

Rising art stars lit up dark year foreshadowing First Amendment struggles

By DANIEL KANY

The past year was a bizarre one for American culture. Donald Trump's election is the most obvious harbinger of cultural reorientation to come, but it's hardly alone. The role of social media as a vehicle for fake news, for example, makes an alarming statement about how culture can be fooled - or used to fool others.

We're going to be talking quite a bit about the First Amendment, so expect the art of 2017 to take a direct line to that subject matter. Already, the fully empowered GOP-led Congress is working to ban the social media broadcasting of what happens in Congress. And Trump has tweeted that he wants to criminalize acts such as burning the American flag. So, expect the smell of burning flags.

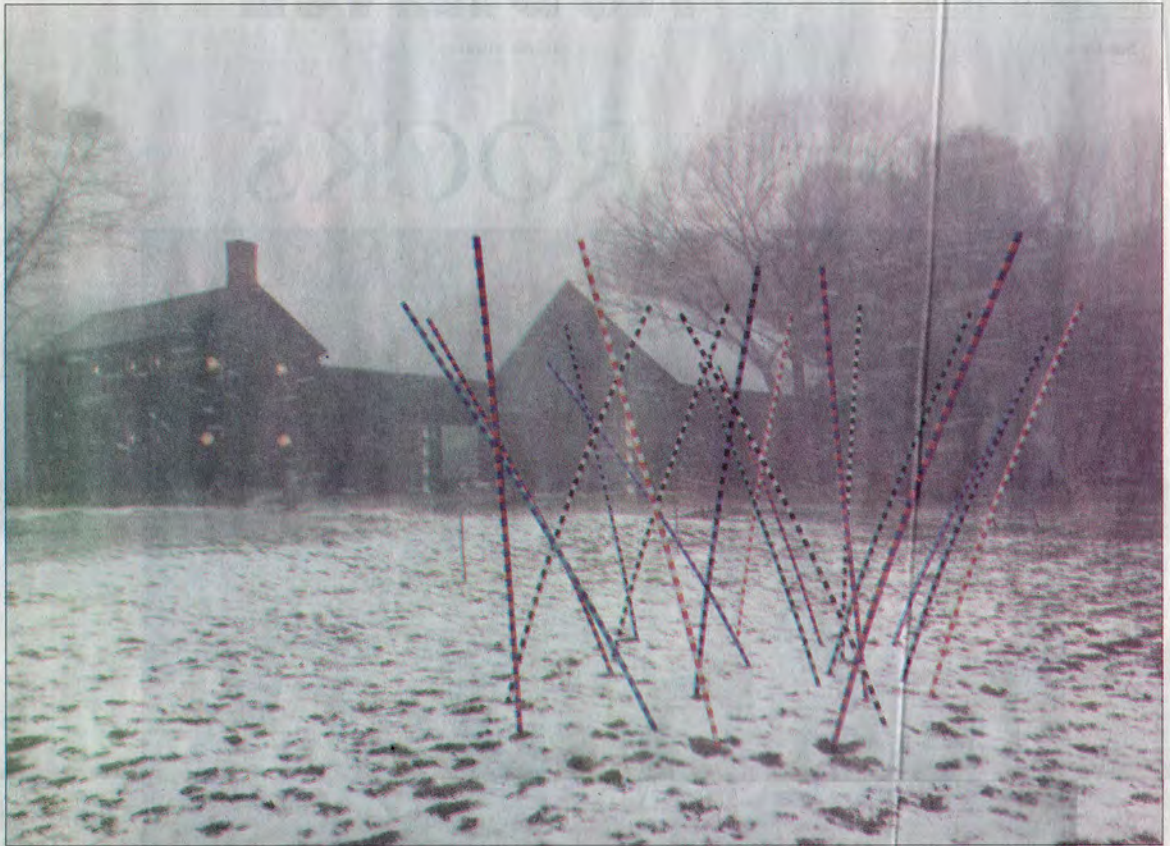
Much happened in 2016. An unusual number of American cultural leaders passed away - actors, musicians, artists and others. In Maine, galleries closed and leading gallerists passed the reins to others. Still, it is hard to focus on 2016 with so much at stake for 2017.

For me, the darkest aspect of 2016 for Maine visual arts was the suicide of Paul Oberst on Dec. 2. Oberst was showing at Corey Daniels Gallery, which I see as the most exciting contemporary art gallery in the state. And his video piece is a high point of the Center for Maine Contemporary Art's biennial, on view through Feb. 5.

