By Andy Monk

How to Steal the American Dream

Masters in Fine Arts: Sculpture

Thesis Paper

Advisors: Emily Puthoff, Michael Asbill, Myra Milmitsch-Gray
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
Page 2

CONTEXT: ALTERNATE REALITIES IN THE AGE OF ALTERNATIVE FACTS
Page 2

THE AMERICAN DREAM: FACT OR FICTION?
Page 4

PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY: PUTTING THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE
Page 5

THE EXHIBITION
Page 8

THE TAKEAWAY: GERRYMANDERING AND YOU
Page 12

GERRYMANDERING: THE MANIPULATION OF OUR GOVERNMENT FOR THE CONTROL OF OUR SOCIETY
Page 13

CITIZENS REDISTRICTING COMMISSIONS: ONE POSSIBLE SOLUTION FOR TAKING BACK OUR POWER
Page 17

CONCLUSION
Page 19

INSTALLATION SHOTS
Page 20

WORKS CITED
Page 23

1
INTRODUCTION

The work in my MFA thesis exhibition, *How to Steal the American Dream* creates a rare opportunity for honest examination and discussion of a political topic in the era of “alternative facts” and “fake news” by using visual strategies to incite curiosity in the viewer. My work persuades viewers to start from a place of curiosity, so their guard is down as they discover the underlying political subject matter. Using bright LED lights and clean, shiny aesthetics, the work, entitled *Gerrymandering: North Carolina Districts 1-13* and *Gerrymandering: Maryland Districts 1-8*, presents the bounding shapes of all the US congressional districts from the states of Maryland and North Carolina, which have been deformed and contorted through centuries of extreme partisan gerrymandering. Two sculptural works in the center of the exhibition represent different societal structures: one standing as a critique of contemporary American society, the other positing a utopian reimagination of an alternative way in which a society might be organized.

CONTEXT: ALTERNATE REALITIES IN THE AGE OF ALTERNATIVE FACTS

In the era of “fake news” and “alternative facts”, it can be impossible to have constructive discussions about politics that bridge opposing sides of the political spectrum because what constitutes reality itself is often a topic of debate.¹ We are living in a time where it increasingly seems as though there are two alternate realities, existing simultaneously but rarely intersecting with one another. Ideas of what is right and wrong, good and bad, or moral and immoral are subjective, but in a period when we are ostensibly no longer able agree on what is true and untrue, fact and fiction, real and fake, competent dialogue is becoming hopelessly elusive. That

is why I presented this topic in such a circumspect way, to ease the viewers into the discussion and keep them from shutting down before engaging with the subject.

The silver lining of our epoch may be that, although we are experiencing a period in which having political discussions grounded in a shared reality is growing ever more difficult, political awareness seems to be on the rise. Even so, I suspect that the vast majority of people still don’t know what the shape of their congressional district actually looks like. They may, for the first time, know in which district they live, but still have no idea if the shape of that district is derived from some rational or measurable criteria or if it has been manipulated for iniquitous purposes, resulting in a convoluted and malformed shape with no recognizable basis in reality.

In this body of work, I present the shapes of gerrymandered electoral districts and give the benefit of the doubt to the viewer that they will arrive at the conclusion that there is something odd about these shapes. Not immoral, not politically expedient, not right or wrong; just odd. If we can all initially agree that these shapes are odd (or strange, curious, aberrant, heteromorphic, irregular, peculiar, or whatever other synonym for “odd” you might prefer), then we have a common point of departure, which has become a rare asset these days.

