a stand-alone object. But, very simply in terms of my images, seeing them reproduced small-scale in a book is okay, but it is still best to view them in real life, where one can experience the color and texture and scale. Some of my drawings are very large. The really nice thing about books is that they are inexpensive, so one doesn't have to be a collector to own one. Though I will say that, socialist as I am, I don't have anything against selling pictures so people can have them in their homes, or so that they can see them in a museum. There is nothing wrong with getting paid for one's labor.

To go back to *Parade*, the full title of the series — *Parade of the Old New* — comes from a Brecht poem that was written in the first years of Nazism in Germany. You often speak about how anachronisms help you to describe our contemporary age through the resurrection of historical forms that were relevant in the past. As a filmmaker, you have the opportunity to shoot contemporary events as they happen, in a perfect concordance between the medium and the time. Instead, over the past few years, you chose to make a film about the Commune, whilst painting a panorama for Trump's presidency!

You know, for me, film and drawing are just two forms of picture storytelling, of making ideas visible. Sometimes I draw simply because I want to represent things that cannot be filmed – for example in my books about refugees. *Between Worlds: An Asylum Seeker in America* is about a man and his family who I met as a volunteer visitor in an immigration detention center. I was not allowed to bring a pencil into that facility, let alone a camera, and of course I could not go to Cameroon and film the places and experiences he described. So, I instead made drawings from verbal descriptions and from photographs that he showed me after he was released.

Can anachronistic forms or historical events speak to us today? There are many ways one could answer this question. Even when historical events are over, their effects ripple outwards across time. The Paris Commune only lasted three months, but I believe the ideas that it stood for continue to resonate. Some of the people in the Occupy movement here in America had never heard of the Commune. I felt that the

3 Another project by Zoe Beloff, *The Infernal Dream of Mutt and Jeff* takes the form of an installation, a film and a book. It uses an animated film created by Bud Fisher in the early 20th century as a starting point for an inquiry into the idea of productive and unproductive bodies.

play, by looking back to 1871, could perhaps help us think about what a Commune of the future might look like, or at least that was my idea. But the legacy of the past can just as well drag us backwards. Watching a man march through the Capitol on January 6th brandishing a Confederate flag only made visible what is all too apparent elsewhere: here, the Civil War is far from over. Today as I write this, all across the Republican states, laws are being enacted to make it harder for Black people to vote.

You are also correct that history painting and the idea of creating an allegory are indeed anachronistic. And yet, I would still maintain that anachronism can also be a form of Brecht's distanciation, a way to look at ideas and events anew, outside of the onslaught of social media and television news. Brecht, who himself was so concerned to speak critically to his time, made history plays like *Mutter Courage*, set in the Thirty Years War, *Galileo*, and of course *Days of the Commune*.

While the panorama might be anachronistic, it is very close to mural painting, which is very much alive and well. Murals are being painted in cities all over the world, with and without permission. It is an exciting and flourishing popular art. Right now, the city of New York has committed twenty-five million dollars to revitalizing the arts. Money on this scale has not been spent since the Federal Arts Project[4] of the 1930s. It is very exciting. This summer the program called The City Artist Corp gave out grants through a lottery to three thousand artists across all disciplines to do public projects. Amazingly enough, I am one of the lucky recipients.

I have also managed to get additional funding from another couple of foundations to do a mural, *The Song of the Essential Worker*. It will be an interactive documentary wall mural, a parade of essential workers, each one a portrait of a real person. Below each figure a QR code will link to a short film where the worker introduces us to their work, their world and their hopes for the future. This project will also take the form of posters in other cities. The idea is to celebrate the people who got us through the pandemic and who are too often overlooked. We start shooting interviews next week. I don't even think I would have thought of doing this if it had not been for painting *Parade*.

This Federal Arts Program is actually central to an essay, "The Troublemakers: History Painting in the Real World", that you recently wrote after having finished *Parade*. It is also important in another related text of yours, "Creative Demolition", that was published online by *Drain Magazine* [the essay will also appear in French in a forthcoming book edited by Paul Sztulman]. In both of them you tell the story of history paintings and discuss the challenge of representing history in a public context.

