



Pictured: Sandow Birk, *Liberty on the Ruins of Democracy*, 2026.

Sandow Birk: An Illustrated History of the Present, Three Decades of Pictures, Stories, and Other Histories

North and South Galleries, Media Room

on view August 29 – November 7, 2026

Opening reception: Saturday, August 29 from 2 – 4pm; remarks at 3pm

Catharine Clark Gallery opens its Fall 2026 program with *Sandow Birk: An Illustrated History of the Present, Three Decades of Pictures, Stories, and Other Histories*. The exhibition is a survey of 35 years of work across painting, drawing, printmaking, ceramics, and film, and encompasses both the North and South Galleries as well as the Media Room. The exhibition is on view August 29 – November 7, with an opening reception on Saturday, August 29 from 2:00 – 4:00 PM, featuring artist's remarks at 3:00 PM.

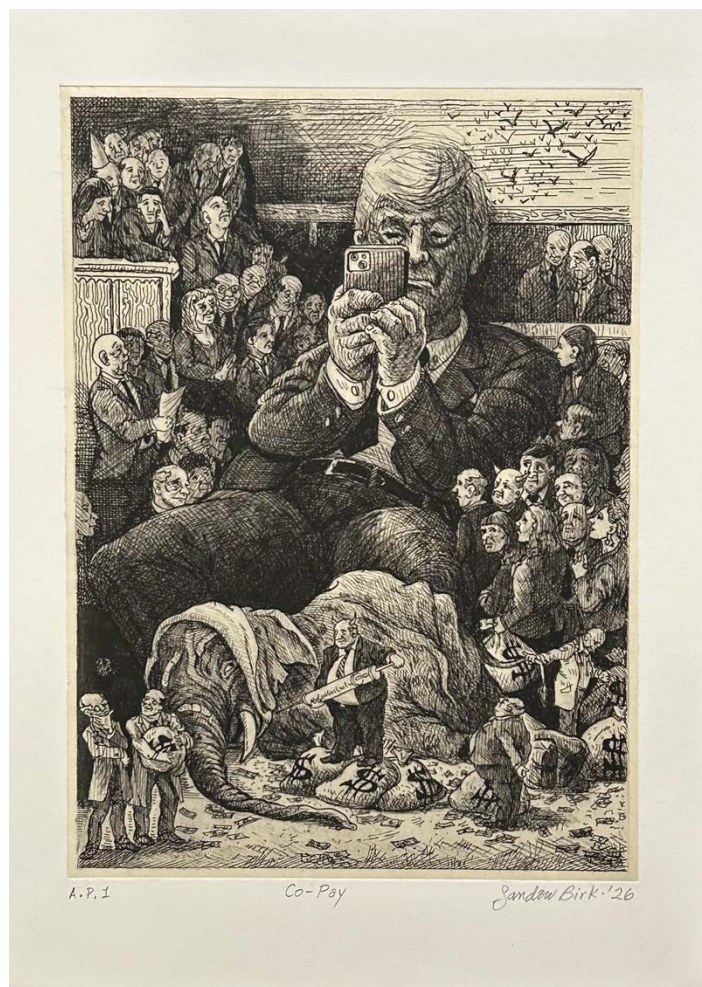


Pictured: Sandow Birk with REALM, *Big Rat Trap*, 1992.

In conceptualizing the exhibition, Birk and gallery founder Catharine Clark drew on key works from the artist's archive to represent major series across his career, such as *Prisonation*, *In Smog and Thunder/War of the Californias*, and *American Qur'an*. In many instances, Birk pairs an historic work from these series with a newly realized or reimagined work that speaks back to the original themes and narratives in the earlier works. The oldest pieces in the exhibition date to 1992: a pair of monumental graffiti paintings, rendered in collaboration with acclaimed street artist REALM, and recently revisited with political updates. The two pieces anchor the North and South Galleries of Birk's survey exhibition.

Big Rat Trap (1992 - 2026) was made in direct response to the Los Angeles uprising following the Rodney King verdicts. Devin Flynn (REALM) recently recalled that the two enormous canvases he made with Birk—*Big Rat Trap* and *The Defence of the Many Food Market*—were both conceived in connection with the riots. Birk himself describes this broader body of "Urban Works" as arising from actual events and from his experience living in Los Angeles's Crenshaw District. *Big Rat Trap* depicts three police officers firing at a Black man in overalls holding a tire iron, while an older woman comforts two frightened girls. Flynn's spray-painted imagery intervenes in Birk's conventionally painted scene: among the graffiti elements is a distorted cow with a popping eye and a blue creature that appears to shoot back at the police.

