

Andres Serrano Lets Objects Do the Talking

Thirty years after his infamous image of a plastic crucifix sparked the first skirmish in the culture wars, the artist-provocateur trains his focus on “The Game: All Things Trump.”

By Siddhartha Mitter



Andres Serrano with the rotating sign from the Taj Mahal's EGO Lounge, part of the artist's collection of Donald Trump-related memorabilia opening Friday on West 14th Street.

Molly Matalon for The New York Times

A few days ago, the artist Andres Serrano was making final choices for “The Game: All Things Trump,” his installation of 1,000 items marketed, branded, or autographed by the current president that opens Friday in Manhattan’s Meatpacking District.

It is a museum-grade project, with quality frames, custom vitrines, careful lighting. It covers two floors, with a mezzanine bar that will operate during the two-month run, an heirloom from a lineage of nightclubs, including Lotus, that once occupied this space on West 14th Street. Near the bar, Mr. Serrano had set up a blackjack table rescued from the defunct Trump Plaza in Atlantic City; boxing jackets from big-ticket bouts, and a case of colognes (“Success by Trump”).

The issue was with the mannequins. Each wore Trump Taj Mahal security guard uniforms (authentic) and a Make America Great Again cap. There were 11, standing on either side of a very large print of Mr. Serrano’s photograph of Donald Trump (made in 2004 as part of the artist’s “America” portrait series) that dominated the back wall. Someone had lifted the right arms of the mannequins in a wave, or salute, and the question was whether they should stay that way.

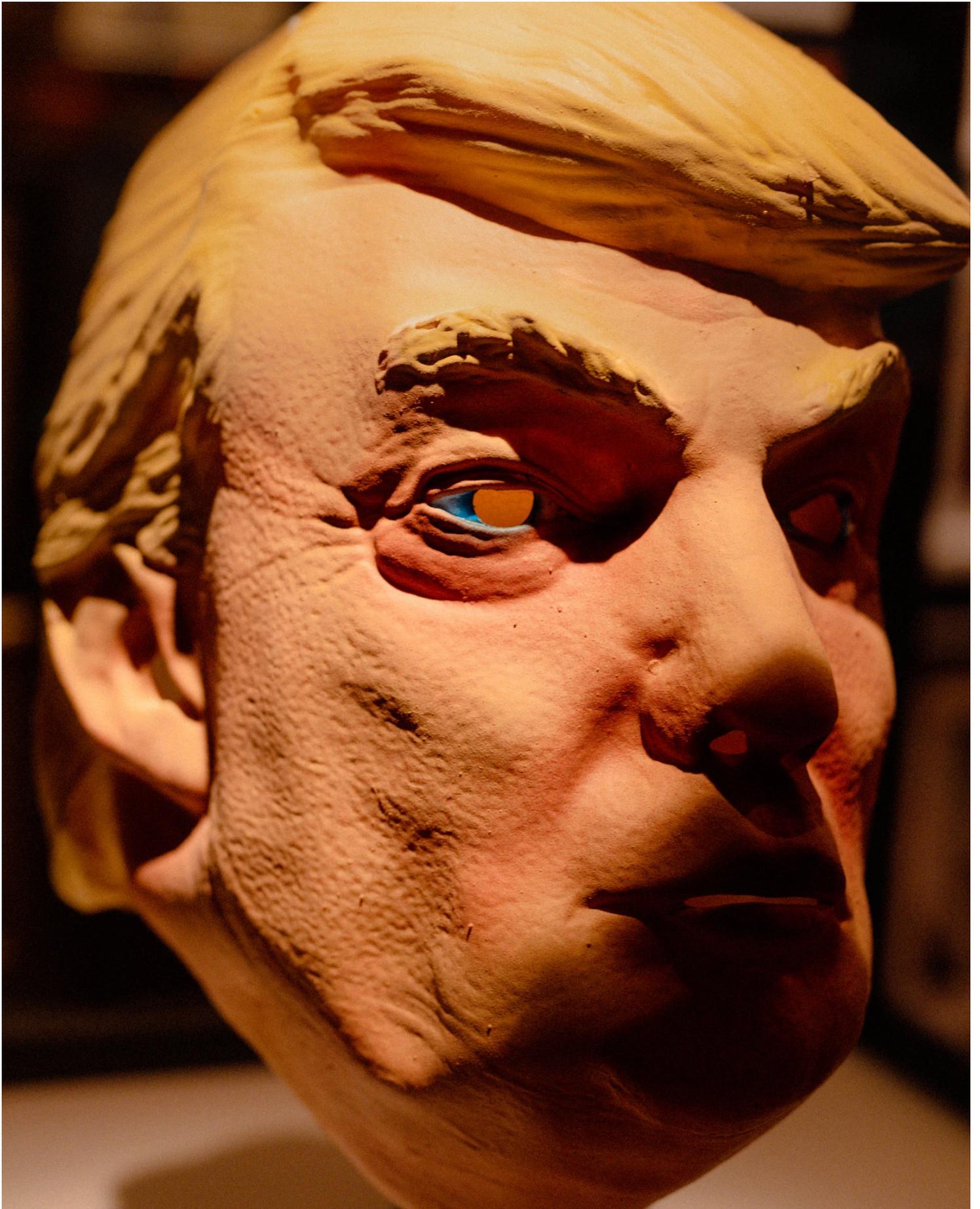
Huddled with his wife, Irina, and the head of the installation team, Mr. Serrano invited this reporter to advise. What first came to mind was, well, the Nazi salute, but the arm positions — too high, too loose — weren’t right.

