

**TATLIN GROANS: ART AT THE CROSSROADS OF FEAR, HYPOCRISY & HOPE**

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A RESPONSE TO THE INTERNATIONAL FUROR AFTER CUBAN ARTIST TANIA BRUGUERA WAS DENIED PERMISSION TO SET UP A MICROPHONE IN HAVANA'S REVOLUTION PLAZA

2015



## **TATLIN GROANS**

### **Art at the Crossroads of Fear, Hypocrisy & Hope**

*By Mike Alewitz*

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*Published in Red Wedge magazine, March 9, 2015, this is a response to the international furor after Cuban artist Tania Bruguera was denied permission to set up a microphone in Havana's Revolution Plaza in Havana, for a performance titled Tatlin's Whisper. The article contrasts the treatment of artists that challenge capitalism to the art of those that cater to the ruling class.*

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FEBRUARY 9 MARKED the anniversary of the infamous destruction of Diego Rivera's great, if wordy, masterpiece, *Man at the Crossroads, Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future*. On that day in 1934, Nelson Rockefeller, heir to a Standard Oil and banking fortune, had the fresco chiseled off the wall of Rockefeller Center and unceremoniously hauled off to the dump.

It was all part of a plan gone awry. In the 1930's, Rivera, and fellow Mexican muralists David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, had been invited by leading cultural institutions and individual capitalists to come and paint in the United States. Rockefeller and other captains of industry wished to be seen as progressive, at a time when American capital was on its ascendancy - still capable of creating great factories, interstate highway systems and other modern infrastructure. They thought the Mexican artists could be useful to their endeavors, but they were to find out that the independent-minded muralistas were not so easily led.

#### **Man at the Crossroads**

Rivera painted at a time when the world's major powers were once again marching towards war. Within a few years, the US would demonstrate the moral superiority of western civilization by facilitating the global slaughter of World War II, leaving over 50 million people dead and whole nations in ruin.

It was also a time when workers were beginning to mobilize in what would be an intense period of labor organizing against the growing power of industrial and financial capitalism. Before the year was out, the Toledo Autolite Strike, the San Francisco General Strike and the Minneapolis Teamster Rebellion would write new chapters of militant struggle that laid the basis for the creation of modern industrial unionism.

Rivera included that sweep of history in his mural, including the symbolic figure of Vladimir Lenin - the central leader of the first successful, sustained workers revolution in the world. Despite the later degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the consequent crimes of Stalinism, workers still looked to the Soviet example as a way to advance human progress. So when Rivera's mural was destroyed, because he refused to remove the figure of Lenin, it was front-page news. Unionists and artists were outraged at Rockefeller's actions and engaged in protests and condemnations.

I had to consider Rivera's work when, in 2008, Perry Rosenstein, President of the Puffin Foundation, invited me to create a centerpiece mural for a new gallery, dedicated to the history of social activism, at the Museum of the City of New York.

## **The Garden of Earthly Delights**

Rivera's work influenced my own piece, but an even greater inspiration came from another important painting of a much earlier time - The Garden of Earthly Delights by Hieronymus Bosch, completed in 1504. Bosch created his masterpiece in the Netherlands during the infancy of capitalism, before the progressive aspects of the brutal new economic system had a chance to drive the development of science and industry. Bosch looked nostalgically to the feudal past, and he issued a warning about the future of capitalistic greed and excess in the form of some downright scary imagery, even by today's standards.

But while Bosch's great vision came to life at the dawn of capitalism, I was painting at the twilight - at a time when the rule of capital is unraveling. I've chosen to reference the Garden by both looking back at the horrors of unfettered capitalism and also contemplating the possibility of future revolution. My intention was that the paintings would act as bookends for an entire historic epoch.

## **The Joys of Capitalism**

Unlike during Rockefeller's heyday, contemporary capitalists seem largely disinterested in fostering an image of being progressive. Instead, the culture of self-indulgence and commodity fetishism has climbed to even greater heights. Less than one hundred super-rich individuals own as much as the poorest half of the planet. The oligarchy maintains its rule through the super-exploitation of billions of people and by doling out crumb-rewards to the rest of us.

