

The Creators Project

Postcards from the End of an American Era

Emerson Rosenthal — Dec 22 2016



About two weeks after the single greatest upset in American liberalism, on a particularly gusty Thursday, I ambled into the Andrea Rosen Gallery to meet Michael St. John. I was there ahead of the opening of *These Days; Leaves of Grass*, the artist's fourth solo show with the Chelsea institution, and moving with the bustle of someone chasing a perfectly timed arrival. My cab driver had tacked the kind of cross-town course that makes every turn feel like a pull on a slot machine lever. The reason I say this is for anyone who knows what it feels like to enter a room more exciting than the one before it; to pass from New York City at night to somewhere even more vibrant.

A Google search for the artist Michael St. John yields a number of other Michael St. Johns, and not much else, a challenge, no doubt, for a writer running on little more than fumes and gleaned references. On one hand, I'm relieved to find that the work is outstanding: digestible 2' x 3' collages; sticker-covered sculptures recalling the verve of the city; newspaper and printer paper assemblages scattered just to make you feel the rush of Manhattan's West Side. On the other hand, I'm terrified: I have no idea *why*.

This is the moment the artist spies me and strides over, smiling in a pea coat, polo shirt, cutoff shorts, and no socks in tennis shoes despite the dark (and darkening) Autumn.



The show begins on the gallery's nearest wall. A black, chalkboard-esque canvas bears the title of the show and a printed excerpt from the titular poem, signed "Walt Whitman" by St. John, affixed with masking tape. In red acrylic paint, the artist has scratched the word "DEMOKRACY". "Walt Whitman was all about this idea of democratic inclusion," the artist kicked off our tour. "So I wanted to continue with that, but I put a 'k' in it, for the 'alt-.' And then, in the main room, I wanted to go from Walt Whitman—you know, out on the street, in Manhattan—and continue that with an idea of the Ashcan School, the New York studio school where they were painting the street, the bars and restaurants, and people from the street, and tenements. So the idea was to have this room become a 3D Ashcan School today."

Here, St. John stops to introduce me to Andrea Rosen, and it's the first and only time I've ever been relieved to meet a gallerist. This is where full-disclosure comes in: I needed help writing about this show. Although I only partially disclosed my motivations, I knew St. John was also a teacher. The teacher, in fact, of art stars including Josh Smith, Nate Lowman, and Borna Sammak, artists whose mastery over their crafts is matched only by their art history prowess. So I emailed him asking if he had any recommendations for books covering the subject that kept getting repeated, threading our conversation like a tightrope (for me, at least): form.

He did. Four, actually. But I'll spare you the air quotes from Roberta Bernstein's riveting *Jasper Johns' Paintings and Sculptures 1954-1974: The Changing Focus of the Eye*. You wouldn't believe how much I learned anyway.



Instead, I'll tell you what "getting it"—not that I'm saying I do, by any means, though the show became subsequently more enjoyable when my understanding surpassed pure aesthetics—came down to: The whirlwind feeling of this precise moment in history. It's something that could never be fabricated. You would either have to either replicate the exact conditions under which it occurs, right down to the smallest units of social measurement (an obvious impossibility), *or* understand the properties of the zeitgeist with the same nuance that one would canvas after, say, nearly four decades of painting (and teaching it).

"I love art history," St. John later would later clarify. "When I walk down the street, everything turns into art history. For most people, it's boring. But for me it's very exciting. I think about history all the time when I'm making stuff." The canvases in *These Days; Leaves of Grass* are like the vivid trompe l'oeil paintings of 19th century painter John Haberle, but they aren't hard like the surfaces mimicked on Haberle's mock backwards picture frames. St. John's crumpled paper arrangements (actually acrylic and polymer on canvas), carry the same weight as the arbitrarily arranged paper bits plastered beneath Jasper Johns' wax brushstrokes, but without the latter's mania. Instead, the works convalesce in a choir of quiet howls, equal parts perspicacity, curiosity, and chance.

