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BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

MARK THOMAS GIBSON: *Early Retirement*

By William Corwin
October 14, 2017

I know it is futile—an impossible dream—for me to join Mark Thomas Gibson’s *NRA* (Negro Rifle Association), but longing is a major component of the magic associated with comic books. The invention of fantasy associations and institutions like the Justice League and COBRA is one of the main attractors of comics and graphic novels alike. Comics allow for the appropriation of aspects of existing organizations, and then incorporate a topping-up mechanism—increasing the powers inherent in these bodies, both human and metaphorical; in this case it is an expansion of anger, irony and rebellion, in the face of a foe who bears little improvement with satirization. My only criticism is that Gibson’s *NRA* (all works are from 2017), an inky drawing that simply and effectively changes two words in the standard NRA crest (“National” to “Negro” and substitutes in the motto “Everyday”), is that it doesn’t appear again in the exhibition. The images in *Early Retirement*, Gibson’s third solo show at the gallery, are paintings and drawings for an upcoming monograph of the same title. Perhaps more explanation lies in the text.

Gibson doesn’t indulge in bells and whistles for the sake of creating a spectacle exhibition—he presents a selection of work that approximates a narrative plot. There are clear bad guys: *Trump’s Entry into Washington*, an ink-on-paper companion to *NRA*, displays a be-tusked leader looking only slightly more warthogish than in real life. Here, he is carried on a paladin by a bevy of swimsuit models while an orgiastic bacchanal precedes him. Gibson pulls on all the comic book tropes of over-the-top sex and evil in the style of Will Eisner. The bystanders in *Trump’s Entry into Washington* express wild enthusiasm and drink publicly with skeletons spread out through the crowd. By staying true to his comic book lingo of caricature and intense extremes, the blunt irony found in the succinct *NRA* is somewhat foregone.



Poised against the cartoonish super-villainy of Trumpland is the seeming anti-hero: a black and blue demonic figure seated amongst books in the paintings *Library 1* and *Library 2*. Who is this emaciated intellectual whose books bare titles such as “Utopia,” “Empire,” “Liberty,” and “Beloved,” and what is this green wind blowing in from his unlit fire place? The liveliest figure in these pictures is a white rat atop a yellow globe. It seems unlikely that anything good will come from this scene of understated depravity.

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Gibson clearly enjoys toying with the blurred lines between the saturated comic-book colors representative of a simplistic reading of good, bad, evil, and innocent versus a very literal racial and political assessment of those same colors: is the bad guy black because he's evil, or is he black and not even evil? The confusion is entertaining. We are clued into the much darker genocidal impact of Trump's political romp in the paintings *Procession 1* and *Procession 2* in which chained prisoners in orange jumpsuits are marched through the streets in shame, by police like figures in riot gear, while Klan and Nazi-like standards line the streets.



As an artist who wields the comic as a tool for social justice, Gibson slips himself into the ironic and polemical comic tradition of Walt Kelly, George Herriman, and Bill Griffiths: he is a comics "purist" adhering to the norms of drawing and inking, sometimes reproduced via acrylic on canvas. My love of comic books foundered in the seventh grade with a revulsion to the ultra-violent *Punisher War Journal*, and a schoolboy fascination with She-Hulk, so the images from *Early Retirement* that continued to draw me back were the interstitial panels that functioned as scenic segue, not the ones heavy on plot. *Sunrise* is a small painting showing a clawed hand slipping through Venetian blinds. Like a Lichtenstein, it absorbs all of the pathos of a comic book panel without indulging too heavily in the epic struggle that is constantly needed as fuel to propel the spectacle forward. This simple act of evil penetrating through normalcy is a perfect representation of what we are all witnessing right now in our political reality.

