

# American Gothic

A 90<sup>th</sup> year appreciation



Aldobranti  
(editor)







## **foreword**

There's a party going on.

Grant Wood made the painting *American Gothic* in 1930 to record a building — surviving from the early settlement of Iowa — and found neighbors and relations to model the kind of people who might have lived there, back in the day. The image has a clear eye for conservation issues across issues of farm implements, haberdashery and architecture. An international crowd of artists have taken up the challenge to respond to this image as gifts to mark this 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Come on in, the guest of honour is about to speak...

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2020

THEY TELL ME that I am 90 years old. That is a good age but means too that most of the people — sights — sounds that I grew up with are now gone and it is strange to celebrate those changes. And what is it to be 90? The house was already old before my Mr Wood saw it first in Eldon IA, near 50 years old in an unforgiving midwest climate, I guess they've had to replace those glazing bars a few times since.

Whoever these two people may be, painted in 1930 but harking back to an earlier time, I can tell you that they have seen a dizzying rate of change, I know I have. When the railroad came, as a stop on the CRI&P Limited, big-city slickers, travelling salesmen, revival speakers and all sorts could tip up in Eldon and the townsfolk might attend magic-lantern shows to learn of foreign countries and mission work. From 1887 they can enjoy sacred and popular music recordings on an Edison phonograph. George Eastman's successful promotion of a roll-film developing service at the same time dramatically expanded the scope of domestic photography and eliminated the long exposure times and rictus looks of tin-type photographs. In the same time the economic opportunities for any small town were increasingly tied to greater market forces, the 1890's were tumultuous times with waves of bank failures nearly every other year. The hayfork wielding man is not wearing a farm worker's shirt and might be a clerical or professional type — his job is by no means secure. The Wall Street crash in the fall of 1929, triggered a slow and inexorable decline in economic activity; the Great Depression lasting almost all the 1930's meant that farm prices and farmers' incomes fell by near two-thirds over the decade. For Mr Wood it was probably a question of painting to keep his spirits up and very likely to keep his mother, Mrs Hattie Wood cheerful too. The radio brought a whole spectrum of content from popular music to revival preaching and the cinema from 1927 was "talkies". A later portrait of his mother figured a telephone as an unwelcome intruder into her life, 'Woman with Flowers' (1929).

Can you hear me at the back there? Is this too much conceit, can a picture speak and be heard? Where do the words come from to seed the feelings and then the thoughts that first good Iowa people had for me; then the likes of you, artists and critics? Well I seem to have your attention.

So whose voice can this be — the folks portrayed? — Mr Dibble who got this house built in 1882 would have had to have been 94 or so when Mr Wood turned up on the porch and Mr Wood records that he got permission to sketch from Mrs Selma Jones-Johnston. There's Miss Nan Wood and Doc' McKeeby; Miss Nan was insistent that her brother didn't paint her as an old maid. So here I am speaking in two voices, feminine and masculine, I will have some fun and keep you guessing. Though to be absolutely clear: the feminine influence around this Eldon house is that of a dutiful spinster daughter keeping house for her father. Miss Nan was most sure on that point.

But in the end I cannot stop you having your own fun with me. I do try to keep up with things and M'sieur Barthes tells me not only Mr Wood is dead but also my past and provenance are of no great importance. You will see what you want to see — you want hostility in our gaze? Or the frozen ennui of the long exposure photograph? You will hear the voice and words that you want to hear. Which may help in part to answer my question; now that Mr Wood is gone, this cannot be his voice – I'll have one of my own, or more than one! One for each of you but come on then, let us take a look at the works I selected from the gifts you brought on this happy day:

It does need a reminder that in any age, were it the 1880's or the 1930's, before the invention of penicillin, sickness and death often went together. And as for viruses, just remember that the 1920 influenza pandemic took out 675,000 Americans – notions of hygiene and social distancing were perhaps not so well understood. **Chris Pig**'s account of grief may seem lightweight but these young children are scarcely less aware of death than their 1930's counterparts. The linocut carries the sombre content and the artist has managed to demonstrate the same quiet warmth of feeling for his children as Mr Wood showed for his fellow Iowans through his later paintings.

The next three images seem to belong together thematically as well as stylistically. Society shows in any age the strains experienced in these conditions of rapid change. **Roland Borzelleca** picks up on contemporary consumerism, an attempt to find in fast food or disposable luxuries the fragile possibility to ease the feelings of hurt and dismay brought by disruption and failure.

More recently the totem of national prosperity driven through a program of wider home ownership caused the financial collapse of 2008. **Andrea Mikyska** amply shows the dystopic qualities of that

period with faceless realtors driving a new foreclosure on the latter day mortgagors of the Dibble house.

**Michelle Devlin** uses this same freedom of media to explore the dislocation and communication difficulties of the present time. The economic hurt done to ordinary folk by a virus is of the same kind as the austerity programs that characterized neo-liberal government responses to that financial collapse.

The team **Pink and grAy** has not forgotten these ordinary people but takes the enforced isolations of Lockdown as a stimulus to re-evaluate their development process. Their work showcased here celebrates the anonymous workers who service all our stays in hotels, pick litter in open spaces, sanitize everywhere on public transport systems, and scour all the many places which are being cleaned far more frequently than in former times.

These dystopian views are of course nothing new: having failed to learn from history, we see it come around again. **Margo Leonard** reminds us of the Punk Rock scene and the age-specific alienation of unemployed, disenfranchised youth. Mr Wood was hardly a revolutionary but he saw the rise of totalitarianism and moved against it in his national arena: the two enslaved figures in the background, and the corpse hanging in a noose in ‘Parson Weem’s Fable’ (1939) are unequivocal. Parson Weem landed him a whipping — dodged by young George Washington — as a ‘parasitic pinko’ from the Chicago Tribune.

Some folks saw satire in American Gothic but I might suggest that if it is satire that you want, take a look at ‘Daughters of Revolution’ (1932): these self-important ladies, smug looks, drinking *tea* [ for sakes! ], “those Tory gals” had riled him when they complained of his getting a war-memorial window made in Germany. He has reproduced the iconic, revolutionary picture ‘Washington crossing the Delaware’ by Emanuel Leutze – a *German* Artist. It just goes to show that revenge is a dish best eaten cold: the fuss about the window was back in 1927.

And next up, **Paolo di Paolo** points back to Dorothea Lange’s photograph ‘Migrant Mother’. Lange was working for the Farm Security Administration set up (1937) to funnel New Deal funds into the

hard hit farms of the Midwest. I recall too that Gordon Parks, a black FSA photographer satirically remade ‘American Gothic’ (1948) by posing a black charwoman with mop and pail against a US flag. Parks continued onto a brilliant career as a photojournalist for LIFE magazine and covered many stories for the underclasses of American society.

The Eldon house was an example of Carpenter Gothic, a tradition for local craftsmen to emulate the stylistic features of the Gothic Revival and was also the earliest architectural influence on new house building for arriving settlers. When Mr Wood spotted the Dibble house that day in 1930 it already looked outdated but he was an inveterate collector of 19<sup>th</sup> century memorabilia. It is not fair to describe him as reactionary but rather he was a conservationist. In the UK **Nicola Hepworth** makes a study of prefabricated churches, constructed of corrugated iron complete with “gothic windows” – economically downsized – for the use of rapidly growing populations.

