

MAGA Representing! Send Painter Jon McNaughton to the Venice Biennale!

*Artist Justin Lieberman is petitioning the State
Department to Make Art Great Again*

by R.C. BAKER



JONMCNAUGHTON.COM

Joseph Stalin was a keen student of propaganda, and was assiduous about how he was represented in the media. Soviet paintings in the Socialist Realism style portray the Communist dictator surrounded by children, speechifying to eager acolytes, communing with the beloved novelist Maxim Gorky, and in other hagiographic

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settings. Donald Trump, with his proclivity for despots, would no doubt have found common ground with Stalin. And if conceptual artist Justin Lieberman has any success with his change.org petition, “US State Department: Jon McNaughton must represent America in the Venice Biennale,” POTUS may get the Socialist Realist artist he deserves.

Not that painter Jon McNaughton has any truck with socialism — but Socialist Realism never did either. Most thoroughly put to use in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (with a variant in National Socialist Germany that looked back to ancient Greece for inspiration), this illustrational style was useful to the Bolsheviks and the Nazis not for promoting the social welfare of citizens but as a way to dumb down the culture. The most important tenet of such work is to elevate authoritarian leaders to semi-divine status, so that their dictates cannot be questioned by the public.

McNaughton has gone so far as to paint President Trump teaching a young man to fish. Blunt metaphors abound: We all know the proverb that giving a man a fish will feed him once but teaching him to fish will feed him forever. Thus, the business mogul saves the young man from the pernicious socialist theories found in the books he’s been toting around in his backpack. But there is also the biblical sense of fishing for souls, of being saved by Christ. There is little room here for dissent.

Which brings us to Lieberman’s witty campaign to have McNaughton represent America in the Venice exposition. Trump has made it clear that he believes little in democracy — everything is rigged, so don’t trust vote counts — and prefers a model where strongmen maneuver to become lifelong leaders, such as Vladimir Putin in Russia, Kim Jong Un in North Korea, and Xi Jinping in China. (Mao Tse-tung, who ruled China for decades, was another despot who could not get enough of his own image.) If democracy is unreliable, then all trust must rest in the leader, and any imagery must reinforce that faith.



“Washington Crossing the Delaware” by Emanuel Leutze, 1851 THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Lieberman is a provocateur who accompanied a 2014 exhibition at the aptly named Know More Games gallery, in Brooklyn, with an emailed screed bidding adieu to the New York art world. It read, in part, “IT’S PRETTY OBVIOUS TO ANYONE WHO PAID ANY ATTENTION THAT I SET THE TERMS FOR WHAT ALL OF YOU ARE CASHING IN ON THESE DAYS, WITH YOUR CUTE LITTLE RECTANGLES AND MAGAZINE PAGES. AFTER ALL, WEREN’T THEY THE ‘ANTIDOTE’ TO THE MESS I MADE?” Lieberman then decamped to Munich, but he gets props for satirizing our current age of caps-locked rage, a cultural moment that, if his petition is successful, will be writ large on Venice’s world stage. For example, McNaughton’s *Crossing the Swamp* pays homage to Emanuel Leutze’s monumental 1851 canvas, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. But Leutze’s Washington is painted with robust modeling and compositional élan — the commander’s curved scabbard dynamically echoes the flowing lines of the centrally located flag, tying the father directly to his country. In McNaughton’s version, the diagonals of John Bolton’s shotgun and of Sarah Sanders’s, Ben Carson’s, and other minions’ oars serve only to fracture — rather than unify — the illusion of space.

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Leutze found endless textural variation in the Delaware River's surface, but McNaughton deploys the same white-highlighted algae-green motif throughout the painting to drive home the commander in chief's supposed battle with the dank muck. (It's also worth noting that, in the Soviet Union, when colleagues fell out of favor with Stalin they were not only imprisoned or executed but also airbrushed out of official photographs and painted over in state portraits. Considering the turnover in Trump's White House, we can only imagine how many revisions McNaughton's canvas will require by the administration's end.)



