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In Cleveland, Two Artists Picture the Ugly Realities of American Politics

By Douglas Max Utter



Michelangelo Lovelace, "Shoot to Kill," acrylic on canvas, 30"/20" (image courtesy the artist)

CLEVELAND — Maybe it's not quite that bad; hell is just *some* others — many of who stopped in Cleveland this past week for the Republican National Convention. Minuteman artists and brave galleries responded with volleys of comment, or outrage. The politically vital, grassroots-inspired film projects of Kate Sopko, for instance, shown at SPACES gallery and elsewhere around town, took viewers to the heart of ongoing efforts to reinvent the city in areas where the industrial town had withered. Or there was the undeniably impressive 15,000-foot-long "Wall Off Trump" banner,

5 Ninth Avenue, NYC, 10014 | [galler@fortgansevoort.com](mailto:galler@fortgansevoort.com) | (917) 639 - 3113

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which managed to outdo Spencer Tunick's earlier protest involving 100 nude women with mirrors in naked ranks just outside the RNC at dawn of the Convention's first day. Among more traditionally formatted pieces were Michelangelo Lovelace's and Adam Sheetz's paintings and drawings that examine American political culture with sheer pictorial energy.

The term "gonzo" appears on the card advertising Sheetz's show, *Nobody's Safe* at Gallery 160, invoking the post-William Burroughs drug-inflected manner of journalist Hunter S. Thompson and the infectious illustrations of Ralph Steadman. Sheetz more than lives up to that. Some of his densely nervous ink-on-watercolor-paper drawings, prints, and paintings show candidates like Trump and Clinton in familiar political settings, speaking from a platform packed with hypocrites and fools — all in a more or less traditional editorial page manner, going for easy marks. But Sheetz tends to twist the screw another time or two. Clinton, more than two-faced, really has two entirely separate, vicious-looking heads in "Hillary for Hillary America," while her supporters on the dais sport corporate logos instead of faces, bobbling above bow ties.



Adam Sheetz, "don't think twice it's alright (it's alright ma, i'm only dyin')," ink, collage, mixed media on watercolor paper  
(image courtesy the artist)

Elsewhere Sheetz engages with global issues in a more complex style. He nods to his artistic influences as in the title to his ink and collage on watercolor paper work, "Don't think twice, it's alright (it's alright Ma, I'm just dyin')," which calls to mind one of Bob Dylan's most darkly political songs, "Don't think twice (I'm only bleeding)" from 1965 (the song with the line "Money doesn't talk, it swears.") Here Sheetz shows skeletal polar bears perched on an ice floe the size of a rowboat, about to be devoured by a mob of zombie-fish. At the horizon, beneath a smoky orange sky, mustachioed capitalists watch the scene from the platform of an oil rig as ships founder and cities tilt into the waves. But it's the foreground images — of the goblin bears, Dachau-like, and the turbulent, fascist darkness of crisscrossing, blotted seas — that enable this particular picture to



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reach beyond political aspersion, saying something in the scratchy language of line about the textures of fear.



Installation view of 'Adam Sheetz: Nobody's Safe' at Gallery 160 (image courtesy the artist) ([click to enlarge](#))

Sheetz also visits the history of art and revolution. His "Dead Press" is a literal rendering of Jacques Louis David's iconic painting "The Death of Marat," with the letter from the radical journalist Marat's murderer Charlotte Corday (clutched in his dying hand) replaced by the Bill of Rights. Sheetz goes on to crib paintings and styles that add up to a "proto-Gonzo" bestiary of darker Western art. His acrylic on wood painting, "persistence of reality," is a disturbing mash-up of Dalí, Bosch, and Bruegel the Elder, depicting an alien valley of priestly birds preying on hybrid humanoids. And everywhere the witch-haunted, justice-starved spirit of Goya wraps *Nobody's Safe* like smoke.



