

# Kathryn Andrews

Interview: Laurence Chandler  
Portrait: Tierney Gearon

*Kathryn Andrews begs the viewer to look beyond the obvious image. The Los Angeles-based artist combines found objects and archival images as well as references from popular culture to create narrative arcs that enable her materials to become signifiers of a larger socio-political context, symptoms of a certain social failure. Andrews' practice further draws on the heritage of minimalism, conceptualism, and pop art in order to reinvigorate debates on gender, race, and politics. She imbues her readymades with a symbolic force, pressing the viewer to question existing power structures and the role of imagery to exert such power. We caught up with the artist on the opening for her first solo museum show in the United States, at the MCA Chicago titled "Run for President." Here, Andrews' addresses the climate of the current presidential election by weaving together narratives around historic and imaginary candidates, the campaign trail, the office, and the end of a presidential term. Reality and fiction collide, urging viewers to immerse themselves in Andrews' multilayered narratives, and perhaps—if only for a moment—disappear in them entirely.*

**LC:** *Kathryn, last time we saw each other, a group of large bouncers were trying to escort us out of a bar in Dallas...*

**KA:** That was a strange night. The bouncers confused me with a very trashed drunk guy. A vampire lady then appeared, attempting to haul me off in an elevator. She had cuts all over her body.

**LC:** *We were all terrified! It was like being in a David Lynch film. And here we are at the MCA Chicago for Run for President. Throughout the show, you introduce massive wall photographs featuring Bozo the Clown, Sammy Davis Jr. embracing Richard Nixon, and Nancy Reagan sitting on Mr. T's lap. These all seem to serve as conceptual backdrops for your selected body of work. How do you link all these elements together?*

When making the show, I became interested in its timing and how to join art to a bigger popular topic or event. I realized its run would coincide with the election, so I began looking into the history of electoral politics, into its lesser known and more absurd moments. In my research, I discovered many American comedians made a bid for the presidency. Gracie Allen ran as a publicity stunt on the "Surprise Party" ticket in 1940. In 1968, the famous Chicago comedian Dick Gregory was a write-in candidate getting nearly fifty-thousand votes. In 2012, Roscane Barr ran under the Green Party, receiving more than sixty-thousand votes. I also learned that Bozo the Clown—whom I had used earlier as the subject of some sculptures—ran in 1984, traveling around to college campuses announcing that he would be better than the other Bozos running!

I wanted to see how references to these moments could impact the experience of seeing art.

*Little did you know, your inclusion of Bozo perfectly foreshadowed the current election.*

Yeah, I didn't realize quite how on target it would be, particularly with folks like Deez Nuts and Trump coming out of the woodwork.

*And now there is the real potential for the first female President...*

Yeah, I was pretty sure Hillary would announce. The installation doesn't deal with that so directly though.

*I noticed women are largely absent in the show's imagery.*

I planned on making an exhibition with more imagery of women. As I began doing research however, I saw that because we have not yet had a female president, depictions of American women in relation to that position spoke to a failure or a lack somehow—and not the women's failure but society's. For example, pictures of Geraldine Ferraro or Sarah Palin are understood now in relation to loss. Of course there are women who occupy these high-level political positions in say television or film, but that is only fictitious. There are a lot of those types of characters in Hollywood now. Take Olivia Pope from *Scandal* or Laura Roslin from *Battlestar Galactica*. The latter is a slightly older series, but still Mary McDonnell's character plays the governing leader of the human race. That's pretty huge.

*In one of your Hobo works in the show, there is a political pin that reads "92 Year of the Woman." At the time I'm sure it was supposed to seem empowering but in hindsight it actually comes off as derogatory.*

Yeah, that one is funny. Like, the women only get one year to be important.

*You also have this incredible image of Nancy Reagan, perched on the lap of Mr. T dressed as Santa Claus wearing gold chains with a cross and a star of David.*

That image is really mind blowing. *The A-Team* had just debuted, it was 1983. Nancy heard that Mr. T was going around to schools encouraging kids to stay off of drugs. That aligned with her anti-drug campaign.

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Left: *Coming to America*, (Filet-O-Fish), 2013  
Above: *Ran for President*, 2015. Installation view, MCA Chicago  
Right: *Coming to America*, (Filet-O-Fish), (detail), 2013



*"Just Say No" & the disastrous War on Drugs...*

Yes exactly. Nancy invited Mr. T to attend the White House Christmas Party. He dressed up as Santa Claus and brought along dolls of himself as gifts. At some point Nancy sat on Mr. T's lap, he gave her a doll, and she kissed him on the head.

*She also looks like a doll on his lap!*

Totally. I also didn't realize that Nancy wasn't Nancy's birth name. She was originally Anne Frances Robbins and changed her name to Nancy Davis, moving to Hollywood, and starring in several films in the 40s and 50s.

*Nancy, in this context, is in some ways a weird doppelgänger for Mr. T.*

Yeah, if you think about it...she's got this history of identities. Mr. T was Laurence Tureaud by birth, then he adopts his Mandinka warrior, chain-bedecked tough guy persona. And then he suits up further here as Santa. Nancy keeps switching identities. But Mr. T just keeps layering them on. That's what's so brilliant and hilarious about him. He lets it all be visible. His mash-up is such an amazing critique of the social hierarchies of his time.

