

Clark V. Fox CUE Art Foundation



Clark V. Fox

*Curated by*  
Mary Heilmann

CUE Art Foundation  
February 5 - March 28, 2009

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## CUE Art Foundation

CUE Art Foundation is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit forum for contemporary art and cultural exchange that provides opportunities and resources for under-recognized artists. We value the astonishing diversity of creativity that artists provide and the importance of their activity in the social context of the city.

CUE provides artists, students, scholars and art professionals resources at many stages of their careers and creative lives. Our programs include exhibitions, studio residencies, publications, professional development seminars, educational outreach, symposia, readings, concerts and performances. Since 2002, we have operated from our 4,500 square foot storefront venue in the heart of New York's Chelsea Arts District.

CUE exhibiting artists are chosen by their peers and a rotating group of advisors and curators from across the country. This pluralistic process ensures that CUE consistently offers diverse viewpoints from multiple disciplines of artistic practice.

Simply put, we give artists their CUE to take center stage in the challenging world of art.

## *Artist: Clark V. Fox*

I see myself as a history painter through the use of icons. American heroes were people that I could look up to. I painted these heroes for many years. Then as my interest grew, I read more and more books to try to get into their heads and make history and these figures come more alive when I painted them. I've lectured to groups like the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution and told them the truth. As you can see in this exhibition, I discovered that they all seem to have more than a little blood on their hands. Well...nobody's perfect are they?

# *Biography*

Clark V. Fox started making art full time in Houston, TX at age 5 and never slowed down since. Fox studied with Japanese art master Unichi Hiratsuka (1895-1997) in the early 1960's. He took a figure drawing class with the painter, Lennart Anderson (American, 1928-) in Brooklyn 1965-1966, painted on projects with the color field painters, Gene Davis (American, 1920-1985) and Thomas Downing (American, 1928-1985), but is largely self taught. Any idea of organized education was abandoned to work against the war in Vietnam. He copied portrait paintings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. His work is in numerous museums and public and private collections including the National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Museum of Art, Phillips Collection, Katzen Museum of the American University, The George Washington University, The Library of Congress, The National Museum of American Art, The Smithsonian Institution, and The Washington Post Art Collection, Washington, D.C.; The Carnegie Institute Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; The Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York, NY; The Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; The Palm Desert Museum, Palm Springs, CA; The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, Washington & Lee University, Lexington, VA; The Delaware Museum of Art, Wilmington, DE; Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Brunswick, NJ; and Monclair Museum of Art, Monclair, NJ. This exhibition at CUE Art Foundation marks Fox's first solo show in New York in thirty years.

# Curator: Mary Heilmann

## Clark is an Enigma

Clark is an enigma. I met him soon after I arrived in New York through my friend, Joe White. Joe, whom I knew in San Francisco, was a part of an intense alternative art scene that was connected to the San Francisco Art Institute. The attitudes of these people were vastly different from what I found here and I liked them.

Clark is Native American. He comes from Texas and is of Cherokee and Powhatan descent. His people lived in Tennessee until they were moved from their land by the US government. That was in the early 1800's. The people moved throughout the South. About a hundred years later, Clark was born in Austin, TX. Then the family moved to Hawaii, then back to Texas where Clark first saw art at the Menil Foundation in Houston. Even though he was just a little boy, he knew from then on that he wanted to be an artist. He and his little friend walked up and down the street trying to sell their pictures door to door — I don't know where they got that idea. The family then moved to Alexandria, VA. When Clark was in high school his classmate was David Lynch. I tell this because they both are brilliantly acculturated while at the same time being weird and uncanny in their take on life and their representations of it. The American surrealism of David Lynch in movies like *Wild at Heart* and *Lost Highway* relates to Clark's constant depiction of Mr. Peanut, giving him iconic status. Other such images are a stylized dollar bill graphic of George Washington or five dollar Abe Lincoln, except in color. Stylized "Indian" images also appear, as do other generic American icons. With insane focus, repeating, duplicating and re-doing and re-doing these pictures again and again with an outsider artist's obsessive relentlessness. But he is not "outside." Clark is everywhere. He founded and managed for fourteen years the Museum of Contemporary Art in Washington, DC where he and his cohorts exhibited the work of established and newly discovered artists. He is represented in many collections, including the National Gallery and The Dorothy and Herb Vogel Collection. He travels all the time, often in South America and all over the United States, exhibiting his paintings and constantly working wherever he is.

