



The City at The Crossroads of History

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The City at the Crossroads of History was commissioned for the Puffin Gallery of Social Activism, Museum of the City of New York. Despite the unanimous approval by the museum's own committee of leading academics and intellectuals, it was censored on political grounds by the museum and the Puffin Foundation. Composed of four panels, the 16'x21' mural is now on display at Red Square, New London, CT. The mural gives visual expression to the great spirit of social activism in New York City, recognizing the collective contribution of millions of people in the ongoing struggle for social and economic justice—a dynamic, ever-present, interrelated social process. Revolutionary struggle is now an essential element of life – critical for the very survival of our species. Complete mural and more information can be found at <https://chnq.it/zPzVBSKy>.

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The City at the Crossroads of History

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I have the dubious distinction of being the most censored artist in the world. My work has been destroyed by bureaucrats, labor officials, governments, the police, and other detritus of the dying empire.

You've probably never heard of me—I'm as invisible as the people I paint for: the workers that feed us, clothe and shelter us, that protect us by keeping our environments free of disease.

This text and the following photos document the disgraceful suppression of the mural *The City at the Crossroads of History*, commissioned in 2009 for a new gallery about social activism at the Museum of the City of New York, funded by the Puffin Foundation.

Written and verbal assurances were given that the work would be installed. An authoritative advisory committee gave unanimous and enthusiastic approval to the sketches. But then museum director Susan Henshaw Jones refused to install the work. Sadly, the Puffin Foundation and the members of the advisory committee meekly acquiesced to the mural's censorship.

Fear of funders is a fact of life, so the incident received virtually no notice in the progressive or art media. The silence is a revealing example of how liberal philanthropy is used to dampen social struggles and preserve the status quo.

This was not a new experience for me, and so, despite all the assurances, I created the mural on canvas panels instead of my usual approach of working on site. For that reason alone, the work still exists.