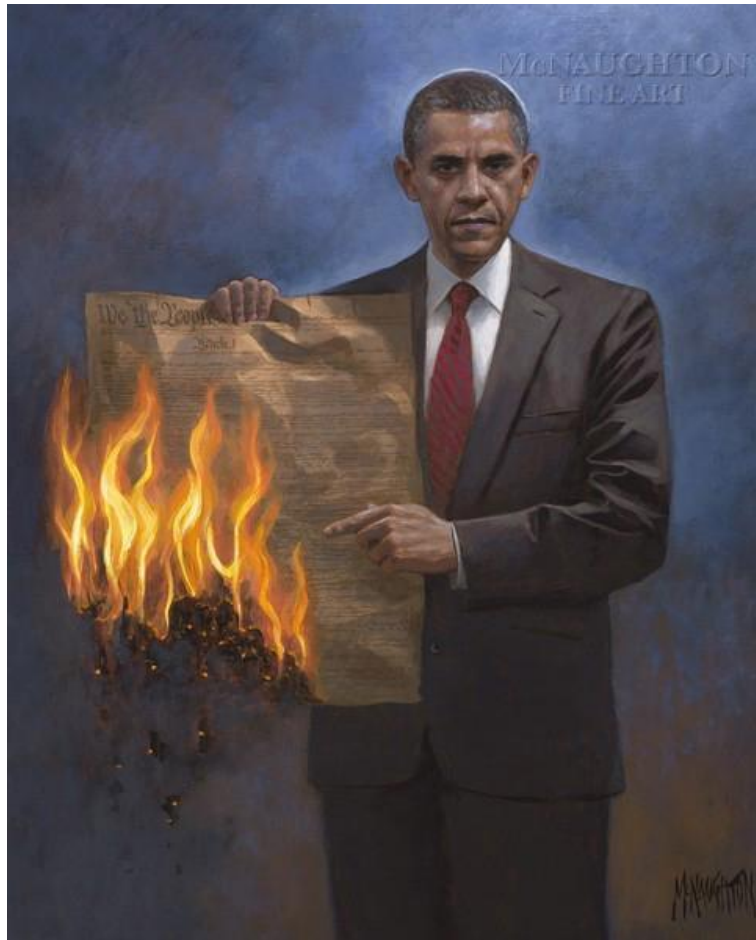
United States Pavilion in Venice EDEN BREITZ/ALAMY

According to his website, “Jon McNaughton is an established artist from Utah.” No birth year is included, but Wikipedia lists it as 1965. In his choice of Americana

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themes, McNaughton has been compared to Norman Rockwell, and while both artists painted for reproduction (Rockwell for magazine covers, McNaughton for giclée prints), the comparison falls flat. Rockwell took patient care that his compositions went beyond mere storytelling, as in the brilliant abstract play of full-frontal and skewed rectangles flowing through *Shuffleton's Barbershop* (1950). Rockwell was often working on tight deadlines, but it is McNaughton's work that feels rushed. In a painting such as *Expose the Truth*, in which McNaughton envisions the president holding up a magnifying glass to examine Robert Mueller's face, the harried brushstrokes turn cartoonish — polemics trumping artistry. Other paintings portray President Obama burning or treading upon the Constitution. The paint handling is as bludgeoned as the subject matter, leaving no doubt what the viewer is intended to think.

Just as Orwell claimed that the “Newspeak” forced upon the populace in his novel *1984* was “designed to diminish the range of thought,” Socialist Realism reduced painting to easily understood narratives that asked no questions but simply presented the party line. Equally important to its success as state propaganda in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, the genre used straightforward representation to convey approved messages: a farmer sowing seed under a rainbow, muscular men wrangling steel in a factory, peasant women tending cherubic babies, heroic soldiers storming enemy positions. Cliché as a virtue.



McNaughton's "One Nation Under Socialism," 2016 JONMCNAUGHTON.COM

But it was not always so in the USSR. Kazimir Malevich was one of the most radical artists who ever lived, and in his 1927 book, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*, he wrote, "In the year 1913, trying desperately to free art from the dead weight of the real world, I took refuge in the form of the square." Malevich was in his thirties (he was born in 1879, near Kiev) when he hit upon this new art of unadorned geometries — squares, circles, crosses — paintings that are startling in their deceptive simplicity. He explained, "By Suprematism, I mean the supremacy of pure feeling in the pictorial arts. From the Suprematist point of view, the appearances of natural objects are in themselves meaningless; the essential thing is feeling."

Today, you can hop on the subway to the Museum of Modern Art and lose yourself in the luminous limbo of Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918). Contemplate the corners of the cool white square — canted just so — diagonally caressing the edges of the larger, warmer square. You just might feel a resonance at a

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century's distance with the Russian Orthodox icons that were part of Malevich's youth, which he distilled into pure painted radiance. You might also sense the political dimensions of the aesthetic shock waves created by the avant-garde's revolutionary art, which supported the 1917 Russian Revolution through banners for marches, propaganda posters, and stage sets for plays celebrating the rise of the Bolsheviks. The sheer graphic audacity of Malevich's work opens many avenues of contemplation.



Kazimir Malevich's "Black Square," 1915 TRETYAKOV GALLERY

The heady elation felt by the avant-garde in the newly born Soviet Union would last only into the late 1920s. Once Stalin consolidated power, his government began to question the nuance and ambiguity inherent to abstraction and instead promulgated those Socialist Realist scenes of collective farmworkers bringing in abundant harvests, workers enthusiastically toiling in factories, and other fantasias of the

