

TOM GREGG:

Still Lives for Tense Times

Grenades and a MAGA hat, apples and playing cards. They're all fair game for inclusion in the paintings of well-known Kansas City artist Tom Gregg, whose luminous, enigmatic still lifes have been mystifying and enchanting art lovers in Kansas City and beyond for the better part of 25 years.

In this issue's Artist Pages, we share a selection of recent paintings from Gregg's January-February 2019 exhibition at George Billis Gallery in Los Angeles.

A committed realist, Gregg paints from direct observation, setting up his still life subjects in his West Bottoms studio after deciding on what he calls their "color environment" — the wall behind them, the tabletop that holds them and the band of color representing the table's front edge. Working in oil, he then begins the process of executing the composition in paint.

As Gregg describes it, "The paintings are an attempt to construct or discover a set of relationships that are harmonious and at the same time imbued with a hint of tension."

Tension is a hallmark of Gregg's work, underlying the allure of his carefully chosen colors and meticulous rendering of shadows, reflections and details.

As in his earlier paintings, Gregg's new works register what the artist describes as "the complicated times in which we live." Traditional still life themes of abundance and memento

mori give way to deadpan commentary about our national obsessions and foibles, where we are, and where we seem to be headed.

Power, money, celebrity, war and a commitment to winning at all costs are just some of the topics we are asked to consider in the following pages. The new paintings, all from 2017 and 2018, revisit some favorite objects, including the hand grenade, shown here set within a bowl of eggs, and the American flag. Rather than proudly flying, the folded version in Gregg's painting appears turned in on itself before a bright red backdrop.

As he explained in a recent email, "There is a political bent to some, or most, of the work in the show, though fairly restrained and rather non-editorial by intent."

Of course, the artist is fully aware that his image of a MAGA hat will stir strong reactions from both sides of the political spectrum, just as his "Globe," showing the continent of North America turned upside down, will elicit different readings as to why the nation has been turned on its head. An inflatable trophy emblazoned with the word "Champion" makes a mockery of the idea of winning and of competition, too often conducted on an uneven playing field.

"There is no such thing as a completely neutral image," Gregg said in a 2012 interview with the "MW Capacity" painter blog. "Anything I paint has some degree of cultural resonance."

— Alice Thorson

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"Globe" (2018), oil on panel, 36 x 36 inches



"Hat" (2018), oil on panel, 28.5 x 27.5 inches



"Apples and Knife" (2017), oil on panel, 24 x 24 inches



"King of Hearts" (2017), oil on panel, 28 x 28 inches



"Eggs in Bowl" (2018), oil on panel, 28 x 31 inches



"Champion" (2018), oil on panel, 33.5 x 27.5 inches



Flag, Folded" (2018), oil on panel, 24 x 36 inches