

# BRUTAL WORLD

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## ABSTRACT

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History repeats itself. My large scale paintings and small ceramic sculptures embrace historical and fictional characters from past and present, powerful/powerless, good/evil, humorous and satiric. The paintings are executed with rough, quick strokes with large characters painted on wide scale canvas, up front in a dominate position to project power, triumph or tragedy. The dramatic, bold colors in which they are painted project the raw brutalism of the culture in which they are produced. Incorporated into my practice are social and cultural commentaries to show the over-arching theme of war, oppression, injustice and suffering on a massive and individual level.

## MY WORKS OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY

*Driver has no cash* (Fig.1) is a painting of a bus carrying convicts, separated from society, trapped and controlled by outside forces, inspired by an article by Alois Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland, The Early Stages* 1902. In the article, Riegl looks at group portraits found only in North and South Holland from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. The portraits were either painted in full size or half size figures at the time, usually life size in dimensions, side by side (like in a bus), wearing the same emblem, belonging to the same organization. The group appears to not have a relationship with each other except through the shared emblem, seen as isolated and without emotion or movement. With the article in mind, I noticed convicts dressed in orange suits getting off a white prison bus on the side of the road. They had a look of isolation, unemotional hopelessness and though dressed alike, had no connection to one another but the situation they were in. I painted the group in *Driver has no cash*, to be similar to *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, as being disjointed and unemotional, side by side, almost seen as wearing masks to hide their identity, but in modern times. In *Driver has no cash*, I used the contrast of the sterile whiteness of the bus and the bright orange suits of the occupants to create an eerie, empty feeling. Paint was applied with a rough texture on inexpensive Masonite board matching the insignificance of the occupants. Their faces were painted very quickly as to not reveal distinct details, distorted, almost zombie-like faces, to emphasize that there is no way out of their situation. On the bus, the convicts are trapped by their own wrong endeavors as a result of their inability to fit into our structured society. People not wearing orange suits could also be in the same bus, sharing the same situation of being trapped in their lives of unfulfilled desires.

The painting, *The Parade*, (Fig.2) has its roots in my childhood. Part of my childhood was either watching my sisters' march in parades or participating in them, especially remembered was the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade and feeling the excitement of it all. The patriotic sounds of drums, marching feet, candy being thrown from floats, runaway balloons, screaming babies in carriages and children being held back by their mothers or on strong shoulders of their fathers, crowds of happy excited people, are part of my memories. The marching participants in the parade: scouts, community organizations, school bands, fire departments, and Miss Town Pageant Queen, made our town prosperous, strong and a perfect place to live. It was a time to celebrate with family and friends, to devour food, fun and beer, to rejoice that we were glad to be Americans, living in the "land of the free." It was natural for me to entangle these memories with my discontent of the present social situations. This procession better matches our time.

To begin this piece, I began brainstorming who was in the parade of my childhood parades and started making small sketches, preparing for my own parade on canvas. I was constantly making changes as I decided what characters should be included. The process reminded me of my childhood bedtime ritual. As a child I had at least 30 different stuffed animals on the edge of my bed, all named and carefully placed next to their friend so they would not fight in the night. I would then decide who gets to sleep on my pillow with me that night. It was a ritual, saying goodnight to all and then tossing them one by one, to hit the ceiling three times. If I didn't always make the hit on the ceiling and fell short, I had to start all over. In the end I would finally make the important decision of the night and choose the lucky one. As in all my paintings, there is a similar ritual to choosing the juxtaposition of each character in order to bring an outcome that will enforce the viewer's understanding of my work.

In *The Parade*, the discontented majorette leads disjointed, soulless marchers of hidden faces

and costumes as they pass the viewer awkwardly. My ideas formed from past photos of the KKK burning or hanging African Americans and from recent shocking videos and photos of ISIS, about to decapitate our captive Americans. The KKK can be seen marching in American parades despite being a terrorist organization. ISIS on the other hand may be hidden in our society now, but could potentially grow to a similar position as the KKK and openly exist in our society. Our unresponsive Uncle Sam is seen in *The Parade*, with closed eyes, not addressing the past KKK or the present ISIS. I placed an African American pageant queen on a float in front of the KKK to satire the hatred that this group has instilled onto the black community. . The Statue of Liberty, an icon of freedom, holds an army gun instead of a torch, representing the constant fight and struggle to protect people's rights against discrimination of race, religion and gender. The painting shows a pharmaceutical symbol, advertising the sale of drugs on a soldier's drum, seen as a healthy part of our community and country. Ronald McDonald, a fun character for kids, is a captive only to the very company he represents, and his purpose is shackled to their first priority, making money. Socially, our children are used as status symbols; young girls are forced to take expensive dance lessons to keep up with the Jones'. The Cub Scouts are seen idolizing the dollar bill in their marching sign to later grow up to believe that money is happiness; all conforming to defend a nation that closes its eyes to the destruction, injustices and the truth.