Miss Nan always said that she hoped to model a spinster lady whose devotion to a Church group was central. Mr Wood painted a steeple on the sky-line which seems to show that the population of Eldon had formalised their church’s accommodation.

The Gothic Revival had been a conscious reaction to neo-classical architecture but in Europe the desperate need for housing and reconstruction after WW2 meant that styles of architecture that used construction materials efficiently would take the lead. **Jane Walker** reimagines the double portrait of another relationship set against a large social housing project under the gray skies of northern Britain. I see a bridge developing growing from the social commentary of the first works I selected to match the painted social commentary on those 1880’s folk through a new class of people very much at the mercy of market forces.

Going forward therefore, in this section of artworks I begin to interrogate the relationship that is being shown, the strengths and weaknesses – the players involved. Many contributors are commenting on the nature of the dual portrait as a direct embodiment of the relationship revealed.

In this transition of mood, **Pauline Rigby** plays out the architectural interest of an interesting building and finds time to check the different relationships, perhaps with housepets that have sustained



these lockdown days. Rigby echoes the forward thrust of the farmer's hand with hayfork in the errant path of the second cat.

**Aldobranti** is querying the presence of an Other in any relationship. Do we ever know and value the significant other, the lover, the brother, the mother for their difference or do we look for a comfortable sameness and feel aggrieved in the absence of this comfort?

There are aggravations in any relationship and these are best explored in their inception. **Dina Sioufi** looks at the structural element of a tree to question strength – not to forget that the tracery of a gothic window has its origins in Arabic art to represent the branching growth of trees – but perhaps to find absence and separation, their togetherness challenged by their divergent gaze. Miss Nan's spinster is steadfast in her refusal of direct engagement, Miss Nan seems to have been silent on her thought processes while sitting for this portrait though Mr Wood had definitely promised she would not be recognisable.

To encourage communication and discussion, you in the modern age have to work uphill against the pressure to remain in the unquestioning comfort of your electronic bubbles. Here is **Rowena Comrie** to reveal a couple making good use of their time together in the non-space of travel in a mass transit system. Better to share something found on a screen with the person sitting next to you than with the nebulous other of the Cloud.

**Brut Carniollus** brings this discussion of communications technology back into another non-space of this lockdown time to remind that the cell phone must remain a tool not a crutch. His use of preserving jars explores the cell phone's limited potential for Social Connection in the reality of Physical Distancing; through sheets of glass and indistinctly heard words of endearment.

For the women folk of Eldon the fall was a great time for pickling and preserving and **Penny Payne** develops a feminist understanding of the expression of the young woman in her picture and the possible intent of her gaze. Her project, growing Iowan corn is a neat reference back to the geraniums and sansevieria on the porch of the Dibble house – keeping houseplants alive was a contemporary marker for domestic skills.

**Ian Cook**, again digs deeper and using serial painting techniques tries to evaluate the relative personalities and strengths of each partner. Each repainting proceeds by a layer of abstraction and merging of gender characteristics. Relationships are two sided of course and mutual understanding will go a long way in a climate of empathy and compassion.

It does seem that Mr Wood was not happy in himself and his personal life bordered on the disastrous in a short-lived marriage after his mom, Mrs Hattie Wood died. His paintings were not short of a queer iconography, a sly camp that insiders might read but **Betsy van Die** tries here to offer some redress and imagines balm for his sadness in the stifled expression of his sexuality. Perhaps Mr Wood was projecting through the spinster figure, to predict some future joy in life: that wayward twist of hair finding itself set free in a new relationship.

It seems valuable to draw this collection to a close with a portrayal of a happy couple in the present age, the irreplaceable partnership from **Ana Miljkovac** inspires. Mr Wood portrayed the working relationship of a father and dutiful daughter but it is understandable that the image is so readily taken for a marriage. Certainly Mr Wood was pretty lax about correcting the mistake. But in that understanding the positivity offered by **Japo Okworobu** is fitting, that the relationship of two close people delivers a strength that is greater in the summing of its parts.

So that's the lot. This collection has run the gamut from death to new life, from social history through architecture to relationships.

The problem of getting old is that I have seen all shades of opinion come and go, my stock goes up and down – it's kind of nice that you people have turned up for this party, in a different age you might have stayed away, I get cynical. But you have all had different opinions about this work and the good people who're going to print up this birthday collection want to make it clear that they take no responsibility to ensure the veracity of what you've had to say. Those guys say *Caveat Emptor*. Well for that matter, half the things I say are pretty preposterous but what do you expect from a cranky 90 year old? I say *Cave Canem!*

## Chris Pig

I had been thinking about a response to Grant Wood's painting for a while when my daughter's goldfish died. I dug the hole for the body to be interred into and the kids lined up to pay their respects. Frank crossed his hands in front of him and said "I'd just like to say a few words." In that moment I knew I had my narrative. The kids were dressed in their jimjams at the time, I added the funerary attire. They are lined up, confronting the viewer, just as they do in American Gothic. There is also a nod to Wes Andersen in that horizontal line-up. I am the headless figure to the right of the composition, the adult facilitator, outside of their grief for the dead goldfish. Some see the image as comic but I was trying to imbue their feelings with the gravitas they deserved.



## **Roland Borzelleca**

I wanted the immediacy of values. More importantly, lack of American values. Grant Wood wanted a positive statement about such values. What represents the iconic yet disposable facade more than McDonalds? Covid 19 has forced me to use alternative materials. I sought contemporary substitutes - none signifies world franchise domination more than McDonalds. A begrudging acknowledgement of what American society, in fact most societies, can reach for, find comfort in. As a sufferer of aphasia, the disconnect I experience between words, thoughts and verbalising brings my work into sharp focus. The symmetry I am not permitted can be created as a collage. The original painting reflected a world seen through the prism of depression. This same emotional ache is now and for the foreseeable future. Two characters, two shapes, close, linked but why. The painting draws us into the strange sedate nature of the individuals. The soft horror of its composition. My collage is placing centre stage and prominently an American consumer staple, whilst also declaring its own horror. The colours pull it apart but in a controlled environment. The balance of shape and colour are as important as the construction of a rural scene with people who darkly challenge our concepts of normality.





## Andrea Mikyska

My research starts with exploring Grant Wood's past as a painter and what leads him to create this figurative painting even when he was focusing on landscapes. I believe he never thought about making the iconic rural capture of American values. He was simply interested in traditions and values in the Great Depression after 1929. I think he wanted to find something archaic in American hearts and dreams and bring conservative values into the spotlight through this painting and put some hope for the next living. Every part of this painting has some specific connotation, if Grant wanted to symbolize owning something he placed woman and man of the front of the house. My owners are less specific as gender, and owning rules have changed referring to the economic and ecologic crisis. Another symbol in the painting may refer to surviving as he wanted to show us all that brave and hard work when the people can work together and be proud of their roots.

I would like to make a satire of our age, with animals owning the houses, with no face realty estate agents, with no nice garden in the front of the house and juicy fruit. Our age is different, but the message is still the same, showing the current situation just like it is and have a little faith in yourselves.

