



"THE MIGHTY GRIP OF FATE"

KRISTIN HJELLEGJERDE
GALLERY

CHRIS AGNEW

Chris Agnew is a British visual artist, focusing on finely detailed drawing, painting and his signature technique of etching on panel. His practice is largely concerned with the construction and deconstruction of belief systems, specifically in relation to the control and dissemination of information. The imagery in his works is diverse: architecture, interior design, geometric forms, miniature painting and abstract elements all play a role. He received his BA in Contemporary Art Practice from The University of Leeds in 2008, followed by a Masters in Fine Art at the Wimbledon College of Art in 2010. His work has been short-listed for the Jerwood Drawing Prize in 2009 and 2010 consecutively, The Clifford Chance Post-Graduate Printmaking Prize in 2010 and Saatchi's New Sensations in the same year. He is also a recipient of the Jealous Graduate Print Prize (2010). His work has been exhibited in Japan, Italy and throughout the UK – including the Royal Academy of Arts' Summer Exhibition. His work has been featured in numerous printed and online publications, including NME magazine, The Telegraph, and on the front page of The London Evening Standard. His first solo exhibition – The Pomp of Circumstances – was held at Nancy Victor Gallery in London in 2012. His work is held in private and public collections, including the Victoria and Albert Museum permanent collection. He divides his time between London and his studio in Bucharest. Chris Agnew is represented by Kristin Hjellegjerde, London.

“THE MIGHTY GRIP OF FATE”

An empty figure stands, facing us, arms outstretched. There is an air of mystery to him, for he stands half shrouded in layer upon layer of undulating fabric. He (for we presume it is a he) has the air of a martyred saint, open, presenting himself to the world. The dense etched lines that comprise the folds of what can only be parachute fabric hark back to another era; while the medium transports us to the past, the figure himself greets us, like some Icarus before his leap from the sky. His body is absent, replaced by a void of floating clouds, sky and tessellated figures, an endless view into infinity. And yet... he commands our attention. He is unmistakably present. As with all of British artist Chris Agnew's detailed works, there is a story behind the figure with which he presents us. However, it is what the figure represents, rather than who he is, or once was, that is of importance.

It is with this in mind that Kristin Hjellegjerde (ARTECO) is proud to present The Mighty Grip of Fate, a solo show of Agnew's works, running from 10 January to 9 February 2014. In the case of The Tailor's Dummy, Agnew has based the work on a photograph of Franz Reichelt, an Austrian tailor who developed one of the first parachutes in Paris in 1912. His virgin flight, from the first platform of the Eiffel Tower, resulted in his death. "In order to gain the attention of the many corporations that wanted to manufacture parachutes, Reichelt decided it would be more impressive if he jumped first," explains Agnew. "His story is now just a footnote in the history of aviation, but I liked the idea of him as a contemporary saint, risking it all to grab the attention of the men with the money; an idea that resonates with a lot of people today."

Herein is the crux of Agnew's oeuvre – the construction and deconstruction of belief systems, be they political, religious, social or cultural. For the artist, it is the malleable nature of what we hold as 'truth' that fascinates him, and how the presentation of information informs our subsequent understanding of events. "The gap between what we know to be true and what we believe isn't always one and the same," he explains. 'Facts have a habit of falling into the gaps that beliefs have opened – the title of the exhibition, The Mighty Grip of Fate, doesn't necessarily refer to the characters in the works, but also the viewer themselves – in that the opinions and beliefs that they hold are subject to circumstances beyond their control."

Agnew finds his inspiration in historical etchings and classical paintings, and it is the inclusion of geometric patterns and tessellations that produces his characteristic style. He works by engraving directly onto the gesso surface of primed wooden panels. He then applies black oil paint, which he wipes off to reveal the etching, and later paints areas onto the surface. Through this process, he creates an intriguing juxtaposition of the permanent and impermanent – rather than etching onto a block from which to create prints, he constructs the print, in a sense, directly onto the surface. Etchings take us back through history; they recall the earliest printing methods and the birth of mass-produced books and subsequent spread of information around the globe. Yet Agnew uses this most permanent of techniques to illustrate the very impermanence of what we know. “Something that questions itself operates in the most honest state of being, as it doesn’t pretend to know the answers,” he explains. “I wanted to use the relationship that engravings have with the dissemination of a particular ‘truth’ and manipulate it for my own purposes, almost as a visual pun on the concept that absolute truth is an unobtainable ideal much in that absolute freedom is.”

