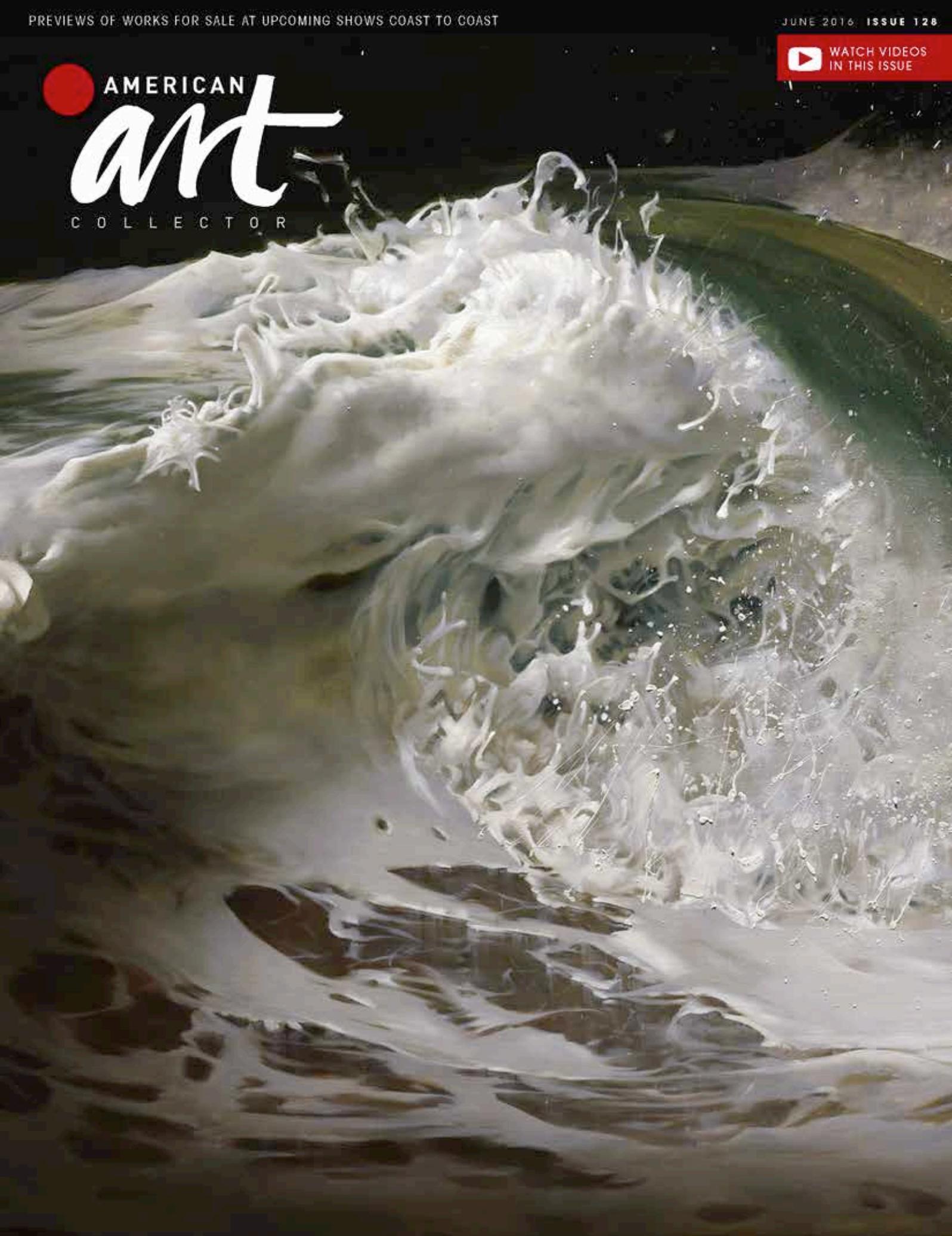
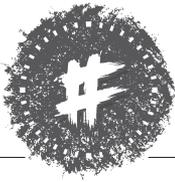




