

KQED

"What's On Your Ballot?: Artist Lava Thomas"

By Brandon Yu

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Lava Thomas working on one of her 'Mugshot Portraits: Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott' drawings. (John Jana)

In 2020, the United States faces an election like no other. Citizens will vote in the midst of a global pandemic, severe climate change, an uprising for racial justice and an administration that has eroded the norms of democracy. In 'What's on Your Ballot?,' KQED checks in with ten different artists, activists and cultural figures about the issues on their minds and their hopes for the country.

The morning Lava Thomas speaks to me, she is spent. It's been a rough week: Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, and days later a Kentucky grand jury declined to charge any officers with the killing of Breonna Taylor, the 26-year-old Black medical worker who was shot while asleep in her own home.

"At this very moment I'm pretty burned out and exhausted," Thomas says over the phone from Berkeley, where the multidisciplinary visual artist lives. That feeling has been ever-present for her—not only in the past year, as controversy swirled around her work when the San Francisco Art Commission selected, then dubiously rejected Thomas for a major Maya Angelou monument—but also generally in the last four years of the Trump era.

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"At the same time, I'm also somewhat hopeful because folks are energized," adds Thomas. "Folks are mobilized to get out and vote because we see what's at stake."

Thomas, who was recently announced as the recipient of a 2020 San Francisco Artadia Award, describes her work as that which amplifies "resilience, healing and empowerment in the face of oppression and trauma"—a tension that strikes at the heart of daily life in a dark year, and in some ways feels like what's on the ballot itself in the upcoming election. Thomas spoke with me about her state of mind going into November.—*Brandon Yu*

Where do I even start? We're living in a country that's more polarized than ever, I believe, in my lifetime, and under a president who denies science, a president who lies, and a president who leads by stoking hatred and division and creating chaos. We're also living in a country where acts of racial terrorism and state-sanctioned violence are rising and casual racism has become more normalized and blatant. You have this against the backdrop of a global pandemic that kills Black and brown people at disproportionate numbers in this country, and during a time where climate change is just wreaking havoc.

So we're living in a time of crisis—social crisis, health crisis, political crisis. I believe our democracy is under attack. I can remember a time when I could have a respectful, civil conversation with someone with whom I disagreed politically. But now the level of political discourse has devolved into name-calling and labeling.

But I also believe that because of this, more people are politically engaged. As we've seen with Black Lives Matter protests and activism, people of all races and all ages are out protesting against the status quo.



Lava Thomas, 'Study for Pandemic Portrait (Mask, Negative Space),' 2020; Graphite, conté pencil and watercolor on paper, 9 x 11 3/4 inches. (Courtesy the artist)

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Many are calling this the most important election of our lifetime. Do you agree with that view?

I agree with that, yes. We have to vote Trump out of office like our lives depend on it, because honestly our lives literally do depend on who wins this election. Trump's incompetence and gross mishandling of the pandemic, his disbelief in science around the pandemic and climate change—it's almost equivalent to murder in my opinion. We have over 200,000 deaths of COVID-19 in this country and over 7 million people infected. And Trump knew of this threat early on.

What is foremost in your mind as our collective response if Trump is re-elected?

If Trump is re-elected I think we really need to focus on flipping the Senate so that there are some checks and balances restored in the executive branch. But quite honestly I have not really considered what the aftermath of Trump's re-election would be.

Is that an act of mental self-preservation?

Yes, definitely. Because most of us are already living in a state of anxiety. For me personally I have to at least try to do everything that I can and hope that come November that we'll have a different president in office. I have to hold onto that hope and not imagine the horrors of another Trump presidency.



Left: Lava Thomas's 'Resistance Reverb: Movement 1,' 2018; Right: 'Resistance Reverb: Movement 2,' 2018, exploring the topic of solidarity. (Courtesy of the artist and di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art, Napa; Photo by Johnna Arnold)

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What should our response be if Biden wins? It doesn't mean that everything will be solved.

No, it doesn't mean everything is solved. I think Biden will attempt to heal the polarization and division in this country. That he will lead by example, and that he will surround himself with the people who will address issues of racial injustice and equity. He'll surround himself with scientists. He will put a plan into place to deal with the pandemic that is led by science. And he'll surround himself with good people. I also hope that there will be a return to civil discourse. But this country was built on systemic racism, which goes back centuries. So there's not going to be an easy or short fix to that.

Do you see meaningful change on issues of racial injustice coming out of the election? Biden, for instance, has said he doesn't support defunding the police.

No, he doesn't support defunding the police. Police reform and accountability are perhaps possible. But I don't think that fully defunding the police is going to happen in my lifetime. I think it's going to take a very long time before that goal is accomplished, if at all, to be quite honest. Thinking about this moment of racial reckoning, and looking at, just for me personally, the number of emails I've received from different organizations, from the schools that my son has attended, the kinds of conversations that I've been a part of—for some people it's really the first time (they have) understood how racism operates in this country.



Lava Thomas, 'Audrey Belle Langford,' 2018. (Courtesy of Rena Bransten Gallery)

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Do you feel hopeful about the future?

I do have hope. And I believe in the power of protest. Without global protests, we wouldn't have companies looking at systemic racism within their own ranks.

Living in a state of hopelessness is just admitting defeat. And if there's anything that this country's history has shown us, it's that we go through periods where there's progress, and we go through periods where there's backlash. And I am hoping we can enter into a period of progress.

After the election—no matter how it goes—what are your hopes and goals for the country, and for the Bay Area?

I'm looking at the big issues. For me, particularly against the backdrop of the pandemic, affordable and accessible health care is really important. The defense of *Roe v. Wade* so that women, especially poor women, aren't forced to bear children that they can't adequately (support). Equal access to quality education. An end to the prison industrial complex. And police reform and accountability.

It's hopeful to imagine a more just and equitable future. As long as we can hold that in our collective imagination, then we have the vision to do what's necessary to attempt to make it happen. That's what I hold on to, despite everything.

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