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Sifting Through The Madness: An Interview With Mark Thomas Gibson

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By Sebastian Gladston

Mark Thomas Gibson is everywhere in the art world. At first glance you might not directly notice, but from shows on 24th street in Chelsea, to assisting Kara Walker on her opus “A Subtlety”, his touch is everywhere. Gibson is a Cooper Union alumni as well as a Yale Masters Grad. He recently returned from Art Basel and spoke with me about all that is art, life, and comic books.

SG: I notice in your work a lot of references to the American Allegory, and what about this concept are you attracted to?

MTG: I've always had an interest in American history, since I was a child. In my family, both of my parents were history majors in college. So, it was something that was just discussed and talked about around the house a lot, and kind of the stacking of history and what actually happened. People's perspectives around historical events have always been a point of interest for me. When I started taking on this body of work it was all about, 'How do I find a defining point for me for which to really think about American history?' It starts around the idea of Manifest Destiny and America and this idea or ideology of our desire or our need to actually take capitalism. Our desire to actually own and war and conquer others – it's all fueled by this idea of Manifest Destiny, a God-given right to do so; I think its a very strange, very peculiar concept. So I've just been thinking about it and recently I got this book I have to finish reading. It's about counter-revolution, the idea that 1776 was actually a counter-revolution. It wasn't actually a revolution, it was a counter-revolution because it allowed slave owners and landowners to continue what they were doing without any oversight at all, and actually gave fuel to the slave trade. I think about things like that: how we view things as American citizens. We think out things one way but if you actually investigate something its a totally different thing.



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SG: Is there a particular place these characters come from, or are they all figments of your imagination?

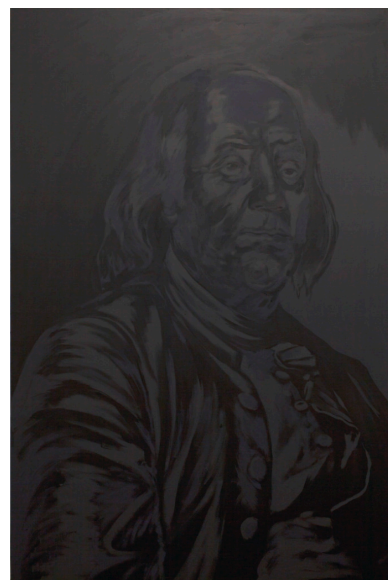
MTG: Some of the characters are based on historical figures, some out of historical paintings by Benjamin West. My fascination with Benjamin Franklin comes from his autobiography and the hypocrisy in it. It is researched information mixed-in with developing a base character, which is this werewolf: this idea of human duality being exposed outward. Seeing everyone as a monster, everyone is a killer, everyone is involved, everyone is a participant. I see Manifest Destiny as a curse that I connect to a science fiction horror curse, which is 'werewolfism' or lycanthropy, which is connected to a bite that is connected to a bloodline. It is viral and passed on due to proximity to the infected.

SG: What do you hope to aim by pointing focus on cultural histories particularly in America?

MTG: I would hope that it would start a conversation around American history, American ideas, and agendas. After my last show at Fredericks & Freiser, one of the things I was left with was the need to have a conversation about the stuff that I was making. I really just want to spark something so I can have that conversation around The Alamo and American politics. I've just always wanted to have that, so I try to create work that's a conduit for that. Especially with the black on black paintings: it's important that you look at it with someone else. I'm doing something that makes one think about the individual in the painting in a slightly different way. Not necessarily horrific as if he's a monster, but questioning, "How do I actually know that person?"

SG: A lot of these references seems to relate to childhood and the imaginary power of the naivety; how does your use of this "comic book" aesthetic, and the glitter in your work, how does that relate to this?

Well, the idea of the glitter and that graphic punch was to counter the other body of work I was making. The black on black paintings are hard to read; they are about burning the image into the eye slowly over time. Then I was thinking about how to counter that and what is the actual opposite of that? It occurred to me that I was thinking about something that visually pushes the eye out. That is illustrative, something that we don't typically think about in contemporary art as being valid so much, but something that is a little more complicated in its directness. It's frontal, with underlying meaning and content. It was sometime later that someone brought up Reinhardt and his political comic strips that were even commentaries on his own process, and



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commentaries on the Art World. While he was doing that, he was actively creating another body of work – the black on blacks, which were this idea of a last painting, an ultimate negation and gesture at the same time. These two sides between the graphic and the abstract are used effectively to determine two forms of space. The Abstract (Personal) and the Graphic (Public and Political). The



idea of making it about a process and allowing its characteristics work as a template in which to embed was a natural fit for me. So if it is possible to have this duality then that means you have the opportunity to push them both. That is why I went to glitter, to bright color, and zest and pattern and overall-ness. The zig-zag “lightning” pattern which kind of has this weird something. I was already into using it but then I happened to be doing research into African art and the discussion about the zig-zag pattern as a common motif which about energy, power, and lightning a universal energy. This energy is a universal constant a representation of a force of nature. So then, when I went to paint a visual representation of Manifest Destiny, I made it a monster of swirling teeth creating the environment and setting the stage for the character with the narrative. The spirit in this story of America is a universal energy.

SG: And did you read a lot of comics as a child, and is there specific comics that you can trace direct influences to in your work?

