

## **A president in oils and rhymes**

From painters to rappers, artists have found unprecedented inspiration in Obama

BY MICHAELA. FLETCHER



Shepard Fairey's "Hope," shown being installed at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., was one of the defining images of Barack Obama's 2008 campaign. AFP PHOTO/Jewel SAMAD

Even before Barack Obama's first presidential campaign hit full stride, guerilla artists began plastering urban bus shelters, rural telephone poles and subway rights-of-way with images and the slogans that would come to define his political rise: Hope. Change. Progress. Our time has come. Si, se puede. Go tell mama! I'm for Obama.

Hip-hop artists, many of whom once shunned politics, shouted out the candidate on commercial releases, as well as on hundreds of mixtapes. YouTube was flooded with mashups by underground emcees urging people to Crank Dat Obama and do The Obama Shuffle.

Once he was elected, rappers continued to name-check the new president. In *On To the Next One*, Jay Z wrote, M.J. at Summer Jam, Obama on text / Y'all should be afraid of what I'm gonna do next. On *My President*, Jeezy intoned, My president is black, my Lambo's blue.

As Obama's time in the White House winds down, it is clear that he inspired artists of every stripe in ways previously unprecedented for the occupant of the nation's highest office.

"There were so many artists capturing the image of the president," said Brandon Fortune, chief curator at the National Portrait Gallery. "We have never seen anything like it."

Already, Obama is the subject of at least two feature-length movies about his early life. This summer's *Southside With You* imagined his first date with Michelle, and the upcoming Netflix release *Barry* will focus on his time as an undergraduate at Columbia University. While still in the White House, Obama has been depicted in fine art projects, television shows, comic books and even a British musical.

New York artist Rob Pruitt, who has documented Obama's presidency by painting a 2-by-2-foot portrait of the president each day he has been in office, has said he was moved by Obama's first presidential election.

"I had just been so excited about Obama's campaign," Pruitt said in a YouTube video about his work. "There was just so much energy and so much enthusiasm, I wondered after Obama won, what was I going to do with all of that energy?"

The paintings, done in a subtle red, white and blue, have been displayed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit and until Dec. 18 are at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, a gallery in lower Manhattan, New York. By the time Obama's term is done, Pruitt will have created 2,922 Obama portraits.

Some scholars say the artistic interest in Obama is fueled by his barrier-breaking role as the nation's first black president. But, they add, it also goes further.

"I think he has proven to be more of an inspiration to artists than other presidents," said Travis L. Gosa, an assistant professor of Africana studies at Cornell University. "Part of that has to do with the obvious: being the first African-American president. But also, I think you have all these artists making sense of who Barack Obama might be. As you study his iconography, you see so many ways people imagine him, some contradictory. They compare him to [Martin Luther] King [Jr.], to Malcolm X, to Muhammad Ali, to Jesus, to the devil. People project their fears, hopes and dreams onto him."

In part because of his race, many artists assumed Obama would be more radically progressive as president — an idea that prompted an outpouring. "President Obama's campaign in 2008 was the only moment in my life when I've felt like there was any hope in the American political system," said artist Josh Kline, whose digital creation *Hope and Change* is currently on display at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum. He continued: "When Obama was elected, it felt like the country was embracing — or maybe becoming — the America most artists know and live in. The diverse, tolerant and outward-looking culture of the cities."

Obama is not the first president whose image and style melded with the culture. He is not even the first president to be seen as hip. John F. Kennedy was vibrant, youthful and handsome in ways that both reflected and transformed the country. The Ray-Ban-wearing, saxophone-playing Bill Clinton also brought a certain style to the White House.

Still, the artistic outpouring inspired by Obama far surpasses anything experienced by his predecessors, particularly while they were still in office. In the past, artistic portrayals of presidents were pretty much limited to official portraits, and a sculpture on display at their presidential libraries. While in office, they mostly had to settle for the caricatures of editorial cartoonists or sketch comedy shows.

There have been a few exceptions, such as the unmistakably Clinton-like character in the book and movie *Primary Colors*. But more substantial treatment, such as Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*, Rob Reiner's *LBJ*, or even the opera *Nixon in China*, typically waited until a president left this life, or at least the Oval Office.

For decades, Saturday Night Live made a staple of mocking the foibles of the nation's chief executive. It depicted an amorous Clinton romping around the White House in his boxers. Comedian Dana Carvey ridiculed the waspy ways of George H.W. Bush, and Will Ferrell parodied the squinty-eyed Texas swagger of George W. Bush. Recently, a puckered-lipped Alec Baldwin has lampooned President-elect Donald Trump on the show. But rather than mock him, comedians have more often than not embraced Obama, or at least empathized with him. Whatever else you may say, black is cool.

