

The Gildless Age

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Curated by Denise Johnson

Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, (1873) saw no romance in the fictions of its time. Although not widely known today, the title quip would come to characterize the period of rapid economic growth and territorial expansion in the U.S. after the Civil War. While the American middle class was invented in this period, the aristocratic elite reveled in unprecedented wealth, establishing a distinct divide in power and privilege between the haves and the have-nots. Twain and Dudley's satire drew no punches as it expressed open disdain for the conspicuous consumption, overt greed and rampant corruption exhibited by elites. Similar tales of greed and corruption were plentiful in the time, pragmatically described in the photographs of sociologist Lewis Hine, muckraker journalist, Jacob Riis and by authors such as Edith Wharton. While no one source fully described the astonishingly overt racism, clashes arising from surges in immigration, fierce union battles, persistent disenfranchisement, and Social Darwinist chagrin, collectively these works described a nation immersed in vicious class conflict.

Since the economic failure of 2007 - 2009, numerous pundits have remarked on the striking similarities to our own age and Twain's. Today, 10% of U.S. households own 76% of the wealth, while the wealthiest 1% own an astonishing 35%,¹ proportions similar to those in the early 20th century that also reflect surging wealth inequality since the 1970s.² What's more, the least wealthiest 40% of American households owe more debt than the total of their wealth!³ French economist Thomas Picketty's landmark analysis, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, asserts that we are not only on course to exceed any previously set gaps in the distribution of wealth, but that the duration of such disparities will surely be longer lived.⁴

JEFF&GORDON's video installation, *Temporarily Embarrassed* (2011) springs directly from this dire paradigm. *Gildless Age* presents three of a five channel work filmed on foreclosed properties in the Inland Empire, a region long associated with higher than average rates of poverty, unemployment, and crime. Jeff Foye and Gordon Winiemko proudly wear the signifiers of upper middle class privilege as they mow, wash, and primp properties in various states of take-over. The pair dryly ignore all signs of impending doom as they perform the absurdity of contemporary economic systems and conditions. Grappling with the futility of surviving in such a skewed system of inequity, JEFF&GORDON extend a bruised critique of the bourgeoisie investment in the farce.

¹ Christopher Ingraham, "If you thought income inequality was bad, get a load of wealth inequality," *Washington Post*, (May 21, 2015). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/05/21/the-top-10-of-americans-own-76-of-the-stuff-and-its-dragging-our-economy-down/>.

² Kim Phillips-Fein, "Why Workers Won't Unite," *The Atlantic*, (April 2015). <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/04/why-workers-wont-unite/386228/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Eduardo Porter, "Q&A: Thomas Picketty on the Wealth Divide," *The New York Times Economix*, March 11, 2014, http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/11/qa-thomas-picketty-on-the-wealth-divide/?_r=0.

With similar disenchantment, **Claudia Cano**'s performance at the exhibition's opening reception is one of a series of work in which the artist's alter ego, *Rosa Hernandez, La Chacha (the cleaning lady)* (2013 & 2016) embodies the exemplary work ethic espoused in so many cleaning products and racist connotations associated with cleanliness. Cano confronts the viewer on a human-scale, insisting on an intimate understanding of the abuse, poor pay, and mistreatments of immigrant workers in low paying, monotonous, unskilled jobs.

Ramiro Gomez also represents labor unseen, offering a counter to well known Pop Art works from privileged realms, and bearing witness to the tremendous work that goes into maintaining California's gilded facades. Affluent metropolitan environs are moved to secondary space in Gomez's canvases as he insists on and centralizes the presence of maids, gardeners, pool cleaners, and day laborers. Given the current contentious climate of debates on immigration, the work stands as vibrant testimony to the un-documented, as it resolutely scratches and scrapes at the sparkly veneer of their masking.

