

How We Got Into It

Tom Burkhardt's exhibition at High Noon Gallery, June 22nd–August 20, 2023

By Elena Sisto

“A rainbow, when its enormous arc is struck by sunlight, often will tint a large expanse of sky, and a thousand different colours shine there, yet when one looks at it, one cannot see transitions from one shade to another, so much so that bands which are adjacent all look the same, but yet the outer bands are very different.” -Ovid's Metamorphosis, translated by Ian Johnston.

Tom Burkhardt's exuberant summer exhibition at High Noon Gallery is a crowd of 353 works in water media and collage. They are painted on pages from discarded books, mostly title pages or chapter titles. He leaves these brief phrases, and paints all around them. The artist, almost 60 years old, is taking pages from books mostly published in the 1940's and 1950's, not too long before he was born. A few were published as late as the 1980's. Titles such as *Control of Sexual Dreams* or *Americans Can Fight* provide a slightly ridiculous and/or provocative context. He constructs spaces and responds to the text, creating colorful images that may feel comedic or surreal.

Burkhardt has been working on these diminutive pieces off and on for more than 30 years, alongside his better-known oil paintings, most recently exhibited at Pamela Salisbury Gallery in Hudson, NY and George Adams Gallery in New York City. It's easy to imagine him noodling away at them, perhaps surprising himself with his own freedom, to get the juices flowing between other groups of work, pushing himself past the inner critic so many artists struggle to subdue.

These pieces could only be done in water media. Burkhardt is particularly adept at the techniques of blending and modulating color, like in Ovid's rainbow. Beginning from one edge of the paper, colors travel and gradate into one another almost imperceptibly across the surface. In the middle of the page, they may even meet up with or overlap another set of colors approaching from another side, creating a sort of plaid. There are many patterns in the work, which give a sense of expansion, structure and of marking time as well as referencing different cultures. Burkhardt almost always employs patterning in some way.

The words here really matter. With titles like *A Short History of Existentialism*, *Do you Like What you See in the Mirror?*, *How to Attain and Practice the Ideal Sex Life*, or *Freedom of the Press*, from non-fiction or self-help books, we sense the hopelessness,

the silliness and/or the futility of their authors' ambitions. Many of them seem to suggest that our collective certitude has devolved since the days these phrases were written.

Other titles refer to a broad array of large themes, some of them all too current, like *Coping With Inflation*, *Crime In America*, *Fighting Fascism by Frontal Attack*, or *Crisis in The Classroom*. Some titles emphasize the obdurate and persistent nature of their subjects. In this context such phrases imply that it is impossible to attain a complete understanding of any topic. The words sound naively boastful and suggest that what would come in the following text would likely be completely inadequate to their promises. The choice of text seems to highlight the absurdity of the hope of rationality or of encapsulating anything. The phrases seem to float and then recede into the past, growing quotation marks on either side as we watch their meanings evaporate. You get a whiff of thrift stores, fusty old academics and outdated hierarchies.

It's a witty move for Burkhardt to separate a title page from its book or chapter, isolate it, and see what meaning and nonsense that releases, given what we've learned about many of these subjects in the intervening years. He thus highlights the manners, affectations or quaintness of earlier bodies of thought. Though Burkhardt is an enthusiastic reader, it's doubtful that he's read *these* books. The few words in each painting seem to *be* the book and to imply many things that they don't say, like magnets drawing associations towards themselves. There's often a slightly slapstick humor: Here's another one we misunderstood! And another! *A Short History of Existentialism—*if only! *Background Of World Affairs--*a tad broad? *Changing Patterns In American Civilization—*where to start? Other titles evoke bullying, especially those concerning fascism. The hundreds of page-drawings fill out many imaginative intervals between the fanciful (*Different Feet Have Different Ways* or *Haywire*) and the threatening (*Death or Drifting to Disaster*), mapping a restless intellect.

Burkhardt's little/big paintings don't just take issue with the futility of trying to encapsulate anything, but also of trying too hard at anything. Conscious control is not the point. Like a standup comedian he's far more interested in improvisation. It's a high flight and feels more like a search for a set of ideas both meaningful enough to give him traction and elusive enough to keep him suspended, challenging his own talent.

He has a protean ability to paint just about any way he wants. Over the years he's worked in many different visual vocabularies. The challenges he gives himself in the pieces here manage to crack open a real sense of wonder and the irrational.

But then, speaking of wonder: he treats color as energy. In his work, it comes in volumes, not surfaces, and in mists and veils. The colors are often saturated, and the relationships are rich, unusual and vivid. There are many dark/light juxtapositions. Forms expand and contract, wrap around each other and melt away, continually moving, intercutting and displacing each other, like in a dream. It creates a kind of euphoric image.

In a clever use of collage, he might work on a painting, make a circular cut in it and then rotate the circle 90 degrees to create a completely irrational, yet seamless, yet disjunctive and mysterious space. He heightens the viewer's awareness of the spaces between sets of ideas, in the process lightly referring to preceding forms of art—from Indonesia to Tibet to New York School painting.

The subject of these paintings seems, in part, to be the subversion of intellectual understanding in favor of just “being there”, opening-up a place for play. In the meantime, we're entertained and enthralled by a constant transition and metamorphosis of form and color.

Given the fantastic number of small pieces in the show, the installation of the exhibit must have been challenging. But it works. It's organized by a loose grid snapped onto the three walls of the gallery using blue and orange chalk from a carpenter's reel.

The spirit of the show is generous. It carries a great deal of good will towards the viewer, a love of the world of ideas and of painting. The subjects and approaches are tremendously varied. Because of the sheer number of pieces and the fact they're on paper and so affordable, the work feels accessible in every sense. Walk right in off the sidewalk to see the show! There's something for everyone here.

The spirit of the show also suits the gallery. High Noon is a much-appreciated presence downtown. It's known for its presentation of estimable mid-career artists. Gallerist Jared Linge has identified the large pool of talent, evolution and dedication that exists amongst artists no longer “emerging” yet not yet ready to be called “veterans”. That resource sometimes goes unrecognized in the din of the art world.

Tom Burkhardt's work gives us the delight of constant transformation even as it reminds us of the fallibility of rationality.

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