



DAVID LEGGETT

## DAVID LEGGETT

Born 1980, Springfield, Massachusetts  
Lives and works in Los Angeles

### Education

- 2010 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine
- 2007 MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
- 2003 BFA, Savannah College of Art and Design, Georgia

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2020 *Why you really mad?* Steve Turner, Los Angeles
- 2019 *David Leggett*, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago
- 2017 *Asking for a friend*, Kimmerich Gallery, Berlin  
*Drawings*, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago  
*Their funeral, our dance floor*, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago
- 2016 *Black Drawls*, Gallery 400, Chicago
- 2015 *Sugar foot rain dance*, Arts Incubator in Washington Park, Chicago
- 2014 *Going to bed angry*, 65 Grand Gallery, Chicago
- 2012 *Coco River Fudge Street*, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago  
*It's getting to the point where nobody respects the dead, fresh to death*, Western Exhibitions, Chicago  
*David Leggett New Paintings*, Hinge Gallery, Chicago
- 2010 *Up for the Down Stroke*, 65 Grand Gallery, Chicago

### Group Exhibitions

- 2020 *Group Show*, Zidoun & Bossuyt Gallery, Luxembourg  
*Blackstract*, Tag Gallery, Los Angeles  
*Eleven Figures in Two Parts*, Atkinson Gallery, Santa Barbara, California
- 2019 *Depiction, Again*, Kunstverein Gallery, Langenhagen, Germany  
*Island*, Ramp Gallery, London  
*The Flat Files*, The Pit, Glendale, California  
*Somebody Told Me You People Were Crazy*, Hathaway Gallery, Atlanta
- 2018 *Above The Rim*, Contemporary Art Museum, Raleigh, North Carolina  
*Mixed Emotions*, Various Small Fires Gallery, Los Angeles  
*The Unseen*, James Fuentes Gallery, New York  
*Cosmic Traffic Jam*, Zevitas Marcus Gallery, Los Angeles  
*Hand-Eye Coordination: Sports and Art*, Western Exhibitions, Chicago
- 2017 *Figured Out!* Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago  
*Council*, Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago
- 2016 *Alex Becerra, David Leggett, William J. O'Brien*, Kimmerich Gallery, Berlin  
*Death: A Summer Show*, Trestle Projects, Brooklyn  
*Chicago and Vicinity*, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago
- 2015 *Three the Hard Way*, Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, University of Chicago
- 2014 *Ducks*, Greenpoint Terminal Gallery, Brooklyn  
*Now Chicago!* The Hughes Gallery, Sydney  
*Poems in a Room*, Magic Pictures, Philadelphia
- 2013 *Recess*, South Side Community Art Center, Chicago  
*Thru-Lines*, 65 Grand Gallery, Chicago  
*Whisper Down the Lane*, Gallery 400, Chicago  
*(I'm Your) Hoochie Coochie Man*, Tracy Williams Ltd., New York  
*Squirts: April Childers, David Leggett, Max Maslansky*, Regina Rex, Queens
- 2012 *Romancing the Tone*, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts  
*Afterimage*, DePaul Art Museum, Chicago

- Where My Clone At?, Double Break, San Diego  
 Where My Clone At? 2, POVevolving Fine Art Printing Studio, Los Angeles  
 Blaque Lyte, ADA Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
- 2011 Museum as Hub: Alpha's Bet Is Not Over Yet! The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York  
 Kodra 11 Contemporary Art Festival, Thessaloniki, Greece  
 Is this thing on? Cobalt Studio, Chicago  
 People Don't Like to Read Art, Western Exhibitions, Chicago  
 The MDW Fair, The Geolofts, Chicago  
 West, Wester, Westest Pt. 2, Fecal Face Dot Gallery, San Francisco  
 Futuro Perfecto, Zora Space, Brooklyn  
 Drop It Like It's Not, Murder Town Gallery, Chicago  
 Psycha-Bobble, High Concept Laboratories, Chicago  
 Skowhegan Alumni Exhibition, 92Y Tribeca, New York  
 Heads on Poles, Western Exhibitions, Chicago
- 2010 Ah, Wilderness!, Ebermoore Gallery, Chicago  
 SK10-New Works From the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Class of 2010, Tompkins Projects, Brooklyn
- 2008 Disinhibition: Black Art Blue Humor, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago  
 Re:visions, Zolla Lieberman Gallery, Chicago

### Grants, Residencies and Awards

- 2018 Joan Mitchell Center Residency, 3Arts Fellow, New Orleans  
 2014 University of Chicago, Arts and Public Life, Artist in Residence  
 2013 Robert Rauschenberg Residency, 3Arts Fellow, Captiva, Florida  
 Maker Grant Runner-Up, Chicago,  
 2010 Fellowship Award, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture  
 The Drawing Center Viewing Program  
 2009 Visual Artist Award, 3Arts, Chicago  
 2005 Trustee Scholarship, School of the Art Institute of Chicago  
 Fellowship Award, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

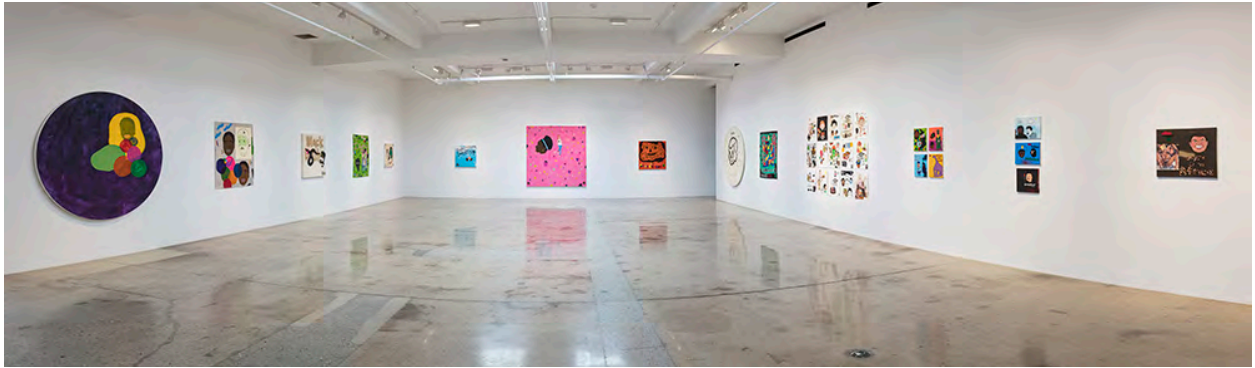
### Bibliography

- 2019 Moreira-Brown, Caira. "Transcendent Humor: A Review of David Leggett at Shane Campbell Gallery," *Newcity Art*, June 24  
 Buchanan, Mary Lynn. "David Leggett Studio Visit," *Mary Lynn Buchanan Blog*, February 15
- 2018 Nimptsch, Emily. "David Leggett and Ryan Richey: Mixed Emotions," *Riot Material*, July 31  
 Caldwell, Ellen C. "Detouring Through Art, History & In Cosmic Traffic Jam," *Riot Material*, August 17
- 2017 New American Paintings, Midwest, Issue #131, August/September  
 Cardoza, Kerry. "David Leggett Has the Last Laugh," *Chicago Reader*, June 28  
 Carney, Sean J. Patrick. "First Look," *Art in America*, June  
 Cardoza, Kerry. "Tough Love with a Glint of Humor," *Newcity Art*, April 20  
 Burns, Emily. "Q&A with David Leggett," *Maake Magazine*
- 2016 Sargent, Antwaun. "An Exhibit Takes Aim at Art History, Race, and Drake," *Vice*  
 Berlant, Lauren. "Comedy is a great way to break the news: A conversation with David Leggett," *Critical Inquiry*  
 Petty, Felix. "David Leggett Is the Dark, Comic Art Star of Underground Chicago," *Vice*, November 8  
 Sierzputowski, Kate. "David Leggett's User Generated Satire," *Inside/Within*
- 2015 Ungur, Laura. "Dry Magazine Artist Interview," *Dry Magazine*
- 2014 Forrest, Nicholas. "'Now Chicago!' at The Hughes Gallery, Sydney," *Blouin Artinfo*
- 2013 Ise, Claudine. "A New Style of Art Communication," *The Chicago Tribune*  
 Perry, Eve. "Not Taking the 1990's Very Seriously," *Hyperallergic*  
 Scott, Andrea. "(I'm Your) Hoochie Coochie Man," *The New Yorker*
- 2012 Langbein, Julia. "Critic's Pick: 'After Image' at DePaul University Museum," *ArtForum*

- Jackson, Danielle. "Cotton Candy Sweet as Gold: A Conversation with David Leggett," *Sixty Inches From Center*, May 28
- Yeapanis, Stacia. "Other Peoples Pixels Interviews David Leggett," *Other Peoples Pixels Blog*
- Bellware, Kimberly. "Coco River Fudge Street," *The Chicagoist*
- Ritchie, Abraham. "It's Getting to the Point Where Nobody Respects the Dead. Fresh to Death at Western Exhibitions. Now That's Fresh," *Art Slant*
- Ritchie, Abraham. "Coco River Fudge Street," *Flavorpill*
- Ritchie, Abraham. "Rackroom Interview," *Art Slant*
- Glass, Claire. "Portrait of the Artist: David Leggett," *Newcity Art*, January 31
- Beautiful/Decay Book: 7, Class Clowns*
- 2011 Weinberg, Lauren. "'People Don't Like To Read Art' at Western Exhibitions: John Parot, Deb Sokolow and other artists make text sexy," *Time Out Chicago*
- Ritchie, Abraham. "People Don't Like to Read Art at Western Exhibitions," *Art Slant*
- Ritchie, Abraham. "Heads on Poles at Western Exhibitions," *Art Slant*
- 2010 "Interview: David Leggett," *Black Visual Archive*
- Ritchie, Abraham. "Chicago's Best of 2010 Pick: 'Up for the Down Stroke' at 65 Grand," *Art Slant*
- Schmidt, Shannon. "David Leggett at 65GRAND," *Chicago Art Magazine*
- "Up for the Down Stroke at 65 Grand Gallery," *Daily Serving*
- "Up for the Down Stroke at 65 Grand Gallery," *Beautiful Decay*

