

History is made by those who take action

“The whole world is watching” was chanted as crowds of people took to the Hamilton rugby pitch on 25 July 1981 to protest the apartheid South Africa team’s tour of New Zealand. Eight years later “wir sind das Volk” (we are the people) was the rallying cry for over 70,000 people when they met on 9 October 1989 in Leipzig to protest the authoritarian East German government.

Culture is shaped by the moments we collectively stand up and show the world what we believe. It is never easy, in New Zealand the 1981 Springbok tour protest tore families apart and highlighted an unassailable generational rift – a dividing line. But this event, along with Parihaka, the 1975 Māori Land March and the anti-nuclear movement, has entrenched protest as an important part of our national identity and our history.

With *The Dividing Line* Lisa Chandler positions herself as a contemporary history painter. In the tradition of Jacques-Louis David’s *Tennis Court Oath*, Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* and Norman Rockwell’s *The Problem We All Live With*, Chandler is looking closely at this moment in time, our political reality, and through painting makes us aware of this unique historical moment. For David it was the French Revolution, for Picasso it was the Spanish Civil War, for Rockwell it was the Civil Rights movement and for Chandler it is more complicated.

We seem to be living in a moment of global urgency with the threat of climate change, totalitarian governmental regimes, social injustice and economic inequity. The protests that have sprung up in response to these issues are a sign of humanity’s limitless hope – the belief that individuals can come together as a catalyst for change. This kind of hope is not blind naivety but a rejection of cynicism. It is an acknowledgement that the world is damaged and that if we act we can create change. In *The Dividing Line* Chandler’s work shows us that despair and hope coexist.

Based for part of the year in Nelson and the rest in the Spinnerei, the artistic heart of Leipzig, Germany, Chandler’s life as a global artist has required the same kind of hope evidenced in these protest movements and in her striking paintings. Living in these two countries, on opposite sides of the world and existing as something of an outsider in both places, has given her insight into that which divides and defines us.

Informed by the history of protest, the forces that fuels these movements and this time of uncertainty, Chandler’s layered paintings make manifest the polarity that drives protests. In *Language of the unheard* these forces meet in a visceral clash, with riot gear and cameras at the ready. The moment she has captured, the meeting of the dark and the light, is encoded through their colours – the white protesters as the good and the black riot police as the bad. A closer inspection of the painting, and the exhibition as a whole, complicates this reading. Her figures are faceless but never voiceless, anonymous but specifically of our time, urgent but thoughtful, strong and yet vulnerable. Rather than depicting specific groups she instead uses them as archetypes. The protesters representative of a resistance to injustice and despair, the shielded police symbolic of the social and political forces that want to maintain a status quo that benefits the few to the detriment of the many.

Her work is beautiful but unflinching. Bodies lay prone, we see the sadly familiar tents which house displaced refugees, while gas masks, automatic weapons, batons and illegible protest signs are depicted without shame or glorification. It is in her ability to make the horrors of what fuels contemporary protest movements – death, war, starvation, homelessness – real but not gratuitous that ensures Chandler’s work is so impactful.

With layers of mark making, ephemeral materials such as baking paper and a restricted colour palette contrasted with shots of vibrant blue and earthy ochre Chandler has infused the urgency of protest into the very fabric of her artworks. The few become the many in both *The faceless* and *The dividing line*, one a regimental grid, the other an unrestricted cloud. The hoarding walls, covered with the artist’s marks, are directly influenced by her European home, where protests are still a matter of everyday life. Reflections of the layers of countless posters, graffiti and paint that typify the art of protest movements, Chandler’s walls are unabashedly ephemeral.

The hoarding walls highlight the physicality of her work. Her paintings are by their nature layered and multi- dimensional but these temporary walls add extra depth. With exposed timber structures and repurposed boards this work was made in situ at The Suter during the week *The Dividing Line* was installed. Made quickly, Chandler’s walls use the materials of the streets – paper, glue, sawdust and spray paint. Hidden amongst the layers of paint are slogans and articles that highlight the global nature of protest in

our current political climate. These are torn and covered, so that their meaning and messages are obscured and obscure – it is impossible for us to see the hidden layers of significance imbedded within. The walls also become framing devices for the exhibition, hiding and revealing aspects of the artworks as you see around and through them. From every angle your view of the exhibition in its entirety is made impossible and the walls become a lens through which the exhibition is viewed. In hiding parts of the whole our attention is further drawn to the concealed figures, stories and histories that have created these protest movements.

The faceless is a work that overwhelms. At The Suter it is comprised of 175 small canvases that reach over 2 meters from the floor and stretch almost 5 meters across the wall. On this scale it is impossible to view the entire work in detail, it is an installation that requires the viewer to move towards and away from it, travel across its surface to understand its individual elements. As with *Language of the unheard* we see light move to dark, in this instance they are not oppositional forces but gas-masked faces and figures that repeat and echo. It is through this that Chandler complicates our understanding of good and bad, if the light and the dark figures are the same, who is right? In each venue in which this body of work is shown it changes. New pieces are added, others are changed, some removed, it becomes vertical or shifts to a horizontal axis. With each change it becomes a new work, but keeps the spirit of the old.

Alongside her adept use of paint, is Chandler's considered use of trace monotyping. Printmaking has a long association with protest and revolution, its roots being in the earliest days of the printing press. It was with Gutenberg's new printing press, which mechanised the reproduction of text for the first time that figures such as Martin Luther were able to widely disseminate their ideas, thus birthing the Reformation. Printmaking does away with the idea of the 'original', the fact that the work exists in the multiple democratizes it and makes it appealing for use in egalitarian protest movements. It is an art of and for the people. Chandler uses printmaking in her work to explore the materiality of protest movements, and in a work such as *The faceless*, it reinforces the ways in which protests thrive when the needs of the unique individual are set aside and people come together as a mass.

One of the most affecting works, in part because of its small scale, is *Sorrow*. Comprised of four small canvases it acts as a striking contrast in scale and colour palette to the larger paintings and installations in the exhibition. Depicting four figures, focused on their faces and hands, *Sorrow* speaks to the fact that protests are caused by, and often result in, pain. In its intimacy *Sorrow* sits as a foil to the large installation work *The dividing line*. Beginning high the paintings shift around the gallery and tumble down the wall. With its 27 framed works on paper, varied in scale and tone, the unpredictable layout of *The dividing line* reflects the sometimes chaotic nature of protest.

The Dividing Line brings together the dark and the light but does not assert their equality, it instead leaves the outcome of their meeting uncertain. As Rebecca Solnit stated in her book *Hope in the Dark* (Haymarket Books, 2016 ed) 'hope locates itself in the premise that we don't know what will happen and that in that spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act.'

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