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Timothy Curtis: Facial Recognition

BY ALEX BAKER



Together We Might Get Away, 2019, oil on canvas, 244 × 183 cm. Unless otherwise stated, images courtesy the artist and albertz benda, New York.



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION



AGUA tag wicket, 2002, spray paint on tile, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

Whether or not you were tuned into the nuances of early 21st-century Philadelphia graffiti, chances are that if you lived in or visited the city during that time you would have caught a glimpse of at least one of AGUA's tags or throwups adorning the most daring, often dizzyingly high locations. Originally from Southwest Philadelphia, Timothy Curtis, also known as AGUA, eventually called Philadelphia's Kensington neighborhood home before serving more than seven years in a Pennsylvania state prison from 2008 to 2015. Curtis's trajectory from graffiti writing to prison to studio art has been marked by intensity, difficulty, sorrow, and elation—all of the complexities and contradictions of the human experience when engaged in the pursuit of painting one's name on as many surfaces as possible, at any cost.

Curtis treated his time in prison as a moment for intense education in art history, and a way to build on drawing and painting skills he developed as a graffiti writer—in other words, an opportunity to self-actualize and become the artist he knew was inside of him. Historical awareness was not a foreign concept to Curtis, as he was familiar with the history of graffiti dating back to the 1970s, from the handstyles of legendary writers to how styles reflected regional sensibilities. However, if he was going to evolve as an artist and move beyond graffiti, he realized that he had to acquire another body of knowledge. Curtis educated himself on every era of art, reading books and periodicals, requesting specific

materials that the library did not have, and receiving contemporary publications from his friends outside in his pursuit of edification.

Sensing that his future survival would be contingent on his ability to become a professional artist, Curtis made an all-out effort to hone his skills. By 2013, Curtis became heavily involved in the first prison-wide mural program, in which he showcased his breadth of art historical knowledge, with works especially inspired by retro graphic design and the paintings of Philadelphia-born Stuart Davis. Curtis led a team of fellow inmates in painting a number of monumental, site-specific pieces—an effort that proved transformative for the facility and the morale of its occupants.

Curtis's fascination with drawing and painting faces evolved on the streets of Philadelphia in the late 1990s, when he was a young graffiti writer. In combining a "wild style" version of his AGUA tag (known as a "wicket")—featuring nearly illegible letterforms—with an expressive face, Curtis developed his own argot, a "secret, underworld handshake" that only diehard fellow writers would be able to read and recognize as his. Curtis notes that the wicket/face combination is a 1970s graffiti creation—an adaptation of the



Portrait of the artist in front of *Destroy Somerset*, 2015, acrylic paint and floor wax on wall, 457.2 x 2,286 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Harvey Ball-designed smiley face popular at the time, which Curtis appropriated and made his own. Curtis has developed the face to an extreme degree of nuance, now possessing an inventory of over 8,000 original character face types. These now serve as an arsenal of images from which he continually references in the creation of new work. While incarcerated, the culmination of Curtis's catalogue of faces took the form of immense drawings comprising many sheets of paper positioned together. One of these works measures 2.74 by 3.35 meters and depicts a community of more than 400 motley countenances. This drawing will be exhibited in the group show "The Pencil Is a Key: Drawings by Incarcerated Artists" at the Drawing Center, New York, this October.

The patchwork grounds of Curtis's recent face paintings explore the surface/ground relationship of the graffiti experience. These works—portraying groups of faces painted in black, overlaid on



Untitled, 2019, acrylic and oil on canvas, 289.5×487.5 cm.

washy, buffed-out grounds of blues, grays, reds, pinks, oranges, and beiges—evoke the palimpsest that forms the basis of all graffiti. Wall writing is in a constant state of evolution and change due to the actions of fellow writers and graffiti removal (“buff”) squads who, more often than not, allow traces of past efforts to remain visible. In these paintings, Curtis builds on aspects of Barry McGee’s gallery-based art of the early 2000s, which explored the relationship between tagging and buffing.

Currently, Curtis continues to explore faces but has moved into other imagery as well. He has also embraced oil paint and oil stick as his media of choice, moving away from acrylic. Curtis’s art exists at the intersection of drawing and painting. While line-making is the backbone of his work owing to the affinity for the tag, even as a graffiti writer, Curtis excelled at painting colorful pieces—a skill he continued to sharpen in prison through murals—which foretold his present ease in combining linear elements with painted color. Recent paintings feature bicycles, woven prison bars intertwined with body parts, and limbs embracing peace signs in a hybrid version of the universal symbol of recycling. As an adolescent, Curtis was a bicycle messenger for six years and views the bicycle as both a symbol of freedom and a symbol of deference to deceased friends who were also bike enthusiasts.