I'm used to doing more or less research before each process, depending on how deep I want to go. The background of the work is often very important so that we can plant it to this day. I used a 3D program that can also be used for drawing, but modern technology came to me as an important part of my response.

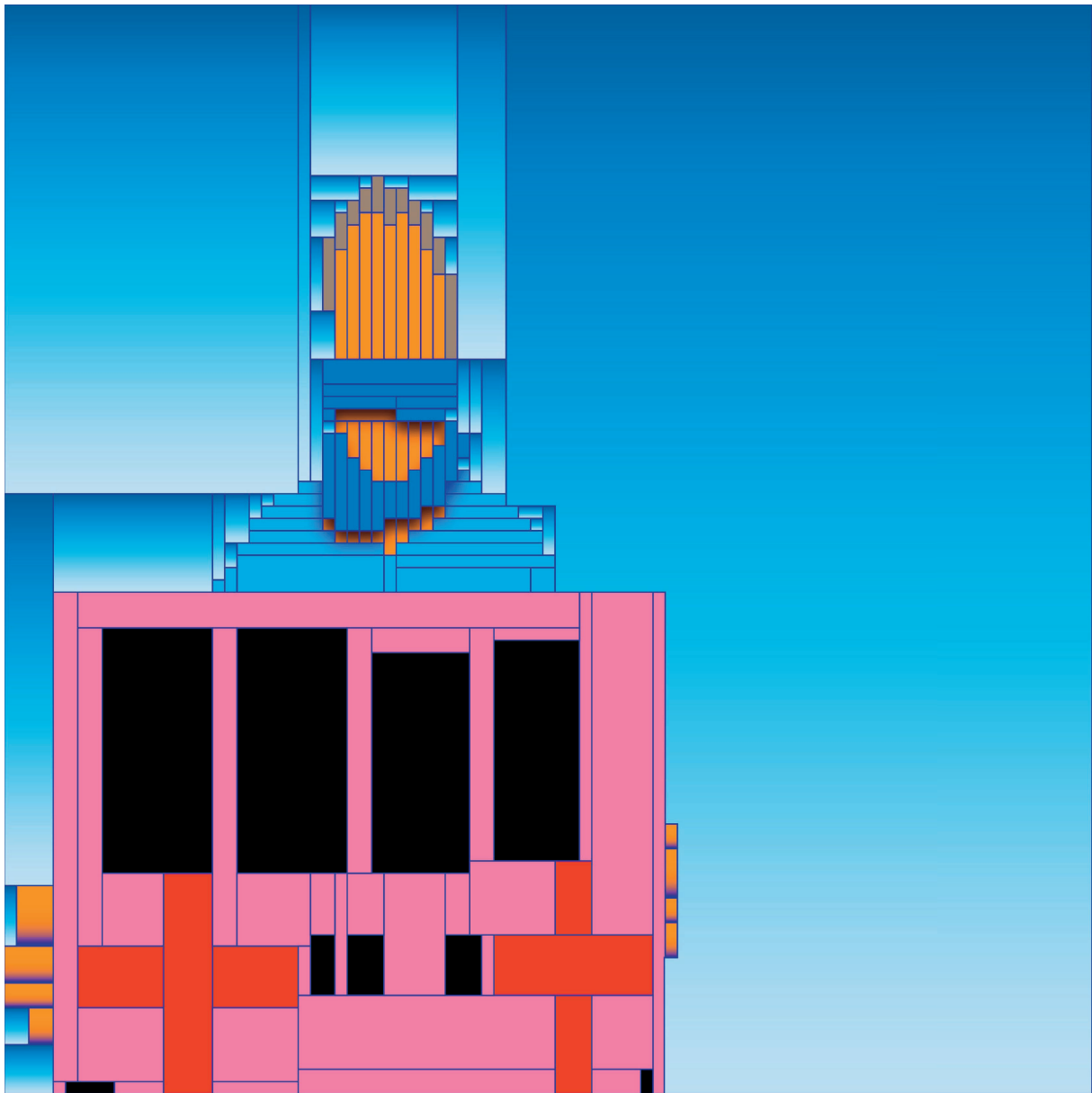
During the process, the most interesting part came to me the idea of another time, which was struggling with the Great Depression and our present, when our values and anchoring are again very important.





## Michelle Devlin

This image emerges as a futuristic counterpart to Grant Wood's American Gothic. I understand American Gothic as a representation of a particular set of people during a particular time in the form of a painting. To my knowledge, Wood found the models for this painting through people he knew, his sister and their dentist. Additionally, Wood practiced in a medium which captured the goings-on of life in a specific manner which was intrinsic to the time/place/environment of the work's creation. In my futuristic counterpart, I leveraged the connections available to me in our current 'times and situations', such as e-mail and news alerts, to find a particular reference image I used for this digital drawing. My particular reference image headed an article regarding issues surrounding a hospital's relationship to their patients published in a newspaper from my birthplace. I believe my image speaks to the unique chaos and communication patterns of this 2020-era by evoking the anonymity of the internet, the intensity of confronting differing perspectives, and the rigidity of being forced to communicate online (which eliminates a different set of communication cues that are only possible in-person). Where Wood makes use of, what I believe to be, a 'natural' or 'realistic' palette due to the nature of the subject, I make use of web-safe colors in order to represent wide-spread feelings / concepts / understandings about the internet in a pixelated aesthetic which, for me, evokes the subject's relationship to the screen and aims to remind viewers of this additional layer / lens / filter we use in order to get our message / image / idea to reach another person.



## Pink and grAy

Our creative process starts with a concept, then we consider why, research, imagination & essence before we move to the next stage which is narrative, after this we consider aesthetic before we move into the rehearsal stage, refinement and skill-up phase. Only then do we move into the 'performance' stage. Finally, we evaluate and apply reflexivity. At the centre of our process model are: our relationship, our audience, our manifesto, and importantly, having fun. This model grew from a residency we undertook two years ago and is specific to our practice as Pink and grAy. We have applied this same model/approach to our critique and production of an image for the American Gothic painting by Grant Wood.

We, Pink and grAy used our creative process to respond to the painting American Gothic. Firstly, we deconstructed the painting and reflected on what the painting means for us. We combined this with research into the painting reflecting on the artist's comment that the house portrayed was pretentious. Initially, we as performance artists wanted to make a work of a performance in front of a chosen house, but Covid19 meant that this was not possible. So we decided to do an imagined performance.

We decided that we wanted to focus on the opposite of pretentious. From original landscapes produced by one of us, we chose this painting as reflective of the mood of American Gothic. This painting includes a hotel which has a baroque look, and also a gothic feeling of romantic horror. We also thought about unpretentious people, which includes cleaners. We enacted (painted) our own images as cleaners wearing the uniform for the hotel, having considered who, what, where and when. We also reflected upon the aesthetic of the work, deciding to make Pink and grAy complementary to the landscape.

In terms of 'rehearsal' we tried out different sizes of images of Pink and grAy, where the images would be located on the canvas, and whether part or all of the bodies would be shown. We also tried out various accessories for the cleaners, together with a sign showing the name of the hotel. Once we had decided, we then put the work together. Finally we evaluated whether this reflected our concept, and was true to our creative process.