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

# STEVE TURNER

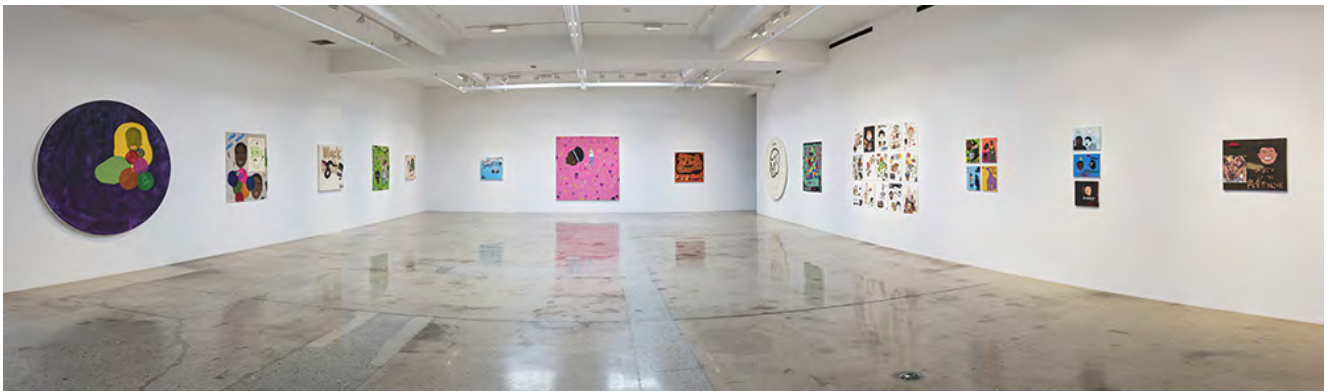


David Leggett: *Why you really mad?*

June 20–July 18, 2020

Steve Turner is pleased to present *Why you really mad?*, a solo exhibition by Los Angeles-based David Leggett which features paintings and works on paper from the last few years that utilize a comic style to deal with serious subjects like racial injustice and police brutality alongside lighter ones like art history and pop culture. While he makes his works accessible with colorful depictions of Bart Simpson, Fat Albert, Alfred E. Newman and other somewhat familiar blobby characters coupled with catchy phrases, he does so to get you in. Once there, you will have to face the more difficult issues that are part of every work. The question in the title is Leggett's, one he poses to anyone who might take offense at his work.

David Leggett (born 1980) earned a BFA at Savannah College of Art and Design (2003) and an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2007) before attending Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2010). He has had solo exhibitions at Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago (2017 & 2019) and his work has been included in group exhibitions at Zidoun & Bossuyt Gallery, Luxembourg; James Fuentes Gallery, New York; Kunstverein Langenhagen, Germany and the Contemporary Art Museum, Raleigh, North Carolina. This is his first exhibition at Steve Turner, Los Angeles.

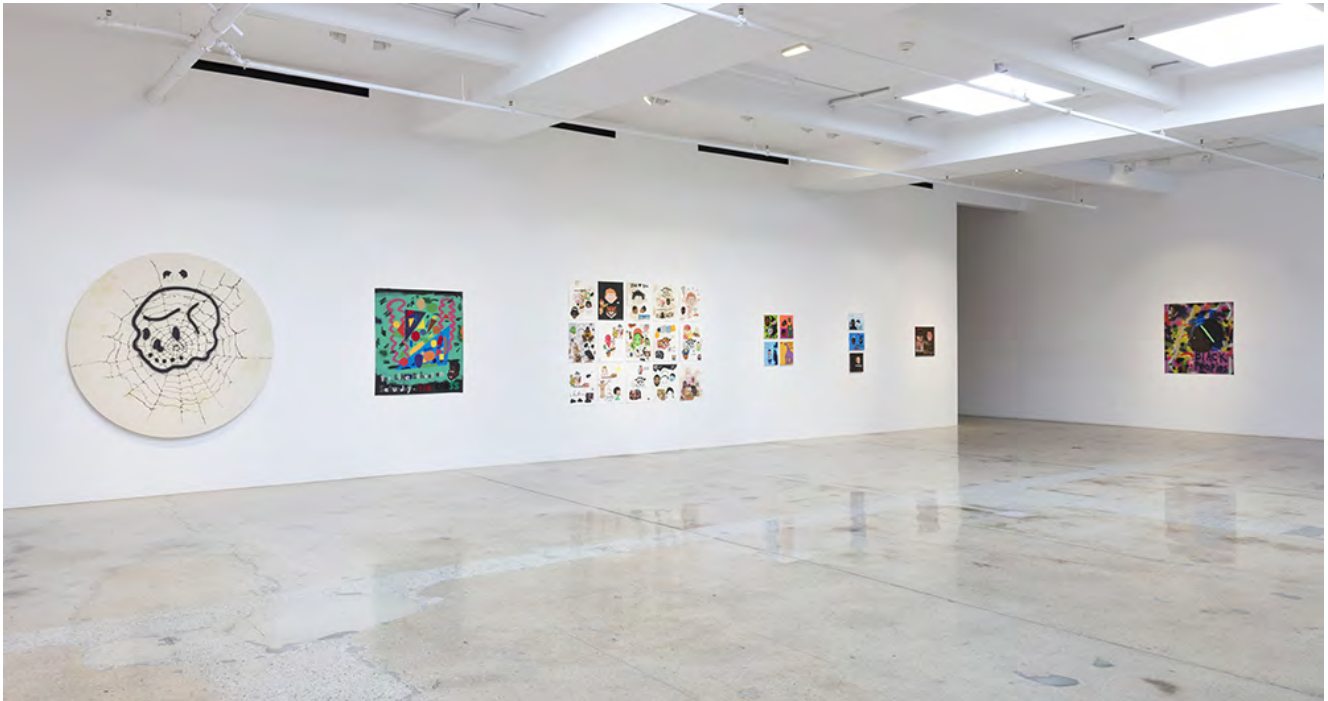


*Why you really mad?* Installation view, Steve Turner, Los Angeles, 2020



*Why you really mad?* Installation view, Steve Turner, Los Angeles, 2020





*Why you really mad?* Installation view, Steve Turner, Los Angeles, 2020



Why you really mad? Installation view, Steve Turner, Los Angeles, 2020



Group Show. Installation view, Zidoun & Bossuyt Gallery, Luxembourg, 2020



David Leggett. Installation view, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, 2019





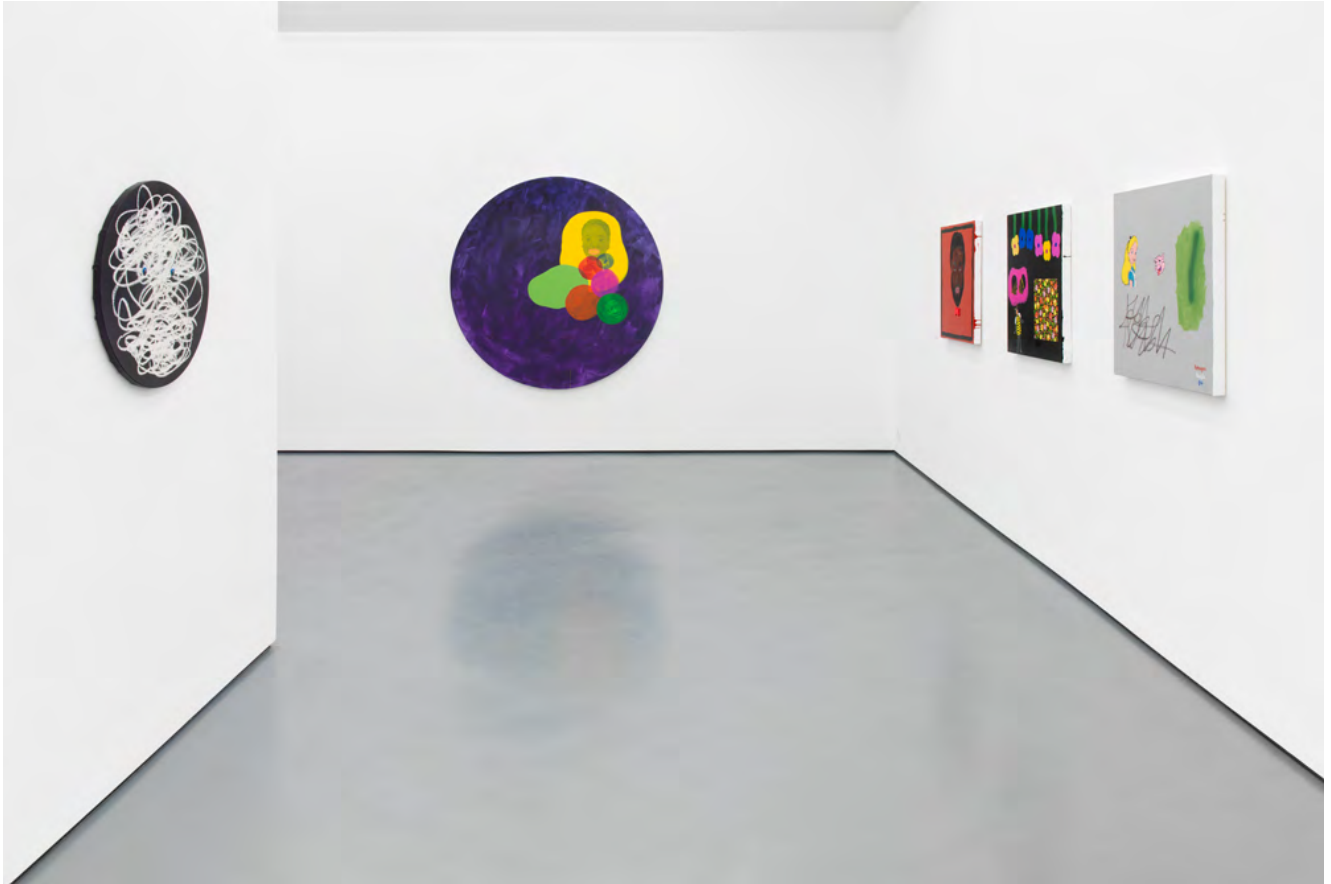
*Their funeral, our dance floor.* Installation view, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, 2017



