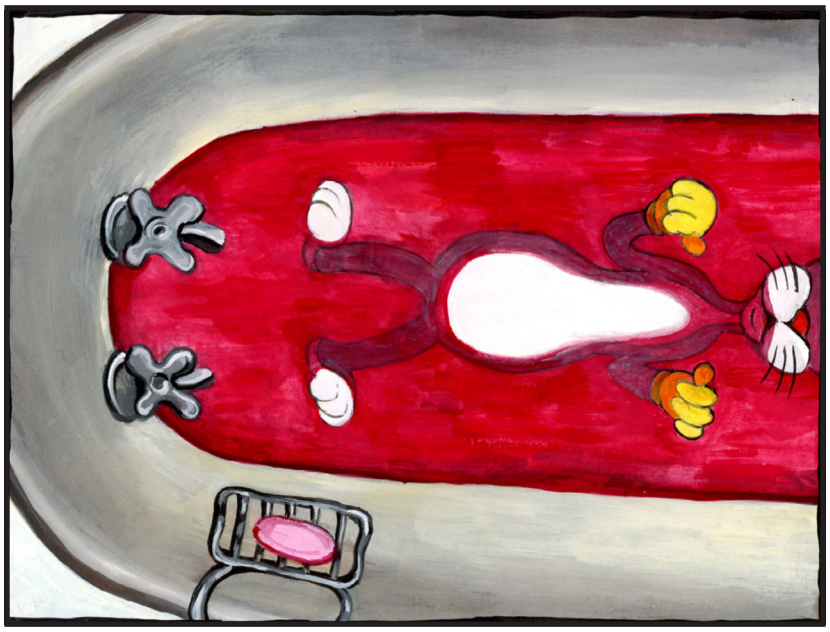


Coached to Suicide by WatupDOC, 2025

EYES FACING BACKWARD / 눈이 뒤집히다

Conversation between Kathryn Chiong, art historian and Tae Hwang, artist took place September 22, 2025. The conversation accompanies the exhibition ***Eyes Facing Backwards* / 눈이 뒤집히다** at LaiSun Keane Gallery, Boston in 2025.

KC: So you and I have known each other for, let's say, well over a decade, right?

TH: Yeah.

KC: It has been so amazing to see how your practice is blooming and changing, and I can't wait to talk about how it's changed since we first met and hear how you're thinking about your relationship to Lawrence's work. But the first thing I want to do is just speak about the work that's in this show. I think the work is absolutely stunning—breathtakingly and beautifully rendered. But I also want to say *achingly* beautiful, because the images just hit you with the force of a hammer, or at least they did for me. It's very visceral and disorienting and disquieting, but at the same time, you don't want to look away, the images are so compelling.

To start, I wanted to anchor our discussion of these images in a text that you referenced, Hal Foster's *Brutal Aesthetics*, from 2020, because I really thought just those two words, brutal

aesthetics, captured something that seemed to be at the heart of this body of work. For those people who might not be familiar with, you know, the argument of *Brutal Aesthetics*, Foster, the critic, art historian, is very much inspired by Walter Benjamin, who is writing in the wake of World War I under the threat of the coming onslaught of World War II. And Benjamin is thinking about modernism as a practice that can teach us how to survive a civilization that's turned barbaric. And Walter Benjamin, who's always, you know, the dialectician, wants to take that barbarism and reinvigorate it and see how the barbaric can be the source of a new culture. So, the artist is this bricklayer who picks up the scraps of this destroyed culture and makes something new. What's so interesting to me, in connection with your work specifically, is that Benjamin invokes Mickey Mouse, and Disney, and he takes them as this dream for contemporary man. Cartoons—not only do they offer a relief from war and industrialization and industrial depression, but Mickey Mouse is this model of playful adaptation. And, for Benjamin, these cartoon characters can teach us how to survive in this state of barbarism. I think that there is a lot of that sort of hope and desperation in your work. Like, how do we survive these brutal times? How do we process the violence that we … that seems to permeate everything now? And my first question to you is, why did you turn to cartoons, and specifically, why Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies?

TH: Benjamin invokes cartoons as a kind of relief and escape. He nails it, certainly for me he does. I started thinking about cartoons when I heard my five-year-old niece bawling in front of the TV screen because Clifford the Red Dog had to leave home to find his friend. She sounded like she was at a funeral, like, the way she was crying, and it just kind of dawned on me, this five-year-old is looking at this image and it's conditioning her to cry at something that's totally fictional. In Korea, when I was growing up, we only had about an hour or two hours of cartoons. And those two hours were really important to me. I sat an inch away from the TV set and did not move. I did watch Bugs Bunny growing up in Korea, but when I came to the United States, I watched cartoons all the way into high school to learn English. I was watching Merrie Melodies and Tom and Jerry. And I remember just thinking, you know, I don't speak the language, but I understand what's going on and I was being conditioned to look at things in a certain way through a certain lens. These cartoons, I realized I was learning a new language through them. This got me thinking just how violent they are but also how violent the times are now. I mean, murders, killings, rape … I don't even fully know how to characterize the type of violence we're experiencing right now. And I felt violent, too, and I feel like there is a … like a violence that's brewing inside of me that … I look at images of violence on TV, on the news, just every day. And, you know, I'm thinking, why am I not crying like my niece?