“It could be Hail to the Chief,” Mr. Serrano observed.

Salute or not, the mannequins gave off a distinct militia energy. Either way, I ventured, both friends and foes of the president would find substance for debate.

“And people who want to hate me or love me will also find a story,” Mr. Serrano said. He decided to lower the arms. Keep it neutral.

Signs and wonders: Mr. Serrano, of all people, shying from controversy.



A signed Donald Trump mask on display. Molly Matalon for The New York Times



Mr. Serrano's collection of Trumpiana includes "Trump: The Game." Molly Matalon for The New York Times

This is the artist whose “Piss Christ,” his infamous image of a plastic crucifix bathed in urine, sparked the first skirmish in the culture wars 30 years ago. On May 17, 1989, after the work’s presence in an exhibition drew national attention, an apoplectic Sen. Al D’Amato tore up the catalog on the Senate floor.

The fracas over Robert Mapplethorpe’s planned, then banned, Corcoran Gallery show followed almost immediately. It led to the first Congressional proposal to defund the National Endowment for the Arts — a move that Mr. Trump’s budget proposals have again put on the table.

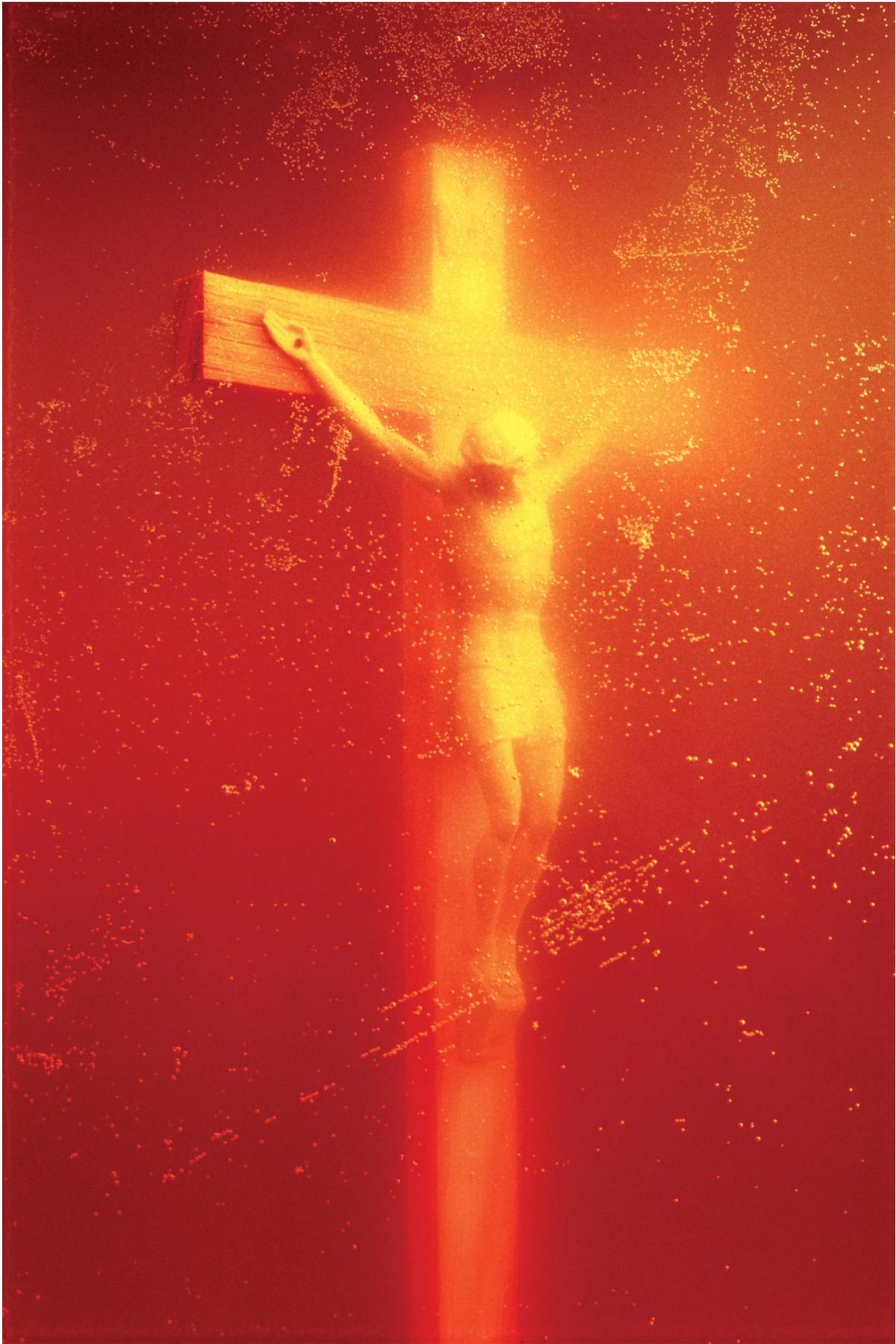
In later photography series, Mr. Serrano focused on Ku Klux Klan members in their robes, cadavers in a morgue, and close-up images of human (his own) and animal feces. Mr. Serrano’s most recent New York show, in Fall 2017 at Jack Shainman Gallery, was titled “Torture.” It depicted antique torture instruments, stylized poses of bodies in torment, and portraits of survivors from Sudan and Northern Ireland.

