

“Walking a Mile in Their Shoes”

by

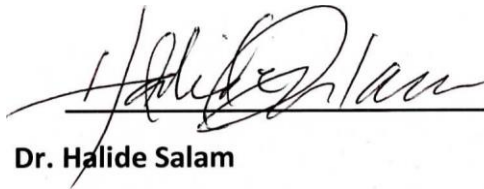
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Walking a Mile in Their Shoes

MFA 2017

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Abstract

My work addresses a variety of social, political, and economic inequities in society that are largely the result of the inability of many to empathize with others. It is often the case these individuals can empathize, but only through personal ties with family, or immediate groups. I include an aspect of dark humor in my approach that reflects the sense of myself as a cynical optimist. Overall, these paintings are a visual representation of my feelings about social issues and my sense of empathy regarding those issues seen through a pragmatic lens.

A great deal of what goes on in my paintings is related to what issues elicit an empathetic response in me. I proceed to formulate a visual representation in which I communicate not just the specific issue, but the overarching problem in general. Depending on my concept for the work, I look for images that are either generic people who can serve as archetypes, or in some cases specific individuals. I work from both photo-references and drawings composed from various photographs. In some cases I utilize live models and still life objects.

While many works are composed in oil, if the imagery I want to create would be better served by other media, such as collage, and found objects, I don't hesitate to employ them. If any materials seem appropriate, I take advantage of what works best.

Within the parameters of the Postmodernist tradition, I often appropriate imagery or themes from artists of the past, having borrowed from such artists as Munch, Ensor, and Bacon in my compositions.

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Dedications

I have to thank both my wife, Ya Qi Chen Gibbs, and my Father, Dr. Gerald V. Gibbs, Ph.D. for their support. Without the two of them, this would not have been possible.

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Joel Gibbs, Fall 2018

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Earlier Works	3
Influences	6
Empathy	12
Power Imbalances	14
Empathy and Power Imbalances in Selected Works	15
You have to have a License	15
Benny the Rat	18
Bad Monkey	24
Techniques and Materials	27
Contributions	36
Bibliography	38

Introduction

“Before you criticize someone, walk a mile in their shoes. That way, you’ll be a mile from them, and you’ll have their shoes.” Jack Handey

While on the surface this is just a silly quote from a nonexistent philosopher, in many ways, it sums up two of the driving forces behind my work; empathy and cynical humor. In the age of the 24-hour news networks and an internet brimming with information of various levels of credibility, it is hard to escape the wider world and the events contained therein. When you are an information junkie, you dive deep.

As a pragmatist, I am interested in separating the real from the “fake” and am often alarmed by the victimization and marginalization of various people and groups. When I hear or read a news item that resonates with me, I start to visualize it. I then proceed to glean images and motifs from popular culture and other artists and set myself to try and assemble a tableau.

Using actual people or archetypes, I endeavor to present images that communicate the feelings that I have within me. I then look for ways to express these thoughts and emotions to the viewer. In my more cryptic work, I am satisfied if the viewer understands the issue, if not the specific incident.

Working primarily in two dimensions and mostly in oils, I also utilize found objects, acrylics, drawing tools, collage, and printmaking. My goal is to explain greater problems through singular events, taking full advantage of the materials available to me.

I recognize that in this world of excessive media exposure, it is easy to become too demoralized. Regardless, I am an optimistic cynic, a condition that provides the alchemy needed for dark humor. Despite the injustices and horrors, I understand that we all need ways to deal with the issues. Sometimes you have to laugh.

At the end of my freshman year at Virginia Commonwealth University, my foundation professors and my advisor determined that the best course going forward for me was to enroll in the Painting and Printmaking program. Upon receiving this news, my father asked, “What sort of job do you think you can get with this degree?”

My response was that as it was fine art, it would be difficult to get a job in the field or make money as a painter. I said I realize that art is not essential for society. Fine Arts don’t feed, clothe, or house anybody. It’s decoration, an embellishment. A country could do what is essential without the Arts.

My father frowned and said, “No, art is a cultural gyroscope. It gives our civilization character; it represents its highest ideals.” He went on to explain that art is relevant as a moral force and in charting a people’s direction as a society.

This idea was passionately communicated to me by a man whose career was in the Sciences, but had not denied paying for his two eldest sons to study music and painting respectively. It resonates with me today. It is the genesis of what moved me to address our society and the issues of today through my painting.

I graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University in the Spring of 1988 with a BFA in Painting and Printmaking and no clear direction. During the next nine years, I supported myself by tending bar, took classes intermittently, and traveled widely.

After a time I tired of the late and long hours and sought something else. In 1997, my father offered to send me back to earn my BFA in Art Education. I hoped that with more regular hours and a more conventional career related to the arts, I would be motivated to be more productive.

I taught in rural North Carolina for four years, but after initial success and a sense of accomplishment, I moved to Wake County, where the work proved less than satisfying. In 2005, I moved to China and taught oral English. I returned after two years and from 2007 until 2016, I taught

secondary visual arts. Becoming disillusioned with my job, I decided to return to university and earn my MFA. It has been an unparalleled opportunity, and I have benefitted immensely.

Earlier Work

Upon my return to the States, I began producing paintings based on my experiences in the People's Republic. I took copious photographs during my time there and felt they would be good subject matter for some new works.



Figure 1. Self-Portrait with Sasha's Uncle, 2008.

The first painting in this series was a self-portrait with my friend Sasha's Great Uncle (see Figure 1). It, too, was applied with a fair amount of added linseed oil on primed illustration board. With a nod to Chinese scroll painting, I used the yellow of aged silk in the lower right. The final acknowledgment was the chop mark of my name in Chinese character *Qiao* (pronounced jiao) or "bridge." I produced several others in this manner, culminating in *Hello Girl* in 2013 (see Figure 2). I continued with the idea of the background being a silk scroll by once again painting it yellow, on this occasion rendering the objects in the environment in a "drawn" graphic style.



Figure 2. *Hello Girl*, 2013.

In the years preceding my acceptance at Radford University, in 2016, I returned to painting on canvas. In the *Noodle Eaters* (see Figure 3), I kept the yellow background and rendered the figures in a more painterly fashion. As a small homage to Alice Neel, I left the bottom right-hand corner unfinished. In the largest and most populated of the works, *Yunnan Ladies* (see Figure 4), I discarded the silk scroll style and painted the ladies much as they were: sitting on a bench in front of a rural market.