The potential for the creation of this common ground was the motivation for presenting the issue of gerrymandering starting with the shapes of the districts alone, without other cues that the work is political. It is the reason why it was important that the work be simple, bright, shiny, beautiful, and enigmatic at first pass, before the reading of the work becomes muddied by the layering on of political ideology. My intention is to entice the viewer into engaging with the work, guiding them to the conclusion that the shapes are odd, and then -with their guard down- to discover that the shapes are the results of the manipulation of our electoral system. If the viewer has already independently come to the conclusion that the district shapes look odd, it will be much easier for them to question why they look the way they do when -in some cases, and
for some viewers- it might have been preferable not to ask the question in the first place. When the work is effective, and viewers from different sides of the political spectrum come to this same conclusion, it creates one of the rare instances in which they have a shared starting point to discuss at least one issue. This facilitates the creation of spaces for other dialogues as well, and helps to bridge the ever widening gap between progressive and conservative people.

THE AMERICAN DREAM: FACT OR FICTION?

The American Dream is “the ideal that every US citizen should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative.”

That dream is being gradually stolen, in part through the manipulation of the systems of government that are meant to ensure that each person’s vote counts equally. As power is continuously consolidated at the top, the deck is being stacked against the common person, even as the idea of the American Dream is being used to impel them to locate the fault for the lack of advancement in their situation in themselves, rather than in the system that makes such advancement nearly impossible. Homeownership has long been a primary threshold of entry into the American Dream and a stabilizer of our communities, but with each passing generation, fewer people are able to afford to buy their own homes. Like the proverbial carrot on a stick, the American Dream is being held out in front of people to motivate them to work longer and harder in the hopes of moving up, but increases in the productivity of the American worker have led to higher corporate profits rather than a boost in wages. Strategies like gerrymandering allow policies that exacerbate these problems to be advanced. They are difficult to resist because they are insidious and subtle. They work slowly but effectively. As the American Dream is

---

continuously being eroded, it becomes progressively easier to subvert and eventually, we will reach a point of no return when it will have all but disappeared.

PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY: PUTTING THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE

In creating this work, I reversed the normal order of my process. Instead of beginning with a concept and then selecting a process or set of visuals to explore that concept, I encountered a phenomenon that I thought was compelling and then sought a concept that would lend itself to an interesting exploration using that phenomenon. The phenomenon I encountered is the way different colored lenses alternately absorb light or allow it to pass through. A red colored lens allows only light on the red end of the wavelength spectrum through, absorbing and effectively filtering out other colors of light\(^3\). Since red and blue light are not neighbors on the wavelength spectrum, this means that a red lens doesn’t allow blue light to pass through. The same phenomenon occurs when red light is observed passing through a blue lens\(^4\).


The concept I eventually settled on is gerrymandering. Gerrymandering is a set of strategies used to control the outcomes of elections by manipulating the boundaries of electoral districts.\(^5\) There are several ways these manipulations are effectively deployed to influence election outcomes, which I will explain later in this text. In short, these machinations ensure that a given electoral district will be won by one party over the other, suppressing the actual will of the voters and filtering out opposition voices.\(^6\)

When I began my research on this topic, I expected to find a myriad of examples of states in which Republicans were using these strategies to suppress and thwart the will of Democratic voters. I was certainly not disappointed.\(^7\) But I was surprised to find that Democrats are just as guilty of the practice.\(^8\) In this body of work, I focused on North Carolina and Maryland because both states are examples of extreme partisan gerrymandering and because North Carolina was gerrymandered by Republicans\(^9\) while Maryland was gerrymandered by Democrats.\(^10\) It was essential to present the issue in a non-partisan way to foster the creation of a common point of departure for people coming to this issue from all ends of the political spectrum. Laying blame at the feet of Republicans or Democrats would have been counterproductive to the purpose of the work because it would have closed the door on this potential.