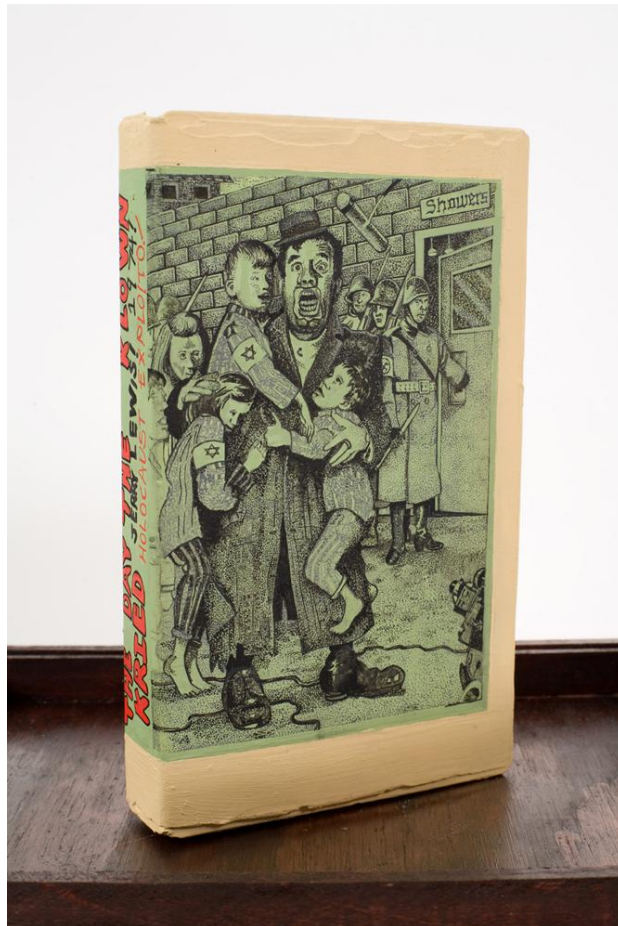
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supposed workers' paradise. Artists who didn't get with the official program were branded counterrevolutionaries, and their work was banned. Some, including Malevich, were also jailed. Malevich's health was shattered during his incarceration, and when he was released he attempted to satisfy the cultural overlords by working in the Socialist Realism mode. Yet he could not confine himself to simple storytelling, and his 1933 portrait of a peasant woman in blue headscarf, red blouse with white sleeves, and yellow apron, set against a black background, crackles with abstract power, not least from the incisive concept of primary colors against black and white. Still, there is pain in the image, a sense of something lost, a lesson that an artist such as Ilya Kabakov — born that same year of 1933, in Ukraine — learned well when the dissident art he clandestinely created caused him trouble in his day job as an approved children's-book illustrator. Kabakov found international success when he left the USSR for the West, in the 1980s, and now lives on Long Island. A short, poignant essay he wrote on Malevich's *Woman Worker* notes that the odd positioning of her hands implies that a baby (Malevich's Suprematist Art?) has been taken away by the authorities. Malevich died in 1935, a few years after his release. His work would not be seen again in the Soviet Union until 1989, when the thaw of Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost brought Malevich's work out of its hiding places in museum racks and private collections.

There were a few Socialist Realist artists who rose above the confines of the genre (Alexander Deineka's light-suffused bathers come to mind), but more often the paintings feel like chores rather than a search for humanity's frontiers, which is always the mission of great art — the quest that landed Malevich in jail. But McNaughton, judging by the lengthy captions he appends to his paintings online, is a true believer. He paints in this desiccated, shopworn manner because he wants to, and such imagery aligns with Donald Trump's understanding of what is most aesthetically pleasing: pictures of Donald Trump. The president seems little interested in any imagery beyond what he sees on television or in the mirror; filling the U.S. Pavilion in Venice with his own mug would certainly be in line with his successful takeover of the Republican Party and ongoing crusade to rule America in any way he sees fit.

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In that vein, perhaps Lieberman’s boosting of McNaughton can be seen as a plan to send out a cry for help from Venice’s international platform. Or maybe it’s just a way to stir up more shit around the biggest shit-stirrer ever to inhabit the Oval Office. Lieberman’s mordant conceptualism might favor the latter interpretation. In one solo show, he included a mock-up of a VHS tape of *The Day the Clown Cried*, the legendary but unseen 1972 Jerry Lewis movie about a clown who leads children into the gas chamber at Auschwitz. Other than Lewis, the comedian Harry Shearer is one of only a handful of people who have actually seen the film. In an interview with Howard Stern, Shearer said that in 1979, he and his then girlfriend sat “and watched [a bootleg copy], our mouths just getting lower and lower on our faces,” adding, “If you say, ‘Jerry Lewis, clown in a concentration camp,’ and you make that movie up in your head, it’s so much better than that. By ‘better’ I mean ‘worse.’ You’re stunned. You’re just, ‘Oh my God, you’ve got to be — OH NO!’ ”



**Justin Lieberman, VHS Cassette Collection with “The Day the Clown Cried”
Bootleg Placeholder, 2008**COURTESY THE ARTIST

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Lieberman clearly appreciates the fathomless wrongness of Lewis's film, which the comedian-filmmaker kept under lock and key for decades before he died, in 2017. There are reports that Lewis donated a copy to the Library of Congress, with the stipulation that it not be screened before 2024. Lewis at one point said that the film was "bad, bad, bad," adding, "I didn't quite get it. And I didn't quite have enough sense to find out why I'm doing it, and maybe there would be an answer."

Such artistic and moral bewilderment might be as good a reason as any for sending McNaughton's art to Venice. It may feel as if we're living through a profoundly awful movie, but Trump is as real as it gets.