

# NEW ART examiner

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## NEW ART EXAMINER

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Since 1972, Lawyers of the Creative Arts has provided pro bono legal services for artists and grass roots arts organization. The staff of the *New Art Examiner* and the board of the New Art Association wish to express profound gratitude for their expertise and generosity in giving advice and help with a variety of legal issues over the years.

# Introduction

This issue introduces several changes to our coverage. We are no longer using quarterly themes after having found them too restrictive. Also, we are no longer separating articles from reviews. Our articles are always analyses of art issues or art exhibitions, so the separation was mostly based on article length—an arbitrary and artificial distinction. Less dramatic, we no longer list the name of the artist in the caption in reviews that are only about that artist. If there are more than one artist, then their names will appear in the captions.

Our new website is up and running, but still under construction. It has a new internet address (URL) [thenewartexaminer.org](http://thenewartexaminer.org). Our old site is still running ([newartexaminer.org](http://newartexaminer.org)), and that is where you want to go for archived material and recent past reviews that have not yet been uploaded to the new site.

## About this Issue

This issue starts with a review by Marissa Jezak of MO-CAD's "Free Your Mind: Art and Incarceration in Michigan," a powerful exhibition that reveals the state of mind of prisoners. This issue's cover image, Bryan Picken, *Confiscated Goods*, is from this exhibition. Leandré D'Souza contributes a piece on the Indian social practice artist Khyungwoo Chun, and Diane Thodos reviews "DEGENERATE! Hitler's War on Modern Art" at the Jewish Museum of Milwaukee, a show devoted to the artists that Hitler deemed undesirable.

On a historical note, Paul Moreno reviews a show devoted to the work of the late Louise Fishman at New York's Cheim & Reid gallery, and Tom Mullaney reviews the early photography of Gordon Parks at Chicago's Rhona Hoffman Gallery. *Chrysalis Magazine* and the *New Art Examiner* present an obituary of the imprisoned Belarusian performance artist Alieś Puškin.

We also wrote about living artists. Michel Ségard reviewed the summer show at Chicago's Mickey gallery and the work of Antonius-Tín Bui at Monique Meloche Gallery. K.A. Letts reviewed Jeanne Bieri's exhibition of quilt-like fabric pieces at Detroit Contemporary. Paul Moreno covered the work of Richard Haines at Daniel Cooney Fine Art in NYC, and D. Dominick Lombardi evaluated "Then Is Now: Contemporary Black Art in America" at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Connecticut. Sean Bieri wrote a piece about biographies of well-known artists that were done as graphic novels. John Thomure reviewed a recent performance series by the group { } { }Δ‡!{ } (No Nation) at Chicago's Comfort Station, and Annette LePique reviewed the works of Tom Robinson and Lorylyn Kumlin at Chicago's new gallery SoNa. Finally Sebastian Smee, art critic for The Washington Post, wrote a review of Kehinde Wiley's show at the de Young Museum in San Francisco that annoyed Michel Ségard so much he wrote a rebuttal as part of our I.D.E.A. series—essays by individuals on any issue dealing with the visual arts.

Happy Reading,

*The Editors*

## NEW ART EXAMINER—ABOUT US

At the *New Art Examiner* we are dedicated to the in-depth criticism of contemporary art and culture. We are here to not only produce content, but also to foster a community for intellectual discourse and critical inquiry that holds visual art to a high standard of both formal and conceptual vigor. We put the artist and the artwork above the markets of monetary, social, and political capital so that we may interrogate the experience an artwork generates for a viewing audience and the impact of that experience on shaping thought and meaning in the world.

In addition to examining the artist and artwork, we critique the institutions that determine what artwork is deemed worthy of exhibition. We do not limit this analysis to institutions with outsize resources and rich legacies. Instead, we cover exhibitions spaces large and small, ranging from blue chip galleries and major museums to artist run workspaces and DIY pop-ups.

Artworks and venues are treated with the same level of scrutiny, focusing on the experiential impact generated by their formal and conceptual quality.

The *New Art Examiner* is a platform for the curious and the critical to explore ideas the art world has to offer. It is a platform that reflects upon the experiences we have as people who engage with the publication. Our contributing writers and editors are invited to participate in our rigorous approach to critical inquiry and to bring their own literary and artistic voices to the content we produce. Above all, we are committed to perpetuating the legacy of NAE co-founders, Jane Addams Allen and Derek Guthrie in maintaining an open forum for the serious discussion of issues in the arts. We invite anyone who is interested in participating in this forum to explore what we have to offer in our digital and printed content and if so desired to reach out to us with thoughts, questions, and concerns.

# “Free Your Mind: Art and Incarceration in Michigan”

**Mike Kelley’s Mobile Homestead, MOCAD**  
**April 14–September 10, 2023**

by Marissa Jezak

Distant memories, imaginative fantasy, juxtaposed with a severe reality, collectively inspire “Free Your Mind: Art and Incarceration in Michigan,” a diverse showcase consisting mainly of two-dimensional art by individuals currently or previously incarcerated in Michigan prisons. Co-curated by Steven L. Bridges and Janie Paul, the show opened April 14th, and ran through September 10th of 2023. The artworks depict scenes of day-to-day life in lock-up, men sitting in groups playing cards and chess, passing the time. Some pictures reflect a more introspective personal narrative with elaborate illustrations evoking intense mental suffering, anguish. The intensity and crowdedness, the feelings of confinement and conflict portrayed in the imagery contrast starkly with the comfortable domestic setting in MOCAD’s *Mobile Homestead*, a separate addition to the museum which was designed as an exact replica of artist Mike Kelley’s suburban childhood home. Through the living room, dining room, and narrow

hallways of this small “home,” visitors encounter the creations of artists who have lost precisely that—*home*, at least temporarily.

Walking up the driveway to the gallery, yellow yard signs display statistics such as “At least 20% of Michigan’s incarcerated population has been identified to have a mental health disorder,” setting the tone for the exhibition ahead, which clearly intends to educate viewers regarding the subject of incarceration. Beginning in the garage section of the homestead, a table displays dozens of ‘zines full of drawings and poetry, collaborations from workshops made up of college students from Michigan State University and inmates from local penitentiaries. Also, in the room is a film and two paintings, which transition smoothly into the rest of the show. In *Rehabilitation*, an acrylic painting by Phillip Crowley, two prisoners are depicted behind bars in a haunted cell, surrounded by ghosts and what appears to be Jesus on the cross. A large clock



Phillip Crowley, *Rehabilitation*, 2008.  
 Acrylic on canvas. Collection of Janie Paul. Photo: Marissa Jezak.



Dara Ket, *Why My Baby?*, 2009. Acrylic on stretched canvas. Collection of Janie Paul. Photo: Marissa Jezak.

divides the two figures, with the scales of justice below it, holding two books, one of which reads "God's Law." The resemblance between the men, one appearing young and the other old, combined with the symbol of the clock, infers the artist may be referencing the long passing of time and aging process that's happening to him on the inside. (The controversial length of prison sentences is another point raised by the informational plaques throughout the show.)

Descriptions next to the artworks communicate that many of the artists were employed in skilled trades prior to their imprisonment. This fact is demonstrated in the special attention to detail and technical accuracy visible in the works. The exhibition represents a blend of genders among its artists, including a mix of men and women. A

wall text elaborates on the incarceration of women specifically, stating, that in recent years, the percentage of women being locked up has steadily increased, as well as have the lengths of their sentences. The text highlights the fact that women's biology can make their time served harder to bear due to childbirth, breastfeeding, motherhood, and dealing with menstrual cycles. In the painting, *Why My Baby?* Dara Ket addresses the pain felt by a mother whose child has been locked away. The child, strikingly depicted as an infant, is dressed in a prison uniform and is shown talking to its mother through the wired glass visitation window. In the artist's statement, Ket speaks from the heart, "This painting is dedicated to those that are in prison for the rest of their lives and not going home. I feel their pain. I feel the number on their shoulder, not knowing when you're going home. You can't put it in words to know that you're gonna die in prison." Similarly, a father's

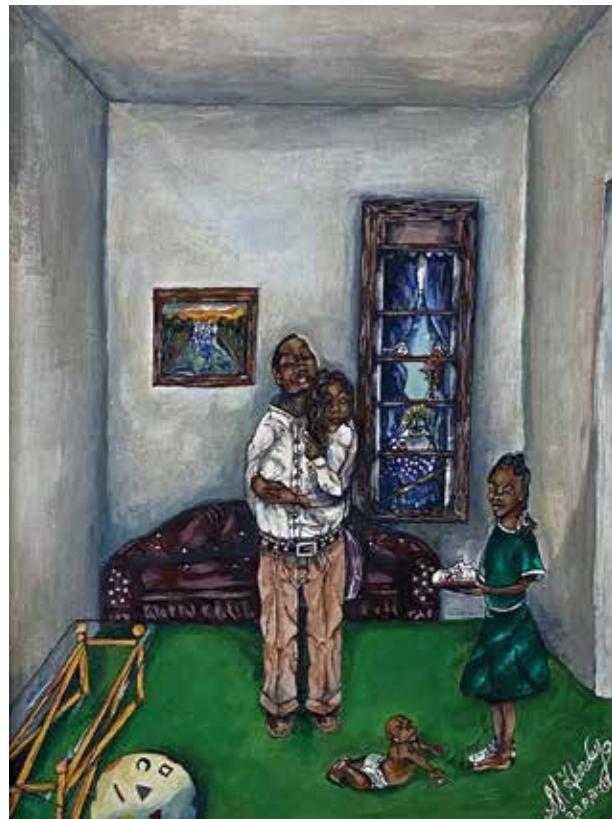


John Lonchar, *Our Cell*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas board. Collection of Janie Paul. Photo: Marissa Jezak.

Samuel Hendley, *Father's Responsibility*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy the artist and the Prison Creative Arts Project. Photo: Marissa Jezak.

perspective of this scenario is drawn out in the family portrait, *Father's Responsibility* by Samuel Hendley. In this painting, the artist depicted himself at home in his living room, holding a little girl, with another child and baby painted beside them—an idealized view of where he *should* be, as a protector of his home—not showing the reality of where he is now, in prison.

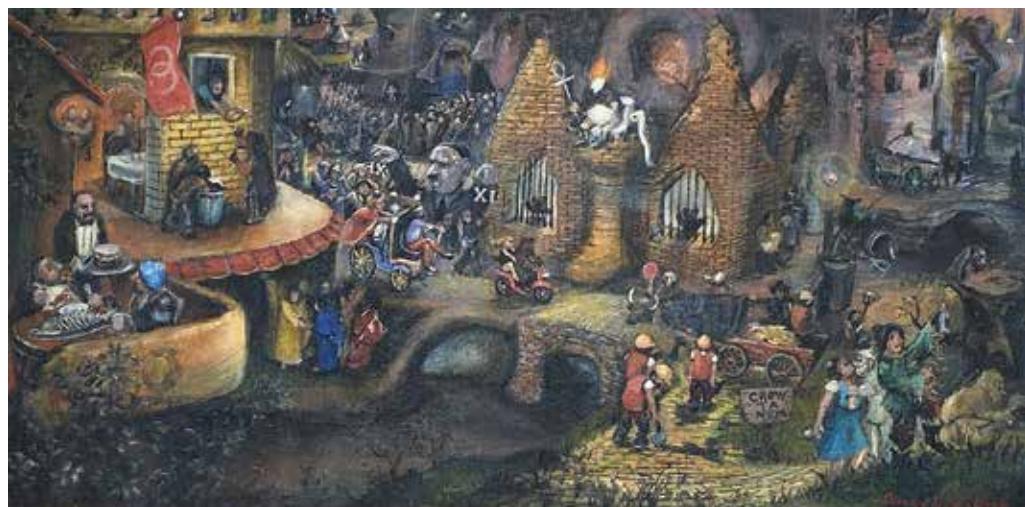
Coincidentally occurring at the same time that Detroit's new Wayne County jail is being built, this exhibition not only draws attention to the problems of the prison system and the activists trying to change it, but more importantly connects the public to the *humanity* of the artists—the imprisoned people who are stripped of their personhood and reduced to a number or statistic, and used as pawns in political warfare—their exploitation fueling the grimy machine of capitalist greed that lies at the heart of the prison industrial complex. Throughout the show, the theme of suffering is heavily present, as it is intertwined with the experience of a dysfunctional criminal punishment that has been fabricated by our society. In



these artworks, the sense of loneliness, scarcity, and pain is real. The hearts of the prisoners are displayed in a sensitive space of openness that demonstrates *survival* in its rawest form. ■

**Marissa Jezak** (b.1992, Harrison Township, MI) is an artist and writer based in Detroit. She earned a BFA in photography and critical theory from the College for Creative Studies in 2014. Marissa Jezak's writing has been featured in publications such as *Detroit Research* and *Runner*, and she has exhibited artworks internationally. Her ongoing research focuses on illness, trauma, and gender politics.

Andy Wynkoop,  
*Economic Redistribution*, 2012. Acrylic  
on canvas board.  
Collection of Janie  
Paul. Photo Marissa  
Jezak.



# Mickey Gallery: Five Years of Experimentation

**Mickey, Chicago, July 14–September 10, 2023**

by Michel Ségard

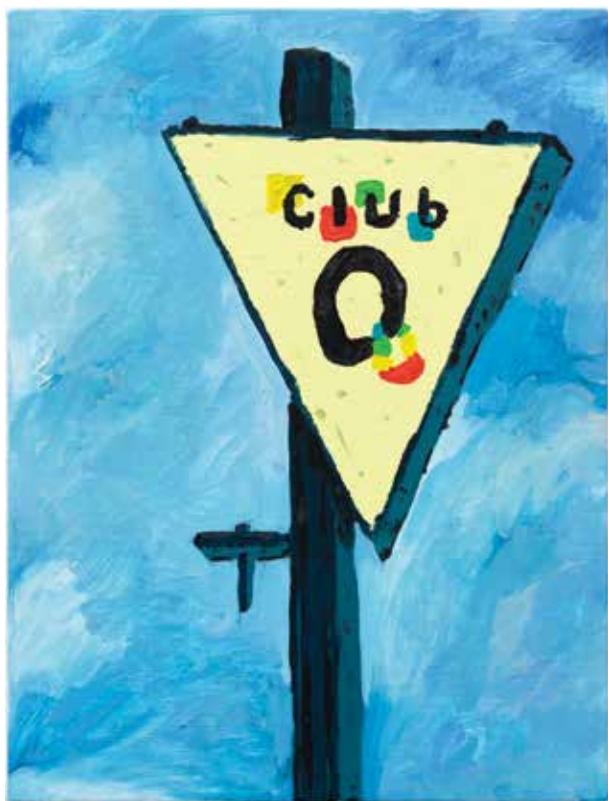
This gallery is new to this writer but has intrigued me since I heard of it. It is a gallery for emerging artists of a certain style. Its architecture has a Manhattan ambiance that I found a little odd for Chicago—extremely minimalist with small works widely spaced and unlabeled on stark white walls. The Gallery is housed in a renovated, modest sized, one-story commercial building in an (as yet) undeveloped commercial street.

Mickey shows mostly young artists who are still developing their style. This show, “A Summer Group Exhibition,” features artists that have shown at Mickey in the past five years as well as invited artists. It includes works by

Marcel Alcalá, Rachel Bos, Michael Garland Clifford, Bailey Connolly & Isabelle Frances McGuire, Michelle Grabner, Paul Heyer, Leonardo Kaplan, Michael Madrigali, Vanessa Maltese, Zach Meisner, Ryan Nault, Emma Pryde, Emma Robbins, Nick Schutzenhofer, Chloe Seibert, Joe W. Speier, Amy Stober, Neal Vandenberghe, and Kevin Weil.

Some of the work appears to be conceptually and/or technically unresolved. Closer inspection suggests that the “unfinished” character is often part of its style—a self-conscious nod to outsider art and a repudiation of the highly polished output of many high-priced art superstars. This strategy doesn’t always succeed—some of the work just looks slap-dash or sloppy and, therefore, insincere to the eyes of a more mature or uninitiated viewer. But, a younger, hip audience might be attracted to the seeming rebelliousness of that approach and might be unaware that it could be a marketing ploy.

That is not to say that the work at Mickey is necessarily sub-par. Marcel Alcalá’s *Club Q* is a crudely painted homage to the Colorado Springs LGBTQ nightclub where five patrons were killed in a hate crime mass shooting in 2022. Alcalá approximates the club’s logo as depicted in its road sign. The hurried and “casual” manner in which the piece



Marcel Alcalá, *Club Q*, 2023, Oil on linen. Photo: Mickey Gallery.

Michael Garland Clifford, *OJ Goes to Disney*, 2015. Oil on canvas. Photo: Mickey Gallery.

is painted suggests an emotional turmoil going on in the artist's mind over the event—something he could not endure for the time it would have taken to do a more precise rendering. The concept was set down; grieving done; don't dwell on what you can't change.

Across the room is a small painting by the late Michael Garland Clifford titled *OJ Goes to Disney* from 2015, the year before his death. The piece, all in blacks, grays, and beiges, depicts a four-fingered glove, very crudely rendered with a top and bottom border that is a not-quite Greek key motif. This motif appears in many of his paintings—all done in a casual, child-like style, and most having some allusion to death. Sadly, *OJ Goes to Disney* is not his

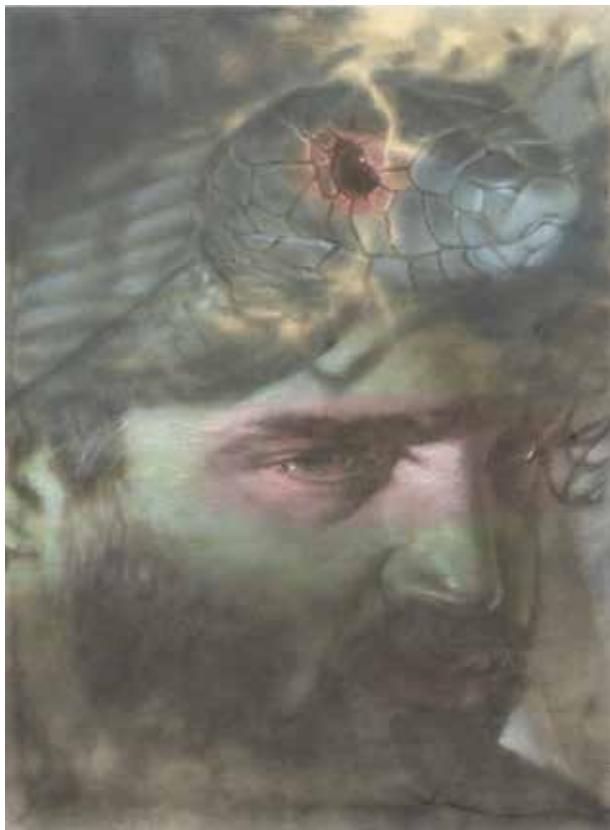


best work. It would have been more dramatic to include his piece *Michael Was Present*, done the same year. That piece indirectly foretells his untimely death at the age of 27 and, as such, is in the company of works like Larry Stanton's 1984 drawing *Untitled (Hospital Drawing) [I'm Going to Make It]* that was included in the ARTAIDSAMERICA Chicago show held in March of 2017. (See "ArtAIDS American Chicago: The Anguish of Remembering," *New Art Examiner*, Volume 31, Number 5, May/June 2017, pages 26.)

History rears its head again in the piece by Paul Heyer from 2022 titled *01203*. At first glance, it recalls the early paintings of Christopher Wool with its silver metallic-looking background and an image rendered mostly with black paint. A closer look reveals that Heyer's work is nothing like Wool's. First, the background is not metal but a glittery silver lamé fabric. The "image," the paths of a pair of butterflies collaged onto the painting, suggests the persistence of nature in an urban environment. Ultimately, the butterflies bring color and life into an environment that is uniformly gray.



Paul Heyer, *01203*, 2022. Oil and acrylic on silver lamé. Photo: Mickey Gallery.



Neal Vandenbergh, *Mickey*, 2023. Graphite, pastel, colored pencil, and acrylic on paper on aluminum panel. Photo: Mickey Gallery.

Neal Vandenbergh gives us an entirely different view of nature. His portrait, *Mickey*, includes a cobra's head inserted over the forehead of the subject (presumably the gallery owner). The cobra head—representing the goddess Wadjet—adorned the headdresses of Egyptian pharaohs. Rendered in graphite, pastel, colored pencil, and acrylic on paper, the piece has a very soft focus. Mostly muted greens and blues with some beige, the eyes of the cobra and the subject are depicted with warmer tones of orange and red so that they stand out. Is Vandenbergh commenting about the role of a gallery dealer in the lives of artists?