But back to his painting: His iconic imagery combines to convey a rich take on reality, the state of the world, our country, and his own unusual psychic identity and nature. The familiar images of JFK, phallic Planters Peanut man, big dimply oranges, Abe Lincoln, Chinese Characters, ears of corn, buffalo, maps, generic icons that are poetic stand-ins for much more than is seen, simile, metonymy, synecdoche. Yes. His pictures are poems.

His travels, his social enterprises and his generous relationships with people are all a part of his work. He is an endless storyteller, stories which I am determined to capture in sound or print, someday. This is just the beginning. Clark's show here at CUE Art Foundation is just the beginning.



# *Biography*

Mary Heilmann is an artist who has lived and worked since 1968 in New York City and in New York and Bridgehampton since 1995. She is represented by 303 Gallery in New York, NY and Hauser Wirth Gallery in London and Zurich. She makes prints with Pace Prints in New York, NY and Crown Point Press in San Francisco, CA. She recently exhibited work at the New Museum in New York, NY, an exhibition curated by Liz Armstrong which originated in Orange County, CA. She currently has a exhibition on view at 303 Gallery, accompanied by a group show she curated.

Clark V. Fox



*Fire Plug / US Capital Shrine (detail), 1981-1984*  
Oil on wood and bronze, 24" x 24" x 6"



*45 JFK Paintings and Portrait of Lori Ann Piestewa\* (detail)*

1998-2006, Oil on canvas, 12" x 9" each

\*Lori Ann Piestewa was a member of the Hopi Tribe and the first Native American woman killed in combat in the history of the U.S.military.

FOR A DETAILED IMAGE DESCRIPTION SEE PAGE 25



*Caunotaucarius [Geo. Washington], 2005-2008*  
Oil on canvas, 48" x 48"





*Front view of Chairman Mao 1954 Shrine (detail), 1981 (Restored 2006)*  
Oil on wood and bronze, 24" x 30" x 6 1/2"



*Rear view of Chairman Mao 1954 Shrine, 1981 (Restored 2006)*  
Oil on wood and bronze, 24" x 30" x 6 1/2"



*The Half King / Tanaghrisson*, 2008  
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30"  
FOR A DETAILED IMAGE DESCRIPTION SEE PAGE 25





*Caunotaucarius [Geo. Washington], 1995-2007*  
Oil on canvas, 40" x 30"



6 *Mr. Peanuts / Who Would Jesus Bomb?*, 2004–2008  
Oil on canvas, 12" x 9" each

