

# Art in America

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## Roger Brown

NEW YORK at DC Moore

by Max Rosenberg

This exhibition of Roger Brown's "Political Paintings" spanned the years 1983 to 1991. The works cover the crises that plagued the U.S. during that time, ranging from the savings and loan scandal to the collapse of the Soviet Union to the Gulf War. The compositions evince a cynical view of American politics, conveyed through cartoonish depictions of prominent political figures, silhouetted caricatures and carnival-style advertising banners.

Born in Alabama, Brown studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1960s, where he became a key contributor to the informal group of representational artists known as the Chicago Imagists. While several of the Imagists concerned themselves with politics and social justice in their work, Brown developed a distinct approach, combining a faux-naïf, comics-inspired visual style with psychologically ominous formal cues and direct critiques of the social and political status quo.

This approach is fully realized in the 1991 work *Aha! Heterosexuals Fuck Too*, in which Brown depicts Magic Johnson wearing a yellow warm-up suit adorned with the U.S. flag. The image was derived from a widely circulated photograph of the athlete. Johnson, with a wide, lighthearted smile, is situated against a dark and striated cloudy sky. (The sky motif appears throughout Brown's work, including in still lifes that were presented in a concurrent show at Maccarone gallery and that involve found objects, like bowls and mugs, placed on shelves protruding from abstract painted grounds.) An orange painted-on frame surrounds Johnson, and a banner above him contains a statement that reads, "AHA! WHAT HAVE WE HERE?"



Roger Brown: *Gulf War* (detail), 1991, two panels, oil on canvas, each 36 by 24 inches; at DC Moore.

HETEROSEXUALS.” The statement is completed in a little yellow text bubble at the bottom: “FUCK TOO.” Brown made this work shortly after Johnson revealed he was HIV-positive. Using Johnson as a symbol of hetero-masculinity, Brown thus highlights the absurdity of the religious right’s conservative belief that AIDS was God’s punishment for homosexuality.

Some of the paintings in the exhibition almost take on the character of knitted tapestries or quilts in their handmade quality and in their repetitive placement of figures and forms. So it is in the diptych *Gulf War*, another work from 1991, featuring twin portraits of George H.W. Bush and Saddam Hussein flanked by identical helicopters and tanks. The sense of doom in this work is further highlighted by the odious red, white and black sky. As Lisa Stone, curator of the Roger Brown Study Collection, points out in a short essay for the exhibition catalogue, this color scheme was meant to resonate, subtly, with the plight of the gay community. As the AIDS epidemic raged in the early ’80s, owners of gay clubs installed warm red and peach lighting to cover up signs of illness on their patrons. As a gay man who died of complications from AIDS in 1997, Brown sometimes combined personal narratives with depictions of social crises.

Even when not explicitly challenging the status quo, Brown’s self-conscious and universally coherent graphic style could be a lively and political contrast to the escapist machinations of the Neo-Expressionistic resurgence of the 1970s and ’80s. Indeed, his work, along with that of many of his Chicago compatriots, offers a compelling contrast to New York’s bloated painting scene at that time.