

The New York Times

*President Trump Has Inspired Art.
That's Not Always a Good Thing.*



In "Ivanka Vacuuming," the artist Jennifer Rubell hired an Ivanka Trump look-alike to clean in a former art gallery in Washington. Credit... Ryan Maxwell

By Jillian Steinhauer
Feb. 22, 2019

Just a few months before Donald J. Trump became the Republican nominee for president, The New York Post published an interview with his first wife, Ivana. Speaking from her seven-story townhouse on the Upper East Side, the Czech emigrant praised the restrictive immigration policies proposed by her ex-husband, before adding, "As long as you come here legally and get a proper job ... we need immigrants," she said. "Who's going to vacuum our living rooms and clean up after us? Americans don't like to do that."

That comment — loaded with both xenophobia and a snippet of truth — took on new relevance this month because of a work of performance art. For the better part of February, the artist Jennifer Rubell hired a look-alike of Ivana and Donald Trump's

daughter, Ivanka, to vacuum in the former Flashpoint art gallery in Washington; the piece was titled "Ivanka Vacuuming." The model put on stilettos and copies of the pale pink dress that Ivanka wore to G20 summit in 2017, which she attended in her official capacity as an adviser to the president. (The dress is also part of her clothing line.) The model did not speak as she vacuumed a small area of pink carpet, occasionally pausing to adjust the cord or sweep back their hair. A mound of crumbs occupied a pedestal in the center of the space, and visitors were invited to throw a handful on the carpet.



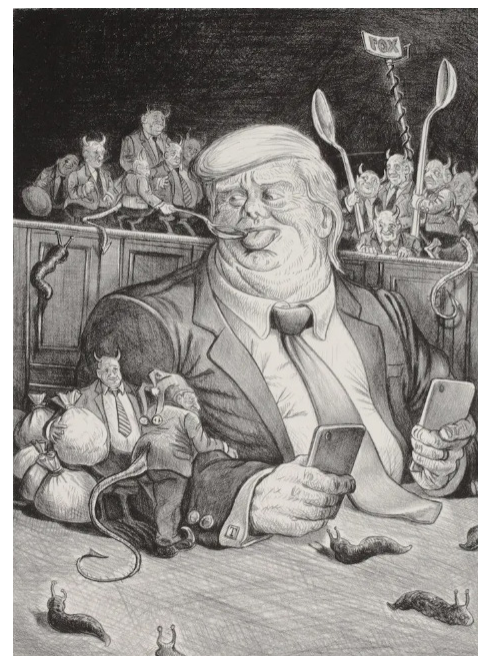
"The People's Prison" by Jason Goodrich/Indecline, installed at the Trump International Hotel and Tower. Credit...Jason Goodrich/Indecline

It was a striking image: Ivanka, who positions herself as both a feminist and a paragon of heteronormative white femininity, performing stereotypical women's labor, in contrast with the type of work associated with her class and privilege.

But it wasn't much more than an image. Although Ms. Rubell identifies as a conceptual artist, her work, which usually involves food, tends to traffic in obvious symbols with muddled meanings. This time was no different. Were we supposed to empathize

with the Ivanka stand-in for being forced to vacuum? Mock her? Notably, the news release about the project, sponsored by the nonprofit CulturalDC, was careful not to position the piece as a critique, calling it "simultaneously a visual celebration of a contemporary feminine icon; a portrait of our own relationship to that figure; and a questioning of our complicity in her role-playing." Ms. Rubell herself called it a "portrait of our time, not a judgment of our time."

