

Walter Wickiser gallery presents abstract paintings by Ken Kaminski, from January 31 through February 25, 2015.

The Walter Wickiser gallery is pleased to present the abstract expressionistic paintings and additional assemblage oriented paintings by Arizona-based (previously NJ) artist Ken Kaminski, from January 31 through February 25, 2015. The *work* includes a stirring sequence of paintings directly responding to the worlds current and recent significant events including the attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11, recording in bright, architectural, iconic, expressionistic and sometimes volatile paintings the 'lived experience' of an engaged artist processing the event from initial shock to, more than a decade later, signs of recovery and perspective-taking. With *Man's Religion* and other paintings Kaminski has also come to see that the events of that day are best seen as a side-effect of the tendency of concretists to polarize the elements of religion devoted to peace and understanding, and use them for nefarious purposes. A curated selection of Kaminski's paintings will be on view from January 31 through February 25, 2015.

As an artist, Ken Kaminski inherited a vision of the world from Pop-expressionistic artists like Robert Rauschenberg and minimalist sculptors like Richard Serra that frames the modern world as an assemblage made up of large moving parts, more often than not expressed as architecture. Kaminski also began his career in the 1980s, partaking of what critics of the time noted as a "fusion" tendency to synthesize all of the lessons of the Pop and Minimalist artists in a kind of neo-expressionism that addressed the complexities of the framing of life by modern media. Such "fusion" art, though broadly named neo-expressionism, was a vital part of the painterly petri dish of the East Village in 1980s New York, the visual equivalent of synthesizer rock of the time. Kaminski has "always" addressed media and current events in his work, and, with a brilliant graphic design sense, also gravitated to the iconic. When translated into thought and culture, it only followed that Kaminski would be interested in the most fusional, expressionistic, monumental, graphic and iconic element of human thought: religion. In *Christ with De Kooning images* (1992) a gothic Christ on a red cross is contrasted to sculptures by De Kooning (playing the part of the thieves of the crucifixion story) to draw a comparison between expression and a kind of faith.

In *Man's Religion* (1097-2011), Kaminski constructed with carpentered excess a Rauschenbergian-Johnsian interrogation on the adequacy of faith alone to cope with life in the modern world. A disassembled cross is scattered in pieces of true wood across mid-canvas, painterly touches of abuse and devotion pepper its surface, a benign survey of *Man's Religions*, a book, is reduced to a place to put a can of paint on, and set next to a milk bottle and a duck decoy, resituating religion among objects of other functions. In this, and later assemblages, in a style that seems ever at the ready for Kaminski, Kaminski intuitively engages in what scholars now call the rhetorical strategy of "dialectical disorientation," by which a theme is raised, but then confused with all kinds of possible readings and interpretations of issues that, in public discourse, are usually discussed in dualistic, polarized and concretist ways. The fallen cross, made of real wood, evokes hints of depositions and intensified devotion, at the same time as, taking a step back, it clearly breaks down the symbol of a faith, to utilize it as a part of a stretcher. Kaminski seems to contrast art and religion in favor of art, though his expressionistic style could just as easily be read as displaced, if contested devotion. Kaminski's tendency to "mess with" simplistic, singular meaning, and problematize easy answers, resurfaced in *Out at Home* (2003-2004) Kaminski's assemblage of found object propellers, American eagle, baseball home plate and newspaper clippings, to capture the wild flux of emotions elicited from the "shock and awe" phase of the Iraq War, ending with the capture of Saddam Hussein, all in disorienting glory.

One of the primary postures for an artist proposed by Pop art and also by Rauschenberg was a bardic one: that the artist's duty was to comment on the current events of the time. This media-oriented as opposed to activist strain of political art is one of the mainstays of contemporary art and Kaminski has situated himself vis-à-vis current events in this way. Kaminski made use of his iconic-monumental lens to view the war in *Persian Gulf* (1991) as an intersection of right angles, diverted by a Richard Serra-looking barrier, in a kind of visual pinballing, into a pyramidal-ziggurat form iconically representing the Middle. In *Baghdad* (1991) Kaminski utilized Johns' target along with a spray of geometric vectors to represent with some wryness the crosshairs focus of that war. *North Sea Crude* (1991) was tailor-made for Kaminski, allowing commentary regarding the underlying purpose of the war with iconic painterly drip re-signified as it trickled down over geometric oil drums.