A piece that has overt religious symbolism is Emma Pryde's *Morning Star*. This acrylic and pencil drawing on paper at first seems derivative of Marc Chagall's paintings with floating bodies and pastel shades and, because of the wavy form of the figure, of Munch's *The Scream*. But this is actually a crucifix—a crucifix of an androgynous "Christ" with cross-shaped stigmata. There are two locks and keys

floating in the swirling universe that is the background. One lock is suspended from a beaded "chain" (a rosary?) while the other, winged and heart-shaped, seems to pair with a heart-shaped key hovering above it. Clearly, this image is meant to provoke reflection on the meaning and social effect of Christianity. I wish it had been executed more carefully. To my eye, the casual style diminishes the seriousness of its intellectual content.

Next to *Morning Star* is a piece by Chloe Seibert titled *Lovers*. It consists of two images, one above the other, of two creatures engaged in a passionate embrace. In the lower image, the figures, reading female, are depicted as grotesque with long, hairy, pierced ears, pointed teeth, and cat-like faces. In the upper image, a pair of hands are digging into the buttocks of the other being. It is a grim piece that made me think about the base and carnal nature of sex. Next to this on the adjacent wall is a much



Chloe Seibert, *Lovers*, 2023. Gouache on board. Photo: Mickey Gallery.

Nick Schutzenhofer, *Untitled*, 2018. Oil, pigment dispersions, and rabbit skin glue on paper on canvas. Photo: Mickey Gallery.

calmer *Untitled* image by Nick Schutzenhofer. Schutzenhofer depicts a serene female figure in green (with wings?) cradling the disembodied head of another sleeping female figure. While the narrative of the imagery is difficult to interpret, as his organic style hovers between the abstract and the surreal, it is a carefully executed work that has an undefined, compelling maternal quality about it.

Two wall sculptures offer dimensionality. *Girl Gaze* by Amy Stober is a cast basket whose handles are splayed out against the wall and whose bottom is covered with cloyingly cute images of girls, cats, and flowers. It offers a 1950s Reader's Digest version of femininity. What is it saying about today? The other sculptural work is easier on the mind. Zach Meisner's *Untitled*, a small-scale wall piece in muted olive tones, has elegant organic curves. A projection on the upper left has a perforation filled with a textured yet transparent substance. A random patina enlivens its surface. Overall, it soothes—easy on the eyes with no combative or provocative undertones. Only about eight inches tall, it looks diminutive by itself on the wall of the gallery. I would have liked to have seen it twice its size.

Two video works play with expectations. The one in the main room by Bailey Connolly and Isabelle Frances McGuire is titled *Dresses Without Women Archive 2021*:



Zach Meisner, *Untitled*, 2022. Acrylic paint/medium stretched over acrylic on MDF. Photo: Mickey Gallery.

Amy Stober, *Girl Gaze*, 2023. Cast polyurethane, polyurethane pigments, and acrylic. Photo: Mickey Gallery.





Bailey Connolly & Isabelle Frances McGuire, *Dresses Without Women Archive 2021: Video 2*, 2023. Digital video. Photo: Mickey Gallery.



Kevin Weil, *Site Gag*, 2023. 4k video, sound. Photo: Mickey Gallery.

*Video Two*. It documents what was going on during the installation of the show in the other smaller room. While I was there the first time, the television was on the floor and nothing was happening on the screen; I thought the work was not operational. On my second visit, the screen showed the momentary reflection of a worker in the gallery. Boring. The second video—located in the smaller room of the gallery—depicts a microwave oven with a timer set for 2 minutes and 40 seconds. The video starts when the timer starts and stops when the timer reaches 0. Cute, if not very serious.

Owing to its content, one piece stood out from the rest. Most of the works in this show have a social message as the driving force behind the work. Ryan Nault's *Some Cups* is about painting. It is a painting that "asks" how few strokes it takes to create an image of a glass and its transparency. This is the opposite of the Dutch still-lifes of the 16th and 17th centuries or the more contemporary work of Richard Estes, the hyperrealist. Nault's work is about human perception and the technique of painting—a sur-

rising position in this show that is otherwise mostly about social politics.

Mickey reminds me of Feature, the gallery run by Hudson in Chicago from 1984 to 1988 when he moved to New York. At Feature, artists could test their aesthetic on a discerning crowd of young artists and collectors. This is what Mickey does. Many of the artists' works are conceptually or technically incomplete or unresolved, but that is what makes the work interesting overall—the experimentation, the process of discovery, the unconventional viewpoints. There are far too few galleries like this that show works by emerging artists—works that are not necessarily safe. When you go to Mickey, you will not like everything you see, but you will be enlightened. ■

Michel Ségard is the Editor in Chief of the *New Art Examiner* and a former adjunct assistant professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is also the author of numerous exhibition catalog essays.



Ryan Nault, *Some Cups*, 2022. Gouache and pencil on cardboard mounted to panel in artist's frame. Photo: Mickey Gallery.

# “Hide And Seek”

New Work by Jeanne Bieri at Detroit Contemporary  
July 1–July 30, 2023

by K.A. Letts

Jeanne Bieri's deeply personal fiber works, collaged from vintage quilt fragments and U.S. army blankets collected from 20th century conflicts, were on view throughout July in her solo show "Hide and Seek" at Detroit Contemporary. The exhibition functions as a mini-retrospective—reflecting the artist's output over the last ten years. Overlaid with elaborate hand embroidery, they represent a "stitching together" of Midwestern lives and stories into a rich visual narrative of resilience and reclamation.

Bieri, who was awarded a Kresge Fellowship for Fine Art in 2017, has been a frequent prize winner for her fiber work, including the Detroit Scarab Club's Gold Medal in 2008, 2011 and 2014, as well as a Michigan Council for the Arts grant in 2000 for the study of historic regional quilts.

Discovering fine art in her thirties after moving to Detroit, Bieri brought a trove of memories from her western Michigan childhood to her newfound passion—memories that provide the heart of this emotionally resonant and visually rich body of work. Her father, who fought in World War II, returned with stories of devastation in post-war France, along with his well-worn army blankets. Her female relatives contributed an attitude of frugal make-and-mend, as well as a keen appreciation for the decorative potential of traditional quilt making. And Bieri's education in fine art at Wayne State University in the 1990s



*Mended*, 2016, approx. 48" wide x 65" high. Assorted army blankets, vintage cotton patchwork quilt fragment, rayon, wool, silk, cotton, army suture silk embroidery, repurposed dyed quilt lining. Photo K.A. Letts.



*Shirt Quilt*, 2017, approx. 75" wide x 64" high. Assorted army blankets, vintage cotton patchwork quilt fragment, rayon, wool, silk, cotton, army suture silk embroidery, repurposed dyed quilt lining. Photo K.A. Letts.

provided a sturdy conceptual scaffolding upon which to build a highly personal record of her life and the life of the community from which she came.

"I grew up on a farm in Hastings, Michigan, went to western Michigan University, taught in a two-room schoolhouse in Hopkins, Michigan, married, and moved to Detroit in 1972," she states. "In the 80s, I discovered art and art making and it was as if a curtain opened, and I was able to translate the visual world into my terms."

One of the early artworks in Bieri's collection of tapestries, *Mended*, demonstrates the idiosyncratic process with which she combines unconventional materials in esthetically satisfying ways, all done by hand and intuitively. Along the right side of the roughly 48" x 65" tapestry, is a wide, irregular swath salvaged from the ruins of a vintage crazy quilt, banded in jagged crimson, and surrounded by what might be an olive-green landscape—map-

like, almost—over which float meandering, stitched linear currents that resolve into concentric circles throughout the composition. Significantly, surgical suture silk salvaged from the Korean War is Bieri's preferred embroidery thread—here, the act of decoration functions as a ritual of healing.

Bieri describes her creative process as meditative, as she coaxes the quilt and blanket stories to the surface. She states: "My stories become threaded into theirs, to-



*The Dance*, 2022, approx. 8" (at top), 72" wide (at bottom) x 84" high. Army blankets silver lame applique, rayon, wool silk, cotton, army suture silk embroidery, repurposed dyed quilt lining. Photo K.A. Letts.

*Frog Quilt*, 2023, approx. 60" wide x 96" high.  
Army blankets, salvaged, pieced vintage fabrics,  
repurposed dyed quilt lining. Photo K.A. Letts.

gether into one. The chain stitching gives a sense of unity, a sturdiness, one I appreciate. The linear quality of the stitch defines the flatness of the surface and at the same time penetrates the fabrics, fusing the layers, fixed for all time."

*Shirt Quilt*, created at about the same time as *Mended*, is a slightly more organized composition. The top quarter of the piece is a row of vertically radiating stripes in two shades of army blanket green. Beneath, a line of salvaged checked quilt piecing gives way to more irregularly assembled fabrics that imply a topographical map. The chain stitching in *Shirt Quilt* is more densely worked than in *Mended* and begins to imply a ghostly figure of some kind.

In more recent work, the overall contours of the pieces have begun to reference articles of clothing. *The Dance*, shown in 2022 at the Elaine L. Jacob Gallery, takes on the character of a figure festively stepping across the wall. The recognizable leaf shapes in silver lamé within the composition reflect a looser, more gestural iteration of her process.

*Frog Quilt*, a tapestry from 2023 that was shown for the first time in "Hide and Seek" at Detroit Contemporary, illustrates the continued evolution of her art practice—away from the conventional quilt format and toward a free-form overall shape dictated by the internal elements of the artwork. Recognizable cutout reverse appliqués of



frogs and leaves circulate throughout the composition, interspersed with pieced circles and rows of stripes.

A group of small, monochrome paintings, based on vintage snapshots that Bieri has collected over the years at yard sales and thrift shops, share the wall with her fiber work. She does not know the subjects in the original photos but feels a need to care for these lost images. A number of the paintings, in particular, record a common sales practice of itinerant photographers in the 1950s, who would lead a pony around a suburban neighborhood to attract customers. Doting parents would commission a photo of their child on horseback along with a bonus pony ride.

Though the small paintings do not offer the lush and sensual pleasures of her tapestries, they represent another common through-line in her work. Bieri often acknowledges the value of humane care and her capacity for feeling the innate significance in ordinary lives, as well as for the shared experience that makes up a community. In both her fiber pieces and in these small pictures, Bieri honors the commonalities of our human species in all its quotidian particularity.

Bieri's work not only conserves, but actively finds, new beauty from the historic resonance of discarded materials and images. Scraps and remnants from the lived histories of G. I.'s and farm wives in America's heartland are combined in a poignant tapestry of memory. The dull greens and tans of army blankets from various conflicts, juxtaposed with shiny bright satins and meandering currents of embroidery, reveal a previously undiscovered, yet somehow familiar, country. ■

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(Left) *Buddy*, 2023, 10 x 8 inches. Oil on canvas. Photo K.A. Letts. (Right) *Butterfly*, 2023, 8 x 8 inches. Oil on canvas, Photo K.A. Letts

# “Dear Louise: A Tribute to Louise Fishman”

Cheim & Read, New York City, May 18–June 30, 2023

by Paul Moreno

Louise Fishman, born in 1939, passed away in the summer of 2021. Cheim & Read, who had a decades long relationship with the artist, mounted a beautiful exhibition of her paintings this past summer which was a bittersweet joy to see. I should share here that I really began my own career in the arts at Cheim & Read in 1998 as the front desk attendant. One of the first shows that I was at the gallery for was Fishman's 1998 exhibition there. I remember the first day she walked in with her small dog. She wore jeans and a plaid shirt; she was warm and charm-

ing and an immediate delight. I must also admit I was not at all familiar with her work but when I saw it, it changed my eye. And in the various times I would encounter her over the years, I would be touched by her wisdom, her desire to find meaning in the world, and her impulse to imbue meaning into her painting.

Though her work contains all the trademarks of Abstract Expressionism, I think it is far too simple to limit her work by calling it late AbEx, as it sometimes has been. In particular, if AbEx is thought of, spiritually, as a great

American movement reacting to the horrors of global war while edifying America as the new global cultural center, and physically, as a pushing of paint away from an impulse of representation toward paint's inherent formal capacities and limitations, the work of Louise Fishman honors these. However, maybe in an accidental spirit of the postmodern, she also teases out the loose threads of these notions. In doing so, she gently creates a space where a queer Jewish woman could express her unique experience of living in the world of our present century.

This gentleness however comes from strength. For example, the 2002 paint-



*MY CITY*, 2002. Oil on linen, 80 x 70 inches.  
© Louise Fishman. Photography: Alex Yudzon, Cheim & Read, New York.



*Night Of Watching #2*, 1988. Oil on linen, 19 x 32 inches. © Louise Fishman. Photography: Alex Yudzon, Cheim & Read, New York.

ing *My City* is a rigorous painting. This roughly six-and-a-half by five-and-a-half foot painting at first reads as a wheat-colored field upon which a rough grid of forest green and terra cotta has been overlaid. The long bold strokes of this grid are thick and consistent, and they tread over the rough underpainting never running out of fuel. But just like a city, we see that the grid is not an overlay, it is the structure in which one must make their way. Within each vaguely rectangular segment of the grid, the pale golden wheat color is painted in and even then, the occasional line of the grid crosses over it. I think this is the story of many a person here in New York; we try to fill in the grid with our selves and even then, when we feel we have made our mark, the city comes and erases it. When you look even closer, you find that the narrative I just described is all atop another underpainting. The bright yellow, the fiery red, the electric blue that one might naturally associate with 'the city' is bubbling underneath the comforting colors of the surface, as if Louise is telling us, the city is only ours when we make peace with it.

This sort of imaginative contemplation of a painting is probably quite out of fashion, and as I write this, I fear it is the kind of reading of a painting one dare not do aloud. However, I feel like it is a very

useful tool when looking at Louise Fishman's work. She is usually not the kind of artist who hits you over the head with a directive: look at this, think this, do that. Rather she is opening herself up to the viewer and it is our job to accept her invitation to do some thinking or feeling. For example, in *Night of Watching #2*, we are given a field composed of layers of nearly black vertical and horizontal marks. Specks of a medium gray appear bright against the dark grays that vary as they turn more reddish purple here, or more cool and earthy there. Some marks appear like brutalist architecture, others like distant hills. The upper left quadrant of the painting contains vertical translucent streaks that begin to pale and surround a gesture where the surface is suddenly gritty. Around the time this



*Credo*, 2015. Oil on linen, 72 x 88 inches. © Louise Fishman. Photography: Alex Yudzon, Cheim & Read, New York.



*Mine and Yours*, 1979. Oil on linen, 42 x 36 inches. © Louise Fishman. Photography: Alex Yudzon, Cheim & Read, New York.

painting was made, Louise was adding ashes that she had collected on a visit to Auschwitz to some of her paintings. If you know this, you wonder if those ashes are what this mark is. Whether it is or is not, you are struck with a gravitas of what the moment of that visit must have felt like, of what it was to bring those ashes and memorialize them, of even this moment today 35 years later when antisemitism is again so present.

A very different mood is struck in a large canvas (72 x 88 inches) from 2016, *Credo*. This joyful painting is an energetic collection of large bold strokes of mostly blues and greens. The composition is almost musical, the bottom quarter is a heavy horizontal bass line above which we have first, on the left, a bold square blast of a complex chord followed on the right by a sudden strident striated flourish. Then there is a counter melody. Just above the bass line, about a third of the way into the picture, a vertical streak starts to just turn pink. Then, in the bottom

right corner, almost a composition within itself, a more saturated structure of pink and white along with the aforementioned blues and greens appears to hold up the entire composition. And then, a rest.

Though I was quite enraptured with *Credo* on one visit to the show, a smaller painting from 1979, *Mine and Yours*, struck me as I was leaving. The painting is quite different from *Credo*. It is boxy and architectural and almost appears to be the view from within a room, looking out onto a terrace with an ornate railing. This idea of looking through a doorway was so strange as I had never thought of Louise's paintings being so representational. I assumed that this was something that only I was seeing, something that was not there. Then I thought that this painting was almost like the seed of *Credo*—that everything in *Credo* was already here nearly 40 years earlier and the artist was on a sort of spiritual journey from this painting to her *Credo*. Then I thought of this: One day in 2016, when I was in a particular moment of crisis, I ran into Louise on the street, near her home in Chelsea. She clearly saw I was in distress and asked what was happening and I told her. She hugged me and told me that a door was opening for me. She was profoundly accurate in that assessment. And that same profundity and generosity is in her work, for our taking. ■

**Paul Moreno** is an artist, designer, and writer working in Brooklyn, New York. He is a founder and organizer of the New York Queer Zine Fair. His work can be found on Instagram @bathedinafterthought. He is the New York City editor of the *New Art Examiner*.

# No Words Spoken: The Ordinary in the Works of Kyungwoo Chun

by Leandré D'Souza

*Editor's Note: Due to the length of this article, it will be published in the print version of the New Art Examiner in two parts. Part One is presented below, and Part Two will appear in the January 2024 issue. The entire essay is available online at our new website <http://www.thenewartexaminer.org/>.*

## PART ONE

Along the path to a Buddhist monastery lies a container filled with rocks of varying sizes. Next to it stands a table atop which rests a pile of red fabric. Pilgrims en route stop by. After a brief introduction with South Korean photographer and contemporary artist Kyungwoo Chun and his project team, each picks up a stone (or several of them) and places them inside a red fabric scrap. With a marker, the wrapped stones are

labelled with their names and dates of birth. Intrigued by the long and patient queue, my three-year-old and I join in. We are told that each person is invited to pick the stone(s) that mirror the weight of the pain they carry. My son pulls the heaviest one out of the barrel, almost too large to lift single-handedly. Folded and tied securely into the square patch, we inscribe his details. The stone, now hidden, joins the others. 3,000 people pour their pain into these tiny parcels. Chun arranges the marked bundles in a grid on to the main temple square. Against a radiant sky, the stones' burdens vanish beneath the ground that carries them.<sup>1</sup>

To relieve the heaviness of daily struggle, even for an instant, beckoned introspection and lingered with me. It also led to a decade long association with the artist. This resulted in a series of provocations in multiple contexts in India. Chun was recently in Goa, a state on the south-

A table bench is constructed in the middle of CST Terminus that attracts over 3 million commuters daily. *Happy Journey*, 2015, public art project,[en]counters 2015—*Spaces in Transition*, ArtOxygen, CST Terminus, Mumbai. Photograph by Kyungwoo Chun, courtesy of the artist.



Recordings of children in dialogue with nature. *Resonance*, 2023, *Songs Without Lyrics*, Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts. Photograph by Kyungwoo Chun, courtesy of the artist.

western coast of India, where we launched his latest solo project at Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts.<sup>2</sup> *Songs without Lyrics*<sup>3</sup> explores alternatives for lyrics with sounds that have no text. The works in the show make visible what is often not seen or as yet unknown, stretching our capacities for listening to sounds that are invented, and generating unimaginable possibilities for communication.

### Mapping the Essence of Time

The human subject is a central motif in Chun's practice. As a photographer, he is preoccupied with the superimposition of time that is inscribed into the image from an extended exposure. For the definition of photography, he draws from the 14th century Korean word *Sa-Jin* that was reserved for portraiture. The word meant depicting truth or soul, and therefore transcending the reproduction of the real. It is intended in this case, instead, as an "exchange of souls."<sup>4</sup> In Chun's portraits, he constructs a studio setting in which sitters pose or perform a task for a prescribed duration—a few minutes, an hour, a full day. With the opening of the shutter, photographer and subject embark on a journey. A relational exchange evolves. What we see in the image is a hazy memory of the moments that were spent together. By enabling the experience of real time, consciousness awakens.

This process spreads beyond the photographic record and spills into video, performance, across several geographies, demographics, and social divisions. Fundamental to Chun's research<sup>5</sup> are the study of time as brittle, as caught between the present and what has just passed and is thus absent, and its asphyxiating bond with memory. He is concerned with how we interact in this world, how we relate to ourselves and others. Encouraging social cohesion, he creates situations inside which people (mostly strangers) enter into a framework conditioned by a set of

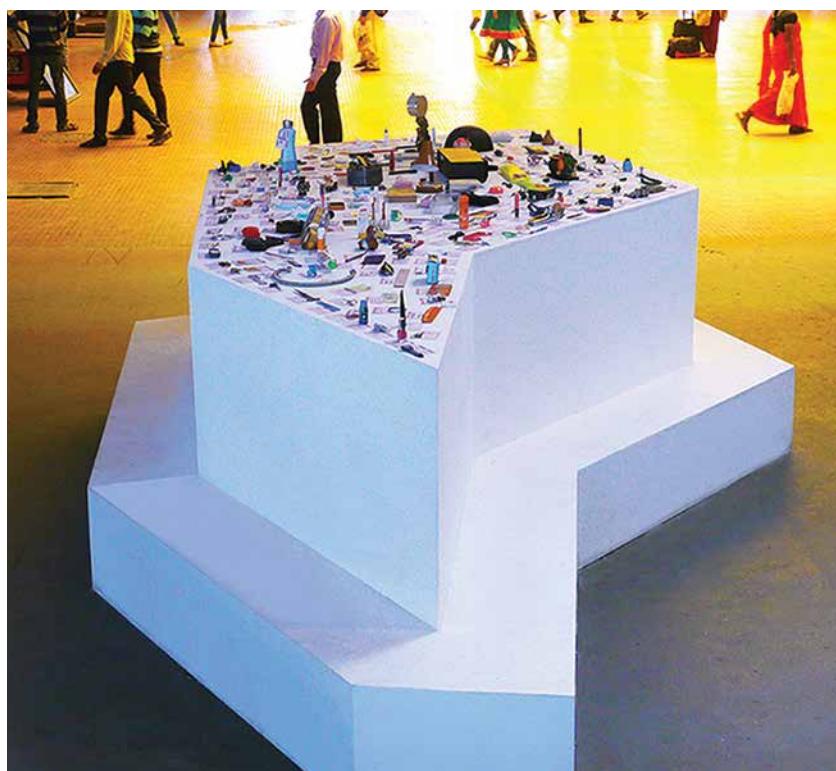


instructions and actions. Like an alchemist, individuals are thrown together which provoke intimacies shown through physical connection. Inside the void, something shifts. The ontological experience moves from the sight to the touch. The body loosens, is freed into a state of sheer abandon and opens itself to new imaginations.<sup>6</sup> Sensations of love and compassion flourish. The human soul starts to flutter.

