ALMINE RECH

Umar Rashid
If there's been a way to build it, There'll be a way to destroy it, Things are not all that out of control. L'époque Totalitaire part one.

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Almine Rech Brussels is pleased to present Los Angeles-based artist Umar Rashid's second solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from from November 16, 2023 to January 13, 2024.

After Rashid's last multi-part series of international exhibits (*Ancien Regime Change Parts 1-6*) , this new exhibit traces Frengland's surviving revolutionary leaders as they inevitably fall from grace, transitioning from rebel freedom fighters to totalitarian despots and greedy warlords.

The year is 1799, and we follow three former revolutionaries who will become the co-consuls for the Frenglish Republic. There is Lucien—a passionate orator with an even greater passion for violence, Charles—a military commander who is skilled in war, yet not not in charisma, and Captain Tarek—a Turkish Greek raised in France who loathes the Holy Roman Empire (a supreme obstacle to domination) almost as much as his sworn enemy the Mamluks (for killing his family in Egypt). This rugged crew comprises key characters who will help to transition the Frenglish Republic to a true Empire.

Umar Rashid (also known as Frohawk Two Feathers) is a master storyteller and epic trickster, using historical events as jumping-off points to retell, respin, and reimagine history. In this installment of his imagined Frengland (existing in a revisionist world where France and England unified), Rashid explores the Napoleonic rise of these three Frenglish leaders as they face an onslaught of unexpected enemies, including both a coalition of Prussian, Austrian, Russian, and Ottoman forces on the ground and a rebel force in space, known as CONTROL.

In this sense, *If there's been a way to build it* plays out in multiple locales, ranging from the European continent to Egypt, to space, to the Subcontinent. While his works have an underlying humor, it is a biting one, as Rashid critiques the nature of history repeating itself as something that seems bound and fated. This is clear in just a few of his descriptions in this saga's installment: "Here, we begin to see the emergence of a new kind of leader, yet with old world designs" "and "The revolutionary zeal has slowly turned into empire as usual " [emphasis added]. Rashid is both a verbal and visual narrator in this way, laying the groundwork for a new historical narrative that has seemingly both already been written one hundred times over and, yet, unwritten in this specific manner.

Indeed, Rashid notes that "the lines are blurred" in this installment, and yet this could be the theme for his ongoing epic. In the Frenglish Empire, the lines between history, historiography (or the telling of history), icons, iconicity, and icon-making, are all blurred. Rashid references a conglomeration of popular culture, historical figures, and musical references, so that a kind of cultural zeitgeist is deeply embedded within his paintings, drawings, and sculptures. For instance, Rashid has taken the first clause of the title of this exhibit from a Stereolab song called "Crest". " He references the song, while simultaneously imbuing it with new and complex meanings.

In one work, Janet Jackson is pictured in outer space, as she fights alongside her crew (Rhythm Nation) to wrestle away control from a group seeking to dominate all life on Earth (aptly called CONTROL). Rashid's titles, both of his works and shows, are often lengthy and riddled with pop culture references as well. They are both humorous and informative —signposts for viewers to help them dig their teeth into the world of Frengland and to understand some of Rashid's intentional take-aways.

Rashid's weaving of stories is epic and Afrofuturist, as he plays with the changing constructs of race across and through time. Through his monumental paintings, he takes viewers back in time to ancient Egypt (through allusions to the winged sun or Horus and Anubis, two principal gods—of war and of the dead, respectively, and who are depicted with a human body and falcon head or dog head, respectively) and into an unknown future in an intergalactic battle in outer space (with untold and unclear ramifications), all while both reinterpreting and reenvisioning the past to explore the very present in which we live.

In his book *Time Travel in the Latin American and Caribbean Imagination: Re-reading History* , Rudyard J. Alcocer spoke to the use of time travel as a literary device that can implement actual change in our living world. Alcocer argued that sometimes "the only possible remedy for historically profound social ills seems to lie in—or be informed by—the fictional mechanism of time travel. A related notion is that however difficult this may be to ascertain or measure, fiction can provide templates for the actual creation of a different world. "In this way, it seems that Rashid employs time travel as an artistic device for our world, visually exploring both the past and future in order to comment upon and explore new presents. Indeed, Elana Gomel has asserted that"[t]ime travel enables agency, which is predicated on the ability to choose between several alternatives." So too, Rashid offers viewers such agency and choice in the hyperpresent now. With Lucien, Charles, and Captain Tarek at the helm, Rashid continues to grow and expand the complexities of the Frenglish Empire and to trouble our very own understanding of the heroes and pitfalls of history.

— Ellen C. Caldwell, art historian, writer, and professor.