Remarking on the dissolution of middle class agency, **Justin John Greene**'s *Infinite Set* (2016) caricatures the climate of anxiety surrounding the eroding middle class. The domestic scene is full of despair and longing in its noir coding. Victim/participant in the gig economy, the figure seeks the next precarious hustle, revealing the fallout of union busting and free market employment. Here is the citizen, who obligingly bought into the notion that they could be anything they wanted to be, with nothing more than a little hard work. In the context of this exhibition, the monotonous toil chips at the subject's humanity with no just reward in site.

Within this landscape of outsourcing, sub-standard wages, and inhumane employment practices, **Marc Trujillo**'s work makes the alienation and discontent palpable. The structures he represents in his ongoing *Drive Thru* series are fortress like in their bland conformity. Glances are never met, and gazes cannot be exchanged as figures are broken and fractured in the name of fast and cheap. In these joyless spaces, through commercial marketing ploys, the artist nudges the viewer to focus deeply on the very things that are not meant to be looked at for too long.

On the other hand, **Dee Williams**' photographs of Los Angeles environs frame the lonely urbanity that feeds California's sunny fictions. Billboards call out to crumbling infrastructure to buy, want, and voraciously consume. Over and over, the viewer is confronted with flat reminders of the natural world now paved. Meanwhile, Williams captures evocative nationalistic gestures and nostalgic visions of what the West was once imagined to be, while dismantling numerous enticements of the conquered terrain. At a time when the median household income in the U.S. is about \$50,000, in these scenes, the viewer finds the American Dream ragged and torn.⁵

In the years between the *The Gilded Age* and the beginning of the 21st century, trickle-down economics, neoliberal politics, police militarization, institutionalized racism, and endless wars against vague foreign threats have persistently wreaked a toll on the collective conscience. **Elana Mann**'s *IBD (Improvised Balloon Device)* (2007 - 2011) presents an individual confronting and engaging with these forces face-to-face, or rather, person to lone oil pump jack. A somber turmoil lays heavy in each scene, and one senses a boiling rage from the figure as she

⁵ "Rise of the New American Barons," narrated by Celeste Headlee, Weekend Edition, *NPR*, August 10, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/08/10/210759502/rise-of-the-new-american-barons>.

struggles against the cumbersome weight and girth of the bubbling balloons and the industrial/corporate/political might they represent. Created at the height of the U.S. attack on Iraq, the work laments both human and ecological loss.

Similarly, **Bijan Yashar's** images of power lines entreat the viewer to engage in what Mann has termed "everyday rebellions."⁶ Facing impending expiration as they are buried underground and systematically removed from our awareness, Yashar understands the unsightly cables as symptomatic of the fractured states citizens must navigate to forge community. Testifying to dialogues on sustainable energy production, democratic allocation of resources, and the corrosive effects of divisive media that seek to immobilize and disrupt communities of resistance, the photos offer the possibility of cooperation, bi-partisanship, and coalitions, particularly in their assembly together.

In contrast, **Sean Duffy's** *Steelcase* (2004) conveys a system that is emphatically closed. Comprised of found filing cabinets and skillfully expanded with redwood, the work explores the codes of labor and power through a minimalist looping of the mundane object. In the context of *Gilded Age*, the work speaks to increasing anxiety over the hapless exploitation of resources and the powerlessness (actual and perceived) of the People to contest global issues such as climate change, and mass extinction resulting from corporate supremacy.

This sense of a rigged system, where bureaucracy, corruption, and seedy politics collide is captured in **Jeff Cain's** unnerving *Radar Balloon* (2005). The quaint act of releasing an elongated weather balloon in the Mojave Desert results in sudden and forceful "contact" with Predator Drones apparently launched by a nearby military subcontractor. The viewer's gaze follows as the benign balloon meanders to the east, deftly hunted by no less than three unmanned aerial vehicles in unrestricted air space. As with so many military aggressions, we can only guess at the grim fate suffered by our renegade balloon.

Further, Cain's fractured 3D printed sculptures of taxidermied animals symbolizing the American West partnered with glitched high-resolution scans of natural history museum tableau, point our consideration to the extraordinary technological advances (like photography) that have both fueled economic growth and ever-impending disaster. Assembled from multiple tessellated print-chamber-sized polyhedral forms, the artist's attempts at accurate and complete rendering of endangered wildlife are inherently flawed, drawing deep skepticism to assumptions that we can invent our way out of ecological disaster and climate catastrophe.