It is arguable, however, that the Pop art posture toward current events, based anthropologically in the behavior of listening to the news on television and reading the newspaper, framing events in screen and page, is too passive after all. Kaminski perhaps needed something more paradigm-shaking to make best use of his particular artistic armamentarium. The events of 9/11, it could be argued, provided Kaminski with the shock treatment his art required. Kaminski responded immediately to the attack against the World Trade Center on a personal, but also iconic, monumental and architectural level. Primed by a career interest in icons, and a graphic sense of what kind of imagery strikes the mind, Kaminski, as few other artists in response to the event, fixed on the image of the Towers themselves under attack as the most compelling signifier capable of summarizing all of one's feelings about the event. Over the course of the period that sociologists now term the "rally round the flag effect" period, from 9/11 to about mid-2005, Kaminski worked up a compelling crescendo of more than a dozen works, all about the towers, variously titled, *Wounded Towers* (2002), *Ex-Towers* (2003) and *Ghost Towers* (2011), in addition to other works.

Social psychologists have productively analyzed public response to terrorists attacks as a sudden threat to mortality that caused people to respond to the event in a singular way, termed worldview defense. Faced with mortality salience, people tend to shore up their beliefs. Some people chose to demonize out-groups and engage in blaming and scapegoating, others shored up their tolerance, tried to learn more about what brought it on, improved personal relationships, came together (as New Yorkers famously did). Though in retrospect George W. Bush has been criticized for mistaken responses to terrorism (the Iraq war), media scholars concede that his us-versus-them (them being the terrorists) universalizing of the frame of the 'war on terror' was phenomenally successful both for his own popularity and also for establishing a conceptual model for the interpretation of reality for the four years after 9/11. What is fascinating about Kaminski's *work* is the variability of his response, within that frame and aftermath limbic-excited time period, and his honesty as an artist and a human being in expressing what he felt, regardless of political correctness, which demands consistent repression of emotion by one's toeing a party line making the painting. The result is a unique testament to what phenomenologists term the "lived experience" of 9/11 and its aftermath, which may, after all, be the only truth in life. In *9/11 the moment it happened* (2002) Kaminski's remarkable graphic sense is enlisted to create a partial view of the top of the towers looming large, rendered as the very symbol of black-and-white worldviews, splashed with red, a sign of blood, not fuselage explosion, in a sky not at all the clear bright blue morning it was but one of anger and chaos and terror, all the ugly outcome of extremism. *Wounded Towers* (2002) is completely different: in it the outlines of the towers, bent almost anthropomorphically by the blast, exemplify pain, a punch, a body-blow, being felled, but all is rendered in a De Kooning-esque mix of whites, yellows and reds that somehow personalizes the terror. *Ex-Towers* (1986-2003) is serially dated because it makes use of some of the many photographs Kaminski took of the World Trade

Center in the 1980s, and then, assembling them into a POV memory of looking straight up at the towers, x's them out in red, to express an artist's sense of a personal attack on an urban world of commerce and people he loved.

*Twins* (2003) one of his first response paintings, comes from a completely different place, as Kaminski must have been having a burst of positive energy, hoping for rebirth or at least a Periclean rebuilding of the twin towers (which was a common public response at the time). Now the bright white towers are back up, gleaming again in a yellow light, green up top, symbolizing fertility and future, and though they cast a dark shadow still, the caption rejoices at a special rebirth, twins! Where in the public discourse can one say one has seen such as uniquely personal response to the towers as in this painting? *Sequence* (2004) is a smaller meditative triptych, which relives, in almost surgically precise, organic, fleshy expressionism, the first and second strike, against bright white towers, and then the collapse, the still unbelievable sequence from one terror to the next on a single morning. *Blind Sided* (2006), though the sky has cleared, and has acknowledged the irony of the day's clear blue, would appear to represent a re-experiencing recoil back to angst as the flight of the propulsive jet is compressed by a remarkable act of abstract expressionist iconism in a lance-like body blow against a groaning, doubling up tower: another remarkably humanized image.