While painting *The Parade*, I also made a hand-printed book, *Come Join Us (Fig.3)*. The book contains the same characters drawn on single pages: majorette, cub scouts, Statue of Liberty, soldiers, KKK, ISIS, dancing girls, captives, Ronald McDonald, Uncle Sam and army tanks. They finally reunite in the end of the book as a complete parade.



The 60's were the starting point for the piece *1969: Vietnam, Woodstock & Civil Rights* (Fig. 4). Outside my college window in 1969, the world seemed to be in an upheaval of defiance. This was a time of miniskirts, Hendrix, flower power and drugs. People were questioning traditional ways and fighting for human rights all around me. It was a revolution, an exciting yet confusing time of social change: Vietnam War protests, racial riots, the feminist movement, the first man on the moon and the famous Woodstock Concert.

I decided, metaphorically, to "go back in time" and paint all these happenings in a single piece. Since I was dealing with three different protests at the same time, my process of deciding who to include was a difficult task in order for them to co-inhabit in one scene. Again I brainstormed, not knowing which section or event I should start with. How do I make everyone be separate but belong together, sharing the same era? In *The Parade* I began painting from right of the canvas to the left, going along with the procession. I found that I needed three different sections telling their story, so I progressed from the left this time to the right as I found it difficult to work all sections at once. This gave me time to change anything along the way. As I progressed with the painting, my composition changed often. I added and deleted characters, changed backgrounds, made sure weight and the repetition of colors of the characters balanced each other compositionally. The art of social commentaries to injustices of that time echoed in the words of songs, speeches and protest poster signs that I was surrounded by. I have recorded Civil Rights posters such as *I have a dream*, *I am a Man*, and war protest signs of *Stop the War*. I replaced a sign in a café window that in 1969 may have read, "No Blacks Allowed" with one that reads, "No Gays" in 2015. In portraying the Vietnam War, I replaced the face of the Statue of Liberty with the face from the 1969 poster for the musical "Hair"— a controversial play of freedom vs forceful enlistment to fight in Vietnam. I intervened satirically with a modern day,

non-Christian ISIS soldier; holding up the Christian cross, with words of *God is Dead* scrolled on it, referring back to a recent movie, *God is Dead*, where the main character had to prove that God was still alive. Alfred E. Newman, a character from *Mad Magazine*, is included, as there were always responses to the Vietnam War written in the magazine. I represented the lack of psychological and medical support for the returning vets with the classic Peanuts character Lucy. She had a stand where she gave out advice for a nickel. In my painting she wears a Jason mask from the more recent horror movie series. I symbolized the slaughtering of our soldiers then in Vietnam with the slaughtering of cows by fast food corporations, relating to Picasso's tortured people and animals in *Guernica*. Uncle Sam, shown as a pig, is carelessly leaning on the Vietnam Memorial Wall while a corrupt Nixon peers around the corner. Through all this destruction, ironically, Snoopy and Big Bird were born, and a man landed on the moon, serving as a distraction to the significance of war and injustice.

The injustices to humans have not changed for thousands of years. The painting, *World at War* (Fig.5) depicts characters going back as far as Egyptian and Viking days, through the Crusades, Roman gladiators, The Trojan War, Napoleon, the Civil War era, War of Independence, WWI & WWII. Some could be identified by their attire and others by their mask or facial appearance. The painting compares the past with present wars and events by combining the prominent players of the time such as Napoleon to an armored Uncle Sam, and a captive POW 2016 to a captive Joan of Arc, all in a single space.

It seems the same traits of war exist no matter how far back in time you reach. In the painting as well, child video character Mario is seen dying because wars kill childhood fun and joy. Orcs from the movie "Lord of the Rings" and Darth Vader from "Star Wars" represent the violence that is so much a part of our daily amusements and culture.

In organizing all subjects in the *World at War*, it was important to brainstorm all the possible recipients that would co-inhabit the scene. Choosing the right ones to juxtapose with other characters was important. Again, I draw a small sketch of each one's position after temporarily deciding on most of them. When painting, there was a need to have a balance of weights with colors and shapes that would all fit compositionally, in a group picture. I painted all figures so it would seem like this group was standing directly in front of you and you could touch them or be a part of them. To get a sense of depth and atmospheric perspective, I painted the fallen Twin Towers and smoke on the distant horizon and a receding hillside of undetailed cowboys and Native Americans. In the middle ground the Trojan horse stands in half of the Colosseum painted in light colors. Inspired by artist Leon Golub's techniques of spreading thick paint layers and then scrapping into this, I painted heavy rough textures over and over again on Uncle Sam's and Joan of Arc's amour and Napoleon's coat. Again, I satirically put a cross in ISIS'S hands in front of the Christian Joan of Arc, who is with Hitler on the same burning stake.

