

# CON TEMP ORARY CAUSE

ACTIVIST ART IS RISING IN MYRIAD WAYS ACROSS THE DESERT.

WORDS BY KRISTIN SCHARKEY

If you walked into Dead or Alive bar this spring, you may have noticed a mélange of brightly colored posters on the walls. “You are getting very sleepy,” read one in a ghoulish font. “Sanctuary bar,” read another on a peach-colored print with a palm tree.

The posters were part of Brooks Hudson Thomas’ show, “Politica/Horror Flick,” 20 designs in total. The Palm Springs artist originally made them to be distributed as protest posters, but as they evolved in scale, he imagined them as a collage in a larger interior space. Enter: Dead or Alive.

While not set up to be a gallery, the bar offered an “ad-hoc vibe,” which Thomas and owner Christine Soto liked. “We wanted to show up quick,” Soto explained via email. “We wanted it to be accessible.” During the show’s month-long viewing, 10 percent of the proceeds from art sales were donated to the American Civil Liberties Union. It’s just one local example of activist art in the desert.

“Activist art” is a term that covers a broad spectrum of practices, from political posters to movement murals and tactical performance. High-profile examples include the work of Beijing artist Ai Weiwei, British performance and graffiti artist Banksy and Los Angeles-based artist Shepard Fairey. The Guerrilla Girls, Yoko Ono and Pussy Riot also come to mind.

Historically, the genre has often been dismissed by critics and collectors. Some say all art is political. In *Art Monthly*, University of Essex professor Gavin Grindon makes a distinction: “Much art that is socially critical, engaged or activist, is only so within invisible but strict, institutionally defined limits. Such art might mimic



“Politica/Horror Flick”  
at Dead or Alive  
EMILY DANIEL

the practices or raise the issues of activism, but it does so in a context without consequence. One can be as subversive and questioning of social relations as one wishes in a gallery. In fact, it is actively encouraged: often rewarded with good reviews and funding. But doing so within actual social relations has greater risks, which many artists and institutions are less willing to take. Much that is labelled art activism is not, in fact, particularly active when it comes to changing society.”

For Soto, presenting Thomas’ message outweighed any associated risks: “From a business standpoint, it did cross my mind, ‘Am I going to alienate some of my customers?’” she explains. “But there is very little separation between me and my business. My business is me and it’s how I connect with my community in many ways, so there is no use sanitizing it.” For activist artists, numerous other considerations remain.

High desert nonprofit Mojave Animal Protection, for example, is hosting “Resistance as Art: An Environmental & Animal Justice Exhibition” through April 30 at Art Queen in Joshua Tree to raise awareness (and funds) for its education and advocacy programs that encourage protection of the Mojave Desert ecoregion. The lineup reads like a who’s who of activist artists. On display is work by English animal rights artist Sue Coe, “trashion” creator Marina DeBris and “Daily Trumpet” founder Jonathan Horowitz, among others. The exhibition also includes “Long Live Our 4 Billion Year-Old Mother,” a poster created by Jess X. Snow for the Women’s March on Washington, and “The EveryBee” by Matthew Willey – a painting that’s part of his “The Good Hive” initiative, in which he’ll paint 50,000 honeybees (“the number necessary for a healthy, thriving hive,” according to his website) worldwide.

Overton says the show has elicited numerous reactions, with much attention directed toward a series of photographs by Mary Shannon Johnstone titled “Discarded Property,” which depict cat euthanasia at an animal shelter. There’s a delicate curatorial balance, he says, to be achieved between fundraising and awareness. Or, as DeBris described via email, the “fine line between having people want to engage with the work or turn away in disgust.”

Financial considerations are also present: “A lot of people who make movement art, we’re not really making \$100,000 a year from it,” says Snow, a queer Asian-American artist, filmmaker and poet. For “Resistance as Art,” she sent three limited edition prints of her poster, donating the first while splitting the proceeds of the other two with MAP. “Activism is a form of cultural work and deserves to be paid just as much as entertainment,” she says, while noting two exceptions: Corporations that benefit off activist

art or pieces with the name of a specific movement (Artists in her cooperative, Justseeds, designed Standing Rock posters, for example, in which proceeds were donated to the camp).