With utmost perfection, Chun intuitively pieces the ingredients together and steps back, allowing time, space (void), and the vibrations that simmer between them to simultaneously morph. In the interim between creation and dissolution, surfaces dissolve. These transient encounters are repeated, over and over, till they arrive at the ritualistic. Chun is testing the nature of being and existence. Within this deeper philosophical inquiry, participants probe the meaning and experience of time. Through the impulse of emotion, a new language arises. The subjects, in their union, are no longer in isolation but are joined together. The residues of these experiments form a landscape, mapping human interactions and the memory of existence.

Activated through the dialectic between the absence of what has passed and presence, a tension is triggered.<sup>7</sup> A reserve of memories flows into the empty vessel, stimulated by the interdependence of beings. Each present moment crumbles into the recesses of memory. But rather than widen the distance between the self that is now unfamiliar and what exists in real time, the interconnectedness grows closer. Andrey Tarkovsky states "Time cannot vanish without trace for it is a subjective, spiritual category, and the time we have lived settles in our soul as an experience placed within time."<sup>8</sup> Thus, as the psyche transitions, enabling the exposure of the inner self, experience turns limitless.

As witnesses and participants in these investigations into non-linear processes of memory and time, we begin to understand that the core of Chun's process is to push us into a state of nothingness. Through embodied experience, through our fundamental connection with others, we chance upon acts of care. It is in our very essence. We are instinctively predisposed to forming meaningful relations where we can share love, sorrow towards or with others. It is reciprocal and can only be imagined as a collective act.



The CST Terminus transforms into a repository of objects and a peoples' archive. *Happy Journey*, 2015, public art project, [en]counters 2015 – *Spaces in Transition*, ArtOxygen, CST Terminus, Mumbai. Photograph by Kyungwoo Chun, courtesy of the artist.

Care also treads between devotion and burden. Throughout these ephemeral and constructed settings, people unknown to each other, enter into a state of mutual dependence. With bodies heavy against each other, they determine the level of comfort or dis-ease that will transpire. As Chun remarks, "We're strangers only for as long as we feel estranged. Even if it's someone you've only just met, you may feel comfortable together or you may remain strangers—although remaining strangers is something that makes us anxious."<sup>9</sup>

Chun pushes the boundaries of authorship, maintaining a distance, but his presence is still imprinted and perceived. Chun dissipates hierarchies and separation between artist and participants, as well as between the subjects with cutting-edge work in the relational.

The intent is not to represent individual identities (selves), but to make visible the "existence of a phenomenon."<sup>10</sup> This is manifested in the concentration on the basics. The exterior is stripped bare and what remains in the photograph/video/performance is the movement of time—what occurred between Chun and the person(s) involved and the conversations that evolved, even if not one word was said.

The works, in amorphous states, give a sense of something that happened, a sort of incompleteness—time capsules where its rhythms are expanded and slowed down.<sup>11</sup>

Travellers at the station are asked to share with the artist an object that belongs to them. *Happy Journey*, 2015, public art project, [en] counters 2015 – *Spaces in Transition*, ArtOxygen, CST Terminus, Mumbai. Photograph by Kyungwoo Chun, courtesy of the artist.



## The Emotional Value in the Relational

In early 2015, Chun interceded in Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST),<sup>12</sup> its main railway station, in a project called *Happy Journey*.<sup>13</sup> The terminus site is particularly hectic, busy, and challenging for an artistic intervention. It receives more than one million commuters daily, always in a hurry, rushing off trains on their way to work or to catch their return journey home. Chun resolved to tackle this hindrance by placing a white table-bench sculpted in the form of CST at one of the stations' platforms. People were invited to rest while waiting for their trains. During this stretched time, he would invite commuters to share with him personal objects: a rabbit's foot for good karma, a child's toy chewed by his dog, an x-ray, a precious bangle from birth. Anything personal. He only posed one challenge: commuters had to think about his request, go where they were headed and then return with the selected object. The artist wanted the people he met to invest some time and consciously decide to be a part of the project. By sharing a piece of themselves with the artist, they were intentionally giving a part of their lives to the work. Without them, the blank surface and shape of the sculpture would not have had any meaning. Each object shared was marked with the name of the person who gave it, the place from where it originated, and the distance it had travelled to arrive at the site. The tagged object was then placed on the sculpture. What emerged was a silent, objectual archive of stories of workers and commuters, city-dwellers who are not part of the city's dominant discourse, but very much part of its economic backbone.

Time becomes an important factor in the work; it is the occasion which allows the encounter to happen, and in its duration, relationships are established. Chun asked rushing commuters what was lacking in their lives. It was time. By being present at the site, speaking to people, listening to stories of hopes, dreams, failures, wishes, and the inter-relations that emerged out of the work, both Chun and the 'participants' were left with a bond. In some cases, this

turned into participation. In other instances, they were both left with the memory of their encounter. The artist played on notions of space, time, and memory as he subtly persuaded the participants into thinking about the encounter, the absurdity of his request and the significance of their mindful involvement. In this case, value was found in the ordinary object, in the memory it was connected to, and in the relational experience which generated it.<sup>14</sup> ■

*Part Two to be continued in the January 2024 issue of the New Art Examiner.*

**Leandré D'Souza** is the curator and program director at Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts. She is the founder of ArtOxygen, a collective aimed at curating and producing art projects in open spaces. From 2010 to 2018, she organized [en] counters, a festival dealing with issues affecting the everyday life of Mumbai. She was invited to curate the participation of Indian and international artists at the biennial Haein Art Project in South Korea in 2013 and curated the 2015/16 & 2018 editions of Sensorium at Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts. In 2014, she received an award for Culture and Change from the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development

### Footnotes

1. *The Weight of Pain* was realized as part of the second edition of the Haein Art Project, a biennial public art project held in 2013 in South Korea. Initiated by a group of Buddhist monks from the Haeinsa Temple, a UNESCO world heritage site and repository of the Tripitaka Koreana, the most complete collection of Buddhist texts worldwide, the project aimed to investigate the connections between contemporary art and Buddhism.

More than 30 contemporary artists from across the world were invited to explore the theme of MAUM, which in Korean refers to exploring the idea of the heart and mind. The participating artists created site-specific projects as they interpreted the theme and its various declinations that allude to healing, communication, energies, relations, and interactions between people. <http://www.kyungwoochun.de/data/public/public.php?id=public-05>.

2. Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts is a not-for-profit initiative founded by Dipti and Dattaraj V. Salgaocar. Since its inception in 2009, its vision has been to preserve Goa's creative legacy, to encourage cultural growth in India, and to promote a range of cultural activities across various media, geographies, and time frames.

Over the years, the Foundation has worked towards cultivating a program that brings together a plurality of voices and practitioners from various creative disciplines.

With the patronage of Isheta Salgaocar, the Foundation has evolved into a bridge connecting Goa to India and the world, enabling the addressing of questions concerning the contemporary social and cultural environment, reflected across the spectrum of its work.

Today, exhibition formats have expanded and are directed towards generating a laboratory of ideas that address questions concerning sustainability, redistribution of resources, and ecology with greater urgency.

The Foundation's pedagogical programmes include the **Suna-paranta Art Initiator Lab** (a mentorship programme that is practice-based, open to creative professionals from various streams and offers them the opportunity to refine their practices through innovative learning (and un-learning) methodologies); the **Artist-in-Residence Lab** (research-based and offers a space for artists/curators/writers/researchers to critically examine existing practices through exchange and dialogue); **Fellowship Grants** (for cultural operators producing scholarly work in various creative fields); **Emerging Artist Grants** (contributes to the advancement of research, practice and production); **Art & Theatre School** (places children at the forefront of learning and thinking where they become the protagonists in open and process-based art and theatre practices). [www.sgcfa.org](http://www.sgcfa.org).

- 3 *Songs Without Lyrics* marked the first solo show of Kyungwoo Chun in Goa, India. It began with a series of collaborations with the Ektaal Children's Choir, and it also presented in-situ, photographic, video, and performance works. [https://sgcfa.org/Kyungwoo\\_Chun\\_Brochure\\_2023.pdf](https://sgcfa.org/Kyungwoo_Chun_Brochure_2023.pdf).
- 4 Kyungwoo Chun reveals: "I believe that photographing people always involves an exchange of souls up to a point and that this exchange is singular and unique to each photograph. You sense the energy inherent in both space and time and create an image that is both." Susanne Pfeffer, "Sometimes we forget we're alive...", Interview with Kyungwoo Chun, Hatje Cantz, 2005, <http://www.kyungwoochun.com/texts-pdf/susanne-pfeffer.pdf>.
- 5 Lori Wike, "Photographs and Signatures: Absence, Presence, and Temporality in Barthes and Derrida," in *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, Issue 3, 2000, p 1-9, [https://www.rochester.edu/in\\_visible\\_culture/issue3/IVC\\_iss3\\_Wike.pdf](https://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/issue3/IVC_iss3_Wike.pdf).
- 6 "Western's love tradition has mostly located love as an experience connected to sight, and as such as somewhat unattainable. However here love is 'allowed' and as such enables us to touch things. It is an ontological experience that moves from the eye ('you'll see the sun') to a meeting enabled by touch. Seeing become touching, and humanity is accordingly freed: 'you are allowed to love,'" Yoav Ronel, "'Exiled From All Gregarity': Profane Love, Poetics and Political Imagination In Barthes and Agamben," in *TheoryNOW Journal of Literature, Critique, and Thought*, p 3, [https://www.academia.edu/38324007/\\_Exiled\\_From\\_All\\_Gregarity\\_Profane\\_Love\\_Poetics\\_and\\_Political\\_Imagination\\_in\\_Barthes\\_and\\_Agamben](https://www.academia.edu/38324007/_Exiled_From_All_Gregarity_Profane_Love_Poetics_and_Political_Imagination_in_Barthes_and_Agamben).
- 7 While, as mentioned earlier, intentionality in this sense is not an issue that Barthes takes up, the presence of the referent is an important subject for both writers. In fact, one could easily substitute "photograph" for "signature" in the following passage from Derrida: "By definition, a written signature [photograph] implies the actual or empirical non-presence of the signer. But, it will be claimed, the signature also marks and retains his having-been present in a past now or present [maintenant] which will remain a future now or present [maintenant], thus in a general maintenant, in the transcendental form of presentness [maintenance].... In order for the tethering to the source to occur, what must be retained is the absolute singularity of a signature event [photographic-event] and a signature-form [photographic-form]: the pure reproducibility of a pure event." Lori Wike, *Photographs and Signatures: Absence, Presence, and Temporality in Barthes and Derrida*, ibid, p 4-5.
- 8 "Time can vanish without trace in our material world for it is a subjective, spiritual category. The time we have lived settles

in our soul as an experience placed within time." Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair, University of Texas Press, 1987, p 58, [https://monoskop.org/images/d/dd/Tarkovsky\\_Andrey\\_Sculpting\\_in\\_Time\\_Reflections\\_on\\_the\\_Cinema.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/d/dd/Tarkovsky_Andrey_Sculpting_in_Time_Reflections_on_the_Cinema.pdf).

- 9 Elucidating on the relational element that emerges through situational performance, Chun comments: "We're strangers only for as long as we feel estranged. Even if it's someone you've only just met, you may feel comfortable together or you may remain strangers—although remaining strangers is something that makes us anxious." Susanne Pfeffer, *Sometimes we forget we're alive ...*, Interview with Kyungwoo Chun, ibid.
- 10 When asked about the phrase, "I photograph not what I see, but what I believe exists," Chun replies, "I'm much less interested in the search for motifs, or rather in my visual environment, than I am in the idea of what would be possible. Making the existence of a phenomenon visible may be laborious, but it's always worthwhile. Of course, photography has to do with direct reality, yet it also has to do with the belief that there are many different ways of viewing the same thing. Believing really is seeing." Susanne Pfeffer, *Sometimes we forget we're alive ...*, Interview with Kyungwoo Chun, ibid.
- 11 "Chun ... makes time portraits: portraits of time using slow, minute-long exposures of people. The portrait becomes a kind of vera icon—not of the person, but of lasting time, of appearance; not of individuality, but of the state of being human, of existence in general: typified intuitive space versus linguistic, formalized identification." Urs Stahel, *Travelling Faces, Circulating History*, Kyungwoo Chun-Thousands, Hatje Cantz, 2008.
- 12 The Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, formerly known as Victoria Terminus Station, is a UNESCO World Heritage site in Mumbai that serves over 3 million passengers daily.
- 13 Founded in 2009, ArtOxygen (ArtO2) is a Mumbai-based art initiative curating and producing art projects in urban spaces. From 2010-2018, it organized [en]counters, a yearly art project in public spaces exploring issues related to Mumbai's urban landscape and encouraging creative ideas & actions that transform the city's everyday life. *Spaces in Transition*, 2015, was the 5th edition of the project that focused on the action of moving and commuting in Mumbai's transportation network. A total of twelve projects were realized by Indian and international practitioners. Each prompted a reaction to the following questions: how is Mumbai's landscape perceived by commuters; How can trains, buses, cabs and rickshaws be turned into places for temporary sociability; and how can the suspended period between departure and destination become an occasion to critically re-think urban and public spaces? The aim of the project was to promote the use of public transportation by making commuting/moving in the city a more enjoyable activity—generate a sense of civic pride, belonging and of ownership; to trigger collective imagination and critical thinking; and to provide wider accessibility to contemporary arts by using urban transportation networks as a shared platform. *Spaces in Transition* was realized with the support of the Prince Claus Fund, under the award for Cultures for Change. <https://youtu.be/xdO23myGpn0?si=Khkz0WuRCZ7j6ZBA>.
- 14 In this approach, the life of the work is contingent to the will of the subject, who is no longer just a spectator, but a partner, as s/he determines how s/he wishes to be represented. This confuses the stratification of each person having a pre-defined task and specific way of doing or seeing. And the only way this disturbance can be recurrent, and to determine whether equality is indeed possible is through repeated experimentation. This also gives way to new kinds of knowledge production, based on the intellectual capacity of each individual that is unleashed when encountering and engaging with the artistic process. "Aesthetic experience eludes the sensible distribution of roles and competences which structures the hierarchical order", Jacques Rancière, *Thinking Between Disciplines: An Aesthetics of Knowledge*, Jon Roffe, trans, Parrhesia, 1, 2006, p 4.

# Worth a Thousand Words—Graphic Biographies of Artists' Lives

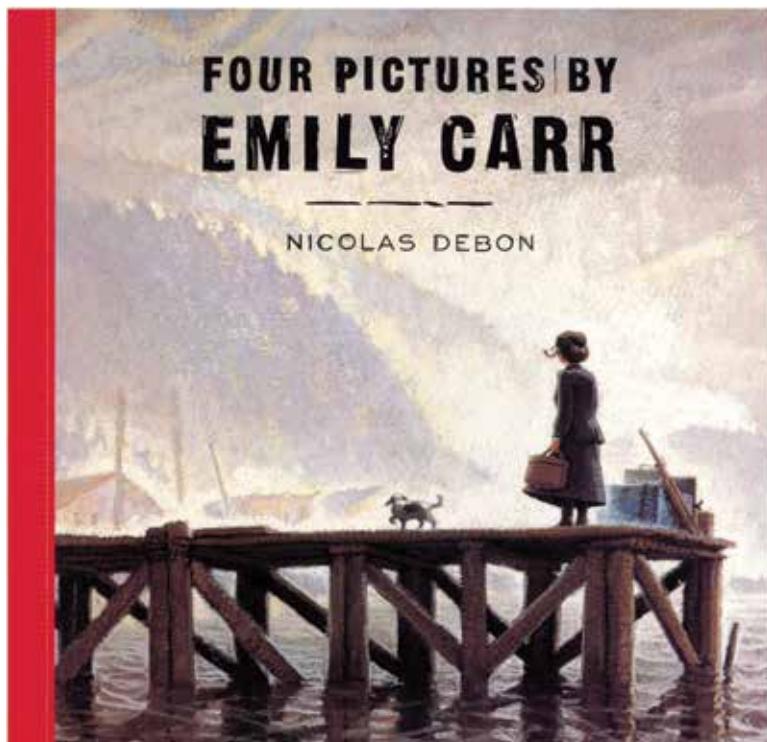
by Sean Bieri

**A**s a lifelong fan of comics, my college years could not have come at a better time. In the late 1980s, the independent comic book scene was exploding. My housemate introduced me to his stash of *Raw* magazines, the cutting-edge "comix" anthology that first serialized Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. From there I went on to discover *Love & Rockets*, Acme Novelty Library, and dozens more artistically mature comics, some hefty enough to merit the still new label "graphic novels," that gestured toward a future for comics beyond their super-heroic, kid-stuff reputation.

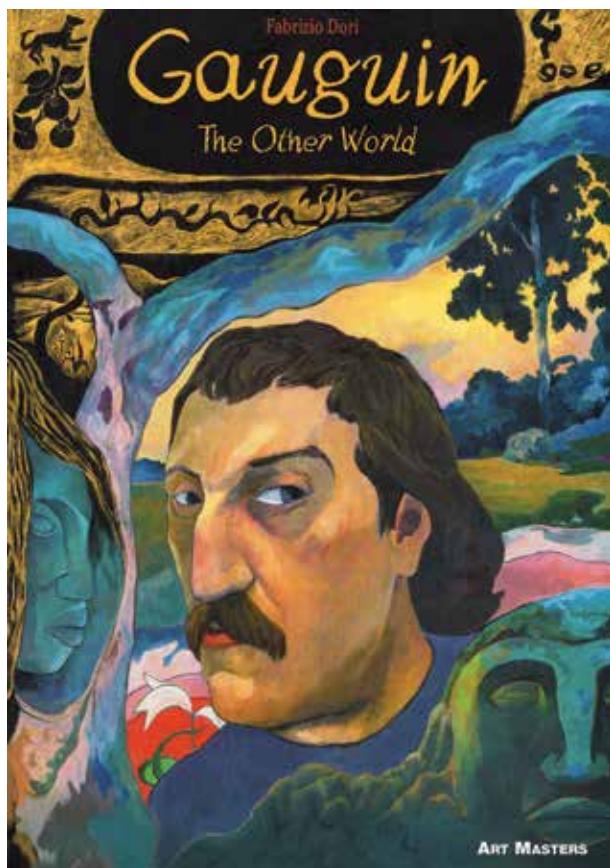
That future eventually arrived and now even the blandest chain bookstore carries a wide selection of comics for all ages. However, that hard-won term "graphic novel" has become more confusing than ever since many of the best new comics are not fiction at all but biographies or memoirs. In particular, there has been a spate of graphic biographies in recent years that take fine artists as their subjects. (Ironic, perhaps, since us "comix" partisans always insisted that cartoonists were serious artists too!) There are almost too many to list—Jean-Michel Basquiat, Frida Kahlo, and Niki de Saint Phalle each have no fewer than two comics biographies devoted to them—but here is a round-up of some of my favorites.

From 2003, an early entry in the genre is Nicolas Debon's *Four Pictures by Emily Carr*

*Carr*—a brief but compassionate overview of the life of the late-blooming Canadian painter whose luminous landscapes have drawn comparisons to Georgia O'Keeffe's. The book comprises four chapters: Carr's encounter in her 20s with the Native people of Vancouver; her frustrated attempt to study art in Paris; her rediscovery at age 56 with her first major exhibition and her introduction to the artists of the famed Group of Seven; and her later years working out of a trailer in the woods, where she made some of her greatest paintings. Debon is a French-born illustrator, and his simply drawn characters—Carr's face is rendered with dots for eyes and a dash for a mouth—reflect his childhood love of *Tintin* and other European comics. His pastels drawings suggest Carr's own work, and the



Nicolas Debon, *Four Pictures by Emily Carr*, 2003, book cover. Photo: Amazon.com.