---

North Carolina was gerrymandered by the Republicans, who are actually slightly in the minority in that state. North Carolina Republicans used gerrymandering to turn a 43% to 57% loss in aggregate voting numbers into a 77% to 23% win in terms of the number of seats they procured in US congress.\textsuperscript{11} In contrast, Maryland was gerrymandered by the Democrats. While they already represent a majority in that state, they used gerrymandering to augment a 68% to 32% lead in overall voting numbers into an even bigger 87% to 13% win in the number of US congressional seats they took in that state.\textsuperscript{12}

The phenomenon of the interaction between the lights and the lenses is a very effective metaphor in addressing the topic of gerrymandering: one can actually see a blue LED bulb through a red lens because it reflects some of the ambient red light being emitted around it. Yet although the bulb itself can be seen, it appears to be off when viewed through the lens even though it is not. Viewing the work directly, the only evidence that there are two colors of lights in each piece is the mysterious halo emitted from behind the lenses and reflected onto the backer boards. This halo is not one pure color -red or blue- but rather a gradient of varying shades of purple.


*How to Steal the American Dream* consists of a total of twenty-three individual works. While all the pieces are in dialogue with each other, they can be divided into three closely related groups. Hanging in a corner of the gallery are two floating mini-wall panels. The panel on the left contains thirteen works, depicting each of the thirteen US congressional districts of North Carolina. On the smaller panel on the right are the eight US congressional districts of Maryland. The borders of each district are laser-cut out of colored acrylic to form lenses in the shapes of the geographical boundaries of the respective districts. The lenses are blue or red, according to the party affiliation of the representative elected from that district. Each lens fits within a twelve inch square bounding box. This is because although the districts vary significantly in terms of actual footprint (for example, metropolitan districts with high population density cover fewe
square miles than their rural counterparts), each representative theoretically carries the same weight in our national politics, and each district is ideally supposed to have roughly the same number of constituents. Behind each lens is a laser cut plywood panel, painted white and with 100 LED lights embedded into its surface. The lights are also red and blue, with the proportion of red to blue lights in each panel determined by the percentage of votes cast for a Democrat vs Republican in the respective district. The pieces are hung in a grid formation on the wall panels in numerical order by district number. These works expose the warped and malformed shapes created by gerrymandering, and the play between the colored lights and lenses demonstrate its effect on the voices of opposition constituents.

In the center of the installation are two works on pedestals whose connection to the gerrymandering work is subtle but important. On the left is a sculpture bearing a resemblance to the Washington Monument entitled Untenable (Obelisk). This austere and intimidating work
towers over the viewer on a tall pedestal. On the right is a less formidable sculpture on a shorter pedestal entitled *Utopia (Fractal)*. This piece is on a more human scale, and is much more inviting. Both are visual representations of societal structures. Both start with the iconic shape of a house (that is, a triangle on top of a square) as a metaphorical point of departure. We often take measurements of our society using the household as a basic unit: household income, head of household, household growth, and so forth. In these works, I present the houses in two very different configurations that prompt the viewer to consider the relationships between them.

*Untenable (Obelisk)* represents a late-capitalist society much like our own in the United States. The one richest household sits at the top, crushing the houses below it. The houses become smaller and smaller with each subsequently lower tier, representing declining levels of household wealth. The number of houses at each level increases exponentially, maintaining a constant footprint equal to that of the largest house. The formation of the houses is tight and rigid, and the smallest houses at the lowest level have a claustrophobic and compressed
feeling, as though they are packed in and crushed together at the bottom, trapped with no hope of escape.

**Utopia (Fractal)** posits an alternative societal structure; one in which the wealthiest household rests comfortably at the bottom, supporting the successively smaller houses as they branch up and out in a light and airy formation resembling a geometric tree. In this configuration, the richest household serves as the supportive foundation for the society from which it benefits, rather than a crushing weight imposed upon it at the top. This ethereal outstretched fractal arrangement of households stands in stark contrast to the ponderousness and discomfort of the towering obelisk.

