

Review of "7 Deadly Sins: A Trump Dystopian Heptology" by Carl Mellor

"7 Deadly Sins: A Trump Dystopian Heptology," Tim Atseff's one-man show at the ArtRage Gallery, operates with a hybrid structure, blending the caricatures and provocation of political cartooning with the size and breadth of fine-art painting.

Most of the works in the exhibition connect Donald Trump to various sins including gluttony, vanity and lust. In this series of seven paintings, the pieces are large (48' by 60"), bold, full of vivid colors and depictions of Trump as a grotesque figure.

In "Envy," he appears with a greenish face and a stripped garment surely meant to suggest a prison uniform. In "Lust," he's a twisted creature sitting on a throne. In a third painting titled "Sloth," he sits on a couch watching television and holding a remote. The floor is littered with soda cans. "Wrath," meanwhile, portrays him as a swaggering bully.

However, even as Atseff offers an absurdist, sometimes comical view of Trump, that's not the sum total of the exhibit. The artist is deeply concerned about the impact of the Trump presidency on the operations of a free press and other media, on the environment, on the future of political discourse in the United States.

And so, Atseff works with motifs that signify the serious nature of examining Trump's tenure in the White House: police tape, American flags typically hung upside down, torn-up presidential seals, and more. In "Lust," the scales of justice are tossed on the floor. "Redact," a 2020 work not part of the "7 Deadly Sins" group, displays the U.S. Constitution in a parchment format. At the very bottom, Trump's signature blots out the names of the document's signers.

In addition, "Gluttony," one of the best pieces in the exhibit, presents a wild caricature of Trump plus red, white and colors and four brief texts embodying Trump's compulsive use of Twitter.

Clearly, Atseff benefits from working on a full-size canvas instead of the postage-stamp format available to most editorial cartoonists. Yet, size isn't a primary factor in the show's appeal. Rather, the ArtRage exhibition reflects the artist's ability to skillfully design and execute a painting.

Consider another 2020 work, "100 Seconds to Midnight." There Atseff references the work of a group of scientists who each year evaluate the threat to humanity's future posed by nuclear weapons, tensions on the world scene, militarism and obstinate leaders. The metaphor of a clock is used to communicate how close we are to total destruction.

Atseff deals with this concept in concrete terms. Indeed, the painting integrates multiple elements such as sticks of dynamite, an alarm clock, hogs crowding in to eat, and lemmings. At the top of the work, look for small images of President Trump and other politicians as well as "Kaboom" in cartoon lettering.

"Crown of Thorns," another 2020 artwork, takes a drastically different approach. It features a dark background and a shadowy figure who places a crown on his head. The oil seems to refer both to Donald Trump and to political thinkers who argue that democracy is an inefficient, outdated system.

Beyond that, the "7 Deadly Sins" paintings are accompanied by brief statements from Atseff and relevant quotes from Trump. In "Wrath," the artist states that "Trump, thou art a villainous, tickle-brained, bully-rag." It's followed by a statement from Trump emphasizing the importance of getting even with people. For "Vanity," Atseff wrote that "Trump, thou art, a beslubbering, motley-minded, lout." This insult is paired with four quotes in which Trump praises himself.

Among other things, the artist's comments spell out his contempt for Trump's persona and policies and make it clear that he's enraged by the events of the last three-and-a-half years.

The ArtRage exhibit isn't a premiere for "7 Deadly Sins." It was first hung during 2019 at the Center for Contemporary Political Art located in Washington, D. C. However, it does provide a Syracuse venue for an artist with many connections to our city. He was born here and later worked for the Syracuse daily newspapers as an editorial cartoonist, art and design director, and managing editor.

More importantly, the exhibition stands on its own merits. It's visually and topically interesting, provocative and visceral. In creating the "7 Deadly Sins" series, Atseff moved into crowded territory; a variety of artists working in various disciplines have addressed the Trump presidency. Yet, the current show at ArtRage has its own identity and plenty of visual appeal.

It's well worth a visit to the gallery, located at 505 Hawley Ave., which hosts the exhibit through October 4. ArtRage is open from noon to six p.m. on Thursday and Friday and from noon to four p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. Admission is free. Be prepared to wear a mask and practice social distancing. For more information, call the gallery at 315-218-5711 or go to www.artragegallery.org.

Carl Mellor wrote about visual arts for the Syracuse New Times from 1994 to June, 2019 when the paper closed. He continues to write about exhibits and artists in the Syracuse area.