CHILD
LAVERY

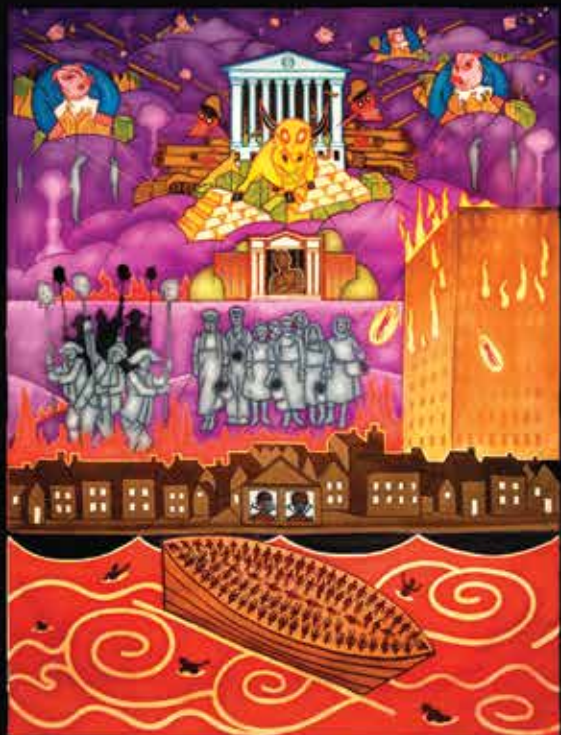
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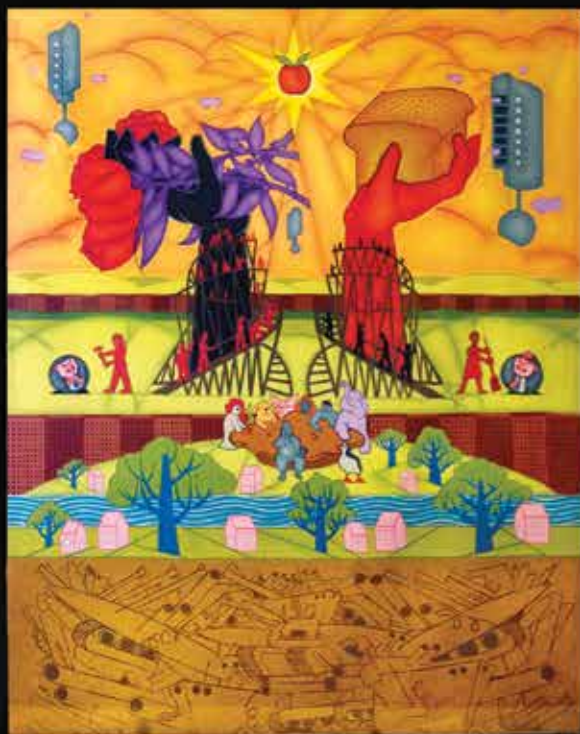
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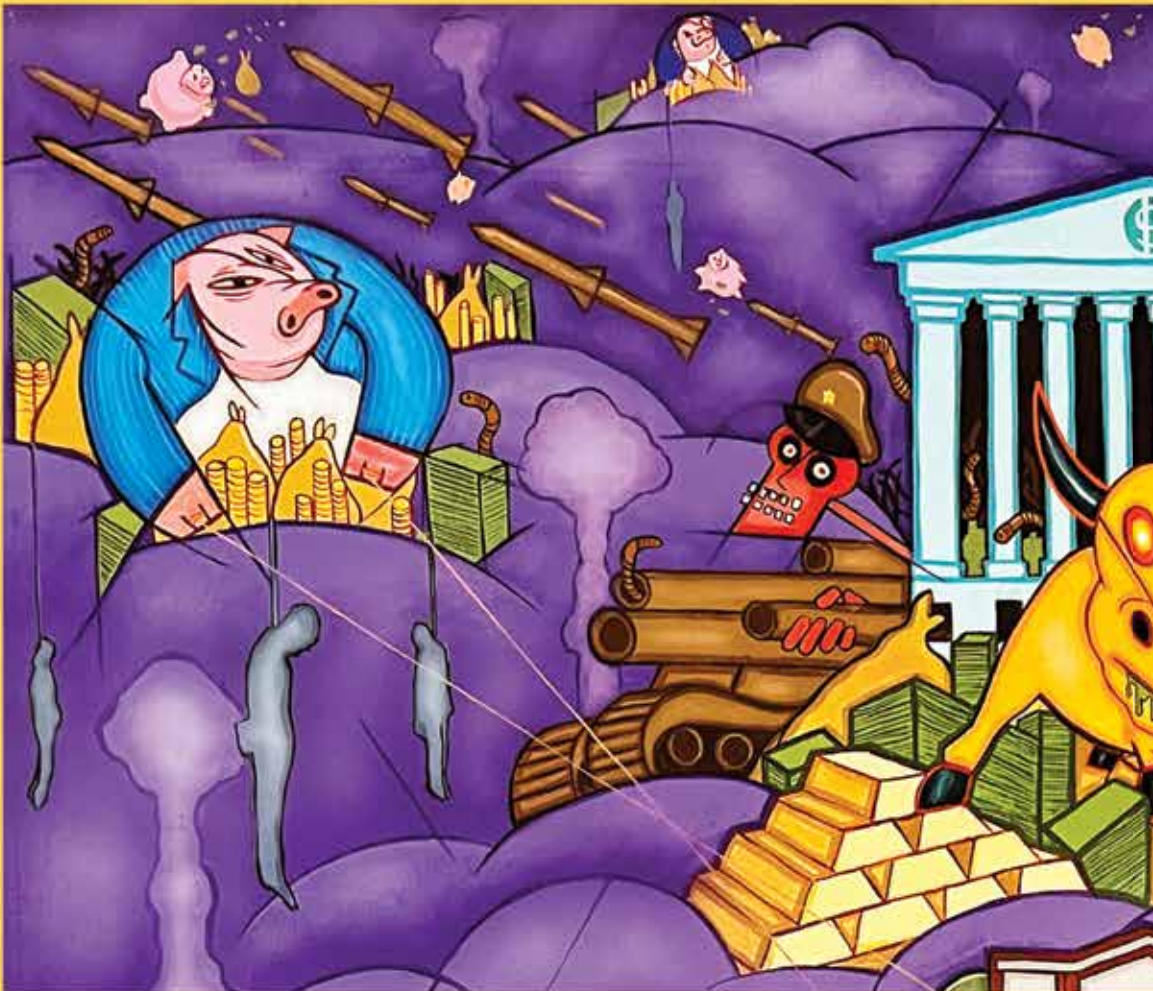


The Garden of Earthly Delights

While the title of the work references Diego Rivera's mural at Rockefeller Center (themed "Man at the Crossroads"), another inspiration came from an important painting of a much earlier time: *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, a triptych by Hieronymus Bosch, completed in 1504.