KC: Hmm. Interesting.

TH: I am totally used to every aspect of violent imagery!

KC: First of all, I absolutely love Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies. And I guess there's a couple of things that I thought were really interesting about your choice. I mean, part of it is autobiographical, because that is what you are watching and because there's like, an infinite cornucopia of cartoon and animated violence that you could have drawn from. But that you picked and used these specific ways of mediating violence. It's interesting because they're nostalgic now, but they were already nostalgic when we were watching them. You know what I mean? I was watching them, I already knew as a child that this was the olden days, right?

TH: Yeah.

KC: They were never contemporary. They were always showing us some kind of historical past. It's interesting that you learned English from these, because a lot of the ways people speak in them is old fashioned, like, the expressions that Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck might use, or certainly Elmer Fudd. So, I think that's interesting. And that the violence, as it was portrayed in those cartoons, was always meant to … it was always anarchic. It was irrational, but most importantly, it was always without consequence, right? And that's why it was kind of redemptive. Even if they died, even if they shot themselves, then they would either come back to life for the next episode, or they would just turn into funny little angels and ascend into heaven. So, it was all light. But I think what was interesting about the violence, as it was portrayed, was that although certainly it served some kind of sadistic impulse—you enjoy watching these characters blow up, get sliced in half, or any number of crazy things that happen to them—but I didn't think that the violence was ever glamorized. And what I mean by that is, the aggressors never seem to win in those episodes, and I think that's the important distinction.

TH: Yes!

KC: So, if it's Bugs and Daffy who are at each other and Daffy Duck, or Elmer Fudd, they're trying to shoot Bugs Bunny, or whatever it is that they're trying to do, they always seem to be foiled by their own kind of violent plans or violent devices. So that's the redeeming part of that cartoon violence. It's never victorious. What always wins is just luck, Elmer Fudd can just belucky when Daffy is trying to sell him insurance. He keeps escaping all of Daffy's attempts to murder him. In your work, you have completely perverted this violence because, suddenly, all the violence is bearing consequence. It's as though now the violence in your paintings is going to be triumphant, or that … that's at least the impression that you get.

Shaving Cuts Is The New Trend In 2025, 2025

New And Improved Crossing Signs Coming Near You, 2025

In the gouaches … there are certain gouaches that I found, as a fan of Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies, so chilling. And it's funny, the ones that really pricked me. One of them was Bugs Bunny shaving. And I can't figure … it's just like, it's … that, to me, was the most horrific one. And partly, the reason is because Bugs Bunny is the one who always escapes, right? Bugs Bunny, I mean, he's never a hero, but he's a survivor and he's always clever. He always knows what's happening to him, and then in the image that you have, that you feature the image of him shaving, he's cutting himself, but he doesn't realize it. I mean, that to me was … you know, that's Looney Tunes completely out of whack, right? It's no … it's not Looney anymore. Bugs Bunny is *actually* getting hurt. The other one that was really upsetting, of course, is that there's the suicide in the tub. There's Bugs drowning in his own blood, oh, even worse! So, Bugs Bunny killing himself is terrible. And then the crosswalk with the policemen arresting Mickey Mouse? Of course, you cannot help but see that in the context of our own moment. So, my next question is how did you pair the images with the captions or titles? What was the process?

TH: At first, I had no idea how I was going to caption them. I just wanted to see them in a different light. I wanted to totally put them in different contexts. I wanted them to sound very propagandistic and violent. I needed the images to feel that way and captioned to follow that lead. Just the sheer amount of news and propaganda that I was seeing every day … I wanted to kind of bring that back, that violence into the images. I don't want to make fun out of these tragic moments. I wanted to see if we can look at it in a different way, to actually feel the violence again in a different way. I picked the images from Looney Tunes that sent chills down my spine and later paired them with current event news headlines like the way *ONION* news will make their headlines.

KC: The signs now have become completely arbitrary. And you can basically use them, pervert them in any way that you would like. But there's also something interesting about reading these Looney Tunes stills or clips through the lens of today's traumas. It's just that, you know, when you see Mickey Mouse and the crosswalk with those … I guess those are supposed to be police? Then you can't help but think about it in relationship to what's happening now. This made me think of another reference you sent me, Susan Sontag's *On Regarding the Pain of Others*. Can I just read this little excerpt here about the caption?

TH: Yeah.

KC: It says:

> To the militant, identity is everything. And all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions. During the fighting between Serbs and Croats at the beginning of the recent Balkan wars, the same photographs of children killed in the shelling of a village were passed around at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings. Alter the caption, and the children's deaths could be used and reused.

