

Contemporary Art Galleries Revisit Gatsby with 'Age of the One Percent' Exhibit

By Kenneth Best | April 1, 2013



In thinking about how to create an exhibition for the Contemporary Art Galleries (CAG) exploring this year's UConn Reads book, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, curator Barry Rosenberg knew he would face a challenge.

"We did *Half the Sky* [by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn] last year, but I could visualize that," Rosenberg says of the book that addresses the oppression of women and girls in developing nations.

Last year, Rosenberg says, he used some of the photography that is part of the human rights collection of artwork in the William Benton Museum of Art. The museum also has as part of its permanent collection works created during the 1920s and 1930s era of the Fitzgerald book that make up its UConn Reads exhibition, "*Millionaires and Mechanics, Bootleggers and Flappers: Speaking of 'The Great Gatsby.'*"

The CAG exhibition "*Gatsby Revisited in the Age of the One Percent*" is on display in the gallery through April 19. As part of the exhibition, there will be a *Gatsby* Symposium on April 15 at 4 p.m., followed by a closing reception and presentation, "*Gatsby Performed*," at 6 p.m. in the Art Building, 830 Bolton Road, Storrs.

To reconnect with the themes and details of *Gatsby*, Rosenberg re-read the novel and watched the 1974 film version of the book with Robert Redford and Mia Farrow. He also

listened to an audio version of the book during his daily commute to Storrs.

"I read it and listened to it," he says. "Reading the book, I was interested in the story but couldn't capture the images. It was really the movie I was trying to play off of."

With the book's themes about wealth, class, and social and moral values, Rosenberg connected to issues raised during the 2012 Presidential election and the Occupy Wall Street movement. He also found a link to the Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Price of Inequality* by Joseph Stiglitz, which addresses the nation's growing economic inequality.

'Father & Son, 1996' by Tina Barney, left, and two lithographs by Robert Longo depicting a well-dressed man and woman seeming to fall away from the viewer, are on display as part of the *Gatsby Revisited in the Age of the One Percent* exhibition. (Photo courtesy of CAG)

'Father & Son, 1996' by Tina Barney, left, and two lithographs by Robert Longo depicting a well-dressed man and woman seeming to fall away from the viewer, are on display as part of the *Gatsby Revisited in the Age of the One Percent* exhibition. (Photo courtesy of CAG)

One of the first artists that Rosenberg thought about for the exhibition is Tina Barney, an internationally known photographer known for her images of wealthy families. Her large chromogenic color print, "Father & Son, 1996," depicting a conservatively dressed older man standing with younger men in a room with gold-framed paintings and a table holding gold and silver decorative objects, is among the first works in the exhibition.

There are also two lithographs on paper by Robert Longo depicting a well-dressed man and woman, each seeming to fall away from the viewer. The man's tie is flying upward, almost as if he is being choked by it.

"It's like the man is almost hanging himself, floating in air, out of control," Rosenberg says, recalling the economic difficulties faced in recent years that caused so much unemployment and hardship.

On the wall above the two lithographs wrapping around the room is a quotation from the Stiglitz book that reads: "One percent of the people take nearly a quarter of the nation's income, but their fate is bound up with how the other 99 percent live."

"There was so much about wealth that I wanted to capture," Rosenberg says of curating the exhibition. "I wanted it to be balanced, but not lose what I wanted to say."

Many of the works reflect images that Rosenberg sought to replicate from the 1974 film. For example, one of the symbolic images in the novel is an advertisement on a billboard with the eyes of a doctor. Charles Hagan, associate professor of photography and video in the School of Fine Arts, suggested to Rosenberg that he had a photograph that might reflect the scene.

"When I looked at it, it was perfect," Rosenberg said of the color digital image, "Eye and Barbed Wire," which shows a graffiti-covered wall containing the dominant image of a single eye amid other images under a barbed-wire fence.

Two inkjet prints on Hahnemule by photographer Elizabeth Shrier depict what could be considered a modern-day version of Daisy Buchanan, one of the central characters in *Gatsby*. The works, "Red in Daisies" and "Daisy in Red," show the same woman with a short hairstyle similar to one popular in the 1920s. In one photo she is posing in a bright red dress, and in the other she is wearing a blue dress with a flower pattern.

The grand homes described in the novel are represented by a series of small paintings by Patricia Cronin, who uses current real estate photos as her muse to show multimillion dollar estates.

"These are the mansions that were sold for \$8,000 or whatever it was then, that now you see for \$3 million or \$10 million," Rosenberg says, noting that Cronin sent him some of the original advertisements she used as the basis for her works.

The closing reception on April 15 is where the novel and the exhibition will come together, in a symposium featuring University faculty and in "Gatsby Performed," a musical and dramatic work created by Karen Ryker, professor of voice and acting in the School of Fine Arts, and performed by fine arts students.

The symposium will include Man Bartlett, an interdisciplinary artist specializing in social media and performance known for his "Occupy Man" economic performance art, whose work is included in the exhibition; Veronica Makowsky, a professor of English and women's studies in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences who has written extensively on F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby*; Ray DiCapua, a professional artist and associate professor of sculpture in the School of Fine Arts who works extensively with the intersection of art, politics, and social justice; and Micki McElya, an associate professor of history in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences who specializes in American history, especially through the lens of gender, sexuality, and race.

"Gatsby Performed" will feature performances, costumes, and music by UConn students in the School of Fine Arts. Excerpts and characters from the Fitzgerald novel were selected by Ryker's students, who will perform their roles in costumes created by Patricia Ubaldi, a graduate student in costume in the Master of Fine Arts program, and with transitional jazz music performed by saxophonist Colin Walters '14 (SFA).

Ryker says she asked her students from the fall semester to read the novel and select a passage that resonated with them and a character from the book.

"They read for me the various descriptions and identified the character. I chose those descriptions that supported Barry's theme," Ryker says. "It was really interesting. He's so beautifully chosen the themes that are prominent in the book that my students were coming up with the same material."

The link between the exhibition's works that are connected to the film will be seen as projected images during the performance. Ryker says she decided to use Cronin's five real estate paintings as part of the performance.

"I thought: Wouldn't it be cool if we had the real estate descriptions read? So she sent all the descriptions. We have a sexy realtor voice reading the descriptions selling the property," she says.

The student actors performing include members of the sophomore acting ensemble in the undergraduate acting program: Saul Alvarez (Mr. Wilson); Whitney Andrews (Myrtle, woman); Gabriel Aprea (Gatsby, Tom); Julia Estrada (Jordan, Catherine, woman); Conor Donnally (Nick); John Manning (narrator, Meyer Wolfsheim); and Gina Salvatore (Daisy, Lucille, woman).