



September 7 - October 12, 2019

# William Powhida

## Complicities



WILLIAM POWHIDA, La Biennale di Venezia (Propaganda, 2019)

Postmasters Gallery is pleased to announce *Complicities*, William Powhida's first solo exhibition with the gallery in nearly five years (and almost a decade since the Brooklyn Rail published "How the New Museum Committed Suicide with Banality").

*Complicities* is a show of painfully obvious, politically didactic, research-based, and precisely rendered works on paper. Produced over the last ten months in the wake of the crisis at the Whitney Museum, the work makes visible generalized and abstract systems – investment, real estate, museum boards, private family-owned companies, curation, public policy – illuminating the connections between art and the ruling class.

Through specific subjects and case studies, Powhida uses an aesthetic of what might be best described as 'capitalist realism' to render an image of neoliberal governance and art's instrumentalization in perpetuating a system of private-public partnerships. Punctuating these slow takes are a series of paintings based on the artist's Instagram memes drawn from films and series including *Halloween*, *Don't Look Now*, *The Terminator*, *Robocop*, *Chernobyl*, and *Billions*, which offer a different kind and degree of reflection on art's role in society.

Over the last decade the need for critical re-evaluations of American social and cultural governance continue to intensify as the degrees and layers of structural, systemic, pragmatic, and opportunistic 'complicities' are laid bare.

The private and public systems that William Powhida maps out involve a lot of powerful white people. The artist visualizes financial investments in a military and defense conglomerate by four Whitney board members; the corporate web of profit, violations, lobbying, and philanthropy of the Koch Brothers' sprawling empire; the policies and investments behind developer Stephen A. Ross's Hudson Yard's project initiated by former mayor Michael Bloomberg; laws and executive orders behind privatization since President Reagan; the direct flow of businessman Warren B. Kanders' tear gas to his previous role as a trustee at the Whitney Museum; and the curatorial structure of the Venice Biennale.

The artist has described the resulting works as a form of 'capitalist realism' – a data visualization made of charts, diagrams and annotations filled with his exquisite watercolor drawings. He is attempting to put information back into circulation as art– the thing that links all of his subjects together.

Through a companion series of Instagram memes largely drawn from science fiction and horror, the artist comments on the institution of critique – "political art is a joke" – but as Kanders' resignation from the Whitney Board shows, there are, in fact, ways to engage institutional critique outside of the studio. As the *Teargas Biennial* essay, the *Decolonize this Place* protests, and the withdrawal of 9 artists from the Whitney Biennial demonstrate, internal and external pressure can compel institutions to change. Nan Goldin's efforts and lawsuits, brought by five states, representing thousands of victims, have caused museums to sever ties with the Sacklers and ask existential questions about their relationship with structural inequality.

Artsy's Nate Freeman recently reminded us that it's been nearly 10 years since Greek mega-collector Dakis Joannou purchased a \$1,000 William Powhida print *How the New Museum Committed Suicide with Banality*. It is a drawing "that satirizes the various players in the scandal and maps out all their connections, brutally criticizing the institution and its benefactor. "Freeman's observation, beyond suggesting Mr. Joannou has a sense of humor, implies that Powhida's own complicity in the systems – museums, the art market, social media, white male privilege – undercuts or negates the function of critique. Powhida it would seem, is already bought and compromised.

At the risk of centering structural problems on himself the artist has long been engaged through satire, parody, and self-critique of the problem of his identity as an artist. A crucial aspect of this problem is best articulated by artist Xaviera Simmons, "*Understand the historical American narrative and see yourselves within that framework; do the cultural autopsy, name what whiteness is and the centuries of harm it has done; show yourselves to each other and wrestle with the implications of whiteness on canvas, in performance, in front of the camera and definitely in writing; and, most importantly, stop oppressing us through dismissive and condescending words and deeds.*"

William Powhida has no illusions that this work will change the systems he inhabits, or save anyone, but he will not be selling any of this work to any of the subjects depicted (sorry, Glenn Furhman!). The artist will make any information about sales that transform art into commodity public upon request and tell you some other things about unpaid labor.

William Powhida [b. 1976] lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. His recent shows in 2018 *On the Contemporary* at Gallery Poulsen and *After After the Contemporary* at Charlie James Gallery follow his first solo museum exhibition *After the Contemporary* in 2017 at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut. His work will be included in *Twenty Twenty* at the Aldrich and *SUM Artists: Visual Diagrams and Systems-Based Explorations* at the Wellin Museum in Ithaca next year. His work has been reviewed and discussed in the *New York Times*, *Hyperallergic*, *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *October*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Artnet*. He holds a BFA in painting from Syracuse University and an MFA from Hunter College. He currently teaches at Cornell University and the School of Visual Arts.