So, I feel like your process of pairing these titles, these newspaper headlines, whether fictional or non-fictional, with those images speaks to what Sontag is talking about. How there's a further violence inflicted upon the images through how people use them, right? Oftentimes to perpetuate more violence.

TH: Yes. To add to that, I think the violence of cartoons is very much recycled and reused too. There was part of me that wanted to directly address this violence. After seeing my niece watching these cartoons over and over and over again, I wanted to capture her relationship to violence that is currently happening now. She is not reading the newspaper right now, but there's this kind of a relationship between text and image even at a young age. These news headlines are not for children, but I put these two against each other because, honestly, it feels like what's going on right now in the world.

KC: To circle back to something that you spoke about. When you were talking about your niece and being trained in emotional sort of manipulation by images, I think that's something that your work is also about too and that's what propaganda is.

TH: Yes. Cartoon as propaganda is old news, and we all know we are being manipulated but we can't turn away. It is the emotional aspect, I think, that makes us not turn away. The more human side of us.

The First Strike, 2025

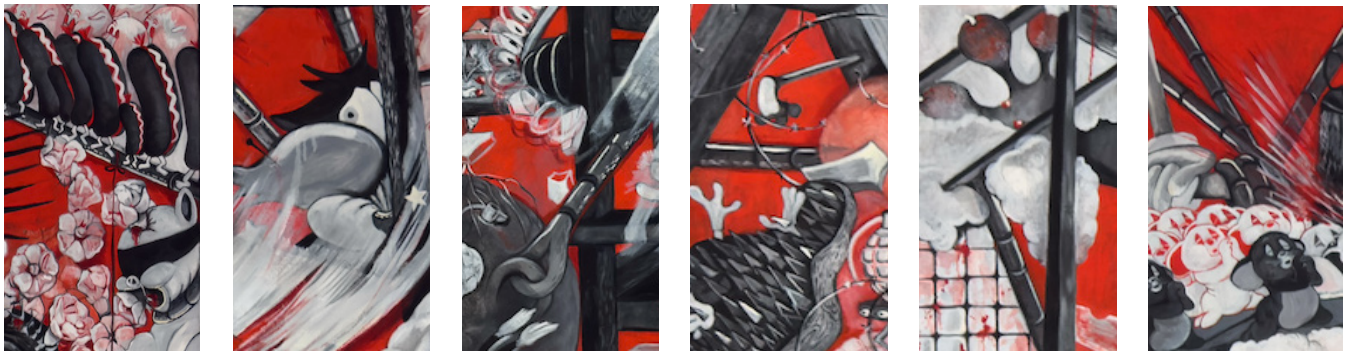
KC: Let's talk about your large painting, *The First Strike*. And it is, in fact, a strike. It's total assault. It's pretty big.

TH: It's about twelve by four and a half feet.

KC: What is so striking about it is not only the violence and the gore but the sheer kind of unintelligibility of it. It is so intricately interwoven and so hard to understand what's going on because there's so many things happening all at once, and the violence is coming at you from kind of every angle. What was your process of combining all these images into one?

TH: Like searching for a thing … I needed to do many small sketches and paintings. I needed to memorize, embody myself in this to know what I wanted. I spent hours looking at old Looney Tunes and Tom and Jerry. Then I would take a still shot of the moving image, alter it, then paint or draw it. I wanted to live in this language. When I stared *The First Strike*, all these small paintings took turns shaping the large work. I started just painting with the memory of what I had been doing. I rely on my memory to see what I want in the composition. When I draw something, it sticks in my memory. I don't do a small sketch of what the big painting will look like because it doesn't work for me, mostly due to scale. It's just a puzzle, I go back and forth, back and forth, and, you know, if I want to put Bugs here or there … the more it starts to develop, and things take shape, feelings take shape. I wanted chaos but also order. Sometimes it helps me to have one or two elements that go through the entire image. For instance, the rope goes through the entire image like a pathway and stops to make some explosions on the way.

KC: Okay, so you're saying there's a rope?



details of *The First Strike*

TH: I guess let's start from where the blindfolded Porky Pig is on the far right side. The rope is choking him. Then it travels above where the walking hot dogs are. And it goes all the way up and down, chokes Sylvester, goes behind the fan, then it comes down. And it gets attached to one of these big cannonballs. And then it appears by the guillotine. And then it goes up where the swollen fingers are. And all the way up, above the praying Jerry. And it splits into three. I used the rope as a movement in the composition, but also depicting many of its violent uses in real life. Then there are big elements like the mushroom cloud, the fan, giant phallic bullets that anchor the image. I needed this to balance all the elements, so it won't be weighted on one side or the other. I had to make sure that it was evenly placed. To have this equal distribution of both color and elements. I also wanted to bring collectivity into the image—from praying Jerrys to fat Porky Pigs, scared Toms on the bottom to little grenades next to flattened Wile E. Coyotes. And then the two reflections on the very end, Bugs, looking at the mirror, literally as he's like, cutting himself, and then Tom, looking at the mirror as well, as his teeth are falling out.

