

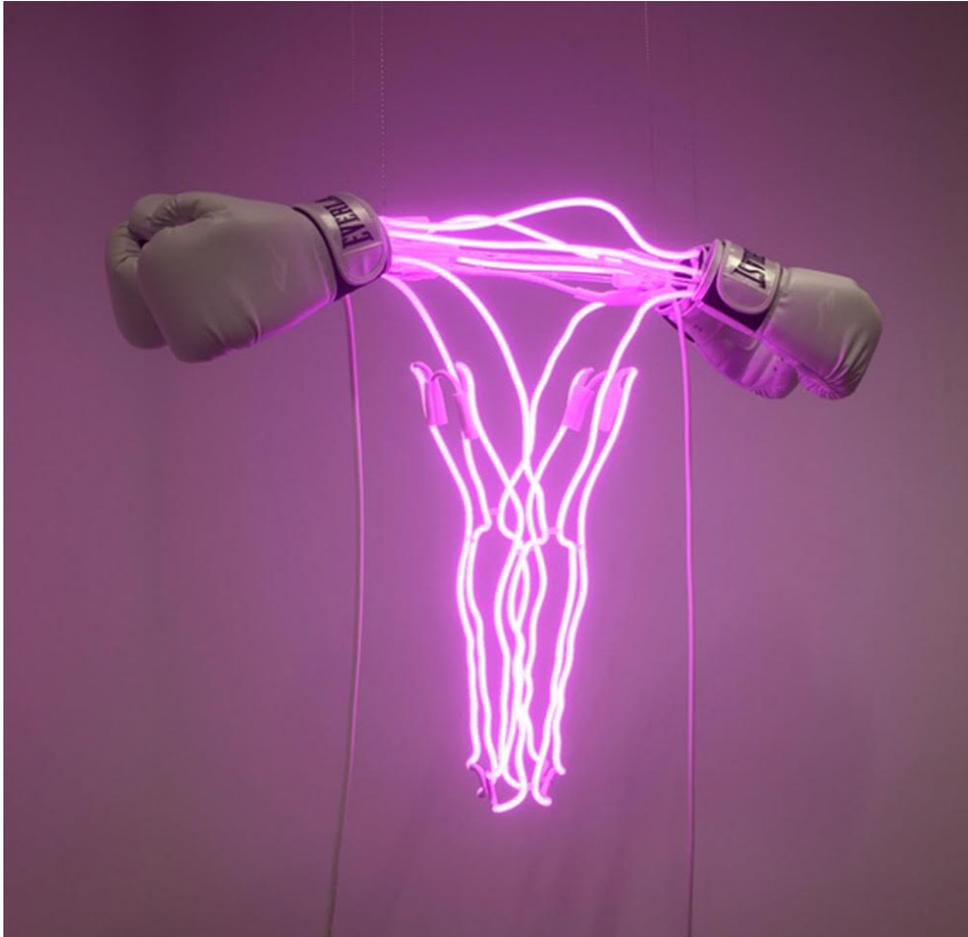
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Zoë Buckman and Natalie Frank Won't Let You Forget What Politicians Say About Women

By Katy Donoghue

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Zoë Buckman | Champ, 2016 | Neon, glass and leather | 30 x 18 x 10 inches

Today marks the launch of a weekly column for 2017 focusing on women in the arts and culture on Whitewallmag.com, "The Ascent." To observe that women are vastly underrepresented in art history, the contemporary market, and the luxury and lifestyle industries is nothing new. Nevertheless, it needs to be repeated, reevaluated, and challenged, now more than ever.

In the nearly ten years that I have been with Whitewall, I have had the pleasure of interviewing incredible women who make their way as artists, designers, architects, photographers, collectors, curators, gallerists, museum directors, CEOs, and creative directors. We have spoken about their work, their passions, their drive, and their life. Perhaps without them knowing, they have lifted me up, changing my way of seeing and thinking about our world. I wanted to create

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a larger space for those kinds of conversations with this new column—following each woman’s path or project from that beginning spark, to future vision.

Over the summer, we set in motion plans for our annual spring 2017 Art Issue to be comprised entirely of women. “The Ascent” is both a result of the groundwork for that publication, and the urgency felt in November after a man with a clear history of misogyny was elected to the highest public office in our country.

With that in mind, I could think of no better way to kick off the series than with Zoë Buckman and Natalie Frank. Last week, the two artists began a Kickstarter campaign for “We Hold These Truths to Be Self Evident,” a public mural at New York Live Arts in Chelsea. Buckman and Frank have been pulling together quotes from politicians about women and their bodies that will be reproduced on the mural, calling on viewers to consider how they feel about statements like, “Rape is kind of like the weather, if it’s inevitable just relax and enjoy it,” said by Clayton Williams of Texas. Or, “If a woman has the right to an abortion, why shouldn’t a man be free to use his superior strength to force himself on a woman? At least the rapist’s pursuit of sexual freedom doesn’t usually result in anyone’s death,” said by Lawrence Lockman of Maine. And how about, “If Hillary Clinton can’t satisfy her husband, what makes her think she can satisfy America?” said by president-elect Donald Trump.

WHITEWALL: What was the starting point for this project? How did the two of you come together and was it in direct reaction to the result of the election?

NATALIE FRANK: It was! I have long admired Live Arts, Bill T. Jones and Bjorn Amelan, both great artists and activists. They have a fantastic and long wall in their lobby that seemed like a great place to express sentiments of anger, confusion, and contention post election. I immediately thought of Zoë as a collaborator, who’s work, literally and figuratively, packs a Feminist punch. We are two women who care very much about representation of the body, Feminism, and flipping narratives of power—which tend to favor men.

