**Juror Statement for *What’s Right, What’s Left: Democracy in America***

**By Kathy Battista, Ph.D**

When invited to jury this exhibition, I was excited about the possibilities as well as the challenges that it presented. I cannot think of a topic that is more important today. Democracy, a fundamental ideal of the United States constitution, is a contested term as of late. Democratic elections and governance are the hallmarks of an emancipated, first world nation. In the so-called West we look at nations that live under dictators and despots as uncivilized and barbaric; however, we live in a nation of contradictions, a few of which I detail below.

The United States has one of the highest statistics of incarceration in the world including the infamous Guatanamo Bay detention center, which some argue has defied laws established by the Geneva convention; a battle over freedom of choice, thought to have been resolved in the 1973 Roe vs Wade case, still wages, with the family valuesright recently eliminating Medicaid funding for Planned Parenthood in Texas; gun crime is at endemic levels, including random mass shootings in public spaces; and police brutality against the African American community is the topic of daily news. How does one find elation living in the midst of such turmoil? How do we understand and differentiate our nation from others that we consider less civilized? Is democracy the key to the well being of all citizens?

In the call for submissions to this exhibition the artists were asked “What is right and what is left in America?” The double entendre in the title, which I unfortunately cannot take credit for, was hiding in plain sight. Right and left in the political conception are traditionally understood as a conservative, Republican viewpoint versus a liberal, Democratic stance; of course, this binary seems antiquated at present in the increasingly centrist elision of the left and the new extremism in the right. However, if we ask ourselves what is “right” in terms of moral aptitude, it lacks the discrete boundaries of a fixed position. What is “right” is subjective, the subject of debate, and stands for different things depending on who is asked and who answers the question. Is it right to tell women how they can control their bodies? Is it right that guns are so easily accessible in this country? Is it right that we incarcerate more people than any other democratic, civilized nation? But there is also what is right FOR America—how should we behave as a world superpower and how should we support as well as discipline our citizens?

We can also ponder what is left? In political terms it has become increasingly centrist in its views, veering close to conservative viewpoints at times. Alternatively, “what is left?” also means what remains. If we ask ourselves what remains we are left with both disparities and inconclusive ideals. We are left with a second amendment that many find outdated, a leftover from a time when bearing arms was not related to gang, youth, and random mortality. We are sadly not left with a conclusive stance on reproduction. So what is left in America? How far are we as a nation from what we were originally founded as?

The works in this exhibition cover a range of these issues with visual acuity and insight, as well as humor and playfulness. Looking at the works that were submitted, I was reminded of the ability of art to transcend political party or message through the assertion of universal concepts and truths. Making a selection that would fit into the intimate proportions of the Phoenix Gallery required discipline. I had the luxury of a plethora of works to choose from, many of which were significant to me for several reasons. There were works that had huge visual impact, which I wanted to include for their sheer physical presence. This was difficult given the confines of the space and the fact that I wanted to be as inclusive as possible regarding the amount of featured artists. There were pieces that dealt with political issues through abstract aesthetics, which were magnificent in their subtlety and nuances. I could have selected, and considered doing so, an entire exhibition of abstract work. This would have been a completely different show than what one sees at Phoenix Gallery.

In the editing process, the works that prevailed represent a wide use of media and techniques. There are videos that use straightforward editing, found and created footage, as well as digital enhancement. There are sculptures that contain found objects as well as those finely crafted traditional materials. There are paintings, drawings, photographs and prints that use figuration and text to portray individual and universal messages. There are also installations (one of which is performative and interactive for the duration of the exhibition) that were important for me to include for the challenging nature of these works.

I am particularly excited about the range of works in the gallery exhibition as well as the digital display. They read as a time capsule of 2015 in the United States. I hope that I have the luxury of looking back at this work in decades to come, to see how contemporary artists have progressed or returned to these debates. Hopefully what is right for our nation, in a moral rather than political sense, will prevail and that we will be left with ideals and policies that we are proud of. The concept of democracy, albeit difficult to adjudicate or predict, assures one thing: that in a civilized nation people can agree to disagree, debates can be waged and that people will continually revise and update their positions. Citizens, and especially artists, need to keep talking, keep creating and continue to propose different viewpoints. Although we may not like a viewpoint, being part of a democracy means allowing every opinion, left or right.