Figure 3. Noodle Eaters, 2015.



Figure 4. Yunnan Ladies, 2016.

Influences

Like many boys, I enjoyed comic books. Unlike my friends who preferred the superhero variety, I preferred Mad Magazine. I especially enjoyed the parodies that were off-color, irreverent, and well drawn. The artist that excelled in these spoofs of movies and television shows was Mort Drucker (see Figure 4). His ink work and skill at caricature stood out from rest. Although some of the pieces I would read might have been better written, I felt that the most interesting ones were the best drawn. His high level of skill as an artist improved the parodies markedly.



Figure 5. *The Oddfather*, Mort Drucker, 1972.

A high school friend introduced me to the work of Ralph Steadman through Hunter S. Thompson's "gonzo" novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (see Figure 6). I was completely enamored of the artist's technique. His combination of splatters, agitated ink lines coupled with geometric shapes was a match for my sense of disorder. The dark humor at play in his work appealed to me as well. Many of my early collegiate figure drawings would appropriate this sensibility. I would often use a

toothbrush to spray ink droplets on the paper and use broken twigs to apply ink. I found this unpredictable application of the medium exciting.



Figure 6. Illustration, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, Ralph Steadman, 1972.

My undergraduate years exposed me to many more artists. Appreciative as I was of unique and expressive linework, it was logical that the Austrian Egon Schiele would influence me. I especially admired his active and spontaneous hand demonstrated in his series of Russian POWs (see Figure 6). Schiele considered drawing a primary art form and mastered the technique. The expressive linearity of his drawings carried over into his paintings; they are masterpieces of contour and line. His canvases often appear more to be painted drawings than oil paintings in the traditional sense. His technique was quite influential on my figure drawing in my undergraduate years.

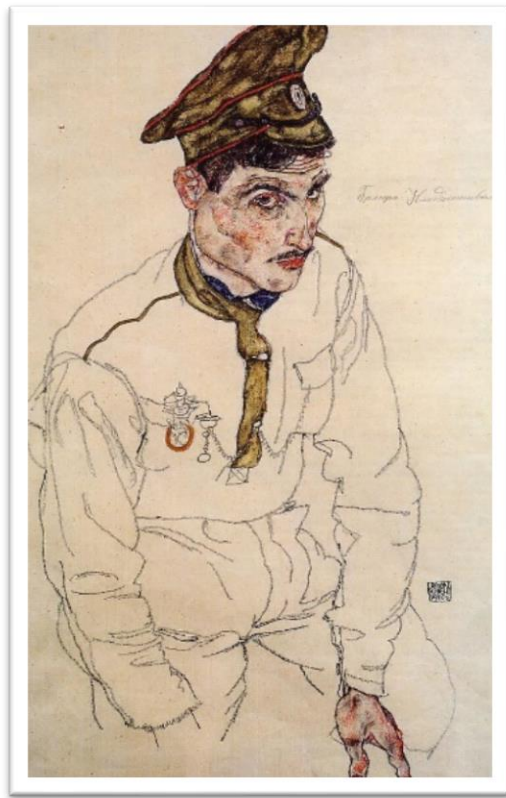


Figure 7. Russian Prisoner of War, Egon Schiele, 1915.

As my figurative painting evolved, I began to reference the American artist Alice Neil (see Figures 7 and 8). Her brushwork and expressive colors were appealing. Again, as was the case in the works of Schiele, I found the graphic characteristics of her paintings something to emulate. When I started my series of Chinese paintings, her work was definitely on my mind.

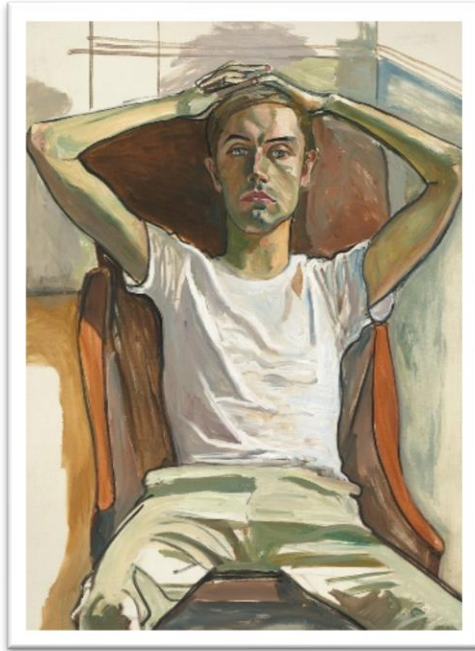


Figure 8. Hartley, Alice Neel, 1965.

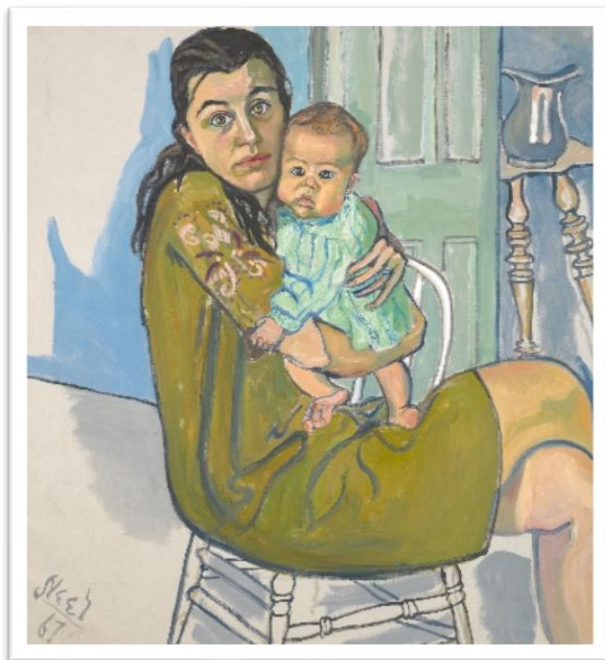


Figure 9. Mother and Child, Alice Neel, 1967.