*David Leggett. Installation view, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, 2019*



*David Leggett. Installation view, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, 2019*



*Asking for a friend.* Installation view, Kimmerich Gallery, Berlin, 2017





*Asking for a friend*. Installation view, Kimmerich Gallery, Berlin, 2017



*Asking for a friend.* Installation view, Kimmerich Gallery, Berlin, 2017



*Drawings. Installation view, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, 2017*



*Drawings*. Installation view, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, 2017



*Drawings*. Installation view, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, 2017



*Their funeral, our dance floor.* Installation view, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, 2017



*Their funeral, our dance floor.* Installation view, Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago, 2017



*Black Drawls*. Installation view, Gallery 400, Chicago, 2016





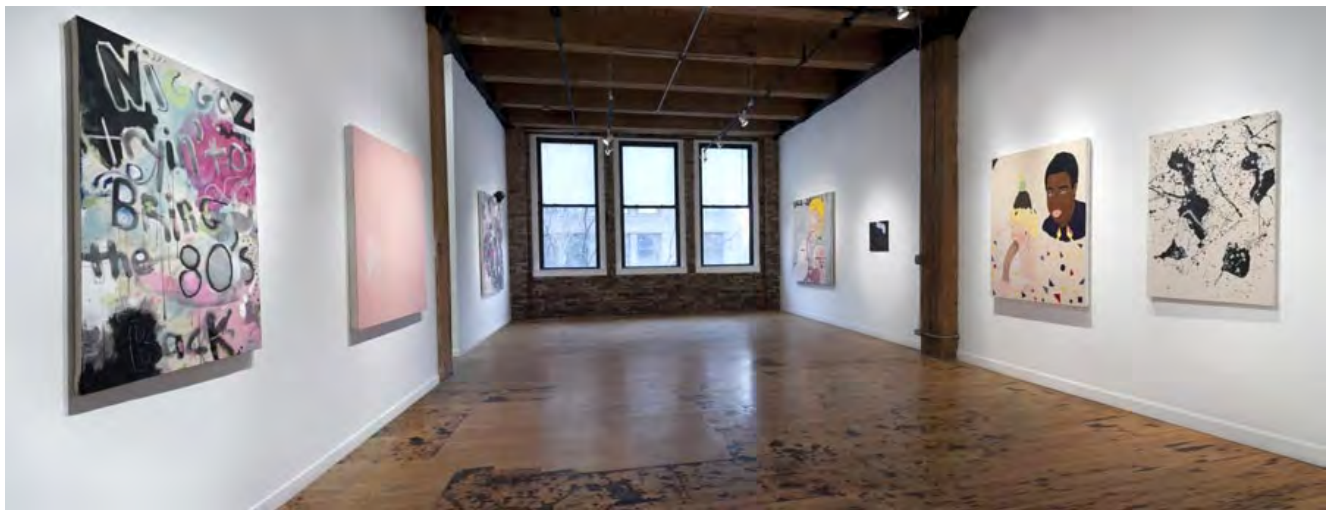
*Black Drawls*. Installation view, Gallery 400, Chicago, 2016



*Black Drawls*. Installation view, Gallery 400, Chicago, 2016



*Coco River Fudge Street*. Installation view, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, 2012



*It's getting to the point where nobody respects the dead, fresh to death.* Installation view, Western Exhibitions, Chicago, 2012



*It's getting to the point where nobody respects the dead, fresh to death.* Installation view, Western Exhibitions, Chicago, 2012

## SELECTED WORKS



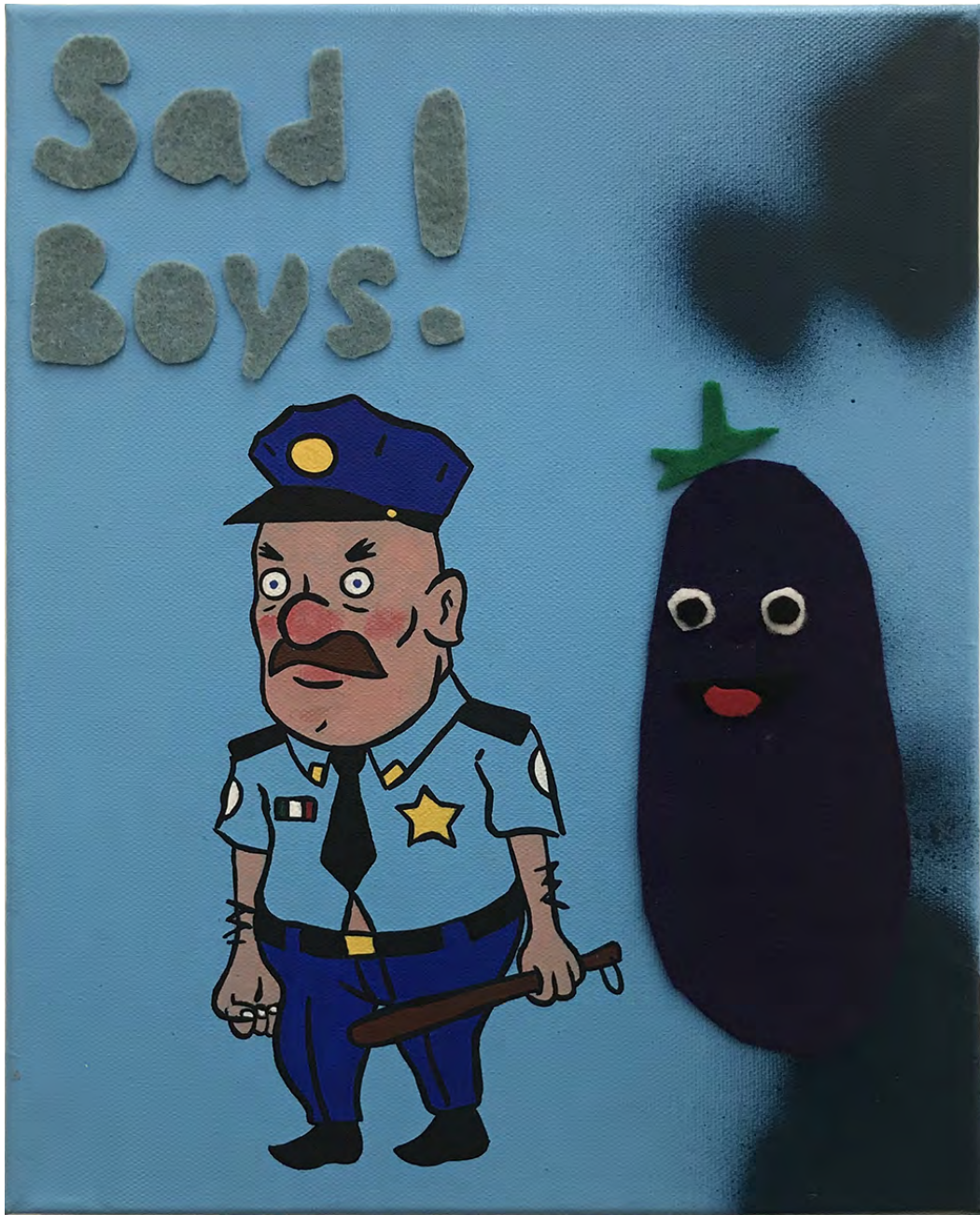


*All my friends are dead, 2020*  
Acrylic and airbrush on canvas  
12 x 9 inches (30.5 x 22.9 cm)



*I wasn't here*, 2020  
Acrylic, oil bar and felt on canvas  
20 x 20 inches (50.8 x 50.8 cm)





*Officer Prosciutto*, 2020  
Acrylic, spray paint and felt on canvas  
12 x 9 inches (30.5 x 22.9 cm)



*The whites in their eyes, 2020*

Acrylic, screen print, watercolor, color pencil and collage on paper  
20 x 16 inches (50.8 x 40.6 cm)





*The whole world in his hands, 2020*  
Acrylic and felt on canvas  
12 x 9 inches (30.5 x 22.9 cm)



*Well, to make a long story long*, 2020  
Acrylic, spray paint and collage on paper  
48 x 42 inches (121.9 x 106.7 cm)





*Why you really mad?*, 2020

Acrylic, screen print, watercolor, ink, color pencil, rubber stamp, coffee and collage on paper  
20 x 16 inches (50.8 x 40.6 cm)



*To protect and serve. (Protect your goddamn neck), 2019*  
Acrylic and felt on canvas  
9 x 12 inches (22.9 x 30.5 cm)





*Unbothered, but I'm going through his phone while he sleeps, 2019*  
Acrylic, spray paint, felt and collage on paper  
48 x 42 inches (121.9 x 106.7 cm)



Boy scout jamboree, 2018  
Acrylic, felt and collage on canvas  
12 x 12 inches (30.5 x 30.5 cm)





*My salad is making me laugh (I got it for cheap)*, 2018  
Acrylic and felt on canvas  
30 x 30 inches (76.2 x 76.2 cm)



*I'm having a hard time holding these alligators down, 2017*  
Acrylic, spray paint and collage on canvas  
40 x 40 inches (101.6 x 101.6 cm)



*Mmhmm*, 2017  
Acrylic, spray paint and collage on canvas  
84 x 84 inches (213.4 x 213.4 cm)





*We may not make it. Gardens with headstones, 2017*  
Acrylic, spray paint and collage on canvas  
30 x 30 inches (76.2 x 76.2 cm)



*Won't he do it?*, 2017  
Acrylic, spray paint and glitter on canvas  
72 x 72 inches (182.9 x 182.9 cm)





*Y'll Fuckin'*, 2017  
Acrylic and airbrush on canvas  
30 x 30 inches (76.2 x 76.2 cm)





*You can do what you wanna do, 2017*  
Acrylic, spray paint and felt on canvas  
40 x 40 inches (101.6 x 101.6 cm)

SELECTED PRESS

## Transcendent Humor: A Review of David Leggett at Shane Campbell Gallery

June 24, 2019 | By Caira Moreira-Brown



L.A.-based artist David Leggett's current exhibition at Shane Campbell Gallery will leave you feeling full of contradictory emotions. On view are four large-scale canvases with repeated icons on each work. The comic, stylized work provides a friendlier approach to sensitive subjects like religion and racial segregation. At first approach, Leggett's work can be seen as humorous, as the colorful, childlike shapes echo a simpler time, allowing the artist to soften the difficult subject matters he is tackling.

