

Campaign Trailer *Artist observed Obama in '08, spurred by a mix of motives*

Boston Globe - Boston, Mass.

Author: Laura Collins-Hughes

Date: Nov 2, 2010

Section" Living Arts

Text Word Count: 1166

Document Text

CAMBRIDGE - It sounds ironic now, with a fretful public expected to shift the congressional balance toward the Republicans in the midterm elections, but what most struck British artist Nicola Green about the American people back in 2008 was their patience.

Green, 38, a London portrait painter whose work is in the collections of Nigella Lawson, Elle Macpherson, and Tony and Cherie Blair, had given herself an assignment: to follow the Obama campaign on the road and distill her observations of the American democratic process into a visual record of that time. The resulting artwork, a series of serigraphs titled "In Seven Days . . .," is having its debut exhibition at Harvard Law School's Austin Hall through Dec. 3.

"It was a different kind of America to the one that I really had read about or thought I understood," Green said the other morning. A small, elegant blonde, she stood in front of her seven silkscreen prints, recollecting the uncomplaining throngs she encountered at events from the Democratic National Convention to the inauguration. "It was actually much more patient, humble, kind of quieter and different to what I was seeing in the papers, which was all about something quite hysterical."

As President Obama's alma mater, the law school makes sense as a venue for the show, but it's fitting in more ways than one. It was there that Green's husband, David Lammy, a member of Parliament and former government culture minister who earned a Harvard Law degree in 1997, met Obama (class of '91) five years ago at an event for black alumni. Lammy has said that the two subsequently struck up "a professional friendship."

Green, who is white, said that being the wife of a black Labour Party politician was not the reason for her intense interest in the Obama campaign, even if she did ask her husband to run her idea of documenting the contest past the Democratic nominee. It had far more to do with being the mother of young boys, she explained. Now 2 and 4 years old, they are mixed-race, as Obama is.

Obama's candidacy "exactly coincided with them coming into the world," she said. "You do a lot of thinking about what the world looks like and what it's going to look like in the future for your children at that moment of bringing them into the

world."

When Green set out for Denver to attend the nominating convention in August 2008, she hadn't yet conceived of the project as a series. Instead, she thought she might make a single Obama portrait in one or two trips. But on the plane back to England, she decided she wanted to go deeper.

"I quickly realized that the story wasn't about his personality or the lines on his face - that it was a much bigger, bigger story," said Green, who also believed that because she was not an American, she "would have the ability to draw back from that intense emotion" people here were feeling about the campaign and create from a longer-lensed perspective.

The publicity materials provided by her press representative for the exhibition say that Green "served as artist in residence" on the campaign and "enjoyed unprecedented access to Obama and his campaign staff" while she was "embedded" with them. A White House spokesman, Matt Leirich, said he was unable to confirm that.

According to Green, she made about a half-dozen trips to the United States over the course of the project, staying sometimes for a few days, sometimes for more than a week, drawing and photographing the candidate, the crowds, the press. She drew on the plane, too, and back in her studio - hundreds of pictures in all, she said.

The resulting serigraphs have a stripped-down, Pop Art feel reminiscent of fellow British artists Gary Hume and Patrick Caulfield. The images, which are not intended literally to document seven specific days, hang in a capacious corridor just inside the entrance to Austin Hall.

Francis McCrossan, the law school's dean for administration, was careful to say that Harvard's hosting of the exhibition, though it does focus on an alumnus, is "not meant as an endorsement of any political agenda." Rather, he said, the show's themes, which he described as civic responsibility and participation as well as the encouragement of public service, are in line with values that are part of the law school's mission.

For her part, Green called the series "a reflection on what actually hope is and what is possible with collective action when people come together, whatever you want to achieve."

But she also said that the way people perceive her images will change over time, depending on Obama's fortunes and what's going on in the world. "And so it wasn't my job to comment or have an opinion," she said.

The United States is hardly terra incognita to Green, who was only a few weeks old in 1972 when she came to live in Cambridge with her parents while her father, Sir Malcolm Green, had a fellowship at Harvard Medical School. But it is

sufficiently unfamiliar that when she flew into Logan Airport in September 2008 and got a campaign text message instructing her to go to Concord, she didn't think, "New Hampshire."

"Because I'd flown into Boston, and because I am English, I sailed off to Concord, Massachusetts," Green said, laughing at herself. A more detailed text message that followed prompted her to change course and head north in the pouring rain.

One of the images in the show came out of that trip to New Hampshire. At the time, the Republican ticket was the focus of great excitement: John McCain had just made Sarah Palin his running mate. The print, titled "The Second Day, Struggle," shows a defiant-looking forearm and fist - Obama's - rendered in gold leaf.

But, like Green's interest in the campaign itself, the image contains quiet echoes of her children.

"When my first son was born," she said, "a black woman in the UK said to me, 'When he asks whether he's black or white, you're to tell him that he's golden.' " Green laughed softly. "And I did."

Laura Collins-Hughes can be reached at lcollins-hughes@globe.com.

IN SEVEN DAYS . . .

At: Harvard Law School's

Austin Hall, Cambridge, through Dec. 3.

02green.ART0

Credit: Laura Collins-Hughes, Globe Staff

[Illustration]

Caption: Nicola Green, a British painter who followed the Obama presidential campaign, at her exhibit, "In Seven Days . . ." Next to her is "The Second Day, Struggle" in gold leaf, and below, "The Fifth Day, Fear," a five-color serigraph. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF; NICOLA GREEN (BELOW); Nicola Green, a British painter who followed the Obama presidential campaign, at her exhibit, "In Seven Days . . ." Next to her is "The Second Day, Struggle" in gold leaf, and below, "The Fifth Day, Fear," a five-color serigraph. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF; NICOLA GREEN (BELOW); "The First Day, Light," a two-color serigraph. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF; NICOLA GREEN (BELOW)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is

prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

According to Green, she made about a half-dozen trips to the United States over the course of the project, staying sometimes for a few days, sometimes for more than a week, drawing and photographing the candidate, the crowds, the press.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.