

# TWO COATS OF PAINT

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*The political imperative: Gatson, Humphrey, Williams, Worth in Chelsea*

1:27 pm by Two Coats Production



David Humphrey, *Overturned*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches

Contributed by Jonathan Stevenson / The clash between Donald Trump's nascent fascism and America's liberal traditions, brought to a head by the murder of George Floyd and its aftermath and exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, made the 2020 election the most important one since Abraham Lincoln prevailed in 1860. In this meanest of election seasons – its poisonous tone set by an abject liar and demagogue who is now fortunately a

lame duck – political disengagement became morally impracticable, as shown by record turnout. Painters have heeded the political imperative, mobilizing with notable intensity and aplomb in a roughly four-square-block section of Chelsea.



Miles McEnery Gallery, "Rico Gatson: Ghosts"

Rico Gatson's powerful yet nuanced show "Ghosts," at Miles McEnery Gallery, features hard-edge geometric paintings, acrylic on wood, abstract but hefty with symbolic content as well as pristinely beautiful. Five large ones – three on one wall, two on the opposite – array regimented isosceles triangles, some pronounced and others more obscure, that suggest Klansmen hoods. They are not white, however, but rather composed of vivid, saturated colors that include black, red, yellow, and green. Surely not coincidentally, these collectively encompass the colors of the Black nationalist and liberation movement and the Pan-Africanism movement spearheaded by [Marcus Garvey](#). One interpretation is that the camouflaged racism, latent and systemic in the United States for hundreds of years and obvious to every Black American, has finally become visible to White America. This take obliquely recalls that of [Kerry James Marshall](#)'s early painting framing a pair of watchful eyes against a barely decipherable Black figure in an even darker milieu, and also [Didier William](#)'s eye motif: you haven't seen us, but we have seen you. While Gatson's five flanking paintings could seem accusatory and foreboding, increasing the

tension between identity politics and classical libertarianism, the paintings that usher them in – one of a welcoming rainbow-like archway promising blue sky, another of bright thickening lines radiating energetically from a point – leaven the viewing experience, as do collages celebrating iconic Black cultural figures and the painting of an alternative American flag at the gallery’s 22nd Street location. A large painting rear-and-center, in which black right triangles alternate with multicolored ones, intimates the possibilities of both separation and integration. The upshot is a kind of enlightened realism: an admonition from a keen and judicious Black chronicler that there are reasons both to hope and to remain vigilant.



David Humphrey, *On the Ground*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches





Fredericks & Freiser, "David Humphrey: New Paintings"

David Humphrey is a master of narrative representational painting – never either obscure or obvious, funny enough to affirm a sense of irony but too incisive not to be taken seriously. Although he is always attuned to socio-political rhythms, in his highly cohesive "Arms of the Law" at Fredericks & Freiser, Humphrey tightens his focus, devoting most of his paintings to police confrontations with suspects or protesters. His opening salvo is *On the Ground*, which could allude to Floyd's death in Minneapolis or simply reflect the broader phenomenon of racially-charged police violence in its depiction of a Black figure grimacing beneath the boot of a silhouetted policeman joined by several others. The perfectly calibrated *No Knock* likewise nods to the police killing of Breonna Taylor in Louisville but reaches much farther. Other paintings, such as *Chorus*, also show white captives, suspects or demonstrators – usually more articulated than Black ones – imparting solemn and highly qualified solidarity without celebration, for which it is plainly too soon. The police in this series of paintings tend to appear affectless and golem-like, and Humphrey provides a clever explanation in *Policeman's Dresser*: the accessories laid out include a mask as well as what looks like a throw-away gun. Not content to blare, Humphrey unearths more subtle and troubling perspectives. As *One* and *Teamwork* highlight the forbidding martial alignments of protesters and police – law and a grim sort of order. Automotive mishaps are a leitmotif of his, and catch poignantly harsh light in *Rear View* and *Overtuned*, in which police in cars loom as threats and casualties, respectively. In *Oath*, a quizzical African-American cop, whipsawed by Black and Blue, raises an arm in fealty to slices of white bread. Invariably with Humphrey, there is crowning wit.