The super-rich own almost every government - no Pharaoh or monarch ever possessed such power. Their super-profits require endless, grinding wars. Their press and airwaves dumb us down. They feed us poison and are turning our lovely planet into a toxic dump. Politicians vie to accommodate the whims of Wall Street. Corporate flunkies are dismantling our public education system. Universities and museums are run by bureaucrats and art-illiterates that see their only role as facilitating the corporate agenda - education and enlightenment do not enter the equation.

Worst of all, the US has become a nation living in fear - fear that is whipped up in one media campaign after another: fear Ebola, fear Hezbollah, fear campus shooters, fear anthrax, fear underwear bombers, fear shoe bombers, fear ISIS, fear Iran, fear Hamas, fear Assad, fear Putin, fear North Korea, fear Black men, fear Muslims, fear students, fear strangers, fear the future.

The fear is a symptom of a cancerous system. Capitalism is in a profound economic and social crisis - it is a dying empire.

## **The City at the Crossroads of History**

Diego Rivera reputedly said to Rockefeller, "I paint what I see," so I have tried to live up to that maxim in The City at the Crossroads of History. The art is composed of four panels - in the top three sections of the mural I transposed Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights, portraying a garden that is not about erotic leisure activities but the field of social struggle, from which all of the fruits of social advancement have grown.

The left section of the mural is entitled The Hell of Exploitation. It focuses on the twin pillars upon which the vast wealth of the United States was born: the extermination of the indigenous people and the exploitation

of African slave labor. It also illustrates the evils of an economic system based on the profit motive: child labor, exploitation of women, racism and the other atrocities of capitalism.

The center panel, *The March of the People*, gives expression to the history of social struggles that led to the advances for working people: organizing unions, the anti-war movement, civil rights, the black nationalist movement, women's suffrage, Stonewall, etc.

The third panel is entitled *Another World is Possible*. Based on Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, two mighty worker's hands arise from scaffolds, each holding bread and roses. Tatlin's tower was one of the great visionary works from the early years of the Russian Revolution. Designed to be the highest structure of earth, its twin spirals symbolized the dialectic of the revolution and was intended to serve as the headquarters for global revolutionary struggle.

Also in this panel is a golden sky where the Big Apple of education glows. Floating buildings, first envisioned by artists and architects in the early years of the Russian Revolution, drift above the city. In this bright future we share the delights of the earth with our fellow living beings. It all takes place over landfill created by burying all of the world's weapons of war.

Finally, in the bottom section of the mural, *We Follow the Path Less Traveled*, are life-size figures of thirty of New York's historic leading social and labor activists.

### **Censorship and Silence**

The mural proposal was met with acclaim by the Puffin Foundation officers, along with the committee of academics, cultural activists, publishers and others assembled to oversee the installation of the gallery. The work was completed in February 2014.

However, the museum director, Susan Henshaw Jones, stepped in and refused to install the mural. For a year, Jones refused to explain her actions, but I did receive some feedback through Puffin. For example, both Puffin and Jones objected to the centrality of Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King in the design. Jones eventually chose the occasion of the Martin Luther King Day to finally issue a terse statement that the mural did not meet the current "curatorial standards" of the museum. (Of course, to give credence to such a remarkable claim is to sanctify censorship at virtually any time by any authority).

For their part, the Puffin Foundation, which had commissioned the work and promised its installation, simply walked away from their responsibility, as though they were a disinterested party that had accidentally wandered into the discussion. They expressed regret that the mural was not being installed and wished me well. (They almost seemed unaware I had just spent a few years working for less than minimum wage in order to create a work for their gallery, or that they possessed the ability to guarantee an exhibition venue).

The committee that had lauded the work has remained silent. Nor has there been any public outcry about the fact that labor's story is being censored at a major museum in the city of New York. The progressive media has refused to even mention the censorship. With a very few exceptions, there has been no published articles in the press, no outcry on progressive radio shows, no objection from academia and virtual silence from the art world.

