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ART

Nearly 100 artworks that diagnosed America well before the election

The Rubell Museum's "American Vignettes: Symbols, Society and Satire" reveals a national ambivalence that long predates any particular election result.



An installation view of "American Vignettes: Symbols, Society and Satire" at the Rubell Museum. At the back wall is Glenn Ligon's "Condition Report D" (2000). (Chi Lam/Rubell Museum)

Review by Maura Judkis

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It's tempting to view the Rubell Museum's "American Vignettes: Symbols, Society and Satire" exhibition — installed in September, when both presidential candidates were neck and neck and either outcome was possible — through a post-election lens.

But we live in the same country we lived in when the show's curation took place, and that's the point. Any emotions these works inspire were already there — have always, in fact, been there — and imagining a different interpretation of these nearly 100 pieces had Vice President Kamala Harris won would only distract from the reality that inspired them. The exhibition contains the multitude of national feeling right now: uncertainty, fear, shame, pride, resilience and resignation.

“American Vignettes” is organized around three themes, and the first — symbols — immediately invites deliberations on how they might be viewed in an alternate history. Does Piotr Uklanski's “Untitled (American Eagle),” an imposing sculpture of the eagle image on our quarters, look more or less fascistic depending on whom the viewer voted for? Would Vaughn Spann's massive mixed-media flag, edges grayed out, seem more or less depressing if the candidates had been different?



Vaughn Spann, “Dark Days Bring New Hope (Never Forget),” 2020. Polymer paint, pulp, mixed media, terry cloth, canvas on aluminum stretcher bars. (Chi Lam/Rubell Museum)

But if you get closer to both of these pieces, you'll discover a previously unnoticed softness — Uklanski's is sculpted in foam, and the pixelated-looking stripes on Spann's flag are made of terry cloth. Can we still find what's soft in this fractured place? Those are the types of metaphors that a post-election viewing invites, sometimes overtly: Glenn Ligon's “Condition Report D” is a re-creation of the “I Am A Man” signs marchers held at the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers strike, attended by Martin Luther King Jr. the day before his assassination. Ligon gave his painting to an art conservator to make a condition report with handwritten annotations. The image, the conservator noted, is full of hairline cracks.



Karon Davis, "Family," 2019. Plaster, steel, armature, chicken wire, glass eyes. (Chi Lam/Rubell Museum)

Upstairs, in "Society" and "Satire," the country's most vulnerable populations come into focus: immigrants, members of the LGBTQ+ community, Black people, women and children. Karon Davis's "Family," an embracing Black family cast in plaster, is a commentary on school shootings and violence against Black people: The trio wear deer antlers because they're being hunted. Naomi Fisher's "Assy Flora Suite of 3" is a set of photographs of disembodied women's butts, lying prone in gardens and covered in flowers, leaving it ambiguous whether they're hedonistic instigators or victims — and by studying them closely, we, too, are implicated. When you see them, it's impossible not to think about a tweet from right-wing agitator and white supremacist Nick Fuentes that went viral after the election: "Your body, my choice."



Robert Colescott, "Sunset on the Bayou," 1993. Acrylic on canvas. (Chi Lam/Rubell Museum)

But there are moments of loveliness, too, like Doron Langberg's "Lovers," a painting of two men tangled up in bed. "To me, this is a loving embrace but also an embrace in which the couple holds onto each other to form an anchor in a turbulent moment," writes the artist. A lot of those happening lately.

The dim, silent rooms of the museum's lowest level feel especially meditative. You could sit for 20 minutes watching Urs Fischer's "Untitled (Branches)," a room-size installation of two cantilevered branches hanging from the ceiling, rotating slowly in overlapping circles with a lit, dripping candle at their end. The wax forms a ghostly Venn diagram on the floor. How can the polarized circles of American society possibly come together in an overlap anymore? How narrow can that center sliver get? How long before the flames snuff out — or spread?



Rob Pruitt, "Eternal Bic," 1999. Bronze lighter, lighter fluid, table. (Chi Lam/Rubell Museum)

There is one piece I did not get the chance to see on a recent weekend visit. "Eternal Bic," an installation by Rob Pruitt, popped up in the audio guide: a never-extinguished Bic lighter on a table, a wry homage to John F. Kennedy's eternal flame. It was nowhere to be seen. I asked a guard about the piece.

"They took it down for a second," he said, chuckling. The irony, the metaphor: "It wouldn't stay lit."

If you go

American Vignettes: Symbols, Society and Satire

Rubell Museum, 65 I St. SW. 202-964-8254. rubellmuseum.org.

Dates: Through fall 2025.

Prices: Free for D.C. residents, \$10 for nonresident students, \$12 for nonresident seniors and \$15 for all other nonresidents.