

I thought it would be different by now

RISE UP, NASTY WOMEN: ARTISTS RESPOND TO TRUMP

BY ANDREA ALESSI

“Literally the day the election results were announced I started working on the exhibit,” says artist and curator Indira Cesarine. Next week, her Tribeca gallery, The Untitled Space, opens the exhibition *UPRISE / ANGRY WOMEN*, featuring work by 80 women-identifying artists addressing the social and political climate in America today.

Cesarine wasn’t the only one sparked into immediate action.

“Hello female artists/curators! Lets organize a NASTY WOMEN group show!!! Who's interested???” artist Roxanne Jackson posted on Facebook a few days later. She had no idea just how overwhelming the interest would be: within an hour she had 300 responses. Jackson and curator Jessamyn Fiore got to work on the *NASTY WOMEN Exhibition*, which opened at the Knockdown Center in Queens on Thursday and runs through the weekend.

Some exhibitions take months, if not years to plan. But these two shows, both timed to lead up to Donald Trump’s inauguration on January 20, tapped into something that we’ll likely see a lot more of over the next four years: a pressing need to respond. These exhibitions are remarkable, not for

their curatorial research and selectivity, but in their urgency and passion. In each case, organizers came up with an idea and mobilized hundreds of artists and collaborators with barely a month's notice.

“We included them all.”

Both exhibitions began with open calls shared widely in social media. Cesarine says *UPRISE* is the first open-call show her gallery has organized: “I felt it was important for the *UPRISE / ANGRY WOMEN* exhibit to reflect how women in America are feeling right now, and to have artists from all over the country from diverse backgrounds represented in the exhibit.” She ultimately received more than 1,800 submissions from some 400 woman-identifying artists. Due to the space limitations of the Lispenard Street gallery, she curated the submissions down to 80 artworks by as many artists.



Jordie Oetken, *In Solidarity*. Exhibited in *UPRISE / ANGRY WOMEN*

NASTY WOMEN took a different curatorial approach. “This is not a traditional show,” says Fiore. “I’ve never worked on an exhibition where I said ‘Everyone is included.’” But when she began the project, she knew her role was not about making selections. “It’s more about inclusivity. It’s about bringing all these diverse voices together—and I do look at these works as *voices*. The art is an

action that these women have made. So we included them all.” But Jackson and Fiore could not anticipate how widely their call to action would resonate: they had to close the submission period early after receiving some 1,000 artworks by nearly 700 artists.

“There is no better point in time to enact change than during a cultural rupture.”

“As I watched Roxanne’s Facebook post blow up, I saw that other people are feeling this too—that we have to *do something*. And do it now,” Fiore recalls. These exhibitions tap into an enormous and growing sentiment: how can we respond?

