

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

INTERVIEWED BY: JASON PATTERSON

Jason Patterson met William Blake in Champaign, IL, Jason's hometown, when William was studying at the University of Illinois. William was a regular customer at Art Coop, the local art supply store, where Jason was an employee. They quickly bonded over their shared interests in art and history.

In the spring and early summer of 2022 they discussed William's new series of work, *A Great Battlefield*:

JP: We live in a time when the invention of photography is almost 200 years old. Within our society and culture, taking pictures digitally is now the ironclad standard when it comes to how we collectively make visual representations of each other. Painting, as a primary way to create visual representations of people, has long passed. So today, in the 21st century, when we paint and draw representational artwork, there must be more to it conceptually. So for you, in your practice as an artist, why is it important for you to oil paint? Conceptually, why is oil painting the best vehicle for your ideas?

WB: Because people have pushed around mud to make images for at least 40,000 years, painting is in constant dialogue with the past. Reading a painting is a mimetic encounter, I think especially for us painters. When viewing a painting, we attempt to dissect the moves made, put ourselves in the position of the painter, to see what they saw... like that painter did with the paintings around them. A painting is a gesture to the past and the future in that way—Manet made his balcony painting in dialogue with Goya and Magritte. His painting was a response to Goya and knowing his

painting was to last, it was also a call to future painters. Though it doesn't have to be that linear or visible.

I have an attachment to painters like Winslow Homer, I embody him at American Civil War battle reenactments. There's something similar that happens when reenacting and honestly more direct when painting what I paint. Reenactment uses the body to connect to the past and so does painting, more than photography at least. I think that's why it's important to me.

JP: In your work you wonderfully make references to old master paintings. Winslow Homer is a main subject in this project. We see him beautifully celebrated in the forefront of this series. But along with Homer, can you also talk about the other old masters referenced in this new work?

WB: There are always some Catholic sympathies in my paintings, either because of the resurrection/embodiment metaphors in reenactment or the fact that my first deep encounters with art were at church. So, I'm looking a lot at the Spanish and Italian painters.

I was thinking directly of Pontormo's Deposition for the painting High Water Mark. I love his figures and the gesture of Christ's hand being held. I made a series of paintings after participating in a reenactment at Gettysburg which had Clara Barton checking the pulse of a man during his leg amputation. I liked this idea of searching for the liveness in reenactment and brought that into how I saw the Pontormo painting- that they were checking Christ's pulse, always questioning his liveness.

Manet's Civil War lithograph is another reference. The first images I



saw of the Marines playing dead in the 1922 reenactment made me think of the lithograph.

Manet also held my attention because he painted the Battle of Cherbourg, had a stint with the French Navy, and fought in the National Guard during the initial siege of Paris. I thought it was fitting because the next time a German army approached Paris it was engaged by the US Marine Corps at the Battle of Belleau Wood. A battle that helped shape the identity of the Corps and had some of its veterans participate in the 1922 reenactment.

I also love the paintings of Thayer, Beaux, Whistler, Chase, and Julian Scott so there's some of that in there as well.

JP: I did not know about the Manet litho! Is your painting only a reference to that or is it a reference to that and the matador painting? I'm guessing it's both. So my question is: In your answer do you think you could acknowledge both works by Manet? I'm thinking a lot of the readers will see this painting and their minds will go straight to the matador and, like me, they may not know about the litho.

WB: For sure, I imagine that the litho was drawn onsite as he ventured back into Paris but the image has its DNA in the dead toreador painting, which he lifted from a painting thought to be by Velasquez. I see a progression from the playful theatrics of his early paintings in the mid 1860's, to the political heaviness of the execution of Maximilian and then culminating with these lithographs. You can kind of feel it. There's a different sentiment between the litho and the toreador painting even though it's a very similar image.

So the painting Good Friday attempts to hold both those sentiments, it's somber and weighted but it's also a Marine playing dress-up, playing dead.

JP: As you know, both of our practices have a lot of similarities. We're both history painters and we both deal in portraiture. Also, I think race and our American history of white supremacy, are always resonant on both of our artwork. Mine may be a bit more direct.