Conceptually, but certainly not materially, I appreciated the works of Honoré Daumier. During the Reagan years, I was forming a complete sense of myself as a political person, and I found his prints especially interesting. Daumier's biting sense of humor and often brutal caricatures took the rich and powerful to task. I could begin to see a direct association between what I was personally experiencing and what Daumier was depicting over 150 years earlier. In the 1980s, I was becoming increasingly aware of the widening gap between the haves and have-nots in this country. Works like the artist's 1831 *Gargantua*, depicting King Louis Phillippe enriching himself at the expense of the poor, seemed apt (see Figure 10).

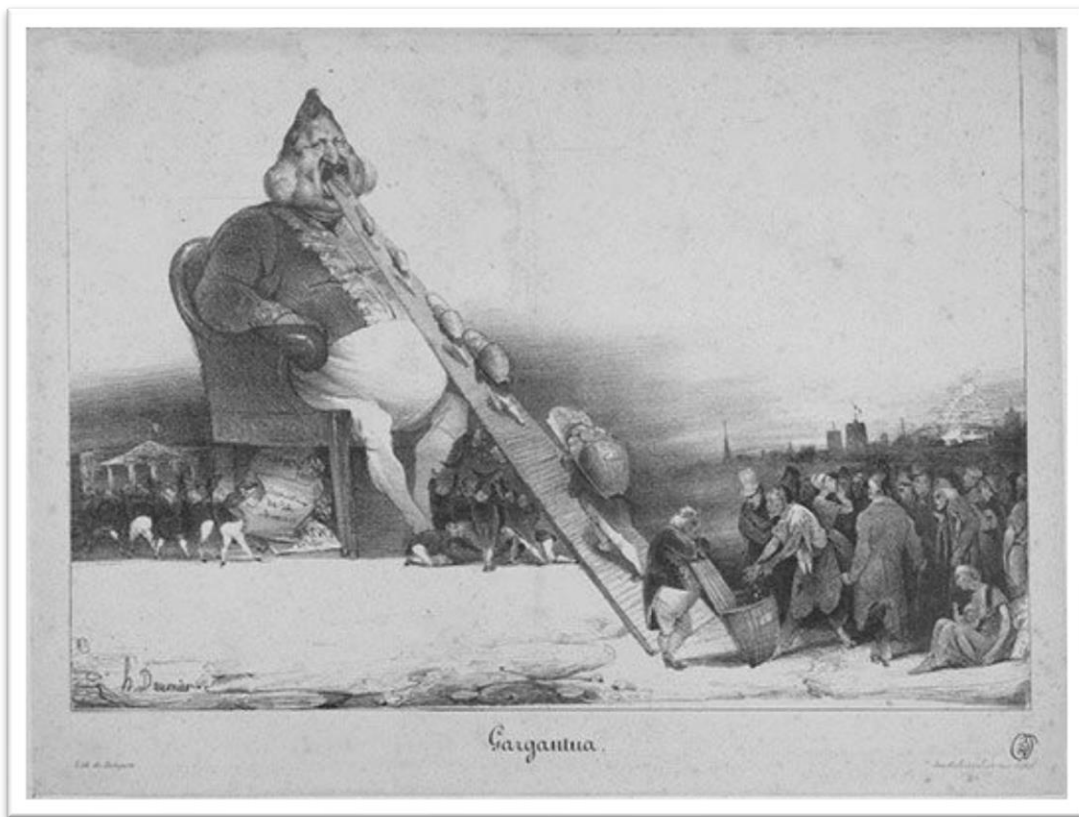


Figure 10. *Gargantua*, Honoré Daumier, 1835.

I truly appreciated his lithographs, having learned the technique and knowing what it takes to produce them. Additionally, as an artist who was sometimes inclined to create caricatures, I found his

prints exciting in their grotesque and subversive nature (see Figure 11). Where I find Daumier influenced me the most is through his political themes and my occasional use of caricatures in my paintings (see Figure 12).



Figure 11. Caricature of Adolphe Thiers, Honoré Daumier, 1838

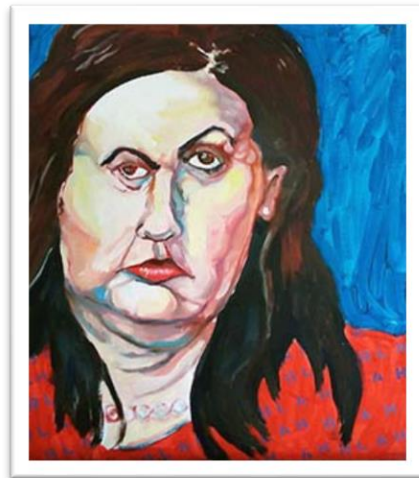


Figure 12. Smokey Eye, Oil on Canvas, 2018.

Outside of the visual arts, the subject that has interested me the most is World History. My readings on the topic extend from Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* to Martin Gilbert's three-volume *History of Twentieth Century*, and from James MacPherson's definitive work on the American Civil War, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, to Mary Beard's *SPQR*. I am convinced that we cannot see ourselves objectively without placing our current situation in context. Through my readings, I can reconcile our times to larger historical narratives and put things in perspective.

Easily half of my reading over the years have been histories of the Twentieth Century. I have been keenly interested in the two World Wars and the intervening years. It is in that vein of curiosity that I came across the artists George Grosz and Otto Dix. As of late, they resonated with me anew as I

get the sense that we are living in a slow-motion proto-Weimer state. I have the distinct feeling that the United States, like inter-war Germany, is suffering from a national trauma. The onset here has been slower, but that does not diminish its impact.

It is in this atmosphere that I revisited the German Expressionist artists, George Grosz, Max Beckmann, and especially Otto Dix. Authoritarian leaders are rarely concerned about rights and certainly have difficulty with empathy. Their work motivated me to take a socio-political direction in my painting. It is through this lens that I began to examine the society around us to try to understand the issues, symptoms really, of a nation under stress.

Empathy

The English word “empathy” has its origins as a nineteenth-century translation of the German *Ein feeling*, or *in (in) funhlung* (feeling). Etymologically, it is from the Greek *empathia*: *en (in) pathos* (feeling, suffering, or passion). The Germans who developed the idea (William Wundt, Robert Vischer, and Theodor Lipps) were proponents of German aesthetics, a theory that beauty did not inhabit an object itself; rather, it was the judgment of the viewer who projected onto the said object. By extension, it was this projection from subject to the object regarding “feeling” that shaped the individual’s understanding of the feelings of another. The total of the subject’s life’s experiences is brought to bear in the emotional assessment of the “other.”