After the original 'rally round the flag' period ended, the war on terror frame with which 9/11 was made sense of for the world began to waffle, and Kaminski himself appeared ready to move on. And yet he felt one last impulse to revisit the memory ten years on to see if he could, in taking his expressive temperature, as it were, gain a sense of where he was. *Ghost Towers* (2011) perhaps expresses this fading of the block of anger and pain represented by the icon of the towers; they seem softer, rest in a sunset glow, night falls. *Collapse* (2011), recoiling again, revisits the moment of impact but at night, and as a wildly gyrating event being ushered onto another plane of reality. Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of his ten-years-after paintings is the fact that Kaminski's professional talents in graphic design have been imported into his art to signify the solidification of a clear break or closure, with expressionistic painting itself now resignified as a mark of personal emotional turmoil. Kaminski has taken many photographs at the site of 9/11 and visited the rescue site very early with members of the cleanup crew. His visit to the 9/11 Memorial and seeing how no matter how severe aesthetic correctness wishes to make anti-monuments to give existential voice to the unrepresentability of such traumas, a tradition developed in public art in response to the Holocaust, human beings will be human beings, people want to touch, to experience, to connect, their response is not clean and aesthetic, serene and refined, slate and negating, it is messy and emotional. Kaminski's *Touch* (2012), a photograph, is his acknowledgement of this, even as the shiny surface of the monument itself seems to provide a kind of iconic closure to lock the genie of turbulence away.

All of this is exemplified in Kaminski's summative *gesamtkunstwerk*, *Switch to Recovery* (2012), a large mural-size work which he mulled over for over a decade, and finally resolved in 2012. The title refers to the fact that on the day of 9/11 Kaminski was in a business meeting pitching a design for the box for an allergy medication, as it was being "switched" from prescription to over the counter. The blue sky, that benign, clear cloud, evoke the morning of September 11, 2001, but now, in retrospect, as a promise of blue skies in the metaphorical sense: the World Trade Center towers return, but obliquely, elliptically, they are blue and green, and the waterfalls and pools of the monument have been resituated up top of their imaginary reconstruction. The turmoil and chaos of the skies, captured by Kaminski with expressionism, has now resolved into the red and white of an American flag, and Kaminski has stored a real flag up top. His two handprints mark this and the *Towers Series* as a whole as his personal ten-year-long response to 9/11, and his confidence that safety and security has returned. To reinforce this feeling,

Kaminski's *NYC911*® (2012) used assemblage fire alarms with a logo of the city, proposing a resignification of I Love NYC, with an assurance that first responders always have our back. And in *Blue Sky Day* (2012), the sky now is as it was, blue, clear, serene, and a silhouette of a plane, moving sequentially from small to large, Kaminski enlisting again his sense of graphic design, still there, but somehow put behind. It is apparent that Kaminski has begun to disengage from the specific iconic quality or emotional response to a specific event, to muse upon the broader implications of what happened. In *Desire* (2013), again in a graphically clean style, on a clear blue ground symbolic of deeper insight, Kaminski contrasts the most cherished dream of an American boy, a real Schwinn String Ray bicycle, and what is put in the hand, too often, of young boys by terrorists, hijacking a faith that, like all faiths, preaches love and understanding, a real, decommissioned AK47 rifle.

Kaminski has felt that perhaps time has come to exhibit in full his honest response over time to a life-changing event in American life, **Kaminski has commented, "What is most important for me is to leave a historically accurate legacy that ensures that all global citizens remember what happened."**

Ken Kaminski exhibited his work at the FDU Gallery in Hackensack, NJ, Richard/Bennett Gallery in Los Angeles, the Nivida Gallery, San Diego and at the Hurlbutt Gallery, Greenwich, Ct. His *Window Views* was a solo exhibition at the New York University Broadway Windows Gallery.

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