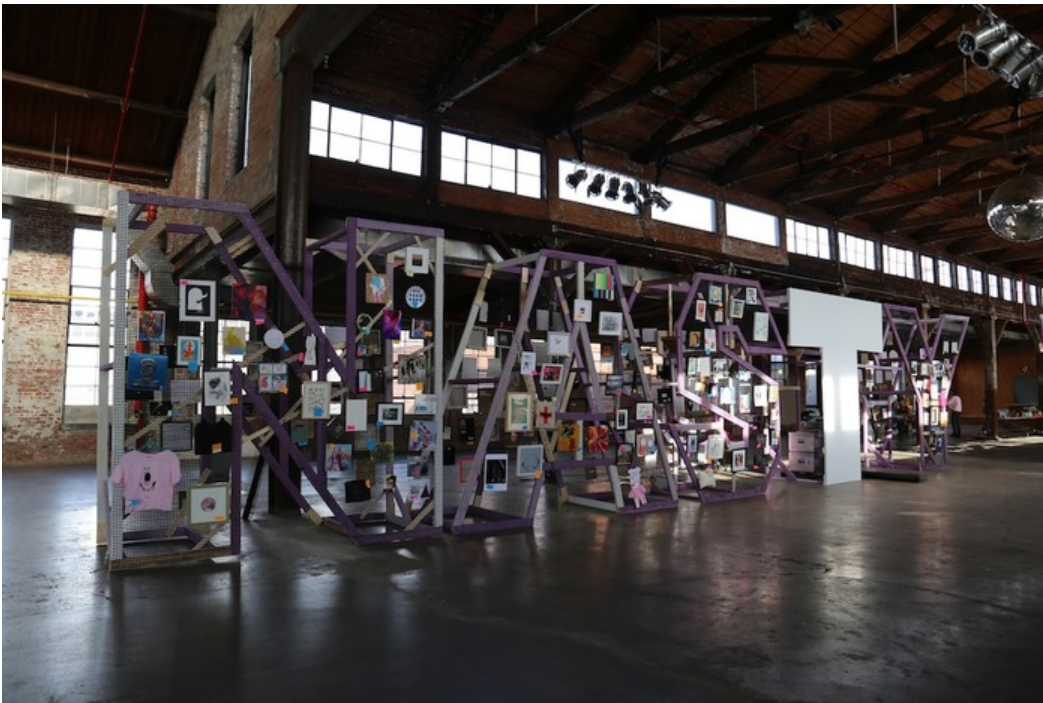


Jen Schwarting, *WAKE UP*, 2016. Exhibited in *NASTY WOMEN*

In mass actions, be they group exhibitions or the imminent Women's March on Washington, it's clear that diverse congregations of women are looking for ways to register discontent, to be seen and heard, to be held to account. There is also a search for commonality, solidarity, and belonging in these undertakings. "Art can challenge the status quo and shed light on the issues our society is facing today," says Cesarine. "It is an important time in history for women to join together to fight for our rights and ensure that they continue to progress. It is important for Trump's sexist, racist behavior to not become normalized."

These are not the first exhibitions of their kind. In 2014 and 2015, eighteen Missouri galleries staged *Hands Up, Don't Shoot: Artists Respond*, in which more than 100 artists considered the killing of Michael Brown. That December, immediately following the non-indictment of Daniel Pantaleo, the police officer who killed Eric Garner, the Brooklyn non-profit Smack Mellon rearranged their exhibition schedule and put out a call for work responding to police brutality, racism, and social justice. The resulting show, *Respond*, featured 200 artworks from over 600 proposals.

Urgency and scale are essential to these actions. "There is no better point in time to enact change than during a cultural rupture," wrote Joel Kuennen about *Respond* for ArtSlant at the time. He continued, "This is part of the mandate of contemporary culture: to express with as many images and words as experienced time will allow." In the *New York Times* Holland Cotter concluded that "it's the show as a whole, its massed voice, that is so impressive, and heartening."



NASTY WOMEN Exhibition, Installation in Progress at Knockdown Center, 2017. Photo: Jessamyn Fiore

UPRISE and *NASTY WOMEN* are, indeed, each greater than the sum of their parts. The very gesture of amassing so many voices is a protest, a rising up to be heard. Like *Respond*, *UPRISE* will be hung salon-style, a cacophony of mediums, positions, and voices. *NASTY WOMEN*, on the other hand, aimed for an even more unified, monumental experience. Ten twelve-foot-high letters spelling *N-A-S-T-Y W-O-M-E-N* span the vast hall of the Knockdown Center. This scaffolding-like installation provides walls and shelves for more than 700 artworks, each no larger than a foot in any dimension.

The project's dimensions are, in fact, even more expansive than that: There are currently 27 confirmed venues (and counting) organizing related "nasty" shows across the United States and abroad. Most exhibitions will take place this month, but a number are scheduled throughout the Spring.

“Wherever you are is the place to start.”

Following the election, clients began asking Beth Pickens, an LA consultant to artists and cultural non-profits, whether making art was enough. Should they quit art making and, say, go to law school or run for office? In response, Pickens put together the pamphlet “Making Art During Fascism,” which concludes: “Your work will be more important than ever. You have no idea who needs to see/hear/feel what you are making.”



Johanna Braun, *Slumber Party*, 2016. Exhibited in *NASTY WOMEN*

“Wherever you are is the place to start. Art is going to help people through this time,” Pickens said in a recent interview. “The things we’re called to do—we have to continue doing them no matter the political reality because that will help us add new actions into our lives.” She encouraged people to take stock of what they have to offer: “Is it time? Is it money? Is it a particular skill or tools or physical space? Is it previous experience in activism or leadership or organizing?”

NASTY WOMEN and *UPRISE* are triumphs in this sort of thinking. “It’s been pretty phenomenal how it’s come together,” says Fiore, who normally works on shows with a much longer lead in time. Due to the incredible generosity of artists, woodworkers, technicians, venues, and others donating their skills and resources, the *NASTY WOMEN* team was able to achieve things that would have been challenging even under normal circumstances. This generosity, she says, speaks to how “things are different right now, and how this is a different type of exhibition.”

Does Fiore get the sense that the open call, or the political climate in the States, has mobilized women artists who do not normally make political work?

