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Midwest, Refreshed

CAM Chief Curator Jeffrey Uslip's first concurrent exhibitions aim to redefine the Midwest narrative.

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Joe Goode, Whew! (Tornado Triptych), 1992. Sumi ink on Washi paper, 168 x 468 inches. Collection of the artist.

Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

Even before beginning his position at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, Jeffrey Uslip knew what his first main gallery exhibitions would be as chief curator.

“When I thought about what types of curatorial projects I would produce at CAM, I wanted to choose a program that mattered here, in St. Louis,” Uslip says. Although Uslip has curated several shows at CAM since beginning his role last February, this January marks the first time that all concurrent main gallery exhibitions have his stamp on it. Eleven months ago, the Brooklyn native became a St. Louis transplant, relocating to a state he describes as “flickering between the middle and the south.” By being outside of coastal art-world centers, where art and culture

seem “etched in stone,” Uslip has found himself in a liminal position where there’s opportunity to question, provoke and reshape. “[In the Midwest], you feel like you’re in this middle register, where there’s a great intellectual and meditative freedom,” Uslip says. “You have a sense of possibility here that you don’t have elsewhere. In the Midwest, you have the space to rebuild art historical narratives.”

The centerpiece of January’s shows is tripartite: “Joe Goode,” “Jesse Howard: Thy Kingdom Come” and “Barnaby Furnas: The Last Flood,” all opening Jan. 16. Together, they present a conversation that examines the lived Midwestern experience, rejecting one-dimensional portrayals to describe a complex and nuanced region. Uslip hopes viewers experience the works as a way to leave the current “sense of volatility behind and embark on a new future, to be our future selves in the present” and, in a way, glimpse a utopia that could be.

The exhibits pull in voices that exist outside of the canon: Goode, although an icon of Southern California art, draws from a Midwestern background that is largely ignored in assessments of his work; Howard was a self-taught local artist who lived and died largely unknown, though his work serves as a mirror for the Midwestern experience during the social transition of the ’50s into the ’60s. And not all the works are realized: Furnas will be creating his work on-site.

Goode is where Uslip does most of his art historical rewriting: By repositioning Goode in the context of his Midwest background, Uslip hopes to revise how the artist is perceived by the art world.

“The exhibition is going to hopefully hit the reset button on Joe, to see his work in a new way, which I would argue would’ve been impossible to do in New York or LA because of the preconceived and highly established understanding of his work,” Uslip says. “Not only are we bringing him here because it’s the locus, the point of departure or the point of genesis for his work, but I think there’s something about the Midwest that allows that reset button to be hit.”

Goode came to the fore in 1962 with his seminal milk-bottle paintings and “torn cloud” works in the first museum survey of American pop art, “New Painting of Common Objects” at the Pasadena Art Museum. Goode was ahead of his time with his vast, rich expanses of canvas, a nod to the big sky of the Great Plains. Although he’s often thought of as Californian, his works clearly express influences from formative years in Oklahoma City. “He’s examining the notion of transparency and opacity and seeing through,” Uslip explains. Goode’s milk-bottle series plays with that notion, turning a transparent bottle into an opaque ground: “It’s by entombing glass bottles [in paint] that Goode illustrates the cultural shift from a 1950s’ sense of postwar exuberance to a charged object that anticipates the uncertainty surrounding the social landscape of the 1960s,” Uslip says.

Getting closer to home, Howard’s key works are wooden signs emblazoned with biblical phrases and fragments of first-person narrative that fall into a Beat rhythm. Often drawing from the Bible for inspiration and incorporating commentary on local politics, race, gun rights, Hitler and America’s position in the world at that time, his works, like Goode’s, reflect midcentury social transformations and provide sounding boards for the lived experience of Missourians during that time. “You feel as though the work is screaming at you,” Uslip says. “There’s something about Jesse’s work that not only turns a mirror to the Midwest and to Missouri, [but] it holds up a mirror to what the collective consciousness was like during these years.”

Uslip’s most unique effort, though, is arranging to have a work produced on-site: New York-based Barnaby Furnas will be in residence at CAM for two weeks. His commission: to depict the Red Sea on the museum’s 56-foot project wall that connects the two exhibits conceptually, using household brooms and other objects to sweep pigment, dye and water across a large canvas.

Together, Howard and Furnas present a call to action: Howard’s signs, in their verbal fury, evoke a sense of discomfort for viewers, who then move on to Furnas, where they experience the parting of the Red Sea from Moses’ first-person point of view. The sublime nature of the large-scale position, both overwhelming and empowering, turns cathartic for the viewer after the stressful insistence of Howard’s work.

It’s a work that will celebrate regeneration and transformations—perhaps evoking a reaction that will spur social change. “[After] being on the ground now for nine months, that feeling of restarting or starting over or the possibility of a renewed America feels even more relevant and pertinent given the local social events,” Uslip says. “Art is a

transformative experience, and I think these bodies of work will allow the viewer to understand their own local past, but be able to take this visceral and spiritual journey into the future.”

All exhibitions open Jan. 16 at CAM (3750 Washington Blvd.). For more info, visit camstl.org.