

Sadow Birk

# art and cake

Narrative Painting in Los Angeles



Carl Dobsky, Narrative Painting in Los Angeles, Craig Krull Gallery; Photo credit Betty Brown

*Narrative Painting in Los Angeles*

**Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica  
through August 31**

*"We are not makers of history. We are made by history." ~ Martin Luther King, Jr.*

### **Written by Betty Brown**

The term "history painting" comes from the Latin word *historia*, which means "story" or "narrative." In this sense, the "Narrative Painting" at Craig Krull Gallery is history painting. It's not ancient history, though. Instead, it is contemporary: the people and events that make us who we are today.

The exhibition features a powerful and powerfully diverse line-up of thirteen California-based artists: Sandow Birk, Carl Dobskey, James Doolin, Steve Galloway, Lola Gil, Ja'Rie Gray, D. J. Hall, F. Scott Hess, Laura Krifka, Dan McCleary, Milo Reice, John Valadez, and Shawn Michael Warren. All of them situate human (or humanoid) figures in resonant environments, whether quotidian architectural interiors or fantastic landscapes. All of them deploy realism to one degree or another. And all of them, without exception, are exquisitely painted.

This essay focuses on how the artists are inspired by art historical precedents. Sandow Birk's "The Passing of the Tax Bill" (2018) is based on Pieter Bruegel the Elder's "Gloomy Day", from his 1565 series *The Months*. Readers may be more familiar with the Flemish artist's "Hunters in the Snow", which similarly starts with a nearby foreground on the left then opens up, on the right to an expansive view of the landscape. In place of Bruegel's distant panoramas of the Netherlands, Birk gives us a view of Washington D.C. And whereas Flemish peasants occupy Bruegel's composition, Birk gives us modern workmen clad in orange jumpsuits with chartreuse vests and yellow hard-hats. They are repairing fallen power lines, some of which are laden with icicles. Like a winter storm, the Trump tax bill is "gloomy" for most

Americans. Similarly, in his “The Mid-Term Election” based on Bruegel’s “Children’s Games” (1560), Birk makes contemporary political commentary through the filter of art historical perspective.

Dan McCleary’s triple portrait “Trouble” (2019) was inspired by another Renaissance master, Piero della Francesca. As the gallery notes, the portraits are based on Piero’s “formal sensibilities” seen in such works as his 1437 “Baptism of Christ”. Working as a mathematician and geometer as well as a painter, Piero was called a “madman for perspective” because he was so enamored with the new spatial vision provided by Brunelleschi’s linear perspective. Like Piero, McCleary reduced the many undulations of head, hair, forehead, nose, lips, and chin to simple planar surfaces. Also, like Piero, he condensed the necks to columnar cylinders and their clothes to crisp, sculpted solids.

In both “Offering” (2019) and “Trance Dance” (2017), Steve Galloway speaks of the human-nature interface using mud-headed humanoids who recall both Hopi Koyemsi kachinas and the Jewish tradition of the Golem. Koyemsi are represented throughout Hopi art, in small sculptures (often called “kachina dolls”) and painted depictions. Given the anti-figurative proscriptions of Jewish art, it is more rare to see paintings of the Golem, but one example is Miloslav Dvorak’s “Le Golem et Rabbi Loew pres de Prague” (1951). First mentioned in Psalm 1139, the Golem is a Frankenstein-like figure (i.e., a humanoid created by a man) who could be both a savior and a destroyer. Galloway’s Koyemsi/Golem dances through surreal landscapes prompting thoughts about the infinity of creation—as well as the destructive horrors of global climate change.

Carl Dobsky's "Bird of Paradise" (2016) presents a crowd of rich white people drinking at a pool party. Gorgeous and elegantly attired, they appear totally unaware of the fire raging in the hills behind them. Dobsky's painting references Nathanael West's 1939 novel about Hollywood, *The Day of the Locusts* (as well as the 1975 film by the same name). The book's main character Tod Hackett works as a scene designer for film. While he does so, he composes a painting he calls "The Burning of Los Angeles". West wrote that Hackett "wanted the city to have quite a gala as it burned, to appear almost gay. And the people who set it on fire would be a holiday crowd." One cannot help but think of Emperor Nero, who was known for the golden excesses of his profligate ways—and who reportedly played his fiddle while Rome burned. The current US president, also known for his golden excesses, golfs as climate change devastates the entire planet.

F. Scott Hess's "Dream of Art History" (2018) situates the artist in the whirling maelstrom of a remembered dream. The dynamic orange and blue space is populated by three beautiful female nudes on one side and a skeleton on the other. The figures represent the vital forces of creativity and the ever-present threat of death. They are also symbolic of the traditions of mimesis (most of the art of Western Culture has been based on imitation of the natural world) and abstraction (which dominated art of the twentieth century.) Hess has thoroughly mastered realism, even as he distorts it with brighter colors, more intense light, and more perfectly idealized female nudes.

Art historical echoes are seen throughout the exhibition. Lola Gil's haunting oils are informed by Surrealism. Shawn Michael Warren's workingmen recall American Regionalist

murals from the 1930s and 40s. Milo Reice's "(A Pentimento): Pride A Pas de Deux of Love for All" (2017) refers to the tradition of under-painting, and to the traces of revealed process inherent in his practice. And D. J. Hall's three paintings in the exhibition—"Barbara, Venice" (2010), "Gabriella, Venice" (2018), and "Senia and Mum, Venice" (2018)—are from her *Max Project*, a series inspired by the work of German expressionist Max Pechstein. Hall notes that her works "became a testament to an underlying string that seems to connect all artist through space and time."

That metaphoric string is tautly connected to all of the excellent works in this superbly curated exhibition. Artists James Doolin, Ja'Rie Gray, Laura Krifka, and John Valadez—whose compositions in this exhibition are not overtly art historical—are nonetheless joined by their creative practice back to the caves and forward to the Virtual Reality masters who are, even as I write, painting in air.

**CRAIG KRULL GALLERY**  
**2525 MICHIGAN AVE # B3, SANTA MONICA, 90404**





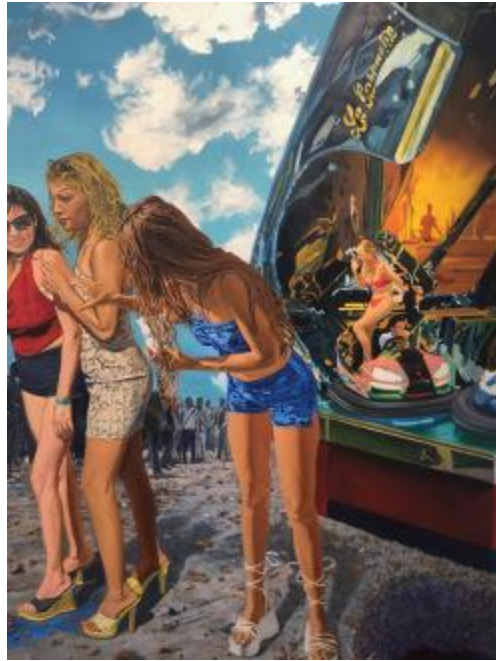


























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