KC: As a viewer, what is order isn't … the order is latent, right? Which I think is a brilliant, very realistic reflection of our infoscape today, because as consumers of information, there is this sense of constant bombardment. You don't even know where to look because there's just so much happening everywhere and all at once. But what you must understand is that it is all by calculated design. That that's a strategy. That it's as meticulously planned as how you just described your composition.

TH: Yes.

KC: It's not chaotic. It's on purpose to feel chaotic, but as a result, we as viewers, as observers … there is something paralyzing about it. Next, I'd love to talk about, um, the overall title of your work. Can you just talk a little bit about "eyes facing backwards"? Because that's a very specific … culturally specific expression, and what it means to you, and how you feel it relates to the show.

TH: It's a Korean idiom. "Eyes facing backwards" is kind of a strange direct translation, but as a nonnative English speaker, I wanted to invoke the awkwardness of my adopted language, so titles for the works in the show also have intentionally bad grammar. This title was also interwoven with the Weiners' (Lawrence, Alice, and Kirsten's) influence on me. Working at the Weiner studio feels like a long time ago, it's a part of my adolescence. And also because Lawrence works with words as material.

KC: Yes, of course, yes.

TH: "Eyes facing backwards" is a Korean idiom that means that you have gone insane. My mom used to say this to me when I watched cartoons for too long—that my eyes will be flipping inside out or backwards. The madness, or maddening world, will make you insane. It can be used in a lighthearted way or to speak of something heavier. It is a common phrase. My mom says this a lot about the state of the world. Her eyes are flipping inside out and backwards, like, she can't even look at the news.

KC: Nice! Also, what your work is conveying is, like, it's mass hysteria. What I also liked about the title is that it is so very rich. I love that it is also about looking backward, it is also about taking this kind of historical view on the past, and your past, and your past with Lawrence. But there's also another kind of implication, when your eyes are facing backward, there's an inability to process and an inability to see.

TH: Yes.

KC: It's just, as you said … because you see too much, and you can't process it, or you refuse to look. For instance, with myself, it's a policy of mine, I read the news, I never, ever watch videos. I try to, you know, maybe some photographs can sneak in there, but I try not to get my news from social media, I just want it printed.

TH: That's good but also very hard to do these days.

KC: So I am not constantly emotionally hijacked by the news, because, you know, then it becomes difficult to do anything, you just are so destroyed by what you've seen, because you internalize the information so differently when it is a video or when it's very graphic. So that's part of … that's my eyes facing backward, I guess.

TH: Indeed.

KC: I'd love to get to Lawrence, but before we do, I wanted to talk about the scale of the work because one of the artists that you referenced—somebody that is always kind of looming in your consciousness, is Diego Rivera. And so, for me, the link to Diego Rivera is in the scale, in the idea of the public mural. That's where the work has its utopian dimension. You know, in Rivera's work, at least, it is all about being able to translate something to a public, about history, about collectivity, about the work that needs to be done. And, of course, I see a through line there between, let's say Mexican muralist work and the work that you did with Collective Magpie, where it was really invested in this. Here, too, is where you could see the very clear link to Lawrence's work. The idea of a participatory aesthetic that is involved in conversations and online surveys, and, you know, making Buckminster Fuller structures and balloons that cross borders. In that work that you did with Collective Magpie, there was this kind of optimism and engagement. But now it's very different, because you've returned to a studio practice. I would love to hear about why you returned to painting, why painting now?

TH: You know, I've learned so much from that participatory practice, especially that everything has so much complexity and layers. In my collective practice back in the early 2000s, we would design a project and have people participate in the making of the project. And the process was A to B to C. We do this, and then that, but everything else was so messy. It was just endless conversations about everything. We would just encounter so many different conversations about the border, about race, about art. It would naturally happen as we're making the work together. And it was quite overwhelming, I have to say. Just working with so many different public projects … and the scale of the projects that we did was so big. It was really overwhelming. And now there is this trend and the growth of this social practice movement in the art world.

KC: Yeah.

TH: When I was working with the Collective, the conversation about participatory practice wasn't new, but it wasn't as mainstream as it is now. And somehow, I think the hardest thing for me, and I still haven't figured this out, even after many years of doing it ... for me, social practice sits in a strange ethical place. Like, who am I, and who are they? There was always a hierarchy between the artist, art, and the audience, and the participants. And I think there still is in the social participatory practice work, and once this hierarchy exists, the intention of the work inevitably is affected and changes its meaning. Who benefits from it in real value versus fake value? I really started to resent that.

KC: Mm-hmm.

TH: Social practice work became so performative contextually that it was hard to understand the real underpinnings of the work itself. I started to question my intent, my logic. So I turned to studio practice. If I didn't do the collective work, strangely enough, I do not know if I would be doing the work I am engaged with now. With the collective work, there was a lot of advertising language used to entice people to come and work with us. But really looking back from that language, instead of looking at the collective voice, or what I thought was a collective voice at the time, I think now I'm more interested in this kind of a messy space because what collective voice taught me was there's just always going to be a messy space. There's never a clear place, right? There's never going to be an answer, one answer of what a race is, one answer on what immigration is, because we're always changing. The culture's constantly in motion. There's just so many different people with different opinions. It's just… we can never agree on anything, and I think that's kind of great. If we can see that space.