The use of tessellations and geometric patterns, then, plays an important role in Agnew’s work; he states that they are part of the human psyche’s need to “seek and observe rhythms and patterns at work in nature and particular events.” They act as our way of seeking order in the universe; when facts or events don’t add up, we try to make them do so in the eternal search for the ‘bigger picture’. Here, patterns fill the empty spaces where each painting’s characters would be – an intervention of sorts. By erasing the characters from their scenarios, each work becomes less about the person or original inspiration, and more about what they have come to stand for – whether this is true or not. “I’ve expanded this concept to the point of ridicule,” he says, “inserting seemingly unrelated imagery into the silhouette of the character, like a drunk journalist trying to tenuously link people and events with childish logic and a Google fetish.” The repeated tessellations stand in for this search for truth, representing a logic where none exists, and a search for a higher meaning – if there is one.

When it comes to choosing his subjects, historical incidents and people are at the forefront. “Essentially all of our knowledge – collective and individual – is shaped by the past, which in turn will shape the future,” explains Agnew. “I’m concerned with the etymology of socio-cultural practices and how they shape our world today. Information is power and the manipulation of information offers only even more power to those who wield it.” The artist works by absorbing information on a constant basis, whether through documentary films, books, podcasts or radio. He sifts painstakingly through images in publications and the Internet in order to find a starting point, what he describes as “a striking composition or scene.” From here he experiments with sketches, inserting landscapes and props, rather like a set designer for a film. Meticulous research takes place, and every item he depicts is connected to the original subject. “Rarely do I use an image, or an object, that doesn’t have some connection – no matter how tenuous or esoteric to the subject matter,” he says. In a portrait inspired by Rasputin, the objects on the table are from the Yusapov Palace (now a museum), where the famous Russian was assassinated. Meanwhile, in a work based on the obscure Romanian hero Badea Cârțan (a figure who fought for the country’s independence), we see a line of trees – the same trees that surround Trajan’s Column in Rome, to which Cârțan famously walked from Romania. The clouds too are composed based upon an old Piranesi etching of Trajan’s Column – for Agnew, it is the connections that one can make, and the subsequent connections of our neurons and synapses that brings together a rereading, reconstruction and a renewal of what we think of as ‘truth’. And then, in the middle of each carefully constructed gesso surface, we find these areas of tessellation and paint – a beautiful void.

It is through this delicate balance of permanence and impermanence, of fact versus fiction, that Agnew brings together various elements from history and brings them together to present an entirely different scenario. Figures from times past and present merge to produce intricate narratives, stories drawn from the threads of history and woven to create new patterns. Agnew plays with our perception of what we know as real, sculpting and shaping the narrative imperative with a deft and astute observation of human nature. “Past truths are unobtainable,” he concludes, “but you can remove the possible corruption of future truths. It could be described as an almost anarchic look at history, but with optimistic intentions for the future.”



