

M U S I N G S
FROM
THE FUTURE

SELECTED NEW WORK BY TAD SAVINAR

On the Anniversary of His Fiftieth Year as an Artist

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FROM
THE FUTURE

PDX CONTEMPORARY ART

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AN EXHIBITION FOR THE END-TIMES

AN ILLUSTRATED ESSAY BY LINDA TESNER

DEATH AND DESIRE

On a recent studio visit, Tad Savinar greeted me with the proclamation, “It’s over; it’s all over.” By this, he meant that human beings have squandered our last chance to save ourselves. There is no reversing the increasingly dire effects of climate change; nuclear holocaust remains a potent possibility; American democracy is unsalvageable; economic disparity will only widen; genuine social change will come too late, if we ever see it at all. Every object in *Musings from the Future* is a thought experiment concerning all that has been lost, collectively and individually—and even worse, what is yet to come. It is hard to imagine an exhibition that casts a more pessimistic pall over, well, just about everything.

The most explicit example of this grim outlook is probably the installation *Death* (facing page). It consists of a sticker on the floor, the kind of social-distance marker we have all become accustomed to in the age of COVID-19, that bears the admonition: “Please keep your distance. Wait here.” An imaginary queue leads to a silk shroud hanging on the wall; the slightest movement of air agitates it in the most evanescent way. The printed silk ground is a color that is called, ingloriously, puce (“flea” in French).¹ Across the banner is a single word, in the stoic font found on a tombstone: *DEATH*. The text is in oxblood, another purposeful choice of color. The floor sticker and scrim are not quite macabre, but their message is somber, a

DEATH

Digitally printed silk with
vinyl floor sticker

78 x 30 x 72 inches

2022

“An Exhibition for the End-Times”: This title is inspired by a comment made by Colin Meloy on KINK 101.9 FM while introducing the Decemberists’ “Calamity Song,” from the band’s 2011 album *The King Is Dead*.

1. Puce is said to be the color of stains on bed linens from a flea’s droppings, or of bloodstains left after a flea has been crushed. Metaphorically, it could be said that puce is a color associated with pestilence and death.



twenty-first-century memento mori reminding us that, yes, we are all pretty much waiting in line for our own demise.

While *Death* sets a dark tone for the entire exhibition, every other work in the series speaks to loss. *Desire Denied* (facing page) is a graphic notice that the formerly accessible American dream, as many have interpreted it, is no longer available to most. It's irrefutable that the American family, once upwardly mobile, is now facing downward turns on every front. The premise of the artwork is a substrate collage of popular lifestyle magazine covers: *Martha Stewart Living*, *Savonar*, *Coastal Living*, *Travel + Leisure*, *Sail*, and *Elegant Homes* among them. A closer look reveals other magazine covers for publications that are not necessarily reserved for the 1 percent. Who among us wouldn't like good *Health* or a *Stress-Free Home*; to learn the *Secrets of Getting Organized*; or—my favorite—the benefits of *Brain Food*? These many everyday desires born of media-driven lifestyle dreams are obscured by a veil of transparent violet, the color most closely associated with royalty and privilege. The purple haze is a not-so-subtle message to “look but don't touch,” further emphasized by bold black discs that visually cancel out each magazine cover's bountiful tease. It's like Savinar has made a list of things that many—most?—Americans aspire to, from robust health to an extravagant trip, and negated each aspiration with a resounding *NO*. One can almost hear the “wrong answer” buzzer as one's eye moves from cover to cover: *Nope! NOT for you!* It is a sad truth that the post-pandemic middle class is in serious trouble, that forty hours of work a week will never keep up with inflation, that no matter how meticulously we manage our health, there are still toxins in the very air we breathe and the water we drink.

The structure of *Desire Denied* makes one think about the formal qualities that Savinar has consistently employed throughout his fifty-year-long career. He admits an indebtedness to the heavy hitters of minimalism and their use of juxtaposed color fields—Ellsworth Kelly, Donald Judd, Robert Mangold—and he often uses bold color as a central compositional motif. *America 2020* (page 13) is an example. In this piece, the formalism of the 1970s is apparent, the picture plane dominated by a giant