KC: Mm-hmm.

TH: There is a book called *Rap on Race*. It's a conversation transcription between Margaret Mead and James Baldwin and it's like a seven-hour conversation they had. They met for the first time for this conversation and talked about anything and everything, and they were very much involved in ideas of race and thinking about race and writing about race. And you're reading these two brilliant minds talk about race and the conversation is so messy, and they're fighting, and they're just at times angry at each other and they're all over the place. This was fantastic and I wanted that in my new work, because… that's what I've experienced in collective work, was all these messy conversations. I can't possibly put them in any categories, they're just out there floating. And so that's why I kind of turned my work to propaganda, because if I turn to something that's very clear in narrative, that's what the propaganda is. You have exactly one message and it's clear what that message is. It's what the propagandists want you to believe. So, I wanted to take some of that language. Whether it's in visual form or in text form, in whatever form. And make it messy. I needed to have something that I can make mess out of. I can't make a mess out of already a messy situation.

KC: Right, right. I see.

TH: So moving from this collective which was … the work itself was very clear, but everything around it was very messy. I kind of take the messy part of the collective and I wanted to develop my own work. It's bouncing off that, from clarity to messiness. I wanted to kind of delve into my own work. Think about what migration, what race, all the things that I addressed in my collective work, like what that was for me. Maybe I wasn't ready before. Maybe I was too scared. Maybe I didn't know what it was. Maybe I had to go through fifteen years of this and talk to people about it to understand where I am now, today. So it's a response. So, studio practice is a response.

KC: And is there something about choosing, at least for this show, the medium of painting? Because you can do everything, right? You could do photography; you've done three-dimensional work. But to choose painting specifically, is it because of the link of visual image to propaganda, or was there some other reason that it was painting that you chose to delve into?

TH: I've always wanted to be a cartoonist.

KC: Oh, right, you mentioned that. So it's the link to cartoons, also.

TH: Yes. You know, it took me months to make all these paintings, and I was just sitting there, like having the best time.

KC: Yes, you made your own dream come true!

TH: How do I draw them, you know? Because when you want to be a cartoonist, you want to be able to do that thing perfectly, draw exactly what you want. So that was part of this, I wanted to make it my own, in a way. Even though, I mean, some of these things don't look like Bugs or Daffy.

KC: Yeah. Well… it's so interesting that you say that, because there was a show about Chuck Jones that was at the Museum of the Moving Image. Obviously, this is no secret, but there are such strict rules about how you can draw Bugs Bunny, right? They have very, very strict rules about, like, how he looks in profile, and how he looks this way, so that there is that consistency. And that is the kind of uncanniness in your work, and as you said, you make it your own. Like, Porky Pig, your Porky Pig, doesn't really look like Porky Pig. They are slightly off on purpose, of course. As gory and violent and horrific as the content of the images are, you can really feel the exuberance of the practice in the work that you love doing it, because … I mean, they're still so beautiful, the work is still so beautiful.

TH: You know, the tragic part to all this is that I've been drawing these cartoon characters for years. I still can't do it! I can't get it right! It's inevitably different because I move my hand in a certain way.

KC: But I feel like that's you in it, right? That's your line in it. It has to be a little bit different.

TH: I mean, it's hard because you only have your hand. And especially if you're drawing. For instance, I have been copying Charlie Brown for many years. If you look at Charlie Brown, he's got basically one giant circle for the head. And one strand of hair. And to get that head just right in

that one stroke, it's just impossible. To mimic someone else's hand is absolutely exhausting. In some ways, it's harder the simpler the images are.

KC: Wow.

TH: It's way harder to grasp that kind of rhythm in the kind of lines that come through in cartoons. And I think a lot of these images are a little off because I can't resist not putting myself in here somehow.

KC: I think this is a good way to transition into the connection to Lawrence, right? Because I think that this question is: how much of yourself as an artist that you put into the work is something to consider when you're thinking about Lawrence's work. So, I'm just… I think it bears repeating, in case anybody may not be familiar with Lawrence's work, he is grouped as a conceptual artist, but he always describes himself as a materialist and a sculptor. And in the medium line of his work, it always reads. Language plus the materials referred to. There's a statement of intent that has followed Lawrence's work around since 1969, which he articulated as follows:

> 1. The artist may construct the piece.
> 2. The piece may be fabricated.
> 3. The piece need not be built.
>
> Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.

One of the things we could underscore about that is that Lawrence himself said that what this statement does is make it so that, let's say he's formulated a work, and it's a material relationship. His iteration, his execution of that work is equal to whatever else anybody else could come up with. And what you've described is kind of the opposite, right?

TH: Mm-hmm.