## Margo Leonard

After studying Grant Wood's work 'American Gothic' and his interpretation of the Iowa House and the kind of people that should have lived in it my vision transported me to 1970's London. Wood's original work painted around the time of the Great Depression and portraying an alleged satirical view of rural American provoked my notion back to 1970's London and the similar depression that engulfed the city. The British Empire had more or less ended, the world oil crisis had severely disrupted the economy and inflation rocketed while wage packets stagnated. Unemployment levels soared with coal miners, nurses and even undertakers striking for better pay and working conditions, leaving the dead unburied, children in hospitals going hungry and the streets strewn with uncollected household waste. There was discontent with the three day working week, power cuts and a sense of despondency amongst young adults who saw no future in the city's gloom. Although these were dark days there were radical, rebellious factions emerging within the capital's younger generations who demanded and fought for change. An example being the formation of the Gay Liberation Front who challenged centuries of bigotry and a cohort of young musicians who defied the pretentiousness of the music industry and composed three chord anthems unheard of before that spat rage at the establishment and shocked their peers. Members of The Clash and Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren were ex art school students while others were street wise teenagers from the wrong side of the tracks who screamed about the futility of life at this time. Their pioneering work stood the test of time and left a musical, artistic and social legacy just as Grant Wood's work has done which guided me to paint 'London Desolation'. I wanted to portray a derelict Victorian house from 1970's London that stood empty with its beautiful bay window that would once have let light in boarded up with breeze blocks, amenities switched off slowly decaying and the people who might have lived in it. Not rural agricultural workers but homeless squatters who included talented artists, drug addicts, musicians and poets waiting to get their message out to the masses all residing in cold, damp, dark rooms that was home. Victims of a society in decline without a future or hope who challenged the establishment and fought for change.







## The Great Regression

*Oil on canvas*

67 x 92 cm

### Paolo di Paolo

Some have viewed the piece as an example of the work ethic at a time of the Great Depression . Others about the mealy-mouthed mentality of the small parochial existence of the countryside. As always context is every thing. There is a moral threat to the piece, the pitchfork the meanness of the style it is for the viewer to decide. For me it is a threat, no light, dyed in the wool mentality, religious inflexibility. Once again context, this painting is upfront and personal, we look and scoff at their mentality, but in so doing confirm our snobbery. I am no exception, but I have not lived in their shoes. And yet the image is a construct. The truth is: they are models, his sister and dentist. So what is the message. Well for me it is the world of Nutbush City Limits. I wouldn't want to live there. The image always evokes the great depression and for me that means the black and white photography of that era, this was my direction of thought.

This painting reminds me of the photography of Dorothea Lange, the Migrant Mother. This painting was a change for me as it was almost a medieval madonna figure I was painting in a modern context and it was a ten day odyssey. I wondered if I had the courage, but it continued to draw me in. But again context, it feels like a paraphrase of the American west; the clothing is modern but the subjects the same; poverty of ambition and hope. This is as close to a religious painting I will make and don't feel attracted to the subject. Like Grant Wood I leave the observer to decide.



## Nicola Hepworth

My response to American Gothic was to research the tin tabernacle churches that we have in Britain. These are small corrugated iron chapels built in the 19th and early 20th Century as kits that could be put up quickly in areas where congregations were expanding, or as missionary halls. The earliest surviving example of such a tin church, dated 1858, happens to be a few streets away from where I live in Hackney, East London. Originally put up for Presbyterians, and more recently a Pentecostal Church, the building has long fascinated me with its near domestic size and makeshift look, combined with the Gothic revival architectural features of pointed windows and steeple. It has some similarities with the clapboard house and Gothic style window in Grant Wood's painting. I began to photograph the church, now a private home, and make drawings and paintings based on it.

There are two rustic examples near where my mother lives in Worcestershire, more rectangular mission halls, rather than Gothic. I went to photograph and draw them. There was something of the frontier, even the wild west, about these little chapels, often put up overnight so that by law the land could be claimed. They seemed to have an affinity with Grant Wood's puritanical, pioneering couple.

I made a series of photographs of all the tin tabernacles I visited and I began to make paintings based on the Hackney example. One day when I was approaching this one, still signposted "The Sight of Eternal Life Church", a girl came storming out of one of the modern houses near the chapel (not the one pictured), shouting "I'm never coming back!" From the doorway of the house came the resigned reply: "If that's what you want." This unexpected piece of real-life human drama was quite sad, potentially tragic even, and it gave me an idea for the characters that should inhabit my painting. I did not base the girl on the real person who strode past, but asked my daughter to pose; this echoed Grant Wood's use of his sister as a model. In the doorway I have painted a woman who could be the girl's mother or grandmother, but it is left deliberately ambiguous. I wanted to suggest a narrative but also create a mood of slight alienation and disconnectedness.





## Jane Walker

The conceptual journey from Wood's painting to mine started with thinking about the Flemish Renaissance. In Flemish Renaissance painting there were 'world landscapes', I paint world cities. This style holds Wood's painting together and gives his subject matter a critical edge. A Gothic window was the start of his thought process, I have chosen Brutalism, an architectural style that I am familiar with in Sheffield. It carries its own philosophy that is misunderstood, misinterpreted.

The particular building I have depicted is Park Hill, now a derelict listed building. It was built from 1957-61 and was inspired by Le Corbusiers' Unite d'Habitation in Marseilles. In French the word 'brut' means raw, the structure and the materials are exposed in the architecture. Translated into English 'Brutalism' adds horror to its meaning. The English response was horror to the style. I started by looking at Jean Dubuffet, a painter who instigated the term Art Brut to describe his style. He used unconventional materials mixed in paint, the marks and lines show raw emotion. An artist associated with Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier made a series of hostage paintings in 1944. I carry Dubuffet's emotion in Fautrier's use of materials, gluing paper onto canvas then mixing a thick paste to scratch and paint into. In Art Brut much of the subject matter is internal, coming from inside the artist. Wood's painting is tightly observed and external. My work is also external, it is also specific to place. The north of England has a grim aura that I am playing on. Like Wood I am not at one with it.

In the north of England I am much more aware of light than colour. The light is sharp, and it has a powerful effect. Park Hill is dark, grim and stained, it ended up with dreadful social problems that are not the fault of the architecture or its style. I have made use of the horror of the style. The material is pronounced in my painting and the architecture and figures are one. Wood's people take their facial expression from Flemish saints and so fit in with the style of the painting.

'American Gothic' finds the national in a regional agricultural theme, I have done the same. I replaced Wood's figures with a single mother and her grown up son. Opportunities are reduced but the people are tough and resilient like Wood's workers.



## **Pauline Rigby**

Many people have assumed that the people in Grant Wood's 'American Gothic' lived at the farm, and it created some annoyance at the time.

This led me to think about the construct of buildings and habitation. Wood's portrait is a layered piece using real people, building and landscape, but none of them really belong together. The piece is artificial.

There is a round house around 30 miles away, in Southport, UK built in 1924 by Luke Highton with its own observatory. As it is a rotunda it is away from the normal box style of house and very unusual. It has always intrigued me, particularly the observatory. This started me thinking of 'who would live in a house like this'? An astronomer? Or someone scientific? I started looking at famous astronomers and scientists. Then I realised a friend of mine lives in Southport and would be perfect. I dressed her in a long tunic, which is similar to a lab coat.. She has two cats, so instead of two people as in Wood's portrait, I decided a human and animal interaction would be intriguing. The second image of a black and white cat actually belongs to another friend, and I decided to play with scale, so the black and white one is almost jumping out of the picture.

