

AMERICA'S GOING TO HELL IN A LOUIS VUITTON HANDBAG

Artist Keer Tanchak updates the art movement preceding the French Revolution

words: Suzanne Wu

The pursuit of indoor leisure—adopted by Hugh Hefner as his personal hedonistic mantra—was one of the central tenets of the French Rococo, a gilded 18th-century aesthetic movement focused more on the physical interactions among sensual beings than on the metaphysical issues of spirituality. Of course, reinforcing the notion that members of the aristocracy did little more than sit around and admire one another's powdered wigs isn't going to win you many devotees in the radical classes, and when heads began to roll during the French Revolution, Rococo's heyday came to an end.

"I see parallels between 18th-century France and now," says artist Keer Tanchak. "It is fascinating that Madonna has diamond-encrusted fake eyelashes and that so many of us are obsessed with Paris Hilton, who is definitely a modern-day version of Marie Antoinette. [But] my motivations have always been about making fresh pictures and not making obvious statements about these subjects."

Tanchak, who moved to Chicago almost five years ago for graduate study at the School of the Art Institute, uses the exaltation of the aristocratic lifestyle found in Rococo works to draw attention to the presence of fantasy and luxury in painting.

"By interpreting these works that carry a stigma of frivolity and romance, I hope to make these subjects accessible so that the next time someone sees the real thing they might have a basis to appreciate it," she says.

However, instead of making an overt socio-political point in her artwork, Tanchak's commentary is subtle and witty. She appropriates hoop-skirted, powdered personages from the works of Rococo artists such as Jean-Antoine Watteau and Jean-Honoré Fragonard and paints the images onto a decisively egalitarian product of the machine age: aluminum.

"The smooth surface, gray neutral color and industrial surface [of aluminum] are very attractive to me, and my process of applying paint has been dictated by these qualities," Tanchak says. "Reflection, absorption and luminosity are all elements I use to my benefit."

Tanchak's paintings also play off our cultural familiarity with fine-art tropes, specifically figures in historical costume. She strips Rococo of its ornate embellishments, instead creating expressionistic groupings of vaguely familiar people set in color-block environments, often interpreted as contemporary theater sets. In an anecdote from her youth, Tanchak explores the origins of her fondness for seemingly odd juxtapositions of the classical and the modern. As a teenager, Tanchak spent time in Münster, Germany, living across the street from an 18th century mini-palace with decidedly un-18th century courtyard décor: a Richard Serra sculpture.

"To me, these two things from different periods have always belonged together," Tanchak says. "Having lived with this post-modern setting is something that informs me today, and the tension or relationship there is something I hope to find in the paintings I make."

Tanchak's work has long been informed by another idea associated with the French Revolution—the idea that works of art, like the paintings of Jacques-Louis David, can encapsulate political attitudes and rouse suppressed longings for something different, something better. But Tanchak is circumspect about how much her views of our current political climate affect her work: "America is going to hell in a handbasket, or a Louis Vuitton handbag carried by a frolicking



Curtain, oil on aluminum, 12" tondo, 2005

Lindsay Lohan," she says. "We have more billionaires than ever."

And yet: "None of this affects what I am already doing unless there is a revolution tomorrow and I'm dividing my time between plowing a field and making drawings by candlelight."

One of the first works Tanchak can remember being really proud of was an unflattering drawing of a right-wing politician that she made in sixth grade and brought to school to show off.

"I grew up poor with a very radical parent," she says. "It's pretty funny now, but I was obsessed with finding out what 'bourgeois ennui' was. And if they were so bored, what could potentially be the downside of being extremely wealthy? It makes sense that I later focused my attention on one of the most famous moments in European history where the scales tipped."

Tanchak has said elsewhere that making art is itself a luxurious occupation, but now that she's been out of school for a while, and showing at the Navta Schulz Gallery in "Four in Chicago," I ask her if she still thinks this is true.

"Work is the best inspiration," she says, sounding the proletariat horn explicitly for the first time, with a healthy suspicion of people who don't do anything with their hands.

"I would never give anyone the impression that this is not a job," she says. "But I have always wanted to do this. It's a luxury to realize any goal."

Keer Tanchak exhibits work in the group show "Four in Chicago," through April 24 at the Navta Schulz Gallery (1039 W. Lake, 312/421-5506)