Currently, the issue of empathy is being revisited by many authors, in the realm of politics and morality, and from how we approach problems from our singular point of view. There are concerns as to how empathy relates to rational decision making. In 2016, Yale researcher Paul Bloom released his book, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, in which he argues that empathy, as he sees it, is destructive and drives us to make bad choices. It is in this environment that I feel that I must be clear of what I mean when I speak of empathy as it relates to my work.

In Copeland and Candide's book *Empathy*, the authors list what they determined, in order, are the most popular definitions of the word:

- (A) Feeling what someone else feels
- (B) Caring about someone else
- (C) Being emotionally affected by someone else's emotions and experiences, though not necessarily experiencing the same emotions
- (D) Imagining oneself in another's situation
- (E) Imagining being another in that other situation
- (F) Making inferences
- (G) Some combination of the processes described in (A)-(F)¹

In my case and for my purposes as an artist, empathy is about "walking in another man's shoes" or "imagining oneself in another's situation." Bloom argues that the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith's sense of empathy, "feelings what others feel and, in particular, feeling their pain" is problematic.² He frowns on this sort of reaction as being "biased and parochial" and rather prefers "cognitive empathy." That is to say, he finds the notion of trying to "find out what is going on in other people's heads"³ is less emotionally charged and dangerous. His contention is that empathy as a moral instrument is too focused and doesn't take into consideration the broader effects of one's more narrow perception. I recognize his fear of good intentions having wider unintentional, negative results. Bloom argues his point well, but to create works that address a particular incidence that stir empathy in me, to manage to create a single piece, I must focus on my feelings and my subjective sense of morality and outrage.

1. Amy Copland and Peter Goldie, *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

2. Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 35.

3. *Ibid.*, 36.

Power Imbalances

We like to think America is a meritocracy that everyone is playing on a level playing field. Sadly, more and more studies indicate that social mobility is on the decline and many European nations are more equitable in this regard.⁴

My sense of empathy focuses on those who are at the mercy of those in power, such as authority figures who exploit children. We have too many instances of abuse perpetrated by those in positions of power who parley trust and rank into the most egregious advantage. As bad as this is, it is just one example of the many types of imbalances common in the country. It is not a new phenomenon, but it is sad to see it on display in a state that imagines itself to be just and ethical.

Wealth, position, power, race, and gender have laid bare the myth of American meritocracy. They have created a social order that favors a select few over the many and have insured that if you are born to the right family, you are immune to repercussions. Inequality is not just a weapon in the victimization of the weak, but it often shields the entitled from punishment.

4. Dadush, Uri B. *Inequality in America: Facts, Trends, and International Perspective* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), 21.

Empathy and Power Imbalances in Selected Works

You have to have a License

To give an overview of how my work relates to my sense of empathy and its association with imbalances of power, I chose three representative works that I consider significant in the development of my concept and technique.

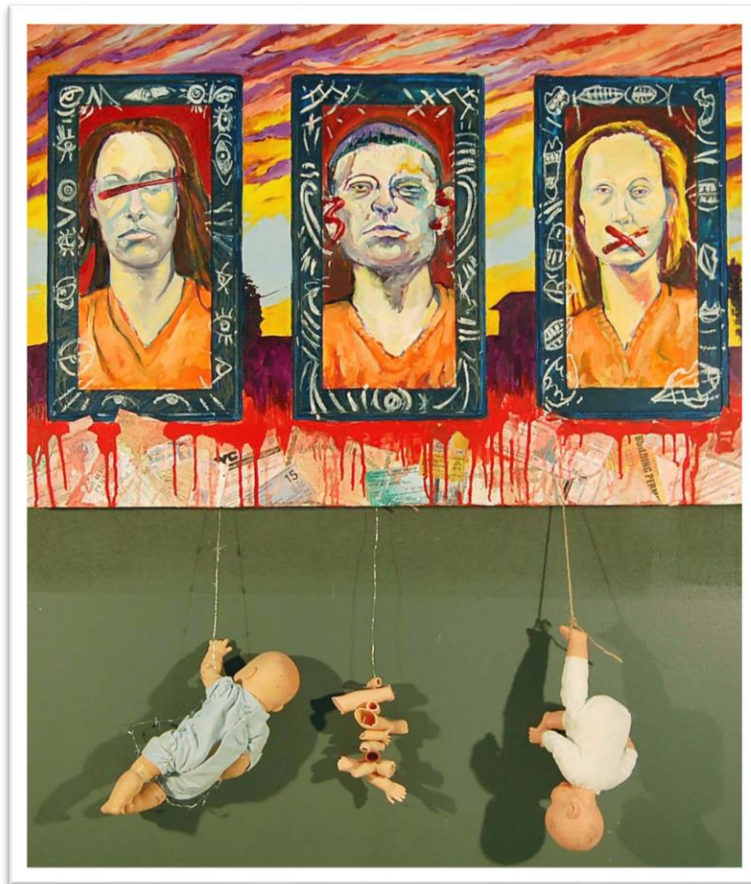


Figure 13. You have to have a License, Mixed Media, 2017.

The first painting to address my concept is *You have to have a License* 2017 (see Figure 13); This mixed media piece was a marriage of various materials and techniques. It is the genesis of the works that addressed empathy and imbalances and my feeling regarding the powerless.

On the very eve of the first day of classes in the fall of 2016, I was initially horrified and eventually artistically inspired by the story of the murder of ten-year-old Victoria Martens. She was drugged, brutally raped, and killed by her mother, Michelle Martens, her mother's boyfriend, Fabian Gonzales, and Gonzales' cousin, Jessica Kelley.

Empathetically, to feel for this girl, victimized in the most inhuman fashion, takes little effort. What makes the story cry out to me is both the victim's age and the relationship she had with the perpetrators. A crime of this sort is terrible enough when committed by strangers. What makes it so much worse and profoundly unbalanced is that her mother was involved. Whereas a child may be conditioned to fear "Stranger Danger," what defense is offered to children when it comes to their own family? Your mother?

The fact that the perpetrators were meth users is important to note. Would Victoria have been brutalized and killed if her mother had not been an addict? Would she still be alive today if she had been raised in a stable household by a clean and productive parent? It is indicative of how completely we have failed in addressing drugs and addiction. Politicians pay a great deal of lip service to the problem, but the collateral damage of this national crisis is intruding on the lives of more and more people.

