

# The Economist

## THE Q&A: KURT KAUPER, ARTIST



Michelle Obama's famous arms were slowly taking shape on an oval canvas in a converted storefront near New York City's Williamsburg bridge. Only a few weeks remained before show-time and "Michelle Obama" was not finished. It was to be one of two paintings in Kurt Kauper's solo show, "Barack and Michelle Obama", at Deitch Projects through October.

There is something vaguely anachronistic about Kauper. While many contemporary artists now rely on assistants, fast-drying acrylic paint or computer software to streamline the creative process, Kauper has made his name with oil portraits. He meticulously paints layer after layer of colour until his subjects seem illuminated from within. His subject matter, however, is quite modern.

Kauper's work first earned attention in the mid-1990s, when critics grouped him with artists such as Lisa Yuskavage, John Currin and Elizabeth Peyton, at the vanguard of a figurative revival. But his work eschewed the rebelliousness and crude sexuality of Currin and Yuskavage. His full-length nude self-portraits were neither life-like nor cartoonish yet straddled both realms. They seemed virtual yet fully alive. His "Diva Fictions" series, which presented sumptuous, sexually ambiguous songstresses against strange neutral backgrounds, landed him in the 2000 Whitney Biennial. Then he seemed to go a little berserk, conjuring nude portraits of a cavorting Cary Grant and then, to the horror (or delight) of hockey fans everywhere, a series of mostly nude Canadian hockey players.

On the eve of his solo show "Barack and Michelle Obama", as he prepared to enter the maelstrom of race, gender and political anxiety surrounding the country's African-American first family, Kauper took a moment to speak with More Intelligent Life.

**More Intelligent Life: You've had some pretty strange subjects in the past. Why paint the Obamas? Why now? How do they fit into your oeuvre?**

**Kurt Kauper:** They don't fit in any direct way. After finishing the hockey player paintings, I was at a loss as to what to paint. I tried working on another one, but I couldn't get interested. I don't remember exactly why the idea of painting Barack and Michelle Obama occurred to me. And at first I thought it seemed like a ridiculous idea. But then, I've always liked the idea of painting subject matter that seemed degraded or ridiculous, so I pretty quickly thought the subject matter might have possibilities. And there's nothing less ridiculous, at least in the mainstream art world—the world of "advanced culture" as [Clement] Greenberg called it—than presidential portraiture.

**MIL: Are these political paintings? Anti-political paintings? What do you want your viewers to think of these images?**

**KK:** While I've never been interested in overtly political art, the Bush years did make me think about the possibility of making political paintings. Both as a response to the political realities at the time, but also as a challenge to make myself consider subject matter outside of the sphere of things I'm normally interested in. But it seemed to me that to make critical paintings of Bush or the Bush administration would be too easy.

That was the summer of 2008, after Obama had become very prominent. I couldn't help but be constantly aware of him. We were also being subjected to absurdly celebratory images of him, and at the same time ridiculously demonising images, but little in between. So I thought it might be interesting to make paintings of him and Michelle that tried to stake out a neutral objectivity. I wanted to make paintings that wouldn't allow fulfilment of the expectations a viewer might bring to them, whatever those expectations may be.

**MIL: Do you consider yourself an historical painter? How do these paintings fit into painting tradition?**

**KK:** I've never considered myself a historical painter, although I guess you could frame these paintings that way. When I think of recent history-painting, say Luc Tuymans or Gerhard Richter, there's a gravity in the work that conforms to the traditional concept of history painting, and I think that's absent in my paintings of

the Obamas. Tuymans's paintings have a kind of absurdly self-conscious, almost self-satisfied gravity to them. But that's another subject. I've always embraced the idea of being a traditional painter—in other words somebody who loves the Western painting tradition and draws nourishment from it. And I would like to think that my paintings fit into a tradition within that tradition, having to do with irony and satire—artists such as Hogarth, Goya, certain Surrealists, and above all David and Ingres, even if David and Ingres weren't intentionally ironic or satirical.

**MIL: What's going on in the background? Why did you place the president and first lady in a parking lot?**

**KK:** The president is actually in a suburban neighbourhood. Michelle Obama is in a parking lot. There was no overt attempt to construct meaning by placing them in those settings. It came about because before I started the paintings I was in Sutton, Massachusetts, visiting my mother. I hadn't yet thought of doing the Obama paintings. Just on a whim, I was painting plein-air landscapes in her neighbourhood. When I decided to do the Obama paintings, I was struggling to figure out where I should place them. Not being able to come up with anything, I decided to place them in the landscapes I had just painted: one of my mother's neighbourhood, the other of a parking lot near her house.

**MIL: Your images are lifelike but not photo-realistic. What else are you conveying besides the Obamas' form?**

**KK:** While I love some artists associated with photo-realism, I'm not interested in it as a formal option in my work. I like the high artifice of Renaissance space, the kind of space you find in traditional paintings; and I especially like the crystalline clarity of space in artists like Bronzino, Caravaggio, Ingres, or Meredith Frampton. When it's used in contemporary subject matter it's exotic enough to make the viewer uncertain as to the level of realism in the work. When done right, I think that that uncertainty can be subtly destabilising; it can have the effect of surrealist displacement, without having to use obvious means to achieve that experience of displacement.

**MIL: You spend months on each painting. Can you describe your process? Do you ever ask your subjects to pose?**

**KK:** My process is to do a very careful line drawing of the composition I want. I then transfer that to the panel that's been covered with a red ochre imprimatura. I then build up the lights of the paintings with lead white, leaving the shadows as the red ochre. I end up with a white and red ochre grisaille. I then build up the colour in thin though not entirely transparent layers. My recent subjects have

been imaginary opera divas, Cary Grant without his clothes, hockey players without their clothes and now the Obamas. So even though I would love it if they posed, there was little chance of that happening with any of these people. I do use myself in the mirror for some figural information. And I paint almost all the still life and landscape information in the paintings from life.

**MIL: Any reaction from the White House so far? Were they relieved that you didn't paint a nude President? Why didn't you paint him nude?**

**KK:** To answer your last question first, I was simply tired of painting nude celebrities. There's been no reaction at all. I'm sure they know nothing about them. When I painted Cary Grant and the hockey players nude, I was sure that because of the insular nature of the art world, neither Cary Grant's estate nor any of the hockey players would find out about the paintings, which was fine with me because I didn't want to offend them or create any kind of sensation-driven story. Ultimately, the hockey players did find out about them, much to my surprise; and I have to say they handled it in a very enlightened way. With the Obamas, I'm less concerned about offending—I think that with politicians it's completely appropriate to offend them, whether one agrees with their positions or not.

*"Barack and Michelle Obama" is on view through October 31st at Deitch Projects on 76 Grand Street, New York, NY ~ JAMES MCGIRK*

**Image credit:** Deitch Projects

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