Birk constructed *Big Rat Trap* by combining elements from two Jacques-Louis David paintings: *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784) and *The Lictors Bringing to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789). Whereas David's paintings belong to the political atmosphere immediately surrounding the French Revolution, Birk redeploys that visual language during a moment when Los Angeles itself appeared to be undergoing civic rupture. The intervention by and collaboration with REALM additionally situates graffiti and history painting within the same artistic legacy and continuum of narrative, socially engaged art.



In its companion painting, *The Defence of the Many Food Market* (1992-2026), Birk draws on his experiences of living in the Crenshaw neighborhood of LA during the time of the King riots. During the 1992 uprising, Korean-owned businesses were disproportionately targeted amid longstanding tensions between some Black and Korean communities in South Central Los Angeles. Those tensions had been intensified by the 1991 killing of 15-year-old Latasha Harlins, a Black teenager who was shot by Korean-American store owner Soon Ja Du after an altercation over a bottle of orange juice. The extraordinarily light sentence given to Du became a major source of anger in Los Angeles before the uprising. In revisiting the painting this year, Birk reimagined the work by incorporating imagery referencing ICE officers and raids, pointing at the larger structures that target people of color and that perpetuate violence against them.

The exhibition marks the debut of a new series of prints from Birk's ongoing project *Horrible & Terrible Deeds & Words of the Very Renowned Trumpagruel*, realized in

collaboration with Mullowney Printing in Portland, OR. The works feature a caricatured, larger-than-life President Trump, focused on his phone, surrounded by manipulating political allies in various moments of victory and defeat. Birk was inspired to create the project by the books *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, written by François Rabelais in the sixteenth century about the adventures of two bumbling giants. Originally created in the aftermath of the 2017 U.S. Presidential inauguration, the newest etchings in the series continue Birk's parody of the bloviating commander-in-chief while also shining a light on the horrific abuses of power currently at play.

Above: Sandow Birk, *Co-Pay* from "Trumpagruel," 2026. Published by Mullowney Printing, Portland, OR.



Above: Sandow Birk, *Afternoon on San Francisco Bay (Death Row)*, 2026.

A particularly beautiful and haunting painting, *Liberty on the Ruins of Democracy* (2026), depicts Lady Liberty with her eyes downcast and her crown held loosely to her waist, her pleated blouse off her shoulder in the style of a Mexican *campesina* dress. With bare feet, she steps across the apocalyptic remnants of an American tableau: abandoned cars, plastic bottles, semiautomatic weapons, and an abandoned 7-Eleven overtaken by scavenger birds. The U.S. Capitol Building looms in the background through slack power lines against a polluted orange sky. It's a dark vision of an American "after-life," but Lady Liberty, though standing in sorrow, still appears elegant and poised, as if even amidst the horrors of corruption, violence, and pollution running unchecked, there is still the hope for a new beginning.

Gallery founder and president Catharine Clark writes that "Sandow Birk's work has been foundational in shaping the ethos of the gallery for more than three decades. From the collaborative works with graffiti artists that I first exhibited in the early 1990s, through *In Smog and Thunder* and *Prisonation*, his reimagining of *Dante's Divine Comedy*, the monumental *American Qur'an*, the Daumier-like political satire of *Trumpagruel*, and *Imaginary Monuments*—in which foundational texts such as the Declaration of Independence, the Equal Rights Amendment, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, and the US Constitution are interpreted through imagined architecture—Sandow has continually engaged new approaches and forms through which to examine the promises, contradictions, and political realities of American life."

She continues that "I have always believed deeply in the capacity of art to question power, wrestle with accepted narratives, and make us look more closely at the structures and values that shape our lives.



Birk's combination of formal ambition, intellectual rigor, social engagement, and willingness to take on difficult subjects helped set the tone and define the gallery's exhibition program from the outset. The spirit of his work resonates across the practices of many artists we have championed over the past 35 years, making this survey deeply personal and emblematic of what we have stood for as a gallery committed to advancing contemporary art."

Birk's exhibition is the latest in a series of exhibitions organized loosely under the theme "Roots & Shoots" for the gallery's 35th anniversary. The anniversary year celebrates artists who have sustained long relationships with the gallery alongside newer voices entering the program. Birk's exhibition will be on view during the gallery's 35th anniversary celebration on October 15, 2026. More information on the festivities will be revealed in coming weeks.

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Gallery hours:

Tuesday – Saturday: 11am – 6pm