

ART BEAT

NBAM exhibit a powerful reminder

Eyes on the prize, reboot the mission. I've lost the sight but not the vision."

— The Wallflowers

Art does not need to match the couch. Art does not need to be beautiful. Art does not need to celebrate the norm. Art does not need to reinforce prevailing power structures. Art does not need to sit back, shut up and relax.

Art can be used to provoke, to proselytize and to empower.

Art, in all its myriad forms, has a long and complicated history with political dissent. Musicians from Woody Guthrie to the Clash, from Peter, Paul and Mary to NWA have used song to inspire and ignite. Writers with political leanings as diverse as George Orwell, Ayn Rand and Joseph Heller have produced novels that pushed the envelope of comfort.

Painters from Picasso to Banksy, comedians from Charlie Chaplin to Dave Chappelle, and filmmakers from Sergei Eisenstein to Spike Lee brought us to the edge. And then pushed us somewhere new.

"Global Voices for Social Justice / Art as Activism," the current exhibition at the New Bedford Art Museum / ArtWorks! (co-sponsored by the New Bedford Historical



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Society) offers a broad window into the power of images, as seen through political posters, buttons and comic books, as well as the enduring historical import of archival photojournalism.

Many of the posters on display are from the private collections of Lee Blake, Bettina Borders and others and they make commentary on the recent past, a past that must continually be invoked lest it be overlooked and trampled upon.

The labor movement is the subject of a poster for a 1986 Ralph Fasanella exhibition at the New Bedford Whaling Museum. It shows a factory floor, absolutely pro-union, and makes note of the infamous Triangle Shirt Factory fire.

A screenprinted poster, in vivid yellow, red and deep blue depicts a row of people, hands clasped, following a flag-carrying leader up a steep hill. The legend above reads: "We Celebrate Women's Struggles, We Celebrate People's Victories."

What was once commonly referred to as "women's liberation" is a recurring theme in the exhibition and "A Woman on the Move," from the collection



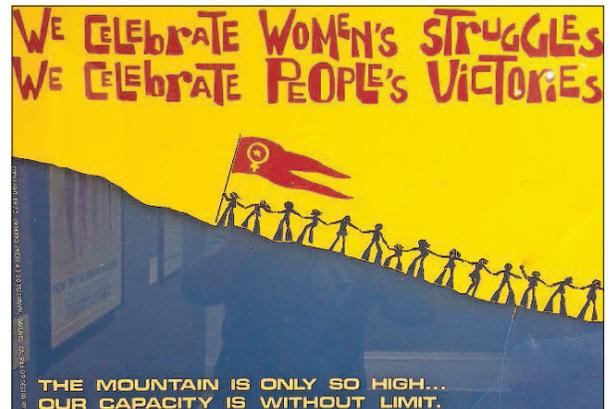
Archival photos on display at the New Bedford Art Museum show protests in the city and beyond including demonstrations in the early 1970's centering around a then-national restaurant chain called Sambo's. COURTESY PHOTOS

of Lee Blake, is a fine example.

A series of black-and-white news photographs, most from the early 1970s, is a reminder of the racial strife and social disenfranchisement that was a part of everyday life in New Bedford (and well beyond) then. Among those images are images of both black and white protestors wearing placards in opposition to a then-national restaurant chain called Sambo's.

The name of the restaurant was derived from the names of the founders (SAM Battistone, Sr. and Newell BOhnett) but they soon began decorating the chain with offensive imagery (including a dark-skinned boy, tigers and a magical "Tree-friend") from "The Story of Little Black Sambo." That choice reflects a naive yet profound tone deafness that ultimately led to its demise.

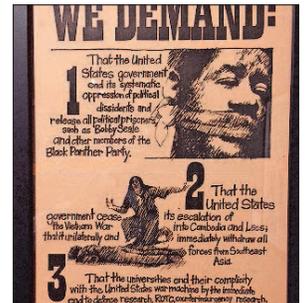
Sadly, it is now an era in which swastikas are scratched on synagogue doors, and in which racial epithets,



Poster on display at New Bedford Art Museum.

homophobic slurs and references to crotch grabbing are the norm. The President-Elect has a skin thinner than an onion and responds with vitriol to commentary from the cast of the Broadway musical "Hamilton" and a comedy skit on Saturday Night Live.

If that is not indication of the impact of art on the powerful, I don't know what is. It's



A Poster on display at New Bedford Art Museum.

time to "reboot the mission."

"Global Voices for Social Justice / Art as Activism" is on display at the new Bedford Art Museum / ArtWorks!, 608 Pleasant Street, through January 8.

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