Standing in front of one of his 6' tall lamp post pieces, I asked how he decides whether his wall-hanging works are paintings or sculptures. "A lot of my things, when I explain them, I feel are also very self-explanatory," St. John told me. "Sometimes I take a picture of something I just like formally. Then I'll add something to it. Well, I have a theme for every painting, but I do use a lot of formal things that people invent for me. The lamp posts are from the same kind of idea; people fill up the spaces and they dance around [each other]. So I started to do these lamp posts and the billboards."

The billboards themselves are pretty dark—gritty, stuck up with actual paper, boarded up, and literally unchained. In *Gun Crazy*, an array of posters for the 1950 caper of the same name, a film pseudonymously written by a then-blacklisted Dalton Trumbo, is spray-painted over with an ambiguous offer: "30min \$7, 60min \$14." For what? Is it a fraction of the film for a fraction of the price? Or, like a soliciting john, the opportunity to flavor the fever of John Dall and Peggy Cummins' firearm fetish?

"I make things with the phrase, 'It is what it is,'" St. John said. "I think about this as a metaphor for our time, where reality and illusion are on a slippery slope all day long. I've been playing with it for a long time, and collage gave me an opportunity to do that."

What looks like wooden siding in the background of *Birthright* (below) also looks like St. John printed it with gear he borrowed from one of his prodigious students, but decided to not change the ink. "This one can seem not that urban because of all the wood," he told me. "I loved that as the formal device, and then I knew about Oscar Micheaux, an African-American director. He had his own production company, stars, and distribution system. At that time, it was only-white and only-black theaters. [Micheaux] gave an answer to *Birth of a Nation*, the most super-racist movie ever. He made the movie *Birthright*. Given our time, I used this movie poster, boarded it up, and also faded it out." Are the crisscrossing slats boxing up for burial the American dream of racial integration, or boarding it for safe transport like a trapper would a rare animal?

"Around ten years ago the world seemed really urgent to me," explained St. John. "I didn't want to do silkscreen like Andy Warhol: get the picture, send it out, screen it all night, and only after, you get the news. So I decided to use collage and get an immediate response. Get up in the morning, and work on it instantly." Packed with visual information, history, understanding, and a willingness to keep negotiating all of it, the experience of *These Days; Leaves of Grass* is akin to an episode of *Jeopardy!*: you may not know the questions, it's still fun to reminisce over all the answers.



"When I do things, I believe that formal things are as important as the content," St. John explained of *No Floor* (above), which depicts both St. John's own understanding of the present and an unchained sidewalk cellar hatch designed for unsuspecting viewers to fall through. "This artwork is pretty dark but formally it is beautiful. So you get both things. This is on my mind a lot of the time: What else makes you look at Rembrandt's face? When you look at him, this guy looks like an old drunk. If you would see him on the street, you would think, *What a mess!* But when it's a painting, it's beautiful."

As part of the show, St. John also curated a show-within-a-show in the gallery's back room, assembling the works of, as the gallery orders it, Leo Gabin, Nate Lowman, Thomas McDonell, Alex McQuilkin, Lanier Meaders, Pope.L, Borna Sammak, Dirk Skreber, and Andy Warhol. That's right; if the idiomatic assembly of a flat Amerika-within-America was giving you major Warhol vibes, fear not: he's here too, crossing his arms and stepping over the Dirk Skreber bronze floor sculpture all but indistinguishable from the "suspicious package" it was created as a facsimile of.



Take, for instance, this hat, by Belgian art trio Leo Gabin. It was made from fiberglass, lacquer, and resin, but you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?

Is it "real?" And to what end? "Does it really matter?" You can practically hear Andy sighing.

Manifest destiny collides head-on with the craggy beak of the end of an era against the gallery's back wall. The final piece is a 12" x 12" collage that features a printout of Kate Upton lounging like a lion, either guarding or holding hostage Ma and Pa in a Walker Evans Depression-era photograph. Clearly I'm winded, because when a gallery assistant asks if I'd like a margarita, the coup de grace for the private opening's showgoers, she reads the answer on my face. The drink comes in an extra-tall highball glass, with a widemouth paper swizzle straw. Red, white, and green.

Michael St. John's *These Days; Leaves of Grass* runs through December 22, 2016 at Andrea Rosen Gallery.