KC: You can never draw Charlie Brown the way Charles Schultz does. So there's something about Lawrence's work that takes his hand out of the meaning of the work. Not the presentation, right? Because the presentation is meticulously Lawrence's aesthetic. But that the meaning of the work does not reside in however it would be that he might construct or build or fabricate the work himself. So, that's a way of abstracting himself from the work, so that the work may be expressive. And it's certainly about a material relationship that can be very expressive, but it is never actually an expressionist

work. He has spoken about this, that his work is not about his own angst. And I think language is, in large part, Lawrence's way of making the work more abstract so that it isn't just expressive, or an expression of him. While it's not morphologically obvious, the connection between his text-based work and your paintings … one connection that I found is that using the cartoon language, that's also a way that you have abstracted yourself from what's being represented, because it's part of this common idiom. The image is already hyper-mediated.

TH: Yeah.

KC: Because it's this cartoon image that is kind of public domain, that has been passed down through generations and generations so that the violence is processed, not necessarily through you personally, but through these cartoon violence images. So, it seems to me that there's a way in which your use of cartoon signs is connected to the way that Lawrence seems to be using language as a form of abstraction. But I would love to hear how you think about the relationship of Lawrence's practice to yours. Specifically, the work that Lawrence's studio has loaned to show with yours, how you think that it relates to your work?

TH: I never thought of my work as a one-to-one relationship with Lawrence's work. His influence on me was me watching Lawrence being Lawrence an as a young adult. But also watching everyone at the studio. The complexity of what an artist is in Lawrence cannot be separated from all the people that I worked with, Alice, Kirsten, Bethany, Alyssa. For me, the studio is like a clock, there were so many moving gears to its operation and it works well when everyone is moving the gears and it is not a one person operation. I want to emphasize the importance of the support system, the behind the curtain efforts is tremendously crucial in the making of an artist. In fact, how many artists without any support would be able to continue working today? To speak specifically of Lawrence, he is not a 9-to-5 artist, then a father, then a partner, then takes the weekends off. He doesn't have these divisions. Anything and everything is just art for him, from hamburgers to politics. Everything had some type of significance. I think he lived in this kind of space, this spirit of perspective. Through his art, he wore these glasses that everything he was seeing could be interpreted. And those were the only glasses he wore all the time; there were no other glasses. Also, he made work that was a response to the present moment. He had a very acute sense of the present. He was able to create logic or make sense in some way of the present through his material. And I think that was the beauty of it. I do not think I have ever met anyone who was so consciously, actively trying to engage with the present. And that is what I learned watching him, responding to the present moment. I think the work I am making now is very much about my response to the present. Things were always in motion with Lawrence. Working at the studio never felt stagnant. It was just always moving. And I learned to move in my own ways as I watched the people in the studio move in their own ways. That's something I learned, that there was no division. There's no art in life. There's just art. Or there's just life.

KC: Yes.

TH: Also, I really loved the public freehold pieces, this concept of public domain, where art can be freely used, built, or fabricated by anyone; the idea behind it was basically an impetus to my collective work. I thought about it a lot. He wanted to erase the authorship, the kind of hierarchy. I really appreciate that spirit. It shows in his action.

KC: Yeah, generosity is a word that comes up with Lawrence again and again, that model of working that aspires to be somewhat ego-less. I'm thinking back to when he talks about the Johnny Appleseed model of making art. That you could just leave it by the side of the road, you just spread it around and leave it by the side of the road, you leave a book in a hotel room, and maybe somebody finds it. And it's just as good to spread it that way as it is to have it on the walls of a museum, maybe even better, right?

TH: Yeah.

KC: I just was wondering about the specific work that is in your show, WHEN COMPLETED AT A DISTANCE WHEN DELETED FROM THE EMISSION. How did that specific work come to be coupled with your paintings?

TH: Alice and Kirsten already knew my work—and me—which made the choice feel especially profound. I've known them since I was nineteen. We had conversations about how the exhibition would be realized and what works I would include. I trusted Alice and Kirsten to choose the work, and their insight and sensitivity made the selection not just fitting … their vast knowledge of Lawrence's work and their understanding of the conversation between Lawrence's voice and mine,

understanding the dialogue between Lawrence's practice and my own—it's two distinct languages that, when placed together, begin to echo and collide and unfold in unexpected ways.

KC: Well, I just have to say what is extremely poignant is if you could just describe how they're going to be installed, because I think it's really wonderful.

TH: Yes, I am going to be hand painting his work on the wall with red chalk and gel medium mixture. Kirsten and Alice asked if I would install the work myself. There is something about this gesture, painting his text, about me installing Lawrence's work—the work of the fellow artist in the show—a person who has greatly influenced my being … I was testing out the installation paint today and was thinking that I've never installed Lawrence's work before, even after those years … working there. It feels like more than just an installation. There's something about painting his work in order to have conversation with my paintings.

KC: Mm-hmm.