The panel I had previously purchased with the three framed areas lent itself perfectly to a triple portrait. What intrigued me was that the looks on the face of the trio were so impassive (see Figure 14). I felt it imperative to capture this "Banality of Evil." In fact, in her booking photo, Kelly's face seems blasé.



Figure 14. Detail, *You have to have a License.*

I felt that it was essential to document the issue as a tragic event rather than a shrine to the victim. Additionally, I believed it necessary that my work should represent an overarching theme as well as stand as a testament to a single, tragic, incident. The jumpsuits indicated that the portraits were those of criminals, the red “gashes” of paint covering the eyes, mouth, and ears on the three were a cryptic message that they saw, spoke, and heard no evil; there is little doubt that the trio is evil.

The title comes from the film *Parenthood* (1989), an otherwise unremarkable piece of cinema in which Keau Reaves’ character relates his sad childhood and states, “You know, Mrs. Buckman, you need a license to buy a dog, to drive a car - hell, you even need a license to catch a fish. However, they’ll let any butt-reaming asshole be a father.” I agree with this sentiment. Raising children is arguably the most critical task of our adult lives, but we require no evidence of skill or competence.

Daily women and men are bringing fragile lives into the world that they cannot manage to nurture. Whether it is due to age, immaturity, or lack of concern, it is the children that bear the brunt of their ineptitude.

Gracing the background with an Albuquerque sunset and the ersatz foreground with various collaged images of licenses completed the central tableau. Red paint was added to be a not so subtle indication of butchery, but what of the victim? She is the pivotal figure in the tragedy. How should I represent her?

I completed a small portrait of young Victoria Martins in Prussian blue and red on a small 6"x 8" panel, but that seemed trite and came off as a little too precious. It would do too much to fashion the work as a shrine. A suggestion by Dr. Salam to reference Robert Rauschenberg inspired me to go the route of found objects. By binding plastic baby dolls in both scale rope barbed wire, flanking a string of dismembered doll limbs, I was able to allude to violence perpetrated on a child without painting the child directly.

Benny the Rat

In January of 2016, I came across an article in the New Yorker Magazine, *What Pope Benedict Knew About Abuse in the Catholic Church*, by Alexander Stille.⁵ It was a damning piece about the retired Pope's behavior as Pope John Paul II's second-in-command. It detailed the actions and inaction of the Church in regards to the ongoing child abuse scandal. It exposed his protection of clergy while he headed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: a department, or Curia, that was founded as an

5. Alexander Stille, "What Pope Benedict Knew About Abuse in the Catholic Church," (*The New Yorker*, January, 2016), www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-pope-benedict-knew-about-abuse-in-the-catholic-church.

institution whose mission it was to defend the Catholic Church from heresy. It is the oldest and possibly the most powerful of the nine Papal departments and had been tasked to cover up the scandal.

Although I am no longer a Catholic, nor a believer of any sort for that matter, I keep abreast of news about the Church. Stille's piece didn't break any new ground about actual abuse, but it did firmly point an accusing finger at a man who as John Paul's number two was someone who "had more ability to know and act more than almost anyone."⁶

Ratzinger was an easy visual target to caricature as his features, even in a smile, have a sinister aspect (see Figure 16). I wanted to maintain my focus on his actions before he was Pope, allowing myself a jibe in the title of the painting. I had heard a comedian equate the Pontiff to a mob boss with the moniker Benny, short for Benedict, and Rat, for Ratzinger, thus, Benny the Rat (see Figure 15).

Having a menacing looking Pontiff wasn't quite enough. The Pope himself took up the majority of the canvas, so where else could I paint? The vestments seemed a logical choice mainly because they occupy a prominent place in the composition; replacing the golden threaded stole's more pious imagery with ones of my own making seemed appropriate.

6. Ibid.



Figure 15. Benny the Rat, 2017.



Figure 16. Pope Benedict XVI.

As a young member of the Catholic Church, I never had the urge to be an altar boy, nor was I pressured to do so by my mother. Many of my friends were, and although I was close with some of them, I never heard of the priests in my parish acting in a way that was inappropriate. That said, there are stories of victims waiting decades before revealing their pain. Due to shame or a sense they will not be believed, or possibly attacked by doubters, many take their awful secrets to their graves. In the course of my life, more than a few sexual abuse stories have been told to me by close female friends. These stories and how it affected them are devastating.

While listening to these friends, I always came away with the sense that part of these women had died a little due to the abuse. Whether was it rape, or molestation, by a trusted family member, or family, they all communicated a sense of helplessness and undeserved shame. I could not help but sympathize with them and was angered by the advantage taken.

I chose death as the motif for the Pope. I see the clergy as men who are morally dead and the children whose psyches were so gravely emotionally wounded. The stole was tableau upon which the gold thread displayed images of childhood and death — a Church that had become the murderer of souls rather than the Savior: the malevolent Shepperd. I surfed the internet for medieval imagery that I could appropriate (See figure 17).



Figure 17. Detail, Benny the Rat.

For the area behind the Pope, a suggestion by Dr. Salam that I look into the Belgium artist James Ensor was fortunate. Whereas I had initially thought of populating the background with images of bankers and dictators as the nefarious characters that cling to and pay lip-service to religion, studying Ensor directed me elsewhere. He was often at odds with the faith and politics of his day.

Ensor's macabre masks that "seem instead to gather into themselves all the malignities (sic) of the beings they purport to disguise"⁷ were ideal. To those who know the artist, my reference is apparent, but to those who do not, they are suitably grotesque figures. Their comic-tragic appearance struck me as ideal for the painting (see Figures 18 and 19) .

7. Roger Van Gintertael, *Ensor* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 158.



Figure 18. Detail, Benny the Rat.

from Ensor



19. Detail, Benny the Rat

from Ensor

The final touch was a nod to the English painter Francis Bacon. Remembering Bacon's 1953 painting *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (see Figure 20), I appropriated the purple and yellow, as well as the painting style, to complete my Pontiff, partly as reference to the painting, which is a study of another work, but as a nod to the Atheism both Bacon and I share.

