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Tom Gregg, *(Blue) Flag*, 2011, oil on canvas, 29.5 x 26.5".

A Long, Winding, and Sometimes Futile Search for Meaning





Tom Gregg, *Seven Lemons*, 2008, oil on panel, 22.5 x 25.5",

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
4525 Oak Street
816-751-1278
Kansas City
Tom Gregg – Artist Talk
Friday, March 9

By **BLAIR SCHULMAN**

Visual artist Tom Gregg was the third in a series of four "Tours + Talks" at Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Gregg's work elicits a conversation that can meander between simple enjoyment to controversy. His still life paintings of everyday objects are a straight-forward cross of Wayne Thiebaud-meets-Paul Cezanne. Looking deeper into his work, viewers can discern a subliminal political context the artist himself feels really isn't there at all.

The idea his work conveys is mostly concerned with symmetry and says Gregg, "...offer control." Objects are the core and forefront of each piece. Three bands of perspective (a background, a flat surface, and a sub-surface) usually in solid colors; hold an almost smoky patina of age that is restful to the eye. Sometimes he'll incorporate a patterned background that could easily be found in grandmother's house. The shapes of his

glassware and porcelain bear a somewhat nostalgic feel as well. During his talk, the slides went by and I kept thinking where I might find drinking glasses in these odd shapes; some with thick bases and wide mouths, others tall and thin, almost like test tubes.

My Virgoan nature appreciates the specificity he places in his objects. Apples on a table or lemons surrounding a glass, for example, have an almost-military precision. There is nothing random in his work; Greggs' coordination of structure creates harmony. His paintings are sometimes so straightforward in process and context you could look at them for a very long time without realizing you're doing so. The visuals come to you head-on, with the idea all the clues are right there, waiting to be discerned.

Even if Gregg claims his work is apolitical, that his audience is opting to puzzle out the political implications, says quite a lot. In terms of a nation engaged in overseas wars for over a decade, we're looking for enemies everywhere, and his paintings of American flags are among the latest in tirades against a symbol that is at once both sacred as well as born for reinterpretation. The Flag painting in question is of a series through an exhibition underway until March 24 at the George Billis Gallery in Los Angeles. (georgebillisgallery.com/galleryLA)

His work might not be considered provocative; however, a recent flame war on the Nelson's Facebook page over one of these flag pieces had me wondering if all the commentators on the site would show up for the lecture. I was curious how this might play out. But in the end no argument or fisticuffs ensued. The Facebook page for the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art was host to a salvo of both contempt and pride for the artist, his work and the museum itself. The Nelson is an institution that maintains prudence in its collection and programming, upholding its responsibility as one of Kansas City's cultural leaders. All



responsibility as one of Kansas City's cultural leaders. As told, it was very interesting to see people getting worked up over something, anything!

The online response and reactions does reignite an oft-told conversation; when is it art? when is it not? Not having seen the online conversation beforehand, Gregg didn't touch on this during the lecture. I did ask him about it afterwards in an email exchange and he expressed surprise about the reaction this one painting was receiving. "I am amazed at how sensitive and readily inflamed people can be, but then also a bit encouraged for the ability of art to mean enough to people to get them thinking and responding."

The conversation on the site ran from "cancel my membership ... effective immediately! HORRIBLE!!!" to "If you do cancel her membership, I will be happy to buy a new one." Aside from the reactionary responses also came, "... a conversation has begun and that ... is the sign that this artist has accomplished a great deal."

Is it wrong to reconfigure the flag to suit your own purposes? To cite the law, it is not illegal to improperly hang, wear or burn the American flag. (United States Supreme Court in *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397 (1989), and reaffirmed in *U.S. v. Eichman*, 496 U.S. 310 (1990). The most recent attempt to adopt a flag desecration amendment failed in the United States Senate on June 27, 2006.

Gregg, for his part, asks the viewer to see through the political and view the forms of his flags — wrapped, tied, folded. Politics intersected with his work in 2005-6 when "there were a series of beheadings in Iraq, some broadcast live on the internet. Gregg started a series of draped forms, which started with the idea of a severed head wrapped in cloth. But this was always just the inspiration/starting point, never meant to be literal or even obvious. They were meant to be mysterious, or puzzling, at the most, maybe vaguely threatening."

Not a new idea, Old Glory as art is a permanent fixture in our culture lexicon. Jasper John's *Flag* (1954-55), was painted after he dreamt of the flag. John's work makes his audience question the ironies, contradictions and paradoxes of classical iconography.

In 1996, the Phoenix Art Museum exhibited a collection of sculptures, paintings, collages and photographs that both celebrated and denigrated the American flag. Flags displayed were made of human skin and included flags on buttons, on coffins, and made of matchsticks. One flag was stuffed inside a porcelain toilet bowl.

A wall shelf as part of an installation allowed visitors to record their feelings. However, one needed to stand on the flag to reach the book. The installation was rendered by Chicago artist Dread Scott (but known as Scott Tyler when he created *What is the Proper Way to Display the U.S. Flag?*) The writer discussing this exhibit for the *New York Times*, B. Drummond Ayres, Jr. asks, "But is it art? Or is it politics? Or is it just plain desecration of that greatest of American icons, under the guise of artistic freedom?" In the piece, the same argument both for and against ensued.