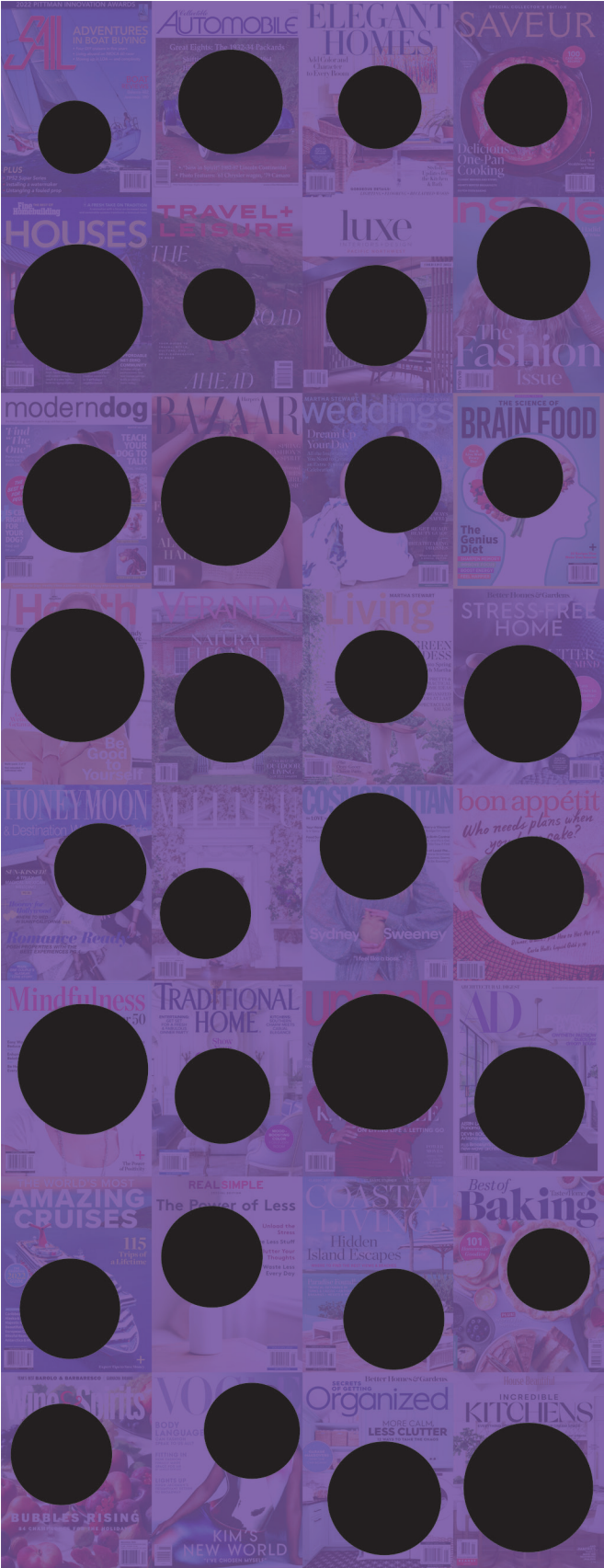
DESIRE DENIED

Digital print on paper

80 x 30 inches

2022

Edition of 12



blue rectangle (a tombstone? a stele?) bifurcated horizontally into azure and cerulean blue. (When asked about the use of color in his work, Savinar replies that his palette is largely intuitive, or at least reaching for a certain mood; that color choice is then used as a conceptual element in a composition.) But at the very bottom foreground of the print, there is a tiny bug lying on its back. Savinar's work often combines formal considerations with pictorial concerns. The title, *America 2020*, is enigmatic—what part of this composition is supposed to signify the United States? Or is the viewer even supposed to read this work so literally?

No one would argue with the assertion that much (if not all) of the acute danger facing humanity has been caused by human hubris. Savinar addresses this in *Man* (facing page), which features a curious deconstruction of Jacques-Louis David's iconic *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1800–1801). The equestrian painting was made as a celebration of Napoleon's triumphant coup d'état, in which he installed himself as First Consul of France. Just a few years after this portrait was made, he crowned himself Emperor of the French. Savinar uses only a small portion of the David painting—a detail that includes Napoleon's left hand, pointing toward the summit, the exultant apotheosis awaiting the French leader. But the primary appropriated detail, mirrored and confronting itself, is the head of the horse Napoleon is driving up the mountain, eyes wild with terror and mouth open in a silent scream. David's painting is an image of unabashed blind ambition, and the horse knows what the rider ignores: danger lies ahead. In Savinar's piece, a black Rorschach print that looks a lot like a male pelvis with an erect penis—rocket-like, monument-like—saddles the twin horse heads, dividing them into opposing forces. There is some humor in this image—the ridiculous arrogance of Napoleon, the funny phallic shape that resembles a middle finger—but the image sadly and successfully sums up the audacity of human culture.

