

HYPERALLERGIC

Mark Greenwold Looks in the Mirror and Does Not Flinch

by John Yau June 23, 2019

Greenwold takes us down the rabbit hole into that place where fear and trembling preside.

There are artists who aim to shock the viewer and those who attack decorum. While the former may gain immediate attention, and generate buzz in the media, the latter might have more staying power, and for good reason. The art world believes in decorum—the display of appropriately polite behavior—which is especially apparent when you think about what gets put up in public institutions these days. You may behave or misbehave, but you must do it in an acceptable manner. You must know how to walk up to the line but not cross it. Propriety must be maintained at all costs. Titillation and smugness are fine but the truly indecorous and the blurring of boundaries are another matter.

Mark Greenwold challenges protocol, as does Peter Saul. Their transgression is that, no matter what they put into their paintings, they don't divide the world into us versus them. Whether the subject is an old man with knobby knees in an adult diaper, or a knife-wielding woman, or a goofy-looking killer strapped into an electric chair, it is us we are seeing, and none of us are pretty.

In an interview I did with Mark Greenwold that appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail* (April 2010), we talked about William Bailey and James McGarrell, two painters he studied with as a graduate student at the University of Indiana in the late 1960s. During this part of our exchange, he made an observation that still resonates:

The same things that trouble people today troubled [Bailey and McGarrell]: that I don't make more work and that it veers between something that's too over-the-top or operatic and the sentimental.

For viewers who don't know this artist's work, I think it is important to see the exhibition, *Mark Greenwold: And Now What?!*, at Garth Greenan Gallery (May 30–July 2, 2019). You should not leave before you experience the whole extravaganza. Spend time with each work and notice the attention Greenwold pays to surfaces and color, such as the veined, mottled skin of an old man's leg.

There are 12 paintings in the exhibition, done between 1964 (when Greenwold was a graduate student in his early 20s) to 2018—a lifetime of work. Despite all the changes his paintings have undergone and the inspirations he has absorbed—from Tamara Lempicka and Francis Bacon to Ed Keinholtz and McGarrell—he has proven remarkably consistent. His paintings include human figures (usually more than two), an animal (or insect), and a room. The figures are often posed frontally, with at least one in the foreground. The space occupied by the figures is a room, and, in that sense, closed—a kind of stage full of props. Distortions and scale shifts of all kinds take place. As has often been stated about Greenwold, the subject is sex and violence, though this seems too general to tell us anything.

In an early work, *Christmas Painting* (1964), whose figures, in contrast to his later, hyper-realist style, share something with Bacon's expressionist distortions, Greenwold presents us with all the trappings we associate with that holiday: a Christmas tree, Santa Claus, a stocking hanging above the fireplace, a reindeer peering through the window, a dog, and a nuclear family—man, woman, a boy. The painting above the fireplace depicts a woman lying nude on an animal rug, most likely a bear.

The room itself is an interlocking series of monochromatic rectangles, which section the space off, adding to the feeling of isolation that runs through the composition. The boy, who looks like he is striking a kung fu pose, occupies a maroon square facing the man and woman, who are standing in an adjacent, red rectangle. The woman faces us, while the man is either embracing or restraining her from behind. Santa Claus seems to be partially undressed, with what could be his penis peeking out from under his red and white suit.

It is impossible to figure out what is going on in this early painting. This is also true of the other works in the exhibition, even as Greenwold expanded his skill set in pursuit of visual excess and the orchestration of dissimilar appearances. In *A Magic Summer* (2017), we look into a narrow room dominated by a double window looking onto a calm sea. Proportionally, the characters occupying the room feel too big for the space.

The primary drama of the scene takes place in front of the bed, where a skinny woman recoils from the body of a man on the floor, whose bare chest has apparently been stabbed by a pair of surgical scissors. They are both in their underwear. Is she the culprit, or is it the man in glasses, also wearing only underpants, straddling him, scissors in hand?

And yet, for all the violence—implied and otherwise—some of the figures seem to be mugging for the camera, while others are lost in a hypnotic daze or busy with their hair. What is the oversize cat standing on its hind legs near the painting's lower left corner looking at? Who is the bearded, bare-chested man collapsed in the opposite corner? Is that Chuck Close, in green-framed glasses, appearing as a bodiless head hovering on the windowsill? And what about the naked man next to him, wielding a meat cleaver? Floating above them all is the only fully clothed figure in the picture, with the body of a boy and the face of a man, whose face is red and blue and demonic.

While this cast of characters are Greenwold's wife and friends, I think it is extraneous to focus on that. We should think only about what is in front of us. If we concentrate on the color scheme, we would notice his use of greens, turquoises, and blues, dominated by the lime green underpants of the bespectacled man lying in front of an Empire-style sofa, clutching his bloody chest. We might further notice the attention Greenwold lavishes on the furniture or how the mirror on the right-hand wall opens the painting up, offering us a view of things we cannot otherwise see; the reflection become an aperture that relieves the room of its claustrophobia as well as underscores its closed, narrow space.

In *Diaper* (2017), Greenwold paints with a slightly looser hand than in *A Magic Summer*, to devastating effect. Three men form a triangle in a room, again with the back wall dominated by a window. The man on the left is wearing an adult diaper and a knee brace. Is that a catheter bag full of urine beside him? Why is the naked man in the middle—the apex of the triangle—hanging from the ceiling, his eyes bugging out? What about the man on the right seated in a modern mid-century chair? Why are there a cluster of lines partially obscuring his face? Are these Greenwold's fears about getting old and incontinent? Is that why he holds his hands in the air, palms facing us, in a pose faintly suggestive of crucifixion? Is his mouth open, aghast, because he knows his body will eventually betray and humiliate him?

Greenwold takes us down the rabbit hole into that place where fear and trembling preside. I cannot think of another painter who has dealt with the subject of incontinence and the feelings of impotence that come with old age, but it is entirely in keeping with the emotional arc represented by these works. Beginning with *Christmas Painting* with its conflicted emotions about the family, about being left out, even shunned, Greenwold has dealt with what the literary critic Sianne Ngai calls “ugly feelings.” If they were too sentimental at one point, Greenwold seems to have eliminated that possibility from his work. It is hard to imagine a scenario where the failing body can be turned into a sentimental subject.

As for being over-the-top or operatic, this has always been true of Greenwold's work, only more so as the years have gone by, and he has continued adding to his storehouse of painterly skills in order to prepare himself for all the indecorousness to come. I think there is something fearless about the different ways Greenwold looks at the failing body with such hard-nosed clarity, and, sensing signs of chaos beginning to bloom, does not turn away. It is one thing to look at death in the eye. It is another to look at dying and see that it has your face and body.



Paris, 2017–2018, oil on panel, 50 x 40 inches