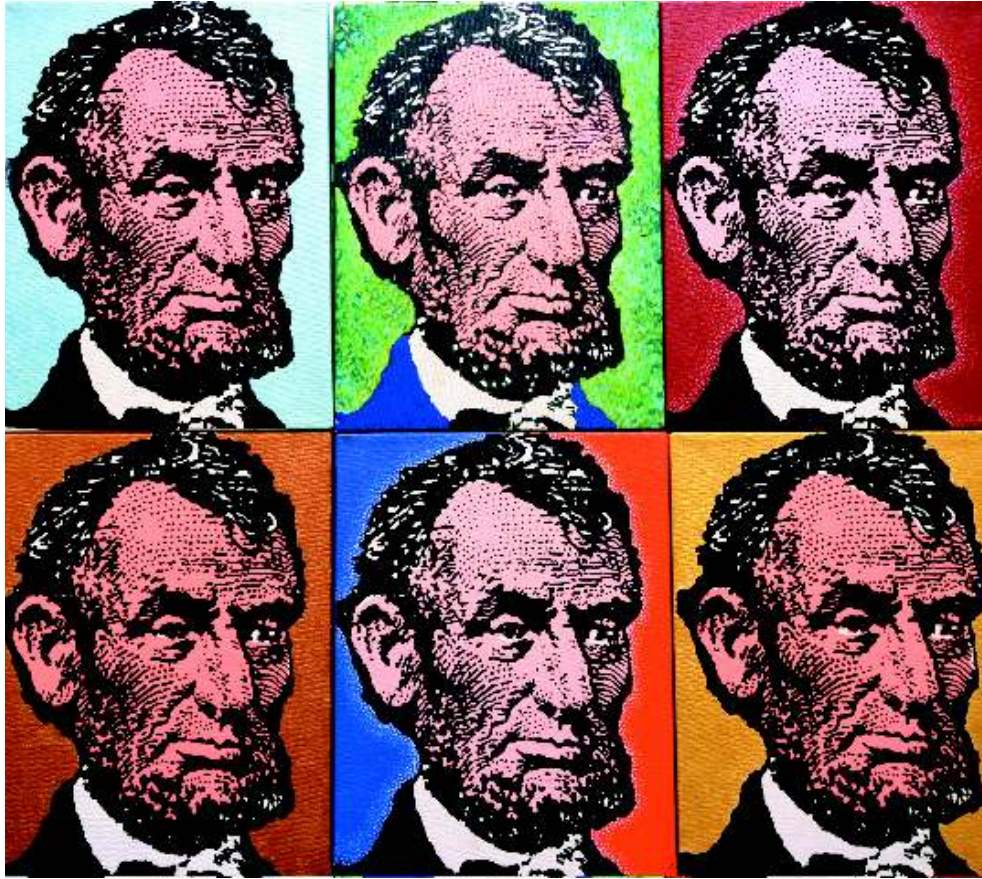




*Chairman Mao / Mr. Peanut, 2003*  
Oil on canvas, 48" x 24"



*Habana Cuba / 26 Julio Shrine (detail), 1982-83*  
Oil on wood and bronze, 24" x 24" x 6"

