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Capsizing The Mayflower Myth, These Artists Are Creating New Iconography For A Nation Of Immigrants



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Seeking to escape Fascist Italy for the United States in 1941, the artist Saul Steinberg allegedly had to apply a little artistry to his expired European passport. Fancifully enhanced with a hand-crafted rubber stamp, the “slightly fake” document supposedly helped him to dodge dehumanizing bureaucracies on both sides of the ocean. After his arrival in America – following a year of limbo in the Dominican Republic – he continued to exercise his graphic skills, producing a series of absurdist credentials and certificates that brilliantly evoked the arbitrariness of citizenship.

One of Steinberg’s elaborate passport-inspired artworks is featured in [Arrivals](#), an invigorating exhibition at the Katonah Museum of Art investigating America’s complicated history as a “nation of immigrants”. Building on three foundational moments in the nation’s pre-history – the arrival of Christopher Columbus, the Middle Passage, and the docking of the Mayflower – the exhibition also encompasses the perspectives of Indigenous peoples who were here long before all of these events, as well as the ongoing complexities of immigration and xenophobia through the Second World War up to the present.



Titus Kaphar, American b. 1976 Kalamazoo, MI, lives and works New Haven, CT. Columbus Day Painting, ...
[+] TITUS KAPHAR

Some of the imagery will be familiar to anyone who has ever studied civics. Period engravings of well-known paintings by John Vanderlyn and Peter F. Rothenmel depict the landings of Columbus and the Pilgrims with all the melodrama that made those moments mythic. These works serve as an important baseline for more recent interpretations of the past that reckon with fictions of *terra nullius* and the civilization of savages.

Some artists directly interrogate this more-than-slightly-fake all-American iconography. For instance, Titus Kaphar's *Columbus Day Painting* recapitulates the work of John Vanderlyn but shrouds the European figures in rags, stripping away their presumed authority.

More subversive is the work of Norman Akers, an Osage artist whose *Alien Conquest* repurposes the engravings of the Founding Fathers found on modern banknotes. His lithograph sets their heads inside flying saucers surrounding the portrait of a tribal chief in ceremonial dress.

This acute inversion of otherness is an effective means of confronting the assumptions underlying American society, which has victimized Native Americans since the first days of colonization, while also hypocritically marginalizing Blacks whose ancestors were brought over in bondage and closing borders to newcomers of all colors save white. The question of who belongs has for too long been answered by opportunism backed by power and policed by acts of exclusion and discrimination based on biased comparisons to the ruling class. Othering the colonizers is not sufficient to solve the political problems of today, let alone make up for past atrocities, but undermining false distinctions between insiders and outsiders is a necessary condition for substantive reconciliation.

This transformation requires multiple approaches, articulated by a broad range of artists with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. For Annie Lopez, the impetus was the passage of SB 1070, a 2010 law authorizing Arizona law enforcement to demand proof of citizenship from anyone. Intended primarily to intimidate the Latino population, the law put people such as Lopez in a position of constant interrogation, ignoring the fact that many (including Lopez) had a longer history in Arizona than the governor and many state legislators. *Show Me Your Papers and I'll Show You Mine* responds to this injustice by printing Lopez's documents on a pair of panties and a bra made of tamale wrapper paper. The sense of personal violation is made visceral, compelling viewers to put themselves in her place.



Annie Lopez, American b. 1958 Phoenix, AZ, lives and works Phoenix, AZ. Show Me Your Papers and I'll ...
[+] ANNIE LOPEZ

There is a generational and cultural abyss between the artistic treatment of personal papers by Annie Lopez and Saul Steinberg, yet both address alienation from within, transcending satirical representation of discrimination through the authority of lived experience. . (As it turns out, [the story of Steinberg's "slightly fake" passport](#) was slightly fake, later fabricated by Steinberg, adding artistic embellishment to his Kafkaesque escape from Europe.) The balance of pointed humor and earnest declaration – also evident in the work of Norman Akers and Titus Kaphar – has the potential

simultaneously to upset the status quo and to encourage empathy for those injured by it.

Both moves are essential to real change in the context of American democracy. With their ability to turn autobiography into alternative iconographies, artists are perfectly positioned to achieve both at once.

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