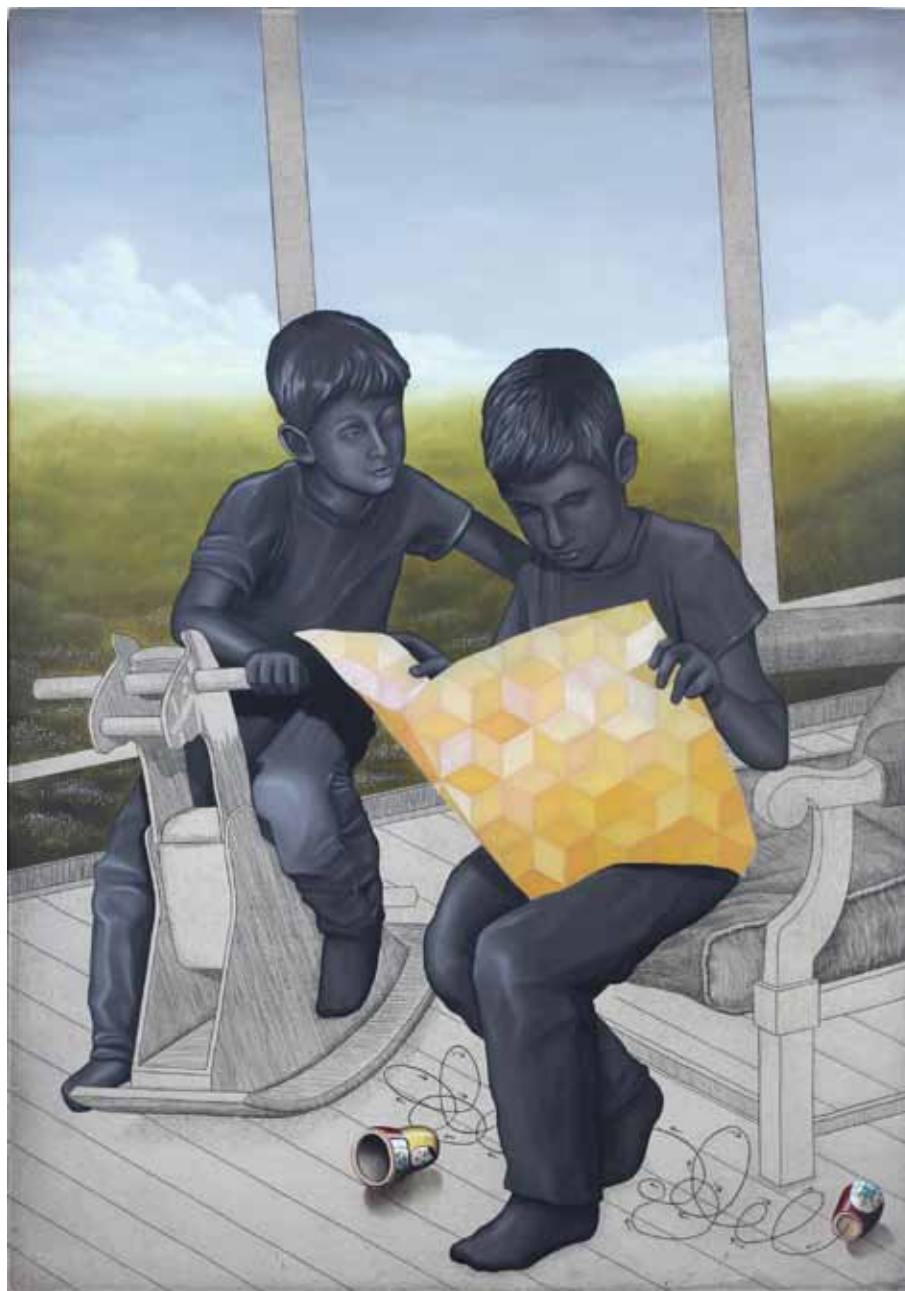
The Tailor's Dummy, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 49 x 67 cm



A perfection of means, a confusion of aims, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 37 x 52 cm



Let this be said of me, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 37 x 52 cm



Sitting forever, gluing things together, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 37 x 52 cm



Fortune found in the mist, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 37 x 52 cm



The way on the way, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 37 x 52 cm



In preservation, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 49 x 67 cm



In conversation, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 49 x 67 cm



Victories over the ant hill, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 37 x 52



Razing Stone, 2013
Pencil on paper, 108 x 136 cm



Razing Stone (detail)



Hijack, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 37 x 52 cm



What becomes real, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 49 x 67 cm



The procession of ideas, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 37 x 52 cm



Monumental stories of forgotten glory, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 37 x 52 cm



Chasm, 2013
Etching and gold leaf on icon panel, 50 x 70 cm



Our own devices, 2013
Etching and oil paint on icon panel, 208 x 100 cm

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