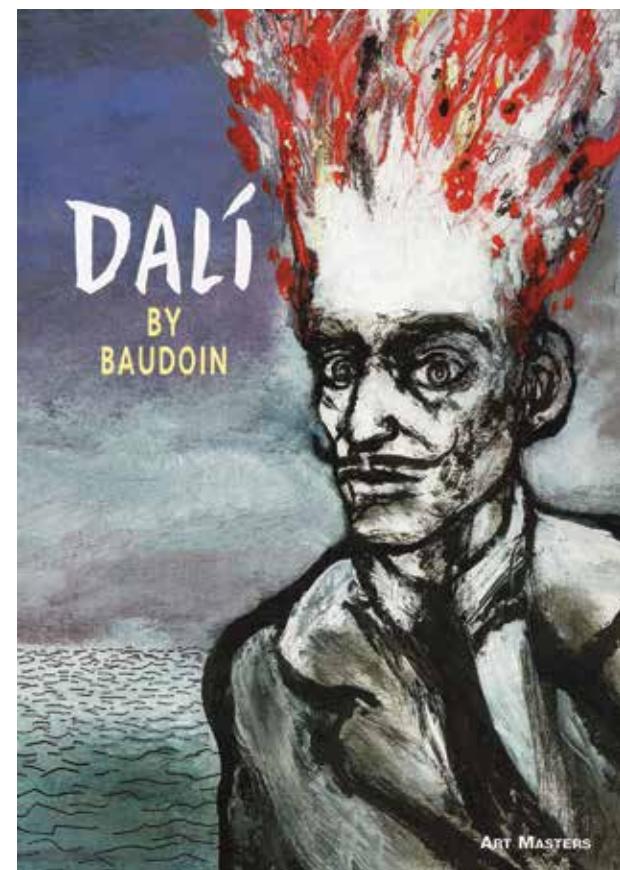
Fabrizio Dori, *Gauguin: The Other World*, 2016. 141 pp. Photo: SelfMade Hero.

moments he chooses to illustrate trace the painter's life elegantly and succinctly.

Fabrizio Dori's art in *Gauguin: The Other World* also beautifully evokes his subject's work, and he quotes a number of Paul Gauguin's paintings directly. Dori switches between flat, saturated color when depicting the painter's time in Tahiti and woodcut-style graphics with a limited palette for Gauguin's voyage into the afterlife. Gauguin dies early in the book and relates his life story in retrospect to his guide into the beyond—one other than the Spirit of the Dead, the otherworldly entity watching over the prone nude girl called Teura in the artist's best-known work. Gauguin is given the floor for most of the book, allowed to relate his struggles and motivations from his own perspective. Readers looking for an unequivocal critique of the artist's transgressions—his abandonment of his family in Denmark, his romanticization of the Polynesian "primitives," and his marriage to the 13-year-old Teura—may be left frustrated. The Spirit of the Dead, like the

other island deities, is bemused by Gauguin, who "like all white men... had a hole in his breast... where evil thoughts are born." He grants the painter, in his final moments, "the possibility of leaving this life without regrets" by choosing to stay in Tahiti rather than return to France and his eventual ruin. But Gauguin, by his own admission selfish and merciless in his pursuit of freedom, has no regrets; what he sought was "on a painting's surface, not in reality," and having found it in his art, he dies, by Dori's telling, in relative peace.

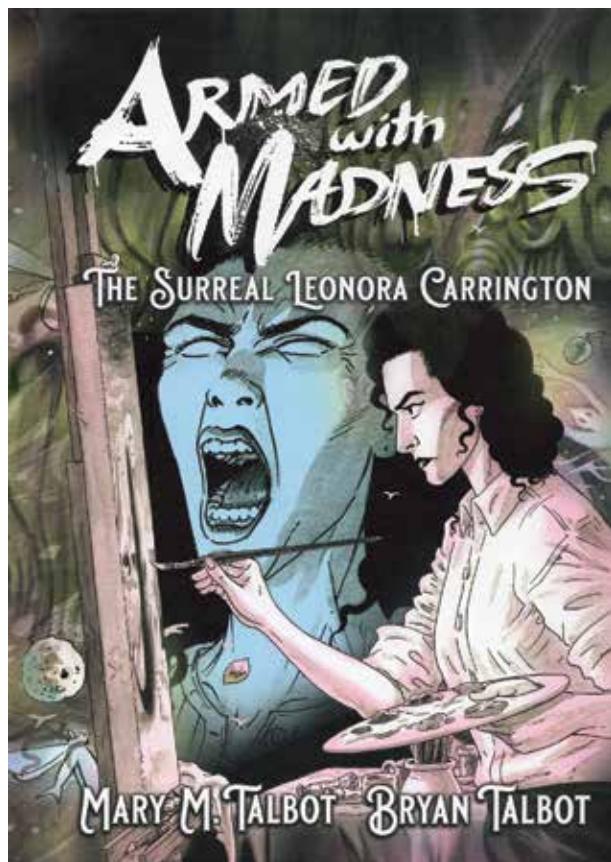
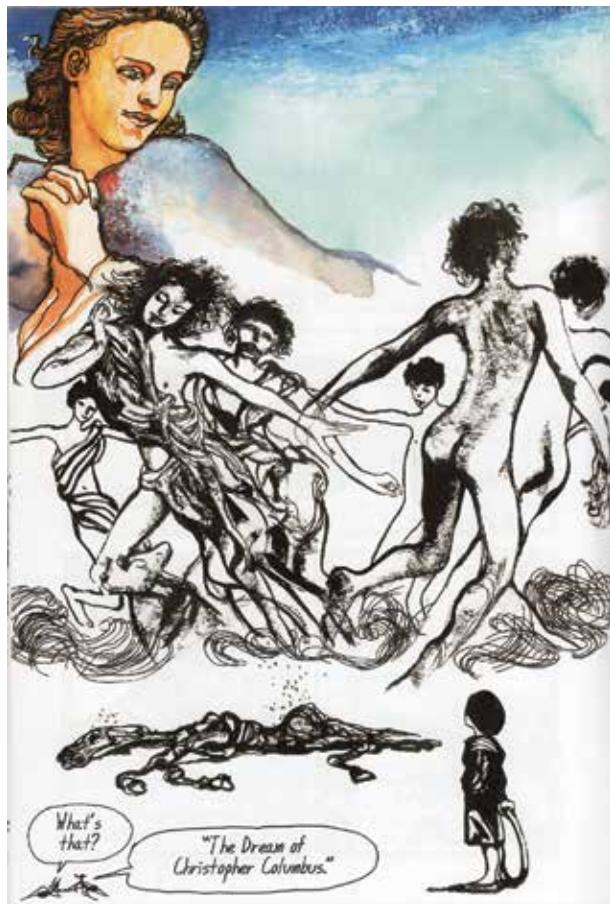
Edmond Baudoin's art has little in common stylistically with that of Salvador Dalí. As unreal as Dalí's scenes are, they are rendered with precision and polish, where Baudoin's ink drawings are loose, brushy, and expressive. He does mimic Dalí's collaging of multiple images and



Edmond Baudoin, *Dalí*, 2016. 159pp. Photo: SelfMade Hero.

Edmond Baudoin, *Dalí*, 2016. Image from the text. Photo: SelfMade Hero.

symbols, either to draw connections between events and ideas, or to reveal the inner thoughts of characters. Baudoin introduces two guides, a young man and woman, who discuss Dalí's evolution from literal *enfant terrible* to art world titan and eccentric celebrity, as they stroll through pages that swirl with images from the painter's life. There's a searching, probing quality to the narrative: our guides are often interrupted, supplemented, questioned, or corrected by passers-by, a Greek chorus of ants straight out of *Un Chien Andalou*, the cartoonist, or by Dalí himself. While the book is predominantly black-and-white, vivid splashes of color are employed for Baudoin's depictions of Gala, Dalí's indispensable wife and muse, to convey her effect on the painter's psyche. In one six-panel sequence, depicting Dalí's first meeting with Picasso, Baudoin suc-



cinctly illustrates the pioneering modernist's influence on the younger artist: for three panels, Picasso silently jabs his finger at some of his own paintings, before showing Dalí to the door. "Got it?" he asks Dalí at last. "Got it," Dalí replies. When the Surrealist's art shifts late in life to a "return to classicism," Baudoin's approach changes too. In a wonderfully meta move, he yanks his female narrator out of the fantastical scenes from earlier in the book and into his more mundane studio, to her chagrin. She critiques the art on his drawing board: "Your interpretations (of Dalí's paintings) are very eccentric. Betrayals." "That's because I'm crazy," Baudoin tells her, "just like him."

Cartoonist Bryan Talbot's career stretches back to the 1960s underground scene. His *Adventures of Luther Arkwright*, a trippy tale of a dimension-hopping psychic warrior, is one of the earliest British graphic novels. The strange story, then, of a psychologically troubled British

Mary M. Talbot and Bryan Talbot, *Armed with Madness: The Surreal Leonora Carrington*, 2023. 143 pp. Photo: SelfMade Hero.

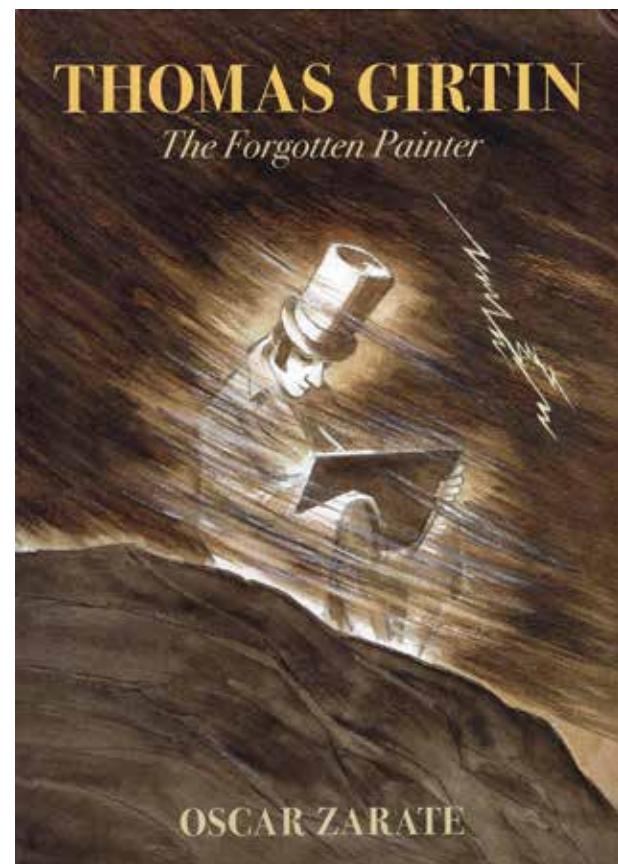


*Armed with Madness: the Surreal Leonora Carrington*, image from the text. Photo: SelfMade Hero.

Surrealist who kicked against the constraints of polite society and occasionally transformed into a wild animal is right up Talbot's alley ("I'm mostly a horse," Leonora Carrington announces on page one by way of introduction, "but sometimes a hyena."). Written by Bryan's wife and frequent collaborator Mary M. Talbot, *Armed With Madness: The Surreal Leonora Carrington* follows its subject from a creative but troubled childhood (her mother nurtures her artistic pursuits, while her domineering father slowly morphs into a fuming steampunk robot), to a life-changing encounter in college with the work of Max Ernst (standing before one of his collages, Carrington's chest bursts into flames), then to a more intimate encounter with Ernst himself (he becomes a bird to her horse as they make love in midair). Leonora is soon running with an all-star cast of 1930s modernists, but internecine political squabbles, Ernst's jealous wife, the specter of impending

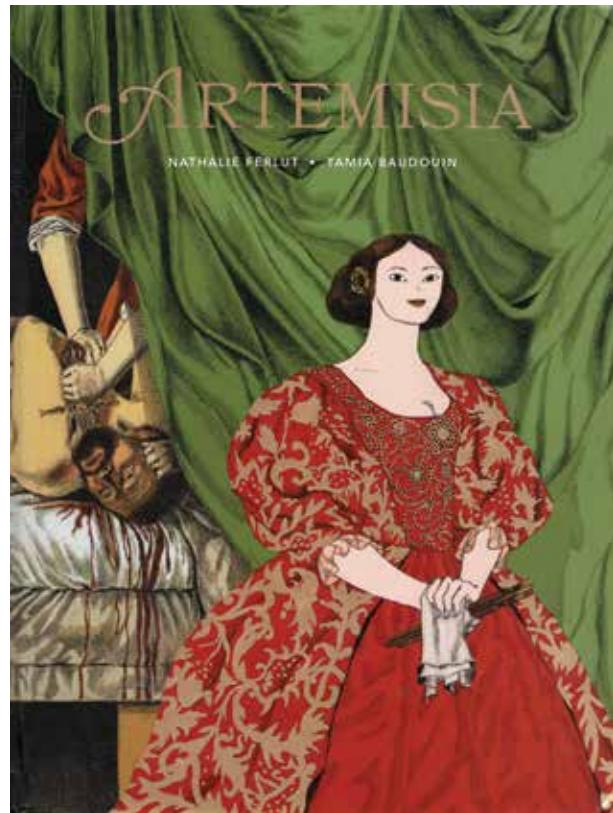
war, and Carrington's deteriorating mental health all conspire to disrupt the artistic idyll. As Carrington's grip on reality falters, Talbot's pages become claustrophobic collages of frog-faced caregivers, buzzing insects, syringes, and swastikas, bathed in blood red and acid green washes. Talbot's art stabilizes when Carrington does, after she slips away from a sanatorium and makes her way to New York to escape the war. Carrington lived to be 94; the book closes with the elderly artist dispensing advice to a small group of earnest students: "People over seven and under seventy are very unreliable," she tells them, "especially if they're not cats."

Thomas Girtin may be the most obscure artist yet to receive the graphic bio treatment, but his is over twice as long as most of the books discussed here. That is because

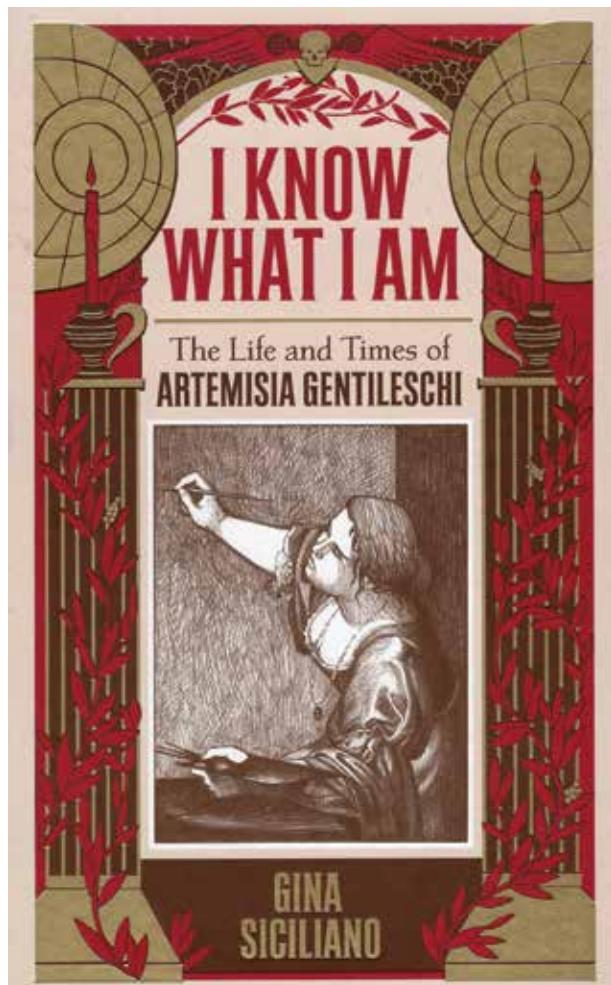


Oscar Zarate, *Thomas Girtin: The Forgotten Painter*, 2023. 392pp. Photo: SelfMade Hero.

Nathalie Ferlut and Tamia Baudouin, *Artemisia*, 2021. 98pp. Photo: Beehive Books.



much of *Thomas Girtin: The Forgotten Painter*, by Argentinian cartoonist Oscar Zarate, is devoted to the stories of three old friends in modern day London, amateur artists who meet for drinks every month after a figure drawing session. Sarah is a devout Catholic and still lives in the shadow of a more ambitious art school friend. Arturo is a cynical refugee from the Argentinian coup of the 1960s who suffers from survivor's guilt. Fred has been fired from his job for poking his nose into workplace corruption and is being followed by thugs intent on reburying the dirt he has dug up. It is Fred who first becomes obsessed with



the life story of Girtin, a little-known 18th-century British landscape watercolorist whose only rival at the time was his friend J.M.W. Turner. Soon, Fred's friends become intrigued by Girtin too. Each latches on to a different aspect of the painter's story: Sarah responds to his emotional, even spiritual, approach to depicting nature; Arturo ponders his revolutionary politics and associations with the aristocracy; and Fred literally follows in the artist's footsteps, making a pilgrimage to the chilly mountains of Wales to commune with Girtin's spirit. Standing on a cliff where Girtin once stood, Fred asks the storm clouds growing overhead, "Why is it that when I look at your art, I feel I have all the answers?" Zarate illustrates the book with subdued watercolor over deft pencils, switching to sepia tones for flashbacks to Girtin's life. The painter was just 27 when he died. Near the end of the book, the still-young ghost of Girtin speaks with the elderly shade of his old friend Turner, who admits that without Girtin, "I doubt I would have turned out the way I did."

Artemisia Gentileschi, the 17th-century Italian painter whose fame has justifiably been on the rise in recent

Gina Siciliano, *I Know What I Am: The Life and Times of Artemisia Gentileschi*, 2019. 279pp.  
Photo: Fantagraphics Books.



Gina Siciliano, *I Know What I Am: The Life and Times of Artemisia Gentileschi*, 2019. Image from text. Photo: Fantagraphics Books.

years, has two graphic biographies to her name. Nathalie Ferlut and Tamia Baudouin's *Artemisia* is the slimmer of the two, illustrated in loose pencil drawings enhanced by digital coloring in a warm Baroque palette. The fictionalized narrative follows Artemisia from her youth as a student of her painter father Orazio; through the trial of family friend Agostino Tassi, who raped Artemisia when she was 18, an event that has become the most salient episode of her biography; to her later years as the first female member of the art academy of Florence and a renowned artist of rare independence.

But while *Artemisia* is an engaging overview of its subject's life, Gina Siciliano's *I Know What I Am: The Life and Times of Artemisia Gentileschi* is the more complex and intense of the biographies. Twice as long as Ferlut and Baudouin's book even without its copious footnotes, *I Know What I Am* is exhaustively researched as well as highly personal (the author speaks in a preface of being a sexual assault survivor herself). On page one, a serious Artemisia stares out at the reader above a caption reading, "A girl artist in 21st-century Seattle writes about a girl artist in 17th-century Rome..." Using sketchy pen drawings softened somewhat by being printed in blue-gray ink, Siciliano first sets the scene. She portrays the brutal political and social situation in Rome circa 1600 and describes the rise of the most influential painter of the age, Caravaggio, before introducing Orazio and, finally, his talented daughter. Even before being assaulted by Tassi, the young Artemisia was groped by another associate of her father's, Cosimo Quorli; Siciliano describes the painter's first masterpiece,

ciating detail; she renders much of it as a series of back-and-forth headshots of the various players—the judge, advocates, witnesses, the accused, and Artemisia. This technique might not normally make for great comics, but here it produces a staccato rhythm that amplifies the tension of the proceedings. The rest of the book follows Artemisia's artistic and professional development, as well as her personal life and relationships (not least a friendship with Galileo), with similar sympathy and rigor. Summing up, Siciliano says, "Questions that scholars grappled with for years take on new life in the comics format."

I have found that there's a special intimacy to comics as an art form that delivers a reading experience ideal for biography and memoir. But their hybrid nature—part visual, part textual—may be what makes them especially suited to telling the stories of visual artists. Will Eisner, the pioneering cartoonist who popularized the term "graphic novel" in the '70s, called his own autobiography "Life, In Pictures." It is as good an encapsulation of the appeal of comics biographies—of Rembrandt or Banksy, daVinci or Kusama—as I can imagine. (I am even in the early stages of creating a graphic artist's bio myself...stay tuned!). ■

**"Sean Bieri, a cartoonist and graphic designer, has written on art for the Detroit Metro Times, Wayne State University, and the Erb Family Foundation among other outlets. He received both his BFA and a BA in Art History—28 years apart—from Wayne State. He is a founding member of Hatch, an arts collective based in the Detroit enclave of Hamtramck, where he lives. He is currently assisting Hatch in the renovation of the "Hamtramck Disneyland" folk art site."**

# Richard Haines: Paradise Lost

**Daniel Cooney Fine Art, New York City,  
May 4–June 30, 2023**

*by Paul Moreno*

In the second chapter of *The Flâneur*, Edmund White writes about the Turkish bath at La Mosquée de Paris, which at the start of this millennium still reserved two days each week for male clientele. He notes: "Although many gay men go to the *hammam* on Sundays (most of them non-Muslims), they understand they are in a house of worship and they look but do not touch—a rule that adds a civilizing distance to their cruising." This tension of respectful longing, of polite looking, of open fantasy-building that barely dares the transgression of touch, of the observant stranger in a Gallic environ, filled the room at the recent show of paintings by Richard Haines at Daniel Cooney Fine Art.

