

An Artist Transforms This RBG Landmark Ruling Into Her Portrait

New York lawyer-turned-artist Geoffrey Stein's collage highlights Ginsburg's 1996 opinion in *United States v. Virginia*, which struck down the male-only admissions policy at the Virginia Military Institute.

By Marcia Coyle | February 21, 2019 at 11:40 PM

A New York lawyer-turned-artist has combined the ancient technique of collage and a modern U.S. Supreme Court opinion into a work of art celebrating the career of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Geoffrey Stein is showing the 30-by-30-inch collage, “R.B.G. 2019,” at Denise Bibro Fine Art in New York City. Ginsburg’s 1996 opinion in *United States v. Virginia*, which struck down the male-only admissions policy at the Virginia Military Institute, is the material for the collage. Stein worked with acrylic and pencil on canvas.

“I thought this was a great time to celebrate her career and her presence on the court,” Stein said in an interview. He said it took him about a month to finish the piece.

A graduate of Albany Law School, Stein, who has an MFA from London’s Slade School of Fine Art, began painting full time in 2000. He earlier practiced insurance law at a number of firms, his last being Mendes & Mount. He said he struggled to squeeze in art classes on nights and weekends while practicing law.

Patricia Poglinco, his wife whom he met in law school, tired of hearing him complain about being a lawyer and told him to make a choice, Stein said. Poglinco is partner at New York’s Seward & Kissel, where she is co-head of the investment management group.

“There was a lot of really good tough love there,” Stein said. “I had spent about 10 years thinking about it and failing to combine the practice of law and doing my art. It’s hard to blow off a brief for attending a class.” His wife, he said, was very supportive of his decision to choose art. R.B.G., 2019 Collage material from *U.S. v. Virginia*. Artist: Geoffrey Stein. Courtesy photo

Breaking away from law is hard, Stein said. “When you tell people, ‘I’m a lawyer,’ that’s the end of the discussion. They know who you are. But say, ‘I’m an artist,’ and what does that mean? Do you paint paintings or do you sit there and get stoned? It’s a more complicated engagement.”

Stein, admitted to the New York bar in 1987, has no regrets about his choice, but he did keep his law license. “I figured if I ever had to practice, I could do it,” he said. “I worked for a defense firm doing med mal and asbestos defense, and then insurance defense. It’s a very civilized practice.”



In making collages, Stein said he tries to use materials from the subject’s world, similar to the signifier that appears in Renaissance portraits. In 2009, Stein put together a portrait series—*Irrational Exuberance*—when the nation’s economy was in dire straits. He used text from the *Wall Street Journal* for portraits of Tim Geithner, Alan Greenspan, Sheila Bair and others involved in the economic crash. When the Dodd-Frank Act was passed, in 2010, the text from the bill served to create a portrait of Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Massachusetts. Later, a Donald Trump collage used the legal papers from Trump’s third bankruptcy.

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The Trump collage took six weeks “and I felt like I was being abused going in every day to work on it,” Stein said. “I did another Trump on a stop sign. Who knew you could buy a stop sign? I wanted to get out of the Trump business. I wanted to do something of someone I respected and that made me happy and proud—it was Justice Ginsburg.”

When he was considering a Ginsburg collage, Stein had to choose between the justice's earlier career as an advocate and her tenure on the bench. “Ultimately I decided I would go with the Supreme Court. The Virginia case is one I had heard about and seemed a good place to start. Once I got the case, there was more than enough material,” Stein said.

The collage is on display now, until March 2, at Denise Bibro Fine Art in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan.

Ginsburg returned to Virginia Military Institute in 2017 to talk about her ruling, and the knowledge that the decision “would make VMI a better place.” Ginsburg recounted how she and the late Justice Antonin Scalia shared and reviewed more than a dozen drafts, going back and forth “like ping-pongs.” Scalia opened his dissent with the line: “VMI is dead.”

Ginsburg said in the 2017 discussion: “One of the exhilarating things for me in my lifetime is to see how the military has opened opportunities for women.”

Stein said his favorite medium is “what I'm doing at the time,” but he does a lot of collage. He is thinking about doing portraits of some of the Democratic presidential hopefuls and, he added, “I'd love to get some commissions from lawyers who want their best case or brief as part of their self portraits.”

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