

Hand Over Fist

Forrest Kirk's powerful paintings of fists—universal symbols of solidarity—are rapidly propelling his career forward.

BY ALLISON BERG
PORTRAIT BY ERIC SWENSON



The artist, photographed in his studio, often employs unconventional materials such as Gorilla Glue, which he mixed with acrylic and spray paint to create his 2019 *Cage* painting seen here.

“IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING GOING ON globally, we are trying to come together and gain some semblance of ‘us’ as a nation, as an art community and as individual artists,” Forrest Kirk says as we attempt an uninterrupted conversation in the midst of pandemic month 10, with COVID-19 cases at an all-time high in LA, and in the wake of mobs storming the U.S. Capitol. It feels somewhat ironic to be discussing “coming together” during a week that may go down in history as the nadir of our city and country, but as an artist who both lives and works in a space of social consciousness, Kirk seems refreshingly optimistic. “It’s like we have been on an official time-out for almost a year,” he says. “It’s time to evolve more as people and move forward.”

When Kirk, who was born in San Diego and now lives in LA, first started painting, it was all about formalizing his process. Educators encouraged him to focus on the materials and technical aspects of line and structure and putting together a complete composition. He was influenced by Richard Serra’s theory that to be a great artist, one has to invent something new and move it through a “verb list.” To achieve this, Serra used rubber. Rubber could “take actions.” It could lift, curl, roll and bend and ultimately form a relationship with space and time in order to create a new form of art. For Kirk, the notable material of choice has been Gorilla Glue. Keen on making wall-based art, about 20 years ago he was trying to create a three-dimensional tear on an eye. He used Gorilla Glue, and it looked great. Since then, the polyurethane adhesive has remained a unique and central component in his work. In his powerful paintings, he has considered “gorillas” in the context of his own African American male identity, the connotation of being primitive and the gorilla history that has tended to accompany the Black narrative in the Western canon since the days of Jim Crow. Utilizing this new material, Kirk is taking hold of a stereotype and turning it on its head.

Kirk’s themes have always been grounded in his identity as a Black American and what that entails—historically and currently—as well as in a continuing exploration of human relationships. Whether immersed in the imputation of racism and abuse of power or the aura of physical attraction, Kirk’s abstracted and symbolic imagery is a viscerally charged point of access to meaningful conversations about the world and how we choose to live in it. In his canvases, the grace of colorful, painterly gestures lives harmoniously with challenging, sometimes painful narratives, and the true context of Kirk’s work reveals itself as the viewer spends time probing beyond the beauty on the surface. “Every time I try to ease up on the socially-driven stuff, there is some kind of world event that says, ‘Nope, you should be right back here,’” Kirk says, laughing.

During the initial days of the pandemic, Kirk was thinking about how it feels to connect with a person’s essence yet not be able to touch physically. The result was a series of abstracted figures with moments of complete command over shape and composition alongside texture and movement that suggests something otherworldly. Nevertheless, Kirk has once again shifted his focus back to sociopolitical discourse in response to the injustices laying siege to America. A recent painting titled *A Bird in The Hand* serves as a compelling example of how his work provides a pleasurable viewing experience within the context of a provocative

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investigation. “When you look at it, you don’t immediately think, ‘Oh, this is about George Floyd or Breonna Taylor’ or ‘this is a statement about Trump,’ but everything going on in this moment is formalized in this painting,” says Kirk. “The information is not spelled out, but it is there. People pick up on the symbols. As I approach resolution in a painting’s composition, the painting itself will tell me what it needs to complete the narrative thought.” Within *A Bird in The Hand*’s abstraction, a plant and leaves emerge fairly quickly. Upon further scrutiny, the viewer realizes that the leaves resemble lungs and therefore reference breathing and human interactions with plants and other living beings. Other reoccurring symbols in Kirk’s work are tricycles representing lost childhoods and small tigers representing freedom or an untamed life.

Fists have most recently taken center stage in Kirk’s practice. Last summer, he had a solo presentation of nine abstracted fists at LA’s Parrasch Heijnen gallery. Since then, 25 more fist paintings have sold to prominent collectors with a waiting list for more. “This imagery is permeating all around the world right now. From Lebanon, to Amsterdam, to Russia and to America, there is a worldwide fight against so many injustices. The fist captures and chronicles this time,” Kirk surmises. The artist’s first fist appeared within a larger painting addressing police brutality around 2010. A few years later, after many life transitions, including becoming a parent and going through a divorce, Kirk created a prototype for a single abstracted fist. Sidetracked by a solo exhibition of police paintings at Chimento Contemporary, several group shows around the globe and acquisitions for the Hammer Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Kirk has finally been able to concentrate on the evolution of his fists.

