Exhibition Checklist:

All works and photos courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

Donna Catanzaro
Oil Zombies, 2011
Digital collage, 14 x 14 inches
courtesy of the artist

Jerry Kearse
One Trick Pony, 2012
Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 42 inches

Mike D’Antuono
American Pie, 2012
Oil on canvas, 42 x 48 inches
Editions at Boston University
courtesy of the artist and Red Press

Marie French
Study for pediment of temple
Ink on paper, 5 x 5 x 10 feet

Peter Saul
American Rodeo
Ink on paper, 16 x 22 inches

Russell Lowe
Blood in the Water
Currency collage on panel, 12 x 16 inches
courtesy of Pearl Dodds Gallery, NYC

Testa Brewer
Gaming the System
Currency collage and mixed media on panel, 12 x 16 inches
courtesy of Pearl Dodds Gallery, NYC

American Roulette
American Roulette, 2006–2007
Ink on paper, 16 x 22 inches

Greta Pratt
Liberty Wavers
2010–2012
Printed book

Kate Marks
Stuffed Vote
2012
Ink on paper, 2.75 x 6.5 inches

Jade Townsend
Hooray For Progress
2011
Installation/sculpture, 60 x 60 x 60 inches

Federico Solmi
Douche Bag City
2010
Video installation, 8 x 15 feet
in collaboration with 3-D artist Russell Lowe

Jen Love
Liberty Wavers, 2011
Ink on paper, 2.75 x 6.5 inches

Tom IBM
American Pie
2010
Currency collage and mixed media on panel, 12 x 16 inches

Karoline Haddert
Remaking History:
Paper Collages
2009

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Pratt Manhattan Gallery
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New York, NY 10011
212-477-7775
exhibitions@pratt.edu

Gala Exhibitions:
The Head Ache (after George Condo), 2010
Digital etching and chine colle, 5 x 5 x 10 feet
courtesy of the artist

One Trick Pony
2012
Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 42 inches

Aquatint etching and letterpress
Los Caprichos,
Goya’s
2011
15.5 x 19.5 inches
Digital etching and chine collé
2010
digital collage, 14 x 14 inches
Oil Zombies,
Donna Catanzaro
2011
courtesy of the artist

Return to Goya No.9

Also in the exhibition:

Adams Gallery, NYC
Courtesy of the artist and George Adams Gallery, NYC

The Head Ache
Enrique Chagoya
2011
Digital collage, 14 x 14 inches

Wall Street Zombies
Enrique Chagoya
2011
Digital collage, 14 x 14 inches

The Head Ache
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Art in the Age of Political Absurdity

Do election years bring out the worst in our nation’s character? Candidates question each other’s patriotism and charge the other party with driving the country off a cliff. Supporters threaten doom and destruction if their candidates fail. The talking heads caught up in the horse race focus on biographical minutia, incidental gaffes, and oversimplified polarities. Campaign advertisements flood the airwaves, at least in the so-called battleground states. A startlingly high percentage of the electorate, turned off by the din, takes a pass, allowing the more extremist factions to prevail.

What’s the good news? Well for starters, election years also provide grist for political humor, caricature, and parody. The fact that we can lampoon our leaders and question their policies is evidence of the continuing strength of our democracy. In fact, the most thoughtful political commentary generally stands outside partisan bickering. Instead, it often comes wrapped in wit and irony, reflecting the fact that these are forms of address that resist political pieties and defy the worship of sacred cows.

“Party Headquarters: Art in the Age of Political Absurdity” is a politically themed exhibition timed to coincide with the 2012 presidential election. In the grand tradition of political satire stretching from William Hogarth to Jon Stewart, this exhibition brings together visual artists who draw on both vernacular styles of political address and contemporary communication systems. They employ these to address the larger questions that often go undiscussed when candidates descend into full-bore political attack. These artists reveal the continuity between traditional political commentary purveyed by political posters, broadsheets, and cartoons and the expansive new possibilities opened up by the digital revolution. Employing everything from painting and sculpture to Photoshop, etching, installation, performance, and video animation, they point up the social consequences of greed, the corrosive effects of money and religion in politics, the dire state of the environment, the contradictory aspirations embodied by the American Dream, and the destructive outcome of unquestioning faith in American exceptionalism. But they also affirm the continuing vitality of America’s finest values, among them the belief in democracy, free speech, opportunity, and liberty.

Many of the works look at our uncertain future through the lens of history. Peter Saul brings up the ghosts of elections past with a satirical portrait of once-and-future presidential candidate Newt Gingrich and his stalwart opposition, represented here in the person of a fist swinging Little Orphan Annie. Enrique Chagoya links absurdist past with absurdist present, reworking the dark political satires of Goya and 15th-century caricaturist George Cruikshank to reveal the perennial sleep of reason and the ongoing battle of the powerless against the powerful. In a similar mode, Kara Maria uses the language of political caricature to contrast the complacency of the Republican political class with the militancy of the demonstrators associated with the Occupy Wall Street movement. Michael D’Antuono takes on the corporocracy with a pair of modern-day history paintings that suggest the dire implications of a political order bloated with court-sanctioned corporate money.

Other artists draw on the language of popular culture. Donna Catanaro borrows the over-the-top graphic language of retro horror movie posters to suggest how mindless greed and opportunism have invaded and subverted our discussions about energy, finance, and politics. Appropriating the format of first-person-shooter video games, Federico Solmi creates an apocalyptic portrait of the shenanigans of a Wall Street Master of the Universe. Jade Townsend mimics the American folk art tradition to build an anti-monument to our culture of material excess waste. Martin Wilner creates diaristic drawings that link subjective experiences and objective news events to create maps of specific moments and places in our political and social landscape.

Many of the works here play familiar American symbols off each other in ways that undermine their false reassurances. Mark Wagner uses U.S. currency as raw material in collages that underscore the degree to which money has become the game changer, kingmaker, and saboteur of our political and social worlds. With Liberty Wavers, a series of photographs of greeters hired by an outfit named Liberty Tax, Greta Pratt documents the commercialization of one of America’s most beloved icons.

Sally Edelstein digs deep into American mythology, collaging iconic symbols culled from vintage advertising into a monumental tableau that highlights the strange convergence of the language of patriotism and of consumption. In a similar way, Jerry Kearns points to the melding of religion and militarism as it underlies some of our more unfortunate overseas adventures.

Ian Laughlin and Duke Riley present timely reminders that the vote is the essential emblem of democracy. Laughlin’s installation presents two versions of the ballot box, one stuffed with the cash of lobbyists and campaign contributors, the other filled with the hopes and dreams of the American majority. Riley goes back to the origins of democracy in ancient Greece to remind us that from the beginning those who refused to participate were branded “idiots.”

In an age of political absurdity, it seems to be up to artists and political satirists to remind us of the yawning chasm between our political rhetoric, our social realities, and the ideals to which we as a nation claim to adhere. Taken together, the works here suggest both the strengths and the follies of America. Their larger message is that the strength of our American-ness lies in our ability to question, to look frankly at the nation’s past and present, and to ask if we are living up to our own best selves.

— Eleanor Heartney, September 2012

GUEST CURATORS: ELEANOR HEARTNEY AND LARRY LITT

In conjunction with this exhibition, a New York Mobile Voter Registration Center, designed by artist Duke Riley (M.F.A. ’08), will tour the streets of Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens.

The fifth annual “Pratt Falls” political cabaret, produced by Larry Litt, will take place in the gallery on October 16, October 30, and November 6 at 7 PM.