So here I have a few questions: In another conversation you mentioned as a kid you had an obsession with Robert E. Lee. Obviously that interest has evolved and matured, but could you talk on how that strong interest came about and existed with you as a kid and then how you think and feel about the Confederate General today.

WB: It might be a bit strange to have favorite generals, but as a kid that's what it was. I had a list, top one being Gen. Benjamin Grierson, but yes, the Grey Fox was up there. I imagine it had to do with the way Shelby Foote spoke about him, the way Martin Sheen portrayed him, and the respect he garnered from those he fought. Some folks love Darth Vader and I was into Lee.

Like everything, as you grow up the context becomes larger and you can see the successful strategy of Chancellorsville, see the benefits of not micromanaging, and also to not idolize a traitorous slave holder who used his skills for a cause of white supremacy.

JP: Generally, in your practice, how do you try to acknowledge, reference or represent our history of race?

WB: Like you said, we're history painters, figurative painters. Painting



a figure is not neutral. Obviously, a white painter painting another white figure is just as much about race as if there's folks of color in those positions. It's hard to speak in generalities, I don't have the overarching project that someone like Kerry James Marshall has, so I try to rely on my own sensibilities.

When choosing reenactors, I try my best to have that come organically. The paintings come from a collaborative process and for some reenactors, racial justice is at the forefront of their portrayal and others it's not as much. I want to be critical enough to not cause harm but also to not be so didactic. Some of Homer's images do this very well and some not so much.

JP: You'll have to remind me of what exactly you said, but the last time we chatted, you mentioned (if I remember correctly) that in the original 1922 Gettysburg Marine Corp reenactors didn't exactly shy away from presenting the Confederates in a positive, honorable or triumphant way. Am I remembering that correctly? In any case, can you speak on how our troubled legacy concerning race is present in this new series?

WB: Yeah, I'd say a month before he viewed the reenactment at Gettysburg, President Harding gave a speech at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial, where he celebrated Lincoln, not as the great emancipator but simply the man who kept the union intact, "...he [Lincoln] doubtless believed in its [slavery's] ultimate abolition through the developing conscience of the American people, but he would have been the last man in the republic to resort to arms to effect its abolition. Emancipation was a means to the great end—maintained union and nationality."

Other than for members of the Grand Army of the Republic, the ceremony was segregated. The only Black speaker was censored before calling it a mockery; the Chicago Defender started a boycott of the memorial.

1922 was only three years after the Red Summer, one year after the massacre in Tulsa, and three years away from the largest Klan march in Washington.

So when the Marine Corps (only white men at the time) stepped onto the battlefield to reenact Pickett's Charge, I would say the sentiments were closer to that of the Lost Cause. Like water to fish, that's what they were swimming in. For me, the paintings Union and Palm Sunday acknowledges those sentiments.

It's a hundred years after the reenactment, and I think it's worth thinking about what that battlefield means to me today. Gettysburg has been used as a microcosm of the US since the battle... the whitewashing of the Blue and Gray reunions, the Civil Rights/Cold War battles during the centennial celebrations, militia groups on the lookout for Antifa, someone with a BLM t-shirt being escorted out of the National Cemetery. It's all there for me.

I think that's why I look to reenactment so much; it's always changing even if it's recursive. The battle didn't change, just how we understand it. ■

IMAGE CREDITS (LEFT TO RIGHT): *Majas on a Balcony*; Goya (Francisco de Goya y Lucientes); 1800–1810 (detail) | *The Balcony*; Edouard Manet; 1868–1869 (detail) | *Perspective II, Manet's Balcony*; René Magritte; 1950 | *The Deposition from the Cross*; Jacopo Pontormo; 1528 (detail) | *Finding a Pulse*; William Blake; 2018 | *Civil War (Guerre Civile)*; Edouard Manet; 1871–73, published 1874 | *The Dead Toreador*; Edouard Manet; probably 1864 (detail) | *President Harding snapped at the dedication ceremonies of the Lincoln Memorial today, 1922 May 30*; Photograph (detail). www.loc.gov.