The material choices I made in these two works reinforce the concept and the comparisons they make. **Untenable (Obelisk)** is finished in a lightly polished white venetian plaster, giving it a formal and monumental appearance. From far away the work looks crisp and sharp, however, as the viewer approaches, imperfections in the surface come into view. The surface is not completely even as it first appeared, but rather there is evidence of deterioration, cracking, and areas where the application of the plaster is not smooth. The visual quality of the piece suggests something that was once highly polished and valued, but has been neglected and taken for granted as it becomes less and less sustainable and relevant and is now crumbling under its own weight. **Utopia (Fractal)** appears more modern and clean. It is
constructed from sheets of laser cut acrylic that are lightly tinted, producing the effect of green edges resembling glass and lending a crisp contemporary aesthetic to the work. As the work is so transparent, it is more difficult to see from farther away, progressively coming into focus as the viewer approaches.

*Untenable (Obelisk)* and *Utopia (Fractal)* are separate and independent pieces; however, they support and amplify each other through the relationships and comparisons between them. *Untenable (Obelisk)* is opaque and heavy while *Utopia (Fractal)* is transparent and light. Both works have houses in six graduated sizes. Yet although the largest house in each work is the same size, the smallest houses in *Untenable (Obelisk)* are much smaller and much more numerous than the smallest houses in *Utopia (Fractal)*; there are one thousand twenty four of the smallest houses in *Untenable (Obelisk)*, and only thirty two in *Utopia (Fractal)*. I designed the pedestals for both pieces so that the third smallest house in each would be at eye level, elevating the largest house in *Untenable (Obelisk)* above and beyond the reach of the viewer while the largest house in *Utopia (Fractal)* is accessible. *Untenable (Obelisk)* and *Utopia (Fractal)* are not only in dialogue with each other, they are also in dialogue with the LED works on the wall behind them. The oppressive societal structure that *Untenable (Obelisk)* criticizes is maintained, at least in part, by the manipulation of our political systems for the consolidation of power through gerrymandering.

THE TAKEAWAY: GERRYMANDERING AND YOU

The work in *How to Steal the American Dream* asks many questions and presents a lot of information. While I was using this work to plant a seed in the viewer, I certainly did not expect them to absorb and process it all instantaneously. In order to enable the viewer to allow
these ideas to marinate and easily return to the topic at a later time, I created a zine about gerrymandering which was available to visitors of the exhibition to take with them. The zine helped preserve the momentum and curiosity generated by the moment of discovery had at the exhibit, while ensuring that the viewer would have information to refer back to once they had time to digest the subject more fully. The tone of the writing in this publication was more conversational than academic in order to engage with a wider group of readers and present the topic in a way that was not too heavy. The title of the publication, *Gerrymandering and you*, used humor to further elicit viewers to let down their guard, alluding to the cheesy pamphlets about embarrassing problems one might expect to find in the office of a guidance counsellor or health professional. The booklet is now available through the Zine Collection housed at the Sojourner Truth Library on the campus of the State University of New York at New Paltz.13

GERRYMANDERING: THE MANIPULATION OF OUR GOVERNMENT FOR THE CONTROL OF OUR SOCIETY

Although I briefly defined gerrymandering in a previous section, it does warrant a more thorough discussion. Simply put, gerrymandering is the manipulation of electoral district boundaries to sway the results of an election, either by packing a district with allied voters; dividing and spreading opposition voters out across many districts to dilute their voting power; or packing opposition voters into as few districts as possible to minimize the number of seats they can win. While gerrymandering on a racial basis has been ruled unconstitutional, doing so on the basis of political party or ideology is still legal. This is not a new phenomenon and actually

predates the existence of the modern democratic and republican parties. The term “gerrymander” was coined in 1812 in an article in the ‘Boston Gazette’ criticizing the redrawing of Massachusetts state senate district lines under then governor Elbridge Gerry. A cartoon that accompanied the article showed one particularly convoluted district with talons and wings, claiming the district shape looked like some sort of mythological salamander. It is from the combination of Governor Gerry’s last name and the word ‘salamander’ that the term Gerry-mander is derived.