Here in the United States, there has been lively debate in the art community about the place of paintings and statues in public spaces and their role in glorifying or promoting the country's racist history. The protests against the murder of George Floyd brought these discussions to a boiling point. As a citizen who cares deeply about social justice and about art, I read all I could and thought a great deal about these debates. My writing has been a way of collecting my thoughts on paper.

"Creative Demolition" grew out of an informal conversation with my friend

4 Launched by the Franklin Roosevelt administration in 1935 amidst the Great Depression, the Federal Art Project employed artists to create work for public institutions across the United States in order to shore up the artistic economy. Numerous prominent artists participated in the programme, including Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell and Philip Guston.

Paul Sztulman about the statue of Teddy Roosevelt flanked by allegorical figures representing America and Africa that stands in front of the American Museum of Natural History. Paul had seen it a year earlier on a visit to New York. It was amazing to him that something like this was still standing. So, I playfully wrote back with an idea about how, if it was up to me, I would take it apart and reassemble it in a quite different configuration to open the figures up to a whole new interpretation. He replied that obviously my idea would be impossible to realize but it would make a great drawing so I said, "Okay, I will draw it." The picture in my essay now hangs in his house. I wrote the essay to accompany the image. It was only later, when a colleague sent me the call for papers on art and social justice by *Drain Magazine*, that I decided to submit it.

While "Creative Demolition" was very spontaneous, I had been thinking about the artists and the issues that I put wrote about in "The Troublemakers" for much longer. When you suggested a publication, it seemed like a good opportunity to put my thoughts down on paper. The most painful and difficult section for me was the one about the George Washington murals in a San Francisco High School, commissioned in 1936. Instead of the usual glorification of the founding father of this country, the artist Victor Arnautoff, a Russian immigrant and a communist, chose to show that that Washington was a slave owner, and that the United States was founded on the twin crimes of slavery and the genocide of indigenous people. He created his murals in a style that is lucid and unsensational. Everyone is painted simply and beautifully, with respect and dignity. It is the kind of work I really admire, and to me it seems to be perfect for an educational space, where the contradictions of our country could be discussed and debated. However, there has been a strong push, primarily by the parents of the students, to have the images erased. Understandably they don't want their children to have to go to school and look at images of people like themselves, Black people, represented as enslaved men and women. I understand this. And indeed, who am I to challenge them? Nonetheless, I don't think that erasing history is the answer. Somewhere in my heart I feel that the enslaved people should be recognized, remembered and seen.

At the height of this public debate, I posted a brief outline of thoughts as part of a Facebook discussion hosted by a curator in San Francisco. She was furious and wrote back instantly that I was "on the side of death threats". Apparently, someone had sent death threats to members of the group who had asked for the murals to be erased. I was a little shocked. In the end, we had a long discussion on Facebook Messenger. I think I must have written an entire essay on Messenger. She agreed to a dialogue with me on condition that I made it clear that my thoughts were entirely provisional and open to change and that I began each post with the words, "speaking as an older privileged white woman..." Of course, she was correct. And indeed, I can completely understand why people like me should stop writing and image making and for once just shut up and listen.

Perhaps this exchange with a curator goes some way to answering a question you have previously asked me as to why I don't involve or discuss my own artwork in this context. The answer is simple. The fact that I make images is neither here nor there because I have not yet found a way to make art that changes anything. I enormously admire artists who have found ways to do this. One brilliant example is Laurin Stennis, an artist and social worker who decided to reimagine and redesign the Mississippi flag which, up until 2020, was simply a version of the Confederate

Battle flag. There had been many calls change this blatant symbol of racism, but all of them had failed to win approval of the State Legislature. So Laurin Stennis, quietly and without any support, decided to change the flag on her own. Perhaps because she was also a social worker, she understood how to avoid confrontation with people whose opinions were different from her own. She studied the history of her state from before the white settlers came to the land, she studied flag design, and she came up with very beautiful new flag. She did not want her name connected with it, because her grandfather was a bitter segregationist senator for many decades. She called it the "Mississippi Hospitality Flag". Rather than confront the official flag, she simply aimed to have her flag overtake official one in popularity. And she was very successful. Soon gift shops around the state were buying them. Convention centers were flying the Hospitality Flag. As it happens, last year the Mississippi State legislature finally agreed to change their flag, and after a huge amount of controversy and a state referendum, a new flag was chosen that was different to her design. But still she showed concretely with her artwork that change was possible.