WATCH VIDEOS
IN THIS ISSUE

AMERICAN
art
COLLECTOR





Interview with Umar Rashid aka Frohawk Two Feathers

By Sarah Elise Abramson

We have a fascination with a story well told, be it truth or fiction, and Umar Rashid is telling an interesting one. Inspired by history, knowledge and imagination, Rashid uses his art as a device for storytelling. The story he depicts is not one that could have emerged a number of places or would be easily found if searched for. It's a distinctive story that he lived. The fact that it was lived in his imagination—a swirl of actuality and historical accuracy with the vivacious and malleable imagination of an adolescent boy—is insignificant. His heterogeneous mixture of visual influences range from naive colonial art to Staffordshire figurines with a unique and peculiar afro-futuristic spin. Rashid's narrative paintings use the raw power of visual imagery to stir the imagination and convey cultural truths with historical inaccuracies in a "what if" scenario. They blend two parallel antiquities in order to convey current themes in the political climate.

Can you introduce yourself and tell us a bit about your background?

My name is Umar Rashid, and for the past 13 years I've created paintings, maps and sculptures of an alternate history under the pseudonym Frohawk Two Feathers. I was born and raised in Chicago and relocated to Los Angeles in 2000 just after Y2K when the world was about to end.

What were some of your major influences growing up and what are they now?

In the era of unending black consciousness, Harryhausen films, Indiana Jones, a functional library card and the complete edition of the *Young People's Science Encyclopedia*, I wanted to be a swashbuckling archeologist who would discover dinosaurs living

among us. Then the '80s came and the lights went out and shit got real gray. I managed to maintain my love and affection for history, mythology and science, but in order to escape the harshness of the period I escaped further into fantasy and got lost there for a number of years. Now, I'd say I'm influenced by the bright people of the world, shiny and intelligent, the street, realpolitik, colonialism, Fanonism, pre-colonial indigenous polities, foreign travel, autonomy and transcendence.

When did you realize you were an artist?

Both of my parents were/are artists. Actors mainly, but my father is a playwright, acting coach and a painter. So, I guess it has always been there. I didn't realize it until I flunked out of the film program at university. After that unfortunate incident, I moved to the photography department and began to focus more on prose and non-silver photography. I also dabbled in graffiti in high school so I was kind of all over the place as far as direction went. When I moved to Los Angeles and had my dreams of being a Van Der Zee/Keita-esque portrait photographer dashed by the digital age, I started illustrating the "other" world I lived in all my life. The fantastical, alternative history where I was king.

If you could have lived during any time, any century, when would it be?

So many places I'd love to go, but I would avoid the New World and the African coasts during the slave trade for sure! I guess I'd like to be a part of the Bantu migrations from Central Africa to the southern part of the continent. There was a lot of room to expand and start new kingdoms. I'd just spend time building great monuments, buildings and dominating my neighbors.

1
Most Young Kings. The death of Andre I of Hispaniola by his loyal generals Ricard, and Hector. 1794, acrylic, coffee and tea on paper, 44 x 68"

2
Your Gods Are Impotent and Thus Their Defeat. (Failed Charge (Massacre) At Pic DuBois, Referred To As Mount Blood By The Locals) 1792, acrylic, coffee and tea on paper, 44 x 72"

3
La Mort D'Anibal, acrylic, ink, coffee and tea on paper, 40 x 52"

4
The Siege of Santo Domingo, acrylic on elk skin, approximately 45 x 60"

5
He Dead. Amen! La Donna, inventor of the hot comb and widow of the Emperor Andre I of Hispaniola as Maitresse Mambo Erzulie Freda Dahomey, acrylic, coffee and tea on paper, 44 x 30"



1



2



3

So, if France and England had never gone to war, what is the story you've created? Can you take us through that?

Yes! Let's talk about Frengland! I wanted to create a narrative that spanned the globe and helped me piece together my fractured identity. I initially created a small series called *Tales of Heroism* and focused on a young Inuit boy and his struggle against various European empires seeking to find the Northwest Passage. The work was crude, violent and comedic. Dark times.

One day I was perusing a book on world history and came across a quote by Napoleon that brought it all together for me. The quote was, paraphrased, "You'd think the entire world turned upon a barrel of sugar." Then, in 2006 to 2007, I had started to write a story about a fictional empire called Frengland.