In reality a football presenter, Alan Hansen now lives in the house.

The concept of imagining who inhabits what dwelling has really intrigued me. I am now noting other houses, particularly the more unusual ones and thinking of who may live there.





## Aldobranti

A key theme of my research and made art is intersubjectivity – the relationships between people. This interest grew out of a long term study of the cast shadow of the Self which encouraged me to look at the cultural values of the Shadow and the meaning of a separate and independent shadow of the self.

It seemed to me that there was a tension in my ongoing work between myself as performer to camera and my shadow which was the focus of the work. I began to rationalise this as an alterity, a sense of an Other in the room and wondered how to invoke its presence and to capture some visual trace.

A great deal of this work is now to understand the 'entanglement' of the cast shadow with the Other – that much of our language about Otherness is couched in terms of light and dark; darkness and shadow are signifiers for menace. I wanted in this project to explore aspects of a comfort in Otherness, we do seem to be intrigued by difference and miss the stimulus of novelty.

In developing this project, I should admit at first I believed American Gothic was a representation of a married couple and I was trying to imagine my presence for my partner from a distance.

Shining a laser pointer into the duration of a long exposure photograph leaves a permanent trace of the entire path followed. A complete lack of tactile feedback from a drawing surface, unsure memory of the path traced, and my weak drawing skills combine to make a rather haphazard result. I think however that this non-determinacy in the image may be a way, as for Surrealists and automatic writing, to get through to a less rational side – I did train as a mathematician.

My interest was therefore to see what values I might project into a scene to reflect on my feelings for the relationship. My belief was that Wood's painting was a record of survival and I was mindful too that our life together could merit some celebration.



## The Tree between Unequal Intensity

*oil on linen*

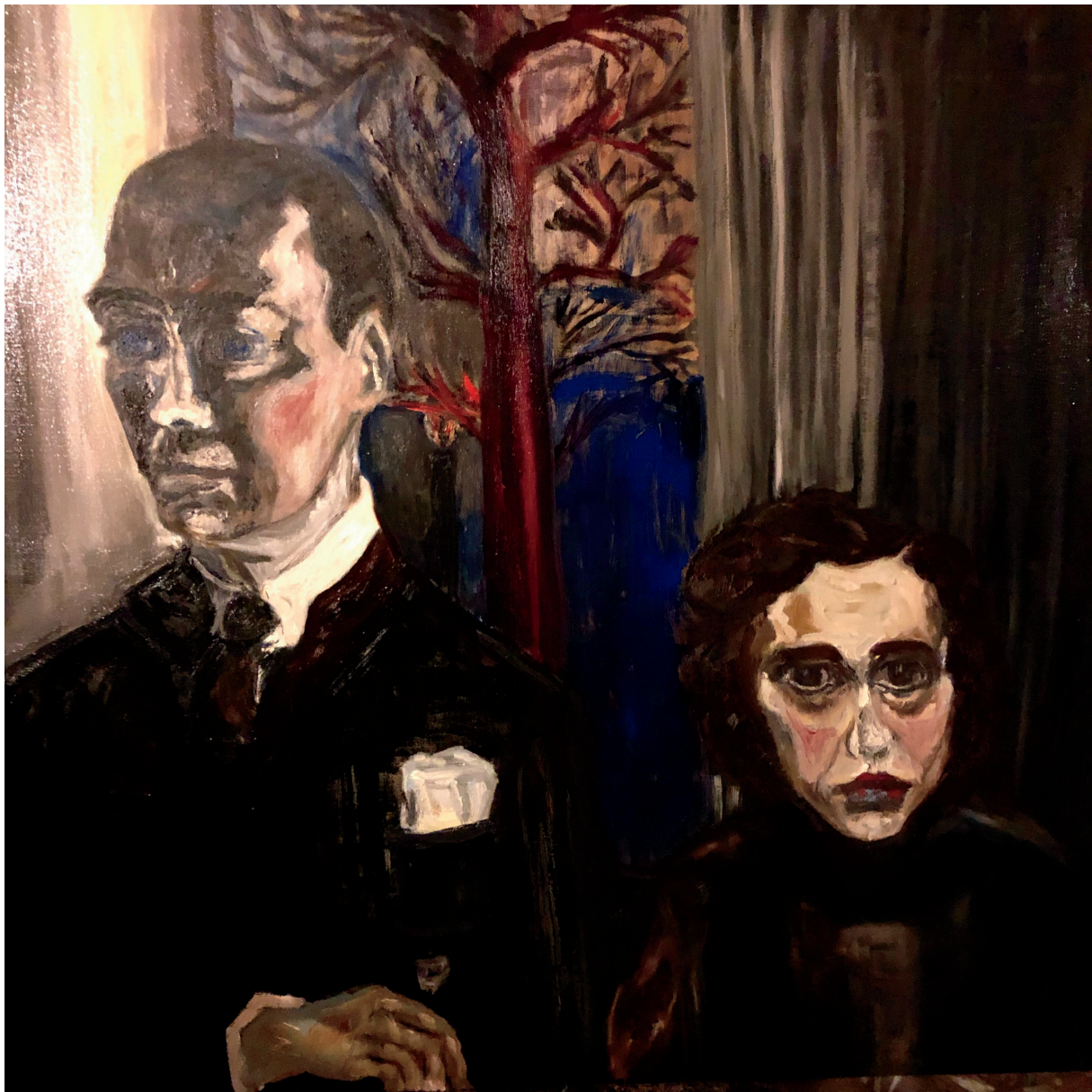
150 x 137 cm

### Dina Sioufi

Coincidence has it that my recent painting reminded friends of American Gothic. The fork pointing to heaven with Church and light on window background/ architecture of spirituality resonates with the tree and light between man and woman reversed here. Whereas the woman/man couple in American Gothic are united in appearance by the church, love/fear of God but have a haystack fork in between, my couple express their separation in unity by the tree and light behind them. Like American Gothic they stare ahead solemnly lost in their own thoughts towards spectator. They are expressive in their silence. This is where I must have had American Gothic in my mind while painting it. My idea of intensity also relates to American Gothic motionless intensity. The caption far top right reads in German: Die Sprache ist der Feind der Zeit ( Language is the enemy of Time). This is a play on the timelessness of a painting. American Gothic comes to mind because of its intense expression and incessant engendering of meaning and literature/writing. In this respect I hoped mine would be a part of this defiance of time. Even if wishful thinking.

This has further enhanced my vision regarding the psychological dimension in art. In addition the construction of space - composition in expressing a given message or for engendering meanings: aesthetic, psychological, spiritual or other.





## Rowena Comrie

It was not until last year (2019) on a return visit to Chicago, and a second opportunity to consider again 'American Gothic', that a chance occurrence initiated my own response to the painting. Travelling on the 'L' train, I found myself seated opposite a man & woman who were simultaneously chatting to each other and using their mobile phones. I was struck by their apparent intimacy contradicting their mutual disinterest. I was reminded of 'American Gothic' and decided that I could paint my own interpretation of the themes of isolation and protectiveness that are suggested to me by Grant Wood's double portrait.