With *Parade*, you looked to engage with unfolding major events in contemporary history that were already widely represented in the media, and to find your own way of depicting them. We were wondering if your aim here was twofold: not only to show these events from a different angle, in a different light, but also to encourage people to think critically about the ways in which they were most often represented?

All I can say is that I felt that it was necessary for me to paint *Parade*. I could not imagine going on with business as usual during this terrible time. Of course, I was not naïve enough to think that making protest art was enough, or indeed that it would change anything. That is why I joined a group of women who were volunteer visitors to an immigration detention center. I created *Between Worlds* to make visible what people go through in such places. Ideally, I would have liked to find a real publisher and distributor, but without connections that is pretty much impossible. I was lucky enough to have a residency in the Netherlands at the Van Eyck Academy where I was able to print a Risograph book. I sold almost all of them and gave the money to a charity that supports asylum seekers. In the big picture, it's not much, but I'm a great believer in doing what you can with what you have. If *Parade* shows history from above on a grand scale, then Between Worlds shows how politics plays out at the level of the individual body. They are absolutely part of the same project.

I was surprised that the art world continued to hum along during the Trump Presidency, and many artists I knew continued to make the same work they made before, even though they might be personally outraged about what was happening. I could not do that. For me, making "art" or just simply images and words is a way o f being in the world and speaking about it. It is not just about my personal aesthetic exploration.

I think most of my work isn't political. *The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society* was the first work, where one could even talk about politics, and even then it was only in relation to the intimate politics of desire. As I worked on the last part of that project, *Adventures of a Dreamer*[5], I began to make connections between

5 The book *The Adventures of a Dreamer* (2009) resulted from Zoe Beloff's project *The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society*. It took the form of a prototype cartoon supposedly designed by the Society's founder.

The Great Depression of the 1930s and the financial collapse of 2008. This inspired me to research Brecht's work. I had a hunch he could help artists speak about the world today. It was while I was doing this that Occupy Wall Street erupted. *The Days of the Commune* came together very, very quickly as a response. If Occupy had not happened, I never would have even come up with the idea. Similarly, my recent work is a response to what was going on in the country in the last four years. I hope I won't ever have to make another work "ripped from the headlines".

In just the last few months, there has been an outpouring of media works uncovering and exploring historical terror and its contemporary legacy. I'm thinking of Raul Peck's documentary series *Exterminate All Brutes* about settler colonialism and genocide, and Barry Jenkin's mini-series *The Underground Railroad* based on Colson Whitehead's novel about slavery. And then I've been listening to the excellent podcasts *Day X* about the far right in Germany and *Blindspot: Tulsa Burning*, which is about a hideous pogrom against Black residents of Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921, something that was completely silenced until recently.

Artists much smarter than I are working on these issues. And of course, with a reckoning comes backlash, as southern States hurry to pass laws mandating what history is permitted to be taught to children and what is not.

I hope I find ways to make work that is relevant. I am still thinking about those racist statues. I am interested in the politics of everyday life, and so I am working to celebrate the resilience of working people and give them a voice.

Have you already shown this work in the United States? We know that you showed part of it at a university. What kind of feedback did you get from showing this work under the Trump presidency? And since we are going to show the full panorama for the first time in Europe, we wondering what it means to you to show this in a foreign country and after the end of Trump's presidency? Particularly in France, a country which has a difficult presidential election on the horizon. You referred to the links between the history of Europe and the United States, and the evolution of fascism. Do you think that this parallel history is still relevant?

