



Congo Oil on canvas 118" x 167"

Jeramy Turner

In our image saturated society the nervous system is visually stimulated, often far beyond our ability to process, by art. We have come to view this aspect of our existence as inevitable, as part of nature, as something that has always been around in its multifaceted incarnation. But Art's historical role has been exponentially extended beyond our wildest dreams. It is hard to see this as a very new development, but indeed it is.

Imagine Europe a few centuries ago, when paintings and sculpture functioned as mythological or religious storytelling, or aristocratic engrandisement. Visual art was fundamentally an

enforcement of the ruling order. It served to deepen religious belief (and concurrent control by the Church establishment) and perpetuate a social hierarchy in which the rich and powerful were ordained to their overseer position. The swarming multitudes, the peasants, slaves, and later, industrial workers, were meant to serve and suffer. Artists had a job to do: to keep the house tidy and strictly in order, and as such they were hired by the rulers to do so as convincingly as possible. Their occupation was to keep the populace in a state of belief, no matter how unjust or absurd this might be. And no matter how ridiculous and fantastical the mythology, the artists' job was to make it simply a part

of reality. Painted and sculpted images could perform this function.

But the revolutions that swept Europe in 1848, toppling one monarchy after the other, brought with them the crowning of the Bourgeoisie as the new ruling class. The shattering of the old world order brought with it the questioning of all that was divine. Ideologies as well as political rule were up for grabs.

Perhaps because artists have to concentrate so intensely and therefore critically upon what they are depicting, artists tend to be thoughtful creatures. Perhaps because the advent of the Bourgeoisie brought them a sudden impoverishment as the "free market" opened



Founding Fathers Oil on canvas 78" x 78"

its treacherous maw, artists joined up enthusiastically with the revolutionary ideologues of the time. They flocked to the new Bohemian culture, living in garrets and consorting with the lumpen proles. Now without patrons, suddenly on their own to sell or starve, artists of the 19th century often joined sympathies with the destitute and the new urban industrial workers, and took to painting these people as People, in and of itself a thoroughly revolutionary concept. (Examples of this are seen in the works of Courbet, Toulouse Lautrec, Van Gogh.....).

Then such artists as Goya and Daumier created work that was itself part of the Revolution. Not simply depictions of the People, but statements, bold and brazen and extraordinarily rendered, their art was a visual voice of marvellous power in

the battles against the ruling classes and their warmongering. It was this that only until recently has been seen as Political Art. Art of resistance, proud and clear, against the Rulers and in deep sympathy with the Oppressed. Joining this tradition, and potentially killing it, would be the Socialist Realism of Stalinist Soviet Union and the art of China's Cultural Revolution. Political Art was socialist, Communist, revolutionary. And by the strictures of these ideologies, it was of necessity clear. A higher education was not needed to understand this work. Nor was it necessary to proceed with a particular language of the art world. Images spoke loudly and forcefully for themselves. Written words were forfeited to visual images in order to insure international comprehension.



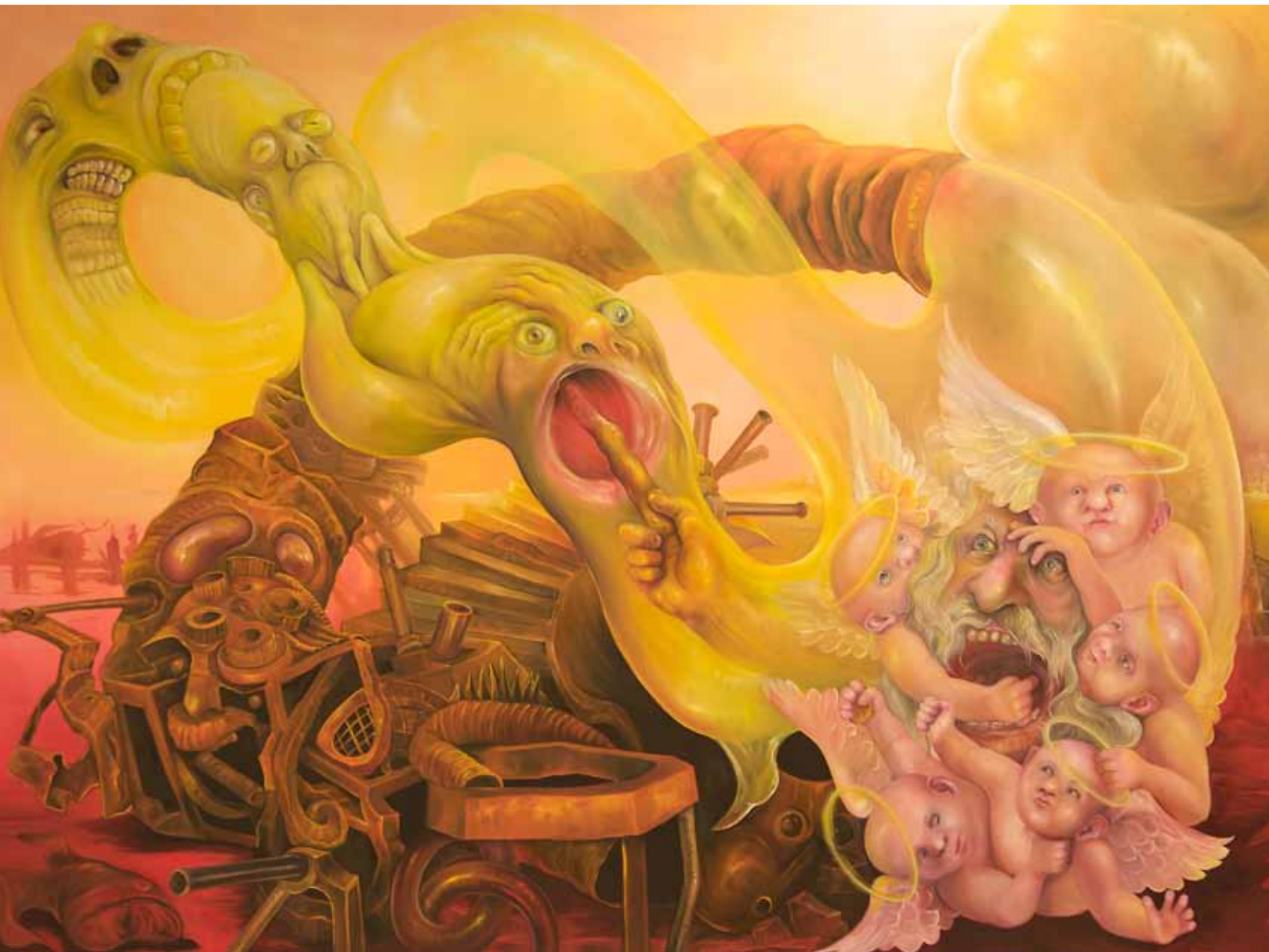
Oil Spill Oil on canvas 60" x 78"

