

Bruce Burris, Summertime

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Bruce Burris's trippy, caustic, and unruly exhibition of drawings—organized by the curatorial platform March and presented at Summertime, a nonprofit art studio and gallery in Brooklyn—felt timely in its caricaturing of the deeply divided United States. The show opened one day before President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris took the oath of office at the Capitol on January 20, 2021, while the nation was still reeling from an unthinkable attack by a violent mob there earlier in the month. The fourteen works on view, all made in 2020, were essentially heralds, announcing that our lives would be inundated with images of the vile Oath Keepers and their repugnant brethren. No joyful tidings here.

Chockablock stacks of ornately rendered words in acrylic, tempera, watercolor, marker, graphite, and spray paint radiated from each twenty-two-by-fifteen-inch sheet of paper. When starting a new drawing, Burris lays out his larger foundational writing first, then embellishes the spaces around it with other phrases and decorative flourishes, building up an unstable architecture bit by bit. Inside the borders of some of the pieces was an enclosed sea of tiny, nearly unreadable script in black pen. Take Labor Day, where the bright and buzzy name of Republican schlock rocker Ted Nugent is getting suffocated by phrases you might hear from his supporters, such as SAVE OUR JOBS, YOU CANNOT ROB US OF OUR HERITAGE, and WORKING FAMILIES ARE UNDER ATTACK.

As an artist, Burris has been producing in this aesthetic vein—protest posters gone berserk—since the 1980s. But he also has an inspiring history as an activist. For more than twenty-five years he's been an advocate for neurodiverse artists and has founded several art centers devoted to cultural equity in Lexington, Kentucky, and in Corvallis, Oregon, where he now lives. However, this enduring commitment clashes with his artistic labor, which is all about insurrection. At times, his wild sampling of right-wing discourse can be downright nauseating. Guns Save Lives was the lone work here reduced to a palette of black, white, and blue, the colors of the Thin Blue Line flag, a sign of "support for law enforcement" and opposition to Black Lives Matter. Shrill proclamations, including PATRIOTS PREPARE and STAND FOR YOUR FLAG, surround a cartoon of a bearded white dude in a T-shirt



Bruce Burris, Totalitarian Tiptoe, 2020, acrylic, tempera, watercolor, marker, graphite, and spray paint on paper, 22 × 15".

reading RANCHERS' LIVES MATTER. I don't believe Burris shares any of these views, but he does seem to enjoy a problematic equivocality. In a press release for a 2019 show he stated, "I am not interested so much in perceptions of right versus wrong—it's more about here we are."

Burris's sardonic parroting of language continued in pieces culled from the institutional jargon of Lexington's Eastern State Hospital, the second-oldest US facility for treating psychiatric disorders. In 2006, while looking for a community garden plot, Burris discovered a mass grave dating to the 1970s. It belonged to Eastern State, and he estimated that between four thousand and seven thousand people were buried there. In three works here—*And Whose Treatment Needs, We Strive to Make our Services . . .*, and *Hospital Promises*—Burris shifted his aesthetic slightly to include droplet shapes with corporate speak from one of the clinic's booklets. Unlike the amorphous text streams found in the other drawings, these come off more as free-floating thought bubbles or freaky bits of concrete poetry. Words such as EXCELLENCE, COMPETENT, and THERAPEUTIC stand out—again, the irony is thick.

The show also offered a remarkable congregating between Burris, March head Phillip March Jones, and Summertime cofounders Sophia Cosmadopoulos and Anna Schechter, all of whom focus on bringing people from the neurodiverse community into public discourse. Their goals are similar to those of Creative Growth, the long-standing nonprofit in Oakland, California, that assists artists with disabilities by providing studios, materials, facilities, and other forms of support. And while I don't know how to square Burris's years of service with his art, one thing is clear: They're both animated by an awareness of how severely broken the US is.