



[“What is your voting story?” a Collaboration between CCA and GSU photographers: To Vote or Not to Vote? What is Your Answer?](#)

Gordon Fung

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., once said, “[a] man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true.” Voting, during this time of a pandemic and endless social unsettlement caused by racial injustice, is a hot topic of conversation across the entire Nation. With uncertainty ahead, voting becomes the primary means of expressing our demands for a better future, environment, and humanity. Young, talented photographers from California College of the Arts and Georgia State University (hereafter “CCA” and “GSU”) collaborated on the online exhibition *Voting Story*. The project seeks to bring awareness to the upcoming election and allow young artists from different states, upbringings, and backgrounds to exchange valuable views on the democratic process as a way to demand social justice and racial equality. As part of the project, SF Camerawork live-streamed *What is your voting story?*, vivid cross-country conversations between the 21 CCA and GSU photographers and 24 attendees, on October 15, 2020.

Immediately striking was an uncanny use of the U.S. flag as a motif in several exhibited works. Tyler Brantley’s (GSU) *Access Denied* shows the national flag behind a display window in black and white. As a barrier from keeping “outsiders” to reach the flag, the glass display is a clever allusion to how the U.S. bars migrants out of the voting system and democratic process. Kevin Balaun’s (GSU) *Trash Can* depicts a U.S. flag painted on a disposal bin standing silently on the sidewalk, as if to say democratic voices are unheard or in vain. Eboni Watson’s (GSU) *America’s Pride* shows a U.S. flag painted onto a pistol leaning on the edging stones and pointing towards the ground. The pose references the ongoing gun violence due to the government’s failure in gun control, inviting viewers to think about the U.S.’s political influence on the Land and the People.

Nia Hemmitt (GSU) explores the tension between rich and vibrant downtown life and non-central, low-income neighborhoods marginalized by the big cities. Nia's *Bad Side of Town* is a peaceful shot that shows a typical day in the "less good neighborhood," defying the misconception and prejudice from the people who reside on the "better side" of town. Markiesha Thornton (GSU) also explores identity as an African-American artist. Markiesha pays special attention to the voting system's precarity, as the election's outcome does not always go the way that the people want. Through the photo of patriotically-designed drop boxes, Markiesha's *To Be or Absentee* reflects an immune-compromised person's dilemma on whether one should vote in person or as an absentee. Speaking of Markiesha's own voting story, they expressed how dangerous microaggressions in the voting system are, and how voters were biased towards a candidates' racial background instead of judging the proposed policies. Extending the theme of identity, Astrid Hernandez (CCA), focuses on performance and photography in her work *The First Amendment*. The photograph responds to her experience facing the empty promises of the Amendment. It shows the artist's performance recreating the experience of a six-hour detainment after being arrested in a peaceful protest. As a Latina artist who has received support from the community, Astrid finds the obligation to support countless other protestors who risk their lives to stand up for their own civil rights.

Voting can be tricky for people whose upbringing had no involvement in politics. Parents of many first-generation Americans, for instance, might be skeptical about voting, or they might avoid discussing politics at all. Elaine Moreno (CCA) takes the initiative to instruct her immigrant parents to know about their own rights as citizens. As Elaine put it, countless immigrants who came to the U.S. have been putting in diligent effort contributing to their new country of residence. They deserve every right to have their needs and voices heard through voting. Elaine's *Mami, Papi, y Yo Votando* ("Mom, Dad, and I voting") depicts a family gathering scene. The artist's family went through the ballots together at the dining table. This very homey and domestic work reflects the close cohesion and intimacy within Latin American families. In Elaine's experience, Latin Americans tend to stay within the family until they get married. As the youngest sibling in the family, Elaine feels the responsibility to guide her parents to fulfill their civic rights. A similar scenario is examined in Caitlin Conrad (CCA)'s *Let me help you*. Caitlin's work comments on the unwillingness of voters to understand a candidate's policies. Instead of reading the ballot pamphlet, many voters—including the artist's family members—vote solely according to their preferred political parties.

The eagerness and passion for voting are surely notable in democratic countries. In many countries that do not support the notion of commonwealth, universal suffrage is an unattainable goal that many democracy-loving citizens long for. Howsem Huang—a CCA double major in graphic design and photography—expressed such hardship as an international student from Canton, People's Republic of China. Seeing the efforts in ongoing Hong Kong protests against the increasing dictatorship imposed by the Chinese Communist and the pro-Beijing local government, Howsem considers the necessity to stand up for what one believes in—democracy, equality, and justice. As

Howsem puts it, if one ceases to fight for democracy and chooses to ignore social unrest, the unwanted political consequence will eventually knock on one's door. Despite the photographer's inability to speak up through ballots, Howsem urged the audience to take proactive action to perform their civic duties.

To some people, voting is just a story, a right one could neglect by casting silence or not voting. To others, voting is an unattainable dream that fighters for freedom and democracy are fearlessly dying for. Dr. King left us a perfect piece of advice: “[w]e shall have to do more than register and more than vote; we shall have to create leaders who embody virtues we can respect, who have moral and ethical principles we can applaud with enthusiasm.”

In the closing remarks, Dave Elfving—the Interim Executive Director of SF Camerawork—praised the conversation and photos being “incredible and inspiring.” Elfving also expressed gratitude to participants from all over the country and thanked the institutions that made this exchange possible. The distance created by ongoing lockdowns has not deterred the young artists from learning about each other's core practices, political views, and values. Virtual collaboration is a promising platform that facilitates beneficial intellectual and artistic exchanges. For more creative outputs—a total of 21 works—and voting stories of the aspiring young photographers from CCA and GSU, please visit: <https://libraries.cca.edu/exhibitions/mays-investigations-voting-story/>

What is your voting story? was co-organized by Aspen Mays, Associate Professor in the Photography Program, and the CCA Exhibitions department, and co-hosted by SF Camerawork.

Do you have questions or opinions about this response? Have you seen an event at CCA you'd like to report on? Please email exhibitions@cca.edu to contribute to our Letters to the Editor series, or to submit to *Review Rewind Respond*.

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