In the 1930s political art took on a Stalinist-led proscription: it had to be printable (i.e. the woodcuts of Lynn Ward) and had to be immediately purposeful for the cause of revolution. Picasso's "Guernica" came out of this period, when the United Front was leading the American Artists' Union, and much discussion was had on what political art must and must not be. Images were often nearly illustrations from the Communist Manifesto. The desired result replicated written propaganda: a depiction of victims of oppression alongside a raised fist and muscles of a revolutionary worker. Certainly some bold and marvellous artists took this proscription beyond preconceived limits: Thomas Hart Benton, for example, in the US, and David Alfaro Siquieros, Jose Clemente Orozco, and Diego Rivera in the astonishingly powerful Mexican mural movement.

The Vietnam War and the subsequent shattering of

all that was "establishment" that took place in the '60s, broke through the stathis of political art. Along came Edward Keinholz who blatantly refused limitations in his scathingly horrific/hilarious sculptures, Jack Levine, Peter Salle, and Leon Golub to bring forth the visualization of rage, art that far surpassed words in exposing the warmongering monsters and their social set-up.

As the '60s waned and the '70s and '80s brought Foucault and Derrida as theorists to replace Marx and Mao, what passed as political changed gradually and also quite radically. There were new developments: obscure art that looked political, styled to say things that baffle in their indirectness. Possibly the artists consciously censored themselves, steering clear of anything that would castigate them as Communist. Political art also became the war cry of the elite, in the guise of anti-capitalist causes, to disguise their vested interests.



Zivilisation Oil on canvas 59" x 78"

The big museums such as the Whitney, MoMa, or Guggenheim, along with mega galleries, were showcasing work that touched on the political, but by the arts' shirking of taking a forceful stance against the system that fed them, reduced political art into a language only accessible to the Foucault-educated who knew the appropriate language. A very important recent exception to all this was the Abu Graib work of Ferdinand Botero, at the Marlborough Gallery in New York. This highly successful artist created hundreds of depictions of tortured prisoners, filling the gallery with the unthinkable, his conscience. And at the Marlborough Gallery, there was a small placard on the wall over the reception desk: the artist has decreed that none of this work is for sale. But generally, the corporate art world has managed to monopolise by edging out independent galleries, and then systematically replacing style for teeth. But in the shadows of the spotlights lurk others. There are a number of bold-minded artists who truly and vehemently oppose the corporate ruling order, and who have been creating daring works that speak out with rage and uncompromised understanding.

These artists represent themselves. They have no backing, no gallery support. Only a few brave galleries, often artist-run or alternative spaces, have the courage to promote these artists, but lack any sort of art world legitimacy. Political art without an audience is meaningless. These artists do not use art primarily for therapy or catharsis. Nor are these works home decor. They have instead a profound purpose, which is propagandistic in an expansive, positive definition of the word. They are intended to deepen understanding, to expose, to simultaneously anger and amuse. And, in order to be effective, they are skillfully rendered and alluring, often using contradictory elements of shock and humor.

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Horseman of the Apocalypse 24th 1987 Toy guns /epoxy resin/ steel

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