MAN

Digital print on paper

17 x 20 inches

2017

Edition of 12



THE UNSEEN HAND

Musings includes a number of wall-mounted sculptures, another trope in Savinar's oeuvre. These sculptures are "event encapsulations," shorthand visuals that summarize a narrative that has just taken place. *Hand of God* (facing page) is an exquisite cast-bronze miniature church—a "house of God"—but the building has been demolished by a gargantuan hand that has smashed into the sanctuary. Nature (or God, or the universe) smacks things into perspective. *Sputnik III* is another cast-bronze replica of a house, but here the home has been destroyed by a giant sphere that has crash-landed onto the roof out of nowhere.

Like Savinar's use of color in *Death* and *Desire Denied*, the use of materials in his wall-mounted sculptures is an important choice. By casting his ideas in bronze and mounting them on stainless steel, he delivers a visual double entendre about permanence and impermanence—the artwork is "made for the ages," yet the narrative underscores the ephemeral vulnerability of our most stalwart and cherished values: God and family, house and home. And the shelf is an important component. In Savinar's work, the stainless-steel perch functions much like a frame, underscoring the gravitas inherent in the object: it is a concept, a sculpture, not a tchotchke.

NO TIME LIKE THE FUTURE

And then there are the images of clocks. Or, more accurately, clockfaces with no hour or minute hands. A clock is, of course, a classic symbol for the notion of fleeting time, *tempus fugit*. Savinar's works using clockfaces, such as *Present Tense* (page 11), are the artist's announcement that the future is here now. Savinar posits that most people think there is still time to counter the "three Cs": climate change, civic change, and cultural change. Yet human beings have been more or less calmly leading "normal" lives, engaged in the quotidian minutiae of daily life, while genuine change and viable solutions are being pushed down the road. The black-painted central frame that obscures some of the collaged clockfaces in *Present Tense* is a vivid semiotic, a formalized device that magnifies the urgency of the situation and announces that

HAND OF GOD

Cast bronze and stainless steel

11 x 16 x 10 inches

2022



the essence of time itself is *now*. The possibility of an imaginable future has been abrogated by our collective foolishness. In the human narrative, the proverbial sky is actually falling.

The clockface works in *Musings* offer an interesting insight into the way Savinar works. A few years ago, he came across a stack of clockfaces at an antique store—they seemed interesting, but he didn’t buy them. Later, he started to think about clocks and ordered a selection of clockfaces—still with no particular idea of how he would use them, or what the clockface would ultimately mean to him. The clockfaces lived in a pile on a table in his studio until the day he moved them to the floor of his studio, at the entrance, so that he would have to walk on them to get into his space. Eventually, it occurred to him that these faces without hands should be a picture, a visualization of his perception that we no longer have the luxury of time—our fate is sealed. Which begs the question: How do we make choices about what to do with the limited time that is left?

IT MAY COME TO PASS

Savinar knows that some viewers, or critics, will lob the assertion that he is squarely in the senior citizen demographic now, and perhaps these musings about time, or the lack thereof, are the concerns of a man facing his own mortality. Savinar concedes that maybe they are. But anxiety about the future of humanity is hardly relegated only to those of us who are closer to the end of life. The *New Republic* reports that 75 percent of young people are frightened about the future, based on a survey of ten thousand people ages sixteen to twenty-five. A full 45 percent responded that fear and anxiety about climate change paralyze their ability to function.² As of this writing, in the summer of 2022, the American Midwest is experiencing unprecedented flash flooding; “wildfire season” has become an annual horror in the scorched West; and states are fighting over the water rights to the Colorado River. Not to mention that one-third of Pakistan is currently underwater, and the citizens who lived on flooded land are now homeless. Anyone who is not terrified is probably not paying attention.