MTG: XMen, Batman, Daredevil, Bone, Cerebus, Conan. My favorite artists were Mike Mignola, Mark Texiera, Travis Charest,

Romita Jr., Frank Miller, Frank Frazetta and Jack Kirby. A lot of Jack Kirby – I think about him a lot. I use it maybe in the backslashes of energy, in the back of my pieces, in the bursts of these energy swells, and weird stuff. Kind of like the opening sequence of the original Superman movie when you see Kal-el’s ship traveling through space toward earth, with sparks coming off the vessel in the opening credits. Carroll Dunham told me to check out this book *Mutants and Mystics*, that basically talks about how Philip K. Dick, Jack Kirby, and all these science fiction writers and artists were all participants in creating these identities, creating these worlds, creating these universes. They were all in some way forecasting the future or having visions of what is to come. I just think that’s something really bizarre and interesting: that illustrators and writers of comic book fiction can be viewed in that way in the contemporary world as a sort of fortune teller. Maybe they were foreseeing things as well as seeing events from history or distant past. I think about science fiction as these kind of weird skins that are put on something that kind of deal with ideas of real life and contemporary issues and past issues and unresolved stuff usually.

SG: Theres an interesting inverse in your work in the sense that the more colorful works become more illustrative and cartoonish, and the black and monotone paintings are much more dimensional. Why do you choose to create this veil over your more detailed work?

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MTG: I think it was something where hand can be deceiving. Making a very direct portrait, and finding a way to not make it simply about being a portrait of Benjamin Franklin. First off, I think people typically do the portrait in a pretty boring way so I was like how do I make it so someone will actually has to stop and look at this and respond to it. How am I going to get someone to actually stop and get someone to think, "This guy is actually into American history"? How do you do that today without it seeming ridiculous or overblown and quick, without it coming off as really sarcastic. How do you do it while trying to be quiet, mature, and respectful? I love the effect of black on black so its just kind of like its the best of both worlds. I get everything I want out of it.



SG: Now I know you went to the Yale masters program for fine arts, which is one of the hardest programs to get into art in the country, and what was the environment like there amongst your peers, was it more competitive or collaborative?

MTG: I wouldn't say it was directly collaborative, but it was definitely competitive, but I think thats what happens when you have a lot of alpha personalities in a space. It's like when you have a pack of alpha wolves in a room together – sometimes they bite each other pretty bad, sometimes they get pretty nasty with each other. But for the most part, a lot of people I was in the program with I'm still friends with today, you know? I find that if I were to ask any of them to show up to something like a show they all show up. At the end of the day it is like an odd family that you're brought into because of the process and because of the crit and everything else that's involved.

SG: And how do you think your work has evolved since you left school?

MTG: I think one thing thats really changed is scale. Being in school I had the ability to make a 10 by 14 ft glitter drawing with a pilgrim devouring a Native American in the middle, and that was gorgeous. Then in the end I couldn't put it in storage, I couldn't do anything with it so I had to dispose of it, and I still think about it like the girl that got away. So I think a lot about space, money, time, and work. At the same time all of these things fuel the work. I think if anyone is going to grad school they should think about how blessed they are to have that time to focus on what they want to do.

SG: Now you're pretty active in the Chelsea art scene, and I think at one point recently you had work in two shows on 24th street. Has your experience with this been a positive or negative one?

MTG: Its been very positive, It was really a great opportunity to work with the other artists in the American Beauty show at Susan Inglett. I'm always down to show, and show with other artists. I kind of prefer it in a way, because I like to see what kind of dialogue can be started between my work and someone else's work – sometimes in ways that I never thought could exist. Fredericks & Freiser has been a great gallery to work with and my first show in Chelsea, Alamo Revenant, did really well. I was surprised by the positive reception. But it's Chelsea, it's the Art World. I had a conversation with my mentor over the weekend and I was saying that the one thing

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that I realize more and more is that I really just like to make the work. You gotta do the work, you know, and if you're not ok with that you shouldn't be in this at all.

SG: Lastly the Whitney Biennial took a lot of heat in the press, one for the lack of women and also for The Yams Collective withdrawal from the show. What was your overall opinion of the survey?

MTG: I support The YAMS Collective, I think how they handled themselves as a collective was intelligent and well thought out. Donelle Woolford is a very problematic piece on many levels. If I can believe that Michelle Grabner sees this piece simply in tune with the long tradition of an artist constructing veil into which to make work, then I think it is disingenuous to not look at the inherent issue of a white adult male using the identity of a middle class black woman as a mask. The construction of this kind of character, this kind of face, is inherently messy especially in this country. This is the Whitney Biennial which is supposed to stand as survey of American Art. Being that this is America, and given our shared history that relates to the minstrel

figure and the lack of representation of minorities and women in the Art World, how can you not get into the conversation? I don't know why he [Joe Scanlan] should have been in the show to begin with. The work is not that interesting on its own merit, the only reason for it being there was also the same thing that The Whitney, Grabner, and Scanlan wanted to minimize. I understand if the artwork is strong then it opens up room for a conversation. I just don't think that conversation was actually allowed to evolve or happen within the space. I don't think that Michelle Grabner really thought about the racial implication of her decisions when she curated her portion of the show. Clearly, when you reference Richard Prince in relation to this work and forget Al Jolson is also a part of this conversation you are clearly out of your depth. There are people on the opposite side of this work, there is a history of this type of work, and there's a history of this racism in America. This is the Whitney Biennial, it's America's biennial and to have that and not desire that conversation around the work means that you're either playing ignorant or you're just being cruel. It felt like a cruelty in the end to not actually speak about race with everything on the table. To not talk about the construction of race, when discussing Scanlan's work is complicated. In dealing with race in America, we have all been done a disservice. We are so undertrained in actually having a conversation around it from a very early age, that as adults, we fall into two spaces: either being overly aware of oneself or completely ignorant of others. Typically when you have a meeting of those two mindsets in a space, it usually becomes volatile. I think it could have been a really good learning moment, but it is instead another missed opportunity – something that will be washed away to return again.