I asked Gregg specifically about his flag paintings. In our email exchange, he said, "I guess for me, the flag paintings are meant to be things of beauty, and also to have a dignity to them. But as with all my paintings they are meant to ask, or get the viewer to ask themselves, some questions. And with the flags I suppose they include: what is this? Who did this? How did it happen? What might it mean? But I believe (and I think someone said this on the comments on Facebook) that it is just a painting, and that it, in and of itself, doesn't mean anything. Are they angry at me, angry at the painting, angry at what the painting means, or just angry?"

A new book *Indivisible: Restoring Faith, Family, and Freedom Before It's Too Late* by J.W. Richards (Ph.D., is a Senior Fellow at the Discovery Institute) and James Robison, founder and president of LIFE Outreach International and co-host of Life Today (LIFE Outreach International a Christian, faith-based organization), published March 11, 2012. debuted at No. 5 on the *New*

Tom Gregg, *Oranges and Cup*, 2011, oil on canvas, 23.5 x 21".



Robert Rauschenberg, *Short Circuit* (Combine Painting), 1955, image courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

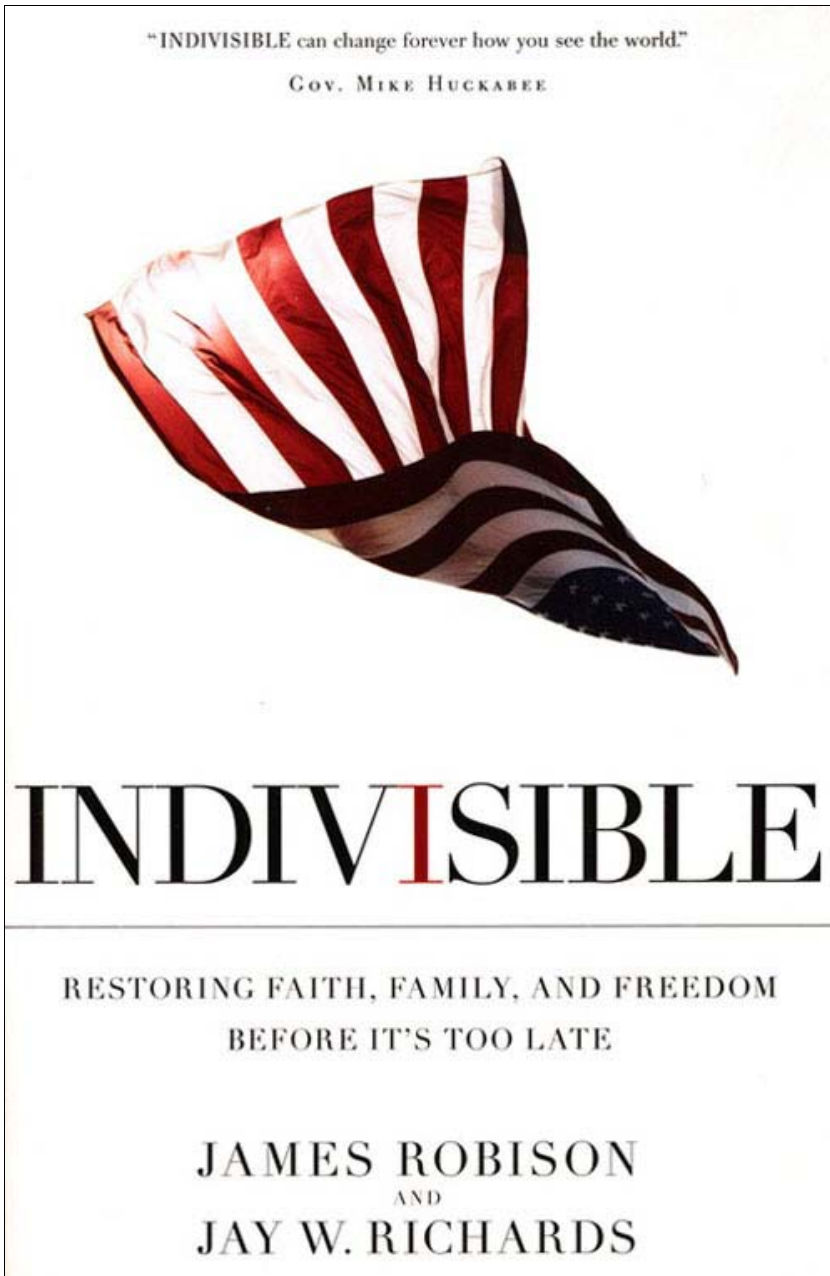
York Times' Nonfiction Hardcover Best-seller List. The cover art displays an American flag rendered twisted, backwards and upside down.

I mention this book in particular to ask, is this image any more different than Gregg's painting? Who is excused from the levels of decorum that run rampant on one end but seem to elicit no reaction on another? I searched the internet for possible reactions to this cover art (by artist unknown) but found no replies at all, but much praise for its content.

Ours is a culture in flux. Patriotism furnished with insulated idealism, depending on which meaning you subscribe to. As well as a social morality burdened with balancing reality and Puritanism.

In trying to thrash out an answer that is simply unanswerable, artists will continue with, to paraphrase Lawrence Weiner, a major figure in the importance of conceptual art, their responsibility to ask questions of their audience. It is the discussion that provokes a response from one another where one can look back while continuing to move ahead.

According to George Billis Gallery in Los Angeles, at \$6,200 apiece, all of Tom Gregg's flag paintings sold immediately.



Cover of *Indivisible*.



Dread Scott, *What is the Proper Way to Display the U.S. Flag?* (installation view), 1988, US Flag, book, pen, shelf.

