
Poli-knits: Lisa Auerbach fashions a message in sweaters

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ASPEN TIMES WEEKLY ,

ASPEN — Rick Nielsen, guitarist of the loopy but critically adored rock band Cheap Trick, is known for his guitar collection. By some accounts, his private stash numbers more than 2,000 instruments, including such oddities as a Hamer guitar with five necks. The collection is a distinct attraction for the Rockford, Ill., quartet’s fans, who attend shows in part to see which guitars will be used onstage.

For most, however, the big association with Cheap Trick remains the 1979 hit “Surrender.” While the band has continued to tour and release albums — Cheap Trick is so big in Japan that they are referred to as “the American Beatles,” and have an elevated place in the pantheon among rock critics — their presence in the States has never approached what it was in the late ’70s and early ’80s.

Lisa Anne Auerbach falls into none of the above camps. She has an affection for Cheap Trick — but she’s not a guitar junkie, nor does she have a geeky love for “Rockford,” the band’s 2006 album named among the year’s best by Rolling Stone magazine. Rather, she’s into the knit sweaters customarily worn by Nielsen, and often accompanied by a bow tie and nerdy baseball cap.

It was one particular sweater that hooked Auerbach, the one that read, “Don’t Steal My Girlfriend.” “I loved having a sweater that said something so offhand and random,” she said.

For a decade, Auerbach, who studied photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology and earned an MFA in painting from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, admired sweaters from something of a distance. She wanted to make a Nielsen-style sweater for herself, but she poured most of her professional energies instead into photography and small art publications. But as the 2004 presidential election season came along, a friend told her he wanted to wear a knit sweater in support of John Kerry — a T-shirt wouldn’t do; tees were considered inappropriate attire for his office.

Auerbach got herself a knitting machine, and got busy. Working along the political theme, which had already been an interest of hers, she sent a knit skirt to protesters at the Republican National Convention in New York City. It read: “Bush is a Turkey.” She later made a pair of sweaters that carried even more pointedly partisan messages: “Dick Cheney Before He Dicks You” and “Bush Is Scary. Vote for Kerry.”

What’s in a word

Auerbach has jumped the political tracks for her current Aspen project. No, the 40-year-old, who lives in Southcentral Los Angeles, hasn’t started knitting pro-Republican messages into her sweaters. But she has



- Jordan Curet/Aspen Times Weekly



- Courtesy Lisa Anne Auerbach

dropped the partisanship to focus on the words and phrases that both Democrats and Republicans — as well as Whigs, Federalists, Progressives and probably even members of the Readjuster Party, which had a short run in the late 19th century — have used to boost their candidates and causes over these 232 years of American democracy. Knit sweaters bearing such slogans as “In your heart you know he’s right, in your guts you know he’s nuts” and “The stakes are too high for you to stay at home” — in red, white and blue, naturally — are being displayed in local storefronts, and on citizens’ torsos. (Aspenites may borrow the sweaters from the Aspen Art Museum, which is presenting the project. The display runs through Nov. 30.)

“Going around putting blatant partisan messages isn’t appropriate for a project in shop windows,” said Auerbach. “It doesn’t engender the conversation I want people to have.”

The dialogue she wants to open up has to do with the intersection of language and campaign politics. “And how the slogans have, or have not, changed, in 200 years,” she said. “The first sweater reflects the 1800 election, Jefferson versus Adams: ‘Is it not high time for change.’ That was Jefferson’s slogan. You think things are new, that ideas have changed. But they’re just representing the same things in history. I wanted people to see that this campaign is just another one in the long chain of history.

“The words, the buzz words, the key words, the phrasing on both sides of the aisle. When McCain stole the idea of change from Obama — everyone has the same slogan, so it’s really confusing. Obama sort of owned that word for awhile — but he never owned it. It’s been used forever, in every campaign.”

But Auerbach is clearly interested in the issues as much as she is in the words. Another of Auerbach’s recent projects, through the Baltimore Contemporary Museum, is titled Tract House. It involved Auerbach working with 62 people, each of whom contributed a sociopolitical treaty or manifesto, which the artist turned into a one-sheet, made available as free takeaways. The tracts are now at Printed Matter in New York City, and are scheduled to move to Miami this winter, with the idea of new works being added. (On the thoroughly apolitical side, Auerbach is working on a calendar featuring photographs of her cats playing with yarn. And on the nonartistic side, she has had a side career contributing articles to skiing magazines.)

The Aspen project, like Tract House, is intended “to get people thinking about the issues, maybe,” said Auerbach, whose desires include starting her own printing press. “To think about how people talk about the issues, and what these issues might be about, instead of just the candidates, their personalities, bastard children.”

In revealing that the words and slogans haven’t changed much, Auerbach hopes to point to the idea that the people who read them haven’t changed much either. It’s not only 21st-century Americans who are being swayed by pithy phrases.

“We think it’s now about sound bites,” she said, “now about attacks. But I wonder — was everyone as educated in the past as we give them credit for? But the past, it was very attack-oriented. ‘Nobody loves a fat man’ — that was used against Taft. That’s pretty cruel.”

Sweaters: a subtle statement

Auerbach seems to have as many thoughts about her medium as she does about her messages. A slogan on a sweater is the same as one on a T-shirt, right? They’re both words on a garment. But Auerbach says that’s far from the case.

“How does a sweater differ from a T-shirt?” she posed. “There’s something very permanent about a sweater — people keep them for a long time. To me, a sweater is almost second to a tattoo. Knitting your message in a sweater, it almost has that same sense of urgency as a tattoo.”

On the other hand – because of the way the message is woven into the fabric of a sweater, rather than printed on it; or because of the viewer’s expectations; or because a knit sweater seems quaint and granny-ish – sweaters don’t make nearly as bold of a statement.

“Sweaters are a lot more stealth than a T-shirt. You’re not going to get kicked off a plane for wearing a sweater, but you wear a T-shirt with something controversial, you’ll get kicked off,” said Auerbach, whose sweater collection includes one with the image of a suicide belt knitted into it, and another that asks, “What’s your favorite thing about the war on terror?”

“It’s a funny thing about a sweater. People don’t read it immediately like they do a T-shirt. And I like that the material can seduce you, even if you don’t like the words, or even notice it. And then, if they like the sweater itself, they might get interested in what it says.”

Getting herself tangled with knitting has led Auerbach to observe the socio-politics of the craft. She spends time on ravelry.com, a “Facebook for knitters,” she said. Since she began knitting, she has seen the hobby explode in popularity.

“It blew up. I’m not kidding,” she said. “In ’04, I was the only knitter for Kerry. And now there are so many knitters.

“There are tons of liberal knitting groups. But not many conservative knitting groups.”

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