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A Star is Born: Metaphorical Portraits of America

by: [Laura Beckman](#) on July 18th, 2011 | Comments Off

Artist Carl Gopal's interests are expansive, but he is by no means a dilettante. He is gifted with an ability to analyze current events in the context of the "big picture" without getting overwhelmed, weaving together schools of thought as diverse as popular culture and politics, spirituality and quantum physics. He is afraid that amid the exhilaration of rapid scientific advancement, we are losing the sense of humble awe at the universe that spurred our curiosity in the first place.

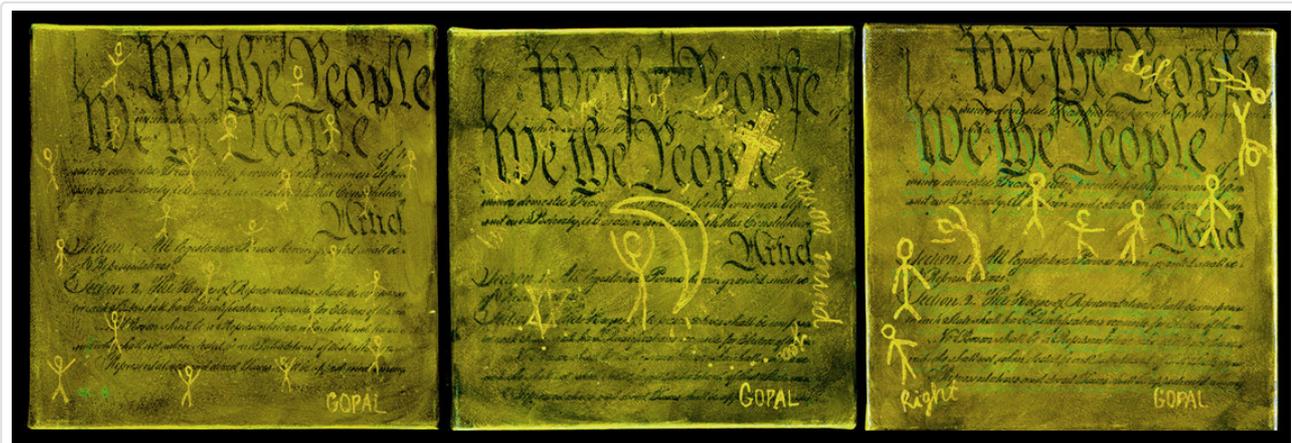


And Starring Benjamin Netanyahu as Norman Maine

To see more of Gopal's work, visit the [Tikkun Daily Art Gallery](#) and visit the [artist's website](#).

Gopal is also afraid that much of America has forgotten a dazzling Hollywood narrative that may have subconsciously shaped our approach to politics on the international stage. Ten thousand miles away, in Perth, Australia, Gopal is trying to remember this narrative for us, starting with a series of pieces layering acrylic paint, silkscreen, gold leaf, and collage entitled "The Assassination of Judy Garland: A Metaphorical Portrait of America."

Why frame the story of American culture around the life and death of Judy Garland? Most of us remember her as a cultural icon, a child prodigy who charmed us with her vocal power and naiveté in *The Wizard of Oz* at age sixteen. When we heard her sing, we all wanted to believe that we would find our “Over the Rainbow” too. Yet happiness never came easily to her. She was thrust into the limelight at age thirteen and struggled with the overwhelming pressure of premature fame. Her producers never failed to remind her that she was not tall, thin, or elegant enough to be a ‘true starlet’, forcing upon her a steady stream of makeup and body modifications from which her self-esteem never fully recovered. She would later claim that MGM studios robbed her of her youth, providing her amphetamines to keep up with the hectic pace of film production, thereby leading to a lifetime battling addiction. In her forty years of life, she skidded through five marriages. Yet through all this pain, her brilliance as an entertainer never faltered.