My first interaction with Leggett's work brought an unexpected series of sentiments. The paintings all feature three young males, two black and one white. They are rendered in stereotypical characteristics, with large nostrils and lips, both associated with African-American features, while applying shoe polish to the face of the white male. Shoe polish was historically used in early American theater to create "blackface," a practice where white actors would use the polish to blacken their face and exaggerate their lips. The black male's

faces convey a more offbeat reaction than expected. The act of blackface has often been primarily used by non-black performers, yet the common motifs of oversized lips and googly eyes displayed with blackface were not accurate representations of black features, but instead features chosen for white entertainment. The cartoonish drawings of these figures create political satire that causes the viewer to ruminate.

Below these three males a milk snake slithers closely. Milk snakes are harmless, but are similar in characteristics to, and are often mistaken for, the coral snake, which is harmful. Younger milk snakes are often killed due to this confusion between their species. Leggett echoes the misconceptions in our society that often result in death through the milk snake representation, similar to racial profiling and the recent police shooting of black men like Harith Augustus, shot in Chicago. As this unravels in front of the viewer, you become complicit in the acts on the canvas.

Leggett's use of repeated images echo the images we see in society, be it repeated in magazines, the news or behind yellow police tape. His continuous incorporation of black figures reinforces to the viewer the importance of the black body and how we represent it.

In "She's saved, but it is the weekend," two African-American figures, one male and one female, face each other. They are positioned below a Jesus Christ figure. This positioning signifies the large role Christianity played during slavery, when Africans were brought to this country, introduced to Christianity and forced to embrace it. In post-Civil War America, this resulted in a large number of black churches that helped provide strength during the civil rights movement. Yet while the church allowed for unity in the community, it was introduced through their oppressors.

Christianity and the devil have always been polar opposites. Leggett explores this relationship more deeply in "Those Three Words." Within the spelling of "LOL" is a pentagon with an inverted star, a trope to satanism, pointing to hell. Within distance of "LOL," there is a witch's hat. Witch hats resemble dunce caps with their elongated form. In general, pointed hats were frowned on by the church and associated with the horns of the devil. What is Leggett's message? He allows the viewer to question how subtle cultural influences with double entendres influence our lives.

"When the ghosts in your closets no longer accept collect calls," features Vanessa Williams, who became the first African-American Miss America in 1984. She was pressured into resigning due to photos of her in Penthouse magazine. America has long had a stereotypical definition of beauty. Using Williams' likeness opens up the conversation about black femininity while dispelling media stereotypes by reminding the viewer that America chose Williams as a representation of American culture and beauty. Similar to most social aspects of our society, the Miss America competition made cultural changes to their judging criteria in order to keep up with the shifts of society. This media is a part of our society that we soon realize we are implicated in, just as we interact with the work.

Within this work, the viewer is caught not only unaware of these untapped feelings, but also involved in the origins of these emotions. You begin to question your own sense of self, what you are predisposed to, and how that plays out in the social context that we write for ourselves.

Humor allows Leggett to not only open himself up to the viewer but for the viewer to let their guard down and then forcefully take it in with each laugh. But Leggett's paintings aren't funny. They aren't a water cooler joke; they're bitter, sad and reflect our reality.

The political subtleties in his work keep you engaged even after you're not physically in front of it. His depiction of black figures echo the views of black production as being secondary and comical and not fine art. The spontaneity we see in his work relays a thought pattern of how Leggett views the world around him. While there are only four paintings on view, they are all multidimensional and heavy-handed.

Leggett reveals antidotes of society to us through black icons, text, body parts and old imagery, all connecting to elements of American culture, but also to racism, a subject that is often swept under the rug due to social progression. At first you may not see race in these four pieces, but it is there in the undertone that incriminates the viewer. Race will always be a part of the conversation and Leggett makes sure we know that. (Caira Moreira-Brown)

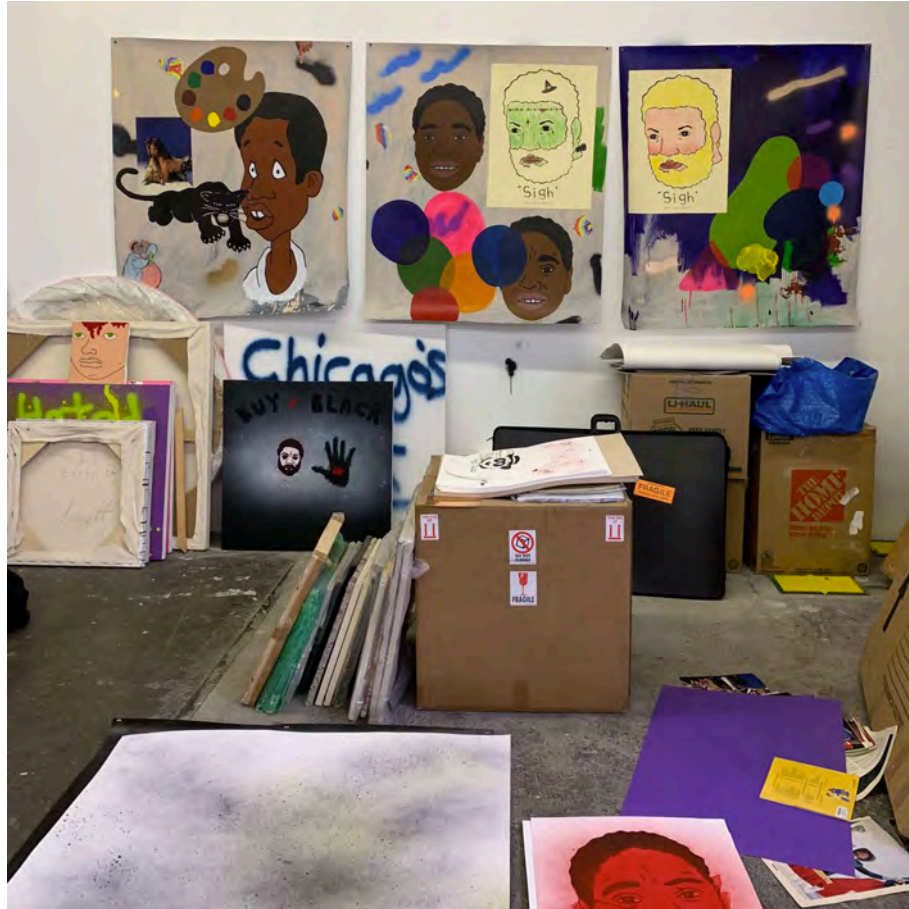
David Leggett on view at Shane Campbell Gallery, 2021 South Wabash, through June 29.



## David Leggett Studio Visit

February 15, 2019

When I was in LA I had the privilege of visiting David Leggett's studio where I got to see some of his newest works as well as ask him a LOT of questions. These included (but are not limited to) what a day in the life of an artist looks like, how he got noticed by a gallery, and he shared some interesting insights into social media and how it's helped him connect with collectors and fans.



### **ML: How would you describe your art in a sentence?**

DL: One time someone described my work as folk art with a gangster lean and I've always liked that, even though I have a masters degree, I can't be a folk artist. But I've always liked that description.

### **ML: You got your masters at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and lived/worked there for awhile, are you from Chicago?**

DL: No I'm originally from Massachusetts. I stayed in Chicago for 14 years. Then I was thinking of moving to New York and it just seemed like, if you're going to do something you might as well go crazy and move to LA. (where he lives now).

# MARY LYNN BUCHANAN

## **ML: How did you become a full-time artist?**

DL: Right out of grad school my girlfriend got me a job at a warehouse and somehow I ended up being a supervisor there, and I didn't make art for two years. Then I got an opportunity to show at the Hyde Park Art Center and I was like "I'm going to make some paintings" - even though I didn't make paintings. I made mostly drawings, works on paper, even though I was a painting and drawing major I was focused mostly on drawing. It's still the strangest thing, because why would I do that?

Fast forward, my friend put me in this group show, and I'd always wanted to show at the Hyde Park Art Center because The Hairy Who showed there and I love The Hairy Who. From there I submitted my portfolio to Skowhegan and other places and it started getting traction. And that's when I was like, I want to quit this job...and make art, which I would never do now but when you're in your 20's you can take that risk.

## **ML: So you were doing group shows, when were you picked up by a gallery?**

DL: I got picked up by a gallery but then it closed really quickly. I would say that was 2012, and I think they closed 2013. I think I was in a group show, I don't think I even showed solo there at the time and then I got with Shane (Shane Campbell Gallery) in 2016.

## **ML: How did you meet Shane Campbell Gallery?**

Shane taught at SAIC (School of the Art Institute of Chicago) and I never met him, I never had a class with him, but his gallery was originally (I believe) in their house in Oak Park and we used to go there. Michelle Grabner also had her gallery, Suburban, which was nearby and that was the spot to go. Then they moved their gallery to its place on the South Loop of Chicago on Wabash Avenue, and then I think just by luck, Tony Lewis told Shane about me and that's how I ended up there.

## **ML: On that note (of connections and referrals), how important is it for you to be connected with other artists and how do you all support each other?**

DL: For me it's very important. If I know someone who really deserves attention I'll make sure that if we have a group show and I'm asked if I know anyone, I'm going to tell them about that person, and if I'm on nomination committees for grants and residencies I always try to put forward at least one person that I think deserves the attention, that isn't getting necessarily getting it. You see a lot of great work but galleries don't always see that so you need someone to push that along.

## **ML: What artists are you excited about right now?**

DL: Robert Colescott, he's getting so much attention now! Blum and Poe had a show of his back in the Fall that was really good. I've always been a fan of Jim Shaw, Mike Kelley, Sigmar Polke, just because I love what they've done with pop culture and subculture as well.

