



Icons, Elizabethans, and Elegies for a Mad King:  
Paintings by Steve Joy

February 3 – May 6, 2018



Steve Joy, *Icon (Constantinople)*, 2011, mixed media on wood, 79 x 55 inches



Andrei Rublev, *Trinity*, circa 1411-1427, tempera on wood, 56 x 45 inches  
Treytakov Gallery, Moscow



Steve Joy, *Icon (Olive Grove)*, 2016-17, mixed media on wood, 47 x 39.5 inches

For many people, the opportunity to stand in front of a non-objective painting (meaning, a painting that in no way attempts to represent people, places, or physical things) is a chance to be confused and frustrated. If an artwork is not about something else, then what is it about, how is a visitor supposed to understand that, and how is that understanding useful?

Artist Steve Joy has been bringing together broad, rather abstract concepts into equally broad and abstract paintings for several decades. His work taps into some of the most important needs and ideas that have been explored during the course of human civilization. His pursuit of ideas and inspirations has led him across the world, discovering how various cultures have found and defined spiritual meaning, how artists throughout history have responded, and how history and art are constantly reinterpreting one another. This pursuit is as large as any artist can undertake, but Steve's unrelenting energy has led to remarkable artistic accomplishments.

Steve Joy was born in England in 1952 and has lived and worked in an astounding number of different parts of the world. After joining the Royal Air Force as a teenager, he traveled through the Far East, Middle East, the Maldives, and the Mediterranean.

In 1973, Steve visited the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, where he encountered the work of American artist Barnett Newman. Newman had died a few years earlier, leaving a legacy of fully abstract paintings that were created with the intent of bringing a sense of self-awareness, even enlightenment, to those who would stand before them. He believed such an experience was possible only when the artwork in front of viewers was not a picture of something. At first glance, Newman's claim about his paintings, which were often fields of color with narrow, vertical bands of contrasting colors, would seem outlandish. But what Newman thought was that pictures of things, even pictures that are difficult to recognize, lead viewers to see only the things in the painting rather than seeking something more. That



Steve Joy, *Lighthouse*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 19.75 x 19.75 inches



Steve Joy, *Winstanley's Light*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 24 x 20 inches

“something more” varies from artwork to artwork and viewer to viewer, but it requires the minds of viewers to explore the artwork and interact with something secretive and maybe even indecipherable. Newman explained it this way: “It’s no different, really, from meeting another person. One has a reaction to the person physically. Also, there’s a metaphysical thing, and if a meeting of people is meaningful, it affects both their lives.”

Newman’s paintings inspired Steve to begin thinking about his life once his service in the Royal Air Force was complete. He initially began to study religion, with the idea of becoming a minister, but switched to art after leaving the military. Since completing his art degrees, he has lived and worked in Japan, Norway, Italy, Belgium, Minorca, New York, Spain, France, and, of course, England.

In 1998, Steve moved back to the United States, settling in Omaha, Nebraska, to serve as the curator of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art. Though he stayed only one

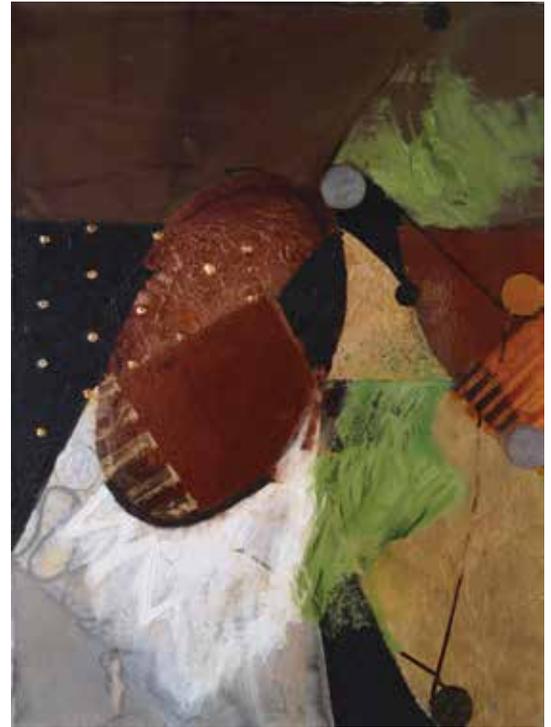
year, and began traveling extensively once again, Steve found Omaha to be a very pleasant place to work. He returned a few years later and made Omaha a permanent base, though commonly spending his summers in England, and still traveling regularly.

What he has brought to this part of the country is an amazing breadth of experience and thought about the purpose of painting in our time. The more he has travelled, the more he has been able to discover those moments in the history of places during which an assortment of ideas first came to life. His travels, studies, and experiences slowly matured into a unique style that performs two difficult tasks simultaneously. They represent humanity’s efforts to attain as much worldly knowledge as possible, while appreciating the continuing mysteries that surround our individual lives and the existence of humankind itself.

