

Kathleen Caprario-Ulrich, Café' 541 Column, published February 22, 2020

ME TOO – REDO

Like a bad case of acid reflux, history repeats itself—or so I've been told and, on occasion, experienced. But does it have to? Rather than a revisionist approach that either demonizes or sanitizes what came before, is it possible to re-envision a problematic past, appreciate its strengths (if any) as well as acknowledge its failings and move, once enlightened, into a better present and future?

Last month's column considered several curatorial responses to the work of the Post-Impressionist Paul Gauguin, informed by the insight and revelations of the #MeToo movement. I believe we have the responsibility to address the moment that we are in regardless of how easy or difficult that prospect may be. It is correct and right to address and call out, for what it is, any reprobate behavior or "ism" that is evidenced in the past or persists in the present. That said—if an all or nothing approach is rejected in favor of more nuanced and thoughtful consideration, might creativity and increased innovation be a possible and likely outcome?

The African American artist, Kehinde Wiley, hasn't shied away from using his consummate paint handling to appropriate the tropes of Western European art history to celebrate and assert the body of color—the black body—within contemporary culture. In a 2019 Paris exhibition, Wiley presented a series of stunning portraits of Tahiti's Māhū community, a group of Polynesians known as a third gender between male and female. It's no surprise that Gauguin was fascinated with this non-binary group; his depictions of them were as sexual objects of colonial exploitation and the exotic, fetishized gaze. Wiley's work subverts the sexist and troublesome language of Gauguin and recognizes the personal agency and self-presentation of the people he paints. Wiley says, "The ways we see black and brown bodies from the Pacific are shot through his sense of desire. But how do you change the narrative? How do you change the way of looking?" Wiley's ability to parse out the potential from the problem without sweeping the pesky bits under a cultural rug of complacent complicity is nothing less than brilliant...and courageous.

However, you don't have to have had flown "across the pond" (no doubt, in economy) to encounter work that creatively responds to and is extrapolated from a keen awareness of the issues that deserve our attention. One example locally is work by social practice artist, sculptor and arts advocate, Chary Swing. On a recent visit to ArtCity's new digs in Downtown Eugene, Swing shared the motivation behind her freestanding sculpture, *Uterunce*, with me. What began as the intention to express a woman dynamically moving forward while bringing others along with her took a different direction after the results of the 2016 presidential election. She decisively cut the figure's head off at the mouth—a startling act that, in Swing's words echoed her "...heartbreak of the words and

opinions of women being continually obliterated..." Yet, it must be pointed out that, that female form persists in her stride, ensuring that the path forward remains open.

The contemporary Chinese artist and social activist, Ai Weiwei, is straightforward and erudite. He calls on people "...to be 'obsessed citizens', forever questioning and asking for accountability. That's the only chance we have today of a healthy and happy life."

And to that, I say, well said.

554 words

Kehindi Wiley quote and link:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/arts/design/gauguin-national-gallery-london.html>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCNutee7Fwx>

Ai Weiwei quote link:

https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/193922.Ai_Weiwei

Charly Swing websites and image information:

Title: Uterunce

Material: Aqua Resin

28"H x 12"W x 13"D

<https://charlyswing.com/>

<https://www.artcityeugene.com/>

KEHINDI WILEY - Third Gender



CHARLY SWING - Uterunce

