



"Study of Perspective (White House)" by Ai Weiwei

# Through the Looking Glass

A major exhibition at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading reflects a dark national moment

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For the nation's 250th birthday, providence has gifted us with the perfect metaphor: the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, a site for contemplating America's ideals and history, now befouled by cheap fixes, corrupt contracts and the hollow promises of a narcissistic autocrat.

While pundits point to the mess on the National Mall as a mirror for the state of the nation on our milestone birthday,

## REVIEW

a slew of institutions, from the Smithsonian to the Vermont History Museum (see page 42), see our likeness in individual artifacts, unearthed time capsules or revolutionary reenactments. One of the most poignant portraits, and one that feels deeply timely and relevant, appears through the eyes of more than 50 artists in "A Farewell to the Western World," a major exhibition on

view this season at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading.

The show spreads across several galleries in three buildings. Two additional installations — Polish artist Piotr Uklański's "The Nazis" and Swiss artist Christian Marclay's video "Made to Be Destroyed" — are billed as separate exhibitions but fit seamlessly into the main presentation.

Rather than look exclusively backward or forward, the show directly confronts a world order in collapse. Surprisingly for a show that registers as up-to-the-minute contemporary, most of the works date from the early 2000s, in the aftermath of 9/11. George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein make prominent appearances, but so do President Donald Trump and Adolf Hitler. Surveillance, propaganda, and the effects of warfare and capitalism are just a few of its themes. Many of the artists hail from post-Iron Curtain eastern Europe, the Middle

East or Asia; many others are German, grappling with a fascist past.

The exhibition takes its title from a 2007 monochromatic grisaille painting by Romanian artist Adrian Ghenie. The strange scene shows a man in a smock who appears to sit on the New York City skyline under the lip of a bunker; neoclassical statues lurk in the shadows. Ghenie based his image on a photograph of workers installing a giant diorama of the city for the 1939 World's Fair. It seems to turn the progressive ideals of such an exposition on their head, contrasting the promise of Western capitalism to the grimmer realities of post-Soviet life.

Many works in the show use older, found or partial photographs as their source material. Some read ambiguously, like half-remembered or obscured stories, often with an ominous cast to them. German artist Gerhard Richter's 1966 painting of Alfons Strawalski, blurred and cropped from an

image of two men shaking hands, seems to suggest an unknown shady deal. Likewise, his countryman Johannes Kahrs' charcoal drawing "Untitled (boy with uniform)" doesn't give us the boy's identity beyond a Star of David emblazoned on his jacket. Colombian New Yorker Carlos Motta's grainy "Public Domain" photos all show people leaning over, looking at something; label text reveals it's the site of the destroyed World Trade Center, hidden behind a construction fence.

Ukłański's installation collects 164 found images from pop culture, all depictions of fictional Nazis in movies and TV. Kirk and Spock of "Star Trek" scowl seriously in their SS uniforms, as does actor Peter Cushing; Eric Idle and Robert Downey Jr. are perhaps less convincing. The piece is both funny and chilling, pointing out how we've created characters who, though they may range from comic to villainous, complicate our collective memory of the actual government and soldiers who destroyed real lives. The piece seems uncannily prescient about the resurgence of neo-Nazism, given its origin in 1998.

