

2015

Artist's Statement



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For years many artists have held the middle class in disdain. During the past century in France art salons known as *cénacles* were held together by "... that merry battle spirit we have all come to know and love: *épater la bourgeoisie*, shock the middle class."¹ This continues to be the reason for much of what passes as art today—to use art as a shock and awe campaign in order to soften up this midsection of society for a cultural reformation.

My work is made for this antagonized and neglected portion of the public. They are the ones for whom the art world has been largely inaccessible, and I assert that this is intentional. To narrow my audience down even more specifically they are the *politically conservative* and *Christian*, and this group makes up about 40% of the United States.² Despised as rubes by elitists in the art world, many of them are those who listen to radio talk shows like Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, and Glenn Beck. They read *The Drudge Report* and watch The Blaze TV and Fox News. They read their Bibles and they may attend a church. And although I do not intend to be overtly hostile to any one outside this group my work has been known to have that effect, as it has been labeled "*Anti-liberal.*" Perhaps then an unintentional consequence of my work is, in the words of John Currin, "Making the right people angry."³

In the past hundred years or so, art has become to a great extent, propagandist in nature, and the progressives who have largely directed the conversation in the arts have

¹ Wolfe, Tom, *The Painted Word*. Picador. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York. 1975. Page 12

² Gallup Online. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/120857/Conservatives-Single-Largest-Ideological-Group.aspx>. 03/12/2015.

³ Vander Weg, Kara. *John Currin*. Gagosian Gallery, Rizoli, New York, NY. 2006. Page 33

used that “conversation” to push various agendas that are aimed at changing the culture.⁴

Adam Bellow writes in *Let Your Brain Run Free*, “The Left has always understood the importance of language to its transformational project. If one can control the use and even the meaning of words, as Orwell showed in his novel, *1984*, they cannot be used to express dissenting views, or even to formulate the thoughts that might inform such intellectual resistance. And if you cannot actually dictate people’s thoughts, you can force them into silence by making it too costly to express them.”⁵

For those who blithely dismiss all this as conspiratorial hogwash, as if I am looking for some imaginary bogeyman in the closet, Jed Perl writes in *Liberals are Killing Art, How the Left became obsessed with ideology over beauty*, “...that politics does not stop at the door of art—and that to think otherwise would be to succumb to “an old illusion.”⁶ Mr. Perl was quoting Alex Ross, a music critic for *the New York Times*, hardly a bastion of conservatism. Art and politics do go hand in glove. And the politics of art has been mainly liberal leaning.

The conservative and Christian audience has been painfully slow wrestling free of the Left’s cultural sleeper hold. In fact, far too many of them are completely unaware they are being propagandized, or their answer is, out of their disgust at the progressive’s “*in your face*” approach, to simply abhor all things cultural. To me this is not an acceptable response. Conservative Talk Show host Mark Steyn puts things very aptly, “Liberals expend tremendous effort changing the culture. Conservatives expend tremendous effort changing elected officials every November—and they are surprised it doesn’t make much

⁴ Wolfe, Tom, *The Painted Word*. Picador. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York. 1975. Page 34

⁵ Bellow, Adam. *Let Your Brain Run Free*. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/381419/let-your-right-brain-run-free-adam-bellow/page/0/1>. Accessed 11/10/2014

⁶ Perl, Jed. *Liberals are Killing Art, How the Left became obsessed with ideology over beauty*, *The New Republic Online*. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118958/liberals-are-killing-art-insisting-its-always-political>. Accessed 11/20/2014

difference. Culture trumps politics—which is why, once the question’s been settled culturally, conservatives are reduced to playing catch-up...”⁷ Steyn continues to drive the point home that as long as the culture is liberal the politics, or the politicians don’t matter. The politics will follow the culture, or, as someone said, politics is downstream from culture.

It may not be too difficult to understand why many conservatives have become wearied over the parry and thrust of liberal art. In his book, *Rules For Radicals* (a book he dedicated to Lucifer), Saul Alinsky writes that the left must, “...do what you can with what you have and clothe it with moral garments.”⁸ In part the progressives have accomplished this task of clothing their ideas with “moral garments” by assailing what conservatives and Christians hold dear, and portraying Christians and/or conservatives as *immoral*. Those on the right have been constanly barraged by the media and labeled with epithets like, bigot, racist, homophobe, misogynist, etc. And even the modern picture of the artist appears anti-middle class or anti-conservative, “...to cut himself free from the bonds of the greedy and hypocritical bourgeoisie, to be whatever the fat burghers feared the most, to cross the line wherever they drew it, to look at the world in a way they couldn’t see...”⁹ In short, it is the “*in your face,*” confrontational approach.