Years previously, purely by chance, I became aware of Grant Wood whilst chatting with peers about the range of American painting. I enjoyed the calm sense of timelessness that imbues his pastoral scenes, the rich colours and the almost naive interpretation of rural landscape that unwittingly reveal particular aspects of his world. The celebrity status of 'American Gothic', like that for example of the Mona Lisa, combined with the many plagiaristic cartoons that continually crop up, raise a barrier to a spontaneous response. Expectations are unrealistically high, and when an image of the painting, photographed for reproduction is seen, it can be underwhelming. It was not until I managed to look at the actual painting in Chicago, for the first time in 2013, that I could appreciate the delicacy of the painting technique, the subtlety of the portraiture, and the wit in the subject matter. I have responded to this in my own painting, a comment on contemporary communication and the most popular current tool for life, the mobile telephone. This is a reflection of the tool featured in 'American Gothic', and what that represented to the community of the era.

I made two versions of this painting because I wanted a result that reflected my reasons for admiring 'American Gothic'. I wanted to create a painting that radiated Grant Wood's particularity of style, and sensitivity of technique. A painting that although inspired by 'American Gothic,' was in a style of my own. My first attempt did not satisfy this ambition; I changed my painting style using techniques that suggest a plurality of interpretation for the viewer to engage with, with possible meanings as equally ambiguous as those in the original.





## Brut Carniollus

As Grant Wood himself explained, (with American Gothic) he aimed to create a positive statement about rural American values and provide an image of reassurance at a time of great hardship and disenchantment brought by the Great Depression. For the artist, man and woman in the painting represented survivors. But although this painting quickly became the very icon of Americana and nearly as famous as La Joconda, its reading remains quite complex. Some art critics, such as Gertrude Stein and Christopher Morley, subsequently saw American Gothic painting as a satire of rural small-town life, while others saw it as a depiction of steadfast American pioneer spirit. Wood himself gave a somewhat confusing statement: *There is satire in it, but only as there is satire in any realistic statement. These are types of people I have known all my life. I tried to characterize them truthfully – to make them more like themselves than they were in actual life.*

Anyway, my own take on the subject also relies on the satire, not as toned down as Grant's own, but also not as the single point of view. As Grant's painting responded to the Great Depression, my photography series titled 'Safe socializing in time of quarantine' responds to the pandemic. The piece 'Love in time of quarantine' (a.k.a. Separation Gothic) follows other works in terms of concept, displaying ourselves not only distanced and separated, but additionally isolated by being put in glass jars, one might even say pickled (as in a pickle). Not only are we separated by glass but also our presence is virtual only, our faces shown on pickled smartphones. At this point I must admit my ignorance regarding American Gothic, I allways thought the couple on the painting were meant to be a regular couple, not a father and a daughter, (but then again I always maintain that misinformation is the very source of creativity) so by splitting the iconic painting in half and putting both virtual halves in separate jars I hoped to amplify the absurdity of the situation the pandemic has put us in, with the intention of making it obviously satirical but also a bit overdone to the point where its severity becomes not as grave as we are told, or may fear ourselves. If there's one thing I wanted to say with the series: it's tough, quite unexpected and absurd but this too shall pass one day. Or so we hope.





## Penny Payne

When I look at this work by Grant Wood, what strikes me first is the ecclesiastical architecture; the Gothic shaped panes repeated in the reversed tines of the pitchfork. I see a commentary on the farming of the lowan land being akin to a religion for this farmer. His hand, the only one visible in the composition, grips the tool of his trade as a talisman of his belief. The pitchfork commands centre stage and is a symbol of honour, pride and fulfilment. His steady gaze inhabits the present with quiet assurance.

To his right the wife or sister is at first appearance at one with the ethos of the painting. The curve of her apron neckline is repeated in the shape of the pitchfork and again in the farmer's dungaree pocket suggesting some uniformity and coherence within the narrative. In fact she stands reduced and twisted in the frame. Her position slightly suppressed behind the male figure. Her hands are hidden, suggesting a lack of opportunity beyond the housewifely duties proposed by the apron. Her searching eyes look out of the present narrative into the distance and I believe a different future.

In my work I have expressed these two people in the simplest of materials and lowan products, corn. Two plain white bowls are filled with this basic staple. One is given water, the other left dry. Photographed after a couple of weeks the difference is apparent. One is nurtured and grows so fulfilling its role.

The other is still waiting.