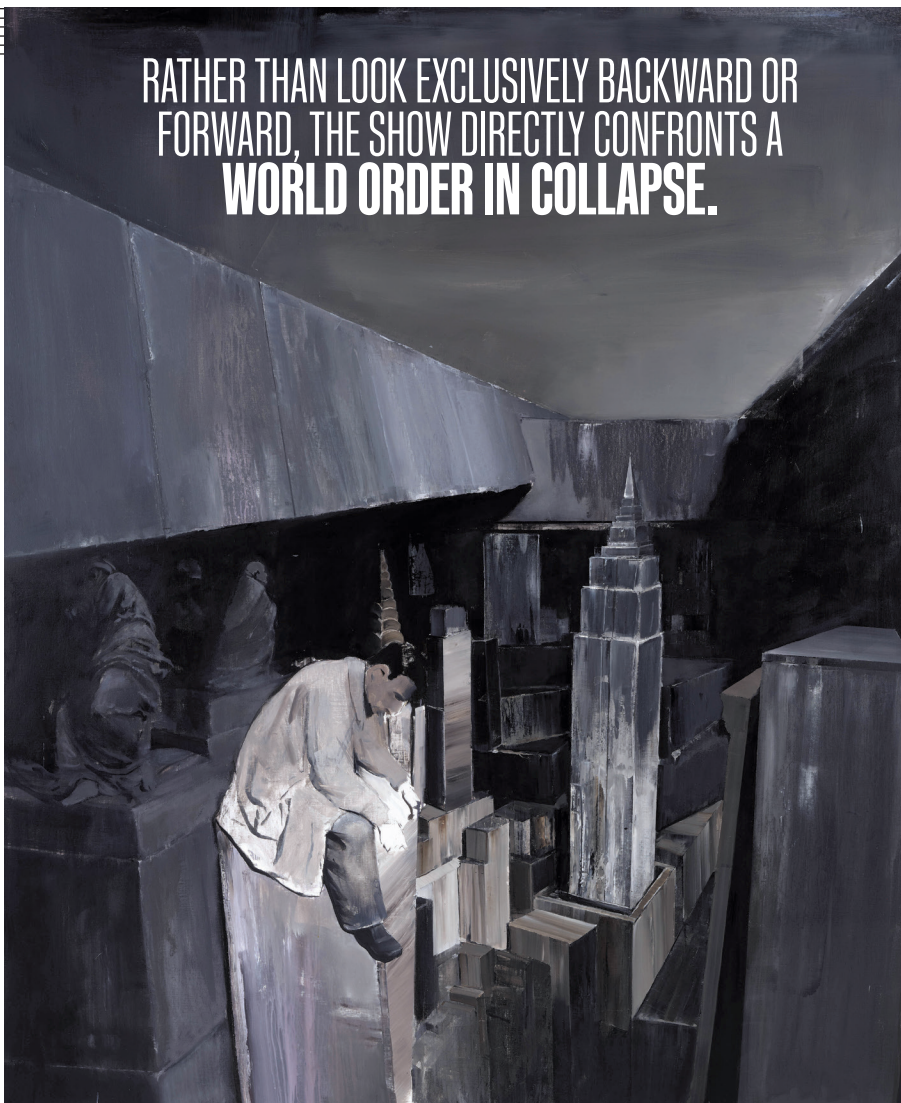
Though a viewer might expect political art quickly to become dated, many of the works in the show seem to have gained relevance with age. German Jürgen Klauke's installation "Antlitze (Faces)," which resonates in format with Ukłański's, is composed of 96 newspaper images of masked people from nearly three decades, starting with terrorists who attacked the 1972 Munich Olympics. Some are in ski masks; others, burkas. Whether they are freedom fighters hiding from repressive governments or bank robbers on the lam is entirely ambiguous. Either way, a viewer today can't look at these images without thinking of COVID-19 masks and ICE agents.

Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra's portraits of Maya Herzliya, taken in April and November 1999, have likewise gained meaning with new context. The young woman, about 18, is pictured before and shortly after her mandatory enlistment in the Israeli army. At the time, Dijkstra was commenting on a forced and militarized transition from adolescence to adulthood. Today, the weight of the conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon adds to the tragic nature of that visible shift.

By contrast, some of the works stress how little has changed. American David Opdyke's "Landslide," at the center of one gallery, is a sculpture of the country made from painted foam that looks like crumbling sandstone. All the places declared as "battle-grounds" in the 2004 election are rendered as literal fractures and fissures in the soil. The work instantaneously communicates a sense of imminent political collapse that has somehow persisted for years.

One of the show's most hopeful themes

RATHER THAN LOOK EXCLUSIVELY BACKWARD OR FORWARD, THE SHOW DIRECTLY CONFRONTS A WORLD ORDER IN COLLAPSE.



From top: "A Farewell to the Western World" by Adrian Ghenie; Detail [Robert Downey Jr. in *Rented Lips*] from "The Nazis" by Piotr Ukiński is the role of artists in documenting, taking down or laughing at those in power. Mexican cartoonist Enrique Chagoya pokes fun at president George W. Bush, alluding to Philip Guston's drawings of Richard Nixon. Swedish American Aleksandra Mir presents an attention-seeking Trump as pictured on a 1999 tabloid cover, blown up and rendered with a Sharpie. Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei gives us a "Study of Perspective (White House)," in which he swaps the artist's trick of holding up

a pencil stub for scale with a middle-fingered gesture, reminding us we can still express an opinion.

At the other end of the spectrum, Vietnamese American Nick Ut's famous 1972 photograph "The Terror of War," sometimes called "Napalm Girl," is a clear example of how powerful works can bring about change. Taken for the Associated Press, the image provoked public outrage against the war in Vietnam. It's disturbing on a human level but reassuring regarding the power of journalism.

Seen in this context, Marclay's video installation, a stand-alone exhibition, may be the most difficult piece to stomach at the Hall. It's a supercut of scenes from movies and television in which artwork is destroyed — some by circumstance and some by the artists themselves. As in "A Farewell to the Western World," the removal of context and story leaves us with a pervasive sense of unprovoked violence, loss and terror. Paired with everything else on view, Marclay's work seems to say that the only way through our current moment is to keep making art, no matter how hard it is to look at. ⑦

#### INFO

"A Farewell to the Western World," Piotr Ukiński: "The Nazis" and "Christian Marclay: Made to Be Destroyed," on view through November 29 at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading. [hallartfoundation.org](http://hallartfoundation.org)



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This exhibition is made possible through generous support from the Charles F. Kireker III and Sarah Kireker Faulkner '79 Fund.

**Image:** Frederic Edwin Church, *Oak Tree in a Field, Vermont* [detail], 1848, oil on paperboard, 12 1/16 x 16 inches. New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. Olana State Historic Site. Gift of Olana Preservation, Inc. and Museum Purchase, OL.1978.20.