Melanie Baker: The Optimates
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Melanie Baker’s new figurative works on paper exude mystery. A person stands at a podium; a man, seen from behind, speaks to someone unknown; and a group of men huddle in conversation at a window. The works are large in scale; some exceed life-size. All are made with charcoal, graphite and pigment on paper. Two are mounted on panels, and the other is presented loose, pinned to the wall.

Baker crops and manipulates the images to draw attention to specific details. The way a hand grips a podium in *Mouthpiece*, the overgrown haircut in *Pomp and Sycophants*, and the framing of *Assembly of Elders* around an illuminated cross in the window all stand out as a result of Baker’s careful composition. It isn’t immediately apparent in every work who the subject is, but signifiers indicate the immense power each wields. They wear dark suits and crisp white shirts, and several are pictured in richly adorned rooms. These are the people, we are meant to intuit, who possess wealth, class, and authority. They are also, clearly, all middle-aged or older white men, and Baker provides just enough context clues to suggest that they are either the focus of attention, or the ones cutting the back room deal. The exhibition title is a further nod to their status; the Optimates in ancient Rome were conservatives who favored rule by oligarchy and opposed immigration and assistance for the urban poor.

Although Baker presents these men as anonymous, her works are based on photos of US politicians. Their shared facelessness is a comment on the mutability of their identities. Political movements rise and fall, and regimes change; but the symbols of power—and the institutions that concentrate that power in the hands of a few—remain the same. In this respect, the dark outlook offered by *The Optimates* is echoed by Baker’s flat, depthless expanses of matte black charcoal. Power has infinite potential to corrupt—regardless of the subject.
Mouthpiece is based on a screenshot I took of Trump making a speech on the White House lawn. The composition is similar to a drawing I made of George W. Bush 15 years ago, but this one is comprised of a lot of angry mark-making. The action of scribbling both provided an emotional release and increased the depth of darkness of the charcoal.
previous spreads:
Mouthpiece (detail)
Mouthpiece (scale view)
While watching a video on C-SPAN of a White House bipartisan gathering, I was struck by the room’s Caravaggio-esque red drapes and the way the windowpanes formed a cross. It reminded me of how Caravaggio would regularly use dramatic drapery to echo the action of his paintings. Bipartisan gatherings are often mostly political theater.
Assembly of Elders (scale view)
These two characters are having a heated discussion after a Senate hearing on Capitol Hill. Behind them is a curious Americana wallpaper, which keeps popping up on CNN during the impeachment hearings. It is important that their backs are to us, for we are not privy to their conversation.
Melanie Baker
Previous Work
Power is the unifying subject in these drawings by Melanie Baker. It is a subject, however, that eludes direct representation. Its presence can be seen in symbols, like eagles, or felt in its effects, like the billowing clouds of smoke emitted by coal-fired power plants. One can also see traces of past power in the ruins of once great ancient cities. But most of the drawings in this exhibition locate power in the bodies of men—emperors, a pope, presidents, senators. Baker makes explicit the gendered social structures that empower these men; *The Emperor’s Detail* and *Senator’s Lap* are literally phallocentric compositions.

The history of art abounds with portraits and statues of great and famous men. They sit on horses as commanders of armies, grasp scepters that symbolize their rule, display laws that testify to their wise governance (for example, David’s *Napoleon in his Study*). Baker uses none of these conventions. Her headless and faceless figures are not portraits at all, even when they borrow from actual portraits. Instead, Baker represents them as generic men of power, their luxurious suits and expensive ties, ruffled shirtfronts and ceremonial armor more telling than their faces.

Perhaps the most striking features of these drawings—the features that most evoke the feeling of power—are their gigantic scale and blackness, an especially deep blackness that seems to stalk these men of power. It is, in Baker’s words, “the void that will suck you in,” the “abyss” into which misused and corrupted power falls. Above all, it is this blackness that visually commands the drawings’ surfaces, engulfs and flattens volumes, and obliterates contours. The world represented here is less a world of objects in space and more a series of fleeting moments in a fluid, moving field of ominous darkness. In this, the fragility of Baker’s medium—charcoal dust on unframed paper—perfectly matches the ephemerality of her subject.

Carol Duncan
Professor Emerita

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Although I often draw emissions from power plants, the smoke in *Blast* is from a real explosion that occurred at an underregulated factory, poisoning a town and its inhabitants. Smoke is an obvious symbol for the wholesale destruction happening on our planet. It is ephemeral and dissipates, becoming invisible, but its long-term consequences can be deadly.

*Blast*, 2018, graphite dust and charcoal on paper. 80 x 156 inches (203.2 x 396.2 cm).
Untitled (Smoke), 2019. graphite and charcoal on paper.
11 x 13 1/2 inches (27.9 x 34.3 cm).
Morning Along the Ohio, 2015. graphite, dust, and pigment on paper. 50 x 80 inches (127 x 203.2 cm).
Emperor, 2017. graphite and charcoal on paper.
72 x 50 inches (182.9 x 127 cm).
96 x 24 inches (243.8 x 61 cm).
Untitled (Piazza Armerina), 2020. graphite and charcoal on paper mounted on Dibond.
Study for Cuirass, 2019. graphite and charcoal on paper. 50 x 41 inches (127 x 104.1 cm).
Fragment from Arro (Detail), 2019. graphite and charcoal on paper. 9 x 24 inches (22.9 x 61 cm).
The First George W, 2008, charcoal and pastel on paper. 72 x 24 inches (182.9 x 61 cm).
54 x 68 inches (137.2 x 172.7 cm).
Oysters and Lemons, 2011. graphite, charcoal, colored pencil and pastel on paper. 11 x 14 inches (27.9 x 35.6 cm). Private Collection.
Benediction, 2011. oil on linen.
54 x 36 inches (137.2 x 91.4 cm).
Papal Blessing, 2006. charcoal and pastel on paper. 19 x 150 inches (48.3 x 381 cm).
After the Blast, 2017. graphite and charcoal on paper. 20 x 30 inches (50.8 x 76.2 cm).
Diamond Jim, 2014, graphite, pigment, and charcoal on paper. 50 x 39 inches (127 x 99.1 cm).
Untitled (Elevator Boy), 2020. graphite, charcoal, and pigment on paper. 48 x 40 inches (121.9 x 101.6 cm).
Senator’s Lap, 2007, charcoal and pastel on paper.
50 x 39 inches (127 x 99.1 cm).
Melanie Baker (b. 1955, Columbus, OH) makes charcoal drawings that deal with the concepts of power and masculinity in politics, history, and finance. Baker’s work has been exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum, Jersey City Museum, NYU’s Gallatin Galleries, Ramapo College, Keene College, and Lehman College. In 2003 the artist received a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship as well as the New York Foundation for the Arts Prize. Residencies and fellowships include the Art Omi International Artists’ Colony; Sacatar Foundation in Bahia, Brazil; Tyrone Guthrie Center at Annaghmakerrig, Ireland; Valparaiso in Mojacar, Spain; and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council’s Workspace program. Baker lives in Brooklyn and Pawling, NY.
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