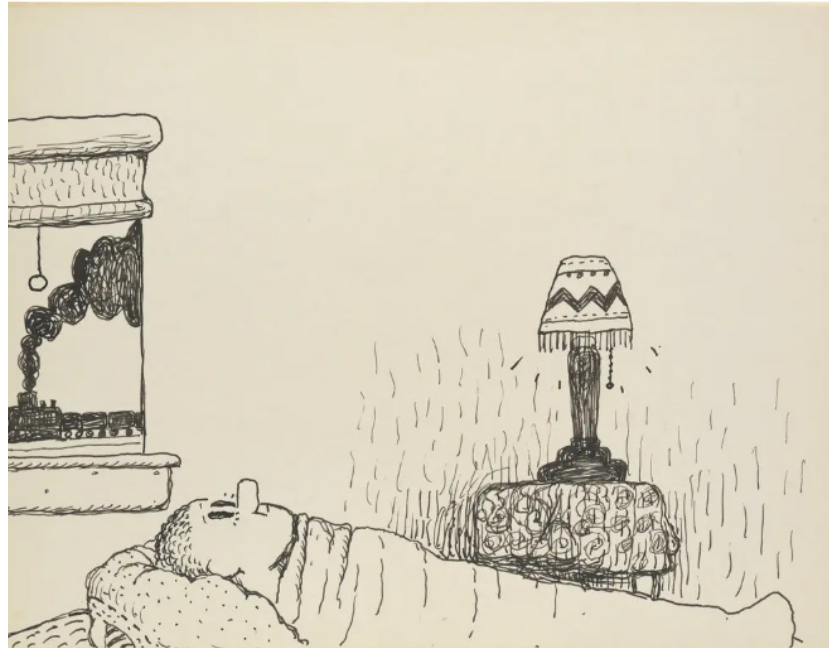
It feels like a missed opportunity. From where I sit, the start of the third year of the Trump presidency is a very good time to make a judgment. Why not offer a critical consideration of Ms. Trump and the political uses, as well as the historical precedents, of her carefully cultivated image of white womanhood? The spectacle of "Ivanka Vacuuming" and the media hubbub it spawned — Ms. Trump weighed in with both self-righteousness and mild indignation — got me thinking about other art I've seen starring the Trumps, usually Donald. A lot has appeared over the past few years — Mr. Trump as an animatronic fortuneteller, a



Sandow Birk's Trumpagrue #5 from "The Horrible & Terrible Deeds & Words of the Very Renowned Trumpagrue" (2017). Credit...Sandow Birk and P.P.O.W., New York

portrait of Mr. Trump made from pornographic images, a presidential double locked in a jail cell (in a Trump hotel) — but little of it has been memorable. I'm grateful that artists are responding creatively to the current moment, but why do so many of their efforts miss the mark?

The answer, I think, has something to do with the difference between art that is political and art that is about politics. Although it's notoriously hard to define, the first arguably has some kind of political intent, meaning or program embedded in its structure; in her essay "What Is Political Art?" the scholar Susan Buck-Morss called this "the continuation of politics by other means." She cited the practice of Fred Wilson, who mines museum archives to create installations of objects that challenge the colonial narratives of those institutions. By contrast, in art about politics, the subject matter is the primary statement, which means what you see is mostly what you get.



"Untitled (Poor Richard)" (1971) from a series of caricatures of Richard Nixon by Philip Guston. Credit...The Estate of Philip Guston, via Hauser & Wirth

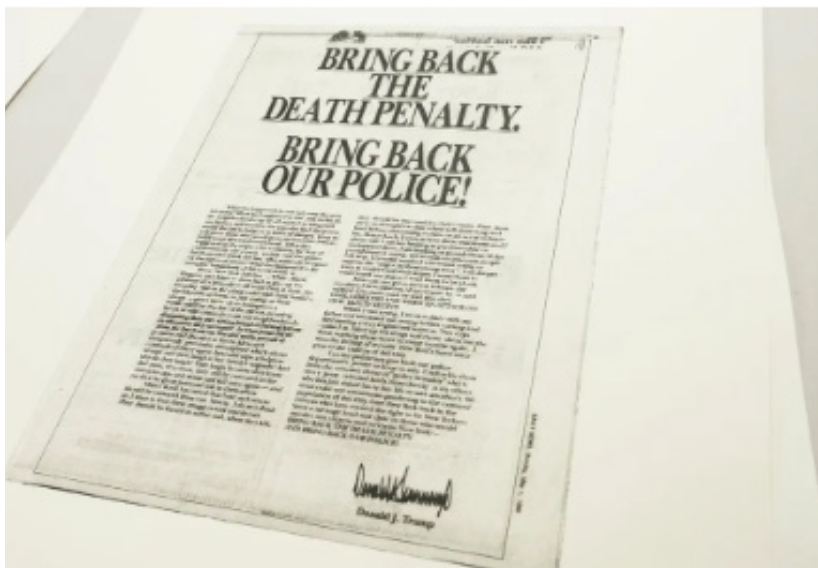
The artist and critic Thomas Micchelli put it another way in a catalog essay for Judith Bernstein's 2017-18 exhibition at the Drawing Center, identifying a "distinction between a politicized artist and a political one." An example of the former, Ms. Bernstein makes brash, frenetic paintings that use sexual humor to skewer patriarchal American culture. Her new work depicts Mr. Trump with a penis for a nose, often surrounded by swastikas or in proximity to Hitler. Her aesthetic is so over the top that sometimes her paintings seem like visual screams. That's understandable and valuable when you're caricaturing a man who's been accused of sexual assault and working in a society that instructs women to suppress their anger.