With the rise of capitalism, Bosch looked nostalgically to the feudal past, issuing visual warnings about the oncoming excesses of capitalist greed. But while Bosch's great vision came to life at the dawn of capitalism, I was painting during the twilight: today, the rule of capital is unraveling.

Today's capitalists are characterized by a lack of vision and a culture of self-indulgence and commodity fetishism unsurpassed by their predecessors. Fewer than one hundred superrich individuals own as much as the poorest half of the planet—more than they can conceivably spend, yet with an unquenchable thirst for ever more.



As they march us toward carbon-based extinction or nuclear annihilation, their press and airwaves dumb us down. They feed us a diet of poison for mind and body. For them, art is but a commodity for investment and self-aggrandizement.

The pervasive fear that haunts us is the symptom of a cancerous system. Capitalism is in a profound economic and social crisis: it is a dying empire.

* * *

This mural is composed of four panels—in the top three sections of the mural, I transposed Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights into a garden not portraying erotic leisure activities but the field of social struggle, from which all the fruits of social change have grown.



The Hell of Exploitation

The left section of the mural is entitled *The Hell of Exploitation*. Its focus is the pillars upon which the vast wealth of the United States was created: extermination of indigenous people and the holocaust of African enslaved labor. It also illustrates the evils of a profit system based on child labor, the exploitation of women, racism, and capitalism's other atrocities.

The image places a slave ship arriving at the foot of the Wall Street wharf, which was the original ingress into the city for slaves. The enormous wealth generated by exploiting millions of enslaved Africans provided the capital for the rapid expansion of the U.S. financial empire—a brutal holocaust of 12 million Africans transported in chains to the United States, with additional millions dying in the process.

After the formal abolition of chattel slavery, fortunes continued to grow through the brutal exploitation of African Americans in conditions near to slavery; for much of the country, such conditions existed until the advent of the modern civil rights movement, just a few decades ago. The vast prison-industrial complex that today enslaves over a million African Americans is both a threat and a constant reminder of that reality.

Hanging figures of lynched African Americans reminds us of the widespread and terrifying use of lynch-mob violence—a reign of terror enjoying the active support or quiet acceptance of both major parties and most of their central leaders.

Representing the racist heritage that underpins the world's leading cultural institutions is the image of Ota Benga, a Congolese Mbuti Pygmy kidnapped from Africa and placed in the Bronx Zoo Monkey House in 1906. Such dehumanizing exhibitions of indigenous peoples were created as popular amusements.