Among the best comedy depictions of Obama was on Key & Peele, where anger translator "Luther" imagined the testy side of the cool, calm-and-collected Obama. The running gag had Jordan Peele as Obama making bland, presidential-sounding statements, after which Keegan-Michael Key's Luther character would offer an angry, blunt interpretation. It was one of the most popular sketches on their former Comedy Central show, and in 2015 it came to Washington: Key and the president performed it at the White House Correspondents' Dinner.

The connection between Obama and the art world began in earnest in his adopted hometown of Chicago after it became clear that he was going to run for president. Inspired, Ray Noland, a street artist who marked his work with the initials "CRO," would go out at night on his skateboard with Obama posters, wheat paste and a brush tucked in his backpack to paper the town with images of the future president.

"Noland sought out every nook and cranny to paste up his handiwork," said Hal Elliott Wert, a professor at the Kansas City Art Institute and author of *Hope: A Collection of Obama Posters and Prints*. "It was the start of something that I think is unprecedented in American political history."

Noland's work imagined the kind of president the nation had never seen — an urban, basketball-playing black man. One piece was named *Coast to Coast*, playing off the slang for a full-court drive and layup in basketball. It featured a silhouette of a basketball hoop, a small picture of the White House in the background, and an image of Obama. Another depicted a smiling Obama with a red, white and blue basketball cradled in the crook of his arm. It says, "Obama got next." The street art series eventually evolved into a touring show of work inspired by Obama.

Noland was the first of dozens of street artists to take up the cause with poster campaigns that gave an insurgent sensibility to a carefully orchestrated political operation. By the time the Obama campaign was in full swing, its website had a section in its campaign store that sold limited-edition posters by top artists.

The most famous piece was by Shepard Fairey, a Los Angeles street artist, whose red, white and blue posters bearing Obama's portrait in a visionary upward gaze, became the iconic image of the 2008 campaign. The image, captioned in various iterations with the words "Progress," "Hope" and "Change," was reproduced in hundreds of thousands of posters and stickers. "More people saw that image than any campaign image from the past," Fortune said. "It was ubiquitous."

The image ended up landing Fairey in legal trouble. In 2012, he was sentenced to two years of probation and fined \$25,000 in a criminal contempt case involving his "Hope" poster. The sentence came after Fairey admitted that he destroyed documents in connection with his legal fight with The Associated Press over the use of a 2006 photo of Obama as inspiration for the poster.

Despite that, the piece remains popular. A fine art version of the Fairey portrait has been on display at the National Portrait Gallery since being unveiled in the days before Obama's 2009 inauguration.

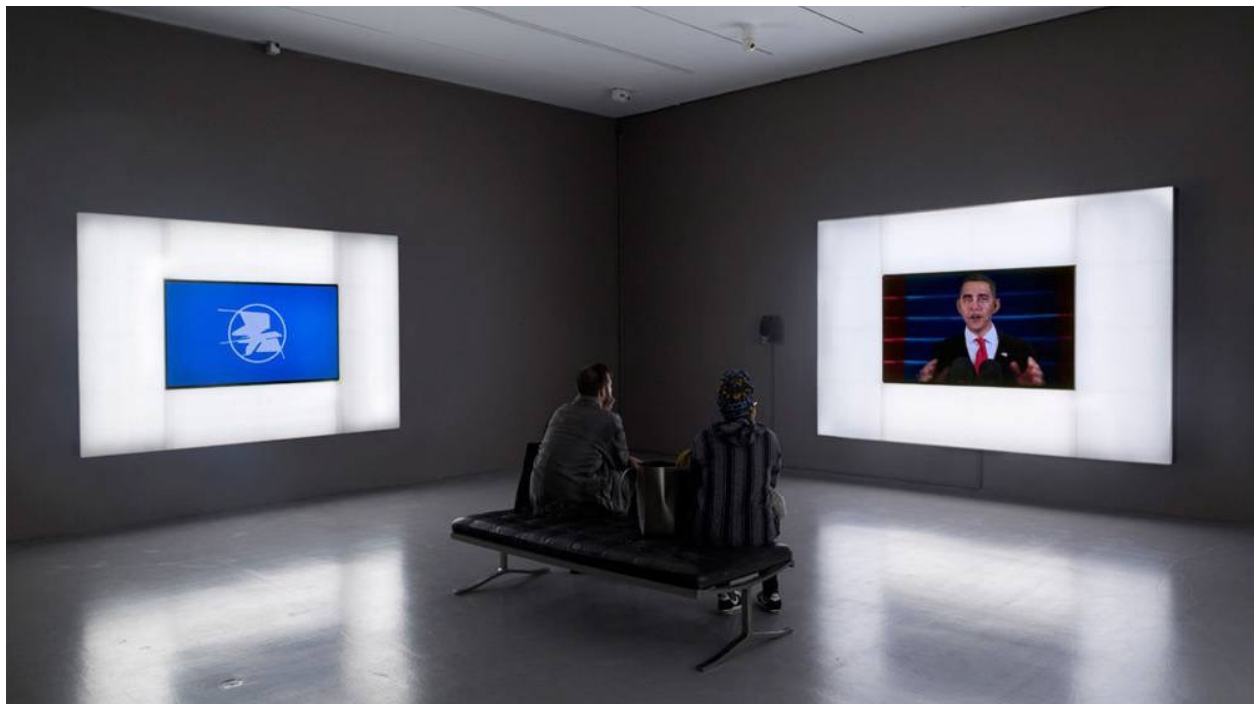
One of the exhibits at the Hirshhorn Museum includes Kline's 17-minute computer-enhanced video, *Hope and Change*. It features an actor digitally disguised as Obama delivering what the artist calls "a politically charged" version of his 2009 inaugural address. The fictional call to action was written by former Justice Department speechwriter David Meadvin, and produced a more populist speech than the one Obama actually delivered.