“Absolutely,” says Fiore. Many artists wrote that they made work after the election, or especially for the exhibition. Some divulged, “I’ve only ever made work, but I never wanted to show it until now.” Others, like a writer, said they don’t normally make visual art at all. “To me that’s a very powerful statement.”

“We’ve been describing it as a visual art protest.”

These exhibitions are not, however, just cries into a dark night. There are tangible benefits, like cold, hard, cash in the hands of worthy organizations. 100 percent of *NASTY WOMEN*’s proceeds will go to Planned Parenthood, and a portion of *UPRISE*’s earnings will benefit ERA Coalition’s Fund for Women’s Equality. The Coalition continues to push for passage and ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, which would prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex.



Priscilla Stadler, *Ungrabbale*, 2016. Exhibited in *NASTY WOMEN*

“People said we should get famous artists so we could raise more money,” Fiore recalls. But the *NASTY WOMEN* organizers wanted the spirit of inclusivity and equality to extend to the show’s audience. Priced from \$10, all works cost \$100 or less. “I wanted everyone to be able to participate through the *buying* of the works as well. We’ve been describing it as a visual art protest.”

Open call, rapid, inclusive, non-profit, cash-and-carry—these attributes do not reflect typical art world systems. Museums—accountable to trustees and reliant on the allocation of exhibition budgets years in advance—cannot respond nearly as deftly to pressing contemporary issues. Political art may be trending in the market post-election, but we can hardly count on commercial galleries with seasonal schedules, demanding collectors, and obligations to represented artists to switch up their model. Can we?

Artists Respond:

Prominent themes in both the submissions and final exhibition, says Cesarine, include “works on subjects of rage, rape culture, protest, equality, reproductive rights, subjects addressing stereotypes of women and gender roles, as well as of course anti-Trump art.” Fiore echoes this sentiment (down to the “very funny” selection of anti-Trump work). In particular, she says *NASTY WOMEN* includes many works “exploring female identity and our position in society in one way or another, often considering the history of the oppression of women.”



Mila Rochenner, *Wrong Side Feelings*, 2015. Exhibited in *UPRISE / ANGRY WOMEN*

Sculptor **Mila Rochenner** was born in Brazil and says she identifies with her German Jewish and Indian heritage. She submitted her sculpture *Wrong Side Feelings* (2015) to *UPRISE* in response to her experiences of sexism, racism, and xenophobia. “This senseless violence forces you to revise your identity. If I know about others’ suffering, I know I am not alone.” Her sculpture reflects a period of pain when she was sexually harassed by an influential teacher during her master’s program.

She says she doesn’t believe art can single-handedly affect political or social change, but that it’s “one tool we have to open a door for discussion. Art affects civil discourse by directing and propositioning ideas that haven’t yet found their way into mass conscious, mainstream thinking.”



Katya Grokhovsky, *Hotness (Approval Pending)*, 2016. Video still. Exhibited in *NASTY WOMEN*

Katya Grokhovsky’s video *Hotness (Approval Pending)* (2016), featuring a faceless female torso, trapped in a glitchy loop, expresses her frustration with a lifetime of objectification and “the patriarchal regime constantly violating the freedom of the woman’s body, health, and life choices.”

She wholeheartedly believes art can affect social issues. “Artists have a responsibility to engage through their work, to not give in to apathy, to ignite, to shed a beam of light into the darkest corners of our world,” she says. “Art can heal, can energize, can lead to revolutions, can challenge the status quo, in diverse, beautifully humane ways, which do not involve any violence or violation of anyone’s rights. A simple positive change of energy in the room created by an artwork, can lead to the most beautiful change of a heart and life.”



Sarupa Sidaarth, *Dark Matter*. Exhibited in *UPRISE / NASTY WOMEN*

For **Sarupa Sidaarth**, whose portrait *Dark Matter* takes on themes of racism, colorism, and xenophobia, forcing these issues into the light is not a new preoccupation. “It is important to find creative ways to coexist,” she explains. “We don’t live in an egalitarian society. By participating I am sharing my way of seeing.”

Can her work affect change? “I think of art as storytelling. When the viewer confronts a work of art, at the very least there is a dialogue between an idea, artist and the viewer.”

