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Make Art Conservative Again

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Make Art Conservative Again

Armed with an easel and a briefcase full of horse manure, Scott LoBaido hopped onto his American flag-painted SUV to visit The Brooklyn Museum on an early Thursday morning in 1999.

"Common sense is being stepped all over," he said as the self-proclaimed creative patriot demonstratively set up his canvas in front of the building, shouted 'This is the medium that I choose to express myself with,' and started hurling animal feces at the museum as a way to protest the upcoming exhibition aptly called "Sensation," which featured a painting of Virgin Mary surrounded by collaged pornographic images and elephant dung.

"To me it was unconstitutional," LoBaido said. "You can't promote a single religion in the publicly funded institute. Therefore, how could you degrade a single religion with public funds?!"

This act of the "professional activism" as he would later call it, codified into his artistic ideas, was LoBaido's attempt to fill the gaps in the art world that heavily skews liberal. For these unlikely conservative artists, ideology has been a countercultural secret handshake, but after the election of Donald Trump, some artists on the right are giving conservative art a new veneer of political chic.

They are the darlings of conservative America, the prophets of the new reactionary movement, the iconoclasts and the patron saints of the free speech, revered by "the basket of deplorables" and castigated by liberal America for being cheap shot opportunists whose goal is to crusade against the values that Americans hold most dear. Although Donald Trump's presidency galvanized a big chunk of artists around the resistance movement, a small group of right-wing artists, who were operating surreptitiously, are gaining momentum.

They have mastered the art of cocking a snook at political correctness and don't shy away from broaching conversations that might easily offend a lot of people.

Among others, the right-wing has its guerilla street artist Sabo, a conservative version of Banksy, who believe that "liberalism is a disease" and "the Republicans are the new punk;" Martina Markota, a burlesque-dancer-turned-into-an-activist who uses sex appeal to become a new face of nationalism; Robert Cooperman, who spearheaded The Conservative Theatre Festival; A reactionary movement Liberatchik that unites over 40 artists across different mediums and focus entirely on political and satirical works. And, of course, Scott LoBaido, who's been deliberately crafting his public face as a creative patriot for over two decades.

Wearing battered brown boots, a plain V-neck t-shirt that may once have been white and blue jeans, all of them paint-splattered with different hues of red, blue and purple, LoBaido is as confident as it gets.

LoBaido found his niche when he pledged his artistic alliance to "the greatest work of art" - the flag of the United States. He christened himself as an activist artist for working-class people who, as he said, have been deprived of the real art: "Why does art have to be so complicated?" LoBaido asked.

LoBaido says that the 2016 election and popularity of Donald Trump attracted new acolytes of opportunist painters to the cause he's been dedicating his life to: making patriotism popular again. At first, he was disappointed in seeing others "jumping on the wagon" and cashing in on the rise of the new conservative wave.

"And then I sat back and said 'Nobody can take it away because I was there from the beginning,'" LoBaido said as he was tapping his fingers on the table to make a point. "Not only the flag painting but also the pro-American, fight-the-political-correctness activism."

Scott LoBaido isn't the first person to use the U.S. flag to provoke reactions. Jasper Johns, for example, an iconic painter who created widely acclaimed series of flag paintings in the 20th century, capitalized on the duality of the flag, the pride and the sense of belonging, but also hostility and complexity attached to it. But for LoBaido, the flag is almost a religious symbol. His art - some of them overtly political, some, not so much - existing somewhere between abstract expressionism and kitsch.

LoBaido painted the American flag on drab walls of firehouses, schools, police stations, veteran houses, and community service centers and turned them into his exhibition spaces.

While other artists used to be socially and politically inactive during the Obama years, tip-toeing around sensitive issues, LoBaido was dressing up like a Christmas Tree on a Staten Island ferry terminal and protesting the ban on holiday decorations, traveling around the country with a single mission to paint his version of Old Glory in every state.

LoBaido, who calls himself a provocateur, set out to fight against the "pussification of the nation," as he puts it. He's not surprised when somebody tells him that one of his artworks have been vandalized with "Patriotism Makes Me Sick" spray-paints or by arson. He's even gotten a phone call from then-candidate Trump after somebody torched LoBaido's latest installation - a 12-foot tall uppercase "T" - in 2016.

Ideology aside, the main thing that binds LoBaido and other conservative artists together is the notion that American art is undergoing a crisis of relevance. Ten years ago, Frances Byrd and Christopher Cook started a reactionary art movement Liberatchik that unites conservative and libertarian visual artists to "take the culture back from the Left."

In doing so, Cook came up with the "Declarationist Manifesto" that urges conservative artists to "be loud and proud in your conservative principles," "become a propagandist. Make agit-prop."

"Don't wait for the left to call you a "fascist"—call them fascists first," reads the manifesto. "Their ideology is more closely associated with fascism, totalitarianism, and historical racism. Don't play defense—go on offense."

"We have always felt it necessary to fight cultural battles on the existing terms," said Byrd, who also creates political art. "If we were afraid to call left-wing culture what it is in plain terms, we would not expect to have people understand the point of our movement."

In her works, Byrd addresses a variety of issues such as social programs, eminent domain abuse, civil asset forfeiture, personal liberty and the increased surveillance state in America. She chose icons of crows to depict the "predatory and destructive nature" of progressivism and to slyly subvert and mock "a top-down centralized control of society by a political and intellectual elite," as she puts it.

On a recent Thursday LoBaido sat around at his favorite restaurant in Staten Island contemplating his plans for new Trump piece over a glass of Martini. "it's not going to be in-your-face. It will be subtle," he said. "I hate to be cheesy; it will be very MAGA, but you'd even love the painting if you didn't know it was Trump."

Michale Graves' Conservative Punk

In 2003 politicians from both sides of aisle found themselves unusual allies: punk rockers. The majority of the musicians sided with John Kerry, then-Democratic candidate, while Michale Graves publicly lauded George Bush's candidacy. This decision almost cost him his entire career.