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Art World

Trump's State Department Has Yet to Pick a US Representative for the Venice Biennale. Artist Justin Lieberman Has a Suggestion

Lieberman has launched a petition stating that famed realist painter Jon McNaughton "must represent America in Venice Biennale."

by Taylor Dafoe • July 27, 2018

Jon McNaughton, *Respect the Flag* (2018). Taken from the artist's Instagram account.

The 58th Venice Biennale is less than 10 months away, and 25 of the 80-some countries have already announced their representative artists. However, as Nate Freeman recently reported, the US is not one of them.

The nomination is the responsibility of the State Department, and recent administrations have set a standard of the representative artist being announced over a year in advance. Of course, this administration, which is led by a president who attempted to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts just months into his first term, is markedly less invested in cultural diplomacy.

The clock is ticking. Still, the State Department is likely to nominate somebody soon. So who should it be?

Conceptual artist Justin Lieberman has a suggestion.

This week, Lieberman launched an online petition on Change.org positing that pro-Trump painter Jon McNaughton is "most suited" for the role. "McNaughton is certainly a social realist for our time. A painter of history as it happens," Lieberman told artnet News in an email.

Jon McNaughton, *Make America Safe* (2018). Taken from the artist's Instagram account.

Upon seeing that the country had yet to nominate an artist for the high profile international event, Lieberman decided to throw his idea out into the world.

"I saw it as an opportunity to put the selection process in the hands of the people, rather than a cadre of curatorial elites, whose abuse of the system has created a situation in which most regular people feel that contemporary art is a big scam perpetrated on the public," he explains. "Unlike the flood of readymades, techno-fetishist video environments, and fabricated objects churned out by studios employing innumerable assistants, McNaughton's paintings embody the American ideals of self-reliance, craftsmanship, and entrepreneurial spirit."

(Notably, last year's US representative to the Venice Architecture Biennale was also abnormally delayed, provoking commentary in the architectural press. In the end, the US pavilion was co-curated by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Chicago, tackled "Dimensions of Citizenship," and was perfectly respectable.)

Jon McNaughton, *Stand Your Ground* (2018). Taken from the artist's Instagram account.

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Lieberman, currently based in Munich, Germany, is a maker of scabrous conceptual art. He very publicly quit the New York art world in 2014, with a show at the artist-run Know More Games gallery whose announcement denounced his peers as phonies and declared, "To Be Honest, You Would Have to Be a Complete Dipshit to Stick Around This Soul-Sucking City…"

As for the Utah-based Jon McNaughton, he gained viral celebrity for his surreal anti-Obama canvasses—his 2010 painting *The Forgotten Man*, depicting Obama stomping on the Constitution as a forlorn everyman looks on, was purchased by Fox News pundit Sean Hannity, who publicly flirted with the idea of donating it to the Trump White House—and is today often named as the most popular pro-Trump artist. His realist paintings are moralizing allegories about contemporary American politics, featuring themes about religion and conservative values.

McNaughton has depicted the current president proudly locking the gate of a white picket fence (titled *Make America Safe*) and peering into the eyes of Robert Muller with a magnifying glass (*Expose the Truth*). Earlier this year, the artist received a big publicity boost when Hannity dared the "left" to weigh in on a hagiographic painting the artist created that depicts President Trump clutching a threadbare American flag in the middle of a football field.

Jon McNaughton, *Teach a Man to Fish* (2018). Taken from the artist's Instagram account.

Lieberman's personal favorite painting is one in which a fatherly Trump is shown helping a young man with socialist inclinations put bait on a fishing pole. Its title: *Teach a Man to Fish*.

"While the event it depicts might not really have happened exactly as it is shown, the painting remains a powerful allegory of the opportunities we are offered as Americans," Lieberman says. "*Teach A Man To Fish* throws the ball into our court. As the artist has remarked about the work: 'Each of us has the freedom to choose our own destiny.' I believe that it is Jon McNaughton's destiny to represent America in the Venice Biennale because his work is the most American art I have seen in quite some time."

Lieberman's deadpan nomination chimes with the theme of next year's biennale, curated by Ralph Rugoff. Titled "May You Live in Interesting Times," it aims to tackle the proliferation of fake news, a term coined to describe the proliferation of distorted or fabricated stories in the 2016 election, but promptly appropriated by the president to describe his critics.

Will McNaughton's candidacy take off? Lieberman's proposal hasn't exactly caught fire yet. At the time this article was written, the petition had only 15 signatures.