Now, with Mr. Trump in his sights, Mr. Serrano is playing it coy.

“Donald Trump is all things to all people,” he told me in his Greenwich Village apartment recently, under the gaze of his ample collection of European church statues from the medieval to the Baroque periods.

“I make art about very basic things: life, death, religion,” he said. “After a while it occurred to me, what’s the most important thing right now? Donald Trump.”

That epiphany, about a year ago, sent Mr. Serrano on a mission, which he conducted largely on eBay, spending long hours locating and then bidding on Trumpiana.



“Piss Christ,” 1987, cibachrome, plexiglass, wooden frame. Exhibited in Virginia in 1989, it helped launch a culture war. Andres Serrano

His efforts turned up gold-coated bottles of Trump Vodka, boxes used to package Trump Steaks, and a fake dollar bill showing Hillary Clinton behind bars.

Mr. Serrano found a legal document pertaining to financing of Mr. Trump's casinos. He procured a 10-foot sign from the Trump Taj Mahal's Ego Lounge, the letters E-G-O rotating on a pedestal.

He calls the venture, his first ever installation project, a portrait. Some viewers may experience it as a demented trip down memory lane. Dredged back to the surface are characters like Marla Maples, Mr. Trump's second wife, who appears by his side in the Tarzan-and-Jane composition of a party invitation poster from 1994 (celebrating the "Lord of the Financial Jungle") and announces on a 1990 New York Post cover the "BEST SEX I EVER HAD!"

Mr. Serrano said he'd love it if the president saw the project. He has bought short advertising slots on a spectrum of cable shows — Sean Hannity, Rachel Maddow, Don Lemon, Morning Joe — to run a 15-second video teasing the installation.

It's a lot of effort, and expense. Mr. Serrano spent close to \$200,000 on the objects. But to what end?



Installation views of board games, tool kit and photographs signed by Donald Trump.
Molly Matalon for The New York Times