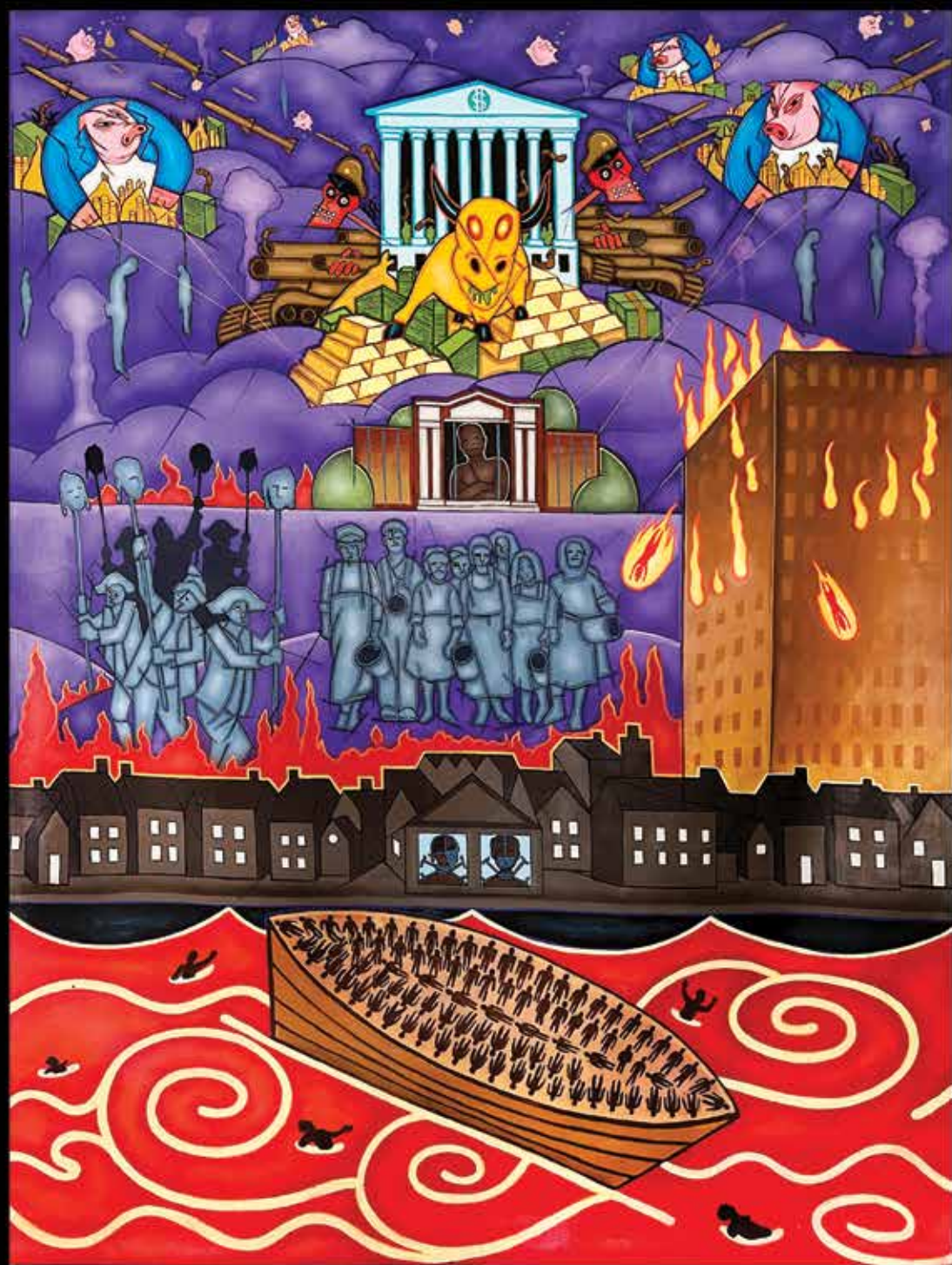
An image of New Amsterdam colonists with the heads of indigenous people on their pikes reminds that westward expansion took place not in an empty land but at the cost of the near extermination of thriving civilizations.

Child laborers worked under inhuman conditions during most of U.S. history as a lynchpin of capital accumulation.

The burning Triangle Shirtwaist Company building, with women in flames leaping to their deaths, should require little motivation for understanding the brutality of wage exploitation—particularly that of immigrant workers—in providing the luxurious lifestyles of the wealthy.

The top of the panel portrays the superrich in all their commodity fetishism—a ruling class so blinded by greed that they will literally destroy the planet in pursuit of ever-greater profits even when they are incapable of physically spending what they have now.

An insatiable, self-perpetuating military machine that thrives on the blood of our young people protects this system of gross inequality. A machine so bloated that it robs our elderly of a secure retirement, our children of an education, and our poor of a nutritious diet. The United States spends almost as much money on war making as all other countries in the world combined.













The March of the People

The center panel, *The March of the People*, expresses the history of the social struggles that led to social and economic advances for working people: union organizing; the antiwar, civil rights, and black nationalist movements; international solidarity; women's suffrage; gay rights; and so on.

This panel represents the great march of humanity and the coming together of centuries of struggle: the shared sacrifice and joy that arises when we enter the street, join the picket, carry the banner, and otherwise become part of a collective expression of humanity that goes beyond individual rebellion.

Visually as well as politically, a mass of human beings engaged in struggle together becomes something greater than the sum of its individual participants. A new consciousness develops, a sense of the collective potential power that we possess.