Sue Williams, *Betsy Ross Composite*, 2020, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 inches





Sue Williams, *Frank Lloyd Wright Prison*, 2020, oil on canvas, 51 x 61 inches

Sue Williams, an aesthetic cousin of Humphrey's, is more freely associative and less neatly essayistic. Her current paintings look like old-style treasure maps – finely but intuitively rendered in a full range of color, with abundant white space to liberate the line and loosen the field – except that the relevant data points are not places but rather American tropes and clichés, sardonically cast as overtaken or just false. Her canvases could be circle-chart precursors to [William Powhida's](#) forensic explorations of American rot, with occasional shots of [Pettibon-esque](#) wisenheimer hilarity. In *Betsy Ross Composite*, the lead piece, the head and torso of the eponymous flag-weaver are fused with the body of a dinosaur whose tail is waving a white flag of surrender. Other distinctively American images – a helicopter, a UFO, a house on the prairie – hover in the picture plane in various states of incompleteness, imbalance, and malformation, like dreams fracturing into nightmares. If the work's thrust is explicit, its visual inventiveness and offbeat intellectual linkages give it a singular quirky force, humorous but deadly serious in wider context, like an episode of [Portlandia](#) storyboarded by [Nicole Eisenman](#). The painting *Pilgrim's Progress* is more abstract than the Betsy Ross piece, but sufficiently referential to discourage any traditionally bowdlerized, saccharinely optimistic iteration of Thanksgiving. *Go West, Creep* envisages America as

a mindlessly chaotic rodeo founded on a sanitized myth. Other works, like *Frank Lloyd Wright Prison*, *Home at Last*, *Land of Profit and Coincidence*, and *Spangled*, operate to similar debunking effect. In 2014, Williams's cynical view of 9/11 seemed defiantly insouciant. Now the world has caught up with the artist: her distressed account of the United States simply reads as true.



Alexi Worth, *Changing Table 1*, 2020, acrylic on mesh, 23 x 36 inches





DC Moore Gallery, "Alexi Worth: Changing Table"

Some artists are more inclined towards conciliation than the persistently arch Williams. In 2018, [Alexi Worth](#) produced a set of paintings of transparent "ballot boxes." One contained an abundance of donations and another a comparable number of actual ballots, but the box in the middle had very few suggestions. There was a complaint there to be sure, but it was relatively subdued, and, in fact, implicitly elicited help from others. In these polarized times, such inclusive impulses are likely to meet only with hostility and give way to the political imperative. Worth tried to listen to and understand Trump supporters via social media, only to be frustrated and dismayed. The show's title "Changing Table" refers not to any infantile adversary – though there are plenty to choose from – but to the childish exasperation Worth himself felt from online interactions with Trump supporters. In the painting *Changing Table I*, a baby – notionally Worth – sprays his own face with urine, a relative innocent literally pissed off. By applying acrylic paint to mesh, the artist renders raised uncannily intricate and expressive white silhouettes that, deprived of definitive identifying features, lend the scenes they depict a sense of settled authoritativeness, like reindeer-shaped Christmas ornaments or blank dioramas. Among the scenes are a performance by celebrity Trump sycophants, the direct subjugation of ordinary ones, and perhaps sexual predation. Self-abasement, Worth forcefully implies, has become part of the American canon. Recent history bears him out, but the latest chapter – Joe Biden's victory – announces that most Americans will not succumb quietly.

["Rico Gatson: Ghosts,"](#) Miles McEnery Gallery, 520 W. 21st Street, New York, NY. Through December 19, 2020.

["David Humphrey: Arms of the Law,"](#) Fredericks & Freiser, 536 W. 24th Street, New York, NY. Through December 19, 2020.



[“Sue Williams,”](#) 303 Gallery, 555 W. 21st Street, New York, NY. Through January 30, 2021.

[“Alexi Worth: Changing Table,”](#) DC Moore Gallery, 535 W. 22nd Street, New York, NY. Through December 23, 2020.

/ Also on view: [“Barbara Taganaka, Shibaraku.”](#)

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[Sue Williams’s Subterfuge](#)

[Weekend Report: Almost Delancey, Colony Room, Leo, Gatson, Robins, and A Coffee in Berlin](#)

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