# MARY LYNN BUCHANAN

## **ML: What does your day-to-day look like?**

DL: When I had the job at the warehouse it was from 7:30 am until 4:00 pm, and I kind of kept that schedule. I try to be in the studio at...well back in Chicago it would be 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, here [in LA] it's more 9:30 am to 4:00 pm. It's much more relaxed. I generally don't come here [the studio] on weekends because I like to do my own thing, I have a little studio set up in my apartment as well so I can do drawings there.

## **ML: Do you come in and just work on one thing at a time or do you bounce around to different pieces?**

DL: I'm pretty frantic, there's multiple things as you can see in here [in the studio], so there's a selection. Some of these things have been around from 10 years ago that I've finally managed to finished now, with just one little thing, so I'm always working on multiple things.

## **ML: What do you have coming up this year?**

DL: There's NADA (New York Gallery Open, March 4-10), I have some works on paper there. I have a group show in Atlanta, which will also be works on paper. There's other things I have going on but they're not quite confirmed...I shouldn't say anything haha.

## **ML: Do you have any advice for your younger self or younger artists?**

DL: One of the things I did was in 2010 (shortly after going to Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture) I started a blog on Tumblr, there's a lot of artists right now that are successful that started there, and that was a way to get your work out to such a large audience because not everyone can go to galleries. It's cool that in my little apartment in Chicago someone in Berlin could see my artwork. But you need to be consistent with it, you have to put your work on social media and constantly be posting and trying to make connections. So keep making work and posting things for people to see. Also, go to galleries and get to know people, don't expect them to come to you because that's very unlikely.

## **ML: What do you think about social media (Instagram), is it enabling you to be closer to people that want to buy your work?**

DL: Interestingly younger collectors will contact me and not contact the gallery, they'll DM me and ask how do I get this, how do I get that. I forward them to Shane [Campbell Gallery] for anything sales related. I think it's just Instagram is less intimidating than going into a white cube gallery, I think a lot of people [that reach out] have probably never been in to Shane's space. A lot of them become friends and they come here [to the studio], they'll visit whenever they're in LA. I'm much more of a shy person, so it's funny they'll want to hang out and I'm like, ok!. It just makes you closer to people, which I wouldn't expect.

## David Leggett has the last laugh

A look at the rising local artist and his approachable, lively and darkly humorous drawings and paintings

By Kerry Cardoza | June 28, 2017



David Leggett in his studio  
by Felton Kizer

A circumcised penis with breasts and wings perches on a pencil above the words "2017 the year you decided to become a political artist." Made to resemble an eagle, with skin the color of raw chicken, this strange, amusing creation figures in the square-foot drawing titled *Reporting Live From the Trenches*, by the artist David Leggett. The piece sums up Leggett's output and attitude: keenly aware of the world and quick with a punch line. And his work is finally finding a wider audience—people hungry for a smart, fresh take on our trying times.

"I wouldn't outright call myself a political artist, but there are some very political things that go on in my work," Leggett says. "It's just the climate—people are responding to that more now. I've seen other artists after Trump won, saying, 'We need to get back to work.' I'm like, 'What were you doing before?'" He laughs. "Whatever you make, it's still your duty to be involved in some sort of way."

Leggett, 36, is a striking presence. He's six-foot-four and solidly built, with an easygoing and affable demeanor. The sense of humor that comes across in his work is palpable in interactions with him—it's not a put-on. The same is true of his pop culture references: he repeatedly uses the likeness of characters like black Bart Simpson or Fat Albert because they're part of his personal history; he grew up with them. Leggett mines everything for inspiration, from art history books to racist Americana to social media. He readily embraces the lowbrow as well as the dark corners of the Internet,

frequently taking screenshots or making notes in his phone of phrases that stick out to him. Beth Marrier, his partner of five and a half years, says he loves to read the comments section of articles. "He reads the trash that everyone says to avoid," she says. "When it's dark out, he'll start reading just the scum of the Internet."

Leggett has a knack for bringing to light that specific kind of murkiness, the things people say when they think no one's listening. He was recently the subject of a solo exhibition, "Their Funeral, Our Dance Floor," at Shane Campbell's downtown gallery; a follow-up show, "David Leggett: Drawings," is currently on display until July 15 at the same location. "He has his finger on all sorts of problematic relationships, without passing easy, direct judgment on anything," says Eric Ruschman, Shane Campbell's director. "He uses humor to draw you in, so you're laughing, and then you're sort of implicated."

Leggett is from Springfield, Massachusetts, and attended Sacred Heart, a private Catholic school, but says he "lived in a really bad neighborhood." That socioeconomic disparity left a deep impression. As a kid, the sunny side of life, such as Disney movies and *Sesame Street*, felt "kind of forced," he says. "I had that contrast of this wholesome world that doesn't exist anywhere where I live."

His neighborhood, though much changed today, was affected by the crack epidemic of the 1980s and '90s. Leggett remembers daily violence and drug dealing. His parents countered that by sending him to a comic book illustration class at the Art Institute of Boston; his high school, Springfield Central High, also had a decent arts curriculum. Leggett knows he's lucky. "There's so many people who I grew up with, or played Little League with, went to Sunday school with, who are dead or in jail," he says.

After high school, Leggett pursued his early interest in art and earned his BFA from the Savannah College of Art and Design. In college, he discovered and was inspired by the work of the Imagists and Kerry James Marshall. "The Internet was much different from what it is today," Leggett says. The library had just one book on Jim Nutt, and a dated one at that. As an illustration major, Leggett found the surrealist, subversive work of the Imagists appealing. "It was stuff that I really related to because it was pop art, but clearly they were into popular culture," Leggett says. "It wasn't



David Leggett, *Reporting Live From the Trenches*, 2017  
Courtesy of EVAN JENKINS/SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY



a cold read like Warhol. I was like, 'I really want to go out here [to Chicago] and meet them.'" It was easier than he thought—shortly after graduating, in the summer of 2003, he moved to Chicago. "LA or New York artists, there's no chance you're going to meet them," he says. "I think Ed Paschke still had his telephone number in the phone book."

Leggett began taking classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and eventually enrolled in a master's program there in painting and drawing. At the time, he was mostly drawing; for years he was skeptical of painting, never feeling successful when working on canvas. "Every time I tried to paint it just seemed like . . . failure," he says. He finished the program in 2007, and about a year after that his practice started to change. He was invited to participate in a group show at the Hyde Park Art Center, "Disinhibition: Black Art and Blue Humor," and impulsively decided to make paintings for it. The positive response to these pieces encouraged him to concentrate more seriously on the medium.

These days some of Leggett's most poignant works are paintings. In "Their Funeral, Our Dance Floor" the vast main gallery was filled with them, mostly done on squares or circles, some as wide as seven feet. In *Get in the House Once the Streetlights Come On*, one of the pieces on display, three disembodied faces take up most of the orange and green canvas. A white man who distinctly resembles Darren Wilson, the cop who shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, floats on the right side; next to him is a black man's face made of felt; and above them both is a cartoonish black man whose mouth is open, as if in shock. Felt letters spell out good cop bad cop at the top in red, green, and black, the colors of the pan- African flag.



David Leggett, *Get in the House Once the Streetlights Come On*, 2017  
Courtesy EVAN JENKINS/SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

This past January, Leggett quit a part-time gig teaching classes for the Art Institute online and began working as an artist full-time. His success has helped his parents, whom he describes as very religious, understand his decision to be an artist. "The fact that I went off to college, I got a master's degree, that alone is impressive to them," he says. Leggett still seems impressed by this, calling the work "a luxury." "I almost want to click my heels together," he says. "It's very exciting. I don't think it will ever not be exciting to do this stuff."

Marrier says that although Leggett's only recently been able to work on his art full-time, it's been a priority for him as long as she's known him. "Art is like taking your vitamins or brushing your teeth," she says of his practice. "It happens every single day in some capacity." In fact, it was this devotion to his craft that initially sparked her

interest. The couple met online, and though they were both eager to meet in person for the first time, he scheduled the date a few weeks away, she says, because he'd already planned to be in the studio. "David won't compromise his art practice for anyone," Marrier says. "That was really attractive."

Always pushing himself to try new things, Leggett's practice has expanded to include more craft materials, and he sometimes works with ceramics. In "Black Drawls," a solo exhibition that opened in November at Gallery 400, he and gallery director Lorelei Stewart decided to include an assortment of materials that inspired him, including cultural ephemera and works by other artists, like Kara Walker and Jim Nutt. An original 90s-era black Bart Simpson T-shirt, purchased from eBay, hung on one wall. Also included were selections from Leggett's personal collection of pop culture memorabilia, like a McDonald's Hamburglar figurine, and racist Americana, such as a set of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Moses salt-and-pepper shakers. He frequently scours flea markets and thrift stores for such items. Leggett's interested in their lineage. "Things never really go away," he says. "They'll just get cleaned up and made more polished."

On a recent trip to Pasadena's Rose Bowl Flea Market, he picked up a COLORED ONLY placard and a few other artifacts for his collection. "When you go to flea markets, there's going to be the racist booth full of stuff," he says, laughing. At one booth, he saw something he'd never before encountered at a flea market: shackles. "With the Americana stuff, you can see how, through history, it's been changed," he continues. "But you see something that was bondage and torture . . ." He trails off. By and large, white people in America get to choose whether or not they want to confront our country's racist past and present. Black people don't get such a choice. "For me, I don't want to forget that this happened," he says of his Americana collection. By expertly weaving this history into his work, he makes sure his viewers won't forget it either.

"Niggas get shot everyday, B." Leggett wrote these words with spray paint and an oil bar, in alternating colors of the rainbow, on a shiny gold canvas. Circular smudges at the bottom of the painting resemble sloppily covered-up graffiti. The words in the piece and the title, *You'll Be Alright (Elementary)*, echo each other, like two friends undercutting news of yet another shooting. The bright colors of the letters, the cheap gold finish, and the simple presentation could all be thought of as contradictory to the content, but for Leggett everything is calculated.

