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Provoking talent and eventful exhibitions



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Guest

THE ART MARKET

Mike Cockrill's paintings, on view at Kent Gallery on Manhattan's West 25th Street, seem at first sight to offer a glimpse of a Norman Rockwell-inflected American past. Look more closely, though, and unease seeps in. If Cockrill, who can handle a brush with a rare old-school painterliness, is under-recognised, I think it's because his work is subversive – and not just standard bohemian subversive. "I present something that's unacceptable," says Cockrill.

He began pushing buttons early. In the early 1980s, he collaborated with writer Judd Hughes on *The White Papers*, which used a comic-book format to present lurid recreations of the assassinations of President Kennedy and John Lennon. These are not the subjects of an artist who needs to be loved. He followed these up with something even more confrontational: paintings of young girls, which, though far from exploitative, carry an ambiguous charge. Cockrill was on the end of a bucket-load of bad publicity and his show was boycotted and picketed.

"As bad as the cartoon paintings were, they were clearly cartoons, clearly satirical," Cockrill told me not long after. "They offended people's sensibilities but nothing quite offended them like my work when I began painting girls." He added: "They were to do with my growing up. The girls were always laughing about something I didn't understand."

Why pick such loaded subject matter?

"I think the same thing applied to Balthus. Or even Bacon. The subject-matter question," Cockrill says. "Bacon denied the violence of his paintings. He says,

'No, it's just about paint'. My wife thinks that's disingenuous. I say, 'I totally understand what he's saying.'"

Really? "I think I did it for a little bit of shock value," Cockrill concedes. "I really wanted to see what the viewer would think."

A later show featured the little girls and guns. The girls are shooting clowns.

"I knew that if I painted a soldier shooting a civilian, which to me is the most horrific imagery of the 20th century, we've become numb to it," Cockrill says. "But if you draw an adorable child in her Sunday dress, shooting a clown, then 'OK, the girl must have a reason! So now you're siding with the authority, with the rifle.'"

Politics has come roaring back in the latest canvases, which still seem to picture a recent but unimaginably

nudes. And the critics made a big fuss. It looked very phallic. The French critics picked up on everything," he adds. "Of course! It was intentional."

Highly-charged art tinged with politics engages with its times and is coloured by them. What with the ghastliness in Iraq and the increasing corruption of innocence via the internet, Cockrill's anguished toying with the unacceptable seems timelier than ever.

Mike Cockrill's work has been under-recognised because of its subversive nature

distant past. One features a soldier as Saint Sebastian and figures from Kennedy's Camelot. "It's a metaphor for Iraq. Also the smiling politicians. The party goes on," Cockrill says. "Robert Kennedy went to my church. When I was a boy, he was there. We're talking about Langley, Virginia. I'm from right outside DC. The parents of everyone I knew worked for the Pentagon, the CIA. So when I go back into childhood imagery, you're going to have that."

The unsettlingly precocious kids are there too. One canvas, "Naughty", borrows its central image from a how-to-read book. "The mom is there. The dog has just taken the cupcake. The boy is pointing at the dog. But the hand of the boy in front of the girl reminded me of Manet's *'Le Déjeuner [sur l'herbe]'*," Cockrill says. "There was a man pointing with his finger. There were the