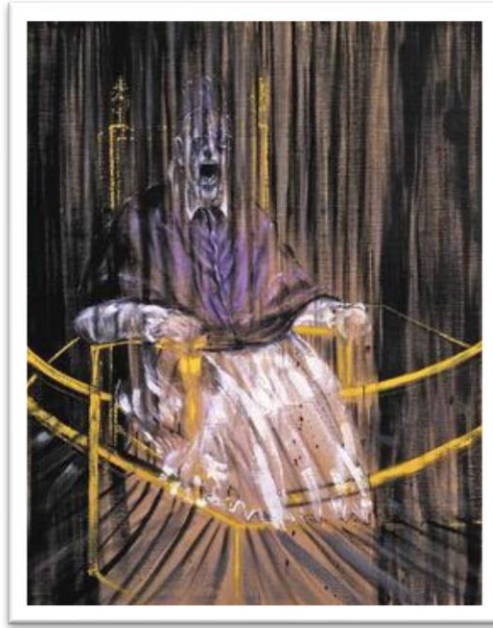


Figure 20. Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X, Francis Bacon, 1963.

Bad Monkey

In January of 2016, North Korea arrested 20-year-old University of Virginia (UVA) student Otto Warmbier in Pyongyang for attempting to steal a propaganda poster from his hotel. Tried for being part of a plot involving Methodists, UVA, and the CIA, the regime sentenced him to fifteen years in the notoriously brutal prison system. Warmbier did not serve his sentence as the North Koreans released him after he lapsed into a coma, a condition from which he would not recover. The young man would pass away in June of 2017.

I started the painting *Bad Monkey* (see Figure 21) shortly after his death. It was striking that this prank perpetrated by a young, likely naive, college student resulted in his incarceration in a concentration camp for such a minor transgression. He was not only a victim of the North Korean regime, but the poor relations between the DPRK and the United States. He was another pawn (puppet) in the vicious politics that have played out between America's various leaders and the Kim regime in North Korea.



Figure 21. Bad Monkey, 2018.

As in the case of Victoria Martens, my task was not to make the painting a shrine to Warmbier, so it didn't enter my mind to render him realistically through portraiture. Instead, I preferred a stand-in, an effigy. The notion of the UVA student as a class-clown struck me immediately, as well as the young man inadvertently becoming a puppet in the bigger game. It was an instantaneous choice to render him as a sock monkey — an image that is at once whimsical, pliable, and defenseless against a police state.

Some who have seen the painting have said that it is mean-spirited and that I am taking a shot at young Otto by replacing him with the monkey figure. I often see myself as an inherently optimistic person with a slightly dark cynical sense of humor. To my thinking, the puppet is a sympathetic figure. I see him as an innocent university student who just thought that it might be “cool” and funny to have this poster hanging in his room: a memento of an unusual trip. Additionally, it struck me on a personal level. As a world traveler who tended to enjoy myself, I have not always avoided trouble. In 1988, I was briefly

arrested and later released without charges in Switzerland. As fearful as I was in a small Swiss jail, I imagine young Otto's situation was beyond terrifying.

In my painting, the guards are the impassive arms of the regime, physically taking away the forlorn monkey after sentencing. Stoic and entirely correct in their uniforms, they stare ahead blankly in the routine of so many who are just “following orders.” I suggested puppeteers by rendering the semi-obscured heads of the three Kim dictators. They are the catalysts behind the scenes and are once again using a minor incident to stick a finger in America’s eye. Warmbier is the unfortunate puppet being used to elicit legitimacy for their dystopian regime.

Most Americans have only an inkling of the sort of helplessness that the average citizen experiences at the hands of these sorts of governments. My time in China was only slightly touched by the authoritarian state there. Not being able to discuss Chinese politics or having to surf a censored internet were minor issues in comparison. Always in the background was the fact that as a foreigner, I would have very little recourse if a sort of incident would put me at odds with the Chinese authorities. Thankfully, I never had any difficulties, but it was unsettling to realize I was living in a country where I had few rights.

In some quarters, there were malicious attacks on Warmbier, making claims that his behavior was an example of the sense of American entitlement. An adjunct professor at the University of Delaware lost her job over a Facebook post regarding Warmbier. She opined that “Warmbier got exactly what he deserved” and that he is “typical of the mindset of a lot of the young, white, rich, clueless males who come into my classes.”⁸

The firing of the instructor is another issue, but the sentiment is harsh. How much can we attribute to entitlement, and how much to naivete? How much was the attempt to take the poster a

8. Derek Hawkins, “Professor who said ‘clueless white male’ Otto Warmbier got ‘what he deserved’ won’t be rehired.” WP Company, 26 June 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/06/26/professor-who-said-clueless-white-male-otto-warmbier-got-what-he-deserved-wont-be-rehired/.

result of him being a spoiled white boy? To what degree was Otto the innocent abroad whose life experiences in no way prepared him for the malevolent force we all know as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea? My feelings, coming from my own experiences as a "stupid white boy," allowed me to be more generous in my assessment.

Techniques and Materials

My works have almost always much followed the same formula: After I come up with an idea, the next step is to construct my composition. Ideally, I would like to reference real live models and actual objects and architecture. Sadly, organizing the figures and items I would need for most of my works is not practical.

The internet is the home of an infinite amount of images and is readily accessible. The challenge is in choosing the most appropriate and effective ones. In some cases, if the subject is a real person whose face needs to be recognized, I am quite careful in the choice of the image. Often, I will take liberties with figures or combine aspects of various persons to create a stereotype or character that is best suited for my painting.

On occasion, I execute a separate drawing first, especially if I plan to make more distortions. I sometimes complete a series of these before starting on the canvas. I utilized this method in composing my composition for 2017's *Puberty* (see Figures 22, 23, and 24).



Figure 22. Preliminary sketches for *Puberty*, 2017.



Figure 23. Detail, *Puberty*, 2017.

In other instances, I paint directly from the photo references, sometimes running through the HDR toning tool in Photoshop, to get the level of contrast in the images that I desire. Once I have found the photos that I need for the painting, I begin to sketch and paint, working around the various figures to keep a level of technical consistency. After that, I start to consider the environment they will inhabit. In this case, it was a combination of palm trees and a fiery California sky.



Figure 24. *Puberty*, 2017.



Figure 25. Photo reference, Puberty 2.



Figure 26. Puberty, in progress, 2018.



Figure 27. Puberty 2, in progress, 2018.

