



O'MALLEY, SUSAN: POWERFUL PLATITUDES

Wednesday, July 8, 2009



Susan O'Malley: "You Are Exactly Where You Need To Be" through July 17, 2009; Ping Pong Gallery; Tuesday & Thursday 6-9, Friday 11-5, and by appointment; 1240 22nd Street, San Francisco, (415)550-7483; www.pingponggallery.com; info@pingponggallery.com This e-mail address is being protected from spam bots, you need JavaScript enabled to view it

This past election, the country witnessed the power of platitude: YES WE CAN. An otherwise innocuous cliché, proclaimed with sincerity and confidence by an old-fashioned role model, changed the status quo.

Susan O'Malley's pop posters proclaim their own message of optimism and encouragement, freighted with gravitas by the sober gallery space. "You Are Exactly Where You Need To Be," welcomes you and your worries, questions, hopes and dream, and blasts you with goodwill like a lightbox used to treat Seasonal Affective Disorder.

A self-proclaimed optimist, O'Malley has always been a fan of inspirational messages. She relishes their crisp authoritative language, and the life-affirming power of a simple "Yes." The phrases are tidbits that O'Malley has heard or read over the years. The title of the show, "You Are Exactly Where You Need To Be," was declared by her a yoga instructor during class one day.

One of the goals of this exhibition was to spur viewers to visibly react to the roomful of positive messages. At the opening reception, O'Malley was delighted to witness visitors enthusiastically posing for snapshots in front of their favorites.

O'Malley's phrases like "This is all part of the process," "Yes," and "Make it happen," in their non-descript Helvetica font, glowing on cheerful candy colored backgrounds mounted against the whiteness of the gallery walls, remind us not to take ourselves (or our art settings) too seriously. [Tucker Nichols' light-hearted and quirky block letter oversize signs drawn with a naive hand could be a distant cousin to O'Malley's series: "Act like it's Christmas," (Lincart Gallery, 2005) and "Ask about our windows" (Gallery 16, 2006).

In 2006, O'Malley graduated from California College of the Arts' MFA program with a focus in Social Practice. The piece for her MFA show was a lapel-button vending machine. O'Malley made thousands of buttons, 25c each, emblazoned with the name of a person she had met at some time or another: one-of-a-kind memories for sale.

For some time O'Malley has been interested in making the relationship between artist and viewer more explicit. Starting in 2004, she and writer Christine Amini collaborated together on a social intervention piece. Wearing jackets proclaiming "Pep Talk Squad," the two would set up folding chairs in unexpected places like parking lots and bus stops, and offer a sympathetic ear. Invariably, a sincere connection was made between confessor and confessee. After the unburdening, the artists would quickly type up a pep talk tailor made for each conversation.

The button maker came in handy again in 2006. A series of pins with peppy slogans inspired by the Pep Talk Squad project came next, and a few are still available for barter through O'Malley's website.

In addition to being a practicing artist, O'Malley is also Assistant Curator at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art. Her programs often require the viewer to directly engage with the work. In 2008, O'Malley curated "This Show Needs You," and it really did. Michael Smit was on-site to ask visitors: How have you been an artist today? Linda Montano administered personalized love/art/life therapy while blindfolded.

O'Malley current project is on display now through September 9 at SJICA. NextNew: Green, co-curated with Executive Director Cathy Kimball, is the political art of the 21st Century. Artists including Michelle Blade, Misako Inaoka, and Vanessa Marsh address mankind's impact on the environment.

"This is Exactly Where You Need To Be" closes soon, but you can surround yourself with upbeat inspirational posters in your own home, and skip your next visit to the therapist. Each poster is one of a series of five, priced at \$250 (unframed). O'Malley used the oversize printer at SJICA to fabricate them herself.

Thanks to Megan Semple for her research and contributions to this article.

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