Adam Sheetz, "so it goes (and so it shall continue)," acrylic and oil on canvas drop cloth (image courtesy the artist) ([click to enlarge](#))

As the exhibition continues, Sheetz moves well beyond the familiar ugly realities of American politics, borrowing themes from Christian and Buddhist visions of damnation and the Bardo. "So it goes and so it shall continue" is the pessimistic title of a 12-foot long painting on unstretched dropcloth mounted on the gallery's back wall, showing a Dada-esque orchard where Yves Tanguy-like, blasted tree entities bear dark, red banners, moving in an apocalyptic breeze. Political passions

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culminate in a post-orgasmic wasteland, populated not even by the dead, littered with shreds of bombast and glory.



Installation view of 'Michelangelo Lovelace: We the People' at at the Maria Neil Art Project, Cleveland (image courtesy the artist)

Michelangelo Lovelace's small paintings, showing across town at the Maria Neil Art Project, are by contrast rooted firmly in human realities, located here and now. The rebukes they might suggest to any RNC delegate (say) who wandered as far off the beaten track as Cleveland's new North Collinwood arts district would have to do with the specifics of social policy, personal behavior, taxation, law enforcement, and racial prejudice.

Awarded a Cleveland Arts Prize last year in recognition of his contributions to the life of the city's art, Lovelace is a prolific, successful, self-taught artist whose punch-packed street scene paintings commonly carry a clear message. Often in the past this has been about substance abuse, or gang violence; in his show *We the People* at Maria Neil, he tackles real-life tragedies on a kind of stage or proscenium where the American flag is the backdrop. In the acrylic on canvas "Shoot to Kill" Lovelace succinctly evokes problems of gun legislation and racial hatred: Two arms reach across in front of the stars and stripes — not to clasp each other, but to be the first to grab a handgun. A caption at the bottom reads: "Guns don't kill people, people with guns kill other people." In "And Justice for All" a uniformed police officer aims his gun at a black man, who lies in a puddle of blood at his feet, apparently already dead. Downstage to the right three more cops strike the "see no evil,



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“speak no evil, hear no evil” poses. Next to the slain man’s head stands a little winged angel in a suit, representing the spirit of the man himself. He holds up a sign: “Justice for All or Just Us?”



Michelangelo Lovelace, “Justice for All,” acrylic on canvas, 30”/20” (image courtesy the artist) ([click to enlarge](#))

Allegorical rhythms underpin Lovelace’s paintings. In “I Pledge Allegiance,” a big garbage can is stuffed full of children. The can is labeled “Trash Can Babies,” but there’s nothing trashy about them, they don’t look miserable — they might be posing for a class picture. Over to one side a little

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figure holds up the words of the Pledge of Allegiance. This picture feels allegorical, yet it lacks any specifically allegorical figures. There's just the can itself, and the fact that it and the children are being displayed on something like a school stage, plus the flag, and the impression of incongruity (at least) that any patriotic spiel, however well-intentioned, is bound to convey next to the social and emotional human nightmare that the phrase "trash can babies" describes.

Lovelace in fact generates a phantasmagorical, rather than allegorical, series of tales that grow from simple observations of social or personal fact. Painting very simply, he lets his paintings speak for themselves in a language of primary color and other signs of expressive urgency, including the overt naiveté of their manner and the deadpan originality of their subject matter. In this way, the real horror of the situations he depicts comes into focus as in a dream where a sense of significance and dread is generated through multiple clues, outflanking the blindness of ordinary perception.

If any of Cleveland's recent visitors at the RNC happened to see either Lovelace's urban exposé-like meditations or Sheetz's more art historically minded forays into the end of times, perhaps they glimpsed some of the intensity of mind and breadth of experience that can be found anywhere in the US, but particularly in its cities. Possibilities beyond the scope of political rhetoric or utopian fantasy (for that matter) might be found prefigured on any block, in a gallery, on a wall, on a face. But one needs to be able to see such signs. As William Carlos Williams put it in his long poem *Paterson*, "unless there is a new mind there cannot be a new line."