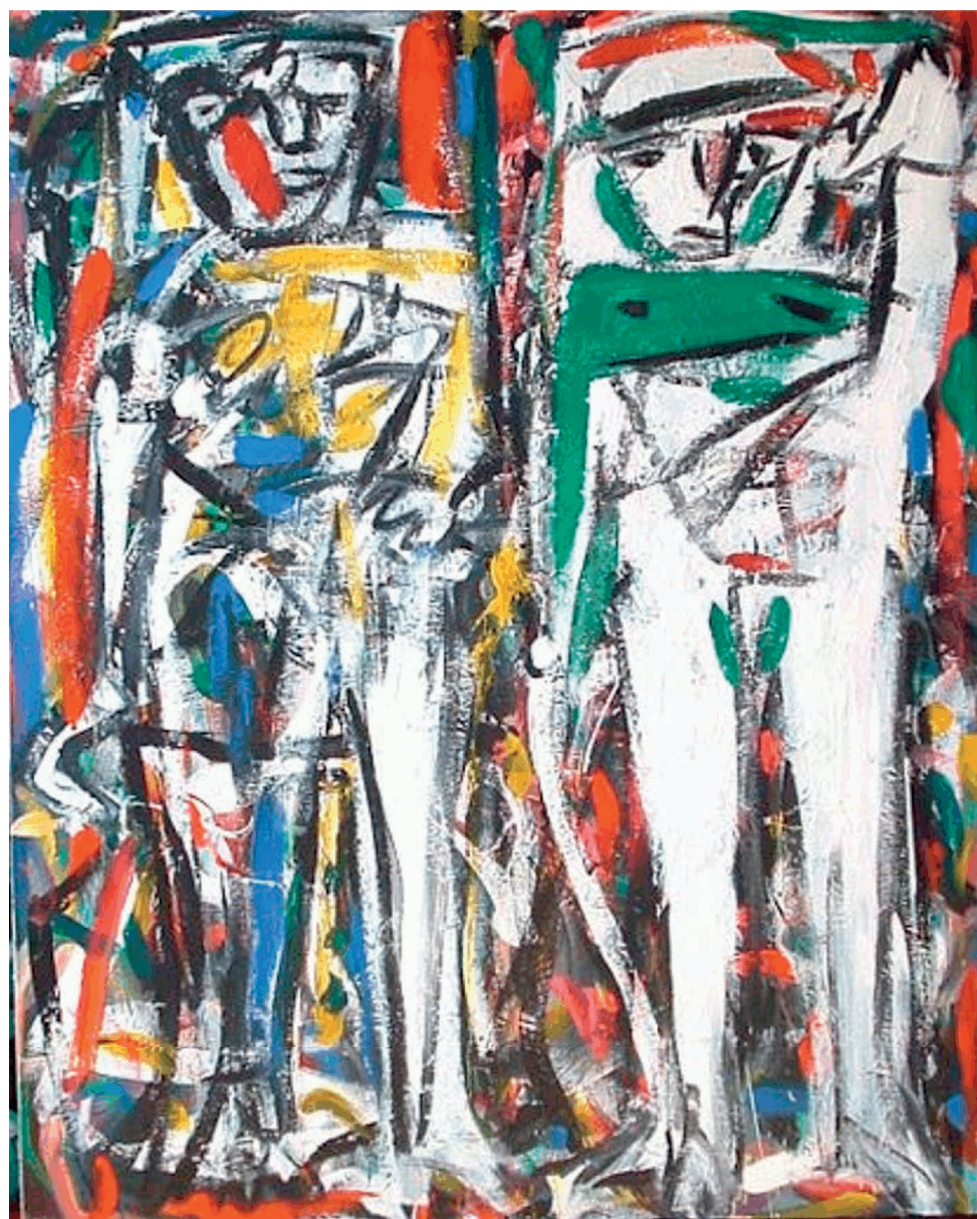


## Ian Cook

As a seasoned traveler in the United States I am sometimes drawn to the rural habitat of the Midwestern states of that continent: how those who prevail in that endless sea of wheat battle against storm, pests and melancholy. These same frustrations can galvanize the will of a farmer and his spouse or break their union. Grant Wood's portrait alludes not only to the couple's undiminished resolve to endure whatever nature and man throw at them, but also to their subconscious fear that their fate lies with the uncertainty of the weather and schemes of mankind. The ambiguous expressions of these two figures initiated in my work a quest to typify the relationship between two persons; how it could on occasions be either harmonious or tense in mood. Using this as a starting point I proceeded to create a series of double portraits that addressed these aspects.

The subject matter for the theme was derived from European, Native American and Latin American environments. Many studies of the rigid postures adopted by couples in Victorian photographs were useful reference as their demure appearances often cloaked deeper moods. Many of the works began as figurative pieces, but in time they became developed in expressionist and semi-abstract formats. This allowed me to use opposing colors in each figure to represent differences in mood between the persons painted. Working in this way allowed me to use the double portrait strategy as a means of creating specific compositions. Furthermore, by depicting people from ordinary social strata, I was able to free the genre from its elite standing among more affluent classes.





## Betsy van Die

Grant Wood's American Gothic has attained pop-culture prominence rivaling that of the Mona Lisa, although this isn't necessarily for its artistic merit. Some art critics have eviscerated this painting and stated that it's among his worst. They have called Wood a one-hit wonder and labeled his work overly theatrical, cloyingly nostalgic, and homespun. When I dug deeper into his life, I realized that underneath their pastoral exterior, Wood's paintings reflect a deeply repressed homosexual man living in the conservative Midwest of the 1930's. The couple depicted in Wood's most famous painting look dour and uptight, which I believe subconsciously mirrors his feelings of isolation and need to suppress his own desires, while maintaining a facade of normalcy.

The artist's sister Nan, the model for the female figure in American Gothic, vehemently protected her brother's legacy and insisted on rose-colored interpretations of his life and work. When she died in 1990, scholars were able to write about Wood's life more openly, although his sexual orientation is still a matter of dispute. In the 2010 book, "Grant Wood: A Life," art historian R. Tripp Evans paints Wood as a closeted gay man terrified of having his sexual orientation exposed. I surmise that Wood was a conflicted man, living a sad, lonely life tragically cut short by pancreatic cancer at age 50. These facts coupled with bad reviews of his work make me feel especially empathetic towards Wood.

I find it heartbreaking that Wood couldn't live an authentic life, struggled with personal demons, and unable to reach his full potential as a painter. I decided to re-imagine American Gothic in an idyllic world with Wood living openly with his lover in the famed house in Eldon. I chose Coming of Age of Wood's art assistant Arnold Pyle due to its strong gay symbolism. In my collage, Wood is transformed from a repressed, melancholy man into a macho gay guy looking flirtatiously at his partner. I melded his unfinished self-portrait with that of his friend John Steuart Curry's Good Earth farmer and incorporated other images including a portrait of Nan and the painting Return from Bohemia. The question unanswered: how Wood's work would have evolved and if he would have attained the artistic greatness that eluded him if he'd been able to live an authentic life.





## Ana Djukanovic Miljkovac

For a longer time, partnership relations are at the focus of my research. Looking at the picture “American Gothic” by Grant Wood I always had a specific feeling: not only that the imagined characters fit their house, but each other as well. I could hardly imagine a replacement of spouse. For example, instead of a wife, to be another person with different character. Or another man with his already painted wife. I transferred this psychic relationship into a sculpture. My couple is an abstract representation of this unrepeatable relationship.

The very process of research has led to the “cleansing” of the superfluous. I transferred the fitting of mental integration with my home and with my spouse to a wider context. This is how the sculptures from the concept of Harmonization in the field of view were created. These sculptures imply a complete fit into their environment as a kind of universal logic.





