

Umar Rashid

Ancien Regime Change part 2. En Germinal : Les printemps de guerre.

Apr 13 — May 4, 2022 | Paris, Turenne (Front Space)

Almine Rech Paris is pleased to present *Ancien Regime Change Part Two. En Germinal: Les Printemps de Guerre*, the first solo exhibition of Los Angeles-based artist Umar Rashid (also known as Frohawk Two Feathers), opening on April 13, from 11am-8pm, and running through May 04, 2022.

In *Ancien Regime Change Part Two. En Germinal: Les Printemps de Guerre*, the year is 1796 and Rashid's Frenglish Empire has sent commanders on colonial reconnaissance missions to discover new territories and countries to occupy. Unlike many of his shows, whose fictitious events take place on the gallery's home soil (a Los Angeles show might detail the imagined wars between the Tongva population of LA and the Frenglish Empire, for instance), Rashid moves this show's subjects out of France's domestic borders, expanding his focus to the fringe of the Frenglish Empire, following the battles taking place in four locales, all while Frenglad attempts to make inroads in new locations, widen its colonial borders, and maintain its relevance as a superpower.

In Quebec, New Caledonia, Mauritania, and the island of Martinique, the Frenglish armies face unique challenges depending on the varied locales, weather, landscapes—and resistance forces. Rashid's monumental acrylic paintings feature sceneries that are bright and bold, packed with his signature cacophony of colors, textures, stylized figures, historical knockoffs, and pop culture asides—always with a keen wit and biting humor. Numerous battles occur in each location, showcasing both the natural landscapes as well as the resistance armies rising up to fight off the faltering Frenglish. In New Caledonia, for instance, the Frenglish navy stops to resupply and the Kanak people lure them to the top of a volcano, while those in Martinique fight a coastal battle, facing the Frenglish sea power with help from Maman Dlo. In Mauritania, the Frenglish armies try to establish trading posts, but their cannons get stuck in the sand just as they've agreed to a duel with a wealthy Mauritanian trade polity. And in Quebec, the landscape is blanketed in a snowstorm, as the Abenaki fight with the impending Frenglish armies, each party abetted by sci-fi snow creatures and lasers abound.

There is a push and pull between humor and protest underlying all of Rashid's work. Simply read the titles of his paintings or observe just one corner of them to get a sense of this. There are cosmological associations through his work as well—in the painting of New Caledonia, a priest hovers ominously above a volcano, holding a Kanak baby in his hands, while a pair of Black and white Jesuses look on in dismay from their respective Pontiac Firebird and Peugeot sportscar in space above.

This installment of *Ancien Regime Change* is the second part in a series of six related shows. *Part Two* follows his Half Gallery show in New York (titled *Ancien Regime Change: Part One. Can You Dig It? A Dirge For Cyrus And His Band Of Warriors*) and proceeds the Galerie Cokkie Snoei show in Rotterdam (titled *Ancien Regime Change: Part Three. The Man who Sold the World*), which will focus on the Dutch East India company. As the title of the series suggests (*Ancien Regime Change*), this tells the story of the last regime change before a string of anticolonial revolts, followed by a resurgence of empire and imperialism. It captures a liminal time of change for Frengland and the world, as colonizers scramble to assert power and as Indigenous kingdoms battle to maintain autonomy, self-governance, and safety for their people and land.

Rashid's imagined union of France and England began over a decade ago and he has been crafting the history of empire since. He is both a master storyteller and an ardent historian in that the stories featured in his shows are inspired by actual events, but they are re-envisioned and updated. In doing so, he does not right history's wrongs—instead, he uses his art to explore and highlight some of the histories that are lesser known. He also refocuses viewers' attention on the revolts, rebellions, and uprisings of colonized and enslaved populations in addition to recasting history with people of color, thus reimagining power structures and highlighting the very social construct of race.

Rashid illustrates an active push against the colonial agenda and offers some victories to those resistance movements throughout. In his paintings, he foregrounds the faces, voices, and stories of people who were colonized and enslaved—those whose stories are not often reflected in history books. Rashid does not simply paint victims either, as they are self-possessed, active, armed, and dangerous. In one portrait, Rashid uses himself as a model for Harlem Carl (a kind of anagram and nod to Charlemagne), making a subtle self-portrait, and tying the present inextricably to the past, much as he does conceptually with his work. Through his art, he encourages viewers to rethink what they know about history—by incorporating historical allusions and newly imagined histories, melding what we know with the fantastical—an Afrofuturist revisionist look at the time continuum.

To be clear, Rashid does not claim a superior moral high ground to France or England through his conception of Frengland. As he shared, “By making these narratives, I am learning more and applying that knowledge. Ultimately what I am trying to do is to learn why these things have taken place and to share how incredibly complicated and nuanced they all are. This is not so much a judgment call, but more so a mashup of what has happened during this whole period of revolt. However, it is impossible not to judge the past with reference to the now, and so, my journey into our collective unknown future will continue indefinitely, and thus I'm committed to the discovery and the action.”

- Ellen C. Caldwell, writer, educator, and art historian