



Grace Nkem: CLOWN WORLD

November 18th - December 18th, 2023

Project Gallery V

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New York, N.Y., November 18th, 2023 | Project Gallery V is pleased to present a solo exhibition featuring 20 works by Grace Nkem.

Grace Nkem (b. 1997, Tver, Russia) is a Nigerian-Russian painter from Tver who studied Art History at Columbia University and now lives and works in New York City. In her work she grapples with the ills of social alienation, mass digitization, and globalism— ironically noting that she owes her very existence to the latter of the three.

Formally, her paintings are inspired by twentieth century figurative painting, twenty-first century digital painting, and the internet writ large (where, in the artist's own words, "all images seem to exist at once."). Leaning heavily into luminous, contrasting color palettes and crisp atmospheres, Nkem brings together disparate images through free association, noting that it takes very little prompting for the human eye to dive into metaphor: when objects are put beside one another in a picture, a connection inevitably arises between them. Meaning in her work is thus produced according to both the internal logic of her paintings' and the social context they are viewed in.

Nkem's main goal is to produce artwork that rewards sustained attention as she works through themes that weigh heavily upon the modern psyche: mass hysteria, truth and untruth, racial antagonism, class consciousness, the dissolution of consensus reality, the specter of terrorism, compounding loss of cultural history, rampant wealth inequality, the tyranny of the digital, and a cultural preoccupation with perceived social decay.

You can view *Grace Nkem: CLOWN WORLD* on the Project Gallery V website [here](#).

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"Clown world" is a euphemism that the alt-right throws around a lot online and, as usual, they're falling off track and drawing wrong conclusions. So while it's a pity that a phrase which so aptly describes our consensus reality (or lack thereof) was coined by Hitlerian numerologists, I will persist in using it. The Clown World exists, but it is not a tragedy born of racial admixture nor immigration, queer liberation nor abortion access— it is the inevitable result of a hyper-connected world in which the material ramifications of economics have dismantled long-standing systems of meaning and value.

Clown World is a place where nothing makes sense but everything is related, pie to the face. Clown World is the result of an overstimulated, atrophied collective unconscious that latches on to the absurd— which, as Baudrillard once said of violence, is one of the few things that can still operate in terms of "the real." Pie to the face.

Thus, this exhibition is a look into a world filled with symbols and void of meaning, a mirror to our own— like an I Spy book, or geopolitics, or a crossword puzzle. It is an attempt to catch a glimpse of our sleep-deprived, sick, and heavily medicated collective cultural imaginary.

By necessity, I'm approaching the question of the collective unconscious from the perspective of my own subconscious, as the Surrealists did. I'm painting the first thing that comes to mind. However, unlike the Surrealists I always make sure to go online and look at a cacophony of images of what I'm about to paint first, because the screen is the surface where every image can exist at once and the internet is our collective proxy-brain, Clown World personified.

I think of my collage-like, painted images as browser pop-ups and I draw upon compositional clichés and visual conventions we encounter when interacting with screens: icons, endless interfaces, a compacted depth of field, cut-paste image-overlay, and so on. It seems impossible to produce a twenty-first century painting that is not informed by digital images, given that our contemporary understanding thereof is inexorably shaped by and tied to their existence in cyberspace, though we only spend fractions of a second with some of the images we see on screens. This goes beyond smartphone-photogenic curation of storefronts and apartments— the tyranny of the grid and the feed has infiltrated the cultural unconscious in ways that we,

certainly, have yet to see. Even our eschatology is becoming cybernetic, as evidenced by the phrase, "I don't want to become a hashtag."

At once, I'm not literally painting the digital, merely applying what 'the digital' has taught me about organizing thought within visual space. I'm painting about lost cultural history, the sublime, the banality of daily life, the subsumption of the real by the digital, the threat of terror, and above all human preoccupation with death and apocalypse; there's a sense of tension lurking just outside of the frame, perhaps it's something grotesque, surely some revelation is at hand— and yet, I'm also painting about beauty, nostalgia, and artifacts that I will never truly know in the way that their makers did; masks, statues, dolls on a shelf, open fields, all of my own mental miasma, because it is frankly distasteful to fake universality.

Though there's more to think about than ever, we are so bored with our symbols that we constantly need to produce new ones and to bear witness to plain absurdity. A world full of connections but void of meaning calls for some form or another of magical thinking. So, without further ado, welcome to Clown World. Pie to the face.

- Grace Nkem

CLOWN WORLD is live on our platform until December 18th, 2023. You can view the exhibition [here](#) and read more about Nkem's practice [here](#). More of Nkem's work can be found on her Instagram [@gracnkm](#).

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