4

Frengland is a combination of France and England, two great superpowers in the colonial era that I had merged into one large, sprawling, global superpower. I began my story in 1680 A.D. after the end of the English Civil War and the death of Oliver Cromwell. My story also begins during the reign of Louis XIV. So, prior to my meddling with the historical timeline, all of the history is true. A wealthy sugarcane planter from Calais by the name of Bertrand deposed Louis XIV and took control of France. He called upon a weakened England to join him in a coalition. The citizens of both countries were not happy with this arrangement but were easily placated (in the Roman sense) with food and games. A dual capital was constructed in Dover and Calais, and after defeating all of his enemies, Bertrand had himself crowned Francis I of Frengland. After quieting all of the internal and external

unrest, and religious conflicts throughout the far-flung empire, Frengland began to grow rapidly. Slavery was increased to meet the demands for exotic products. The army and navies also grew exponentially. Ireland was annexed into the empire. But dangers existed on the borders. The Spanish had a rather large empire (although in a state of decay from all of the wars). The Dutch were growing bolder in their colonial ambitions and had a very strong mercantile empire and navy. The Germans were divided with the exception of Prussia in the east. Prussia had colonial ambitions but could not move until the threat of Frengland was reduced. The Vatican combined all of the Catholic states into a large empire as a defense against a polytheistic Frengland and the Islamic Ottoman Empire. A détente was reached but when Bertrand died, his twin sons took over. Francis II was killed by his brother Francis III, and the world erupted in war. Throughout the reign of Francis III, many states formally allied with Frengland began to revolt. The sugar producing islands saw some very intense slave rebellions, especially in the Caribbean. But no rebellion was more successful than the one that occurred on the island of Saint-Domingue, "The Pearl of the Antilles."

So awesome! Tell us a bit about your upcoming solo museum show at the Martha and Robert Fogelman Galleries of Contemporary Art at The University of Memphis. What works will you be showing?

I'm very excited about this show because it will be my first exhibition in the southern United States. I've always wanted to make a show about the southern U.S., especially because of how dismal race relations continue to be in this modern age and because of the almost complete lack of non-polarized dialogue. Within my narrative, I do not make light of past atrocities or try to cover them up in any way. I try to expand the dialogue to give light to all of the narratives that comprise the story. However, since I changed a moment in history (the creation of Frengland), all subsequent "historical" events would be changed as well. So, in this particular episode of Frengland, I'm going to expand my narrative of the resurgent war between



5

the Frenglish Empire, the Spanish Empire, and the Choctaw Empire and their allies. Another fascinating prospect of this location is the pre-, pre-Colombian Mississippian culture that thrived there with their advanced culture, pyramids and mounds, and subsequent disappearance on which I have some ideas outside of the traditional canon.

And, you'd mentioned a Facebook Mural. What's up with that?

I was contacted out of the blue by the Facebook Artist in Residence program to create a mural for their new office in Los Angeles. Needless to say, I was very excited and jumped at the opportunity. Plus, I haven't created a mural in almost two decades. I'm currently finishing up that mural depicting my version of the story of Prometheus and his theft of fire and subsequent punishment with the backdrop of the Tongva people resisting the encroachments of the Spanish Empire.

What's the best bit of advice you've ever been given?

So many to date, but one always sticks out and I try to share it with everyone I encounter, time permitting. It was said by Mrs. Brenda Landau, my African-American studies teacher in high school. "If you are successful and you don't raise anyone up with you, you haven't accomplished anything."

Contact at
www.frohawktwofeathers.com

Sarah Elise Abramson is a contemporary fine art photographer based in San Pedro, California—a mysterious postindustrial enclave whose offbeat countercultural history and proliferation of unusual sights, sounds and citizens is tailor-made for Abramson's obsession with everyday surrealism. In both her own photography and in her curatorial and editorial approach to exhibition projects and independent publications, her emphasis is on discovering the eccentric beauty in the things most people overlook. Found objects, hidden messages, secrets of the universe that hide in plain sight—throughout her studies at Parsons The New School for Design and Brooks Institute of Photography, and later at LaChapelle Studios, her work has evolved from finding to intuitively creating original daydreams and shared cosmologies.