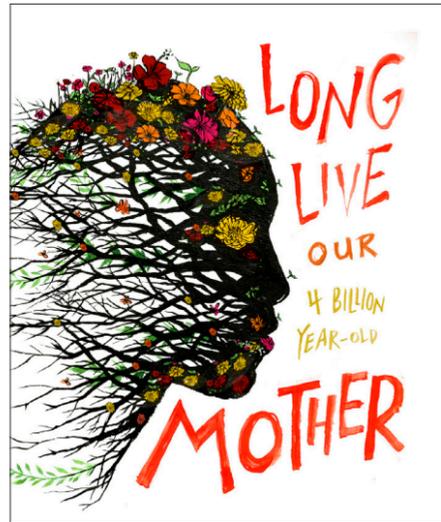
Willey shares a similar view: "I have no problem at all benefiting off of activism," he wrote via email. "I think it's absurd that teachers, people that feed hungry kids, people working to balance humans with the environment or artists would be begging for funds in such an abundant world." He created The Good of the Hive as a "for benefit" company that "could grow as big as the bees needed it to."

"I'd be lying if I said I hadn't struggled, but not because of the art activism as much as the entrepreneurial aspects," he added. "I've been blessed that people have connected with the work from the beginning and supported it. But it hasn't been the art world. It's been the beekeepers, bee advocates and educators."

The struggle for institutional respect may be starting to shift. Palm Desert gallery Heather James Fine Art, which specializes in the secondary market, presented a "Street Art" exhibition this spring with work by Fairey and Banksy, among others, that garnered "a lot" of interest, according to Montana Beutler, who handles sales and acquisitions.

"The art world is moving away from a more traditional collecting model, like Old Masters and impressionists and modernists," Beutler says. "Now, people are excited to buy contemporary art."

While the exhibition didn't include political posters, per se, the pair of Banksy works – "Black Bobby," a plywood board tagged with a police officer, and "Umbrella Rat," a steel door tagged with his signature rat holding an umbrella – are valued at more than \$100,000 each, Beutler says. She estimates the majority of collectors who purchased work were men in their 40s to mid-50s (a younger range than usual for the gallery), and points to "Internet culture and the millennial feeling of sharing these shocking images or exciting political views" as bolstering recent reception of the street art genre. Looking back through art history, she adds, these artists are not alone in being cast out then well respected. (See



"Long Live Our 4 Billion Year-Old Mother" by Jess X. Snow



"Worker" by Shepard Fairey

also: Picasso and Cézanne.)

"If you even look at the realists in the 19th century who were painting people of a lower cast, but painting them on a historic scale – so painting them the size of a wall – that was a huge political statement," Beutler explains. "People got upset over it. People in the salons wanted to throw them out, and no one was going to buy it. Until they did. I think that same way, street art – any kind of politically influenced art – if you don't see the world that way then maybe you're not going to buy it, but I think a lot of people who collect art like the deeper meaning of it because these are, in a way, spiritual objects. Art is kind of the only thing we have in this world that has no use other than to make you think."

Also in the exhibition were two signed Fairey prints: "San Diego Billboard (from Urban Renewal)," which sold for \$5,000, and "Worker," valued at \$3,500. Yet, in



"The EveryBee" by Matthew Willey



"Aquarium of the Pacific Gyre" by Marina DeBris

reality, these pieces feel like the exceptions. Many activist artists will continue to create within the tension of financial efficacy – and that of impact.

"I was grateful to have a venue to try to sell [the posters], but I probably spent more money than I made," Thomas says. "... I'm thinking about how valuable is a piece of artwork as activism, like what did I really affect or change?"

"Change can be as insignificant as me changing my mind [about] something or becoming aware of something that I wasn't aware of," he concludes. "It can happen on an individual basis. It's not going to change the world overnight."

For Snow, that individual can be herself: "Sometimes, it's so easy for artists to ... feel like they have to be a martyr for an activist movement," she explains. "I think that art needs to heal the individual and the creator. If it can do that, it can definitely heal other people as well." ♣