WW: Since the election, both of you have said that we, and you as artists, should be using despair and anger to mobilize—that we need to keep feeling uncomfortable and get our hands dirty. How did that inform what you want to do with this mural?

ZOË BUCKMAN: It’s my belief that real healing can only come after cleansing, and cleansing, by nature, is not pretty. There is clearly an incredible amount of hatred and anger that has been bubbling up here for decades, and in order for real change to take place we need to be able to have some frank, difficult, and confrontational conversations. The mural that Natalie and I are creating isn’t just about empowering women, it’s about exposing the ridiculous, hurtful, unfounded, unscientific, and inhumane statements elected men and women have made about women in this country.

WW: Watching the video on the Kickstarter site, I remember a good deal of these quotes when they made headlines initially. It’s both sickening and frustrating, because while there

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was public outrage when these comments were in the news, the conversation moved on with little to no recourse for those politicians. Do you feel like we need to be reminded and hold these people accountable?

NF: Every day. We need to ask, who we have elected and why? And if they don't represent us: as women, as Feminists, as Humanists, as citizens, what and how will we protest? I hope that by putting the actual information out there, we can let these politicians speak for themselves. And then, we can talk back.

ZB: Yeah, I agree with you both. Not only do these grown-ass individuals need to be held accountable for their words and actions, but we all need to never forget the world we're living in today: the good and the bad.

WW: Hearing these statements from our elected and public officials also seems to perpetuate that importance of staying uncomfortable, staying angry. What has it been like emotionally gathering this material?

NF: Like you, I remember hearing these one by one. Seeing them all together, seeing the amount of hate that has come to the surface, in discourse and in action, during and post election has been eye opening. I think it's important to call it and see it for what it is: hate. Anger is a powerful tool of mobilization.

ZB: There is something overwhelming about seeing all that text together, and doing the research was simultaneously maddening and heartbreaking for Natalie and I. I kept finding myself slamming my laptop shut. For the last few years, my artistic practice has been a process of me channeling something that makes me angry, something I want to start a discussion about, or something I feel I need to work-through. When I was compiling 90s rap lyrics about women for a previous show, I remember feeling disgusted and sad at times... but this is much more intense and is without the nostalgia or appreciation I felt when working on the lyrics. What we both find frightening about this work is the power these people have been rewarded with and their ability to shape the laws that govern us.

WW: Zoë, you've said that artists need to make work outside the galleries for the people and have it be public and free. How have your recent projects on billboards and benches emboldened this idea?

ZB: My mother was a member of the Communist party and is a strong Feminist. She still does a lot of community theater work. I learned from her that, when you have to opportunity to share your work outside of art audiences, you don't have to dumb it down. People can be so much smarter and more sensitive than we give them credit for. I love creating an exhibition but I want to be able to create a billboard or a bus bench at the same time! We need to be able to do it all right now and shed fear of judgment, because we cannot afford to continue to isolate people outside of the liberal set.

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WW: Why was it important for you both to create something public?

NF: This hate speech is public. We are governed by these public officials. We are all people and bodies that exist in a public arena. The surprise of this election has shown that this hate, anger, divide within the country, needs to be aired and also made public, in order to find a way forwards.



Zoë Buckman | And If Thy Mistress Some Rich Anger Shows, 2017 | Used wedding dresses | 60 x 60 inches

WW: Natalie, you've talked about getting involved with Planned Parenthood—can you tell us about that?

NF: I've submitted an application to join their activist committee. Planned Parenthood stands for women's ability to self determine: basic healthcare, choices about their own reproductive facilities, possession over their own bodies. My mother has always been very involved in Planned Parenthood, and having been raised in Texas, it was an organization I learned early on is both vital and politicized. As they say, if it were men and their bodies, abortion and the basic healthcare that Planned Parenthood provides, wouldn't even be in question. My father is a pediatrician, and healthcare in general has always been a topic in our home. Just as healthcare

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and education should be mandatory services that our government provides, which Trump will attempt to destroy and dismantle, a woman's right to choose, our future Supreme Court and the basic healthcare Planned Parenthood provides are all in extreme jeopardy. This intrusion on women and our bodies and our self-determination can't be underestimated.

WW: Both of you have created work that deals with feminist issues. I've admired that in both of your practices pre-election cycle. But now this kind of art feels so much more urgent and vital. Is that something you're feeling in your work outside of this mural?

NF: With great urgency. I'm starting to illustrate another book of French Feminist fairy tales; painting portraits of dominatrices that I've photographed and making drawings of women fighters. I'm trying to use the tools I have to amplify my voice. All of the hate of Trump, of surrounding politicians, racists and misogynists and xenophobists, has physically sickened me these past months. More now than ever, I wanted to make pointed images of strong women, taking, wrestling control and fighting back!

ZB: Yes it does feel more urgent now. Pre-election I had been working on several proposals for public sculptures and installations with a focus on programming. Now, not only am I energized to pitch these pieces and do everything in my power to get them green-lit, but I'm realizing that I want to see my work, and the work of artists I admire, travel to Red States.

WW: Making this together, as two women, is also really powerful. Have you felt a heightened imperative to work with or reach out to other female artists?

NF: Community is essential. Elevating and working with other women, in all parts of life, is where I think it all begins. Any developing society must begin with the enfranchisement and education of girls and women.

ZB: My involvement in this piece came about because Natalie reached out to me. I am so touched and encouraged that this brilliant woman is not only open to collaborating with me, but is giving me the opportunity to dig into something new with her.