## **Tatlin Groans**

This total blackout on information is all the more remarkable, given the timing. Only a few short weeks ago, the question of censorship was daily news in the electronic and print media. When artist Tania Bruguera was denied permission to set up a microphone in Revolution Plaza in Havana, thousands of curators, museum officials, art gallery owners, middle-class artists and academics rushed to her defense, lambasting the Cuban government and decrying censorship.

Bruguera's performance was called *Tatlin's Whisper*. But if Vladimir Tatlin was whispering from the grave, it was probably to give a warning and disassociate himself from Bruguera. Tatlin's work embodied the optimism of the worldwide workers movement, while Bruguera's seems a somewhat self-indulgent exercise to entertain a milieu of dispirited western artists. But regardless of the intention of the artist, her work was clearly seized upon by those opposed to the Cuban government, (at which point the artist could have disassociated herself), attempting to portray Cuba as undemocratic. The State Department found allies among the pro-capitalist Cuban opposition, as well as a layer of collectors, gallery owners, curators and middle-class artists who would like to see western-style market and political reforms in Cuba.

The starting point for this coalition is not the needs of the majority of Cuban working people, who struggle under a criminal embargo – but rather their own particular interests. Perhaps they envision a Cuba far different from the pre-revolutionary mob-run brothel and torture chamber. Instead, they want their own playground of interesting art, music and entertainment – with perhaps some wise investments in Cuban art. They want a nice Cuba – kind of a pet Cuba. These forces, together with the State Department and a servile media, were enough to ensure a massive media campaign on Bruguera's behalf.

## **Pet Workers Everywhere**

From what little could be gleaned of Jones' objections, a similar goal was in mind - she wants pet workers for her Puffin Gallery. In one of Puffin's tortured critiques, they suggested having one big panel – to remove the separate visions of past and future – making it one big post-modern pastiche of vignettes without a cohesive history.

For Jones and her rich pals, it's ok to have a mural about activism, as long as it's a safe, de-clawed, PBS-style, sanitized history. Pet child laborers that you can feel sorry for. Pet female textile workers dying in the Triangle Fire. Sentimentality instead of solidarity. Nothing with teeth. Nothing that exposes the ugly reality that hides behind the philanthropy embodied in institutions like the museum. (I suspect that given Jones' ties to the New York financial world, she may have failed to fully appreciate my images of a ruling class of little pigs counting their money, their bodies festooned with lynched black workers).

If the Puffin Foundation will serve up some balanced, safe activism, and a committee of tame academics will accredit it, there will be accolades galore. For anyone else it's the door. Unfortunately, *The City at the Crossroads of History* is neither cuddly nor fashionable, so the labor activists that people its imagery are not welcome in the gallery.

## **Artists and Workers of the World Unite**

Who then, will defend a mural that reveals a proud history of struggle, seeks to empower workers and points to a future of human solidarity?

Apparently not the professors and publishers and cultural bureaucrats that flatter the wealthy, fluttering about them like moths around a porch lamp. Not those middle-class artists who aspire to be the official court painters of today. There is only one group of people who are going to defend this work, and that is the working class - those who clothe and feed us, who build our shelter, who keep our buildings clean and free of disease. It is a working class that is kept invisible. The mural seeks to empower them. It is their story. And that is why it is being made invisible too.

All this would all be quite depressing except for one thing: ultimately the one-percent are going to lose. The ruling class, in its arrogance, thinks they can stop us from making critical art. Yes, perhaps you can keep this mural out of the museum for now, and you can chase graffiti artists away from city walls, and you can even convince a lot of artists to self-censor themselves for a period of time. But ultimately, you cannot solve the problems of the working class of which artists are an integral part. We can and will make art that empowers our class in the fight for power.

Even if you control the walls inside the museum, we will control the walls in the street. Every night, all across the globe, thousands of young people go forward, spray cans and brushes in hand, in order to give expression to the aspirations of working people. In demonstrations in countless city squares, workers sing our songs, carry our puppets and wave our banners on their marches. Your sanitized art-commodities are no match for us. Your monochromatic vision cannot compete with our art of brilliant colors.

Bureaucrats like Jones may censor our art, but one way or another we will get these images around and tell the world our story. It will be on the Internet and at conferences and demonstrations. This mural is a gift to the working people of New York, and you cannot keep them from receiving it.