ALMINE RECH

Timothy Curtis
SELF WATERING FLOWERS

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Almine Rech Gallery is proud to present “Self-Watering Flowers,” a Paris solo show by Timothy Curtis, his first with the gallery.

“I’m getting to a place where I can feel free,” the self-taught artist said during a studio visit, “and I’m making the best work I can make.”

Freedom and its opposite are very concrete for the Philadelphia native, who was in state prison from 2008 to 2015. He made the best of his time, studying art history and involved with a mural painting program. Curtis was previously a graffiti artist, and while his new works may not obviously resemble graffiti-style imagery, the work is connected to that tradition via a seemingly unlikely link with another art form.

In accounting for the origins of Philadelphia graffiti writing, which he describes as “identifiable across the whole planet,” he connects its characteristic style with the tradition of Pennsylvania stoneware, which, along with cobalt blue renditions of a “man in the moon” motif, frequently features images of tulips that are, it struck the artist, stylized in a manner similar to the way Philadelphia graffiti writers treat text.

And why not, he thought? Pennsylvania stoneware is ubiquitous in the region, and the originators of Philadelphia graffiti surely saw it all around them. The artist himself feels a personal link to the tradition: the Remmey stoneware-making family came from the neighborhood of Kensington, where the artist spent part of his childhood.

Curtis has lately built a substantial collection of such stoneware; a room in his studio is lined with examples. He thus surrounds himself with what he feels is a key to graffiti art, which in turn has been massively influential on contemporary artists. And the City of Brotherly Love is key to the art form’s history, he maintains: “Philadelphia graffiti was already going on for fifteen years before Basquiat and Haring.”

What’s more, he says, considering that the Pennsylvania stoneware artists were drawing on European art and craft traditions, he is, in turn, pleased to bring works inspired by this unique American tradition back to Europe in this show.

The “starting point and guiding light for the exhibition,” says Curtis, is the painting *House of Tomorrow*, which features man in the moon and tulip motifs in cobalt blue and is framed with recycled wood from a Philadelphia row house. It pays tribute to his daughter Nassia and her mother Haelinn, whose birthdays occur during the month of the exhibition. At the time of Nassia’s birth, Haelinn gave him Khalil Gibran’s book *The Prophet*, which includes the poem *On Children*, featuring the lines, “Your children are not your children. / They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself. / They come through you but not from you, / And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.” And perhaps they live in the house of tomorrow.

As his daughter begins college and Curtis looks forward to a possible end to his time on parole, this show marks a bright chapter, symbolized by the notion of a self-watering flower: a self-nourishing thing of beauty. Bright faces continue a longstanding motif of Curtis's inspired by the smiley motif, created by arist Harvey Ross Ball but popularized by Philadelphia brothers Bernard and Murray Spain. Here, they also refer to the stoneware man in the moon.

Past works have dealt with much darker themes. Kensington has been hit hard by the opioid epidemic, and the artist's brother died from opioids in prison. Pills and pill bottles have been a frequent motif. *Juxtapoz* magazine described his 2020 Armory Show presentation as "a personal Guernica of the opioid crisis and the corruption of our prison system." Bicycles, a symbol of freedom, have appeared often, but frequently were damaged or locked up, and thus denied movement. Along with tally marks and prison bars, they alluded to his time in confinement.

Even while on parole, Curtis has forged an impressive early career. He has had solo exhibitions at Takashi Murakami's Kaikai Kiki Hidari Zingaro, Tokyo, and Albertz Benda, New York. He has appeared in group exhibitions including "The Pencil is a Key: Drawings by Incarcerated Artists," at the Drawing Center, New York; "Coney Island is Still a Dreamland (To a Seagull)" at the Brooklyn Museum; and "Negotiating Grids" at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia. In 2023, he appears in "Echoes of Picasso" at the Museo Picasso Málaga, Andalusia, Spain; "City as Studio curated by Jeffrey Deitch" at K11, Hong Kong; and "Beyond the Streets," Saatchi Gallery, London. His drawing practice is highlighted in Claire Gilman and Roger Malbert's new book *Drawing in the Present Tense* (Thames & Hudson), and in 2024, he will open a solo show at Atlanta Contemporary.

– Brian Boucher