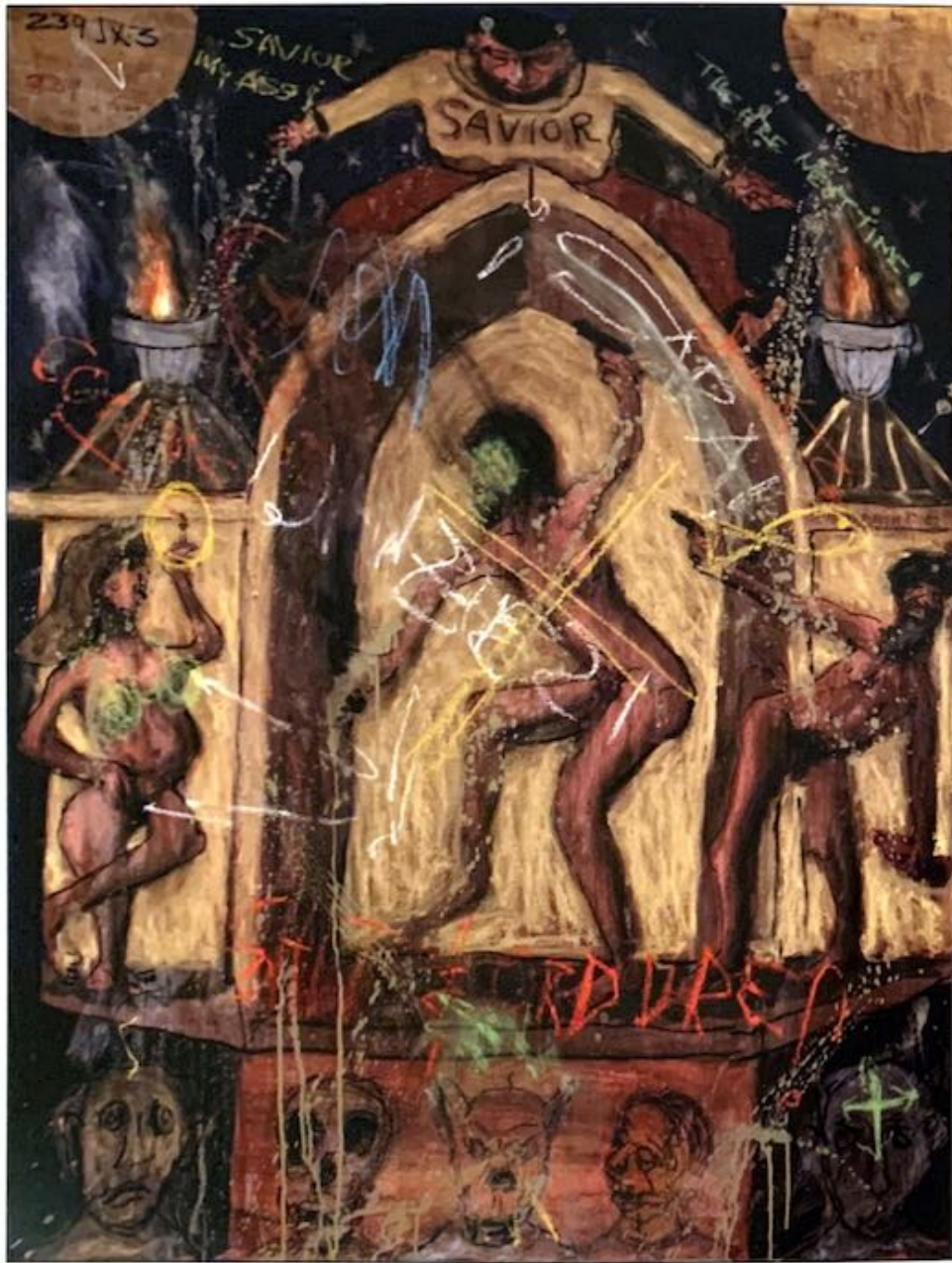




IRA WRIGHT

CHANNELING THE ZEITGEIST by Carol Kino



Altar, 2022. Mixed media on panel, 36" x 48"

Some might characterize the self-taught painter Ira Wright as an outsider artist—one of the cohort described by Jean Dubuffet as “the irregulars of art” who make work that is “totally pure, raw artistic process, reinvented by the artists on the basis of their own impulses.” Yet Wright is in fact something of an insider.

He was trained in the 1950s in industrial design, a field formed twenty years before by renegades from other artistic disciplines, like sculpture, theater design, typography, and painting, and he studied at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan—sometimes referred to as a Scandinavian Bauhaus—whose design department was once directed by Charles Eames. Later, after a career as an art director and graphic designer, he opened the non-profit art gallery Six17 in his hometown of Kalamazoo. Today he is deeply involved with a new gallery in Taos, New Mexico, that bears his name, The Wright Contemporary.

All this time, Wright has been looking at art, teaching art, reading about art, and painting obsessively, with his primary inspirations being the Old Masters and German Expressionism. Although Wright usually works in a rough, unpolished style, he often borrows the format of Old Master paintings, as in *Altar* (2022), which offers a jaundiced view of Christianity. Here, a triptych-shaped altarpiece is filled with naked figures who aim handguns at each other, topped by a devilish figure wearing a t-shirt that bears the word “savior.” The mixed media work *This Is Your Life* (2022) recalls the Last Supper. A Christ-like figure sits at a table as the Grim Reaper, dressed in a black Ku Klux Klan robe, tugs at his shoulder. Around them is a cast of characters who might be drawn from a surrealist comedy sketch—among them, a creature with a blue cone-shaped head, a football player, his hand cupping a naked woman's breast, and a creature with a jackal's head.



Ira in a Wheelchair, 2022. Mixed media on canvas, 32" x 37"

Wright's more intimate works touch on aging, such as *Ira in a Wheelchair* (2022), a self-portrait made in the aftermath of a fall. He's shown staring with alarm while gripping the arms of a wheelchair; he's also somewhat hermaphroditic, with breasts and bikini underpants. The artist explores this same territory through his long-running obsession with Mickey Mouse. In his drawings, Mickey often seems to be Wright's stand-in, charting the passage from youth to old age: in one he smiles perkily in a suit and tie; in another he's a pumped-up gym rat; while in *Mickey at Dusk* (2018) he's old with skinny legs, slumped on a park bench, clutching a cane.

In the paintings, however, Mickey is more of a witness to madness. In *The Crowd* (2018), he lolls like a tongue in someone's mouth, within a gathering that suggests a lynch mob. In *Love Sick* from the same year, two Mickeys surround a naked fellow in a bowler hat whose distorted body parallels the figures of George Grosz; above them a nude woman dangles from a meat hook. Wright's use of Mickey recalls the rough, raw energy of early American pop, most notably early Claes Oldenburg, for whom Mickey Mouse was a ubiquitous subject. But inserting Mickey in scenes like these appears to be a fascinatingly acerbic commentary on the end of the optimism that once powered this quintessentially American movement.

We're living at the brink of times perilously close to Grosz's Weimar era, and Wright is there, channeling the Zeitgeist.

Carol Kino is a longtime art journalist and the author of *The Fair-Haired Girls: Twin Photographers in the Golden Age of Magazines*, forthcoming from Scribner.