TH: I have the same hand that I painted my paintings and I'm painting his words. Which is kind of emotional to me, it's like a translation process taking place here. I feel like, in some ways, I am translating his work into the way I paint. Because it's inevitably, it's the same brushstrokes.

KC: Right.

TH: Same hand, but also just completed as distance because I'm completing it in some ways. I think this was a very thoughtful consideration from Alice and Kirsten. Also, there is a sound to this text that doesn't exist in my paintings.

KC: Oh, yeah!

TH: At a distance, you can't really hear well, but there is a faint noise at a distance, or maybe there's this kind of noise that fades away.

KC: Mm-hmm.

TH: And then to pair it with the second piece WHEN DELETED FROM THE EMISSION. It's also like something that was there but has been removed. It's not like it was never there. It was actually there and then removed. So in thinking about fading away in distance and sound, I thought of censorship,

KC: Well, that's exactly what I wrote down underneath WHEN DELETED FROM THE EMISSION, is that there is some idea of censoring in there, right? And emission as well, because it resonates with your images, because it's TV, right? I just think of the TV.

TH: Right. I think of the painting and hear nothing, but you can see the loud noise. There is complete suppression of sound in my work. The screaming, the yelling, the pain, the crying, the praying. They are all silent.

photograph by Dan Watkins

WHEN COMPLETED AT A DISTANCE (2006) | WHEN DELETED FROM THE EMISSION (2006)

KC: It's incredibly poignant and moving, especially this idea of distance, and of course we should mention that Lawrence died in 2021. And Lawrence is having a show at the same time as you are having a show. We just saw each other there at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery. So, I think that is very beautiful, that you're having this show with his work at the same time that he is having his show in his new gallery. And he is very distant to us, but his work is very present, as you said. And because it exists in language, and because it is messy in the way that you described, because it is constantly open to interpretation and argument. We can never fix what those words mean. That even though he's very distant, the work is still very present. It's something that is kind of a magic trick of the work, right?

TH: It really is. I think Lawrence's work only develops further the more you read it. It's one of these things, like magic.

KC: Yes, that's what Alice says, right? The work is as good or as bad as the receiver.

TH: Yes. I wanted to ask you because you also worked with Lawrence and came to know his work intimately and we met through Lawrence's studio. What was your impression of his work and him?

KC: You know, I don't know why I'm getting so emotional. He died a few years ago, but I don't

know why I was crying at the Gladstone opening, as well. And I don't know why I'm getting emotional about it, but during his memorial service, when Alice was giving a eulogy at the Whitney, Alice said that Lawrence was a special person. And it really is the case! I mean, it really was the case. And the way you described it, I never thought of it in those terms, but I'm glad that you formulated it that way. That there was no division for him between art and life, there was no gap, right? That it was just, I think we have to call it life.

TH: Yeah.

KC: And that he was very serious and sincere and devoted to processing the world as an artist, and that he took that job of being an artist as seriously as you could possibly take that job. If it makes sense. It was like every breath he took, as you said, it seemed to be infused with the spirit of.

TH: Mm-hmm.

KC: And it wasn't like a performance, right? It wasn't a hat that you put on, like now I'm going to be an artist, and now I'm going to be just Lawrence. I didn't spend as much time with him as you did, we didn't really socialize when I was there. I was there at art events, and I was there to go through his notebooks. But what struck me so much about the experience of going through his notebooks, and this was the biggest surprise to me, and it speaks to what you're talking about. The work, as you encounter the work in the world, the work is, to a certain degree, you could say it's impersonal. BROKEN OFF. You see that on a street. It doesn't have to have anything to do with Lawrence to mean something to a human who sees it.

TH: Yeah.

KC: Because it's not autobiographical. But my God, those notebooks are so intimate.

TH: Yeah.

KC: And that was the thing that shocked me. I wasn't expecting that the notebooks would be so personal. Because that was not how I was reading the work. I would never want to, as a critic, interpret the work autobiographically, it wouldn't seem to make sense to me, but the notebooks were filled with his life … like, the fortune cookies that he ate that day… I mean, just so many pictures of Kirsten, and the dog, and you and Bethany, like, just in there.

TH: Yes.

KC: But there was this thing he did to make the work more general, to make the work more abstract, in a way. And that was, I think, the language. To make the work more general, to take it from the specificity of him.

TH: Yeah, going back to thinking about the studio days. I remember … he used to take us, whoever was working that day, to Corner Bistro after work. I didn't realize this, but he would talk a lot about politics and human conditions. Looking back on it now, all those conversations were the work he was making. Things that he was talking to us about. Because he was thinking about it all day long.

KC: Right. Well, he was talking about what was happening in the world. Well, and that's the thing, that's the difference between Lawrence's work and propaganda. I mean, that's why it's not propaganda. Because whatever his opinion might be about that, he would present it as a material relationship. And then it's kind of up to the receiver.

TH: Yeah, I mean, it's almost like anti-propaganda in some ways, yes. He wanted to have a conversation with the audience, and he knew every single person could have a conversation. And he was totally 100% fine with however they understood it. It's just how they understood it.