In his recent show at P.P.O.W. gallery, Sandow Birk took a quieter and more classical approach to parodying the president. The artist showed lithographs from a project called "The Horrible & Terrible Deeds & Words of the Very Renowned Trumpagrue," which was inspired by François Rabelais's 16th-century Gargantua and Pantagrue, a satirical tale about a pair of giants. Mr. Birk renders Mr. Trump as an oversize baby who looks at his phone constantly and is spoon-fed by men in suits with paunches and devils' horns. The prints seem directly descended from the work of 19th-century caricaturist Honoré Daumier, which has the added effect of placing President Trump in a long line of historical crooks and bullies.

Despite their divergent styles, a precedent for both Ms. Bernstein's and Mr. Birk's work can be found in Philip Guston's caricatures of Richard Nixon. The artist started the drawings in 1971, less than a year after he was "excommunicated," in his words, by the New York art scene for returning to figuration after a long period of making abstract work. Mr. Guston's caricatures, which were shown around the time of the 2016 election at Hauser and Wirth, are often visually spare but unsparing in their criticism of Mr. Nixon. They depict the former president with a long, penislike nose and a scrotum for a face, and make him out to be a buffoon as he delivers a speech or visits China. At the same time, an eerie sadness hangs over the images of Mr. Nixon alone in bed. They are satire infused with dread.



A projection by the artist Robin Bell on the side of the Trump International Hotel in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 30, 2018. Credit... Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



"Monday, May 1, 1989 – Page 9," by Alexandra Bell from the series "No Humans Involved: After Sylvia Wynter" (2018). Credit... Sari Goodfriend

That may be what's missing from so much Trump art today — the critical introspection to accompany the laughter. Mr. Guston's drawings and paintings are intimate, as if he were grappling with the reality of Mr. Nixon's existence. The process of making them was fraught, both politically and artistically; only a handful were shown in the following decades (Mr. Guston died in 1980). I don't mean to suggest that contemporary artists like Ms. Bernstein and Mr. Birk don't know the stakes of our time

— I'm sure they do — but hanging on the white walls of galleries, for the eyes of a largely liberal, self-selecting public, caricatures of President Trump feel safe. Creators and viewers alike get validation, rather than a prompt for examination or self-reflection. Part of the trouble may also be with the form. When you have a president whom many people already view as a caricature, representing him as such loses some of its disruptive power. As with Ms. Rubell's performance, you end up with familiar images and generalized meanings. What would it look like to make art about the Trumps

without their likeness? How might it create different aesthetic and political possibilities?

There are answers already out there. Some of them veer closer to propaganda than art, like Robin Bell's light projections of protest messages on government buildings and Trump hotels. (Mr. Bell currently has a solo show on view at George Washington University.) Badlands Unlimited, the publishing company founded by artist Paul Chan, makes signs that appropriate the language and style of the posters used by the right-wing Westboro Baptist Church: "God Hates Ivanka," reads one.

Other answers are contained within larger bodies of work. The artist Alexandra Bell researches the role of the media in the perpetuation of racism. Her exhibition last year at Recess Assembly included a blown-up and marked-up reproduction of Donald Trump's 1989 newspaper ad calling for the execution of the Central Park Five — a searing indictment of the man who's now president.

Sometimes the answer is only partly the work of artists, as in the case of "HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US." In January 2017, Shia LaBeouf, Nastja Sade Ronkko and Luke Turner placed a camera at the Museum of the Moving Image and invited participants to stand before it and speak the title words. The installation was so quickly swarmed by supporters of the president and trolls that the museum removed it within a month. Its rise and fall make for an incisive portrait of the harassment and vitriol that mark the age of President Trump.

None of these works will sway public opinion; art can never be a substitute for action — and indeed, some of the most interesting reactions to Mr. Trump's presidency have been gestures of protest, like Richard Prince's refunding of the money paid to him for making a painting that depicts Ivanka Trump. But they can refocus our attention, open our eyes a little wider and "make us see things we didn't know we needed to see until we see them," as the critic Jerry Saltz once described the potency of art. When it comes to the Trumps, we've seen plenty already, but there remains much more that we haven't.

A correction was made on Feb. 23, 2019: An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to the project titled "Ivanka Vacuuming." There was one look-alike model vacuuming, not several. The error was repeated in a picture caption.