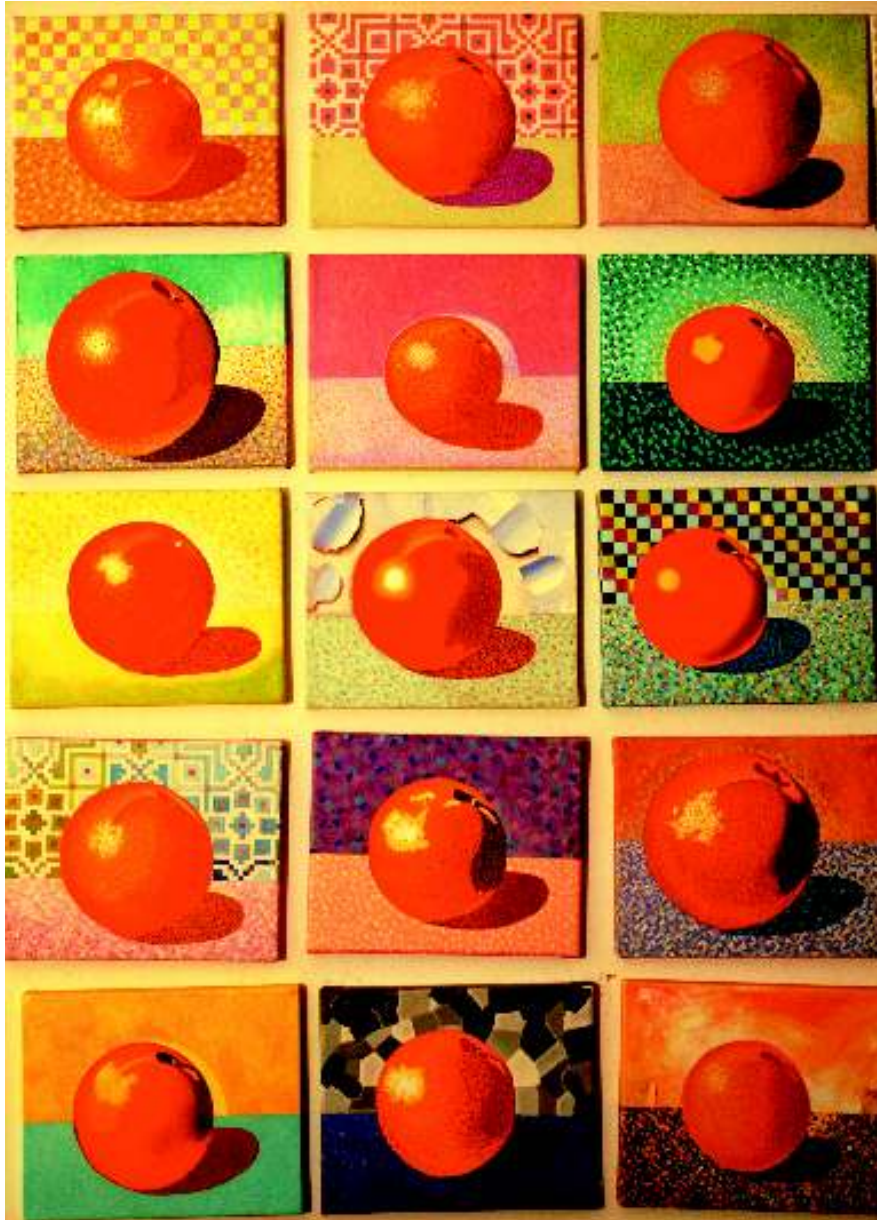


38 *Lincoln Paintings* (detail), 2006–2008

Oil on canvas, 12"x 9" each

FOR A DETAILED IMAGE DESCRIPTION SEE PAGE 26





*200 Nafta Oranges (detail), 2003–2008*

Oil on canvas, 8" x 10" each

FOR A DETAILED IMAGE DESCRIPTION SEE PAGE 26

# Earnest Irony: The Deadpan Passions of Clark V. Fox

*By Emily Warner*

This essay was written as part of the Young Art Critics Mentoring Program, a partnership between AICA USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE Art Foundation, which pairs emerging writers with AICA mentors to produce original essays on a specific exhibiting artist. Please visit [www.aicausa.org](http://www.aicausa.org) for further information on AICA USA. Please visit [www.cueartfoundation.org](http://www.cueartfoundation.org) to learn how to participate in this program.

Clark Fox's paintings, silkscreens and wooden sculptures are at once deadpan and heartfelt. In their pop culture references and their grid-like multiplicity, they have a cool '60s aesthetic. Their painterly and textural qualities, though, are anything but cool: sensual brushwork and color areas reveal an artist deeply involved with his materials and invested in the subtleties and hidden histories of his subjects. His figures, flat images culled from advertising, photographs and dollar bills, are reworked into portraits and complex pictograms, layered with extra, often enigmatic, meanings. The ability to squeeze new value out of established icons is at the core of Clark's practice and it functions best at a slow burn: the full impact of the works comes along gradually.

A frequent subject is George Washington, the illustrious founding father whose image has been memorialized in both high-art history painting and the everyday currency of the dollar bill. This is precisely the juncture from which Clark's own portraits depart. His *Caunotaucarius (George Washington)*, 1995-2007, takes the 1796 Gilbert Stuart painting (the visage reproduced on

## *Title*

the one-dollar bill) as its model, rendering the familiar features with a rash of unfamiliar handlings: pointillist dots and map-like color areas in the face and hair, and painterly scrawls in blue and purple in the background. Clark both stresses the mass-printed flatness of the figure, painting in, for example, graphic cross-hatchings to render shadows, and endows it with a new coloristic intensity. Written at the bottom of the canvas like the title of an official portrait bust is the name “Caunotaucarius,” the Native American epithet for the president meaning “Town Taker.” With this second narrative inserted, the familiar Washington slips into a different sort of role, his steady presidential gaze shading into one of unnerving complicity.

Stuart’s oil sketch was purposefully left unfinished as a study for his own future paintings, which has the unintended result of allowing other artists to complete the painting their own way. Indeed, much of Clark’s work is about putting new endings on old stories. Clark is Native American, his family of Cherokee and Powhatan descent and many of his works wryly recast the history of America from that perspective. His *38 Lincoln Paintings* (2006-2008) are an homage not to the Civil War President but to the 38 Dakota tribes people hanged in a mass execution under Lincoln’s orders at the end of the 1862 Dakota Wars<sup>1</sup>. Each canvas in the Lincoln series derives from the same iconic image and is enlivened, like the Washington portrait, with colored backgrounds. You notice tiny details, and there are subtle, even cunning sleights of hand; most of the Lincolns, for example, are silkscreened, but a few have been hand-painted in a silkscreen manner. The series owes much in style and subject to works by artists like Warhol and Tom Wesselmann. Clark, though, is less interested in exploring the visuality of commodity culture per se than he is in using its rhetoric to unearth specific historical narratives. If he empties out the icon, it is only ultimately to assign it a new meaning.