The march is inclusive and gives voice to events that may provide new revelations to the viewer: that the motor force of social change is not the great leader but the movement of millions.

Here we see maritime pickets that helped to organize both seafarers and longshore workers. Suffragettes are shown on a picketing tugboat that they used to advance the fight for women's right to vote. The fight for women's rights has a history stretching from indigenous peoples' struggles to today's fight for reproductive rights.

Malcolm X is speaking in Harlem. While the mural focuses on the great mass of unknown activists, we cannot ignore some of the greatest spokespeople of our struggles.

The 1913 Paterson Silk Strike Pageant illustrates the amazing character of social activism in New York. When the immigrant textile workers in Paterson, New Jersey, conducted the strike, a massive textile industry remained in the New York metropolitan area. Over 1,800 workers were jailed during the strike, which focused on the fight for an eight-hour day and improved working conditions.

During the struggle, the strikers marched from Paterson, New Jersey, to Manhattan. They walked off the streets and along a painted road, striding onto the stage of Madison Square Garden where they reenacted the strike. They led the audience in chants and sang strike songs—a great moment in American politics and theater.

"Strike girls, strike!" was the chant as the women workers of the New York Woolworth stores became part of the great wave of sit-down strikes that created our industrial unions.

New York City was a center of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, which forever changed world politics. Their mass demonstrations laid the groundwork for the emergence of movements for women's liberation, gay rights, environmental protections, disability rights, and many others.

New strides further extended democratic rights: GIs gained the ability to oppose the war, political activity was extended on high school and college campuses, and Black nationalist organizations reemerged along with movements for Puerto Rican independence, immigrant rights, and other important social struggles.