With its new building in Rockland, this year's CMCA biennial was the most widely anticipated biennial in Maine's history. In reviewing the show, I discussed Oberst's abstract measuring of a beach as a door opening from a natural setting to a technically subtle work of art, but Oberst's intention moved the other way. He considered himself a primitivist, and his take on art was practically pure shamanism. He took his raw, striped iconography and, in the work at CMCA, for example, moved through the film process to represent nature as an ever-balancing and irresistible force. For Oberst, nature was a temple. And his striped "temple markers" have been a fixture for the past few years in the front yard of Corey Daniels on Route One in Wells.

From an artistic perspective, Oberst, who was also a prolific and accomplished poet, was just hitting his stride. His work was strong, so while his life is over, Paul Oberst's artistic legacy is now beginning a life of its own.

Another CMCA biennial artist with a rising star is Gail Skudera. Her large and quite excellent show at the Maine Museum of Photographic Arts came down this past week, and she has several 2017 shows scheduled across the country. Skudera is an 1980s-style feminist artist, and I describe her this way for a reason: To consider what art will look like under Trump, it makes sense to look to the Reagan era, a time which produced over-sized and over-priced but often vapid work whose makers (think Robert Longo, for example, but most of their names are already meaningless to us) largely fell out of the market with the Reagan Recession that ended the 1980s. What did survive, however, were quieter currents of counterculture focused on issues of subjectivity and empathy in work driven by concerns



Paul Oberst, "temple markers"

Corey Daniels photo



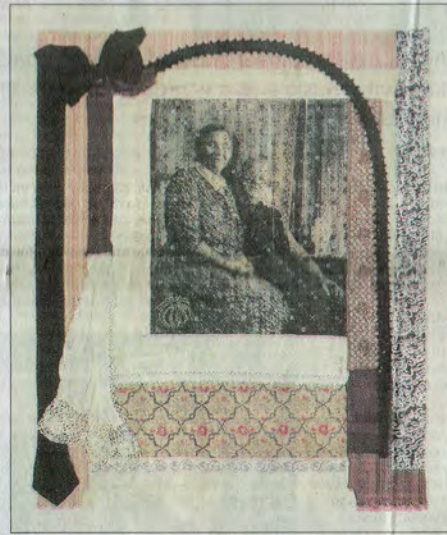
Gail Skudera, "Crosscurrents Vincent," woven mixed media, 2013, 25" x 22" framed

Luc Demers photo

about identity and subjectivity in movements dedicated to feminism, queer culture, racial equality and so on.

Skudera's work is about subjectivity, empathy and weaving together stories and perspectives - quite literally. She weaves photographs and uses sewing techniques in her work. What particularly moves me about Skudera's work is how she reaches out to everyone: children, men, mothers,

friends, communities and so on. For decades, one of her leitmotifs has been van Gogh, who appeared many times in her MMPA show as "Vincent." The first name opens the door to thinking about the artist in terms of fellow-Mainer Don McClean's song, "Vincent" which opens with the lines "Starry, starry night..." It's a tender response to tragedy and mental illness. (van Gogh took his own life.) This is not remembrance



Gail Skudera, "Generation," mixed media, 2003, 23 1/2" x 19" framed

Photo courtesy of the artist

as nostalgia, it's replacing loneliness with love, bittersweet but meaningful nonetheless. Van Gogh only sold one painting in his lifetime, but his "Irises" was taken from a gallery wall in Portland where it had hung lonely and largely ignored for years and was sold for more money than any work of art ever had.

Will 2016 be remembered as a dark time? Probably, but maybe not. CMCA opened its new

building, and I could have mentioned other biennial artists, like Carly Glovinski who are being featured in increasingly important national venues: Glovinski was also selected for the deCordova's biennial which will be on view through March 26. Sure, some Maine galleries closed, but new ones opened and Maine's museums have only grown bigger and better.

We notice when well-known venues close and familiar

faces leave, but Maine's artistic future (Maine's "brand," if you will) is shaped by diasporic qualities. Portland painter Sascha Brautig's exhibition "Shivers" is now on view at the Museum of Modern Art's PS1. Brautig's strung-tight work is exciting, and she's being welcomed warmly to the international stage. Elise Ansel is another rising star who has a solo show scheduled for 2017 at Danese/Corey in New York as well as exhibitions at the Maine College of Art's Institute of Contemporary Art and in Krakow, Poland. I could go on.

In 2016, I wrote about Mainers Ken Greenleaf's and Lauren Fensterstock's critically-acclaimed Chelsea district gallery exhibitions, but they are merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the reach of Maine artists today. It's a question of perspective: The rest of world knew about international superstar Jonathan Borofsky, for example, but it was only this year that the Ogunquit artist had a show here in Maine.

The now-forgotten art of the Reagan era is a good reminder that historical perspective often takes time. With the passing of so many important and beloved leaders of American culture in 2016, it will be difficult for us to come to a more solid understanding of a year so many of us want to forget. Besides, it's time to hang on: The culture ride is about to get very bumpy.

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