

PRESENT / TENSE:  
The Visionary Art of Tom and Malayka Gormally

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The presence of art in today's intensely creative, international environment appears to be unlimited. The fluidity of ideas, technologies, and materials appears more apparent today than ever before, presumably due to breakthroughs made in the late twentieth century. As the categories of art making have become less rigid and less defined, so the possibility of a renewed experiential dimension in art has become increasingly open and variable. Today there is greater access to how we *read* and understand art as a parallel experience to everyday life. This is combined with a more direct insight into the creative process by which artists engage in an instantaneous rapid-fire atmosphere.

Given our increasingly virtual, invisibly complex networks of global information, the art of Tom and Malayka Gormally would appear to offer a somewhat contrary point of view. Instead of following fashionable trends, their art carries a more tactile resonance where the sense of touch plays a more dominant role. Whereas some might interpret this as "political," others will see it more directly in terms of the "metaphorical," suggesting an ongoing symbolic or poetic narrative. I would suggest the resonance found in their art has elements of both that go beyond any strictly pre-conceived categories. For many observers, their work is understood as a rarified insight into the kind of life imposed upon those who live outside the American middle class, including artists who identify with the challenges of our human condition as a source of expressive content. This relates to the title of their current exhibition at the Blanden that asserts they are artists living in the "Present / Tense."

In this context we might say the works of the Gormallys have restored the visible in art and thereby overcome the seduction of the invisible through their deeply profound visuality. Each of the artists retains a depth of clarity as to what art should be within the currency of events that increasingly limits our understanding of a democratic world. In contrast to fashion and social media, the Gormally's take us back to the notion that art is a primary mode of communication, a very basic form of visual utterance. From this perspective, viewers may discover their work as a presence where energy flows between and within their highly evocative, masterfully orchestrated creativity.

Whether we are looking at Tom's ironic brightly lit, steeped church in *One If By Land (Ass Backwards)*, 2017, or Malayka's gouache, ink, and watercolor painting, *Mother With Son Applying for U.S. Citizenship*, 2019, a story unfolds in either case that defiantly confronts the middle-class concept of everyday life. There is both an epic and ironic distillation in these works that emits an intensely visual, emotional experience. Conceptually, our gaze is being pulled forward in Malayka's close-up cinematic drawings, bringing our thoughts closer to the question as to what is real and what constitutes the human experience today. In doing so, we are obliged to come to terms with the meaning of life on the most intimate level in a bygone world perpetually teetering on the edge of apocalyptic fear and septic greed.

Regardless of what medium, style, or proclivity, the artists have chosen to facilitate the experience of the viewer. Rather than foregrounding investment and marketing, the emphasis given to their works moves toward helping those who visit their exhibitions to understand what they are seeing. The focus is on the personal, the communal, and the desire to establish a voice within the international community for refugees, émigrés, and displaced itinerants in search of stability and fulfillment in their everyday lives. The significance is largely contingent on how our extended global network comes together in relation to the personal necessities required to live with one another.

This is definitively revealed in Malayka's penetrating drawings of women from the Ethiopian Community in Seattle or her drawings of immigrants in the process of applying for citizenship through the office of the International Rescue Committee.

Malayka's drawings are emotionally moving and to the point. Her distinctly spatial approach reveals a steady accuracy in emphasizing the holistic presence of the figure as a counterpart to her subjects' facial and corporeal expressivity. Her brilliant ongoing series of largely Middle Eastern women (often with children) going through the bureaucratic ordeal of "applying for citizenship" to the United States is captured through the artist's ability to sense her subjects' environment in relation to their desire to overcome anxiety through courage and a sense of well-being. In Malayka's drawings, we sense a human volition on the part of her subjects to become accepted for who they are – not as statistics but as a people with the same concerns anyone would feel no matter what destiny they have been given.

Rather than making trendy objects that drift into the realm of kitsch as occasionally seen in the auctions of New York, London, and Hong Kong, the Gormally's are more interested in how audiences respond to their art on a more basic level and how they might come to understand the work from the perspective of the artists' intentions. These vary from one artist to the next. I can speak of these intentions in a more fundamental way while looking at the drawings of Malayka. In Tom's sculpture, they appear more complex and therefore more difficult to articulate. His intentions are so intimately connected to the manner in which he works and to the processes whereby his images come into play that language would seem to reduce their importance.

Having met Tom thirty-eight years ago as a graduate MFA student at Wichita State University, I vividly recall his devotion to the physicality of sculpture. This quality would eventually enter into Gormally's work more directly, taking on different forms each step of the way. It is important to note that Gormally does not produce installations.

His indigenous Classicism makes him a full-fledged sculptor. He carves. He constructs. He measures and assembles. In addition, he is aware of the message he wants to advance. One of the most indicative of these messages in three-dimensions can be found in *Life Out Of Balance*, 2017 (wood, Plexiglas, and LED lights). The wooden chair is twisted and falling, ready to collapse from its own weight. If I understood it correctly, this is the artist's metaphor of the era in which we are living in today.

Tom's sculpture goes beyond the object into a living nexus that articulates the very presence of how the artist sees and feels on a socio-cultural basis. This is clearly shown in *US*, 2017, a work constructed out of wood, Mylar, LED lights, tungsten light, and Plexiglas rod. The sculpture contains two twisted chairs on either side of a wooden table on which place settings have been carved. A mirrorized map of the continental United States is in the center with a ladder that moves upward towards a tungsten light. Inspired by a 1972 film by Luis Bunuel, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, Gormally's comment is that *US* represents "the lack of civility in the current political and cultural dialogue."

Looking at the "Fox Series," completed over the past two years, I am struck by Gormally's material knowledge, the depth of his research, and by his extraordinary ability to put it all together. One of the most striking works is *Fox Leaning on the Truth (Shot Full of Holes) Beneath the Tree of Life with the Well of Knowledge*, 2019. Drawn from the ancient Irish Book of Kells (384 A.D.), a Latin Vulgate text that focuses structurally on the four Gospels, this work is filled with hard-core irony, critical allegory, and absurd humor, transformed from the original source. The metaphorical role of the fox is one of betrayal. It is sly and wily creature unable to represent honesty or truth, echoing the dire problems so overwhelmingly evident at the moment in our current dominion.

Relative to this work, the artist comments as follows: "Truth is the basis of meaningful human relationships, and when the truth is sacrificed for self-serving motives, it destroys trust." Any of the sculptures from the "Fox series" which make this clear, each

in its own way. I would suggest taking a close look at *Fox Trap*, 2018 and *Fox Trap II*, 2019. Clearly the slumbering fox is immune to the ecological changes that are happening around him, even as the warning is symbolized by the bird positioned on top of the container cage. In *Fox Trap II*, Gormally borrows a figurative detail from Michelangelo in *Dying Slave* as a means to represent the agony of the White Eagle in the midst of this human-instigated disaster.

Clearly the narratives presented in various works by the Gormally's have been deeply felt and diligently studied. Through their art, they have revealed the current *Zeitgeist* – the desperation that human beings worldwide are being forced to live with. At the same time, the searing emotional content in Malayka's drawings and the prescient assemblages of Tom function as signals of hope. To recognize the realities of today is the first step toward change, regardless of how difficult these realities are to confront. The Gormallys are in the process of opening new pathways towards rethinking where we are today. They are giving us a sense of our personal and communal lives by showing us how the human factor takes the upper hand in the artistry of serious practitioners. They play a central and preeminent role in making changes that resonate as positive through their heightened emotional content that ultimately defines a deftly visionary approach to art.

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