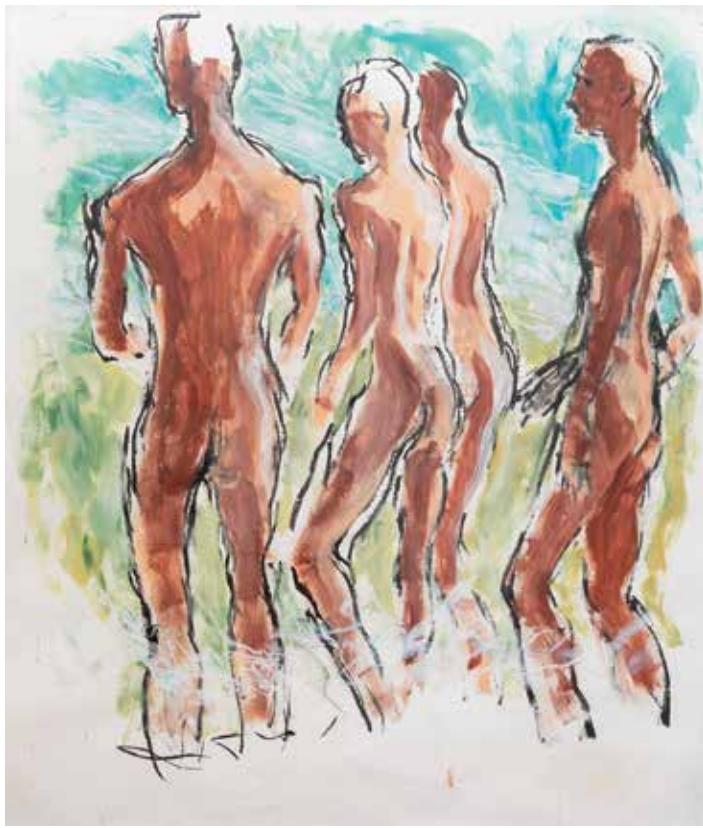
Richard Haines is best known for his successful career as a fashion illustrator. His work has transcended the boundaries of that industry to draw the attention of a broader audience who love his social media posts of his drawings of handsome fellows in cute clothes often drawn from the perspective of the man-on-the-street in Paris, New York, or on the occasional beach. He is also an educator and man about town. He is in fact a *flâneur* of sorts. All of this of course informs his occupation as a fine artist. The work does not feel ardently conceptual like it is push-

ing the boundaries of painting, nor does it feel like it is grasping at the cool to lure art world speculators. Rather this collection of paintings/drawings feel fleeting and poetic, plain and sincere, the kind of paintings that transport the viewer to a time and place when simply being a *flâneur* is enough.

This particular group of pictures feels like a collection of moments each committed to canvas (or in one case paper) more than a coeval group of pictures developed together with a show in mind. They were mostly painted in 2022-23, and all display Haines's recognizable hand, but they vary a lot in personality. One corner was occupied by the one work on paper, *Quatre Hommes Dans L'eau*, and *Three Skaters, Manhattan Avenue*. Both of these depict a group of young men going about their business, seemingly rendered, at the perfect moment, from observation. In *Quatre Hommes...*, four lithe, golden-brown, male figures, drawn from angles ranging from full behind to silhouette, form a callipygian display, each loosely outlined in thick black lines, filled with brushy toffee colored paint, the crowns of their heads left bright white reflections of the glaring sun, as the figures move from only ankle deep into the yellow green smears of water below the white streaked turquoise



Richard Haines: Paradise Lost,  
Daniel Cooney Fine Art, installation  
view. Photo: Daniel Cooney Fine Art.



*Quatre Hommes Dans L'eau*, 2020. Oil stick, pastel, watercolor on paper, 70 x 63 inches. Photo: Daniel Cooney Fine Art.

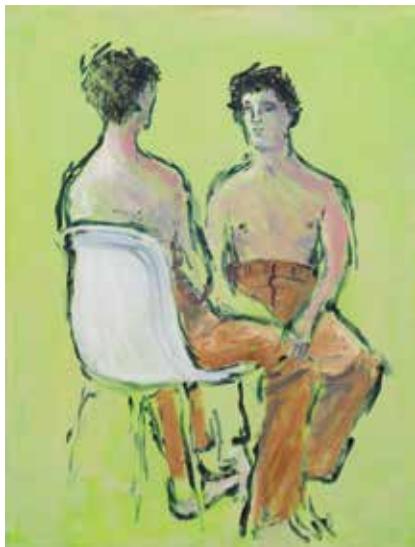
saturated wash of its titular color, a white Eames side chair, a model, and his reflection. The acid green version has the model in high-waisted trousers, shirtless, and his vaguely rendered face is slightly goofy. The salmony pink version has the model leaning one handed into the mirror, one behind his back, as if frozen in a sexy casual minuet. The cornflower blue version takes the unexpected turn of the model being nude but for an eyeless black (leather?) hood. These do not feel spontaneous despite the marks feeling

sky. In *Three Skaters...*, a sort of cadet blue waterfall of a canvas is populated by three boys that we see from an angle of a discreet observer. They're carrying skateboards. Their bodies are long and thin with ski-like feet and broad hanger-like shoulders from which clothes that look more runway than skatepark hang. There are dark blue squiggles suggesting urban architecture.

These two pictures are distinctly different from a trio of paintings on an adjoining wall. I initially thought these were each a double portrait but upon reading the titles, *Green Narcissus*, *Pink Narcissus*, and *Blue Narcissus*, I realized the doubling of the model is the effect of a mirror within the *mise-en-scene* of the paintings. Each of these small paintings (24 x 18 inches) is composed of a field of a



*Three Skaters, Manhattan Avenue*, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 inches. Photo: Daniel Cooney Fine Art.



(Left) *Green Narcissus*, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 24 x 18 inches. (Center) *Pink Narcissus*, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 24 x 18 inches. (Right) *Blue Narcissus*, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 24 x 18 inches. Photos: Daniel Cooney Fine Art.

fast and unfussy. They do not have the impromptu energy of the aforementioned bathers or skaters. They feel like a model as still life, posed in the studio, on-the-spot, self-aware. In all of them, the background color seeps through; the gestures of the model's feet are not concerned with specificity; and the images as a whole feel like a prelude to something we do not see.

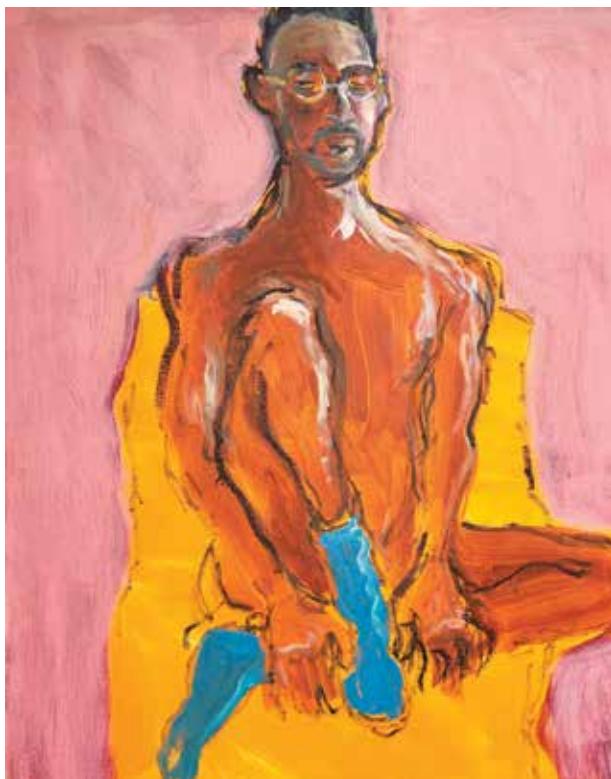
Yet another mood is struck in a painting called *Mordechai with Screen and Mirror*. This picture possessed the most "finishedness" in the show. The model is simply seated facing the viewer. The outline of his body is less rushed and more finessed. Perhaps most notably, the background is far more considered—no brushy washes here—rather the background is broken into a number of roughly vertical planes depicting, based on the title, a screen and mirror; though these distinctions are left to the viewer to interpret. Perhaps more than in any other painting in the group, here we really see Haines' love of European romance, particularly, French. The screen appears to depict a diver that calls to mind a Matisse acrobat. The colors and composition suggest an odalisque. The black that covers the model's shins suggest

Schiele. And I am certain I am not the only one who sees a Munchian optical illusion in the painting; but I am not sure that was intentional.

The portrait *Austin with Blue Socks* felt the most modern to me in the sense of painting during the American Century. It is of note that it is the only painting of a person of color. It also steps away from the brevity of mark in the other paintings to give us a more sculpted and detailed countenance. The amaranth-colored background and a rough goldenrod shape that suggests the foreground, as



*Mordechai with Screen and Mirror*, 2023.  
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 24 x 20 inches.  
Photo: Daniel Cooney Fine Art.



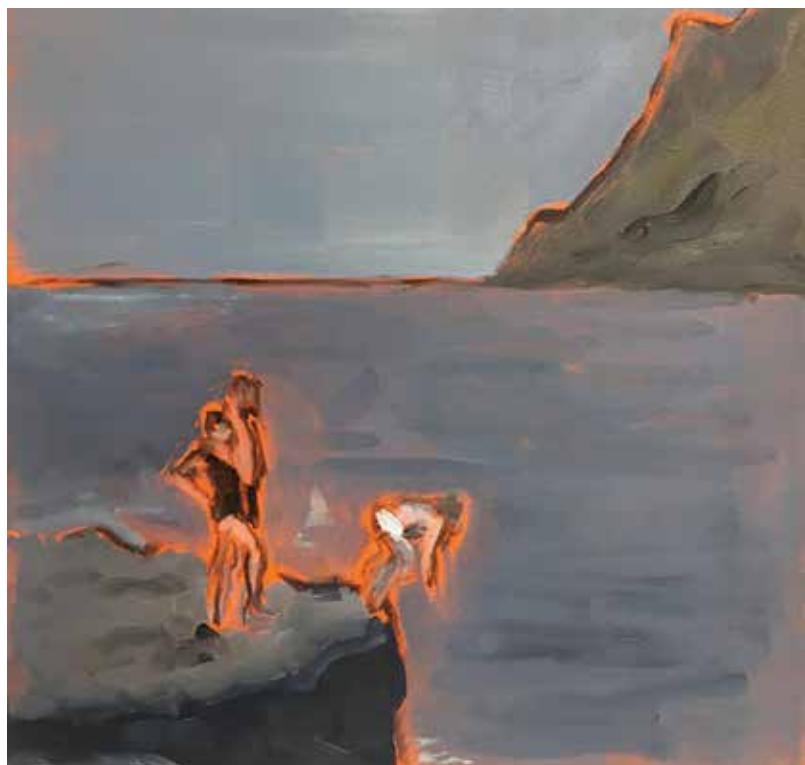
*Austin with Blue Socks*, 2022. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. Photo: Daniel Cooney Fine Art.

well as some furnishing on which the model sits, form an exciting composition that evokes Clyfford Still. Splashes of white light and the super saturated robin's egg blue of the socks bring a vitality to the painting.

As I think about this show, recalling and writing about it, I am bathed in the light of a sunset in the western U.S., far from the formerly industrial concrete building that houses the gallery, I am thinking of one last painting, *Edo Dives*. This picture, so distinct from the rest, depicts a seascape. The blue gray of the water and the gray blue of the sky are beautifully painted in simple strokes. An olive-green mountain climbs up the right side and an anthracite rock juts into the lower left corner where three rough figures contemplate or confront the sea. A bright orange underpainting

gives everything a supernatural glow. It is hard to say how this painting connects to the others, but it does. It is easy to see how this show, so tied to unfashionably fashionable styles of paintings feels so fresh. It is because it is done with conviction. Richard Haines makes paintings that you can feel he loves. He is painting in a tradition that includes Cadmus, Bazille, and Hockney. Younger painters such as Louis Fratino and Salman Toor are also part of this lineage. Haines is bringing something unique to the story through, a politeness, a gentle eye, a looking that only looks. ■

**Paul Moreno** is an artist, designer and writer working in Brooklyn, New York. He is a founder and organizer of the New York Queer Zine Fair. His work can be found on Instagram @ bathedinafterthought. He is the New York City editor of the *New Art Examiner*.



*Edo Dives*, 2019. Oil and acrylic on canvas 12 x 12 inches.  
Photo: Daniel Cooney Fine Art.

# “There Are Many Ways to Hold Water Without Being Called a Vase”

Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago, June 9–July 29, 2023

by Michel Ségard

**A**ntonius-Tín Bui is a Vietnamese American, nonbinary, performance and visual artist whose means of expression in this exhibition is the craft of Chinese paper cutting. This technique for making images dates back to a few centuries after paper was invented, and variations of it are practiced all over the world. But Bui's pieces are extraordinary in their size and intricacy. The main piece in the front room of Monique Meloche Gallery, called *The Work of Love Becomes Its Own Reasons*, is 52 inches high by 112 inches long. It is an outstanding example of Bui's technical expertise and virtuosity.

But that virtuosity is not what makes this show so captivating. It is Bui's exploration of the meaning behind the title of the exhibition, “There Are Many Ways to Hold Water Without Being Called a Vase,” a line taken from the poet Franny Choi's poem Orientalism Part I. The show is divided into two rooms. The front room where *The Work*

*of Love Becomes Its Own Reasons* hangs is devoted to familial scenes. This work shows two men on a couch in each other's arms. The couch is patterned in a vine motif that partially overlaps the figures. The vine motif will play a significant role in the rest of the exhibition. The cushions on the couch have a variety of regular geometric patterns with similar patterns in the clothing of the figures. The figures appear content, if not happy.

Flanking *The Work of Love...* on the right is *Like the Ocean, Having Been the Ocean Long Before We Arrived, Each Wave Newborn and Buried at Once; Like Us, Standing Breathless at The Edge, Astonished by Our Own Lungs.* (Bui uses extremely long titles that are often mini poems.) *Like the Ocean...* is an image of two women from two generations backed by delicate geometric screenwork and surrounded by encroaching vines. On the left is *Not Everything Floats. I Am Trying to Learn Which Parts of Me to Let Sink*, possibly

*The Work of Love Becomes Its Own Reasons*, 2023. Hand cut paper, ink, and paint, 52 x 112 inches. Photo: Monique Meloche Gallery.





*Like the Ocean, Having Been the Ocean Long Before We Arrived, Each Wave Newborn and Buried at Once; Like Us, Standing Breathless at The Edge, Astonished by Our Own Lungs, 2022.* Hand cut paper, ink, and paint, 77 1/2 x 60 inches. Photo: Monique Meloche Gallery.

a self-portrait, is a seven-and-a-half-foot high piece. An androgynous figure is crouched at the bottom, again enveloped by vines that also encircle the books and framed pictures in the background. In the upper right-hand corner is incised "Cutting off ur dick just cuz u feel like it." *Melancholy* pervades this image. *A Silence Settles That Isn't So Silent*, another "family" portrait with two figures, hangs on the opposite wall. The background contains a selection of vases in niches, and a repeated traditional Chinese paper cutting pattern embellishes the garment of the seated figure. Vines, again, surround the figures. In these images, the thing that holds water but is not a vase seems to be the combination of family bonds and traditions. Symbolized by the vines that encroach on the subjects of each of these images, the familial ties suggested in Bui's works may not be as comforting as they seem.

We have become accustomed to seeing vegetative backgrounds since the emergence of Kehinde Wiley as a star on the contemporary art scene. In Bui's works vines

are an integral part of the meaning of the work and are not a decorative motif. They imply the choking presence of familial and cultural bonds. They are like kudzu, threatening to engulf everything.

The second room of the gallery contains works of an entirely different nature. They address the issue of sexual identification. Noticeably, in most of the pieces, the vines are gone and replaced by broken vase fragments. This new motif alludes to a possible inverse of the show's title:



*Not everything floats. I am trying to learn which parts of me to let sink., 2022.* Hand cut paper, ink, and paint, 92 1/2 x 60 inches. Photo: Monique Meloche Gallery.

*A silence settles that isn't so silent*, 2023. Hand cut paper, ink, and paint, 52 x 41 inches. Photo: Monique Meloche Gallery.

"when a vase is broken, its water is set free"—suggesting freedom from the constraints of tradition, freedom from the censure of society, freedom to express one's true self. The main wall of this room contains three works colored in a deep Chinese red. In the middle is *Mending in a Daybreak That Casts Every Shadows Except Your Own.*, an almost seven-foot by three-foot work. It depicts young men masturbating while surrounded by fragments of broken vases and vegetative motifs that echo the vines of previous works. But the parts are not connected into a vine. In fact, they seem more like creatures than leaves, producing a subtly creepy feeling. The piece suggests that sexual self-satisfaction may be ultimately unsatisfying. On either side of this large work are smaller, roughly round pieces, *There's Nothing Left Here for You*, and *In Between Deaths*. They depict broken vases that have the vines as their surface motifs. But what is especially noteworthy in all three is that their backgrounds are no longer a lattice of clean geometric forms. Rather, they are irregularly interconnected tendrils that taper off at the edges like a piece of frayed fabric. Paradoxically, the ensemble is strikingly beautiful despite the unsettling subject matter.



To the left of these three pieces hangs *There Are Many Ways to Hold Water Without Being Called a Vase. To Drink All the History Until It Is Your Only Song*, the titular piece of the show. Painted a deep navy and measuring approximately seven by three-and-a-half feet, *There Are Many Ways...* shows an individual of ambiguous gender in multiple, overlapping renderings, as if a sketch or study. They are surrounded by broken vase fragments, with the vine motifs appearing only on pieces of the vases and possibly as tattoos on the skin of the subject. It is the only large piece in this room that does not have overtly sexual content. Of the other three large works, one, *Body Called Itself Master*.

(Left) *There's Nothing Left Here for You*, 2022. Hand-cut paper, ink, pencil, paint, 33 1/2 x 32 inches. (Center) *Mending in a Daybreak That Casts Every Shadows Except Your Own*, 2023. Hand cut paper, ink, and paint, 83 x 42 inches. (Right) *In Between Deaths*, 2022. Hand-cut paper, ink, pencil, paint, 31 1/2 x 27 1/2 inches. Photo: Monique Meloche Gallery.





*Body Named Itself Free. Body Bought Its Own Freedom. Body Sold Itself to the Top. Body Broken Glass All by Itself. Body Spills All the Light. Body All the Light. Body Only Dark When It Wants to Be,* depicts an orgy in an overtly explicit way. But interestingly, the figures are intertwined with the vines and fragments of regular grids can be seen in the background. It is not surprising that the figures are entangled, when one realizes that the title refers to the life of sex workers. This work, too, is in that dark navy blue. The remaining two pieces in this space each seem to show couples who are sexually engaged. But with body fragments appearing here and there, it is not certain that there are

*There are many ways to hold water without being called a vase. To drink all the history until it is your only song.,* 2022. Hand cut paper, ink, and paint, 86 x 42 inches. Photo: Monique Meloche Gallery.

only two individuals in each composition. Painted a dark reddish brown (a blend of the navy and the red?), these pieces, as suggested by their lengthy titles, seem to contrast the pleasure of anonymous sex versus the rewards of a loving relationship. One is called *Silent & Unkissed – That's How I Wanted You to Suffer, Too, Boy Who Wouldn't Look at Me. Seeing You Run So Beautifully on the Track That Afternoon, I Wanted You to Suffocate, Breath-Starved from All the Miles You'd Run Away from Me.*, the other *Because I Stopped Apologizing into Visibility. Because This Body Is My Last Address. Because This Mess I Made I Made with Love. Because Only Music Rhymes with Music. Because I Made a Promise.* Again, in these two pieces, the vines are relegated to the role of tattoos.

In a way, this exhibition is a chronicle of Bui's life and experiences—not strictly a biography, but a record of his social and cultural environment. It also indirectly addresses the stereotype of the feminized, submissive south Asian male. In the European-American LGBTQ+ community, the Asian male is most often thought of as the submissive participant in sexual encounters, the “bottom,” especially in that community’s pornography. This is a stereotype that must be difficult for an Asian nonbinary male. Feminine, submissive, and nonbinary are NOT the same, and that distinction is made clear in the subtext of this exhibition’s images, especially those in the second room dealing directly with sexuality.



(Left) *Silent & Unkissed – That's How I Wanted You to Suffer, Too, Boy Who Wouldn't Look at Me. Seeing You Run So Beautifully on the Track That Afternoon, I Wanted You to Suffocate, Breath-Starved from All the Miles You'd Run Away from Me*, 2022. Hand cut paper, ink, and paint, 80 x 42 inches. (Right) *Because I Stopped Apologizing into Visibility. Because This Body Is My Last Address. Because This Mess I Made I Made with Love. Because Only Music Rhymes with Music. Because I Made a Promise*, 2022. Hand cut paper, ink, and paint, 83 x 42 inches. Photos: Monique Meloche Gallery.