"If you're going to make something that's politically charged or has maybe a deeper message—having color, having humor, also craft materials, having these things is like sugar helping the medicine go down," he says. "It makes people come closer. And sometimes people are laughing at something they probably shouldn't have laughed at because it's almost like camouflage."

The importance of humor is apparent in Leggett's work and life. He often tries to find the joke in any given situation. He told me that criticisms barely register for him. "Keep it moving," he tells himself. Leggett frequently cites his appreciation of classic stand-up comedians like Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy, whom he'll often listen to in the studio. Pryor notably never shied away from politics, or the horrors of his own life, including being sexually molested as a child and becoming addicted to crack cocaine. Nothing was off-limits; and yet he always had his audience laughing. "That's what I basically hope I can do with my work," Leggett says. "I'm not sure if I always accomplish that, but I hope."

## Tough Love with a Glint of Humor

David Leggett at Shane Campbell Gallery

April 20, 2017 | Kerry Cardoza



David Leggett, Installation view of "Their Funeral, Our Dance Floor," Spring 2017

For David Leggett, size doesn't matter. He told an interviewer last year that he doesn't see "a hierarchy when it comes to size in work." But his pieces, both small- and large-scale, on view in the massive main room at Shane Campbell Gallery impress in a way that an Instagram square never could, no matter how large the screen.

For his first solo exhibition at the gallery, Leggett has put forth new pieces that are in conversation with each other as much as they are with the viewer. His early interest in becoming an editorial illustrator is apparent everywhere: in the subjects he chooses, the titles of his work, and the phrases he incorporates. In "We have to talk about liberating minds as well as liberating society," a drawing named for an Angela Davis quote, an earnest white woman is seen above the words, "I'm going to check my white privilege so fucking hard." "Reporting live from the trenches," shows a bird with breasts and a penis for a head spread its wings. Underneath it reads: "2017 the year you decided to become a political

artist.” Leggett makes the viewer question the sudden popularity of becoming overtly political without passing obvious judgment.

Some characters show up in multiple pieces. A felted Grimace, the oversized purple creature from McDonald’s advertisements, shares a canvas with Humpty Dumpty in “Hold my beer.” In a drawing, he stands in front of a nude man. The McDonald’s “M” floats beside him, but it reads “Reparations” instead of the fast food chain’s name.

David Leggett, Installation view of “Their Funeral, Our Dance Floor,” Spring 2017

The exhibition is a mix of drawings and paintings, which have some sculptural elements thrown in, all in Leggett’s customary colorful palette. In the beautiful, mostly black “Knockin moon boots,” a black man’s face sits on the left side of the canvas, layered on top of the faint words “Mother ship.” The right side features an almost-imperceptible head in blackface. An oil stick and a black hair pick, the handle of which ends in a fist, are affixed to the canvas.

“I hope my work provides a strong stance on how black people are represented and treated,” Leggett said in a recent interview with Vice. In some of his less satirical works, black life is represented plainly. “Their funeral, our dance floor,” which lends its name to the title of the exhibit, shows the heads of a black man and woman facing one another on a pale yellow background. Patches of grass sit below them, a glittery orange sun hangs in the sky. Kerry James Marshall aims to fill the “vacuum in the image bank” by putting the black figure in the Western canon. Leggett builds on this accomplishment through humor, politics and love.

David Leggett’s “Their funeral, our dance floor” shows through May 6 at Shane Campbell Gallery, 2021 South Wabash.



## Q&A with David Leggett

Questions by Emily Burns | 2017



**Hi David! Can you tell us a bit about your process? How do you begin and how does the process of making a painting or drawing unfold for you? Do the drawings inform the paintings?**

It usually begins with writing. I will either write in the notes feature on my iPhone or a notebook a phrase or word. Those phrases or words are sometimes written directly to the paper or canvas or will become the title for the work. The texts are a springboard for me to create the work. I will sit and think how can a phrase or word be turned into a visual work. I also have endless amounts of old and new magazines as source material for drawing and painting in my studio. To me the drawings and paintings work together. I no longer see one informing the other. They work together.

**Can you tell us more about your drawing blog, Coco River Fudge Street? It seems that you posted the last drawing on May 31st, 2016—is it finished?**

Coco River Fudge Street ran from 2010 to 2016. The original run lasted a year. Each day I would draw something new and post it online. On Tuesdays I would take drawing requests from people and on Fridays I would post old embarrassing drawings, mostly from grad school. I wanted the blog to be somewhat like a radio station.

I started the blog in hopes to get my work to reach a wider audience as well as to collaborate with people. Posting your artwork online was still a new concept in 2010. After the first year, I had a solo show of 150 drawings from the blog at the Hyde Park Art Center here in Chicago. That summer after the show had come down I decided to go back to the blog for a two month run. This time with no collaborations or old drawings. I would go back to the blog during the summer every year and stopped last year after feeling nothing new could be done.

**I was introduced to the blog by a friend in 2013. Did you find that the project helped to create a dialog with others about your work or introduce them to your work?**

The blog was how many people were introduced to my work. It reached people all over the world. I didn't anticipate that. The Internet doesn't have a hierarchy like a gallery or museum, and it doesn't close. Everyone is welcomed and that is what I enjoyed the most about the blog.

**Congratulations on your recent solo show, *Their funeral, our dance floor* at Shane Campbell Gallery in Chicago. Can you tell us a bit about the exhibition and the body of work that you made for the show?**

After my solo show at Gallery 400 in the fall of 2016, I knew I wanted to make larger works that were more concentrated on a theme. The title for the show comes from a painting of the same name. The painting depicts a couple whose heads are floating above grass, and there is a glittery sun above them. They are being watched; it's your death and their dance floor. Many of the works follow the same theme of black life. The paintings are made to talk with one another, as they are to talk to the viewers. The conversations range from police brutality, love and friendship – to name a few. The paintings are lined up with one another and each engages with those themes. I also created eight drawings that had more immediacy to them and talked about newly formed political artists, helpful liberals, and the general political discourse in 2017.

**What role does appropriation and pop culture play in your work?**

Many of the pop culture references in my work are things I liked in my childhood. I went to catholic school until I was in the 7th grade and Disney cartoons were shown often to us. Disney movies were wholesome. I admired the early Disney artists like Ub Iwerks and became an illustration major when I entered college. The illustration influence is still a part of my work. Images from popular culture already have their own meaning, so they're easy to manipulate. Viewers recognize them and are drawn in.



**How does the repetition of imagery within the work function for you?**

When I use an image repeatedly I'm trying to give it importance and have the viewer ask why are the images repeated. I can change the meaning of the image by changing the paint application. By doing this I can talk about art history as well. Repeating black figures reinforces that black images are important and contributes to greater representation in art.

**You work with a wide range of materials, including some with a connection to commercial craft (like felt and googly eyes) in relation to more traditional materials like acrylic paint on canvas or linen. How do your materials and the combination of different media function conceptually?**

I think of them on the same level. Many in the fine arts often consider craft materials as lowbrow. I believe craft materials helps bring the viewer in for a closer examination for the work along with humor and color. Craft materials have a familiar quality to them that can help soften difficult subject matter in a painting.

**You create a strong tension between serious subject matter with a vein of humor. Can you tell us more about the role that different or opposing emotions play?**

Humor is a great way to break the news. It is a tool to engage the viewer with subject matter that may otherwise turn them off. I can talk about racism, sexism, homophobia, and other societal ills with humor. That humor is like sugar that helps the medicine go down. The viewer can be left asking himself or herself why they laughed at something that deals with such depressing subject matter.



**Can you tell us more about how you title your work?**

Titles are important to me. They can change the meaning of a work of art completely. I pull my titles from many different sources. Song lyrics, TV and movie dialog, and the comment section on YouTube are a few places my titles come from. I sometimes have the title first and it will help dictate the painting.

**Text plays a prominent role in your work. What is the process for writing and editing text?**

I don't really have a process. I write in the notes feature on my iPhone or in my sketchbook for use later, or sometimes I write directly on the canvas. It's more intuitive for me. Colors and images often dictate what text is added.

**Are there themes in your work that you feel people often miss or overlook?**

No, I feel everything is out in the open about the work.

**What is one of the most exciting things happening in your studio right now?**

I'm not sure how to answer this question. I do have a 1980 *Cracked* magazine I bought recently that is in the studio, and I keep think of all the things I can do with it.

**What is a typical day like for you?**

During the week I go to the studio from 8:30am-5:30pm. I turn on a podcast and start

working. I have lunch at the same time everyday in my studio. I do not go to the studio on the weekends. I try to get out to shows and relax during weekend. I treat working in the studio like a regular job.

**Who are some of the artists that you look at the most often or most recently?**

Robert Colescott, Jim Shaw, Otto Dix, Kerry James Marshall, Faith Ringgold, Horace Pippin, Wilford Limonious, Emil Ferris, Kara Walker, Richard Pryor, Ms. Pat, Johnny Ryan, Nina Chanel Abney, and Alejandro Jodorowsky.

**What is one of the best exhibitions you have seen recently?**

*Monster Roster* at the Smart Museum and Kerry James Marshall *Mastry* at the MCA. Both shows were a couple of years ago but are still my favorites.

**Has there ever been a book/essay/poem/film/etc that totally changed or influenced you? What are you reading right now?**

I enjoy reading and films but I wouldn't say anything in particular has influenced me deeply. I am a big fan of Star Wars and sci-fi. I keep going back to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, but I wouldn't consider it a huge influence.

**Any advice from your past that has stuck with you or helped you?**

I had a painting professor in undergrad that would walk around the classroom with a bucket of white paint. If he thought you were being too fussy with your painting he would make you step back and he would make you start painting parts of your canvas white. He would say, " You cannot break a painting" as he used the white painting. Paintings are not precious. You cannot get hung up on small things. You can always paint over mistakes.

**What has been one of the most challenging aspects of your career as an artist so far?**

The most challenging aspect was time. Time to work in the studio and have a job to support myself. Time is one of the most important things for artists. I often felt I rushed work for shows due to having a day job. I'm now a full time artist and have time to think and work.