Why are there now no great Christian artists? Art galleries include many masterful works by artists from the 18th century and before, but why not more modern era artists? In 1990 the city of Amsterdam hosted a retrospective of the work of the famous and celebrated post-impressionist artist, Vincent van Gogh. It was the 100th anniversary of the artist’s death, and the show was visited by well over 1 million people. However, as

⁷ Steyn, Mark, *The Undocumented Mark Steyn, Don't Say you weren't Warned*. Regnery Publishing, Washington, DC, 20001

⁸ Alinsky, Saul, *Rules For Radicals*, Random House, Inc., New York, page 60

⁹ Wolfe, Tom, *The Painted Word*. Picador. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York. 1975. Page 12

unbelievable as it may seem, the organizers of the event chose to censor the show's contents. Gallery goers were not permitted to see a number of van Gogh's work that shared a common theme. Every one of van Gogh's paintings with a Christian theme remained locked in the gallery basement. No one who came to the retrospective was allowed to see any of them.

Dr. William Havlicek, author of *van Gogh's Untold Journey* wrote the following regarding this unusual decision: "None of the religious imagery was in the show. It was deliberately kept in the basement." "In Western art there has been a move toward secularization through existential thinking," Havlicek wrote, a development which resulted from many artists becoming disillusioned after two world wars.¹⁰

Whether Dr. Havlicek was correct in his observation of artist's disillusionment or not is a matter for another paper, however the bias exhibited against Christians and conservatism is something that will alienate a great number of potential gallery-goers. There are no great, *modern* Christian artists in the collections. To the casual observer this may appear to be an oversight, however, "...the absence of openly religious art from modern museums would seem to be due to the prejudices of a coterie of academic writers who have become unable to acknowledge what has always been apparent: art and religion are entwined."¹¹

In 1963 The United States Congressional Record listed what were called, "Communist Goals." Number 23 of these stated goals was to "Control art critics and directors of art museums. 'Our plan is to promote ugliness, repulsive, meaningless art.'"¹² Ugliness, repulsive, and meaningless art has, in my opinion, not only been promoted, but

¹⁰ Havlicek, William, Ph. D. 2010. *Van Gogh's Untold Journey*. Creative Storytellers.

¹¹ Elkins, James. 2004. *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*. Taylor & Francis Group.

¹² Free Republic, *Communist Goals*. <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/1595013/posts>
Accessed 03/15/2015.

championed. A case in point is Tracey Emin who made her now famous work, *My Bed*, a messy, unmade bed which was cluttered with garbage. Author Richard Bledsoe discussed this piece in *Tracy Emin, 1984 and the Cult of Personality*. He wrote, “*My Bed* can be seen as emblematic of the non-art favored by pretentious metropolitans these days, an unskilled accumulation of dingy objects supposedly transmuted into art by the alchemy of dislocation. In a home the collection of soiled belongings would just be low grade squalor. Move them into a gallery or museum, and the theory is the new context should apparently spark some amazing mental gymnastics of Questioning and Challenging and Transgressing. It’s a pathetic substitute for artistic achievement, but it’s about all the current ersatz-intelligentsia can offer up.”¹³

Conservative/Christian artists have popped up on occasion, but it is my opinion that the work that purports to be conservative can tend to come off as a political cartoon, or simply trite, overused themes. Jed Perl writes in *Liberals are Killing Art, how the Left became obsessed with ideology over beauty*: “It is relatively easy to point to the deformations of art at the hands of politically correct left-wingers and cheap-shot moralists on the right.”¹⁴ I believe that conservative art can and must go deeper than another painting with a gun, flag, and a Bible. There is more that can be explored that is challenging, stimulating, and interesting and appeals to conservatives, *and also* a broader audience. As Andrew Klavan wrote we need to “...let go of the idea that conservative entertainment is synonymous with family-friendly stories with heroic heroes and happy endings. Not that

¹³ Bledsoe, Richard, *Tracey Emin, 1984 and the Cult of Celebrity*, Western Free Press.