In other paintings with darker, midnight-blue grounds, Curtis incorporates fine-line scratching into the surface, creating an illusionary backdrop for the central subject of the work. In *Blues Prisoners, No. 1* (2019), Curtis utilizes this scratched-ground technique and paints a scaffolding of broken prison bars from which bodies seemingly emerge. Scratched tally marks nearly hidden in the center of the painting suggest the way prisoners count the passing of time by etching onto the walls of cells. While Curtis’s line work and

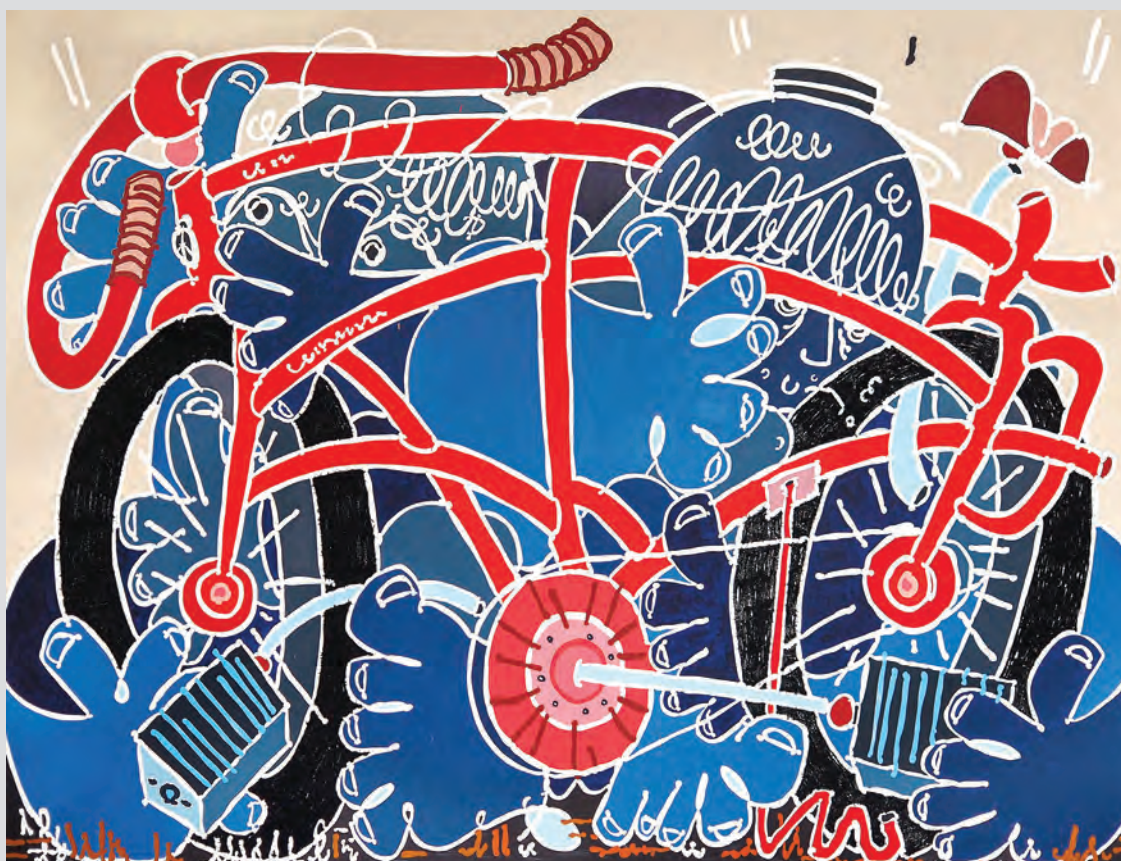
affinity for dark, matte surfaces resonates with Keith Haring's subway chalk drawings, the fragmented, heaped-together human figures recall Philip Guston's late paintings in terms of subject matter, if not execution.

Delving into art history and expounding on his graffiti foundations were avenues of self-directed learning that Curtis pursued in prison. There, he realized that graffiti writers share a kind of common ground with artists such as Pablo Picasso and Willem de Kooning. The skill in creating a particular tag style or canonical abstract painting stems from the same sense of embodiment, muscle memory, and gestural fluidity. By synthesizing these traditions and recognizing that graffiti is a part of the same continuum as so-called fine or high art, Curtis is in a promising place to establish an enduring practice.

While Curtis has achieved sudden success since gaining his freedom in November 2015—with a 2017 solo exhibition at Kaikai Kiki's Hidari Zingaro Gallery in Tokyo, to name one example—it is his inclusion in the aforementioned exhibition at the Drawing Center that might be the highlight, to date, of his meteoric rise. "The Pencil Is a Key," features a wide range of artists, from the 19th century to the present, who created drawings while incarcerated, such as political prisoners, captives of the Soviet Gulag system, the mentally ill confined to asylums, Japanese-American artists held in US internment camps during World War II, and inmates within the contemporary American penal system. As part of a diverse array of artists including Gustave Courbet, Egon Schiele, Otto Dix, Max Ernst,



