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In this issue...

Downtown Rockland Christmas — SEE PAGE 9

One of These Geese Is a Barnacle
— DON REIMER, PAGE 19

Prisoners Protest Solitary Confinement by Another Name
— SEE JORDAN ANDREWS, PAGE 5

Memoir Recalls Life on a Sustenance Farm — SEE PAGE 14

Warm on the Winter Jobsite — JIM BAHOOOSH, PAGE 12

Simpler Thanksgiving Sides
— SEE GEORGEANNE DAVIS, PAGE 13

Art on the Coast 11
Astrologically Speaking 36
Business Service Directory 38, 39
Calendar of Events ... begins on page 35
Car Talk 43
Classifieds 40
Crossword 43
Dining 24
Home & Garden 13
Letters & Opinions 4
Market Basket 40
Movie & Video Shorts 34
Outdoors 17, 19
Sudoku 43
TV Listings 41, 42
Weather & Tides 19



Kenny Cole paints a picture, and it's not pretty — **Santa's Hands and Uncle Sams**

by Ethan Andrews

Earlier this month, in the hour he sets aside daily before starting his day as a carpenter, Kenny Cole painted a pair of praying hands below a schematic diagram of a solid-fuel rocket. The rocket was copied from a 1966 World Book Encyclopedia, which lay open on the desk beside the painting. The hands, painted from the point of view of the petitioner, as though the viewer were the one praying, are a recurring motif in his work.

Behind the praying hands lay a placid ocean horizon, loosely inspired by Cole's recent reacquaintance

KENNY COLE continues page 6

PHOTO: ETHAN ANDREWS

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KENNY COLE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

with the Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca.

Style aside, Cole, who turned 63 this month, would have thrived in the days of Renaissance patronage. The records of his daily painting sessions, which often include a couple hours after work, are packed two levels high in the upper story of the barn in Monroe that serves as his studio. Large cabinets of flat files and sketchbooks bulging with the extra mass of paint on every page are everywhere. In the interest of time, he often works on paper, and on those occasions when he stretches a canvas, he paints the front and back.

"If someone were to say, 'I'll buy your paintings,' I would be able to supply them with an unlimited amount, and would never run out of ideas or run dry," Cole said.

He held up the paper with the praying hands and pointed to the space between the opposing thumbs where a stroke of red paint had gone out of bounds, crossing the gap between the hands like the spark of life between the fingers of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

"This thing," he said. "This red. I like it. It almost looks like mucus or something."

Earlier, he had compared the bulbous fingers to intestines with similar morbid appreciation. The hands, as revealed by a pair of feathery white cuffs and red sleeves, belonged to Santa Claus.

St. Nick is a recurring character in Cole's paintings, along with penguins, polar bears, leprechauns, soldiers, eagles, Uncle Sam, and, starting several years ago, Donald Trump, often accompanied by chatters of blue birds fashioned after the Twitter logo.

If some painters paint what they love, Cole, in broad strokes, goes the other way, poking at his own anxiety and anger toward militarism, environmental destruction and a civic collapse accelerated by social media.

He contends that "the whole art world is awful," but even the worst art-world personality isn't close to as bad as a weapons manufacturer.

The centerpiece of "Jacked," a new show of Cole's work currently on view at Perimeter Gallery (the exhibition space of Chase's Daily restaurant) in Belfast, is a 22-foot-wide painting of a military submarine, cut away to show its imagined inner workings. The sub casually fires a torpedo at something beyond the edge of the painting while, in the turbulent waters around it — painted disorientingly as both the surface and underwater — a gang of killer whales attacks a non-killer



Kenny Cole in his Monroe studio PHOTO: ETHAN ANDREWS

whale, and objects resembling oversized bodily organs bob in the waves.

In another recent painting, an enraged polar bear stands at the edge of an ice sheet, holding a penguin above its head as though preparing to hurl it into the ocean. Blue tears stream down its white coat like rivulets of blood, while the penguin — like the Monopoly man, standing in for the cartoonishly rich — coolly smokes through a long cigarette holder.

Across hundreds of paintings, Cole has sketched out a universe where similar battles are playing out constantly, on mountains and in packed boxing arenas, on the ocean and in the sky. Greedy penguins extract ice with heavy machinery, piles

of gold coins and bricks accumulate in stalactite-filled caves and flags wave above whirlpools of magma or blood.