As his style of painting evolved beginning in the 1980s through the 1990s, Steve used a relatively untapped genre



Unknown Artist, *Queen Elizabeth I*, circa 1585-1590, oil on panel, 37.5 x 32.25 inches  
National Portrait Gallery, London



Steve Joy, *Portrait of Elizabeth I*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

of historic painting: icon painting within Eastern European Orthodox churches. For at least a thousand years, icons depicting Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints, or other biblical figures have been painted for quiet contemplation. Icons are typically small paintings on wood. They are often embellished with metal leaf materials such as gold and silver, and are covered with a varnish. Their beauty, simplicity, consistency, and timelessness can truly make it seem as if they are visually imparting divine knowledge. As much as any manmade object can, they represent God's presence on Earth.

Just as Steve sensed the ability of the purely abstract paintings of Barnett Newman to pull viewers slightly out of their comfort zones to bond with something unfathomable, he easily grasped the similar power that icon paintings have had. Both Newman's paintings and icon paintings bring viewers into contact with something that is either a psychological or sacred mystery. The result of Steve's synthesis of longstanding Christian painting traditions with comparatively recent theories of abstract painting

is complex. His icon-inspired paintings are dazzling. He combines vivid paint colors with the brilliance of gold leaf, the subtle characteristics of wax, and often the gloss of shellac. The different visual sensations created by the reflective quality of leaf and the opaqueness of wax convey a similar feeling of clarity and mystery, as well as light and dark, that viewers experience with an icon. Should we expect to gain divine knowledge through Steve's work? That might be a bit much. However, he does reference icons directly through his color choices and patterns, along with his clean and well-balanced compositions.

The hints of centuries-old painting traditions and decades-old painting theories within Steve's paintings are just the backstories, of course. The resulting paintings speak for themselves, grabbing our eyes with their beauty and brightness that are so extreme that we forget that the colors and shapes are not presenting us with a picture of anything other than paint, leaf, wax, shellac, and a support of wood, canvas, or paper.



After Hans Holbein the Younger, *Henry VIII*, circa 1537  
oil on panel, 94 x 53 inches  
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool



Steve Joy, *Portrait of Henry VIII*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

As he investigated the traditions of painting icons, Steve has also deeply explored different periods of English history. The icon paintings provided a beautiful example of how religion could be interpreted through the arts. Therefore, Steve has looked to the arts for interpretations of English history from the Tudor era and from the reign of George III.

In his series of Tudor-inspired paintings, the “Elizabethans” referenced in the exhibition title, Steve began the series with inspiration from what he described as “dark, mysterious, and very strange Tudor portraits, usually by unknown artists.” Typically, the monarchs, such as Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, and other members of the nobility in these portraits were presented in dark settings that created a very shallow sense of space. Artists tended to emphasize the details of their subjects’ clothing, jewelry, and objects as much as or even more than the details of their faces.

In paintings such as *Portrait of Elizabeth I*, Steve “reworks” 16<sup>th</sup>-century portraits through his now well-established style.

He has written that these recent paintings “have gravitated toward a form of abstraction which hints at reality, though a reality of the imagination.” Steve’s icon paintings abstracted visual symbols of Christian divinity. The Elizabethan paintings have abstracted visual symbols of human authority. Viewers can see the difference between the two sources: the icon paintings maintain order, regularity, and calm; the Elizabethan paintings are more diverse in their geometric forms, and they struggle to maintain rigid order with frail lines and irregular, repetitive marks. The more thoroughly human Steve’s sources are, the more unpredictable his paintings become.

This becomes even more evident when looking at the four paintings from Steve’s current (and ongoing) series titled *Elegies for a Mad King*. How much information do we need to understand these small canvases? In one way, the paintings are Steve’s response to a 30-minute, one-person, operatic composition by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and Randolph Stow titled *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. First performed in 1969, *Eight Songs for a Mad King* was based directly on the



Steve Joy, *Elegy to a Mad King 1*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 19.5 x 15.75 inches



Steve Joy, *Elegy for a Mad King 3*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 19.5 x 15.75 inches

incoherent words of King George III. The musical work is, to say the least, a unique way to learn something of the man who was the King of Great Britain for nearly 60 years. Steve admires the work of Davies and is likewise fascinated by the history of England.

In another way, *Elegies for a Mad King* is a logical extension of Steve's work. Is George III or Peter Maxwell Davies present in these canvases? Sure. Every bit as much as a portrait of a biblical figure is present within Steve's icon paintings, or Elizabeth I is present in *Portrait of Elizabeth I*. "Quite mad" is the phrase Steve has been using most frequently to describe his *Mad King* paintings. They share a basic structure, one that connects these works to most of Steve's other works: a division of space through geometry. Though there are slender, golden-brown rectangles that form a kind of foundation upon which the much of the rest of the compositions are laid, the stability we see in the icon paintings is long gone.

Steve Joy's close study of the long history of art has led him to create contemporary paintings that are infused with the efforts of earlier artists to represent both the limitlessness of divine authority and the limitations of mortal power. But such source material, separated from us by centuries, still provides viewers with a great amount of room for their own imaginations to wander. Steve writes of these paintings, "I would hope that they leave many questions unanswered and that they retain an air of confused mystery suitable for our times." At a time when answers to seemingly every question can be found in seconds on our phones, long moments of quiet contemplation in front of enigmatic paintings inspired by historic senses of awe and wonder might be the very thing we need to maintain our humanity.



Steve Joy, *Icon (Carpathia)*, 2011, mixed media on wood, 36 x 40 inches

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Steve Joy, *Burma Buddha*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 60 x 48 inches