The two primary methods of partisan gerrymandering are called packing and cracking. There is also a type of bipartisan gerrymandering in which sweetheart districts are created by and for both parties to protect incumbents. North Carolina’s 1st and 12th congressional districts are examples of packing. The convoluted district lines were drawn to pack as many Democratic voters as possible into those 2 districts. This concentrates

---


15 Bryant, Mark. “Political Animals: Mark Bryant Looks at the Lampooning of Two Hugely Unpopular Measures Imposed during the Administrations of Two of the United States’ Most Distinguished Presidents.” *History Today*, no. 6, 2009, pp. 56-57.
them into select districts, eliminating them from others, thereby minimizing the overall number of seats they could possibly win. The districts surrounding the left-leaning city of Columbus, Ohio are examples of cracking. The city is divided up into many districts that are combined with (and outnumbered by) more conservative suburban voters. This dilutes the voting power of the Democratic voters living in the city, and when done effectively, makes them unable to win any seats at all. So called Sweetheart districts are created when politicians collude across party lines to draw districts that are either safely Democratic or Republican. The resulting districts are not competitive and allow an election to be won on party line politics alone, rather than actual policy. A primary motivation in this type of gerrymandering is protecting incumbent officials, allowing them to hold on to their seats fairly indefinitely because they have no real competition.

From all of these strategies, two considerable problems emerge. The representatives are choosing their voters, essentially thwarting the ability of the voters to choose their representatives. This constitutes a reversal of the way in which the system of elected representation is intended to operate. Additionally, the elimination of competitiveness from electoral districts further attenuates the role of the will of the voters from decisions being made on their behalf by their elected representatives. That is to say, in a district that has been sufficiently engineered to ensure victory based on partisan ideology alone, the need for candidates to espouse specific policies that will appeal to voters or engage with their
constituents in any meaningful way is all but eliminated. Districts that have not been tainted by gerrymandering are inherently more competitive because a potential candidate must appeal to a wide array of diverse constituents in order to be elected. Not only does this reintroduce the will of the voters as an important component in the electoral process, but it also favors more centrist candidates which has the added benefit of lessening the growing ideological gap between progressive and conservative voters and necessitating cooperation across the ideological spectrum rather than enabling the separationsim and obstructivism that has become so ubiquitous in our political landscape.

Although it seems reasonable that anyone presented with this information would come to the conclusion that gerrymandering is a clear and obvious form of cheating, the politicians engaged in the practice have no incentive whatsoever to put an end to it. This is, of course, in part because it serves to further their partisan ideologies, but a more nefarious and deep seated motivation for continuing to exploit these flaws in our electoral system is shared by politicians across the ideological spectrum. That is: it makes their jobs vastly less complicated and allows them to maintain their positions within our government without expending the considerable effort that might otherwise be required were elections more competitive. Awareness about the problem of gerrymandering is growing, but with the ability to put an end to the practice resting relatively securely in the hands of politicians who are more inclined to preserve the institution for a variety of reasons, it begins to feel as though there is nothing that can be done.
CITIZENS REDISTRICTING COMMISSIONS: ONE POSSIBLE SOLUTION FOR TAKING BACK OUR POWER

In the creation of this work, I found myself longing for an easy resolution to which I could point viewers who felt inspired to get involved and wanted to do something about this problem. Unfortunately in the current moment, there is no simple solution. And while there’s no pre-established movement to join or online petition to sign, I did come across one approach that has been used successfully in a handful of states, some of which now have some of the most competitive electoral districts in the country: the creation of Citizens Redistricting Commissions.

Twenty states use some form of Citizens Commissions to redraw electoral district lines with various levels of success in creating unadulterated and competitive districts. Among them is the state of California, where in 2008, citizens collected enough signatures to put proposition 11, titled the Voters First Act, on the ballot. When the measure passed, the independent, non-partisan Citizens Redistricting Commission (CRC) was established, essentially taking the power to draw electoral district maps out of the hands of politicians and placing it instead with the commission. As laid out in the new law, the CRC is composed of five Democrats, five Republicans and four additional commissioners unaffiliated with either party. Prior to the establishment of the CRC, California politicians engaged in a bipartisan effort to gerrymander their districts to protect incumbents and preserve the existing balance of power within the state. As a direct result, only one congressional seat changed party hands over the course of 255 election cycles.