<http://www.westernfreepress.com/2015/03/05/tracey-emin-1984-and-the-cult-of-celebrity/> Accessed 03/15/2015

¹⁴ Perl, Jed, *Liberals are Killing Art, How the Left became obsessed with ideology over beauty*, *The New Republic Online*. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118958/liberals-are-killing-art-insisting-its-always-political>. Accessed 11/20/2014

there's anything wrong with such stories. But if that's the only vision conservatism has of the world, it will quickly become irrelevant.”¹⁵

Although there are many conservatives and Christians who are perfectly content with iconic art that, to them, personifies all that made the United States a great nation or celebrates their Christian worldview, the broader world of the arts today is asking for something more. “To lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial—the means by which our experience of individual works is joined to our understanding of the values they signify.”¹⁶ This is to say that what is wanted of artwork is that it have a compelling story, or concept behind the work. The art viewer today also wants to chew his own food.

Conservative and Christian painter Jon McNaughton is the artist who made the now famous (or infamous, depending one's point of view) painting of Barack Obama burning the U.S. Constitution, called, “One Nation under Socialism.” Here is McNaughton's statement about the work in his own words...

Why the title, “One Nation Under Socialism?” Our federal government has been moving in the direction of socialism for over one hundred years. Many presidents and politicians have compromised the Constitution as we have given away our freedoms under the guise of entitlements and government intervention. When the people are willing to sacrifice the next generation for their current lifestyles and allow the federal government to have all the power for an illusory mess of pottage—you have chosen One Nation Under Socialism.¹⁷

However one views McNaughton's work it can really only preach to the converted. It is as off-putting to the left as Andres Serrano's “Piss Christ” is to the Catholics. His

¹⁵ Klavan, Andrew. *Klavan on Culture*. There's Something Happening Here: Conservatives Are Catching On to the Culture! <http://pjmedia.com/andrewklavan/2014/11/16/theres-something-happening-here-conservatives-are-catching-on-to-the-culture/>. Accessed 11/20/2014

¹⁶ Wolfe, Tom, *The Painted Word*. Picador. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York. 1975. Page 2

¹⁷ Newell, Jim. *America's Greatest Artist Depicts Obama Burning the Constitution*. <http://wonkette.com/467834/americas-greatest-artist-depicts-obama-burning-the-constitution>. Accessed 11/20/14

work is an example of the two extremes mentioned earlier, the “politically correct left-wingers and cheap-shot moralists on the right.”¹⁸

The judicious use of humor can play a vital role in the presentation of a controversial concept. A little sarcasm can mitigate difficult subjects and make them more palatable, or at least approachable. My assemblages are a combination of nostalgia, whimsical humor and seriousness. My themes are politics and religion, and, although I do not limit myself to these, I attempt to address the following questions:

Who is God?

What is man?

How should man be governed?

I love to introduce parody into my work to point out the hypocrisy of religion and the smothering encroachment of government into every aspect of our lives. Intentionally entertaining on the surface level, they are meant to entice the viewer to take a closer look. I want the viewers to linger at my work and think about the message, which is decidedly conservative and/or Christian. I like to keep my audience guessing to some degree, almost like fitting together pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but to also allow them to come up with their own conclusions of what the work means.

Having earned a Masters Degree in Theology, I have seen first hand that much of what is called Christianity has nothing to do with Christianity at all. Much of it is simply a conflation of Greek and Roman paganism. “Baptized Paganism,” as one writer put it. So many of the teachings of modern day Christianity have resulted in (intentionally or not) making God unapproachable, ourselves unacceptable to Him, and Jesus some

¹⁸ Perl, Jed, *Liberals are Killing Art*, How the Left became obsessed with ideology over beauty, *The New Republic Online*. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118958/liberals-are-killing-art-insisting-its-always-political>. Accessed 11/20/2014

otherworldly, ethereal Being whose feet never touched the ground as he walked. This Christian dogma is held in as high regard as the scriptures, and I believe this is a serious error that I love to bring out in my works with the theme of religion. This approach is a very thin tightrope, indeed, and has raised the ire of Christians who cling to their particular dogma as if Jesus himself instituted it.