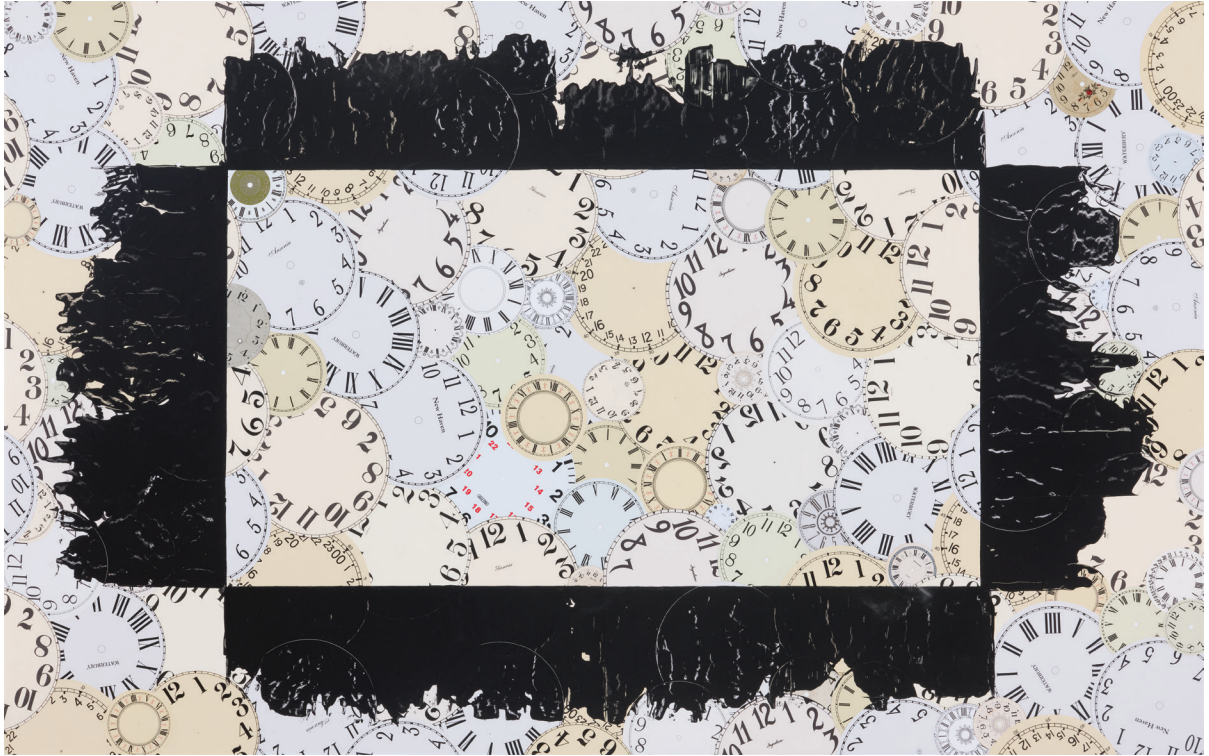
PRESENT TENSE

Mixed media

60 x 96 inches

2022

2. Liza Featherstone, “75 Percent of Young People Are Frightened by the Future. That’s the Only Sane Reaction to Climate Change,” *New Republic*, September 16, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/163683/75-percent-young-people-frightened-future-thats-sane-reaction-climate-change>.



Savinar's work might not be quite so sobering were it not for a peculiar phenomenon that has come to characterize his entire career. Savinar has always been an artist who relentlessly scrutinizes the world around him, then uses his observations to call attention to the arcaneness of modern life. As he explained during a conversation I had with him earlier this year: "In much of my work I often observe some repeated cultural or social behavior and ask myself, what might those behaviors look like if they were allowed to evolve into the future? By exaggerating an observed present-day condition and serving it up to my viewer, they will often scoff at it as hyperbole. This, of course, encourages them to assess the current state of affairs, and ask themselves how what is first thought of as an exaggerated impossibility is transformed into a not-so-far-from-the-truth terrifying situation."

Savinar's work brings to mind an epigram made famous by the American writer Stewart Brand, best known for being the editor of the *Whole Earth Catalog*: "This present moment used to be the unimaginable future."³ Savinar expands upon Brand's pithy epigram, especially the "unimaginable future" part. I would not call Savinar a prognosticator, but he has an uncanny way of drawing our attention to the most implausible aspects of contemporary reality, then pushing us to imagine the *next* most unimaginable circumstance, the one at which we shake our heads and collectively reply, "No, no way." Then, in a fairly short period of time, the spectacle or circumstance that Savinar envisioned, and that his audience perceived as preposterous or impossible, has in fact come to pass.

Here is just one example of Savinar's eerie prescience. In 2008, he conceived a series of individually framed and arranged maxims called *Characteristics of a Third World Country*.⁴ Together, the framed panels communicate twenty-two statements characteristic of a third world country (as defined from a capitalist perspective). Among them are: "inability of the state to deliver various services," "inability to control population growth," "election fraud and irregularities," "decaying infrastructures," and "entrepreneurial businesses thrive." It is more than a little chilling that, fifteen years ago, Savinar's work forecast present conditions in the United States. Could he

3. Stewart Brand, *The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 163–64. In the book's final chapter, Brand recounts an exchange with his friend Gary Snyder, the Beat poet. Snyder sent these lines to Brand: "This present moment / That lives on to become / Long ago." Brand reframed them as "This present moment used to be the unimaginable future."

4. See *A Report on America's Weather 2016–2020: Selected Works by Tad Savinar on the Eve of an Election* (self-pub., 2020).