Alongside its ironic sting, the Lincoln series suggests a subtle disappointment. Clark was awed by the Lincoln Memorial when he first saw it as a high school student in D.C., deeming the seated Lincoln figure “the most moving piece of American sculpture.” In fact, his choice of a source image for the *38 Lincolns* (an 1864 Anthony Berger photograph) is based on its visual consonances with the monumental power of Daniel Chester French’s sculpture. The series is thus a memorial not only to lost lives absented from history, but to a former faith in images of power. The *45 JFK Paintings* evince a similar tension between youthful optimism and a later, hardened skepticism: he has painted one a year since Kennedy’s assassination and will continue to do so until the government offers a reasonable explanation of the death. Each year, Clark poses the same question and finds the affable Kennedy face yielding up the same blank silence. We get a powerful sense not only of what has been suppressed, but of what we can no longer believe in.



In the mid 1970s, Clark turned to the figure of Mr. Peanut as a subject in his work. Mr. Peanut has thrived among the cultural icons that constitute Clark's vocabulary and has become a handy vehicle for commenting on consumerist culture and brand-name iconicity. Bedecked with a monocle, walking stick and top hat, Mr. Peanut hails from the era of industrial capitalism,<sup>2</sup> or, more properly, from an American imagination that casts the successful tycoon as its ideal.<sup>3</sup> Clark is constantly dressing Mr. Peanut up and giving him new roles: he becomes a portrait subject, a right-hand man to Mao and Chavez, or "Afro-Nut," Mr. Peanut's black cousin. In the *Who Would Jesus Bomb?* series (2004-2008), he stands below the emblazoned question, his smile and jaunty stance reminiscent of a televangelist or perhaps a profiteering promoter of the military-industrial gospel. He even begins to look like a devilish version of the top-hatted Uncle Sam, cheerily calculating our best bet for war-mongering. Mr. Peanut was actually used to sell war saving stamps in World War II.<sup>4</sup> Clark notes biting ironies and unexpected consonances in each work, but the overall impression is of a feverish and wacky meaninglessness, an icon devoid of any inherent value. As the consummate "shell," Mr. Peanut captures the emptiness of consumer culture, both the absurdity of the commodity as fetish and the unreal, spectacular language of advertising that promotes it.

If the husk-like Mr. Peanut levels a critique of society along the lines of Guy Debord and the Situationists, he also engages in a quieter but nonetheless potent celebration of a more personal visual vocabulary. In Clark's paintings, the soul is in the brushwork. The real animation lies in the colors, the gestures, the build-up of multiple styles and manners, or (in the wooden sculptures) the accretion and arrangement of collage elements. For all the emptiness at the core of his subjects—exposed as commodities, murderers and blank ciphers—there is a teeming activity at their surfaces. Clark builds up the backgrounds and the rendering of Mr. Peanut himself with a diversity of handling, from the messily abstract to the rigidly checkered, from pure golden sheens to intense, deep reds. Each Peanut portrait seems imbued with a distinct aesthetic liveliness: in some, textural modeling clay is applied to the backgrounds; in others, wooden collage elements are attached. Clark himself has explained Mr. Peanut as a fetish object, and indeed there is something about the hyper-attentiveness to the garb and guise of these icons that marks them with an animating force. Clark's visit to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris in 1970, where he was especially struck by African fetish sculptures, was a precipitating factor in his development of Mr. Peanut. We can see an analogy between the accrual of metals, nails and objects in religious figures like Kongo power sculptures and Clark's layering of materials and gestures in his own paintings. Both insidiously consumerist and aesthetically powerful, Mr. Peanut elicits, like all fetish objects, a very ambivalent response. Even while attentively crafting new portraits of him, Clark admits, "in a way, I hate him."

The spiritual underlies much of Clark's work, even as he takes up the language of pop culture. His shrines—wooden diorama-like boxes made in the late 1970s and early 1980s—compile often highly personal symbols into “pictograms” of specific moments in Clark's life, their interiors holding small statues and ephemera. Through the shrines in particular, Clark creates stopping points for his viewers, small pauses amidst the onslaught of modern visual clutter. These works also display Clark's penchant for riddles and enigmas, even obtuseness. His *Chairman Mao 1954 Shrine* (1981 [Restored 2006]), for example, contains dates, quotes, and astrological signs that hold import really for Clark alone. A similar pause occurs in the subtle shifts and changes Clark makes when adapting his icons, flipping the image, for example, or disguising his painting method as silkscreen. Clark's works ask you to peer at their surfaces and puzzle over their content. Yet ultimately it is precisely there, in the surfaces, that their value lies. His witty redeployments of the image may speak to us more immediately, but the slower and more long-lasting meaning, the “new” value, is created in his tactile, worrying attention to the shells and facades. This is a radically circumscribed area of discourse, to be sure, but against the global profusion of visual images and the political might harnessed behind them, it is no small triumph. —Emily Warner, *Hoboken, NJ, December 2008*

The writer, **EMILY WARNER**, received her BA in art history at the University of Chicago. She has worked in the past at such museums as The Art Institute of Chicago and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, and her writing has appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Newcity Chicago* and *Proximity Magazine*. She currently lives in Hoboken, NJ and works in New York City.

