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# Review: Trumpworld Artist Don Perlis Channels the Theater of Times Square and Current America

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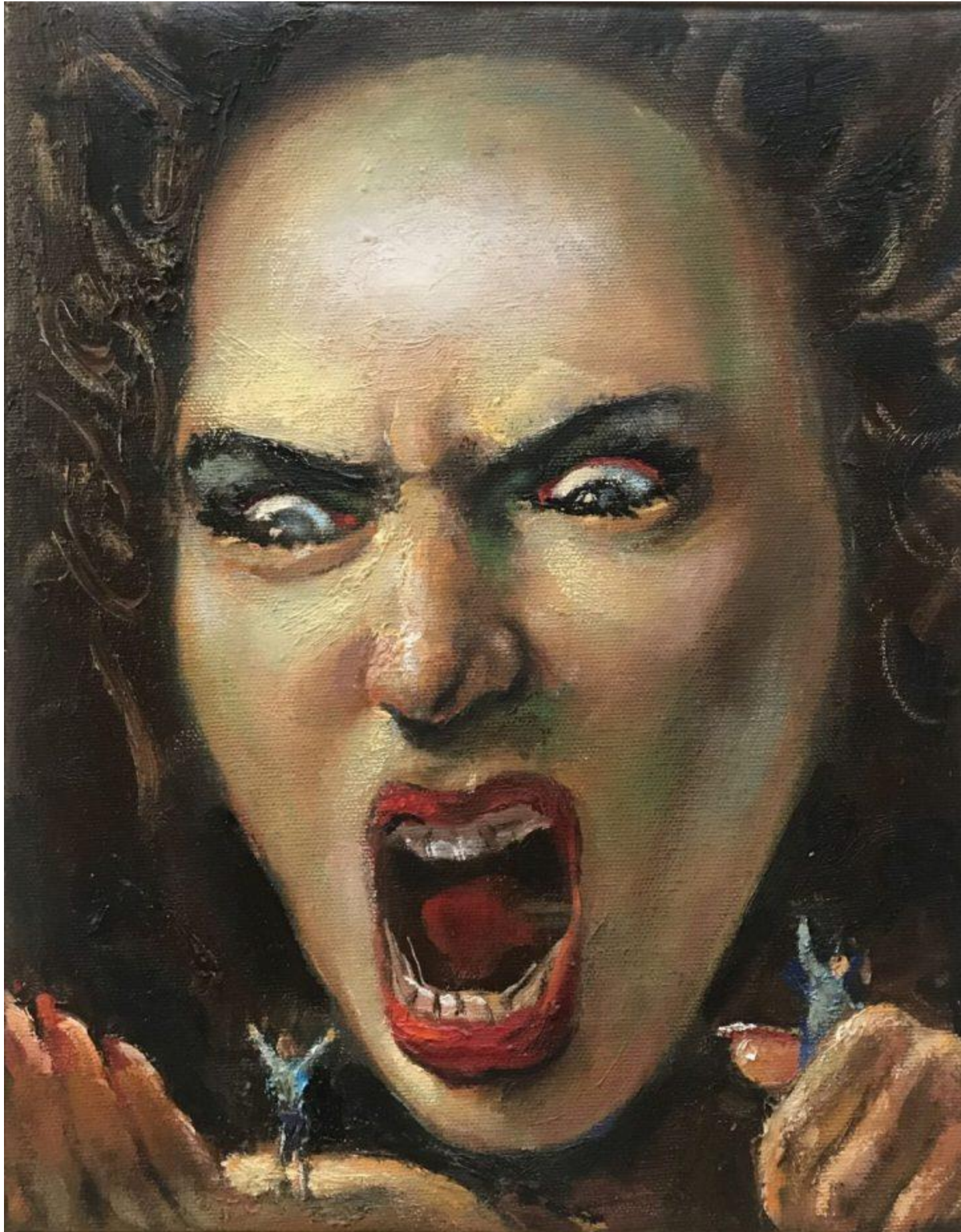
*Trumpworld*, Don Perlis. 2018

Don Perlis' work is like a garish, candied wonderland. It is bright and appealing, even seductive. While his paintings possess a controlled technique, these are cheeky scenes of sarcasm, a showing of the increasingly disturbing hilarity of American life right now. According to Perlis, he titled the show *Trumpworld* since Americans are "all swallowed up and affected" by this administration, this cartoonish leader who is at once comically absurd and frighteningly dangerous to our democracy. As Trump's campaign began, Perlis said in an email interview that "the idea that a talk show host with a ludicrous, big tuft of orange hair and almost no qualifications was running for president was astounding and unbelievable."

