

Class Warfare in Worcester:

New Gilded Age by B. Lynch at College of the Holy Cross

Though I can never find an authentic source for the quote, Chekhov is claimed to have said that “the business of art is to undermine the assumptions of the bourgeoisie.” Perhaps that’s why he insisted on calling his plays comedies: comedy is theatre’s subversive genre, portraying upper social classes and their institutions as corrupt and making enormous fun of them. Class-conscious comedies, making the tacit tension between the haves and have-nots an overt plot point, are at least as old as the French playwrights Moliere, Marivaux, and Beaumarchais. We now regard their plays as quasi-prophetic, since the French Revolution and the fall of the monarchy followed not long after.

B. Lynch describes her exhibit “New Gilded Age” at the Cantor Art Gallery on the campus of Holy Cross as “a theatrical installation.” The exhibit is indeed delightfully theatrical, and its genre is class-conscious comedy. Lynch first started on the figures and motifs of what has become “New Gilded Age” in 2012 after the onset of the Occupy Movement. Most of her work in the past ten years has been on the visual/theatrical imagination-scape of the Reds and the Greys, who are her representations of the one-percent, portrayed as Grand Siecle aristocrats in crimson-and-gold regalia, and the 99-percenters, mostly clad shapeless grey pajamas like prison camps inmates and using cast off cooking pots as hardhats. But as a good comedic playwright, Lynch doesn’t lecture or wag a didactic finger. The gallery sparkles with whimsy, visual wit, and scenes of unexpected transport, like the diorama of the Fisherman, the only Grey who escapes his narrow world to a place not controlled by the Reds, sailing on a high sea beautifully evoked by draped blue tuile.

Other characters are the Carpenter, the Hauler, the Musician, the Wolfman (a street corner preacher), the Bully Boys, strong arms elevated a micro-step above their class by the Reds, and more: a guide to the players is provided. The viewer can follow the characters in numerous ways through the exhibit: small figure tableaux, larger free-standing versions comparable to Bunraku puppets, stunning two-dimensional scenes in deeply beveled frames where the characters are overlaid on realistic backgrounds ranging from baroque Vienna to post-industrial America, and several videos.

Uncommonly for a smaller gallery, these are projected on a large screen and reward repeated viewing.

Some chills are inescapable: one scene with a large staircase is eerily reminiscent of the notorious Stairs of Death at the Mauthausen concentration camp. But the viewer will also become gradually aware that the deluge coming. My personal favorite characters are mostly undercover or unseen: there is an insurrectionist group leaving behind their signature graffiti on various walls called the Red Baiters. The socially conscious patron may want to pin on a Red Baiter button (Lynch offers buttons depicting various characters) after an engaging, stimulating, and delightfully unsettling gallery visit.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, in-gallery visits from off-campus visitors take place by appointment only. Hours are Tuesday through Friday noon – 5 p.m., with limited Saturday availability. To book an entry time, email prosenbl@holycross.edu or call 508-793-3356. Gallery maximum capacity is 12 masked people observing social distancing guidelines. The space has high ceilings and ample square-footage, so go: like all good theatre, this show can only be fully experienced in person.

<https://newgildedage.holycross.edu>

Review by Kent Stephens; cheekymagpie.org; January 2021.