SUPERIOR BRING THEM HOME NOW

WE ARE HERE
PUBLIC
EMPLOYEES

VIVA
LA
HUELGA

SOLFO

AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL

ADMINISTRATIVE

HARD STRIKE

THEY ARE NOT LISTENING

THEY ARE NOT LISTENING

THEY ARE NOT LISTENING

THEY ARE NOT LISTENING

THEY ARE NOT LISTENING

THEY ARE NOT LISTENING

THEY ARE NOT LISTENING



SOLIDARITY
FOREVER

ON
STRIKE

JOIN
THE
LABOR
PARTY
ADVISE

NO
CONTRACT
NO
WORK

STRIKE
FOR
BETTER
WAGES
AND
CONDITIONS

WAGE
FOR
WORK



Another World is Possible

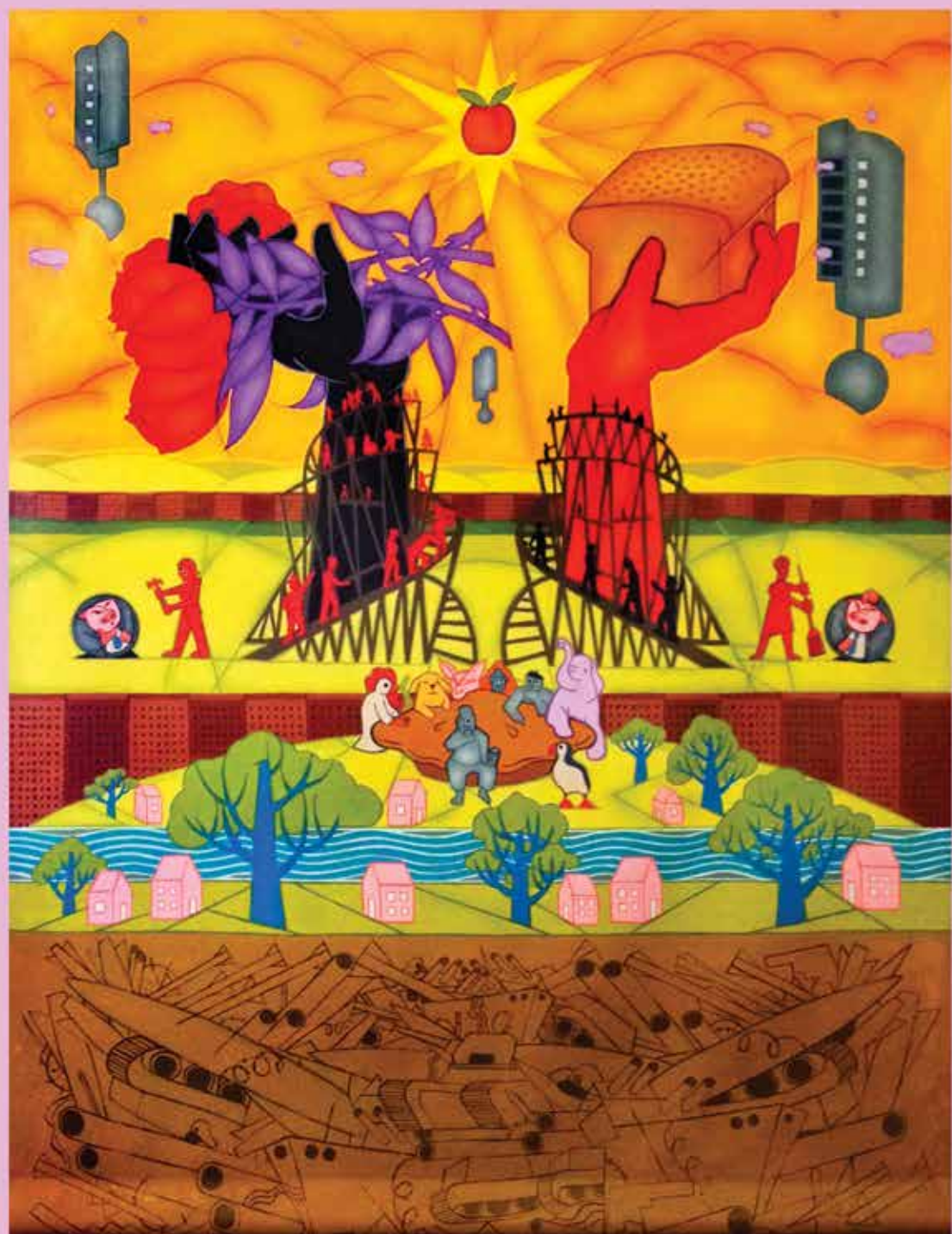
The third panel is entitled *Another World Is Possible*. Recalling Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third Communist International, two mighty workers' hands rise from scaffolding and reach to the heavens, holding bread and roses. Bread symbolizes the material basis for a decent life: today, humanity possesses the material capability to feed, clothe, and educate every human being on the planet, but we are prevented from doing so by oppressive cultural and political structures. Roses represent the working-class aspiration for a meaningful spiritual and cultural existence: our lives are not simply meant for work.

Tatlin's Tower was one of modern art's great visionary works, designed to be the highest structure on Earth and intended to serve as the headquarters for global revolutionary struggle. The panel thus attempts to evoke the idea that working people can build their own future—whatever that may be.

Workers produce socially: we are no longer individual craftspeople or tillers of small plots of land. Our place in society entails working to produce collectively. The resultant cooperation lays the basis for the combative spirit that characterizes the working class.

This panel looks ahead with optimism: the world's armaments have been buried and workers of different nations no longer slaughter each other on the field of battle. Instead, they strive to be in accord with nature, accepting and appreciating the beautiful planet that we inhabit.

Workers live in harmony with nature, sharing a piece of the pie—we no longer have a world where some individuals possess vast wealth and power by accident of birth while others live under brutal, oppressive conditions. Here, we are all constructing a new future, and everyone is expected and allowed to participate.







We Follow the Path Less Traveled

Finally, in the bottom section of the mural, *We Follow the Path Less Traveled*, are life-size figures of thirty of New York's leading historic social and labor activists. A few, such as Martin Luther King and John Lennon, are well-known. But also included are those that have rarely, if ever, been portrayed in public art: A. Philip Randolph, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Marcus Garvey, Big Bill Haywood, and others.

Many of these individuals went to jail or gave their lives for our movement and should not be hidden from view. We have been so robbed of our history that these figures remain unknown to us.

Some were immigrants or visitors to the city. Some were workers, intellectuals, or artists. Others were born to wealth and privilege. There are nationalists, syndicalists, anarchists, socialists, communists, and liberals. There are wageworkers and ex-chattel slaves. There are railroad workers, miners, shipbuilders, textile workers, and musicians. There are Christians, Jews, Muslims, and atheists. They are of African, European, Asian, Latino, and many other origins.