*This is taking place at the height of the Reagan era...*

You have a black man and a white woman supporting the "pleasant-ries" of the system, when neither African Americans nor women have been elected to office. Mr. T though is undeniably mocking the system by using it to an extreme. And Nancy sits there, like a good little girl, waiting to get her present.

*And this knowingness of the distorted realities of the time I felt was also very present in the image of Sammy Davis Jr. embracing Richard Nixon.*

That photo is very important in the exhibition. Davis, at age seven in 1934, starred in a race film produced by white Hollywood filmmakers about a young black child being elected president of the United States. The film was aimed at black audiences but was very racist and concluded with the whole event being a dream. Ironically though, in 1973 around the time when that photo was taken, Sammy Davis Jr. was the first African American presidential guest to spend the night in the White House.

*Right out of a Hollywood script...*

I mean what are the chances that Davis stars in that role, then decades later actually sleeps in the White House, dying before the historic election of Barack Obama? I found the story incredibly poignant. And I couldn't see Davis as anything but a truly heroic American figure.

*You then navigate from "I am Not a Crook" Nixon into a sculptural work that contains a McDonald's playground character, Captain Crook, and a couple of coins from Eddie Murphy's film, Coming to America. The figure is incredibly oversized and weird. Didn't McDonald's have other playground figures like singing chicken nuggets, the Hamburgerler, and there was like this big purple shape guy...*

Yeah, those characters are very strange if you start really thinking about them.

*Strangely, I've found that your work can convey a similar dark undertone—pieces are filled with bright colors and familiar objects but there is an uncanny feeling of something beneath the surface. Is that your intention?*

I try to work with found objects and references that are hyper-recognizable in American culture, questioning popular tendencies to embrace these things simply because they are familiar. A lot of iconic American memorabilia and imagery connects to histories that are quite charged, politically speaking. This interests me.

## I don't sit around thinking about "power" in a big sense.

*There are layers in your work that delve into the constructs of Hollywood, consumerism, political and corporate power. Are you reacting to these forces, or is the creation of your work a way for you, as an artist, to exert power over these forces?*

I don't sit around thinking about "power" in a big sense. For several years I have been collecting Hollywood memorabilia. I frequently look for movie relics...not always the most iconic things, but rather funny things. Objects that make you go "Did they really make that?" Or, "Does someone actually think that weird thing has value?" In the case of the sculpture you are referring to, I came across the pirate head in a prop shop and became obsessed with it. A year earlier, I had purchased the *Coming to America* coins that depict Eddie Murphy as the prince of Zamunda. These things sat around my studio for a while until I saw a potential for a relationship between them.

*Is your way of working about free association then? Or do you seek out these connections: the bullet from Die Another Day on a studio make-up mirror; coins from Coming to America on a relic of a McDonald's children's playground; Mel Gibson's gun from Lethal Weapon amidst the back drop of the Oval Office?*

I do actually free associate a lot. I often get ideas from considering how any two or more things can come together...

*The surfaces of your work are also often very well polished, or reflective. They seem to not only want to visually engage the viewer but also make him or her become a participant in the work itself. The viewer is looking in and is reflected back...*

Totally. I mean, one of my favorite artists is Dan Graham. I always liked how he brings a lot of subjects into his work. Maybe there is a protagonist and then someone interacting with the protagonist, but then the viewer might be reflected or caught in the relationship too. There can end up being a lot of players. I try to bring that dynamic into my work when I can.

*Like Foucault's description of heterotopias, such as taking a phone call or looking at yourself in the mirror?*

Perhaps. I think Foucault's idea is about understanding where you are in relation to where you are not. I am often thinking about trying to bring a lot of subjects into the work so you can imagine being in a viewing position other than your own or in one where you cease to exist entirely.

*In your process you also conscientiously remove your hand, the artist's hand. Your work shows no gestural signature; instead it is the product of fabricators, found objects, painters, actors, photographers & printmakers. Is this your ceasing to exist as the artist in your own work?*

My favorite art is probably expressionist painting. But in my work I have been interested in trying to complicate how we understand the art object when we know a specific individual has made it—a man, a woman, someone from such and such background, etc. I became interested in how industrial forms and processes can slow down the viewer's ability to recognize who made the artwork.

*In that sense, does your work not reflect your personal biases or perspectives? Or through this conscious removal, are you aiming to make that much of a more overarching statement?*

My work reflects some of my personal biases but a lot of others too. I'm frequently thinking about what's valued at large, in a popular sense. And regularly, I make formal and conceptual decisions with groups of people, including strangers, to understand how we see things in the world. I'm more interested in reflecting that, and questioning it for what it is, than trying to make a flamboyant mark from a social position that hasn't been valued historically speaking.

*And the Vampire lady?*

Hopefully we are not going to see her at the corner bar. ◊



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*Kathryn Andrews Gift Cart, 2011.*