One is initially drawn to this exhibition by the technical virtuosity of Bui's works and by their compositional beauty. But the meat of this exhibition is both in the content of the works and how the exhibition is organized to create a compelling narrative that reveals that content. One cannot leave the space without being informed about the cultural complexity of LGBTQ+ Asian men. This is done in a way that tells the truth, both good and bad—not in a propagandist manner. Their nuanced and thoughtful approach is what makes Bui's imagery art. ■

**Michel Ségard** is the Editor in Chief of the *New Art Examiner* and a former adjunct assistant professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is also the author of numerous exhibition catalog essays.

The exhibition is thoroughly documented on the Monique Meloche website, including installation views and a picture of each piece in the show along with detail views.

# “Then Is Now: Contemporary Black Art in America”

**The Bruce Museum, Greenwich, Connecticut,  
April 2–October 15, 2023**

by D. Dominick Lombardi

The Bruce Museum redefines the importance of a regional museum. Situated in Greenwich, Connecticut, the newly renovated and beautifully expanded museum typically offers a blend of work from the 31,000 objects in their permanent collection and works on loan, in theme exhibitions. The excellent rotating curated exhibitions continue the institution's 100 year-long mission to bridge the ever-decreasing gap between science and fine art.

An example of a theme exhibition that broadens the scope of their traditional programming, “Then Is Now: Contemporary Black Art in America” is an impressive look at important artists of the past 55 years who have addressed racial injustices throughout our nation’s history. When first entering the gallery, visitors come face to face with Hank Willis Thomas’s highly reflective lenticular work with text that changes from “Then Is Now” to “Then And Now” depending upon where you stand. My first thought looking at this work is how much our current day socio-political status feels all too similar to past oppressive and transgressive behavior. This is especially true since some political extremists remain determined to roll back the clock by decreasing voting access, taking away



(Left) Charles White, *Study for Seed of Love*, circa 1968–1970. Tempera on illustration board, 25 x 12 inches. Photo: courtesy of the author.



(Right) Elizabeth Catlett, *Homage to my young Black Sisters*, 1968. Red cedar, with painted carved details, 68 x 12 x 12 inches. Photo: swanngalleries.com.

women’s rights, and demonizing gender fluidity.

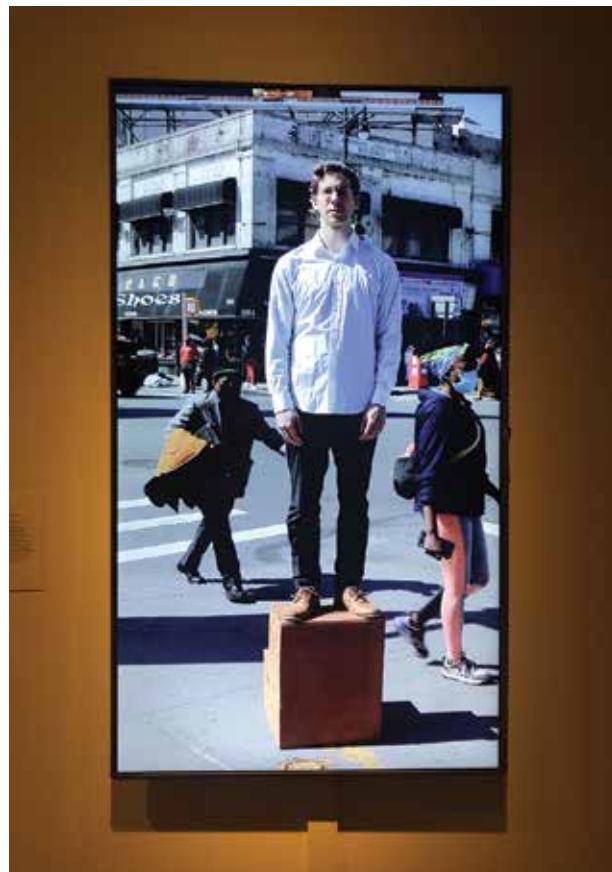
Two of the earliest works in the exhibition, which both address the mid-20th century state of the black female, are Charles White’s tempera painting *Study for Seed of*

The Bruce Museum. Photo courtesy of the Bruce Museum.





(Above) Steve Locke (American, b. 1963), *Homage to the Auction Block #115-wander*, 2021. Acrylic on panel, 16 3/4 x 17 1/8 x 2 1/4 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2023 Steve Locke / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Bruce Museum. (Right) Dread Scott, *White Male for Sale*, 2021, NFT, 7:00 minutes. Photo: courtesy of the author.



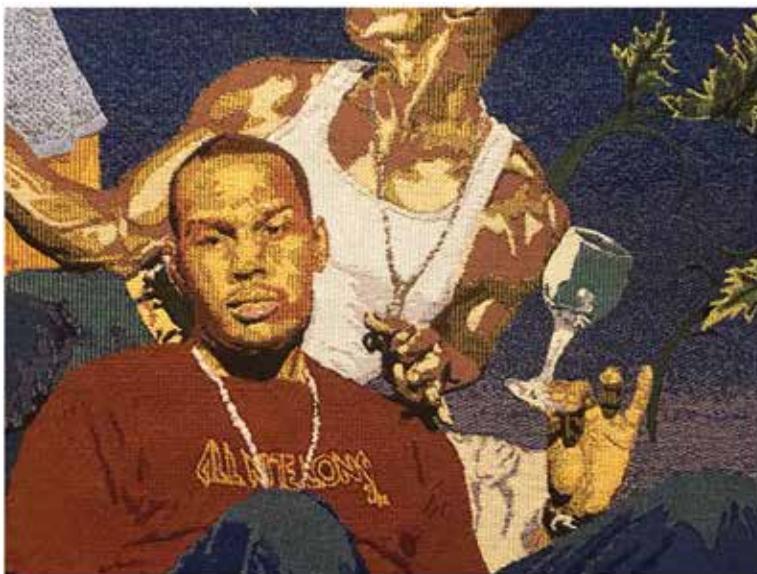
*Love* (1968-70) and Elizabeth Catlett's *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* (1968). These two works could not be more different as White's rather poetic representational figure depicted in profile appears to be distracted, minimized, or kept down (low in the picture plane), while bearing just enough inner strength to sway the day. Conversely, Catlett's entrancing dynamic abstract wood sculpture with a gaping hole in the middle and one fist thrust in the air is overtly defiant, proud, and standing her ground. These two works, coupled with Melvin Edwards' three welded

steel wall reliefs that range in year of completion from 1964 to 2014, present a powerful picture of our nation's history of slavery, Jim Crow, and racial violence.

Still photography documenting Dread Scott's powerful 2009 performance *I Am Not A Man* shows the artist in Harlem, wearing a sign that states the work's title. "I Am Not A Man" is a reference to the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike of 1968, where the placard "I Am A Man" was seen as a basis for better treatment and wages. Scott is making reference not just to the 1968 strike, but to the thread

Mickalene Thomas, *Untitled*, 2013. Collage and mixed media, 34 x 96 3/4 inches. Photo:seavestcollection.org.





(Left) Kehinde Wiley, *The Gypsy Fortune-Teller*, 2007, detail. Jacquard tapestry in Merino wool and cotton, 76 x 102 inches. Photo: courtesy of the author. (Right) Michelangelo da Caravaggio, *Bacchus* (c. 1598), Oil, 37.4 x 33.4 inches, Wikimedia Commons.

that works its way throughout all the work here—that we have not yet reached true equality of all people—a goal that seems today to be closer to falling back than moving forward. In the artist's NFT, a seven-minute slow motion video titled *White Man for Sale*, we see a depiction of a white male standing atop a two-step auction block on a street corner in Brooklyn. For the most part, passersby pay little attention to the ironic symbolism of the statement, which tells us something about the thought process in this

black community. From that perspective, this could actually be possible—a result that speaks more clearly than any actual interaction with the subject might suggest.

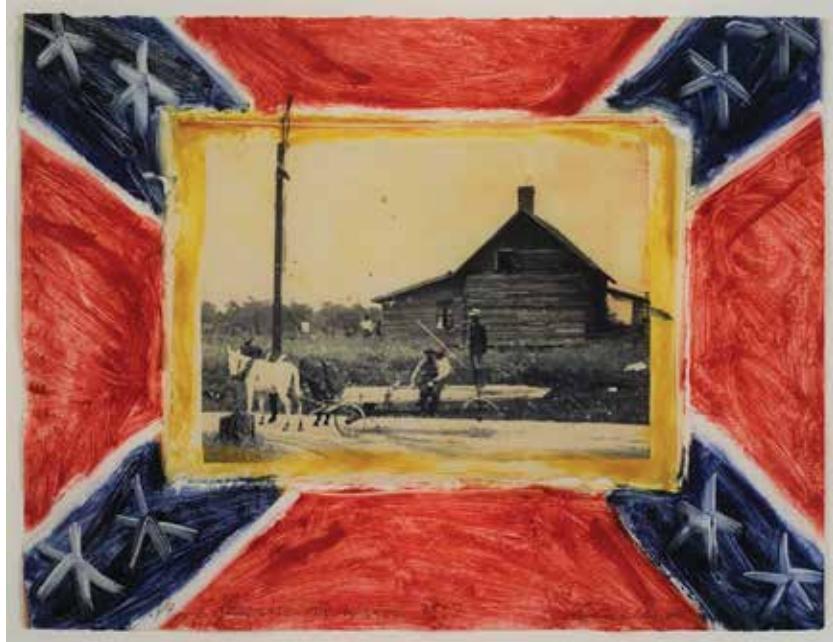
Mickalene Thomas's mixed media triptych *Untitled* (2013) shows a young, beautiful black woman posing seductively as she gazes back at the viewer. The mix of vibrant patterns, glistening beads, mostly unmodulated browns and grays, and the selectively placed collage elements that make up areas of each face, suggest



(Left) Betye Saar, *The Weight of Color*, 2007. Mixed-media assemblage. Photo: Pinterest. (Below) Melvin Edwards, *Homage to James Benjamin Edwards*, 1964. Welded steel, 20 x 17 x 11 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY. Photo: Bruce Museum.



Emma Amos (American, 1937–2020), *Mississippi Wagon*, 1937, 1992. Oil, monotype, and screenprint on paper, 15 ½ x 20 ¼ inches. From The Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson Collection. © Emma Amos; Courtesy of RYAN LEE Gallery, New York. Photo: Bruce Museum.



the balance between individual identity and the male objectification of women. In each panel, the hair makes its mark as a symbol of power and control to counter any compromising or unwanted narrative. *The Gypsy Fortune-Teller* (2007), a jacquard tapestry with a Kehinde Wiley painting as its design, continues a career-long desire for the artist to redefine, expand, and obliterate outdated stereotypical beliefs regarding men of color. The descriptive wall panel makes reference to the Rococo painter Francois Boucher who built a career on capturing the decadence of the aristocracy of late-18th-century Europe. I am getting more of a feeling of Michelangelo da Caravaggio's Italian Baroque painting *Bacchus* (c. 1596), specifically in the unusual way that one figure in the foreground is holding their wine glass.

Some of the more conceptual works in the exhibition are by Steve Locke, who uses a Josef Albers' *Hommage to the Square* (1950-75) aesthetic to expand the intention of Alber's art—offering a new shape that relates directly to the auction blocks used during slavery. In addition to the import of the reference to the "somber memory of millions of lives lost to slave trade," I find the color combinations in these works to be both alluring and Modernist in a very different way than the works of Albers (1888–1976)—

perhaps it is the sense of finality projected by the colors of the shrinking planes. Betye Saar's *The Weight of Color* (2007) focuses heavily on aspects of prejudice, most specifically how it relates to oppression, which in many ways still continues to be a major issue in society today. If visitors would take the time to really experience an assemblage like this—which features a complex narrative with a mammy figure, an old rusty scale, and a crow cramped into an undersized cage secured with a heavy lock—a clearer picture of the continuous weight of racism that people of



Benny Andrews, *Poverty (America Series)*, 1990. Oil and graphite on paper with painted fabric collage, 50 x 39 inches. Photo: courtesy of the author.



Radcliffe Bailey, *Untitled (Blue Green Collage)*, 2018. Archival photograph and mixed media. Photo: courtesy of the author.

color continue to bear can be more fully felt deep down, specifically by white people like myself.

Emma Amos offers a similar message as the previously discussed artists, albeit a bit more directly. In the center of *Mississippi Wagon 1937* (1992) sits the photograph mentioned in the work's title, which has very specific links to the heritage of the artist. Visually surrounding and simultaneously suffocating the vintage black and white photograph is a loosely rendered confederate flag. The colorful border, overflowing in historical associations, creates a target effect, thus compressing the narrative while focusing the viewer's attention on the non-existent prospects for southern blacks during Jim Crow. Radcliffe Bailey's multimedia *Untitled (Blue Green Collage)* (2018) also utilizes black and white photography and a colorful border. However, in this instance, the mood is more positive and prideful, while also incorporating reference to the artist's own family history.

The most powerfully imposing work is Benny Andrews *Poverty (America Series)* (1990)—a somber narrative that

points to the struggles of impoverishment. The incorporation of a dyed fabric that defines most of the subject's body position greatly enhances an incredibly bold, yet somber, composition. Much in the same vein of the great Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000), who too used a minimal earthy palette and angular forms, Andrews generates great depth of emotion and a visceral sensation of torment and persecution.

Also included in the exhibition are wonderful works by Jammie Holmes, Kenneth Victor Young, Titus Kaphar, Barkley L. Hendricks, Alison Saar, and Dawoud Bey. Kudos to the curator of the exhibition, Margarita Karasoulas, who presents a very thoughtful selection and arrangement of work. ■

**D. Dominick Lombardi** is a visual artist, art writer, and curator. A 45-year retrospective of his art recently traveled to galleries at Murray State University, Kentucky in 2019; to University of Colorado, Colorado Springs in 2021; and the State University of New York at Cortland in 2022.

# “Gordon Parks The Early Years: 1942-1963”

Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, June 30–August 4, 2023

*by Tom Mullaney*

Gordon Parks is considered one of the most accomplished photographers of the 20th century. He was a master of several other talents: filmmaker, composer and the author of three memoirs. Such an acclaimed life is hard to imagine for a child born into poverty in 1912 in Fort Scott, Kansas and who struggled with a succession of irregular, mostly low-paying jobs with little sense of direction until 1942.

Working as a waiter on the Union Pacific Railway, he came across a copy of Vogue magazine. In one of his memoirs, “A Hungry Heart”, he says that he studied its fashion photographs with concentration. He then went out and bought his first camera in a pawnshop for \$7.50. “I went to every department store in the Twin Cities seeking to photograph their merchandise without success. But I kept trying.” Vogue, however, would feature prominently in his future.

He met the talented artist, Charles White, at the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago. They became friends and, one day in 1942, he saw White filling out forms to win a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. When Parks asked what that was, White told him it was a fund “for spooks and crackers with exceptional talent—writers, painters, composers and sculptors”. He urged Parks to apply.

White won his fellowships, and Parks became the first black photographer to win one as well. When asked where he’d like to spend his apprenticeship, Parks replied without hesitation, The Farm Service Administration in Washington, D.C. The FSA was the home of famed photographers Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Carl Mydans, Jack



*Washington, D.C. Government charwoman, July 1942 (American Gothic).* Gelatin silver print; 9.33 x 7.16 inches. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., LC-USF34-013407-C [P&P]. Farm Security Administration / Office of War Information Photograph.



*Ella Watson with Her Grandchildren, Washington, D.C., 1942.* Gelatin silver print. Photo: Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

Delano and was headed by Roy Stryker. Gordon Parks' life was about to change.

The Rhoda Hoffman Gallery recently mounted a show of his early work that ran from June 30 to August 4. The exhibit consisted of 22 images concentrating on children and African-American life in all its misery and racial, social and economic inequality. Many highlighted the lives of the poor and dispossessed.

On one of his first days, he met a custodian named Ella Watson. Parks asked her to tell him about her life. After hearing her tale of woe, Parks had a memory of seeing Grant Woods' painting, *American Gothic*, at The Art Institute of Chicago. Parks took Watson's photograph (not in this exhibition) with her standing beneath an American flag, holding a mop in one hand and a broom in the other. When Stryker asked him to name the image, Parks answered *American Gothic*.

That image encompasses Watson's life of hard work and a life marred by discrimination. It has become an iconic image in Parks' portfolio. Stryker told him, "Keep working with her. It will do you some good." For the next month,

Parks photographed Watson's home, her church and any happenstance occasion. The image, *Ella Watson with Her Grandchildren, Washington D.C. 1942*, depicts the cramped quarters of her tiny apartment. Parks captures Watson's humanity while showing the malnourished condition of her three grandchildren.

This is one of six images in which children predominate. Others show children at play, at school and dressed up at church. Parks' instinctive ability to capture children is evident in the emotional depiction *Children with Doll, Washington, D.C., 1942*. Here are, perhaps, a young brother and sister, sitting on the floor, holding a doll. Her brother is asleep while the girl has an arm around the doll and manages a half smile. They are both scrawny, unaware of their living condition.

Parks joined the staff of LIFE magazine in 1948 and, very shortly thereafter, was handling important assignments, like hanging out with a Harlem street gang and being sent to the 1950 Paris fashion show where his fashion sense shined. He was given twelve pages along with that issue's cover of LIFE.

Parks, although self-taught, was a master of visual techniques such as choosing angles to shoot, what lighting and settings to choose, atmosphere, and images that contained a strong emotional impact. One of the strongest was *Street Scene, Harlem, New York, 1952*. It depicts a mournful, com-



*Children with Doll, Washington, D.C., 1942.* Gelatin silver print. Photo: Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

*Street Scene, Harlem, New York, 1952.*  
Gelatin silver print. Photo: Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

pletely bushed, black pushcart vendor, sitting on a broken wooden crate with, apparently, no place to go.

The photos in "The Early Years: 1942-1963" provide foresight into how Parks would develop as a photographer and documentarian of the period. Not all of Parks' images are depressing. One untitled Chicago shot shows young children in a Chicago school, paying rapt attention to the teacher. Another Chicago 1953 shot, *Untitled*, depicts a probable church scene, in which Parks cuts the father figure in half to focus on two young girls dressed in their Sunday best facing the camera, one smiling and the other not. A final image, *Untitled, Chicago, Illinois, 1953*, shows a group of young boys, in the air, arms extended, reaching for a hit ball in a game of stickball. Anyone can relate to the anticipation and joy on the boys' faces.

Parks would go on to capture classic images showing the struggle of blacks in their fight for equality. In one, an angry father is gathered around a "Colored" water fountain in Mobile, Alabama in 1956. Others captured images of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

Besides his photographs, Parks became the first African American to write and direct a feature film, *The Learning Tree*, in 1969, based on his best-selling autobiographical novel. His next film, *Shaft*, was a critical and box-office success.

He continued working the last three decades of his life, ever evolving his style up until his death in 2006. During his life, Parks was awarded the National Medal of Arts in 1988 and was presented with more



than fifty honorary degrees. Today, his archives are housed in several institutions, including the Gordon Parks Foundation in Pleasantville, New York, Howard University, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and the Smithsonian Institution, all in Washington D.C. ■

**Tom Mullaney** is the former Managing Editor of the *New Art Examiner*. His articles have also appeared in *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Chicago Magazine*.



