



OVER THE INFLUENCE



Wheat From Chaff 60 x 52

CLEON PETERSON
CRUELTY

17 JUNE — 29 JULY, 2023

Over the Influence, Paris, is pleased to present *Cruelty*, Cleon Peterson's first exhibition with the gallery, and fourth exhibition with Over the Influence worldwide.

In *Cruelty*, Cleon Peterson's bleak vision grows bleaker and darker than ever before. Over the past 15 years, the Los Angeles-based artist has depicted a culture of atavism, rage, violence and exploitative power dynamics that have presciently tracked recent developments in political discourse both in the United States and, indeed, around the world.

When Peterson's work first received attention, the U.S. populist Right was still a fringe element, social media was in its infancy and identity politics had not yet divided society into fiercely opposed factions. The rise of Donald Trump, backed by fascistic forces and hysterical ideologues, grimly affirmed Peterson's vision, which had once seemed so extreme and hyperbolic. In our contemporary moment, as a Democratic U.S. president appears increasingly helpless to stem the recurrent tide of vitriol and righteous victimhood, while climate and technological crises grow more drastic, more quickly, than most of us dared fear, Peterson has become the artist for our times.



Ironically, perhaps, Peterson's work draws on a long and deep history of cultural representation, not only in visual art but in applied arts, literature, film and philosophy. His paintings, prints and sculptures reference the arts of antiquity, from Babylonian reliefs to classical Greek vases, and also the narrative iconography of Medieval manuscripts, stained glass windows and textiles such as the Bayeux Tapestry. More recently, the emergence of Fascism in 20th-century Europe incited diverse aesthetic expressions that Peterson plunders, from propagandist graphics to artistic movements both in support and dissent, including Italian Futurism and Dada.



What is Natural_Cruelty_72 x 46

If it seems perverse to meld the muscular urgency of a Futurist such as Umberto Boccioni with the abject absurdity of artists like Otto Dix or George Grosz, then it is important to understand that Peterson's subject is the dynamic of conflict itself. Futurism emerged from a feeling of powerlessness and humiliation, which caused its adherents (as with parts of U.S. society today) to turn towards authoritarianism and violence.

Marinetti's asserted wish to destroy history persisted in the artistic avant garde all the way until Post-modernism. Peterson has no such wish; while he makes a study of societal malaise, he also aspires to work through it, by confronting (and asking his viewer to confront) the ugliest parts of our contemporary and historical realities. He is influenced by such philosophers as Nietzsche and Foucault, and writers including De Sade and Jean Genet, who dispassionately addressed depravity, violence and societal breakdown through their work.

With the new body of work presented in *Cruelty*, Peterson evokes a world more poignantly atmospheric than the schematic situations his figures occupied in the past. He achieves this with his greyscale palette and especially through his new deployment of *sfumato* shading, executed with an airbrush. This technique allows Peterson to create pictorial depth in his paintings, and renders them at once more real and more dreamlike than his previous flattened graphic spaces. The inclusion of



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other motifs, such as skulls, masks, flower blooms and bullet casings adds to this sense of nightmarish hallucination. As with his stylized male and female bodies, Peterson is trafficking in archetypes buried deeply in our subconscious. He has observed how such images carry profound symbolic and affective power; the idealized female figure washing her hair in *Dark Magic – The Past*, for instance, represents a vision of innocence and purity, while the herculean male figure in *Dark Magic – The Future* is a promise of virile strength, underscored by the phallic dagger he clasps to his chest.

During the development of this body of work, Peterson reflected on how subjective perceptions of the past or the future – whether nostalgic or aspirational, critical or apprehensive – can be used to justify actions in the present. The (illusionistic) possibility of Utopias, either lost or yet to come, galvanizes Peterson's protagonists into righteous acts of barbarism. Their dream worlds (and shadow selves) manifest in a nightmarish reality, via the unreality of alienating social media and online avatars.

It is also worth noting that in this new body of work it is impossible to identify sides. Bodies battle bodies indistinguishable from themselves; Peterson is describing a senseless and directionless civil war. This state of intransigence offers no hope for disentanglement or progression. As Peterson writes:

In this world, chaos and confusion become the norm; there is no hope for a better future, no possibility of redemption or salvation, and no space for individual freedom. The only way forward is to be conscripted to serve in hate, division, and punishment in a brutal struggle for survival that will eventually destroy us all.



Peace II.5 x 14

Over The Influence was founded in Hong Kong in 2015, expanding to Los Angeles in 2018 and Bangkok in 2022. The gallery is now establishing itself in Europe with its first space in Paris' 8th arrondissement, which opened in July 2022. Over The Influence is dedicated to championing artists who challenge traditional approaches, presenting a dynamic program that explores the intersection between contemporary art, architecture, design, music, fashion, and other forms of visual expression. The gallery represents an international selection of emerging and established artists working in various media and disciplines.

Opening reception

Thursday 17 June
2023 from 6 PM to 9 PM

Exhibition Dates

17 June to 29 July 2023

Address

2 rue des Saussaies 75008 Paris

Open

Tuesday to Saturday
11AM to 7PM

Media contact

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