I work almost exclusively with oil paints, but have found that for expediency's sake, acrylics are useful if I am in need of a quick-drying underpainting. It is not a technique that I use often, but it was helpful in the painting of *Only the Best People* (see Figure 28), as I was in need of a fast-drying surface upon which I could stencil. I also found that acrylic was much more usable in regards to stenciling as it is a water-based medium and is kinder to the stencils than oil, which would permeate the cardboard.

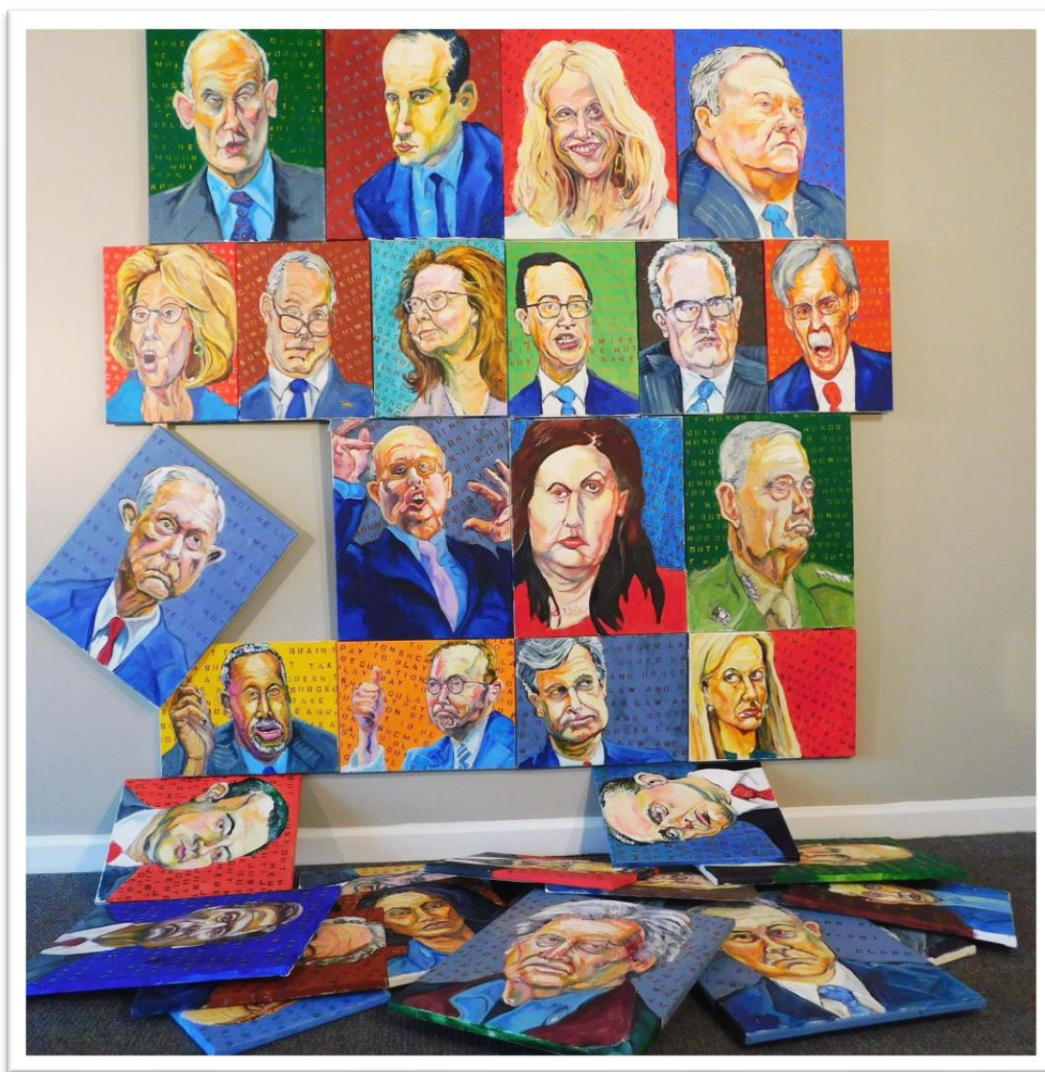


Figure 28. *Only the Best People*, 2018.

When sketching in oils to capture likenesses, I hold the brush loosely. Applying the paint this way results in slight distortions that bring out the character in the individuals portrayed (see Figure 29). As ensuing applications of color subsume the sketches, mistakes that might arise from this technique are unimportant. Having to paint 36 (and likely more) portraits for *Only the Best People*, I became quite adept at this. I routinely do not wait for the sketch to dry. Immediately painting in a wet-on-wet method allows for the foundational brush marks to influence the following applications of color, often to a good effect.

At the time of this writing, *Only the Best People* consists of 36 canvases. The first challenge in each portrait was to find photos that I felt best exemplified the individuals, as the stenciled messages behind each of them were not enough. The second was to get the likeness right. This leaves room for some distortion, but not too much, as I needed the subjects to be recognizable. (Figure 30) The application of the paint was immediate and had much of the liquid feel of my earlier still lifes. Using this technique, I could sometimes paint two portraits a day.