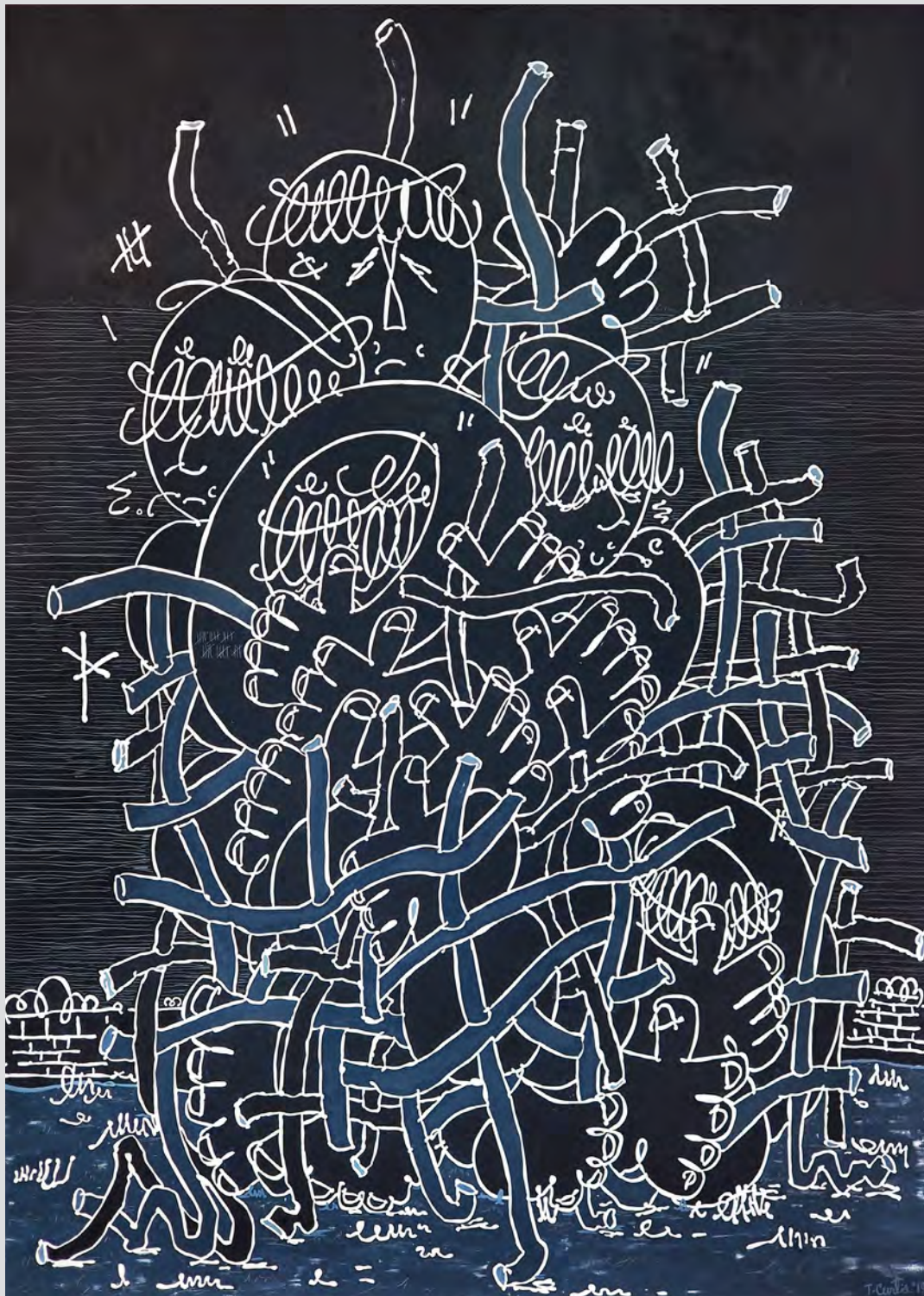
Peace Recycle, 2019, oil stick and oil paint on canvas, 152.4×121.9 cm.



Forever On Route, 2019, oil and rubber on canvas, 289.5×396 cm.

Ruth Asawa, Martín Ramírez, and former Black Panther Herman Wallace, Curtis finds himself among the greats he had read about during art history sessions while incarcerated. Just three-and-a-half years out of prison, Curtis's aspirations, the result of deep focus and intention, have come to startling fruition.

ALEX BAKER is gallery director at Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia. Formerly senior curator of contemporary art at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne; curator of contemporary art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; and associate curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, he has organized exhibitions with artists including Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Julian Martin, Eamon Ore-Giron, Tristin Lowe, Ricky Swallow, Harrell Fletcher, Ranjani Shettar, Robert Ryman, Laylah Ali, Ellen Harvey, Barry McGee, Margaret Kilgallen, and Chris Johanson, among others.



Blues Prisoners, No. 1, 2019, oil on canvas, 213.4×243.8 cm. Courtesy the artist.