

November 14 – December 19, 2004

A Perfect Union...more or less

The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago

Mary Ellen Carroll
Rob Conger
Jen Benka & Mark Wagner
Joeff Davis
Jo Jackson
Rashid Johnson
Industry of the Ordinary
(Adam Brooks and Mathew Wilson)
Van McElwee
Dominic McGill
Jenny Perlin
Maryanne Simmons
Mark Themann



The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
4th floor
Chicago, IL 60637

Museum Hours
Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5 pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5 pm
Closed Mondays
<http://www.renaissancesociety.org>

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Opening Reception: November 14, 4:00-7:00 pm
Featuring an artist talk and poetry reading from 5:00-6:30pm

[this side]

Jenny Perlin
The United States in a Chaotic World, 2003
16mm animated film

[that side]

Joeff Davis
Protest at the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York, 2004
ink jet print

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5811 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60637
Phone: (773) 702-8670

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My Fellow Americans

There is no such thing as "political art." Art certainly has its politics as manifest in a range of practices. But there are no singular characteristics that would allow for a distinct category of production called "political art." If there were such a category, it would contain work of such a wide variety so as not to be a category at all. The denial of this category is at the heart of the statement "all art is political."

But we live in turbulent times. We have before, and no doubt we will again. Under these circumstances, acknowledging that there is no such thing as political art is one thing, while acknowledging our desire for a so called political art is another. Although we can deny "political art" as a category of production, it is all but impossible to resist the urge to look to the recent past for its artistic responses to a tense political climate. The 1960s and the 1980s certainly had their share of doubt, fear, arrogance and rage.

But to what extent does the past provide a template for engaging these sentiments now? Great is the pressure to invoke historical examples of what are considered politically engaged works of art, works that abide by the slogan "say what you mean and say it mean." The last four years, however, have spurred convictions that

have yet to find an adequate means of expression. Americans are still traumatized over the presidential elections of 2000 and September 11, 2001, not to mention the subsequent turns of events. The stakes in this last presidential election were greater than the sum of individual issues, for it was not a question of the politics but a question of the polity itself.

A Perfect Union...more or less will focus on the national fabric in light of the challenges the past four years have presented to core principles Americans use to define themselves. From a basic faith in the electoral system, to the United States' role and standing in the world community, Americans have had to do some serious soul-searching about their social and political beliefs and values. The marshalling of strong convictions (religious, political and patriotic) has taken its toll on Americans' ability to imagine the national fabric in any kind of whole or holistic sense, feelings no doubt, exacerbated by the 2004 elections. Over and above particular, heated issues, the artists in *A Perfect Union...more or less* have responded to this general sense of fraying by asking pointed questions of national identity through a variety of the means by which Americans recognize themselves.

Related Events

Artist talk & poetry reading
Jen Benka
Sunday, November 14, 5pm
in Cobb Hall Room 307
(directly below the gallery) FREE

Jen Benka will read from *A Revisioning of the Preamble of the Constitution of the United States of America*, an artist book made in collaboration with Mark Wagner of Booklyn publications. Benka has had work published in *The Progressive*, *Ms. Magazine*, *So to Speak*, *Off Our Backs*, and on *La Petite Zine*. She is the recipient of grants from the Xeric Foundation, Intermedia Arts, the Poetry/Film Workshop, and was a 2001 Wisconsin Arts Board Poetry Fellow. Benka has performed her poetry and music at the Nuyorican Poets Café, Brooklyn Lyceum, Bowery Poetry Club, and on NPR's World Café. She is the managing director of Poets & Writers, Inc.

Lecture

Eric Slauter
The State and the Work of Art
Sunday, November 21, 2:00pm

Eric Slauter is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at The University of Chicago. His current book project, *The State as a Work of Art: Cultures of American Constitutionalism, 1776-1787*, examines foundational links between aesthetics and politics in a society that feared the arts but developed a legal understanding of the artificiality of the state. Slauter has held fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, the Library Company of Philadelphia, and was a Mellon Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Newberry Library in Chicago in 2003-04. This event will take place in Cobb Hall Room 402 (down the hall from the gallery) FREE.

Screening

Mary Ellen Carroll
Federal
Digital video, dual projection
Duration: 24 hours
begins Saturday, December 11, at 9:00 am
and runs continuously through
Sunday, December 12, 9:00 am

Mary Ellen Carroll filmed the front and back of the Federal Building in Los Angeles, located at 11000 Wilshire and designed in 1969 by Charles Luckman, for 24 hours straight. (She's got Warhol's *Empire* beat by 16 hours.) The Federal Building has been described in architectural guidebooks as the 'embodiment of bureaucracy.' Although we think of the Federal Government as a discreet entity, its many components exceed the capacity of the imagination. Carroll captures the building over an entire day, in part to give us a clear image of what our government looks like. Housing the divisions of the Department of Veterans Affairs, the State Department, the FBI, and the CIA; documentation of the building turns these high-level government agencies from the watchers to the watched.

A Perfect Union... More or Less has been made possible through generous support from Alphaswood Foundation; Chicago Community Trust; the CityArts Program of The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, a municipal agency; Christie's; The Danielson Foundation; Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation; the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; LaSalle Bank; The LLWW Foundation; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; The Peter Norton Family Foundation; the Provost's Discretionary Fund at The University of Chicago; The Pritzker Foundation; The Siragusa Foundation; and our membership.

AmericanAirlines is the official airline of
The Renaissance Society's 2004-2005 season.