The mentor, **RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN**, is a New York-based poet and critic whose books include *Polychrome Profusion: Selected Art Criticism 1990–2002* (Hard Press Editions, 2003) and *The Afterglow of Minor Pop Masterpieces* (Make Now, 2007). He is professor of critical studies at the University of Houston and is also on the faculty of the art criticism and writing MFA Program at the School of Visual Arts, New York.

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#### Footnotes

- 1 Nevertheless, the death of the 38 rebel leaders constituted one of the largest mass executions in American history, and was used as a reason to abrogate all former treaties with the tribe. Barry M. Pritzker, *A Native American Encyclopedia: History, Culture, and Peoples* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 317.
- 2 Clark notes, for example, that the top hat is “a very class thing...to signify your rank.”
- 3 “Planters Peanuts was founded in 1906 by Italian immigrant Amadeo Obici. The Mr. Peanut figure was first developed in 1916. *Planters Historic Timeline*, 1906-Present, [www.planters.com/history.aspx](http://www.planters.com/history.aspx), accessed December 2008. For more information on the evolution of the Mr. Peanut figure, see Jan Lindenberger and Joyce Spontak, *Planters Peanut Collectibles, 1906-1961: A Handbook and Price Guide* (Atglen, Pa: Schiffer Publishing, 1999).
- 4 *Planters Historic Timeline*, 1906-Present.

# Image Descriptions

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*45 JFK Paintings and Portrait of  
Lori Ann Piestewa*

In late October of 1963, I attended a concert on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington. I was within a few feet of John F. Kennedy, where he greeted and spoke to some of we students for a few minutes. On November 22, he was murdered in Dallas during a parade given in his honor. For 45 years, the government has stuck with their story that a lone nut (Oswald) acted alone in killing the president. This was a very moving event in U.S. history of epic nature. My mentor at the time was probably the most intelligent man that I have ever known, Waldo H. Dubberstein (1908-1983).

Waldo was a linguist and ancient history scholar. He could read and write ancient Babylonian and Egyptian text. He wrote many books on the ancient world. When I knew Waldo, he worked for the CIA and devoted most of his career to highly classified duties. A specialist in Middle Eastern affairs, he also knew which targets in the Soviet Union would be hit under ultra-secret Pentagon war plans if a nuclear holocaust were to erupt. His work for the Pentagon included compiling the daily military intelligence summary for the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff — a position that gave him access to the ultra secret single integrated operational plan (SIOP), the precise order of battle for nuclear war. In the mid 1970's, I asked Waldo about Kennedy's death and his answer to my question was, "John F. Kennedy was lucky he was assassinated when he was!" So every year I add another portrait until the government can give me an answer that I can believe.

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"The 18th century Seneca chief known as *"The Half King"* is a figure so obscure that no one knows his real name — it was most likely Tanaghrisson or something close to it. Tanaghrisson stepped into American history in 1748, when the Iroquois league designated him