In his book, *Beautiful Outlaw*, John Eldredge makes the following observation:

Last May I had the opportunity, while in London, to visit the National Gallery. Loving art, and being with two of my sons—one of whom is an art major—I was excited to spend hours there. I loved the Van Gogh, the Monet, the Rembrandt paintings and more. But there was one massive disappointment. No, it was more than disappointment. Massive frustration. I did not see one portrait of Christ, in all the famous works of him, that came anywhere close to depicting Jesus as he really is. Not one. They are all of a wispy, pale Jesus, looking haunted, a ghostlike figure floating along through life making strange gestures and undecipherable statements.

The Nativity scenes were particularly ridiculous. The classic art depicting the infant—themes now repeated on Christmas cards and in the creche scenes displayed in churches and on suburban coffee tables—portrays a rather mature baby, very white, radiantly clean as no baby ever is clean, arms outstretched to reassure the nervous adults around him, intelligent, without need, halo glowing, conscious with an adult consciousness. Superbaby. This infant clearly never pooped in his diapers. He looks ready to take up the prime ministership.¹⁹

There is a need for something else, another way of portraying the message of Christianity that brings out who Christ really was, and *is*. And one reason for this is because I believe that these iconic depictions of Jesus has distorted him beyond recognition. Here is another quote from *Beautiful Outlaw*...

Thus George MacDonald, that old Scottish prophet, asks, "How have we learned Christ? It ought to be a startling thought, that we may have learned him wrong. That must be far worse than not to

¹⁹ Eldredge, John, *Beautiful Outlaw*. Faith Words, Hachette Book Group, 237 Park Ave., NY, NY 10017.
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have learned him at all: his place is occupied by a false Christ, hard to exorcise." Hard to exorcise, indeed, because religion gives the impression of having Christ, while it inoculates you from experiencing the real thing. Most wicked. If you want to destroy an economy, flood the market with counterfeit bills.²⁰

In *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith*, author Conrad Hyers quoted

Chrysostom, a prominent early church Father: "This world is not a theatre, in which we can laugh; and we are not assembled together in order to burst into peals of laughter, but to weep for our sins."²¹ These ideas are truly anti-Christian, and this distorted thinking has infected Christianity since its early years. In my religious-themed assemblages I use parody to bring up these inconsistencies in Christianity, but my approach of using humor is not new. Christian writers from the 15th and 16th centuries used ridicule, sarcasm, and irony in their denunciations of the evils of the church, and promoted education and learning to correct conditions within the church. Their efforts are regarded as preliminary to the Reformation, salvos to soften up positions which Reformers of the 16th century would capture.²²

My politically conservative views were formed mainly during my study of theology, and my opinions stem directly from my understanding of Natural laws, as Nature's God instituted them. A government or government entity cannot grant the rights we have as citizens of the United States. These rights are granted by our Creator and are to be protected by our government. The founders of the United States did not list every one of these unalienable rights in the Declaration of Independence, but they acknowledged that our Creator endowed us "with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Some of the other rights of which the founders knew but did not enumerate in the Declaration of Independence were: the right of self- government, the

²⁰ Eldredge, John, *Beautiful Outlaw*. Page 9

²¹ Hyers, Conrad, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003.

²² Meyer, Carl S., *The Church from Pentecost to the Present*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL. 1969

right to bear arms for self-defense, the right to own, develop, and dispose of property, the right to make personal choices, the right of a free conscience, the right to choose a profession, the right to assemble, etc.²³

I feel it is vitally important to continually educate the public of this true and original role of our government. On this point I agree with Thomas Jefferson who wrote: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness...Preach...a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us from these evils [of misgovernment].”²⁴ This is the main reason I choose to make assemblages that point out the hypocrisy of our government, government abuses, and governmental intrusion (a.k.a. Big Brother) into every aspect of our lives—someone needs to educate the public, and I am willing to do that. However, I do not want to use a bludgeon (i.e. become a cheap-shot moralist) where parody can draw more people into the conversation and these educational aspects of my work.