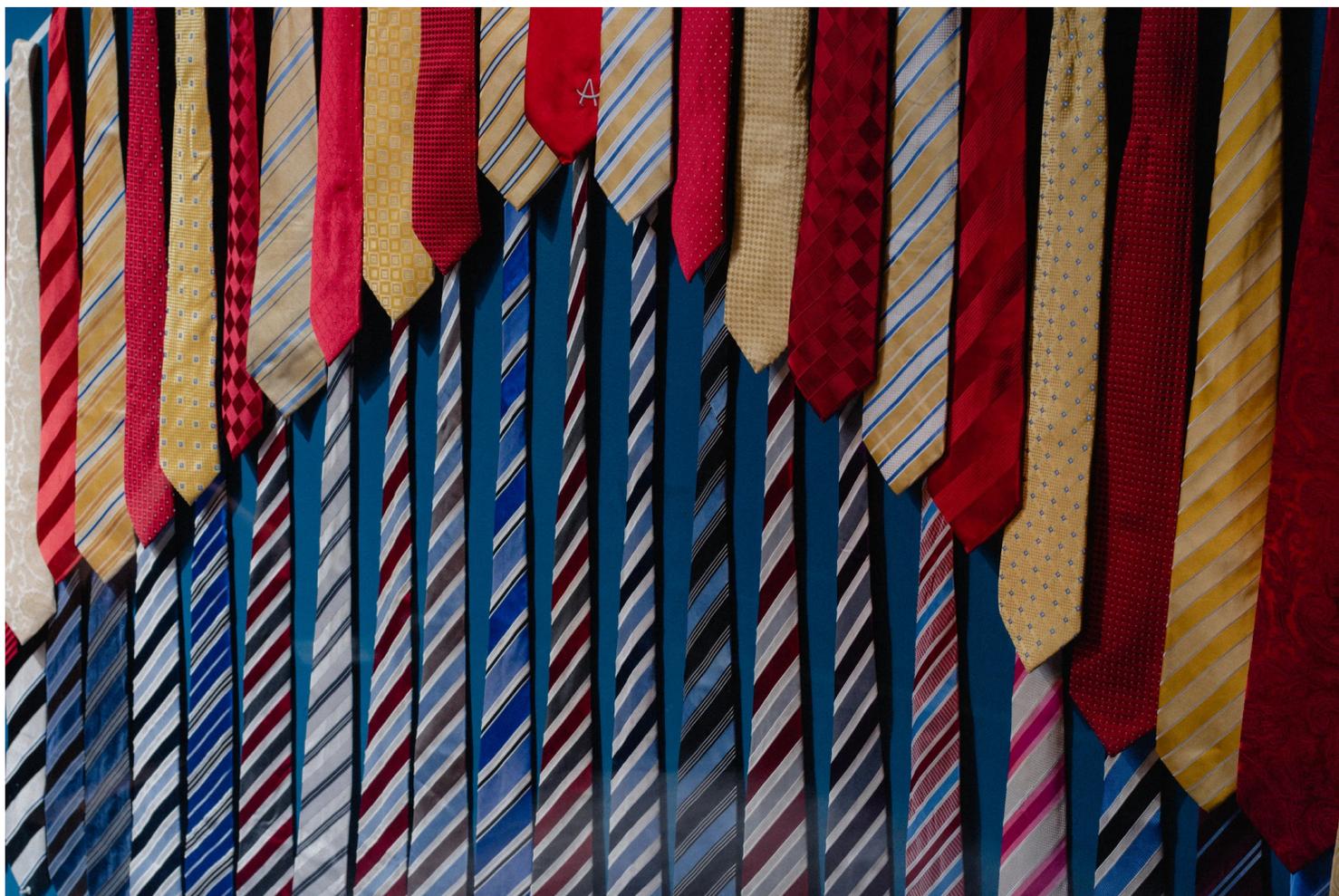
“He’s a fighter,” he said. “He’s good with words, especially insults. He’s sharp on his toes, in a way that’s part of being a New Yorker.”

From Mr. Serrano, a New Yorker and, at age 68, just four years younger than the president, it sounded like a compliment.

“It’s possible that Donald Trump expresses a lot of things that many people might feel but don’t express,” Mr. Serrano said. “Racism? It’s an issue. And sexism, misogyny, they’re all issues concerning Donald Trump.”

I gave the show a chance. I didn’t hate it. At points it feels like it’s about to present an argument. The vitrine of Trump University material, with someone’s real diploma amid the workbooks and videos promising wealth through trading in foreclosures, is haunting: the human pain and exploitation intrudes here.

Elsewhere, it’s a fun house. But the boxes of “Trump: The Game,” a Monopoly-like product with the tagline, “It’s not whether you win or lose ... It’s whether you win,” on their own do little to advance what we have come to know about our present situation.



A collection of Donald J. Trump signature collection ties. Molly Matalon for The New York Times

Mr. Serrano's project is hosted by ArtX, a new private club. Like "Torture" before it, it is backed by a/political, an arts initiative based in London and financed by Andrei Tretyakov, a technology entrepreneur. It is working with a roster of artists with brash ideas, like Santiago Sierra, who recently put up for sale a sculpture of King Felipe of Spain on the condition that the buyer burn it, and Andrey Molodkin, whose latest project asks visitors to donate blood that, pumped into a machine, activates an audiovisual installation.

By that standard, Mr. Serrano's composite Trump portrait seems tame.

But had he gunned for outrage, he would probably have fallen short; by now Mr. Trump's reign is itself the provocation. Mr. Serrano's installation reminds us how relentlessly the president made his legend, but it rings mostly nostalgic, a throwback to times when the poison was merely latent.

Of course, it was never just that. Also 30 years ago, on May 1, 1989, Mr. Trump was running his full-page advertisement in The New York Times, The New York Post, The New York Daily News, and New York Newsday, demanding the death penalty for the Central Park Five, since exonerated — a position he has never disavowed.

That particular Trump-signed artifact does not appear in Mr. Serrano's installation. The artist conceded that it never hit his radar at the time.

"I wasn't aware of his attitude about those young men," he said. "He was a celebrity, a playboy, a businessman, but I really wasn't paying attention to what he was saying."