To coincide with the characters in the painting, I have created ten clay miniatures of the characters in the *World at War* painting, to bring them to life, so to speak, replicating their nature and their colors including: Trojan Horse (Fig. 6) and Joan of Arc (Fig. 7), Darth Vader (Fig. 8), from a recent Star War movie, and Mario (Fig. 9), from a child's video game. They are rough-hewn, unrefined as my characters in the painting. Switching from flat characters made of paint to basically giving the flat figures a form with clay was exciting and rewarding.

The figure in the painting *Rehana* (Fig.10) is based on both the biblical character of Judith and the female Kurdish freedom fighter Rehana. Lucas Cranach the Elder who painted *Judith with Head of Holofernes*, mimicked a story about a beautiful widow who, with her womanly but clever charms, made way into the enemy's tent, General Holofernes, who was about to destroy

her town. Because of his desire for her, he allowed himself to be seduced, drinking until he fell asleep. She then decapitated him with his own sword. Judith became the “seducer-assassin,” masquerading as a seductive woman with long flowing hair, fashionable clothing, gold jewelry and delicate stature. She veered away from the normal role of women at the time, relying on men for strength and defense, and took it upon herself to do the deed that would be more expected of a man and less expected of a woman.

In the painting I equate Rehana to the biblical character of Judith. Rehana, like Judith, has chosen to go outside her womanly character (a character that society sees a woman to be) in order to protect her people. Rehana left law school to join the Kurdish army against ISIS, fighting alongside men. I have replaced Judith with Rehana’s portrait in my painting, holding the bloody sword that ended the ISIS soldiers’ life and holding the gruesome head. My painting is influenced by Cranach’s painting of Judith, portraying her as an innocent, delicate woman, smiling sweetly and with flowers as a background, painted nails, who is now masquerading as a soldier.

I connected Joan Riviera’s “Womanliness as Masquerades” 1929 to Rehana. Riviera states that women who wish to exert masculine power may masquerade with a kind of overt womanliness to avert what men may think of them. Rehana gave up her normal role of a woman to fight the enemy ISIS. Perhaps she had been masquerading as a woman before but now had the chance to indulge into her masculinity in participating in warfare against ISIS. There are few, I believe, women that would take up this assignment (even if the enemy killed your father as they did hers), feel secure with one self, fighting and killing men, as well as being identified as one of the men, unless they were somewhat masculine. I painted Rehana to remind society

that women may not be as strong physically but are as strong minded and intelligent as men and have the ability to accomplish multiple roles, being a soldier and a woman, at the same time.

Women are labeled for certain roles due to a patriarchal social system where men are in authority over women as in Judith, Joan of Arc and also Rehana's society. Women are looked at as being domestic caretakers of their children and homes because of their lack of strength and masculinity as compared to men. Going outside the norm, the certain role as did Judith, Joan of Arc, and Rehana and so many others are seen in a different light. Some societies may look upon this role change as courageous and strong while other societies may look with a discriminating and judgmental eye.

## CONCLUSION

Using the tradition of expressing social commentary artists have drawn attention to the cruelties and injustices common to the human race. I have chosen to continue this tradition to connect the past with the present by commenting on today's media's willingness to profit by showing actual killing, governments who incite suffering and the ugly culture which is the result.

FIG. 1 Driver has no cash



FIG. 2 The Parade





FIG 3. Come Join Us

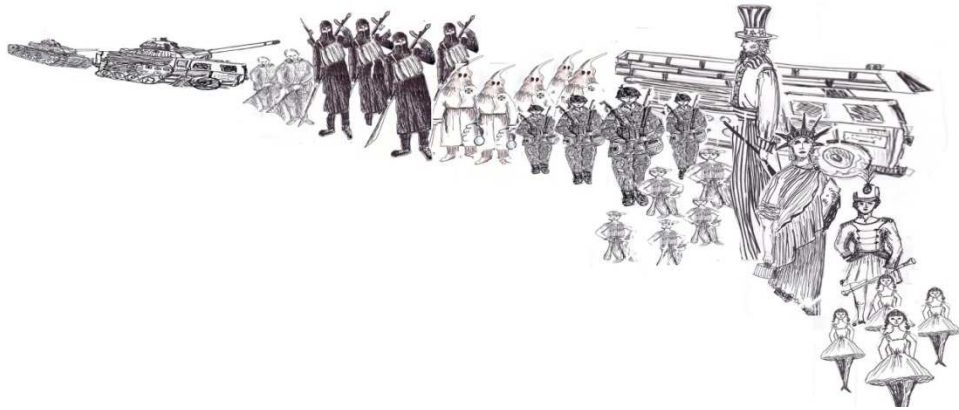


FIG. 4: 1969: Vietnam, Woodstock & Civil Rights





FIG. 5 World at War



FIG. 6 Trojan Horse



FIG. 7 Joan of Arc



FIG. 8 DARTH Vader



FIG. 9 Mario



FIG. 10 Rehana



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