In a rare expression of hope, Cole has painted several scenes of a loon pecking a fatal blow at the heart of an attacking eagle.

Within this dystopian world, Santa's role is complicated, and Cole, whose childhood view of the benevolent, rosy-cheeked saint has been muddled by holiday commercialism and a dim view of the patriarchy, leaves plenty of room for interpretation. At the extremes, St. Nick is sometimes literally getting punched in the face, and sometimes he is doing the punching. When there are multiple Santas, and sometimes there are, it's not unusual to see Catholic mitre or a red baseball cap amid the sea of pom-poms.

Cole plays with our understanding of these well-known symbols. A piece in a past show was nearly rejected for depicting what was taken to be an American flag on a pole stabbing a Bible. Cole

pointed out that the flag had stripes but no stars, the open book could have been any, and the flag pole could as easily have been growing out of it as stabbing through it. He makes similar use of color, strategically deploying Twitter blue — Cerulean, straight out of the tube — and red.

"There's something about red that is very effective for people in power structures that need to get people to put on a uniform, or salute, or whatever, or conform," he said. "When I squirt out some paint, my goal is not to get people to go to war, but we're both using the exact same color. So when I use red, I'm interested in sort of dragging in this non-art stuff."

In the studio, Cole doesn't sweat the meaning. If he's feeling something, he tries it. In passing, he mentioned that he could probably paint praying hands and nothing else, in endless combinations with other symbols. Santa's praying hands and a solid-fuel rocket, for one:

"This is a simple idea, you know. The emoji hands, there's a bunch of other levels, Christianity, whatever. Emoji Uncle Sam, emoji Santa Claus, it's a very, very simple idea... and then pair it with weaponry. I don't know what it means. Maybe it's a good idea. Maybe it's a bad idea."

He settled on it being a good idea and pinned the finished painting to a wall to photograph it for Instagram and Flickr.

"Yeah, that's a beauty," he said. "I love myself. I mean, I just came in and was like, 'Do a Santa Claus.'"

But when he looked at the photo on his phone, he saw something else. The red in the hands that had been delightfully wet and visceral now seemed to have crossed the line into gore.

"When I was painting it, I didn't see how bloody it was," he said. "My intention was not to make a bloody hand. I never would do that. I'm not into blood. But now that it's done, I accept it."

He seemed to be suggesting it had come through his subconscious. I asked him if that's what he meant.

"Maybe it did come through my subconscious," he said. "I mean, there's the science right there, this is the diagram [of the rocket]. This is how it works. We've got the solid fuel, and there's hands praying, and then the guilty 'You have blood on your hands.' I don't know if anyone else is going to read that into it."

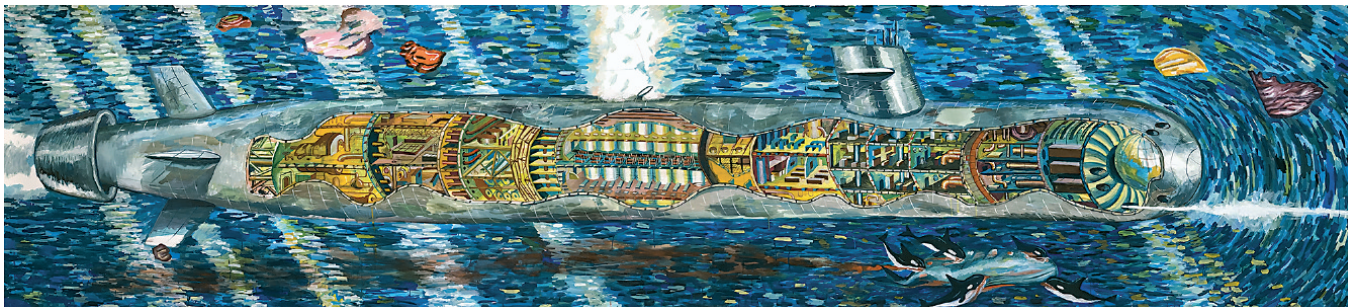
"Jacked" is on view through January 22, 2022, at Perimeter Gallery/Chase's Daily, 96 Main Street, Belfast.



"In Fighting," 2019, gouache on paper, 53" x 111"



"Witness," 2019, gouache on paper, 53" x 112"



"A Look Under Her Skin," 2020, gouache on paper, 60" x 260"