Some were martyred in the struggle, others were vilified, and many spent considerable time in prison. This group includes A. Philip Randolph, the labor and civil-rights activist; Diego Rivera, the great Mexican muralist, and Frida Kahlo, the artist-activist; Pedro Albizo Campos, the Puerto Rican nationalist leader and political prisoner; Margaret Sanger, an early reproductive-rights activist; Mabel Dodge, a freethinker, patron of the arts, and supporter of democratic rights; and Grace Lee Boggs, a feminist and Marxist activist.

Here are John Lennon; Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a “jawsmith” for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a founder of the ACLU, a feminist, and a communist; Harry Haywood, a sailor, communist, and Black nationalist theoretician; Eugene Debs, a railroad-strike leader and presidential candidate for the Socialist Party while imprisoned for his opposition to World War I; and Daniel de Leon, an orator and leader of the Socialist Labor Party.



Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King belong on the streets of New York as much as anywhere else in the country. The same is true of Malcolm X, who gave voice to the Black community of New York City. Hubert Harrison was both a West Indian intellectual and a leading voice of Harlem radicalism.

Clara Lemlich was a young Jewish garment worker and a rank-and-file leader of the 1909 Uprising of 20,000 textile-workers' strike. Frederick Douglass was an ex-slave and ship caulker, a leading voice of the abolitionist movement. Che Guevara was an Argentinean physician, a leader of the Cuban Revolution, an anti-apartheid fighter in southern Africa, and a vibrant voice of internationalism. Bayard Rustin was a labor, civil-rights, and gay activist. Marcus Garvey was a leading voice of Black nationalism and the founder and leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association.





Carlo Tresca was an anarchist leader in the Italian immigrant workers community and the IWW. Sojourner Truth was an escaped slave, a conductor on the underground railroad, an abolitionist, and an early feminist. Emma Goldman was an anarchist propagandist and activist. Big Bill Haywood was a leader of the Western Federation of Miners and the IWW.

The bottom section, this march of activists from our history, is intended to be a photo backdrop. Visitors to the mural can have their picture taken as they march along with this grand army.

Characterizing all these individuals is their shared belief that the actions of working people in their masses can change society in a fundamental way. They proved as much in struggle.

This mural is a magical vision, but art is a magical process in the sense that it frees us to imagine new possibilities. *The City at the Crossroads of History* presents an optimistic vision of the future.

Today, we stand at a critical juncture in history. Events like the Deepwater Horizon oil disaster and the Fukushima nuclear meltdown have provided graphic evidence for how close we stand to catastrophes that threaten the very existence of humanity. The carbon-based foundation of modern capitalism threatens untold numbers of species with extinction—including humanity. Interimperialist rivalries pose the possibility of a global conflagration that would end life as we know it.

Fortunately, new waves of activism are rising to provide fresh visions and alternatives to deepening social and economic crises.

The largest antiwar demonstrations in human history did not occur during the 1970s but in February 2003, preceding the U.S. invasion of Iraq—including in New York City. The largest demonstration of working-class consciousness in the United States was not during the 1930s but in 2006 during the immigrant workers mobilizations on May Day, proclaiming “We are workers—we are not criminals!”

The most wide-ranging political discussions did not occur during earlier waves of radicalization and activism but around recent upheavals like Occupy, Tahrir Square, and Black Lives Matter.

The internet, created as a tool for the military, has been occupied by millions of workers engaged in an unprecedented discussion and debate about how we can build a new world.

Collectively, we possess the power to bring that world to birth.





The City at the Crossroads of History petition and more information: <https://chnng.it/zPzVBSKy>

The City at the Crossroads of History is seeking a permanent home! As are about 50 other portable murals and banners!

See them here: <https://tinyurl.com/565dt6h5>

See many of them currently installed at RED SQUARE Studio/Gallery/Museum: <https://tinyurl.com/mwpa2jtx>

Contact Mike Alewitz: Alewitz@gmail.com

On behalf of downtrodden toilers everywhere, I would like to thank Rethinking Marxism, Yahya Madra and Serap Kayatekin for preparing and bringing this important story to light.