Other fine artists also celebrate the president. Pop artists Peter Max painted Obama, the nation's 44th president, 44 different ways on a 15-by-6-foot piece. Similarly, 44 African-American artists painted or embellished busts of Obama for an exhibit titled, *Visions of Our 44th President*, currently on display at Miami's Black Archives Historic Lyric Theater Cultural Arts Complex.

The artistic celebration was not without interruption. During his two terms as president, some artists grew disillusioned with what they saw as Obama's centrist political tendencies, and many of them curbed their support.

"2008 was the greatest output of campaign poster art ever," Wert said. "However, in 2012, the art community did not respond to the president's re-election with the same enthusiasm."

Nicholas A. Yanes, an entertainment consultant who co-edited a collection of essays about Obama's depiction in popular culture, said many artists, just like voters, projected their own aspirations onto the president and in some cases wound up disappointed.



Artist Josh Kline was inspired to make a computer-enhanced video titled "*Hope and Change*" that's on exhibit at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, but later grew disillusioned with what Obama was able to accomplish.

CATHY CARVER



“Obama’s popularity was associated by how people wanted to perceive him as opposed to who he really was,” Yanes said. “Conservatives wanted to see him as un-American while many liberals wanted to see him as this incredibly left-leaning politician. Similarly, artists in multiple fields depicted him as they saw him.”

“President Obama saved the country from a second Great Depression,” Kline said. “Unlike FDR, though, he was unable to address most of the structural problems that led to it — and he did nothing to halt the runaway rise of income inequality and middle-class and working-class desperation, which is destabilizing our democracy.”

Painter Jon McNaughton did a work showing a mean-mugged Obama holding a burning copy of the Constitution. Another of his pieces features Obama standing in front of the White House, his right foot mashing a copy of the Constitution on the ground, as a forlorn “everyman” sits on a park bench.

Even some hip-hop artists pulled back from the man some called the first hip-hop president. With black unemployment rates still double those of whites, and black wealth decimated and mostly not recovered from the recession, some performers were angry.

On Trap House, rapper Lil Wayne said, Black president ain’t do nothing / We need a real n— up in that office.

Recording artist J. Cole alluded to Obama on his 2014 track, Be Free, saying essentially that Obama has been thwarted as president despite his best intentions.

No disrespect in terms of change, I haven’t seen any, the song goes. Maybe he had good intentions but was stifled by the system / And was sad to learn he actually couldn’t bring any / That’s what I get for thinking, this world is fair / But they let a brother steer the ship / But they never told him that the ship was sinking.

In 2014, Occidental College, the Los Angeles school Obama attended for two years before transferring to Columbia University, unveiled a full-scale mud sculpture of a MQ-1B Predator drone, Obama’s weapon of choice to kill suspected terrorists overseas. The two-month installation named We Will Show You Fear in a Handful of Dust was intended to ignite a debate about modern warfare.

“You really see a turn in the art,” Gosa said. “It goes from excitement to being really upset that we have a black president. But we still live in a white supremacist world and country. You have the rise of the Tea Party, and the alt-right, and before long, the new-president smell has worn off.”

Still, with Obama about to leave office, it is hard to imagine when the nation will see another president whom artists adopt the way they did this one. It certainly does not seem to be happening now: The art most closely associated with President-elect Trump are two portraits of himself that he purchased with money donated by other people to his personal charity.