*Untitled, Chicago, Illinois, 1953.*  
Gelatin Silver Print. Photo:  
Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

# “DEGENERATE!

## Hitler’s War on Modern Art”

Jewish Museum Milwaukee,  
February 24–August 30, 2023

by Diane Thodos

*Fear and destructiveness are the major emotional sources of fascism, eros belongs mainly to democracy.*

—Theodore Adorno<sup>1</sup>

*People were already beginning to forget, what horrible suffering the war had brought them. I did not want to cause fear and panic, but to let people know how dreadful war is and so to stimulate people's powers of resistance.*

—Otto Dix

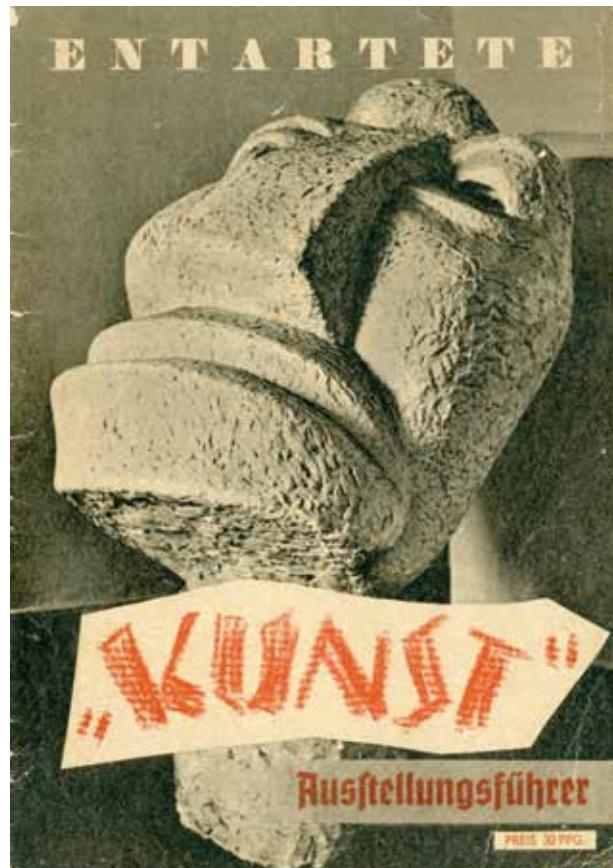
*We have to lay our heart bare to the cries of people who have been lied to.*

—Max Beckmann<sup>2</sup>

Every now and then displays that reconstruct the history of the infamous Nazi inspired Degenerate Art show of 1937 pop up in major museum exhibitions. These range from the large and scholarly 1991 exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to the modestly scaled 2014 show at New York’s Neue Gallery. The Jewish Museum of Milwaukee can be added to this list with their exhibit “DEGENERATE! Hitler’s War on Modern Art,” a small but comprehensively researched exhibit of Modernist and Expressionist works from the early part of the 20th century. The original Degenerate Art show, “Entartete Kunst,” was the outcome of the Nazi’s project to hunt down and confiscate all forms of Modernist art. German museums were stripped of 16,000 artworks made by members of the Die Brücke (The Bridge), Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity), Blue Rider, Dada, Bauhaus

and other modern art movements. From this huge cache, the first Degenerate Art venue in Munich exhibited 650 works to be held up for public ridicule and shame.

The Jewish Museum exhibit has carefully hung displays with explanatory wall texts outlining the historical basis of the newly formed Weimar Republic established after WWI. As Germany’s first experiment in democracy, Weimar was rife with economic and social chaos and political corruption. It was also a period that opened up new public freedoms and creative possibilities in culture and



Pamphlet for the Entartete Kunst (Decadent Art) exhibit, 1937. Photo: Wikimedia.

Max Beckmann, *The Yawners*, from the portfolio *Faces* (*Gesichter*), 1918. Dry-point. Milwaukee Art Museum, Maurice and Esther Leah Ritz Collection. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

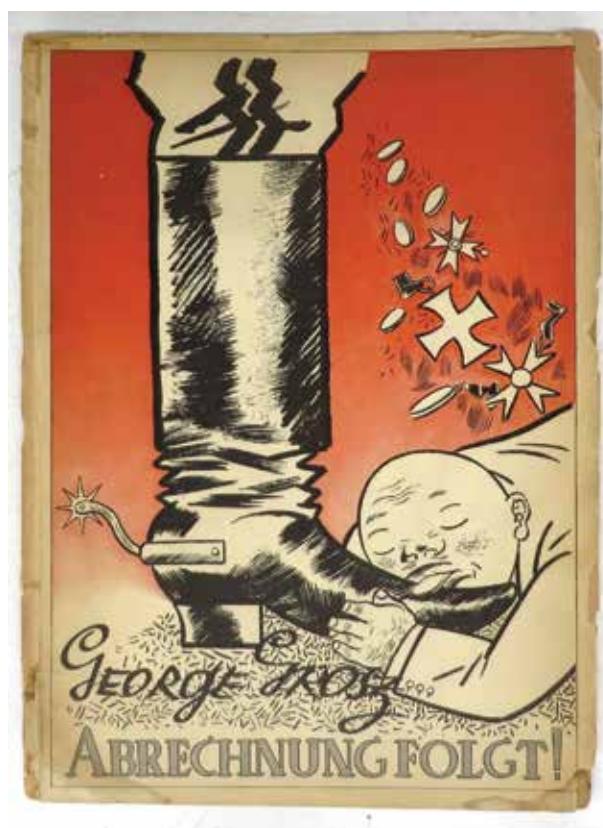
art. This creativity and freedom terrified the Nazis, particularly works depicting the social and economic disintegration following the outcome of WWI and hyperinflation imposed by the Versailles treaty. The latter resulted in a devaluation of the Deutschmark so severe that by November of 1923 one dollar was worth a trillion marks. A barrel of bills could not even buy a loaf of bread, resulting in food riots that broke down law and order. Even after the crisis was stabilized it became one of the motivating factors that helped bring the Nazis to power. The Great Depression of 1929 was the fatal blow to the Weimar era, leaving 30% of the country jobless and leading to a surge in popularity for the Nazi party who came to power in 1933.

What the Nazis feared most—Jews, Bolsheviks, political leftists, cosmopolitanism, sexual liberty, the unconscious—became arbitrary negative labels used in aggressive propaganda campaigns to smear their targets of hatred. One of the exhibit's wall texts explains the development of this history:



"The National Socialists used culture as a weapon for the 'purification' of Germany. When Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, he decreed that all mediums of art be aligned with Nazi ideology and swiftly instated edicts to remove foreign and so-called 'detrimental' influences... The Nazis' strategy to reshape Germany's cultural landscape was monumental in scope and their propagandist campaign against modern art unprecedented. Bans on creation; the purging of state collections; the seizing, sale, and destruction of thousands of modernist works; and mounting exhibitions of shame, including the infamous 1937 *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibit, played a decisive role in swaying public opinion. Promoting 'untainted, German art reflective of its Nordic values and "superior" Aryan race paved the way for more extreme means of social division and cleansing."

The Expressionists of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* or New Objectivity of the 1920's era made art that protested the ugliness, sickness, and hypocrisy of social reality: truths



George Grosz, *Abrechnung Folgt!* (Reckoning to Follow!) Book published by Malik Verlag, Berlin, April 1923. Collection of Kevin and Meg Kinney.



Emil Nolde, *Grossbauern* (Rich Farmers), 1918. Etching with aquatint. UWM Art Collection and Mathis Art Gallery, Dept. of Art History at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

which the Nazis denied and repressed, not the least for the threat it posed to unveiling the dark sickness that lived within themselves. They saw Modern art's vast array of creative expression as subversive to their project of totalitarian conformity; individuality had to be censored and destroyed. Modernist art was an evil plot to undermine the German nation and people. Adolph Hitler himself stated "We are going to wage a merciless war of destruction against the last remaining elements of cultural disintegration. All those cliques and chattering, dilettantes and art forgers are going to be picked up and liquidated."<sup>3</sup>

Most of the Jewish Museum exhibition artworks were small in scale, including many lesser-known artists sourced from local collections. Works were not from the original 1937 Degenerate Art exhibit, but wall texts described each artist's history while focusing on Nazi persecution and the confiscation/destruction of their works. The texts also detailed those who had works that were included in the Degenerate Art show.

These histories included controversy in the cases of artists like Emil Nolde. Nolde was a dedicated supporter of the Nazi party as early as 1920, attracted to their faux Nordic mythology and intense anti-Semitism. Following the Nazi's first attempt at overthrowing the government in 1923, Nolde wrote a friend "The Führer is great and noble in his aspirations and a genius man of action."

Despite Nolde's pandering, the Nazi's seized over 1,000 of his works from German museums and hung 27 of his works in the Degenerate Art show, more pieces than any other artist.

Overall, the scale of cultural oppression was quite breathtaking as artists were systematically suppressed or persecuted in one form or another. This included being discharged from universities and teaching positions, and sometimes being deported to concentration camps. Many chose to flee the country including Wassily Kandinsky, Max Beckmann, George Grosz, Kurt Schwitters and Paul Klee. By 1939 much art that could not be sold at auction



Martel Schwichtenberg, *Sitzende mit Blumen* (Seated Woman with Flowers), 1920–1921. Oil on canvas. Collection of the Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University.

Max Pechstein, *Weib vom Manne begehrt* (Woman Desired by Man), 1919. Wood-block. Milwaukee Art Museum, Maurice and Esther Leah Ritz Collection. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

to fund the German war machine—some 5,000 paintings, watercolors, sculptures, drawings, and prints—were burned. Much of the art that survived this first assault was destroyed by Allied bombing.

The most memorable works on display in “DEGENERATE! Hitler’s War on Modern Art” were prints by major German Expressionist artists including Ernest Ludwig Kirchner’s *Woman Buttoning Her Shoe* (1909), Erich Heckel’s *Siblings* (1913), and Max Beckmann’s *The Yawners* (1918) and *Artist in the Company* (1922). Georg Grosz’s *Reckoning to Follow!* (1923) depicts a grotesque fat bourgeois businessman with pock marked cheeks submissively licking the boot of a military officer while being showered with



money and war medals. Equally caustic is his lithograph / *have done my part... the plunder is your affair!* from his print portfolio series *The Robbers* (1922). A wealthy bourgeois couple carrying shopping boxes of “plunder” bluntly ignore a destitute one-legged soldier begging on the street, having “done his part” fighting the war so they could handsomely profit. Käthe Kollwitz’s prints bear powerful witness to the moment of eternal separation between mothers and their infants. In *Death Seizes a Woman* (1934) a mother holding her baby is seized by terror as a skeletal figure comes up from behind her, locking her in its deadly grip. The print’s direct and simple gestural immediacy makes it one of the most emotionally powerful images in her entire oeuvre. There is also the stark woodblock *The*

F. M. Jansen, *Der Blinde* (The Blind Man), 1925. Oil on canvas. Collection of Kevin and Meg Kinney.



George Grosz, *I Have Done My Part, The Plunder is your Affair* from *The Robbers*, 1922. Lithograph. Photo: Art Institute of Chicago.

*Sacrifice* (1922) from her *War* print series. The naked form of a harshly rendered maternal figure stands in solemn affliction as she is forced to give her infant up as a sacrifice to war. The pathos of loss is expressed through her strong maternal arms which long to hold on to the fragile life, even as her child is being pulled away from her by the forces of destruction. All these major artists capture the condition of social injustice, tragedy, and disorientation using styles that were powerfully heightened by the graphic innovations they explored in etching, woodcut, and lithographic print media. All expressed the zeitgeist of their time when these artists were at the height of their expressive and artistic powers.

Modernist abstraction was condemned by the Nazis as the product of deranged minds and mental illness, being roundly ridiculed throughout the Nazi's "Degenerate Art" exhibit. Several examples of abstract work in this current show included small prints by Wassily Kandinsky, Pablo

Picasso, and Kurt Schwitters. Abstraction had also seeped into the styles of some of the 1920's German Expressionists and New Objectivity artists. This can be seen in Lyonel Feininger's energetic 1918 woodblock *Bark and Brig at Sea* (1918) and also in the work of Georg Grosz's common use of Futurist geometry to construct graphic scenes of biting social and political commentary. After Max Beckmann suffered a nervous breakdown as a medical orderly during WWI, his formerly realistic figures became grotesquely distorted, crammed into claustrophobically angular abstract spaces. He stated "I hardly need to abstract things, for each object is unreal enough already, so unreal that I can only make it real by means of painting."<sup>4</sup>

Beckmann and many other artists expressed intense anti-war feeling in their work, including Otto Dix, Georg Grosz and Oskar Kokoschka. All had suffered serious trauma witnessing the madness of trench warfare. This accounts for the hallucinatory distortion of figures and space in their work often combined with acutely bitter social observation. Kirschner suffered a serious nervous breakdown while enlisted as a soldier, a condition from which he never totally recovered, eventually committing suicide in 1938.



Käthe Kollwitz, *The Sacrifice* from the *War* Series, 1922. Woodblock. Photo: Museum of Modern Art.

Käthe Kollwitz, *Death Seizing a Woman*, 1934. Lithograph. Photo: wikiart.org.

Socialist sympathizer Kathe Kollwitz lost a son early in WWI. This motivated her to create some of the most powerful anti-war graphics in the history of art. All these artists' intense anti-war anti-authoritarianism put them on a direct collision course with the Nazis, whose relentless propaganda glorified war, insisting there was no greater honor than martyring oneself as a soldier for the Fatherland. In 1993 Art Critic Robert Hughes commented on the perception of suffering expressed in German Expressionist art coming to resemble images of Holocaust victims. "I looked at the distortion and elongation in certain German Expressionist pictures as though the aesthetic distortions of Expressionism have been made real and concrete...absolute real suffering on the human body by the Nazis."<sup>5</sup>

The most memorable painting in the exhibit was Georg Kinner's intensely detailed *Woman Before A Mirror* (1932). A flabby woman combs oily strings of hair before a mirror while her stooped body and sagging breasts are covered



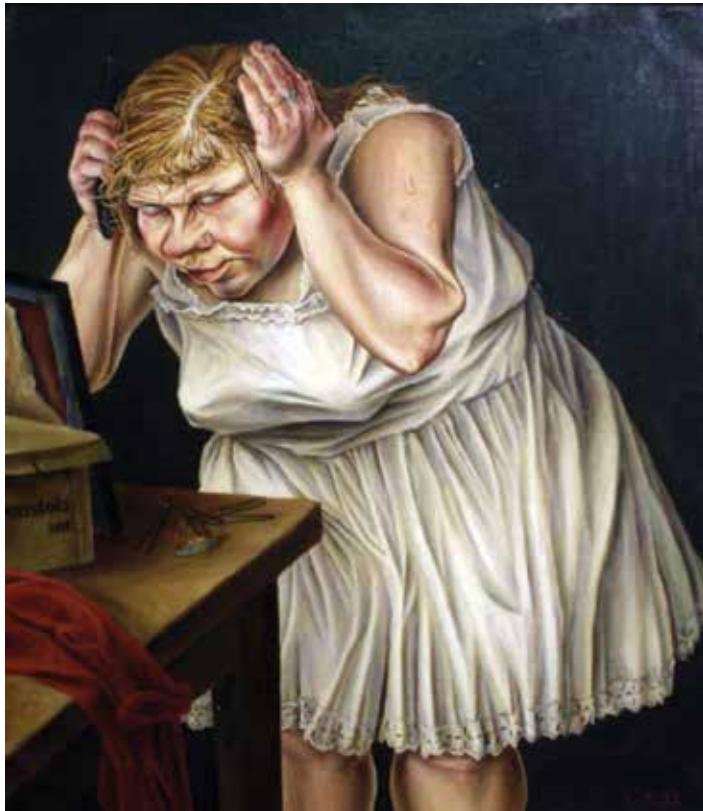
in a tent-like camisole. Her face has a bulbous shovel nose, grotesquely rouged cheeks and squinting gimlet eyes that look like they belong to a rabid animal. Her fatuous preening is a common subject of New Objectivity art—monstrous conceit colliding with hypocritical reality. The relentless precision of detail makes it one of the most fascinating and haunting images in the whole exhibition, exposing the yawning gulf between society's self-perception and its blistering truth.

In similar New Objectivity fashion, Bruno Voigt's drawings from the 1930's express the miasma of despair brought on by the Great Depression, reflected in the wasted expressions of crippled drunks in a bar. In another work paranoid men on the street are filled with fear and distrust as they glance over their shoulders with terror, and their eyes darkly foreboding what tomorrow will bring.

Other than Käthe Kollwitz, works by rarely seen women Expressionist artists were on display including Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler's *Lissy* (1931) and Martel Schwichtenberg's



Erich Heckel, *Geschwister (Siblings)*, 1913. Woodblock. Photo: artsy.net.



Georg Kinner, *Frau Vor dem Spiegel* (Woman Before a Mirror), 1932. Oil on canvas. Photo: artnet.com.

*Seated Woman with Flowers* (1920–21). Schwichtenberg was also a successful designer educated in Dusseldorf and ran her own art studio. She was one of many women who availed themselves of new freedoms under Weimar democracy, breaking out of the imprisoning role of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (children, kitchen, church) by seeking new social roles in education, politics, and work. This resulted in misogynistic attacks by reactionary conservative forces. The media printed sensational stories of *Lustmord*: gruesome murders of women and prostitutes by violent men. Women's freedoms were perceived as an attack on traditional masculine German mores, though some of these deaths were also the result of psychotic fits by traumatized war veterans. *Lustmord* artworks by Otto Dix, Rudolph Schlichter, and Georg Grosz expressed the explosion of uncontrollable madness and violence that could no longer be held in check or repressed by a society in disintegration.

The motivating events that inspired the Milwaukee DEGENERATE! show began with a visit to see the artworks of a major local Milwaukee collector. According to executive director Patti Sherman-Cisler "We were very taken with the artwork and obviously the story about what happened in Nazi Germany; what it did to the culture, what it did to the artists and how it permeated their society. Then we ask our audience if they see those same connections to today." While the exhibit stays firmly within the lines of presenting a historical analysis of its particular era, the correlation between the meticulously documented social, political and cultural symptoms from the Weimar/Nazi times undeniably struck a chord in me regarding the threat of fascism taking root in the United States and globally. It is well to remember Hitler arrested the



Max Beckmann, *Der Zeicher in Gesellschaft* (The Artist in the Company), 1922. Dry-point. Photo: 1stdibs.com

(Left) Ernest Ludwig Kirchner, *Frau, Schuh zuknöpfend* (Woman Buttoning Her Shoe), 1913. Woodblock. Photo: moma.org.

(Right) Pablo Picasso, *L'Homme Au Chapeau* (Man in a Hat), 1914. Etching. Photo: mutualart.com.



transgender community first (a playbook that U.S. red state governors are embracing) followed by the persecution of Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, leftists, the handicapped, and anyone considered “undesirable.”

Theodore Adorno, a Jewish philosopher forced into exile by the Nazis, wrote an important critical study on fascism—*The Authoritarian Personality*. In it, he defines the tactics of authoritarianism as the politicizing of independent institutions, spreading disinformation, aggrandizing executive power, quashing dissent, targeting vulnerable communities, stoking violence, and corrupting elections. This explains why Dix, Kollwitz, Grosz, and many other artists were committed political leftists for good reason, and why their art was so uncompromising in its defiant stance against the extreme political right wing and conservative forces of the time. Big business and the conservative elite allied themselves with Hitler to destroy the political left and workers movements in a bid for hegemonic control. They overplayed their hand, leading to the eventual fascist overthrow of German democracy. Then as now oligarchic power allied with right wing extremism weakens democracies, corroding their institutions and leading to their eventual downfall. If there is anything I see in this exhibit’s timely historical iteration surrounding German history and the Degenerate Art exhibit it is how Expressionist and New Objectivity art remains as a sharp historical warning about what could happen if we do not succeed in fighting and defeating fascist nationalism in our midst today. ■

Diane Thodos is an artist and art critic who lives in Evanston, IL. She is a Pollack Krasner Grant Recipient who exhibits internationally. Her work is in the collections of the Milwaukee Art Museum, the National Hellenic Museum, the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, the Block Museum at Northwestern University, and the Illinois Holocaust Museum among many others. For more information visit [dianethodos.com](http://dianethodos.com).

#### Footnotes

1. Theodore Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), Verso Books 2019 p. 976.
2. Degenerate art - 1933, the Nazis vs. Expressionism <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QE4Ld1mk0M>.
3. Ibid.
4. Max Beckmann, “On My Painting,” 302–3.
5. Degenerate art - 1933, the Nazis vs. Expressionism <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QE4Ld1mk0M>.



Lyonel Feininger, *Bark and Brig at Sea*, 1918. Woodcut. Photo: National Gallery of Art.

# They Exists in the Multiverse: A Review of { }({ })Δ≠!({ }) (No Nation) at Comfort Station, Chicago, August 18, 2023

*by John Thomure*

In Chicago, there exists a portal to another dimension: { }({ })Δ≠!({ }) (No Nation) Tangential Unspace Art Lab. As their name implies, it is not merely a physical place. It is a state of mind, an experience of the body. When you go to { }({ })Δ≠!({ }), there is no way of predicting what you might see. { }({ })Δ≠!({ }) grew out of Happy Dog—a second floor go-to for parties and D.I.Y. concerts. When Amaya Torres took over in 2010, and claimed their moniker, they established a long running experimental art space. { }({ })Δ≠!({ }) host innumerable shows nearly every weekend as well as a three to six month residency program which houses international artists, burgeoning art students, and long-lost travelers alike. It is a home for the dispossessed, the strange, and the otherworldly.

As part of Comfort Station's "Force & Motion" series, { }({ })Δ≠!({ }) was invited to present a series of performances. The Logan Square institution states that "Force & Motion" allows local groups to take over their space to showcase new ideas and approaches to creating community. This edition began with Amaya Torres. In between growls and piercing buckshots of distortion, Torres initiated an incantation to manifest anything we could imagine. We passed around a blank piece of paper, filling it with our thoughts. Concurrently, Amaya prepared the other ritual elements like folding paper airplanes. After collecting all of these ideas, possibilities, and impossibilities Amaya enrobed themselves with the paper airplanes. They then lit the airplanes on fire and bolted flailing and howling into



{ }({ })Δ≠!({ }) (No Nation) Logo



Amaya Torres lighting paper airplanes on fire. Photo by John Thomure.

the night. Torres' performance was somewhere between ritual magic, great black metal, and avant-garde pantomime. Their medium is reality itself—that moment when the performance is taking place. The actions we all performed together pushed against the rigidity of real life.