AMERICA 2020

Digital print on paper

63 x 28 inches

2020

Edition of 12



have imagined current supply chain cumbrances, the challenge to *Roe v. Wade*, the rise of a gig economy, the Great Resignation, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, or the questioning of the legitimacy of a presidential election?

A STORY YET TO BE WRITTEN

You've probably heard of the Doomsday Clock. It is the graphic didactic that visualizes humanity's proximity to the end of the world; when the clock strikes midnight, game over. It was created in 1947 by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, an initiative established in 1945 by the very scientists who formulated atomic weaponry during the Manhattan Project; among them were Albert Einstein, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Eugene Rabinowitch. Designed by the painter Martyl Langsdorf, the clock has become an international symbol of caution, warning of the world's vulnerability to nuclear disaster, irreversible climate change, and runaway disruptive technologies. In January 2022, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the setting of the Doomsday Clock, scientists set the sweep hand at merely one hundred seconds to midnight: closer than ever to twelve o'clock high. It appears that only a miraculous Hail Mary pass will spare humanity now. Savinar's pessimistic outlook is backed by science.

But unlike the Doomsday Clock, Savinar doesn't propose an expiration date for humankind. His *Musings from the Future* assumes that we will, in fact, have a future. Nevertheless, the works in the exhibition are signifiers of a profound sadness on the artist's part, preemptive gestures of finality and defeat. These musings are elegies to something—a way of life? life itself?—that is not dead quite yet, but whose end is nigh. *Musings from the Future* is a funerary march along a very gloomy path to the future.

NIGHTTIME READING

Digital print on paper

55 x 29 inches

2022

Edition of 12





The artist in the studio grabbing a few precious moments before heading out.

TAD SAVINAR

Born in Portland, Oregon, Tad Savinar received his bachelor of arts degree in studio art from Colorado College. He then returned to Portland, where he established a studio practice that he has sustained for fifty years.

One-person and significant group exhibitions of his work have been held at the New Museum and Artists Space in New York City; the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art; the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center; the Center on Contemporary Art in Seattle; The Art Gym at Marylhurst University in Marylhurst, Oregon; and the Portland Art Museum, the Portland Center for the Visual Arts, and the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon.

Savinar's work is included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City; the Smithsonian Institution Archives in Washington, DC; the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia; and the city collections of San Jose, Seattle, Portland, Scottsdale, and Tempe. Selected private collections include those of Jordan Schnitzer, Chase Manhattan Bank, Philip Morris USA, Aratex, John Berggruen, and Terri Hopkins.

The artist has been the recipient of three National Endowment for the Arts Individual Fellowships, in addition to numerous regional fellowships. In 1998 he received the Oregon Governor's Arts Award.

Savinar is represented by PDX CONTEMPORARY ART in Portland, Oregon.

LINDA TESNER

Linda Tesner is an independent curator and writer living in Portland, Oregon. She has served as the interim director of the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University and as the director and curator of the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark College (1998–2019). She was formerly the assistant director of the Portland Art Museum and the director of the Maryhill Museum of Art in Goldendale, Washington. Her recent publications include essays for Mark Ryden: *Anima Animals* (Cernunnos, 2020); Daniel Duford: *John Brown's Vision on the Scaffold* (Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Portland State University, 2020); Maria T. D. Inocencio and Mark R. Smith: *Loss of Material Evidence* (Hoffman Gallery, Lewis & Clark College, 2018); and D. E. May, *Inland Waterways: Correspondence* (Marquand Editions, 2017).

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Death, digitally printed silk with vinyl floor sticker, 78 x 30 x 72 inches, 2022

Desire Denied, digital print on paper, 80 x 30 inches, 2022, edition of 12

Man, digital print on paper, 17 x 20 inches, 2017, edition of 12

Hand of God, cast bronze and stainless steel, 11 x 16 x 10 inches, 2022

Present Tense, mixed media, 60 x 96 inches, 2022

America 2020, digital print on paper, 63 x 28 inches, 2020, edition of 12

Nighttime Reading, digital print on paper, 55 x 29 inches, 2022, edition of 12

Climate Change Migration Trail Marker, digital print on paper, 12 x 12 inches, 2022, edition of 12

Evolution, digital print on paper, 24 x 31 inches, 2017, edition of 12

Time, printed metal, diam. 19 inches, 2022

Sputnik III, cast bronze and stainless steel, 11 x 16 x 10 inches, 2022

2020 (lockdown), cast bronze and stainless steel, 11 x 16 x 10 inches, 2022

Watchman, digital print on paper, 12 x 12 inches, 2022, edition of 12

A Container for Two Opposing Views, stainless steel and wood, 23 x 14 x 7 inches, 2021

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