KC: That's the connection to your participatory practice. Well, one of the things that he would say is that all art is created from anger, right?

TH: Well, I am angry. My therapist did say that ha-ha.

KC: Before we kind of wrap up, I did want to talk a little bit about your aspiration for, specifically, the large pieces. I hope I'm allowed to say this, but you're making them as a triptych. And they're the size of architecture, right? They're wall-sized. And I was wondering, in your perfect world, where would you want these to live? Is there a kind of space that you think that they should occupy?

TH: I don't have a place where they should occupy. The only place they are occupying is my studio at the moment. I want them to be seen together.

KC: That's the thing. Okay, so they are telling this story together.

TH: Yeah, I do want them all together in a space at some point. That's important to me.

KC: Is there a narrative arc between first strike, second, third strike?

TH: Yes, each one is foreshadowing the next one. *The First Strike* is a depiction of domestic violence, violence in private or intimate spaces, little to big things that are of every day. Violence that is all around you every day, but more specific to a certain situation. And then *The Second Strike* is a violence of the collective and the violence here is more structured imagery such as armed forces, robots, big tanks, bigger in scale, bigger numbers being affected by the violence. Then *The Third Strike* is the aftermath of this violence, which is the depiction of empty egg cartoon boxes to the riches. The disparate separation of the rich and the poor. Imagery of the praying and the desperate measures the creatures will go through to survive. And that's it. That's the end of the world. I do not know what would come after the third violence … it would just be a white canvas. Like, I don't even know what …

KC: That's the devastation, and then the end of the world. It's making me think a bit of, I don't know, Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire*, you know what I mean? Although you don't have the idyllic phase. You just have one violent phase begetting another, so there's no utopian image.

TH: One thing that you said in the beginning of the conversation about these paintings that I did think about a lot is that cartoons are redemptive, like, they die, and then they come back in the next episode like nothing happened.

KC: Yeah.

TH: When Wile E. Coyote falls off the cliff, for the ten thousandth time, he just, comes back up again and that makes it okay. I think that makes watching it okay, because you know the coyote's not really dead, he's not hurt.

KC: Yes.

TH: I wanted to stop that.

KC: Yes. Yes, and I think it comes through. It's consequential. Yeah, well, it's consequential violence, right? It is violence that has a violent end to it. There's no happy ending.

TH: Coyote dies.

KC: I think that that is what is, for the present, redemptive about your work, is that it renders. If

we're to take *The First Strike* as a kind of snapshot of our current reality, in some way it renders visible the fact that we are imperiled and besieged, and that this is our common fate. This is what is interesting to me, when at I look at *The First Strike*—it's not clear who the perpetrators are. Do you know what I mean?

TH: Yeah. Yeah.

KC: It's… there's no big bad guy, it's just everywhere and everybody is implicated. What is interesting, going back to Benjamin, and this question of how do we survive in a culture of barbarism, the fascist ideologue, right? The fascist propaganda would be to say that in a time when you are imperiled and besieged, you have to armor yourself against the attack. So you strengthen, and you harden your body, and then that is the kind of armored man, the phallus that is emerging in our current culture. I think the revelation of your work is that what we have to recognize is our common vulnerability and frailty. And what is important in the cycle you've presented in the show is that in Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies, there are aggressors and defenders. Those are kind of the buckets. There's Pepe Le Pew and Daffy Duck and Wile E. Coyote and Elmer Fudd, those are the aggressors. And then there's the defenders, like Bugs Bunny, and Tweety, and Jerry. And typically, they're happy stories because the aggressors always lose, and the defenders always somehow come out on top.

TH: Yeah.

KC: But what is clear in your painting is that there are no aggressors and defenders. Everybody is just subject to violence and hysteria and profound sadness. I mean, some of the most moving images are *Bugs Burial* and *Porkys Death.*

Porkys Death, 2025

Bugs Burial, 2025

TH: When I started drawing *Porkys Death*, I became really emotional. The pain Daffy was showing felt so real—it started to seep into me, like how my five-year-old niece was crying for Clifford.

KC: Tears shed in cartoons usually just make you laugh because they seem like crocodile tears, but these look like the deep, sincere emotions that you recognized in your five- year-old niece. Daffy and Bugs are suffering. There are no heroes and villains here. I wanted to read this quote by Madeline L'Engle because there's this collective vulnerability that I think that your work is showing. And there's a quote by the author that I've been reading to my daughter, Melody. And I just wanted to end with it, because I thought it was nice. She writes:

> When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown-up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability … To be alive is to be vulnerable.

I feel that something your work is forcing us to reckon with, in a very profound and striking way, this idea of our collective vulnerability. And what the hell are we gonna do about it?

TH: Yes, that's … that's the end, Kathy! What are we gonna do?

photograph by Dan Watkins

Princess Minky Momo Right Before Her Death, 2025 | *SpongeBob Summoned To The Council Of Human Rights*, 2025