

‘An Artist’s Anthropologist’

Jeffrey Vallance, who once turned a frozen chicken into a pet, skewers the political process

By Christina Campodonico



Jeffrey Vallance used vintage campaign posters to create "The Octopus of Politics (with tentacles extended)"

Photo courtesy of Edward Cella Art + Architecture

Three big names ran for president this year, but the one you didn't see on your ballot was that of artist Jeffrey Vallance.

While Trump and Clinton were duking it out, Vallance ran his own mock campaign of sorts — building a platform based on vintage campaign slogans, automatic writing and symbols that have reoccurred throughout his decades-long career as one of Los Angeles' most provocative and pioneering artists.

Known as an infiltration artist and something of a professional prankster, Vallance has made a name for himself by investigating and inserting himself into institutional processes both bureaucratic and arcane.

He's created artwork according to the Holy See's exact specifications for sacred art and submitted it to the Vatican, exchanged ties with world leaders through the mail, and ceremoniously buried a store-bought chicken dubbed "Blinky, The Friendly Hen" at an L.A. pet cemetery (which earned him an appearance on "Late Night with David Letterman"). He's even curated a museum dedicated to former President Richard Nixon (not to be confused with the actual Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda).

During his own year-plus run for the Oval Office, Vallance made campaign buttons appropriating Nixon's 1972 campaign slogan "Now More Than Ever," handed out bumper stickers with his name on them, and even participated in a few third party debates.

On Election Day, he ran as a write-in candidate. All the while, he drew and drew and drew.

"There's 22 drawings. It took me over a year to make those," says Vallance, 61, as he goes through stacks of drawings from his archives and surveys his latest work hanging on the walls of Edward Cella Art + Architecture. "I made them in stages, especially the new ones. If you look at it, the backgrounds are really activated. I made the backgrounds first."

These backgrounds for his latest series of drawings, now on view at Edward Cella and part of a talk and performance by the artist on Saturday, are a tangle of chicken-scratch marks zipping through yellow-brown pieces of paper with reckless abandon.

In some, oddball-looking animals seem to shake with the force of Vallance's furious marks — a crab's hairy arms fiercely flick one page, a stonefish's whiskers tickle another. ("Blinky, The Friendly Hen," even makes an appearance in one.)

In other drawings, human objects vibrate with an explosive buzz — blood squirts from a syringe, blackness emanates from a light bulb, and blue paint dribbles over an open umbrella.

Browned and coffee-stained, these drawings look like pages torn from a slightly unhinged ecologist's notebook, like sketches from the field detailing the anatomical intricacies of a bottom-feeding batfish, but also expressing the fury of a fever brought on by too many days spent in a lonely jungle or stuck under an unforgiving sun.

Vallance describes his state of mind while making these drawings as like that of a "possessed cat."

"I got in this altered state. At first I was working with one hand, and then I realized my other hand was moving. So then I started working with both hands," he says. "Then my feet started moving and then my whole body got into it and then I realized it was like automatic writing. ... Just doing these motions became kind of like this automatic thing that was at the same time funny, but also kind of scary."

Vallance wanted to "ruin the paper," he says — turn a crisp white thing into a marked up rampage. His cats also had to christen the pages.

"Cats have to lay on every drawing first," says Vallance, who describes his drawings as "hairy," just like his three felines at home. "You bring out a new piece of paper, they just go right for it and they just lay down."

Fur may have flown onto these drawings, so to speak, but ruffling the art world's feathers is part of Vallance's creative practice, explains gallerist Edward Cella.

"His work doesn't look like art," though it is, says Cella. "It doesn't look like that shiny painting in the frame. There's a kind of playfulness and childlike quality to a lot of the work."

A cartoonish quality does run through Vallance's caricatures of fish, fowl and crustaceans, yet his attention to their anatomical detail and symbolic significance demonstrates a method behind the seeming madness. For instance, his drawing of two ravens is based on his visit to the Tower of London to investigate that landmark's and country's superstition about ravens.

“They have this legend at the Tower that they have to maintain six ravens at all times, and if they don’t England will fall,” says Vallance. “I thought that that’s like the ultimate raven story. So then I had to go see it.”

Going to the Tower was not just about making art, it was a true field trip — as necessary to his artistic practice as a scholar’s cross-Atlantic visit to a rare books library or an archaeologist’s sojourn to a dig site.

“I think of him almost like an anthropologist. He’s like an artist’s anthropologist,” explains Cella.

For Vallance, drawing is an integral part of such cultural investigations into the people, places and institutions that shape our society.

“All this stuff here,” says Vallance referring to the drawings that surround him. “It’s all a piece of the story. And that’s whether it’s a drawing, or painting or a performance. Everything is sort of like a clue or a piece to sort of a bigger world view.”

As for this election, we spoke before the results came in, but Vallance’s words seemed prescient for the many Americans feeling bereft and grief stricken the morning after:

“Take a nap,” he said about his platform.

“With your cats?” I asked.

“Exactly, with a cat. Grab a cat and take a nap,” he said. “Instead of going to war or driving on the freeway or trying to make a billion dollars, if we had more people who do that, maybe the Earth would have more time to heal.”