Artists such as Daumier and Goya used humor, caricature, and also the abject in a political sense in their work. Honoré Daumier, a defender of the urban working class, created a lithograph entitled Rue Transnonain that had as shocking of an impact as Goya’s *The Third of May*. The title of Daumier’s piece refers to a street in Lyon where an unknown sniper killed a civil guard in an area where the government force was trying to repress a demonstration by the people. The shot had come from a workers’ housing block. The remaining guards stormed the building and killed everyone inside. Daumier’s lithograph depicted the aftermath in a scene as he imagined it might have looked.

²³ Skousen, W. Cleon, *The 5000 Year Leap, the 28 Great Ideas That Changed the World*, National Center for Constitutional Studies, 1981. Page 125

²⁴ Skousen, W. Cleon. *Ibid.* Page 31

My love of humor (in particular, parody) comes from my years as a comic book writer and artist for a humor magazine. During this time I fell in love with the work of some of the early *MAD Magazine* artists, specifically Harvey Kurtzman, Will Elder and Kelly Freas. I found their use of visual humor, “sight gags,” and parody, as well as their exquisite drawing and painting skills to be something I longed to emulate. I wanted to draw viewers into my work the way I was drawn into theirs. Hidden somewhere in their work there was often some small detail that could be discovered only by careful study, and this only serves to draw a viewer, or reader, back to look for more.

I intend to continue to make work that makes use of two themes mentioned earlier: religion and politics. I realize that for many people these two subjects are taboo, however I believe that if the culture is going to move in a more positive and sustainable direction these two subjects must be addressed, and integrated into our culture. However by also continuing to introduce humor and/or parody into the discussion will help make it more acceptable. Using humor doesn’t shame anyone for not agreeing with the concept portrayed in my work, and therefore I believe that it opens those who may disagree to at least consider what is being presented.

As long as I can remember I have been something of an agitator, and at times this has gotten me into hot water. And as I have developed the concept in my assemblages I have also wanted to put forward ideas with a message that is something of a “push back” against the silencing tendency of our politically correct culture, government hypocrisy, and to stand up for ideals and values that I personally hold dear.

As I moved from illustrative or purely aesthetically pleasing works, I started looking for artists I could relate to. I found a kindred spirit in Red Grooms with his wacky 3D works. His assemblages appear to almost have sound they are so crowded with the

bustle of the city. I also love the realistic, but humorous paintings of John Currin. To paraphrase Currin, he believes that one of his roles as an artist is to “upset the right people.”

Thomas Allen is a photographer who uses cutout book covers that he reassembles into 3-D illustrations. His “reassembled book covers” are mainly from pulp fiction books from the 1940’s-1950’s, so they all have the stamp of that era, and I love the nostalgia he conjures up, almost like it is a sacred past. The effect is startling and not only draws the viewer into his photographs, but due to the 3-D nature of his work it forces itself on us.

Another artist who has influenced my work is the abject expressionism, or the “POPaganda” of Ron English. English is credited with single-handedly ridding us of the Camel cigarette mascot, “Joe Camel.” English painted over Camel cigarette billboards and changed the images to “the cancer Kids,” etc., and his efforts so turned public opinion against the cigarette manufacturer they eventually dropped Joe Camel from their advertising entirely.²⁵

The kind of cultural transformation Ron English has made with his artwork has blazed a trail for others, like me, who wish to make a lasting impression, however I want to get rid of what I consider to be the “Joe Camels” in religion and politics, or at least open up the debate. And that has been a hallmark of my work. I have not yet been in a critique that the discussion has not been at least lively, and has, at times, even gotten antagonistic.

This open, cultural discussion is important to me because I believe we grow as people by opening ourselves up to new, or ideas that are different from our own. However my art school experience has largely been just the opposite. I have found on numerous occasions that students and faculty alike do not want politically conservative, and/or Christian ideas brought up at *all*, and some have even come off as mean-spirited in their

²⁵ English, Ron. <http://www.lazinc.com/artist/ron-english>. Accessed 11/24/14

disapproval. I believe the art world is big enough for everyone, and even though my target audience is not the “mainstream” art world, it is possible to discuss the merits of a piece without getting personal, becoming angry, or being “tolerant” of everything except Conservative or Christian art work.

In closing I am hopeful that my work will especially appeal to those who are marginalized by the current culture and the art world, but also that it can also be at least appreciated for its artistic merit by those whose ox is being gored.

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When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.