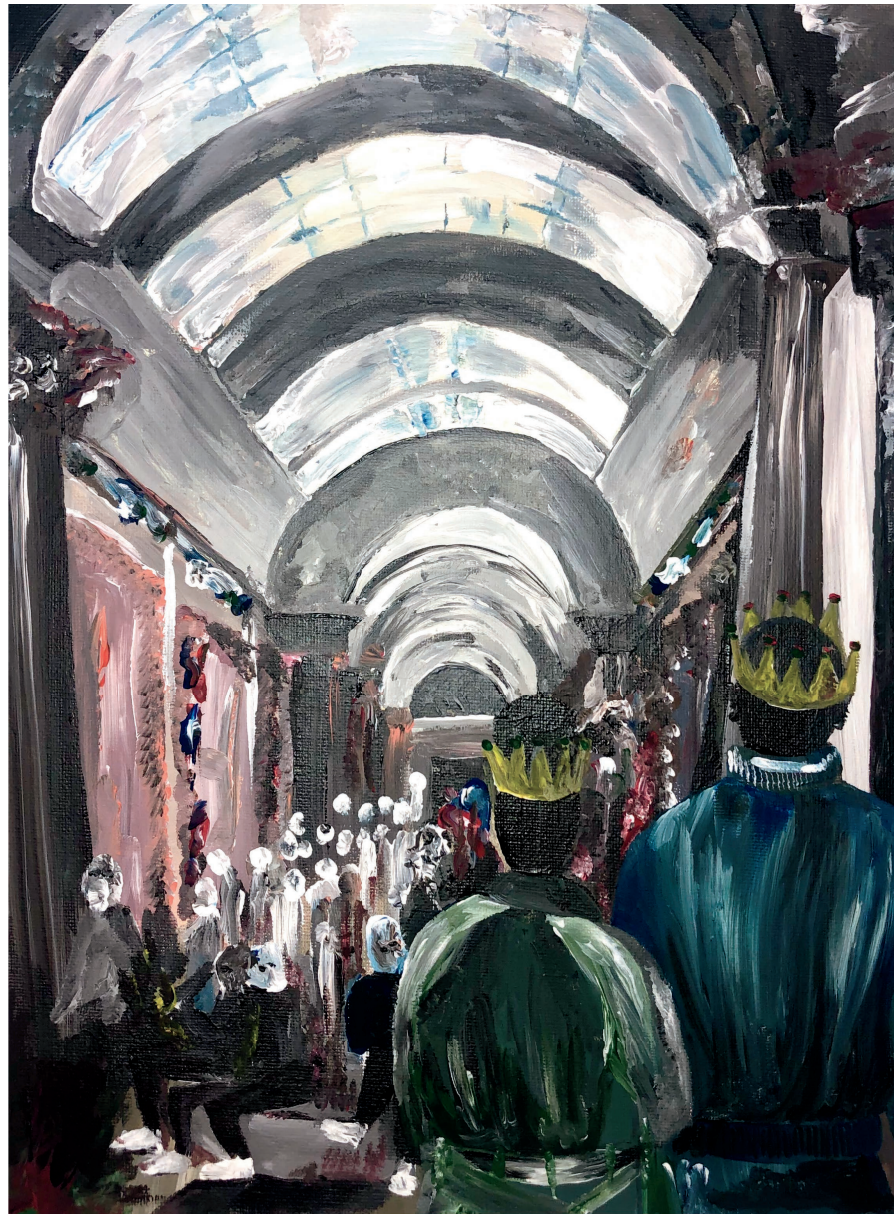
## Japo Okworobu

Grant Wood's American Gothic painting was very captivating to me. As I investigated this painting, I wanted to find out more about who the characters were as well as their relation to the artist. I wanted to explore everything: their posture, elongated faces, the chosen house, why they stood in front of said house and their chosen clothes. Everything was intriguing to me as I wanted to enter the artist's world- or at the very least attempt to. I found it interesting that Wood used his sister and his dentist- those close to him - as subject matter as opposed to random strangers. This triggered my artistic starting point as I wanted to replicate that in my own work.


















I wanted a personal connection to my artwork in order to reinforce the message. As this has been such a turbulent year for everyone, I have the desire to reflect 2020 in my artwork for personal reasons. I wanted all aspects of the artwork to embody this year without going down the stereotypically negative or obvious route. The image was taken earlier on this year in the Louvre museum yet as we can imagine- no-one expected the year to go down this direction. The concept behind this image was to showcase unexpected visitors. As Wood imagined who would live in these houses, I chose to imagine who would visit or even possibly own such a building. Without realising that this is a museum, viewers could imagine that they too belong in such a beautiful space.

This image is a symbol of love mainly because of the subjects. I opted against the alternative image of the subjects facing the camera as I enjoy the mystery- with the hope that the viewer guesses their facial expression and emotions. How do they actually feel, their thoughts and do they even desire to be there? The chosen composition was to emphasis the candidness of the entire picture. It is uncertain whether they are in the frame or spectating from the outside. As the viewer, are we looking at the gallery with deliberately hidden artwork or are we more intrigued by the crowned individuals that look on?

I placed crowns on these individuals as I wanted to represent royalty and strength. Survivors, too. The contrast between their casual clothes and their royal headpieces begs the question: why didn't they want or try to blend in amongst the crowd?



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*\*Pink and grAy are Sylvia Causer and Andrea Freeman*

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## **our publisher writes**

When we began to plan this anniversary party we were thinking to study each artist's process — the steps taken and the mindset or thoughts that run while making art — and set up the internet-based callout to emphasize our interest in this aspect of the artistic life.

We wrote

From the beginning, public response to the painting has been mixed. At the outset it was seen as a celebration of 'American values' and as satire against rural populations. By 1948, Gordon Park's photograph of a Black American woman with mop and broom could be framed against a US national flag and given the same title. In the present the whiteness of those values and the social fault lines of small town populations are more sharply revealed. Again this call is for work that builds on and yet challenges these problem areas.

The curatorial decision making in selecting contributors was a consequence of the net cast as an open call to the global population of artists – in posting the call it was made clear that there was a wider remit than painters alone and even more certain that a greater distance be travelled by the artist than is the case in a parody of the starting point.

The artists selected here are an artificial sample from the wider population, distinguished by their ability to introspect their process. The premise of this book is to offer a constraint — to make an artwork within the heritage of a well-known image — and to interrogate the artists' progress from this common starting point.

Compared with previous book curation projects, the turnout was surprisingly low. We had thought that artists in Covid lockdown might have been looking for some distraction. Reasons for this might be that the bar was set high in requiring a high level of verbal input; the wording of the call seemed academic. A further possibility is that the call was unsuited to the listing environments used: the sites commonly require the applicant to work entirely within the site's data regime and severely limit the space available to the caller to explain the scope of the call fully. It seems very unlikely that references to Grant Wood's painting should have gone unrecognised.



## **the word Gothic**

Early responses to the call quickly exposed a confusion as to the scope of the word Gothic. Gothic can be seen as an applicable attribute in at least three domains. Perhaps the simplest, for a typographer it will mean a sans-serif font which may also be called grotesk in European print terminology. Even so, pre WW2, German printing was in blackletter fraktur which is sometimes mistakenly called gothic.

Grant Wood who visited Germany in the late 1920's, will have seen European Gothic church architecture, understanding its stress on height, intricacy and delicacy and so recognised the tracery pattern in the upper window of the house in Eldon. This architectural usage was popular in the mid to late 19C and more usually styled Carpenter Gothic.

In the present however, the dominant understanding of Gothic is to carry the values stemming from Horace Walpole's novel 'The Castle of Otranto – A Gothic Story'. The list includes mystery and intrigue surrounding the supernatural and the unknown, death and decay, haunted homes and castles, family curses, madness, powerful love and romance, ghosts, and vampires. This rich and exhilarating diet would prove too much for applicants to this call to resist.

Given this level of confusion it was not reasonable to insist that participants should only take the architectural meaning of Grant Wood's title. However as the image was the starting point it would be certain that any account of process that could not show a developmental path from the 1930 picture would not be eligible for inclusion here. In particular references to a 1995 TV serial entitled American Gothic were deemed out of scope.

Under the constraint to describe a journey beginning at American Gothic an artist applying to this call will either fit an existing artwork to the call, or build fresh to satisfy the call. In either case the constraint can be seen as a liberation; a freedom to think outside the box, beyond the frame. Indeed re-cycling, re-titling, re-purposing, or re-using an existing artwork is to be seen for its ecological worth.

Ultimately space in this format, as with a physical exhibition space is the limit on selection from the submission pool. Several applications of great quality could not be fitted into the overall scheme.

Cover photography by Aldobranti  
from a jigsaw puzzle by Flame Tree Publishing, London  
The painting 'American Gothic' by Grant Wood is  
in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago

My thanks are due to all contributors to this project. Their input has greatly helped me articulate my thoughts here. I wish to note my gratitude to Dr Fiona Harvey for many helpful discussions.

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*Aldobrandi*





Grant Wood made the painting 'American Gothic' in the summer of 1930 and exhibited it that October at the annual exhibition of the Art Institute of Chicago. This collection is a tribute by 19 artists worldwide to mark this 90th anniversary. These artists explore and intelligently extend on Wood's own reflections on early Midwest architecture, settler lifestyles, social change, companionship, and sexuality.

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