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Malleable Perspectives

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MALLEABLE PERSPECTIVES

By

Erik Daniel White

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Major: Art

Under the Supervision of Professor Matthew Sontheimer

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MALLEABLE PERSPECTIVES

Erik Daniel White, M.F.A.

University of Nebraska, 2019

Adviser: Matthew Sontheimer

I attentively paint hastily formed figures, symbols, objects, and scenes that were modeled with never-dry clay onto stretched canvases of various sizes. I paint the malleable character of the clay by depicting its bumps, marks and dents, which emphasizes the fragility, impermanence, and the physical construction of the forms. Those visual attributes serve as a metaphor for the social construction of the concepts within the chosen imagery. To create my images I build clay up and physically move it around—in a similar way, ideas and concepts get built up, manipulated, and changed over time. These paintings serve as a cultural critique and a meditation on some of America's attitudes towards the environment, food consumption, peace, liberty, tax policies, religion, and our obsession with competition. Many of these ideas converge and relate with and inform one another. This selection is not comprehensive of every American attitude and because of its evolving nature this is not an end to a project but a beginning.

Scale and color are important aspects for communicating the political content of my paintings. Hierarchical proportion in painting is used to depict the relative importance of the subject matter. A classic example of this is in medieval art when Jesus or Mary gets depicted larger than the surrounding figures. I have inverted this technique to critique current Western values. Many of my paintings are larger, not because the subject matter is praiseworthy, but because I see our culture overvaluing these subjects. That overvaluation is represented in an exaggerated scale shift. For example, when I place my six-foot painting, "Winner Takes All," depicting an oversized medallion, in proximity to

my eleven-inch painting, “Shrinking Liberty,” portraying a figurine of the Statue of Liberty, they stand as a visual representation of how I see many Americans valuing their own success above extending the same liberties, upon which their success depends, to less fortunate individuals who were born outside (and inside) our borders. It would be one thing to believe in a meritocracy if everyone were given the same opportunities for success, but in America there are far fewer doors being held open for impoverished individuals.

My painting “Based on a Childish View of the World” symbolizes the fabricated fantasy that having a big suburban home with a big yard and a big car to drive around will make us happy and keep us safe from the “dangerous” world outside, when really that dream has adverse effects and is causing all kinds of social and environmental problems. There’s a really nice passage that sums up my impetus for this piece in a book called *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* by Lewis Mumford. He eloquently states, “In the suburb one might live and die without marring the image of an innocent world, except when some shadow of its evil fell over a column in the newspaper. Thus the suburb served as an asylum for the preservation of illusion. Here domesticity could flourish, forgetful of the exploitation on which so much of it was based. Here individuality could prosper, oblivious of the pervasive regimentation beyond. This was not merely a child-centered environment; it was based on a childish view of the world, in which reality was sacrificed to the pleasure principle.”¹ We get so focused on our own individual existence, and purposely ignore the extreme inequalities and global catastrophes that are happening around us, even though our consumeristic lives and privileges couldn’t exist without the exploitation of other human beings and the natural world. We live in our own little fairytale fantasies. I also, by design, made the car

disproportionally larger than the house—which might appear to be a childish mistake—but I wanted to push the idea that the American suburbs are dependent upon cars and long commutes.

I made the dollar bill and loose change paintings when the Republicans passed their tax bill that gave large tax breaks to big corporations and the wealthy. A couple of weeks after Trump passed his tax bill, he started cutting funds for SNAP benefits and Medicaid for the poor. Our institutions are failing our poor right now, and we should be ashamed of ourselves. It is a complete fantasy to think this tax bill is going to help the majority of Americans and not widen the already catastrophic divide. Charles Darwin once wrote, “If the misery of our poor be caused not by laws of nature, but by our own institutions, great is our sin.” Fortunately, I don’t think very many people are too impressed with the tax cuts and I hope more people will come to realize what adverse effects it will have in the future.

With my paintings depicting the peace sign, I wanted to discuss what the peace sign means today and how that meaning has changed over the past 60 years. There’s a scene from the movie *Groundhog Day* that illustrates my ideas surrounding this body of work. In this scene, the main character, Phil (played by Bill Murray), is trying to initiate an intimate relationship with the female lead, Rita (played by Andie MacDowell). Because the day keeps getting repeated over and over again, he has the ability to correct any hiccups in the day. At a certain point they order drinks at a bar, and Phil toasts to the groundhog. Rita replies, “I always toast to world peace.” It then cuts to the next day where Phil makes a heartfelt toast to world peace. This is a seminal moment for me for two reasons. First, Phil’s insincerity and ulterior motives when he makes his toast can be paralleled with the history of the commodification of the peace sign, which, in part, has

caused the demise of its agency for change. Second, this scene feels antiquated and highly improbable today. The majority of Americans no longer believe in world peace or the prospect of a world without conflict and war. People no longer make toasts to world peace because if they did, they would be seen as being overly romantic and naïve. My peace sign paintings are a nostalgic reflection on an optimistic world-view. I made this work to illustrate my hope that we can one day regain a mass vision of a better world.

There's something very playful and humorous about enlarging these micro environments made out of never-dry clay. When I was a kid I was infatuated by clay animation videos and I think that has influenced my work today. I like how clay animation tries to pass a handmade micro-environment for reality; it's very humorous and slightly awkward. Similarly, I make forms in a very playful and childlike way but I contrast that by using sophisticated painting methods to render those forms onto canvas. My paintings are often humorous and disarming. Comedy is important because it defuses and charms the audience and allows them an entry into the content; without that comedic buffer these issues are demanding and often unappealing.

Most of these paintings depict popular symbols and ideas, to which we each bring our own histories and distinct meanings. In the end, my hope is that the paintings are used to rethink, reimagine, and prompt conversations about these ideas. Our political climate is becoming more and more polarized, and I'm looking to find and develop a voice that is somewhat humorous and somewhat serious but which ultimately creates opportunities to discuss important issues. My politics are embedded in the work. These paintings are an extension of how I feel and think about the world, but I do not want the work to be objectionably didactic. The political right and the left hate each other right now and

whenever something happens that hurts or defies one side, the other side relishes that misery. That is not how we progress. We progress together, in common understanding.

Documentation of Exhibition:



Title Wall and *Red Meat with Veggies*, Oil on Linen, 46 x 30.5 inches



Based on a Childish View, Oil on Canvas, 69 x 51 inches and *Peace Out*, Oil on Canvas, 25 x 28 inches



Winner Takes All, Oil on Canvas, 66.6 x 75.5 inches and *Spare Change*, Oil on Canvas, 19 x 19 inches



In Bad Faith, Oil on Canvas, 66.6 x 75.5 inches, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, Oil on Linen, 36 x 48 inches



Shrinking Liberty, Oil on Linen, 7 x 11.5 inches

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ⁱ Mumford, Lewis. *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. San Diego, New York London. Harcourt Brace & Company, 1989, p. 494.