Following Torres was Aza Greenlee, { }() {}Δ‡!(){}'s co-manager and impresario. Their performance was much more subtle than Torres. They paraded out with a menagerie of bags, food, and two plastic swords amongst many other things. They began frantically maneuvering everything around, picking up an object while dropping another, tossing another object aside while bending down to grab even more. Greenlee cycled through their assortment of materials at a frantic, yet consistent pace. Swords almost made it into their scabbards, boxes nearly stayed standing, and at one point Greenlee flicked a lit blowtorch around with the grace of a butterfly knife. The resulting effect was one of subtle immersion and rising tension with no final climax.

After a brief intermission, Holden McClain performed. What played out was the tragedy of an American party girl. A party girl seeking an ever-elusive sense of affirmation and love in a wasteland of loneliness and desperation. The performance oscillated between striptease and vaudeville. The noir staging, along with the punk Pagliacci clown makeup, evoked the vaudevillian combination of sexual titillation and tragicomedy perfectly. The whole affair was a feast for the senses as the sickeningly sweet smell of store-bought frosting permeated the nostrils.

It was after Holden's performance that Amaya passed me a camera and asked if I could help document. This is par for the course at {}() {}Δ‡!(){} shows, even the docu-



Holden McClain performing.  
Photo by John Thomure.



Érika Ordosgoitti performing.  
Photo by Sarah Pramuk.

mentation has an air of improvisation and self-autonomy. Aranza Cortés Karam's *Digital Disobedience Lab* embodied these same concerns, but for our personal technology. Karam's piece was part workshop and performance. We were walked through the basics of cyber security, especially regarding the location tracking capacity of all of our apps. Too often, we agree to giving away our digital information and the *Digital Disobedience Lab* exemplified this.

The final performance of the night was Érika Ordosgoitti. It began with Érika emerging from another room dressed in nothing but a mask of meat. Honestly it could have been made of anything. Érika demanded to see our real faces—the faces we hide when we are at work, at a bar, at home with our family. The demands got more and more heated. "Show me your real face!" Érika started shouting at us and we all began complying. Érika shouted at us and we shouted back at Érika. The confrontational style is common to Ordosgoitti's performances which seem hellbent on breaking from normal routines. Our collective screaming self-expression built to a frenzy. It felt like someone was moments away from losing all pretense and smashing a window or spastically dancing. Just as quickly as it had started it was over, but that fever pitched feeling remained deep in our guts. Leaving Comfort Station, I felt like a tightly wound coil ready to let loose.

*{\}0 {\}Δ#!(){} maintains a special place in my heart. It was the first place where I saw live performance art. They repeatedly host international film festivals, visiting artists, and allow emerging artists and curators the opportunity to gain practical experience. It stands as a high watermark of Chicago art. However, despite all of this, {\}0 {\}Δ#!(){}'s future is not guaranteed. The owner of their building, Ken Lubinski, has expressed his desire to sell the building at some point in the near future. This is compounded by Equity Arts, a non-for-profit arts organization, which is attempting to buy the building from Lubinski. Despite the claim to "equity," this non-for-profit has expressly stated that {\}0 {\}Δ#!(){}, alongside fellow venue Tritriangle, will be evicted if this comes to pass. {\}0 {\}Δ#!(){}'s plight expresses the contradictions at the heart of being an artist in the United States: the desire to create open spaces where people are allowed to express themselves freely and the increasing difficulty of finding and maintaining actual physical art spaces. ■*

**John Thomure** is a performance artist and writer currently based in Chicago. His performance and writing practices fixate on local Chicago art history and exploring forgotten or overlooked artists and their archives.

#### Footnotes

1. Amaya Torres in discussion with the author, August 31, 2023.
2. "Force and Motion." Comfort Station. Accessed September 15, 2023. <https://comfortstationlogansquare.org/force-and-motion>.

# “Paintings, Miniatures, Wood Mosaics, and Imagery Boxes—Creative Emergence from the Pandemic”

**SoNa Gallery, Chicago, August 11–October 14, 2023**

by Annette LePique

This is a difficult review to write as Laura Botwinick, SoNa Gallery's Executive Director and one of the new gallery's two curators (the other, Molly O'Donnell) was nothing but kind, generous, and open with her time and space. Botwinick's presence lent a sense of intimacy to the work of Chicago artists and long-time collaborators Tom Robinson and Lorylyn Kumlin.

But intimacy does not excuse poorly conceptualized art.

Robinson and Kumlin's show, “Paintings, Miniatures, Wood Mosaics, and Imagery Boxes—Creative Emergence from the Pandemic” up at SoNa till mid-October, was borne of their shared turn to miniatures during the height of the pandemic. As Botwinick recalled, Robinson happened upon a gutted, but beautiful, Victorian dollhouse in an alley. He and Kumlin took on the project of refurbishing the dollhouse together, and they filled it with meticulously crafted miniature facsimiles of furniture, household decorations, and the everyday detritus of life. This shared project is intertwined in the show with the creation of Robinson's miniature galleries and Kumlin's “Imagery Boxes.”

While the show contains earlier work by each artist that trace the developments in their practices, their turn to the miniature form reveals an unbridgeable distance at the show's heart. Robinson's miniature scenes are duplications of gallery wings, his studio, and corridors of the Art Institute of Chicago. These likenesses are filled with approximations of his own paintings. His paintings, with their lush, dappled colors and tubercular models sit next to a tiny Edward Hopper and Manet reproduction in the Art Institute, and next to copies of Picassos in the halls of the dollhouse. Why does an artist reproduce their own work, hang it, light it, and christen it with the company of well-known pieces from the western art historical canon? It comes off as an unabashed song of the self, a paean to artistic ego. Robinson's apparent turn to this self-obsessed, inward gaze is disappointing, as it has borne art that aspires to live in the realm of the rich. Nothing is said, nothing is done, nothing is changed, it's simply an endorsement of the status quo.

This is a show that unknowingly reveals the deep alienation that girds each artist's forays into market-oriented narcissism. But it is Kumlin's recent work that betrays

something deeply upsetting about the neoliberal relationship to history, society, and identity. As the artist dabbles in virtue signaling and we see her memorialization of



Tom Robinson, *Gallery 6 #2*, 2022.  
Mixed Media, H 13" x W 33" x D  
18-3/4." Photo: SoNa Gallery.



Lorylyn Kumlin, *Birmingham Girls*, 2022. Imagery Box Left to right: Addie Mae Collins (age 14), Carole Robertson (age 14), Denise McNair (age 11), and Cynthia Wesley (age 14). Mixed media, H 11" x W 19-1/2" x D 10-7/8." Photos: SoNa Gallery.

her participation in the 2017 Women's March in her 2023 *Crash Box*, she should also feel compelled to address the following questions in her work: what do the real-life subjects of your imagery boxes mean to you? Who are Rosa Parks, Katherine Johnson, and the four young victims of the terrorist attack on Birmingham, Alabama's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to you?

What is your relationship to these real, flesh and blood people, who lived, struggled, and survived? Why is their history yours to tell? Why was the original title of the piece *4 Lil Girls* (only recently changed to *Birmingham Girls*)? Why did you take the liberty of using the colloquial "lil" in lieu of "little"? Why have you entombed these girls in a makeshift funeral parlor, instead of one of their far too brief moments of play?

It's a pity that both artists have taken such misguided turns, especially when both Kumlin's and Robinson's newer pieces are compared to Robinson's past work. His past forays into woodworking are notable as they hint at a buried craftsman and possess a level of careful attention that is not found anywhere else in the show. Robinson's

"DeLawn" wood mosaic, part of his *Twins* series features the face of a young Black model, haloed by dreadlocks, and formed through alternating hues of wenge and ebony wood. The piece is itself a diptych, with the young model's face replicated in mirror image. The two mosaics are immense and dominate the gallery's back wall. The piece's size, in combination with its painstaking detail gives the show a much-needed sense of grandeur, a perspective other than the somewhat suffocating presence of both artists' self-fixation.

Perhaps this is the best note to close on: the search for something other than misplaced moral positioning or self-congratulatory fixation is long and arduous, but it can sometimes lead to the discovery of something interesting. ■

Annette LePique is an arts writer. Her interests include the moving image and psychoanalysis. She has written for *Newcity*, *ArtReview*, *Chicago Reader*, *Stillpoint Magazine*, *Spectator Film Journal*, and others.

Tom Robinson, "DeLawn" Twins Series, 2010. Wood Mosaic, natural wood (no stains), predominantly wenge and ebony, H 35" x W 68-1/2" x D 2" (each section of the diptych is 31-1/4" wide, with 6 inches between them). Photo: SoNa Gallery.



# Alieś Puškin

## 1965-2023

*by Chrysalis Magazine and the New Art Examiner*

**A**ugust 6, 2023, the internationally known Belarusian performance artist and political provocateur Alieś Puškin would have turned 58 years old. Instead, it was announced in July that the artist had died under “unexplained circumstances” while in government custody. The cause, according to human rights activists, was a combination of poor prison conditions and delayed medical treatment. He was one of 1488 individuals—133 of them members of the cultural elite--currently in imprisoned by the Lukashenko regime for their political views, a number that continues to grow. In cooperation with Chrysalis Magazine, a Belarusian contemporary art publication, the New Art Examiner commemorates the life, creativity and early death of this important artist.

Alieś Puškin was born on August 6, 1965, in Bobsk, a small village near Minsk, that had been home to his family for five generations, and where the artist himself lived until his arrest in 2021.

Pushkin enrolled in 1978 at the Republican Boarding School of Music and Fine Arts and later studied Monumental and Decorative Art at the Belarusian State Theatre and Art Institute (now Belarusian State Academy of Arts), but he was conscripted and sent to Afghanistan. Far

from a model soldier, he spent a total of 28 days of his short military career in detention for dissident activities, including 10 days for keeping a diary in the (then illegal) Belarusian language.

Upon his return home, Puškin continued his studies and held his first performance in 1988 on the occasion of the 71st anniversary of the Belorussian Peoples’ Republic. He described the performance in his interview for Chrysalis Mag in 2020:

“During [my] fourth year at the university, I’d been organizing happenings on the avenue, adorned with posters and megaphones. That is when those performances, walking exhibitions, started... I created 12 posters, invited friends, and together we marched to the House of Press, where we, a total of 36 people, were arrested. This resulted in a five-year probationary term, with two years of probation. But what posters they were!”

In this instance, as in other of Pushkin’s performances, the repressive official reaction of the authorities was understood to be part of the performance.



Alieś Puškin, *Galava*, undated image from smuggled prison sketchbook. Photo: Chrysalis Magazine.



(Left) Puškin confronts riot police at the 2020 protest in Belarus against fraudulent elections.  
 (Right) *Blue Man*, undated image from smuggled prison sketchbook. Photos: *Chrysalis Magazine*.

## **Gift to the President**

Puškin launched his most memorable—and provocative—performance on July 1999, on the fifth anniversary of Lukashenka's rule. In the village of Bobr, the artist loaded an old cart with manure and placed several items on top: a poster that read "Aliaksandar Lukašenka's with the people," a sign saying "For five years of work," pre-denomination Belarusian money, handcuffs, and the constitution with amendments expanding Lukašenka's powers. With the cart of manure, he headed to the President's residence in the center of Minsk on a minibus. When confronted by security, the performer then overturned the cart onto the pavement, placed a portrait of Lukašenka's on top, and pierced it with a pitchfork. Soon, AMAP (Special Purpose Police Unit) officers arrived and arrested the artist.

The court sentenced Alieš Puškin to two years of conditional imprisonment.

From that action until the end of his life, Alieš Puškin continued to engage in performance art and to routinely antagonize the increasingly repressive Belarusian authorities.

In 2020, during the massive wave of protests in Belarus for fair elections, Puškin held his own provocation. He was arrested during his street performance and taken to Akriescina prison, where he endured brutal beatings throughout the night. After his release from the prison, he took a photograph of his injuries, which later appeared at protests and international exhibitions.

After the start of the Belarusian protests in 2020, Puškin's performances caused considerable stir in the arts

community and beyond. Other activists quoted and reinterpreted it, and the artist himself recreated his work at the major exhibition "Everyday" held in Kyiv in 2021. Despite knowing about the criminal case already filed against him in Belarus, Puškin decided to return to his homeland.

The artist was subsequently detained in the village of Žyličy, in the church where he was working on restoration and sentenced to 5 years in prison on trumped up charges of disrespect to state symbols (Art. 370 of the Criminal Code) and incitement of hatred (part 3 of Art. 130 of the Criminal Code).

During his detention in solitary confinement, Puškin continued to draw and to smuggle the images out of prison. Some of his drawings were preserved thanks to human rights activists and can now be viewed on the website of the human rights center "Viasna" (<https://prisonart.spring96.org/about-us>). There, one can find works not only by Alieš Puškin but also by other political prisoners from Belarus.

Though one of the most prominent, Aleš Puškin was far from the only artist to lose his life fighting for freedom of speech and in protest to the illegal 2020 elections. Brutal repression of Belarusian cultural figures and their allies continues. On July 26, 2023 a verdict was handed down against activist, historian, and former director of the "Center of City Life," Paval Mažeika, and lawyer Julija Jurhilievič, who had defended Alieš Puškin in court. The Belarusian court has sentenced Mažeika and Jurhilievič to 6 years in prison. ■

# Wiley, Kitsch, and Politics

by Michel Ségard

**I.D.E.A.** (*Informed Discussion Engagement Area*) is an infrequent feature that allows a person in the art world to express a personal opinion about an art world issue.

**S**ebastian Smee, The Washington Post art critic, recently penned a review of Kehinde Wiley's show at the de Young Museum in San Francisco titled "Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence." Smee's review is titled "Kehinde Wiley is selling kitsch." But is he?

In his first paragraph, Smee states, "AI-generated art is sharpening our taste for art handmade by feeling and breathing artists," an assertion that reminded me of the complaints about the photorealists in the late 1960s (Robert Bechtle, Charles Bell, Chuck Close, Robert Cottingham, Jeff Koons, Richard McLean, and most famously Richard Estes, among others). Then, after a time, it was feared that this photographic style would take the life out of the art of painting. Nothing of the kind happened, and a little more than 19 years later, the neoexpressionists (Anselm Kiefer, George Baselitz, Francesco Clemente, Philip Guston, Julian Schnabel, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and in Chicago, Wesley Kimler) emerged in the 1980s with their hyper gestural treatment.

Later, Smee complains that Wiley's art is algorithmic and "leads with the concept, caring little for the sanctity and surprise of intuitive decision-making." In the context of modern 20th-century art, concept also drove the art of Joseph Albers, Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, Richard Serra, and Christo. An algorithmic approach may lead to deadening theoretical, academic exploration or minimalism devoid of human context, but it is, in itself, not kitsch.

GQ magazine described Wiley as "a self-styled Noah... called by calamity—[of] the world's museums, flooded with whiteness—to bring the art world a salvational brownness." That is actually not a bad description of Wiley's intent. And putting Wiley's works in Old Master galleries to unequivocally demonstrate that black and brown people are just as human and noble as white people is a sign that museums are finally edging into the 21st century. About time—this century is almost one quarter over.

Smee goes on to complain that you can buy skateboard decks with reproductions of Wiley's images on them. In today's world, you can get Monets or Van Goghs on a

Installation view of "Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence" at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. (Foreground) *Young Tarentine (Mamadou Gueye)*, 2021, bronze, and (Background) *Tarentine 1 (Babacar Mane)*, 2022, oil on canvas.  
Photo: Samantha Tyler Cooper.





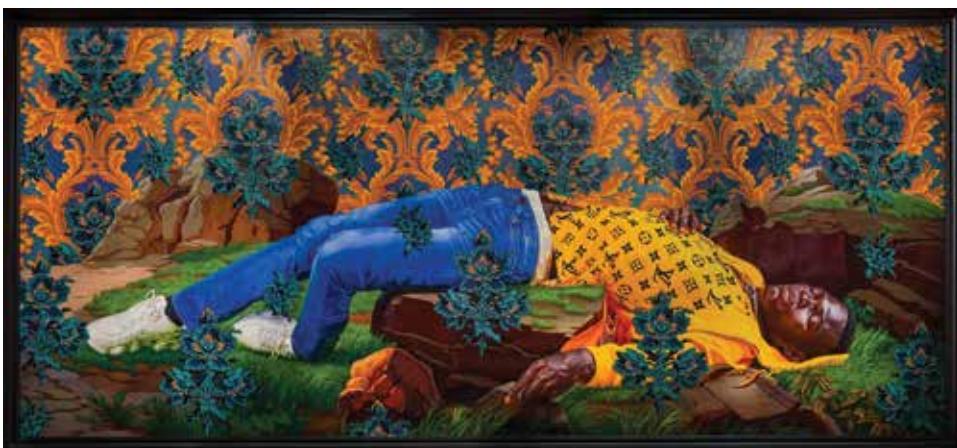
Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1647–1652. White marble and gilded stucco. Multi figure sculpture in Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Photo: Wikipedia.

shopping bag, Hoppers in calendars, and any number of other images by famous artists on scarves, jackets, tee shirts, coffee mugs, etc. One must also remember that Keith Haring actually started a retail shop that sold items with his images on them as a means to distribute his work to common people of modest means. The distribution of art images on everyday items does not make the artist a producer of kitsch. It is the distribution system that makes these reproductions kitsch with illogical placement of images of artists' works on improbable merchandise. And with this distinction, Smee is right to point the finger at museums, albeit indirectly. He complains about the

art-speak and overblown accolades associated with the exhibition. However, that is not the work of Wiley; the responsibility for that atrocity of pretentious verbiage lies with the curatorial staff of the museum that mounted the show. It is a phenomenon that is not restricted to the de Young Museum; there is an epidemic of incomprehensible, pompous art speak throughout the art world.

About kitsch, Smee states: "Kitsch, in other words, is rooted in emotional cliché (the sweetness of children running on the grass, despair about living in a society riven by inequities). It is, at the same time, self-congratulatory (how nice!) and presumptuous. The presumption is that everyone feels the same way as you. Kitsch is a bully." This passage brought to mind the Baroque masters who all played to the emotions of their audience, especially Bernini, Caravaggio, and Rubens. Are they kitsch? Some would think so. But the distinguishing quality of these artists that make them great is how emotional clichés are integrated into their work and used to carry out or provoke artistic discourse.

To argue for the creative force of accident in art, Smee quotes Francis Bacon who once said: "If anything ever does work in my case, it works from that moment when consciously I don't know what I'm doing." Smee argues: "Wiley's art doesn't work because he never doesn't know what he's doing." That brings me to Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Can you for a moment think that Bernini didn't know what he was doing? Bacon's remarks are in



Kehinde Wiley, *Femme piquée par un serpent (Mamadou Gueye)*, 2022. (Ugo Carmeni/Kehinde Wiley and Templon)

fact a romantic cliché promoting the myth of the solitary, tortured artist to which Smee has apparently subscribed.

Smee goes on to point out that Wiley's work is largely manufactured by a troop of assistants. Wiley only does the figure once the intricate background has been completed—just like Rubens (and many other late Renaissance and Baroque masters). He complains that Wiley's paintings have "no evidence of a thinking, feeling hand responding to light, shadow or color... We feel only the application of an assembly line formula." How, then, does Smee feel about 17th-century Dutch still life paintings with all the *trompe l'oeil* execution? What Smee fails to consider is that the impersonal, manufactured floral backgrounds are equivalent to the Louis Vuitton initials used as a fabric pattern on purses and luggage, and as such, Wiley's floral motifs function as a criticism of the high-end kitsch of White European culture.

Complaining about "the paintings' garishly bright colors and immaculate surfaces displayed in dark, chapel-like galleries," Smee equates them with "cheap Catholic kitsch," by trying "to make something horrible and dehumanizing seem sacred and beautiful." That sentiment suggests an anti-Catholic, even anti-Christian attitude. The historical fact is that Christianity has been doing just that for nearly

2,000 years, and that such practices had become the bedrock of most European art until the 19th century. Smee finishes his essay by saying: "By transmuting suffering into style, this show performs a similar operation. It exploits tragedy and the stench of societal failure only to deny its reality." That act is exactly what Western, European art (the foundation of U.S. museum holdings) has been doing since the fall of Rome. Wiley has merely taken the black experience and presented it in white, European terms and not through the lens of exclusively black culture. Wiley is "signifying" white culture about their exclusion of Black culture in Western art history.

I am not arguing that Wiley is the greatest black painter of our time. But by using compositions from historic European art and the repetitive vegetative backgrounds that Smee calls kitsch (which is actually a symbolic copy of white bourgeois product decoration), Wiley presents the black experience in a new light and encourages white audiences to rethink their views about black art. ■

**Michel Ségard** is the Editor in Chief of the *New Art Examiner* and a former adjunct assistant professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is also the author of numerous exhibition catalog essays.

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