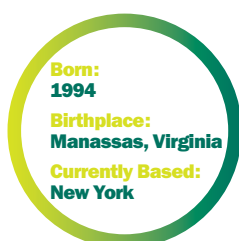


TREY ABDELLA



A new kind of
bad-boy artist.

► In Trey Abdella's gargantuan paintings, the American Dream is alive and well – or at least hooked up to some kind of terrible machine invented in a moment of desperation, keeping the blood pumping if only by a technicality. His beautiful blond figures have bright-blue eyes, but no warmth; their grayish skin looks corpse-like.

Abdella grew up in West Virginia, surrounded by poverty and people who would eventually vote to “Make America Great Again.” He wound up in New York in 2013 after following a former girlfriend who had stood out in their art department at West Virginia University for her unusual ambition. In the city, Abdella transferred to the School of Visual Arts and majored in illustration; the way his pictures tell stories – often, they veer past the illustrative toward the cinematic – betrays this background.

But every point has a counterpoint in Abdella's work, a clear sign of his contrarian impulse. In every vision of blissful Americana, a dark side bubbles to the surface, so that no painting is ever just an illustration. Instead, each scene – a stressed blonde at Christmas, some men gone fishin', a jack-o'-lantern so menacing that one worries about the woman in the painting who carved it – gets either ripped open or patched over via some kind of sculptural intervention. *Time Doesn't Heal All Wounds* (2022) is an 8-foot-tall painting of cherry pie, with a glistening twinkle courtesy of a 3D hologram fan. This moment of magic is so spectacularly fake, and so uninterested in being a convincing illusion, that you'd be a fool to be seduced by the sheen.

The work can be described as so 1950s (Norman Rockwell paintings and Sears catalogs both provide source imagery); so 1980s (for its loudness and size, and a bad-boy



Trey Abdella: *Under the Skin*, 2023.

Time Doesn't Heal All Wounds, 2022.



energy that, impressively, does not reek of privilege); and so 1990s (for its indebtedness to David Lynch, as well as to Abdella's own childhood). All this speaks to the way his subject, American decline, feels both timeless and timely.

For his breakout two-venue gallery show in New York this past fall – titled “Under the Skin,” at David Lewis and Vito Schnabel – Abdella focused on paintings that look like advertisements, only dirty. Their surfaces are rough, not shiny. The star of the show was an enormous sculpture that visualized the exhibition's title rather literally: a 10-foot-tall depiction of skin in cross-section that resembles a slice of cake with layers of veins, hair follicles, and red blood cells. A bottom layer gives way to dirt brimming with burrowing bunnies in the form of holograms, animatronics, and a Pez dispenser. In the center of it all, a motorized train does laps on a track. The crowning touch is a giant mosquito with a lava lamp on its thorax; the whole thing is made of a bunch of dumb American junk.

Abdella's studio in the Carroll Gardens neighborhood of Brooklyn is full of such stuff, like a plastic dollhouse and a fake deer that hunters use for shooting practice (“I grew up with deer carcasses all over my house,” he explained). In describing the way he begins paintings with a plan but then “falls down rabbit holes” – like the time he spent hours on YouTube and in an aquarium store to figure out how to get a painting, *Sealed with a Kiss* (2023), to pump blood – Abdella revealed himself as a true iconoclast. He seems to find catharsis in taking images of America and then fucking them up. Or, better yet, setting them straight.

—Emily Watlington

Photos: Shark Senesac/Courtesy David Lewis Gallery and Vito Schnabel Gallery, New York (2)