Kirk points out that everyone has their own reason for “holding up the fist.” In 1968, atop the Olympic podium, track and field star Tommie Smith held up his fist for the Black Power movement (although he described the action as showing support for human rights, rather than a Black Power salute, in his autobiography published nearly 40 years later). Lately, the gesture has been adopted by the Black Lives Matter movement. “The fists are resonating because the abstraction within each finger represents different struggles. For me, the fist is for human rights—whether you are doing it for Black trans rights, Jewish American rights or Black American rights,” says Kirk. “As a kid, I thought we would have been traveling to other planets by now. How are we ever going to get there when we can’t get past bull like fighting over the color of people’s skin?”

Kirk tells me the first step toward any progress is communication. His fist paintings, six of which will be on view at his solo exhibition this spring at GAVLAK Palm Beach, seem to be a dynamic message of solidarity. “Most artists I know are working toward a better world,” he says. “Whether it’s my painting or someone else’s powerful work that sparks one small idea or a dialogue where someone finally sees a different point of view, artists can change the world, one artwork at a time.”

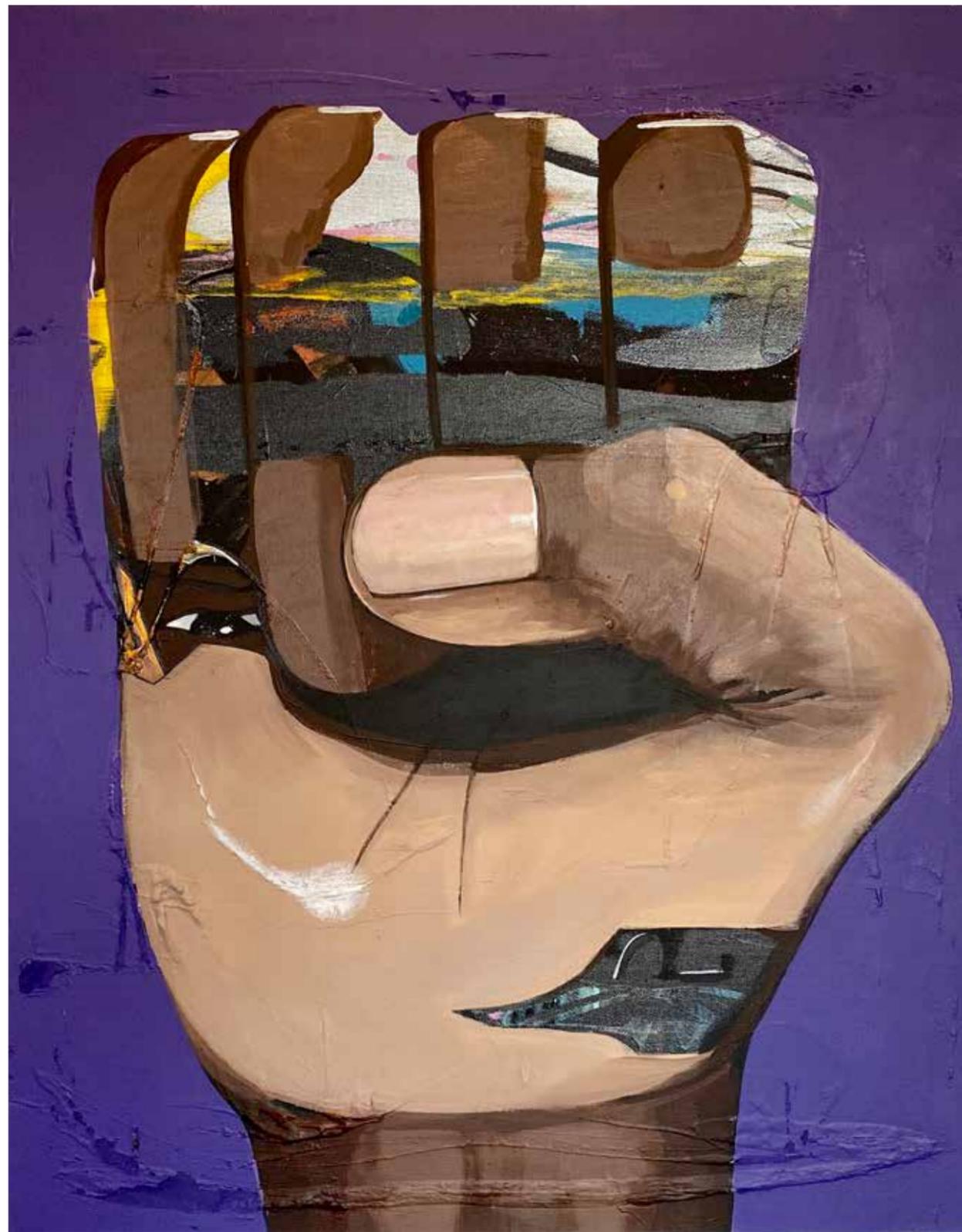


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Kirk painted his first fist within a larger painting addressing police brutality over a decade ago. Recently fists have returned as a focus of his practice, as exemplified in this 2020 *First 8* painting.