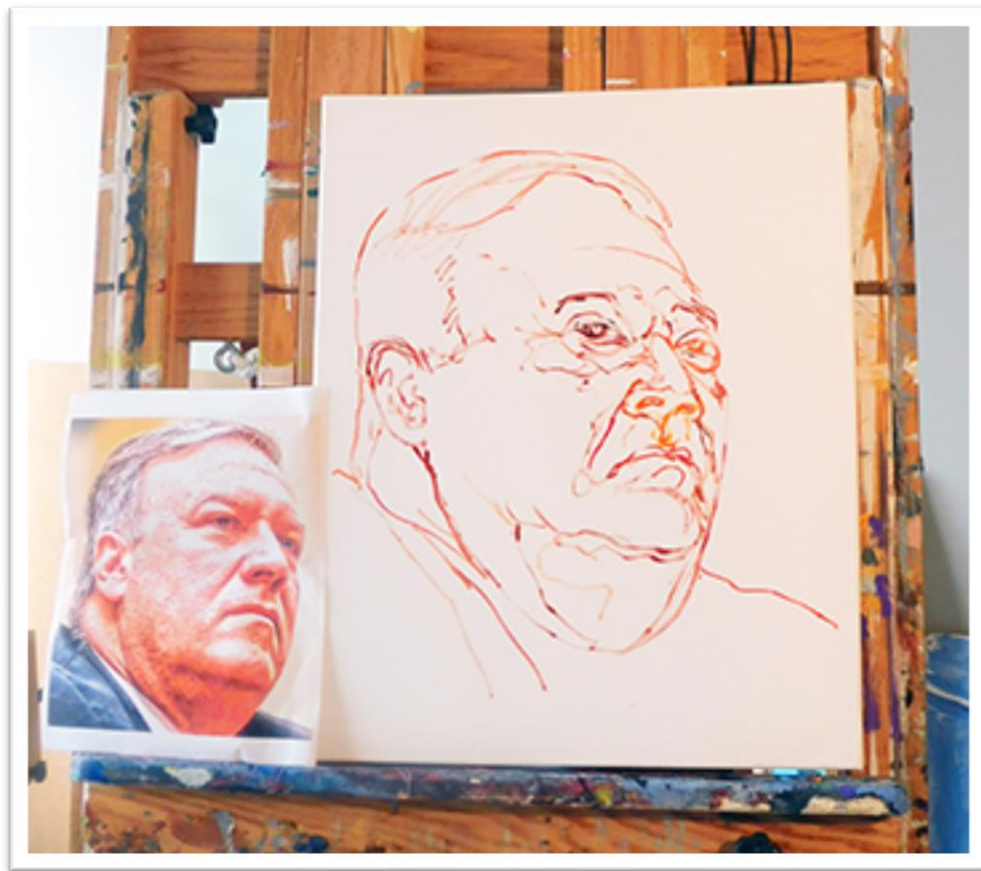


Figure 29. Pompeio, initial sketch.



Figure 30. *Pompeo*, in progress, 2018.

Mistakes or marks that I don't find satisfying can be erased, altered, and corrected at this point. A rag with mineral spirits quickly removes the offending paint. One of the advantages of wet-on-wet is that if I find that the whole portrait is not to my liking, I can obliterate the image. I have erased full canvases at this stage.

Letting the paint dry also has its advantages when it comes to taking care of mistakes and adding finer details. I rarely worry, as the oils are opaque, because you can always paint over it. These multiple applications can increase the texture on the canvas, but this is often beneficial as well.

On the subject of texture, over the last two-plus years, I have taken the advice of those who encouraged me to apply more of a surface on some of my canvases. This technique has worked out well on larger portraits, but when the painting includes smaller faces, it isn't as successful. Large portraits, as in the case of *Father* (see Figure 31) and *Bad Monkey*, came together quite well with the use of a heavier

application of the oils. In the case of the portrait of my father, I have not only used palette knives, but I also have applied paint directly from the tube.



Figure 31. Father, 2017.

The use of materials was quite a bit different in both my earlier mixed media pieces, *Puberty* and *Third of May* (see Figure 32). Acrylics were ideal for my desire to apply flat, even areas of color were. Additionally, it allowed me to work over painted areas with Caran D'Arche wax crayons, and ink and graphite. I also applied the graphite directly into wet gesso. I reserved this for the figures in the foreground, who needed to be more detailed.

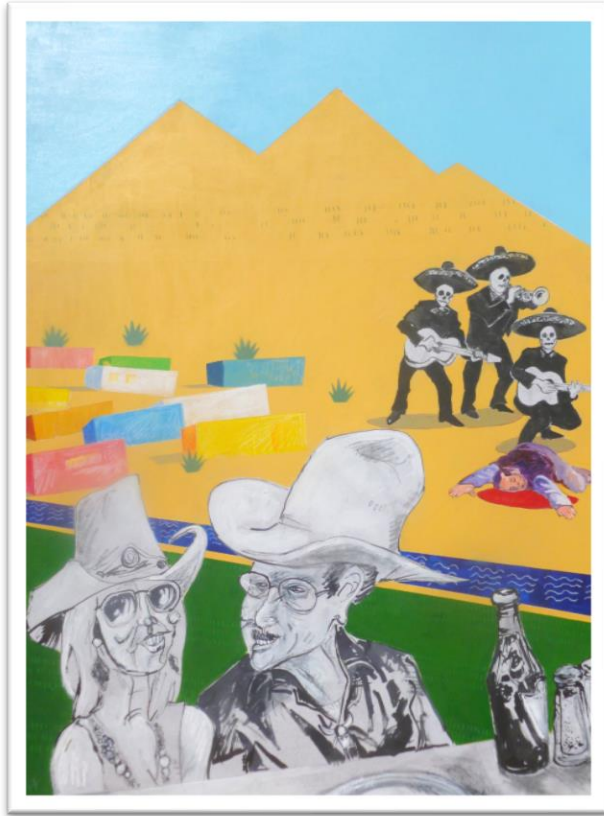


Figure 32. Third of May, 2017.

Contributions

My fondness for the illustrations of Mort Drucker and the parodies of *Mad Magazine* inspired me to be irreverent, controversial, and topical. As with those drawings, I feel that there must be an aesthetic quality that brings the viewer in, while the subject might make them uncomfortable. Like some of the German Expressionists, I want to shine a light on the side effects of our ongoing national trauma.

Additionally, I remembered what my father had said about art and society, his assertion that art is a cultural gyroscope. I felt the need to be part of that gyroscope. My mission is to address our ideals and our better selves by shining a light on where we are lacking. My contribution is to open a discussion about our failings and imbalances through my critical eye and my brush.

The current political climate is precarious, and I'm not alone in wondering if democracy in America is under siege. When I paint a work such as *Halal Diplomacy* (see Figure 33), I am not just creating a work documenting the literal butchering of the *Washington Post* reporter Jamal Khashoggi, but by extension, I'm also pointing the finger at the Trump Administration, and its constant vilification of journalists.



Figure 33. Halal Diplomacy, 2018.

I feel the need to use visual arts much like journalists, and the messages of my paintings are admittedly editorial. I hope, through my tableaux, to reach the viewer and to encourage them to think about the actual incidences or the broader issues therein. I desire that they understand the political and social climate that would allow or not prevent these things from happening. I consider myself a canary in a coal mine. In that vein, I'm a continuation of the tradition of artists such as Otto Dix and Honoré Daumier. It is my contribution to stand on their shoulders and to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

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