**What do you listen to while you work? Is this an important part of being in the studio?**

I like to listen to long form podcasts and comedy albums. They help time go by and for things to stay loose while working. The comedy albums help me with putting humor in my work.

**What is the art community like in Chicago? Any advice for artists who are interested in creating community and finding an audience for their work?**

Chicago artists do their own thing. They don't really concern themselves with other cities or trends. If you want to show your work more and reach a wider audience, show your work wherever you can. Do not be a snob about gallery spaces if those spaces are free to show in. Get your friends involved. Show your work in your apartment. Try to challenge yourself and not just be happy with a recent series of work. I have witnessed several artists here who will



make a new series of work that they have been working on for a month and think they should be showing in the best galleries only. That's not a good attitude. There are many spaces like the Hyde Park Art Center that you can show and expose yourself to a new audience.



**How do you interact with social media, both personally and professionally as an artist?**

Social media is a tool and gets your work to people who cannot see it in person. I think it is important for artists starting out to use social media to promote themselves. I enjoy making memes for my shows and posting work before the show opens. That helps with general interest. I try to post regularly and post what I think are interesting things.

**Do you have any other news, shows, residencies or projects coming up?**

I have a solo show in September at Kimmrich Gallery in Berlin, Germany. I'm also doing an artist residency at the Joan Mitchell Center in New Orleans in 2018.

**Thank you so much for sharing your work and talking with us!**

## david leggett is the dark, comic art star of underground chicago

Felix Petty | November 8, 2016

His paintings and drawings are elaborate collages that meld icons of black power together with symbols of white racism into a political comment on American culture.



You laugh. You feel guilty. You feel angry. That's the emotional chain reaction of spending time with the work of David Leggett, a Chicago-based painter whose art confronts, pokes fun at, picks holes in, and ultimately, makes the viewer complicit in American racism.

My first interaction with his work was an unexpected one for an artist who has built a career in the underground of his hometown of Chicago. It came in one of the salons of a grand Hôtel Particulier in Paris that was home to FIAC's sister art fair, Paris Internationale, this summer. It was one of those works that stops you instantly in your tracks. It was the kind of work that instantly make you want to learn more about the artist and dive into the humorous, dystopia of his pictures.

The painting in question was called DWB; it featured a black Bart Simpson being harangued by Chief Wiggum on a candy pink background. DWB is an abbreviation for Driving Whilst Black, itself a pun on DWI, or Driving Whilst Intoxicated, a slice of black humour drawing on the idea (or reality) that driving and being black is enough to make you guilty of a crime.

And yet the guilt in the picture that accosts the viewer (the art world being made up predominantly of old, white men), is that somehow suddenly you find yourself caught unaware and implicated; that initial laugh quickly turns bitter. Did I just laugh at that? His pictures aren't a funny or dystopian world, really; they're shocking, sad, reminders of the



actual world we live in. They just use humour to remind and reinforce us all of how unpleasant and painful the world can be.

It's this dynamic, political idea that runs throughout much of David's work. He ran a drawing blog for awhile, posting an image a day; unlike the delicate collaged assemblages of his paintings his drawings are stripped back, cartoon-ish, using their simplicity to combine a sense of humour with a subtle but forceful anger and political satire. Yet the images he creates draw their success from never being one note, trite, didactic, heavy handed; they are light on their feet, which makes their impact all the more significant.

His work has assembled a certain visual language to create its satire; he combines fragments of text, black faces, disembodied heads, eyes, polaroids of the artist, old images of small town Americana, icons of black power, black culture, political slogans, bright colours, craft materials. They clearly reference a canon of art that places a majority of black art as "folk" art not "fine" art, but in their political humour they make an urgent play to be recognized, known, and celebrated; few artists work feels more timely and immediate.



**You've primarily lived and worked in the midwest of America, is it an area that's had much of an effect on your work?**

I moved to Chicago in 2003 to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I moved here because I was a huge fan of the Chicago Imagists, and many of them taught at SAIC. The Imagists work spoke to me as a young man. Their work was pop culture, but unlike New York or LA pop artists, the Imagists seemed to have a real interest in pop and subculture. There wasn't much material on them at the time I discovered their work, you couldn't Google them 17 years ago, so I had to piece things together. Their bawdy influence on me, along with Chicago's independent DIY spirit, helped mould me.

**What's Chicago like for an artist?**

It's a great city to be an artist. It's affordable to live and work and you have many interesting down to earth artists that live here. Chicago doesn't care about trends that go on in New York or Los Angeles. People here are fiercely independent. It is also grey like seven months out of the year here. Being in the studio seems natural due to that.

**Do you feel a part of "the art world" in Chicago?**

I don't really think about it. Being obsessed with the market and how things are swaying but it just doesn't interest me. I would still be making art without the "art world".

**VICE**

**Can you remember what made you want to be an artist?**

I'm terrible at just about everything else in life. I have a very short attention span. I get bored easily. Making art makes feel good and when I can't make art for a while I get depressed.

**How would you describe your aesthetic?**

Someone once called my art, "folk art with a gangsta lean". I always liked that description and often describe my art that way. I slowly started to add collage materials over the years. Many of the items in my work today are collectibles I acquired over the years. When you are young you think you know it all and my art reflected that. There was also a mean streak to the work that surprises me today. I guess I had a lot of angst. I mostly focused on printmaking at first. I only started painting seriously nine years ago.



**What is your process of painting like? They're almost collages, yet just about resist it.**

I collect various objects and collage materials that I have in my apartment and studio. I also will write down a word or phrase in the notes section in my phone. These things help dictate what the work will be. I never have a concrete plan. There needs to be some spontaneity. What works in one piece most likely will not work in the next. That makes things exciting for me.

**There are recurring motifs throughout the work, things like; googly eyes, disembodied faces, reappropriated slogans, reimagined cartoon characters, black power iconography, racist American iconography. What's your purpose in these assemblages?**

They are all things I have an interest in for various reasons. When I see old Americana racism, I think to myself "How has this been cleaned up and used today?" When you look at Uncle Ben, Uncle Remus, and Aunt Jemima today, they've been cleaned up from 60 years ago. I then think of the people who were old enough to remember the original images and how that affected them and how they raise their kids.

Craft materials are considered low class in fine art, it's difficult to use craft materials and not make them the focus of the painting. I like that because for me that is problem solving. Putting all these things together seems natural; it's like a mixtape of all my favourite things.

**You used to run a drawing blog that you'd post an image a day on. What made you stop? Did you like the pressure of doing a drawing a day?**

I wasn't excited about it anymore. I still draw everyday, but I don't post them online



anymore. I may again one day. Drawing daily at first was stressful, I was trying too hard to be funny and entertaining and was burnt out after a year of doing it. I eventually got into a groove where I was able to produce the drawing quickly by stripping down the work into simpler gestures. I mostly use ink, colour pencil, and a rubber stamp, and can finish a blog drawing within an hour. What I like about the blog was it was almost a public sketchbook. Some of the blog drawing helped make larger works on paper and canvas. The reaction to the blog was excellent. I wasn't sure if I'd reach anyone and was surprised to have people from all over following the blog.



### **What draws you to the internet as a way to disseminate your work?**

There is no hierarchy online as there is in the art world. You can be a 12-year-old living in India and you can have a following of people to your art online. I like that. It was a way to get more eyes on my work that would never see it otherwise.

### **How would you describe the sense of humour that suffuses your work?**

I love stand-up comedy and often listen to it in my studio. I think of comics like Richard Pryor the same as I would a master painter. It's natural to me to go for the joke as I do in my non-art life. Humour is difficult to convey in art. To get someone to laugh out loud at a work of art is thrilling.

### **And what effect does the humour have, when combined with the dark political reality and issues your work talks about?**

Humour can disarm the viewer and make them take a closer look at what may be considered heavy subject matter. I hope people will question why something they normally would not laugh at is funny. Political art can often be heavy handed and preaching to the choir. But with the humour, it's almost like breaking bad news to someone, telling a joke can lessen the blow.

### **The humour also makes you feel quite sad, after you're doing laughing you feel quite guilty.**

That's what I'm going for. Richard Pryor would tell very funny stories about growing up in a brothel, or stories about American racism, but once you thought about what he was saying it could bring you down. In the same breath you could just shrug and laugh because there is nothing you can do about it. I want the viewer to leave feeling something, even if it's a powerlessness.

## Cotton Candy Sweet as Gold: A Conversation with David Leggett

Danielle Jackson | May 28, 2012

*Through the utilization of common craft materials, paintings, and drawings, David Leggett's work humorously tackles race, sexuality, and class. He draws inspiration from popular culture, everyday occurrences, and art historical research. David Leggett received his BFA from SCAD, his MFA from SAIC, and is a former Skowhegan resident. Some recent exhibitions include: "It's getting to the point, where no one respects the dead.Fresh to death" at Western exhibitions, "Coca River Fudge Street" at the Hyde Park Art Center, and a current solo exhibition at Hinge Gallery depicting works inspired by Afro Pop and Afro-Futurism. Last week, I sat down with David at his studio to discuss some of his inspirations, his love of humor, the Chicago Imagists, Rick Ross, odd encounters, and a whole slew of other things.*

**Danielle Jackson [DJ]: You actually mentioned at your artist talk that you “hero-worshipped” the Chicago Imagists. I’m wondering what it was about them? When did you first encounter their work?**

David Leggett [DL]: I was at SCAD at the library just looking for new books. Somehow I stumbled across this one art history book. It's probably not as rare now to see the Chicago Imagists in books, but back in 2000 if you weren't living in Chicago you didn't really know. So I was flipping through this book and there was Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, and Karl Wirsum. Their work seemed so different. I was an illustration major at the time. It seemed more in tuned with what I was thinking about. I don't make highly polished work like I used to back then. It was also seeing this very finely rendered work (no paintbrush marks). It was very just fine skilled -kind of bratty—making fun of the establishment kind of work.

**DJ: You actually met some of them right?**

DL: I got to meet all of them actually. Well, Ed Paschke didn't teach at the Art Institute. I worked with Karl and I got to see Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson around the school.