Likewise, **Julie Shafer's** *Conquest of the Vertical* (2013) pinhole negatives portray sites that exemplify Manifest Destiny exploits: Malakoff Diggins, site of the largest hydraulic mining operation in California; Owens Valley, framed by the largest silver mine in California, Cerro Gordo, now a nearly hollow mountain, and a dry lake bed created when the city of Los Angeles began diverting its water; a site along Humboldt Bay where Native Americans were aggressively relocated and killed to accommodate gold dredging and sluicing operations; and Lytle Creek where both hydraulic mining and mineral panning were employed to extract mineral resources. The works continue the artists's examination of nature as The Other while their titles make wry remark on California's state slogan, "Eureka," - "I have found it!" - as they offer the distance between the site itself and historic lumber industry hub, Eureka, CA.

⁶ Elana Mann, "Exquisite Acts and Everyday Rebellions," (2007) elanamann.com. <http://www.elanamann.com/writing/exquisite-acts-and-everyday-rebellions-notes-trenches>.

Andrea Bowers' work harkens back to Gilded Age radicalism and grassroots agitation. Prompted in 2002 by a 71 day action by legendary tree sitter, John Quigley, to save a 200+ year-old oak tree in Stevenson Ranch, Bowers began to both participate in and bear witness to activist resistance. Her reverent drawings sourced from *Earth First!* zines reference hand-made protest signs and poignantly remark on the interwoven terrain of art and activism. The works testify to the committed effort, time and organization necessary to sustain movements and effect political shift, something the artist refers to as acts of "radical patience."⁷

As with Bowers' work, time asserts a heavy presence in **Jane Mulfinger's** *Volatiles and Solids* (2014). Here, common household objects once lovingly crafted, now spewed out in vast quantities by automated machinery, find ceremonious end as the artist archives and transforms them into glass relics. The sculptural works defeat the short-term use of their models, while betraying the emotional imprints of the human bodies that once employed them. Their installation ruminates on the conceit in what we so easily discard and leave behind.

With similar spirit, **Collin Chillag** meditates on the act of re-presenting, constantly bringing the viewer back to the moment of construction. While the work can be immediately described as photorealistic, the artist's under drawings, notations, and palette studies float in and about, sometimes clashing and crashing through the composition. Within the context of *Gildless Age*, the painterly process serves as muckraker journalist, working to reveal numerous deceptions. Chillag tenaciously lays bare the devices of illusion, and in doing so, rubs fiercely at the decayed gilding of our age.

By the turn of the 20th century, the shallow excesses of *The Gilded Age* were shattered by a Progressive Era full of social, political and economic reforms advocated with moral fortitude by often ferocious groups seeking to rid their communities of social ills. These social reformers established public school systems, landmark child labor laws, the women's vote, temperance, strong labor unions and stout financial regulations. Such Progressive and populist gains further spurred civil rights movements through the 50s, 60s, and 70s that encouraged unprecedented socio-economic mobility.

Likewise, works in *Gildless Age* confront the gilded myths that the West's colonized history was founded upon while pondering, if we are at the breaking point of Gilded Age exploitations, what might next unfold once the last bit of gilding has flaked? Equally, the exhibition settles in a space of hope that at once refuses cynical mire and embraces the enormous possibilities for radical change ahead. Works in *Gildless Age* embrace what Rebecca Solnit argues in *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (2005), that "We may be living through times of unprecedented change, but in uncertainty lies the power to influence the future. Now is not the time to despair, but to act."⁸

⁷ Susan Vielmetter press release, (June, 2016) <https://www.vielmetter.com/exhibitions/current/524/pressrelease.html>.

⁸ Rebecca Solnit, "Hope is an embrace of the unknown: Rebecca Solnit on living in dark times," *The Guardian Society*, July 15, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/15/rebecca-solnit-hope-in-the-dark-new-essay-embrace-unknown>.

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