By contrast, the CRC follows a pre-established set of guidelines in the creation of district maps that are more common sense, but until that point had been far from common practice. The guidelines direct the commission to create districts that have equal numbers of constituents in each, provide equal opportunities for minorities to elect the candidate of their choice, are fully contiguous, avoid dividing up neighborhoods and communities, and are geographically compact and avoid bypassing nearby communities in preference of more distant ones. The new non-partisan maps that were created by the CRC were not well received by the political establishment, whether Democrat or Republican. California politicians challenged the legality of the CRC three separate times in California State Supreme Court, only to be defeated unanimously each time. They ineffectually put a confusingly worded measure on a subsequent ballot to try to trick voters into repealing their own measure. The newly competitive districts forced out many long-time incumbents who had been safely sitting in those seats for decades because of a lack of competitiveness in their territories, allowing fresh talent to enter the legislature and congress. Most importantly, representatives elected under the new maps were chosen by the voters in their districts, as opposed to the old system in which the legislature had been allowed to choose voters to elect their officials. Even with all the turnover, the partisan balance of power in California shifted only slightly but a larger change had occurred.\textsuperscript{19} Most of the newly created districts were not red or blue as they had been, but rather purple, favoring more centrist candidates and enhancing opportunities for elected representatives who were not ideological extremists since candidates needed to appeal to more moderate and independent voters in order to prevail.

\textsuperscript{19} Fan, Chao, et al. pp. 745-746.
The establishment and implementation of Citizens Redistricting Committees in several other states follows a similar narrative: the citizens were obliged to take the initiative themselves, collecting enough signatures to put the creation of a CRC on the ballot; the incumbent politicians employed every trick at their disposal to try to overturn or obfuscate its deployment; the citizens prevailed and the electoral maps were formed in a much more equitable way, resulting in a sharp increase in the competitiveness of their districts. New York State does not currently use a Citizens Redistricting Commission in the creation of its electoral maps, but the same procedures that have been effective in other states could potentially be applied to break the cycle of gerrymandering here. Although there is, as of yet, no established movement to create such a commission in New York, exposure to this body of work will serve as a starting point for viewers to engage with the issue and spread awareness. As the work continues to be shown, I will forge connections with people and organizations and facilitate the growth of such a movement however I can, fostering the possibility that we may one day put an end to this insidious and archaic tactic.

CONCLUSION

As artists, we spend a lot of time alone with our work, contemplating and creating it, hoping that it will effectively convey our ideas to others. From the interactions I witnessed at the opening of the exhibition, I consider the work to have been quite successful. I watched as viewers approached and inspected the work closely, drawn in by the bright lights. I saw them shift their position in front of the work as I had hoped they would, causing the lenses to pass back and forth in front of the lights, producing an uncanny flickering effect. I saw them investigate the indeterminate source of the incongruously colored halo being emitted from
behind the colored lenses. Perhaps most importantly, I overheard conversations that people were having about the work. They were excited to be engaging with the issue, they were learning about it for the first time or they understood it in a new way. I am excited that, as it continues to be exhibited, this body of work will play a part (however large or small) in precipitating the inevitable dismantling of the practice of gerrymandering. Once and for all.

INSTALLATION SHOTS
WORKS CITED


Bryant, Mark. "Political Animals: Mark Bryant Looks at the Lampooning of Two Hugely Unpopular Measures Imposed during the Administrations of Two of the United States' Most Distinguished Presidents." History Today, no. 6, 2009, pp. 56-57.


"No More Salamanders?" *The American Conservative*, no. 8, 2011, p. 5.


Taylor, Steven. "Did the Republicans Gerrymander Themselves into the Majority?."