**DJ: I was just reading an interview in Bomb on Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson. Jim Nutt had this beautiful quote where he states, “I always draw with an eraser in one hand and a pencil in the other. Every line is under threat.” Then he goes on to talk about how long it takes him to create a piece. He’s super particular about it.**

DL: He’s very. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen his frames—and this is how nerdy I am—he makes all his frames himself and he’ll actually put all of these instructions for the art handlers, like “Do not put wire on this” or “Do not do this” or “This has to go in this light.” [Laughter] This is all hand painted on the back of the frame.

**DJ: I definitely got that from him. It was totally an interesting article. What’s your process like? Is it quick?**

DL: No, it seems quick because there are a lot of things going on. Some stuff for Hinge Gallery I’ve spent two years working on. It’s just this constant start-stop thing going on. I’ll start anywhere from ten to twenty things at once. Sometimes you’ll see the same color palette repeating because I started them at the same time, but it’s not necessarily going to be finished at the same time.

**DJ: Is that because you get frustrated with something?**

DL: Yeah, I need to walk away and think about it. I think it’s just a process. I probably won’t be as interested in it. There are a lot of things where I’m like, “Oh this is going to be the best idea.” Then you start making it and you’re like “Oh man no, no.”

**DJ: Put it to the side. [Laughter]**

DL: [Laughter] yeah put it to the side. Think of something later.

**DJ: Going back a little, you mentioned you used to draw really tightly. What was the point where you decided not to draw so tightly?**

DL: That goes back to Karl Wirsum. When I came here, he saw some of my more scrabbly sketchbook stuff. He favored those more and had more to say about that. I thought, “Well here is a guy I look up to, maybe he’s right.” He was. When I’m drawing so tightly I immediately become very self-conscious. I don’t want anyone to catch my line. I don’t want anyone to see a shaky line. It has to be straight and perfect. That will absolutely drive you nuts.

**DJ: For me, what is impressive about your work is that you use these common craft materials, yet you have interesting compositions. You use felt, rubber stamps, glitter, and wiggle eyes. When did you start utilizing these materials in your work?**

DL: I think I was taking book-making classes at SAIC. I wanted to make a nice cover. For whatever reason I was like, “I want to use felt.” I definitely like Mike Kelley’s felt pieces. At the time, it was just to make a cover, but when I first got the studio out here I started using craft materials. It was really an accident. I was seeing what it would look like. It was kind of problematic. When you use craft materials you have to figure out exactly how it’s going to work. You have to figure out the composition because it’s just going to look like craft materials. Several people who use craft materials—it’s kind of obvious. I’m trying not to use it in the most obvious way.

**DJ: Just curious do you consider your work to be a commentary on black identity and black experiences?**

DL: I do and I don’t. To me it’s more important for the work to be like this is just a human being living and we all think of different things throughout the day (some stuff we will never admit to people). That’s how I see it. I definitely think of other black artists. I think it’s interesting that other cultures appropriate black culture, but usually when they do it’s Hip Hop culture exclusively. Not only do other cultures do it, but we do as well. It’s interesting to see people who didn’t live that trifle life incorporate Hip Hop into their work. It’s okay to be from the suburbs and have parents who are still together and went to college. That’s something to wear with pride. That’s why I made Burr (The Theo Huxtable experience) I would like to see an artist who grew up like the Huxtables make art that reflects that. I think that would be interesting.

**DJ: It’s interesting because some black artists very consciously think about those issues.**

DL: Yeah, to me at least with my work, it’s a little bit more slippery when it comes to that. I’m not trying to hammer it out for you. It’s a “you can take it or leave it” type thing.

**DJ: Is one of your objectives humor?**

DL: I listen to a lot of comedy albums when I make my work. I think if I wasn’t and this is in my mind [laughter] if I wasn’t an artist, I would have tried to be a comedian. I’m always cracking jokes. Humor just makes things go much more smoothly. I never know exactly what people are going to laugh at.

**DJ: Can you speak about Coca River Fudge Street? What led you to do that? I think what’s interesting about that is that you made a drawing a day, took requests on Tuesdays, and even had Old School Fridays much like a radio station.**

DL: The radio station idea came from a book warehouse I used to work at. The radio station was always on WGCI. Hearing that made me think of it. The whole idea started at my residency at Skowhegan in 2010. I was doing these 22 x 30 drawings. The drawings were in my window. I would just write text. I put two up at a time and then I would take them down.



No one knew what I was doing with them until the end of the residency. I would put text up and people would walk pass during lunch or dinner. I could hear people having conversations about what the text meant. I would illustrate what they said. I really liked this idea of collaboration yet no one knew it was collaboration. So I wanted to do that when I got back. That's how *Coca River Fudge Street* started.

**DJ: Did you give yourself limitations for the project?**

DL: I had to stop painting them because it was just going to take the entire day. So that was the only real limitation.

**DJ: What's the oddest request you've gotten?**

DL: The last request was kind of weird. I was having Thanksgiving and one person requested Gerald Ford being bukkaked on. It was so random. I was like, "I don't understand, but I'll do it. It's my last request." [Laughter] I don't turn down anything.



**DJ: In your interview with the Chicagoist, you state that “You have to be willing to embarrass yourself.” Why is that important?**

DL: I think it's because if you're constantly safe, what are you doing? You have to be willing to go "God, I can't believe I'm going there." At least for what I do if you're making fun of all these different people and you're the safe one, people can see right through that. When I think of comedians like Richard Pryor or Patton Oswalt –all these different ranges of comedians—they always attack themselves as well. Richard Pryor put himself out there.

**DJ: He did. He was a character. Pam Grier recently wrote about him in her book. Crazy. [Laughter]**

DL: Drugs man. [Laughter]

**DJ: In your drawings and paintings you insert yourself into them. Do you consider those to be self-portraits?**

DL: Well I think everything is a self-portrait whether you want it to be or not. I think it's easy to use myself just so I don't get the constant questions like, "Who's that?" It's kind of like I'm the every man—the every person.

**DJ: You make a lot of references to popular culture. Where does that interest come from? I do realize that you're an illustrator and you guys are well-versed in that.**

DL: Yeah, I think it's always been an interest. As I'm getting older, I don't fully understand what people like nowadays. I'm a little slow catching up on things. I don't know what I would say about someone like Katy Perry. That may be an old reference by now too.

**DJ: You mention Rick Ross often.**

DL: Rick Ross is hilarious to me. Most people don't remember that there was this other rapper named The Boss back in the day—female rapper. She was hardcore. It was probably back in the early 90s. It was found out that she went to Catholic school and was a straight A student. That was the end of her career. No one wanted to hear her again. She had this gangster look with sagging pants. [Laughter] She had this big smiling photo in the Catholic school yearbook. Rick Ross to me is the same way. He's this guy who went to college and was a correctional officer, but he's claiming he was the biggest drug-dealer in Florida. Come on now. He's not a good rapper either.

**DJ: Do you have any upcoming projects?**

Yes, I have two summer group shows and two fall group shows. One summer show is the *Blacklight* show curated by Paul Nudd in Virginia. Another show in San Francisco curated by Ryan Travis Christian. In fall, I have a group show at DePaul about the Imagists—artists inspired by the Imagists. I have another one at the Pittsburgh Museum of Art that's going to be on text work.

## Portrait of the Artist: David Leggett

Claire Glass | January 31, 2012



David Leggett paints while listening to the stand-up comedy of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy, which serve as kindling for his sometimes cartoonish, playfully rendered mixed media artworks. “In the early 1990s when Def Comedy came along, it was extremely popular, but if you listen now, it was horrible,” Leggett says. “They were doing impersonations of Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor just using the punch lines. Saying ‘dick’ and ‘pussy’ doesn’t make it funny. Those are just words, and that’s kind of how I see some artists—they can say ‘Oh I’m riffing on this,’ but so what?” From his process to his product, Leggett is interested in inauthentic reproductions of 1980s art and hip-hop culture.

Leggett laughed readily, both at himself and his work, discussing his first solo show at Western Exhibitions, titled “It’s getting to the point where nobody respects the dead. Fresh to death.” Leaning back on a small chair in his compact East Garfield Park studio, narrowed

further by layers of leaning paintings, Leggett said his work is not a “moral compass.” He treaded lightly on questions of racial or political tension, and when questioned about stamps of men in black face that appear in earlier works, he answered with an incredulous giggle that he bought the stamps on eBay, fascinated by the fact that they existed at all.

Leggett, who grew up in western Massachusetts and came to Chicago to attend SAIC in 2003, seizes his fair share of iconic imagery. But unlike those comedians, who call up infamous one-liners that rely on conjuring memories of having laughed, Leggett’s renderings do not attempt to reclaim their subjects.

In the painting “A Natural Death,” the word “Jackson” is diagonally scrawled in white cursive. Pink, white and black drips and lines fill the canvas, over which a sparkly skull presides, implying the whittling away of both Jackson’s postmortem identities. “Historically, once you die, people forget all of the horrible things you’ve done, and that was my interest,” Leggett laughs, easily locating humor in dark places. “Now that they’re dead, people focus on elements of their music and their art and not the poor decisions they made in their lives.”



In his painting “Burr,” Leggett presents a Theo Huxtable-inspired face beside an image of porn star Spring Thomas performing fellatio on a black penis surrounded by small felt triangles in primary colors—think your old Trapper Keeper—over which a pink, felt penis hovers dwarfed. He grew serious to address the often-overlooked “Theo Huxtable Experience.” “I’m interested in black artists who grew up in the suburbs,” he says. “I would love to see the Theo Huxtable experience—parents still together, parents went to college—represented.” Pitting the wholesome against the potentially scandalous, Leggett added, is an obvious one-liner, relying on the audience’s preconceived connotations to generate reaction. “People appropriate other cultures—black people appropriate black culture as well—if they’ve never experienced hip-hop or the projects. It’s very obvious. It’s very photocopied.”

A concurrent solo show, at the Hyde Park Art Center, is showing a collection of nearly two-hundred drawings by Leggett, the product of his blog by the same name. Leggett made one drawing daily, organized in radio station fashion for audience collaboration with Request Tuesdays and Old School Fridays. (Claire Glass)