In the autumn of 2016, I was invited to take part in an exhibition at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, *Benjamin and Brecht: Thinking in Extremes*. It was primarily an archival exhibition, but they also invited a few contemporary artists to contribute. When Trump was elected, I decided at that moment that everything I did would have to speak to what was going on today. Benjamin and Brecht lived through the dark times of the 1930s, and I wanted to ask them how they could help us. I showed the first six panels of *Parade* in this exhibition, along with a film that I made for the show called *Exile*. The film imagines Brecht and Benjamin still in exile almost ninety years later, traveling through New York. Only in the interim they have changed: Benjamin is black, and Brecht is Iranian; at the time that I was making the film, the government had just banned all Iranians from entering the country, designating them "enemy aliens" – just as it had prevented refugees from seeking safety in the United States in the 1940s. Traveling through time, Benjamin and Brecht reveal just how little has changed between the bigotry and hate that swept Europe in the 1930s and our time. I made *Parade*, *Exile* and *Between Worlds* as one body of work. *Parade* provided a kind of grand overview, *Between Worlds* looked closely at how the government's cruel policies on immigration acted specifically on the life of one family, and *Exile* explored the situation from a critical and philosophical perspective.

There were many parallels historically between racism in Europe and America. Hitler studied the race laws that governed the Jim Crow South and he applied them to the Jews in his own country, and there was a real American Nazi presence in New York in the 1930s that was buried and forgotten when America entered World War II. Today we see the same vilification of immigrants both here and in Europe. I hope my work will be meaningful in France. I fear that it is because my painting takes place in a country far away, this makes it possible to show it in Paris without offending anyone. Will it have lost its bite? I don't know.

After presenting the first sequences of *Parade* in Berlin, I felt it was imperative to show it in America. This was not a personal work. I made it as public record, to reveal simply and clearly, the dark times that were engulfing us. In retrospect, I was naïve. I approached non-profit art spaces, but without success. Most of the time, it is impossible to know why one's work is rejected. I got the impression that formally, it was hard for curators to understand it as art: they read it as illustration. One suggested I take it to a park and set it up for a couple of hours, another thought it would be better as the backdrop for a play. I thought about this for a long time, but for me, *Parade* is not the backdrop for a play – it is the play. It stages history. Another curator I contacted wrote back saying that they thought *Parade* was too strong a statement coming from one individual, and if they showed it, they would feel compelled to show work from the other side of the political divide. I wrote back and asked whether, if he exhibited the work of John Heartfield, he would feel duty bound to show work "from the other side". Not surprisingly, I did not hear from him again.

I also think that today there is a real wariness and indeed a fear of exhibiting art that shows the oppressors and the oppressed. Understandably, no one wants to see people like themselves represented as victims. We live in a culture defined by winners, where only the glorious overcoming of oppression is seen as an appropriate subject for commemoration. Besides this, there is always the concern that some Republican trustee or member of the public might decide to complain. In these times of political division and painful reckoning, my feeling is that institutions prefer to present art that soothes and uplifts or which is abstract enough that it implicates no one in particular.

Finally, two friends teaching at a college in Staten Island asked me if they could include *Parade* in a small exhibition. They were teaching a class on museum studies and the purpose of the exhibition was to give students experience in hanging a show and writing a catalog description. It was not open to the public. Staten Island is the only borough of New York where a majority voted for Trump. It is also a place with a growing immigrant community. So, it's very polarized. I would have been interested to know more about what the students thought. In fact, one of the reasons, I made the work was as a starting point for a dialogue. But the young women who helped install my panorama just told me very politely that they did not follow politics.

Had I known when I began that I was making a work that could not be shown in America, would I have continued? Should I have continued? I ask myself, was the whole venture foolish? What is the point of making something that only speaks to oneself? That is a good question. I am stubborn by nature, as I think most artists are. Ultimately, I think you have to do what you believe in, what you think is right. As an artist, I think one should never work to please or to be "successful", whatever that means. Besides, I haven't given up attempting to show the work.