

Art & Soul: Jepson exhibit showcases the 1990's
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"Come as you are, as you were, as I want you to be."

– Nirvana, "Come As You Are"

The Jepson Center turns back the clock with "Come As You Are," a new exhibition focusing on art of the 1990s.

Named after an iconic Nirvana song, the exhibit includes experimental work by 45 American artists. Organized chronologically, "Come As You Are" is bookended by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, tracing a number of recurring issues.

"The main themes of the show are identity politics, the digital revolution and globalization," explains exhibition curator Alexandra Schwartz, curator of contemporary art at the Montclair Museum in Montclair, N.J. "So many artists in the '90s were dealing with current events."

Alternately funny and serious, "Come As You Are" captures the tensions and preoccupations of this pivotal decade, covering a range of social issues and geopolitical milestones.

"A lot of younger artists are fascinated by this period," Schwartz explains. "There's a real longing for this time. A lot of the issues that are being worked out now were coalescing in the 1990s."

From Catherine Opie's documentary-style color photographs of tattooed, pierced members of the gay and lesbian community to Elizabeth Peyton's punk lithographs, "Come As You Are" also drives home more personal messages about the nature of identity. Nikki S. Lee's cheeky self-portraits – in which she masquerades as a gangster rapper, a redneck and other cultural stereotypes – provide insightful commentary on the complexity of race and class in the U.S.

"I am committed to presenting shows like this that challenge us because I fundamentally believe in the power of art to help us better understand our world and to bring diverse people together to talk about issues that matter to us as a society," says Telfair Museums director and CEO Lisa Grove. "Throughout history, artists have always reflected on the world around them and allowed us to see things in new ways."

Many of the artists featured in this thought-provoking exhibition probe beneath the shiny surface of American life, providing deeper insight and disturbing revelations. Jonathan Rhoades's scatter art installation, comprised of found objects ranging from funnels to wigs, delivers a scathing critique of consumer culture.

Pepon Osario, who originally hails from Puerto Rico, offers a heartbreaking critique of the failure of the American dream

by embroidering a real-life suicide letter — penned by a single mother who immigrated to the United States in search of a better life for her children — on a plush purple velvet sofa.

Filipino artist Manuel Ocampo turns up the heat with his controversial 1990 painting, "La Liberte." Originally featured in "Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Ocampo's composition depicts a hooded KKK figure and a massive red swastika, surrounded by a threatening cobra. This damning commentary on race relations in America illustrates the darker side of U.S. history.

Above all, "Come As You Are" celebrates the alternative culture that defined the final decade of the millennium through innovative paintings, sculpture, photography, installations, video and mixed media work.

"It was a time defined by experimentation with digital technology, installation art and video," Schwartz explains. "Artists were using new technology in interesting ways."

Highlights include Glenn Kaino's "The Siege Perilous," a dizzying installation with a spinning black office chair encased within a clear plexiglass box, and Alex Bag's hilarious confessional video focusing on the experiences of two bored punk retail workers in London.

On a decidedly darker note, Doug Aitkin's "Monsoon" video exposes a deserted landscape in Jonestown, Guyana — formerly the site of a 1978 mass suicide initiated by cult leader Jim Jones — as a storm gathers. A low, droning soundtrack adds an element of menace to ominous scenes of empty dirt roads and abandoned trucks.

After leaving Savannah in late September, "Come As You Are" will travel to art museums at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and the University of Texas in Austin. With its interactive scope and wide-ranging subject matter, this exhibit is best experienced in person in order to get a full sense of American art in the 1990s.

"This is a really fun show," says Schwartz. "Artists were trying to reinvent what art can be."

IF YOU GO

What: "Come As You Are: Art of the 1990s"

When: Through Sept. 20

Where: Jepson Center, 207 W. York St.

Hours: Noon-5 p.m. Monday and Sunday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursday

Admission: \$20 for a triple-site pass offering one-time entry to the Jepson Center, Telfair Academy and Owens-Thomas House ; free admission for Telfair members and children under 5

For more information, call 912-790-8800 or go to www.telfair.org.

RELATED EVENTS

What: Lights, Camera, Art! Party With Savannah Magazine

When: 6:30 p.m. July 10

Where: Jepson Center

Cost: \$5 admission

Info: Join Telfair Museums and Savannah Magazine for a '90s-inspired soiree, featuring a DJ spinning hits and a cash bar.

What: I Love The '90s! Free Family Day

When: August 8, 1-4 p.m.

Where: Jepson Center

Info: This all-ages '90s party will offer the Telfair photo challenge and the chance to make your own tattoos. Free and open to the public.