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GALLERY

JERRY KEARNS

DEEP COVER
The Deadly Art of Illusion



Madonna and Child, 1986

Don Desmett, Curator

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One of the most difficult feats in contemporary life is reconciling illusions and myths with reality. Most often they prove to be irreconcilable. Jerry Kearns speaks to this dilemma in his paintings. Layered with images from films, the comics, television, newspapers, and fine art masterpieces, his works are peopled with American icons – film stars and comic book heroes and heroines of mythical proportions.

In her essay for the catalogue for *Deep Cover*, Eleanor Heartney discusses Jerry Kearns' treatment of comic book imagery:

...the image Kearns borrows originated in East Coast Comics. These comics gained in popularity in the 50's as an earthier alternative to the superhero genre, and presented image of everyman and everywoman which encapsulate the gender ideals of that era. Buxom, leggy blonds, at once tough and feminine, provide romantic diversion for the muscular sharpshooters, gangsters and desperados who are both heroes and villains of the narratives. Yet, if they mimic the rigid gender stereotypes of the era, these histrionic and hypersexual images also have a subversive edge. They hint at the darker undercurrents flowing beneath the placid facade of 50's America and offer a visual image of the violent unconscious of the cold war era... At the same time, because these images belong to a recent past whose icons still contain a powerful resonance, the psychological world suggested by East Coast Comics is anything but alien to the contemporary viewer. Just distant enough in time to seem slightly old-fashioned, these images embody cultural assumptions which still guide our thinking today. Thus, they become useful tools for investigating our own states of mind. 1

Looking at a Jerry Kearns painting is something like watching several films simultaneously projected onto the same screen. Each layer brings out meanings hidden in the others; reality is in the sum of the parts. We can see this *Madonna and Child* from 1986, in which Kearns has merged a photo of Kim Phuc, the napalmed Vietnamese child whose image shook the nation's conscience, with Andy Warhol's

silkscreen of Marilyn Monroe. These, Kearns says, are the two most famous images of women from the 60's. We need both to understand that time in history. In *Brother*, he juxtaposes a crucifixion by Dürer with a comic style hero to refer to militant role of the Catholic church in Latin America. In *Affirmative Action* which depicts a young career woman shoveling sludge in a cityscape, Kearns speaks to the inequities still present in the workplace.

Kearns addresses the American myth of the rugged individualist in his painting titled *Down By Law*. Against a backdrop of the federal courthouse, a comic book cowboy swings from a rope and crashes through the surface of the painting. This is a corporate cowboy of the type made infamous by 80's celebrities such as Donald Trump, Ivan Boesky, and Michael Millikin. Eleanor Heartney says of this painting, "The juxtaposition of these images, along with the title of the work, suggests that there is a basic conflict between the cherished ideal of American manhood and the rule of law. Elegantly and eloquently, Kearns reminds us that democracy requires such unmacho qualities as the submission to common rule and a recognition of the rights of others." 2

Jerry Kearns has been the recipient of the Prix de Rome, as well as grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the Massachusetts State Arts Council. His works are in numerous private and public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; the IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, Valencia, Spain; and the National Gallery in Berlin. Kearns has had solo exhibitions at Kent Fine Art, and Exit Art in New York; at the Meyers/Bloom Gallery in Los Angeles; Galeries Fahnemann in Berlin; and at Galeria Temple in Valencia, Spain, among others. *Deep Cover: The Deadly Art of Illusion* was organized by Don Desmett for Tyler Galleries, Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pa, with support from Kent Fine Art, Inc., in New York and from Tyler Galleries.

1. Heartney, Eleanor, "Deep Cover: The Deadly Art of Illusion," Jerry Kearns, *Deep Cover: The Deadly Art of Illusion*, Exhibition Catalogue published by Tyler Galleries, Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pa., 1991, p. 32

2. Heartney, "Deep Cover", p. 32