Times Square is the context of many of the works in *Trumpworld*, and it melds well with the current America that so profoundly changed on November 8, 2016. The bright, neoned atmosphere of Times Square was once (seemingly at least) darker with its seedy cast of characters and their questionable but intriguing activities. It was real-life drama of the absurd and now it is a different real-life drama; far more unsettling and absurdist. Perlis contends that Times Square is seedier now because of its "blatant commercialization and vulgarity."

In the title painting of the show, Trump is the leader of this commercialized corporate hell, hovering in a bubble. Inside his profile, according to Perlis, are quoted minted coins, as well as *deus ex machina* and a Macy's parade float. In this way, *Trumpworld* is a snapshot of the result of capitalistic obscenity. Trump's disembodied head looks to be on its way to colliding with the large Coca-Cola sign next to spectators

watching the action from a balcony. The balcony mirrors the theater across the street where those leaving *An American in Paris* walk away, ignoring the live theater of the absurd, focusing instead on the consumerism surrounding them on all sides. The action outside the theater is just as theatrical, if not more so in its grit and gut-shot truths of America today. The ostentatious consumerism even exists in the street performers earning money through the tourists (and the exiting theater-goers) flocking to this orb of absurd and garish capitalism.



*Me Too*, Don Perlis. 2018

Beyond Trump's contentious cameo in the title painting, other symptoms of the state of America today are addressed in the exhibition, including the #MeToo movement. There is both a study and the final portrait in the show of the painting, *Me Too*, where we see a Medusa-like woman screaming angrily at two tiny men. One of the men stands in the palm of her hand, waving his arms as if he is searching for rescue or for mercy. The other man is clenched in her fist with one hand raised and looks to be pointing at her. Despite there only being these three figures in the painting, it conveys so much about the #MeToo movement and our current "Trumpworld." The woman is portrayed here as larger than life (quite literally) as she dwarfs the two men within her grasp. Here, she is in control even if one man appears to beg for mercy and the other points, exploiting her with a male gaze. She is defiant and aiming to emasculate the men with her rage.

This painting is far darker, with browns and fleshy colors, but these subdued elements also highlight her talon-like red fingernails and opened, red mouth. Her eyes are blue and match the shirts of the men, but are also outlined in red to show her rage. Her hair billows upward in curls, which is what gives the figure her snake-haired appearance. In Greek mythology, Medusa would turn those looking at her face to stone. Thinking of the myth in studying *Me Too*, I like the possibility of these male figures frozen in stone, the rightful punishment to their abusive, objectifying gaze. Perlis said, "*Me Too* depicts the ancient feminine rage that emerges once again as the formerly hypocritical actions of powerful men have overreached." He continues, "The harm done is apparent. Women have renewed strength to resist the blatant

misogyny that goes with unwarranted power. This is clearly another result of *Trumpworld*."



*Lust*, Don Perlis. 2016-2017.

I feel these issues continue in *Lust*, a work that possesses a creepiness in addition to the seediness celebrated and critiqued in the exhibition as a whole. In it, two Spider-Men (one with a mask and the other maskless), an Elmo (without the Elmo head), and a cop fulfilling the role of the voyeur, who coyly grins at the action before him. Mickey Mouse very much dominates the visual narrative with his large form and his universally recognizable, tongue-out smile. His gloved hand begins to reach for the woman who in turn reaches for him. This is the only moment that looks tender rather than mildly exploitative with the possibility of escalating to a dangerous situation. The women have a look of pride in the power of their feminine wiles over the men, even as they are mostly being pawed at by the characters. The cop looks on, not protecting them at all. The women are channeling a Wonder Woman figure in their costumes but not so much in their action and interaction with the males. Wearing G-strings and looks depicting various degrees of exhaustion on their faces, in addition to their ogling company, the superhero dream does not appear to be a hopeful one.

The whole body of Perlis' work addresses other sides of New York City life—particularly his paintings of subway performers putting on circus-like performances on the handles and poles as the train cars speed through the tunnels. But even as New York City permeates Perlis' work, it still possesses a universal urban mood that shows the need for entertainment in times of struggle and within a tiring metropolitan life. This is the artist's first exhibition in Chicago and he hopes it will not be the last. Here's hoping his characters return again soon to the Windy City.



*Trumpworld* is on view through Friday, November 23, at Firecat Projects, 2124 N. Damen Ave. [firecatprojects.org](http://firecatprojects.org).