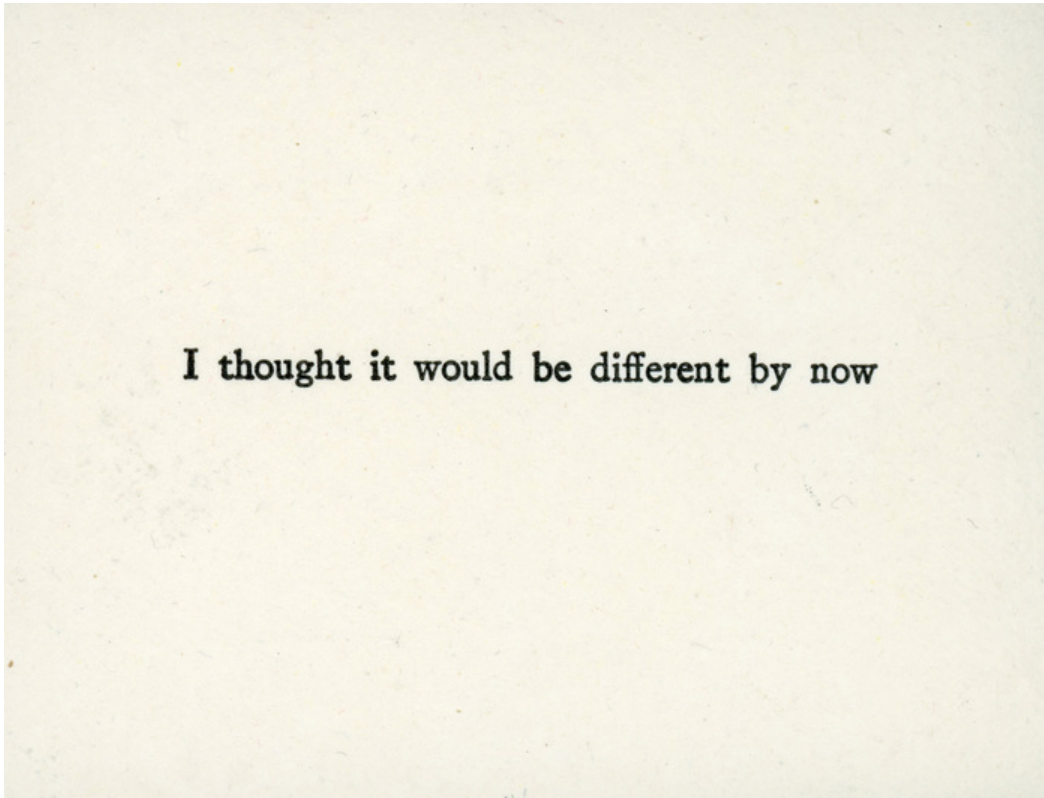


Parker Day, *God Bless America*. Exhibited in *UPRISE / ANGRY WOMEN*

Los Angeles-based photographer **Parker Day** says she's glad to be a part of an all-women show "that goes beyond the baseline fact that we all identify as female." She went on: "There are lots of click-bait articles and reductive shows that are 'all women' but... *UPRISE / ANGRY WOMEN* has teeth to it and a strong point of view."

Her photograph *God Bless America* is part of *ICONS*, a series of 100 portraits of misfit characters, who "demand attention and will not be denied." "My work is fueled by a gentle undercurrent of rage," she says. "It's about saying fuck you to the 'real world' and how things have been and forging your own world."

"Art is power. Art is strength," Day asserts. "It can shift how people see themselves and the world around them. When we feel differently, we act differently."



Alyson Provax, *I thought it would be different by now*, 2016. Exhibited in *UPRISE / ANGRY WOMEN*

Alyson Provax submitted *I thought it would be different by now*, which she made within a week of the election results, because she felt “a sense of community from being part of a show focused on women’s anger.” The work reflects on her sadness and feeling of culpability following the election. Provax says she was surprised by how hard Clinton’s loss hit her. “I realized that I had been blindly expecting history to simply move in the direction that I believed that it should. Donald Trump’s victory felt a bit like falling into another world. But alongside those feelings of course I also realized the fallacy of trusting history to move in the direction I want it to. Actions are important.”

She cites way the film *The Day After* reportedly affected President Ronald Reagan’s feelings about nuclear war. “Art can change our perception and understanding of things on a personal level, and this can have great repercussions.”

“And angry.”

Fiore ended our conversation saying, “there are a lot of women who are *scared*. They’re scared. And angry. They feel disconnected. And this show for them is a way to make that connection, to show solidarity, to represent themselves with other women.”

The NASTY WOMEN Exhibition runs at The Knockdown Center in Queens from January 12–15.

UPRISE / ANGRY WOMEN runs at The Untitled Space from January 17–28.

—Andrea Alessi

Andrea Alessi is Managing Editor of ArtSlant.

Posted by Andrea Alessi on 1/13/17

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