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HYPERALLERGIC

Mark Thomas Gibson's Cartoons See the US Going Nowhere

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By John Yau
March 19, 2023

Americans don't speak to each other much these days. They yell, stamp their feet, and take positions on everything. A storm cloud of violence is roiling the air. Since January 1, 2023, there have been nearly 100 mass shootings and we still cannot discuss possible solutions in a polite manner, much less agree on what constitutes a massacre. This is one reason why Mark Thomas Gibson is an artist of our time and more: he sees what is going on and has just enough distance to remain civil, and even a tad optimistic. He is able to find human folly in his subject matter. Unlike newscasters and other pundits, he never expresses shock. Instead, he recognizes that there is a pleasure and (so far) safety in the making, which allows him to infuse his work with humor. If Thomas Nast, who is considered the “Father of the American Cartoon,” has an heir, it is Gibson, who goes one step further and elevates caricature and commentary into art. Such is my impression after visiting his recent exhibition at Sikkema Jenkins & Co in Chelsea, Manhattan.



A whirligig is a toy that spins around and goes nowhere. That is Gibson's view of the country's current political and social situation, and he is not wrong. That bitter deadlock — for which few can see any peaceful outcome — is the show's primary focus.

He gives viewers lots to look at and think about in 12 works, ranging from collages and graphite on paper to ink on canvas. The latter works are detailed cartoons on the scale of a painting. If one measure of both a cartoonist and an artist is the originality of a motif, then Gibson is already a standout. He has developed images, such as anthropomorphized steam whistles (a jaunty sign of American industry) and hands passing a magician's black cloth over a pile of bricks, from which a white hand is emerging. Is the magician making something appear or disappear or both?

In “Whirly Gig” (2022), Gibson depicts two pairs of tangled legs and arms, one dressed in blue and the other in ocher, against a black-and-white printed ground. The hands of the person in ocher are white, while the hands of the other person are brown. The background of curving, stylized forms seems to be a kind of printed material.

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As the centerpiece of the exhibition, “Whirly Gig” evokes the US’s current struggles regarding race, civil rights, voting access, education, and just about everything. We see only the interlocking limbs, no faces. Gibson never indicates why they are struggling. This ambiguity is what separates him from political cartoonists.



Though inspired by topical events, such as the January 6 attack on the US Capitol, Gibson does not identify his source in this exhibition, except in “The Show Goes On” (2022), where we see a crumpled placard with “TRIP” (Trump) on it. The broom suggests that January 6 might be receding in our rearview mirror, but the forces that enabled that day’s explosion of vehemence are still very much with us. Part of it is, as the title indicates, “a show,” a disavowal of history and reality.

When he includes lines from Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” and The Rolling Stones’ “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” in “Rally Jams” (2022), along with clasped white hands, a burning cross, a hood that resembles something between the Ku

Klux Klan and Casper the Friendly Ghost, a pair of hands holding a red sheet, provoking the bull whose horns are visible, and a blue chain-link fence in the background, it is hard not to think that Gibson is trying to turn his fears into humor. He is trying to get a handle on what is roiling both the United States and his everyday life.

In “All A Go (Steampipes and Hands)” (2022) Gibson offsets anthropomorphized steam pipes with a brown hand in the upper left-hand corner reading a book by Édouard Glissant, the great Martiniquan philosopher, poet, and critic. Against the backdrop of building walls against others, Gibson offers the alternative philosophy of Glissant, who wanted to think beyond the narrow definitions of identity and essentialism.

In his large ink on paper, “Mark and the Shark” (2022), Gibson re-envisioned John Singleton Copley’s best-known painting, “Watson and the Shark” (1778–82), which depicts nine men in a dory rescuing 14-year-old cabin boy Brook Watson from a shark attack. As an adult, Watson, who had become a successful merchant and later Lord Mayor of London and director of the Bank of England, commissioned it. In “Watson and the Shark,” Copley depicts a Black sailor at the apex of the painting holding the rope that will help the victim, who would famously defend the slave trade and was described by the American prisoner Ethan Allen as “a man of malicious and cruel disposition.”

What does it mean to rescue a man who supports slavery and believes others are subhuman? That is one of the questions Gibson asks when, in “Mark and the Shark,” he replaces the nine men in Copley’s painting with the same number of self-portraits. That question hovers over this exhibition and Gibson’s work. What would happen to the United States if Black people no longer worked in positions that benefit White people? Would those very people continue to be as shrill and loud as Gibson’s steam pipes?