leader of the Senecas and Delawares who had migrated to the upper Ohio Valley. Ordinarily an Iroquois headman who acted as an official spokesman for the league was called a "king," but because the Ohio Indians were hunters and warriors without permanent council fire, Tanaghrisson enjoyed only an abridged authority, hence his title, "Half King." By the early 1750's, English traders and French soldiers began to penetrate the upper Ohio Valley, and the English seemed the least likely to threaten the autonomy of Tanaghrisson's people; they also offered the most abundant trade goods for him to distribute among his followers. Thus Tanaghrisson allied himself with traders from Virginia, but he could not stop the French from building a line of forts from Lake Erie down to the forks of the Ohio River. In May of 1754, a young Lieutenant Colonel named George Washington marched several hundred troops to the area to protect Virginia's interests. The French sent Ensign Jumonville up from Fort Duquesne to warn them off. Tanaghrisson alerted Washington to the presence of a French party, guided him to their camp, and encouraged him to make a surprise attack." <sup>1</sup> "Naively, Washington did just that the morning of May 28, 1754 before he could explain that he had come on a diplomatic mission" (not true).<sup>2</sup> To quote George Washington, the Half King stepped forward and in fluent French declared, "Thou are not yet dead, my father," then sank his hatchet into Jumonville's head, split his skull in half, pulled out his brains and washed his hands in the mixture of blood and tissue. His warriors then killed and scalped all the French soldiers under the eyes of the shocked and hapless Washington. "Tanaghrisson intended to make it impossible for Washington, the Virginians, and the British Empire as a whole to back out of their alliance with him, and to use Britain's strength to eject the French from his land. Tanaghrisson's calculated act triggered events that ranged unimaginably far beyond his control, however. A French counterattack quickly escalated into the French and Indian war, which spread to Europe as the

Seven Years' War. By 1763 France's empire lay in ruins and Britain was in at least theoretical control of the eastern half of North America. Thirteen years later, Washington would lead colonial forces against the British in the revolt known as the American Revolution."<sup>3</sup> The Indians, for the most part, stuck with the British and have been paying for it ever since.

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### 38 Lincoln Paintings

In 1862, the Dakotas, a band of aboriginals of the Sioux nation under the leadership of Ta-oya-te-duta (Little Crow), angered and at the mercy of dishonest agents and government officials who had cheated them out of all their food and money and the white squatters that over-ran their lands, killed hundreds of non-Indians in and around their reservation in Minnesota. In reprisal, the government hanged 38 Dakotas and President Lincoln pardoned 250 others and confiscated all Sioux land and property in the state of Minnesota. All previous treaties were laterally abrogated. Chief Little Crow was murdered by bounty hunters in 1863 and his scalp and skull were placed on display in a government building in St. Paul, MN.<sup>4</sup>

In 1858, Abraham Lincoln, in the historic debate with Senator Stephen A. Douglas stated: *I will say, then, that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races; that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say, in addition to this, that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.*

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### North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) – 200 NAFTA Oranges

The orange piece happened in a funny way. The NAFTA treaty was negotiated in 1992 and came into force on January 1, 1994. Right after that I began painting the NAFTA Orange paintings.

I never took pictures of them individually and one day, I had 8 orange paintings and only one shot in my camera left. I stuck them all together and when the film came back, bingo! I realized how powerful they all looked together! The orange that I modeled them after was bought from a Mexican national standing next to the highway — 2 bucks for a big bag of oranges. In the Safeway, one orange cost 89 cents!?! Wow! This is the NAFTA agreement? A real rip off for the poor, green cardless worker on the side of the freeway. Who knows how little they made a day doing such a crummy job? So the NAFTA Orange installation was my tribute to the working class peoples of Mexico. In the state of Oaxaca I had watched skilled artists painting barefoot in studios with dirt floors for very little money. After NAFTA came into effect, they had to come to the USA to make money to keep from starving! The author of the NAFTA agreement, Duaine Priestley actually came to my gallery in May of 1998. The Washington Post had given the piece a rave review: *The Juicy Tale of 110 NAFTA Oranges* by Paul Richard, yet not one mention of the socio-political implications of the work. Mr. Priestley took photographs of me in front of the oranges. I didn't tell him what I thought about the treaty! I mentioned immigration problems. Today there are no Mexican workers selling oranges next to the freeways in L.A. County. I guess they are all back in Mexico starving?

The paintings themselves have to do with the issue of the tradition of still life painting. When I work on these pictures, it is done as a meditation on form and color. I never know what way they will go. The concentration has to do with the energy and intensity of the pigment and the form. I began this series in 1994. All of the oranges in this exhibition were painted after that period of my life. When the oranges are put all together and it becomes one huge work and starts working optically it takes you back to my roots in minimal abstraction.

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1 [www.thehalfking.com/hk/](http://www.thehalfking.com/hk/)

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Pritzker, Barry: *A Native American Encyclopedia: History, Culture, and Peoples*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pgs. 316-317.

5 Abraham Lincoln during fourth Lincoln-Douglas Debate, September 18th, 1858, Charleston, IL. *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume Four, Constitutional Edition.

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