People Who Need People

According to Gopal, the arc of Garland’s life can be seen as an allegory for our nation:

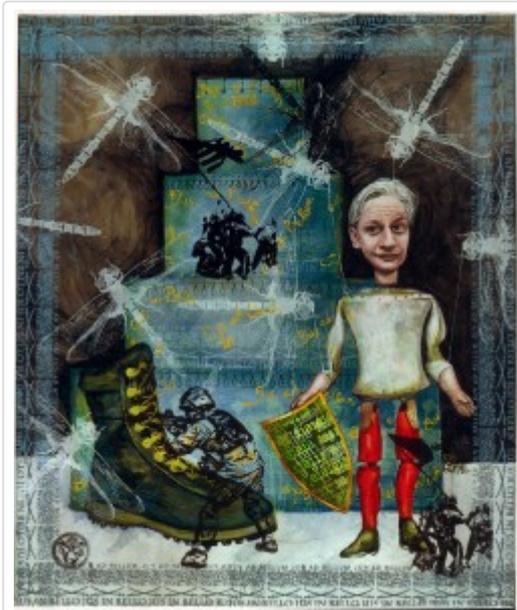
Something about Judy Garland represented the best about America — even though she had her problems. And I think that Judy Garland is a really great metaphor for America right now, because she had a lot of talent, the kind of talent that isn’t just something you can pick up — it’s just genius really, and I think that there is so much of that in the American personality. At the same time, there are these demons that sometimes come with a lot of talent.... Judy Garland represents to me high-risk, crazy, dangerous, wonderful creative behavior in America. She was the scout of scouts, if you will.

Gopal insists that the aim of his work is not to preach right and wrong in politics, so he hesitates to cast moral judgments on the legendary figures he depicts in his work, ranging from Benjamin Netanyahu to Barack Obama to fellow Australian Julian Assange. Instead he uses these larger-than-life actors as metaphors to explore contemporary politics.

By recasting Netanyahu as Norman Maine (James Mason) opposite Esther Blodgett (Judy Garland) in the 1954 film *A Star is Born* he highlights the sensational histrionics that often supersede reason in political relations between Israel and the United States. Says Gopal: “It was very much like a marriage. I could see these same relationship issues between the characters of James Mason and Judy Garland.” He went on to observe that Israeli-U.S. negotiations have become so emotionally fraught that they are beginning to lose touch with reality.

Gopal’s intricately layered piece *Gaza Wedding* also draws a parallel between the emotional investment attached to decades of warfare and a tumultuous romance. Painted in 2009, it reflects a deep disappointment with some of Israel’s actions in Gaza.

His glimmering pastiche *Angels and Pears* digs deep into two national histories, containing elements of the American Constitution as well as ever-changing maps of Israeli territories. The Israeli and Palestinian flag are hidden somewhere in this mélange, so indistinct that it is nearly impossible to distinguish between them. Angels seem to be fighting on both sides. "This painting is not so much about boundaries as lack of boundaries," Gopal says.



Song of Julian

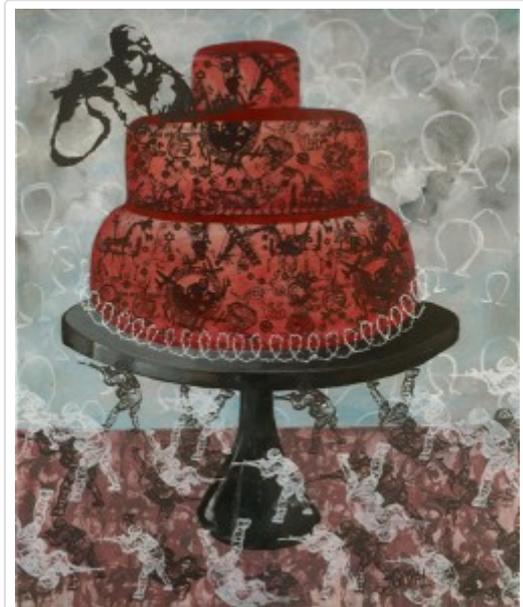
In *Song of Julian*, Gopal recasts Wikileaks founder Julian Assange as a medieval crusader, encouraging

us to reflect on the relationship between readily available technology and ethics in the information age. Were Assange's actions the heroic feats of a knight in shining armor, were they duplicitous and immoral, or were they somewhere in between? The style of the Assange portrait was heavily influenced by the ninth-century French tradition of *chansons de geste* (songs of heroic deeds), epic poems that were used as a sort of propaganda for military leaders and latent nationalism. They were initially based on historical events, but ultimately retold

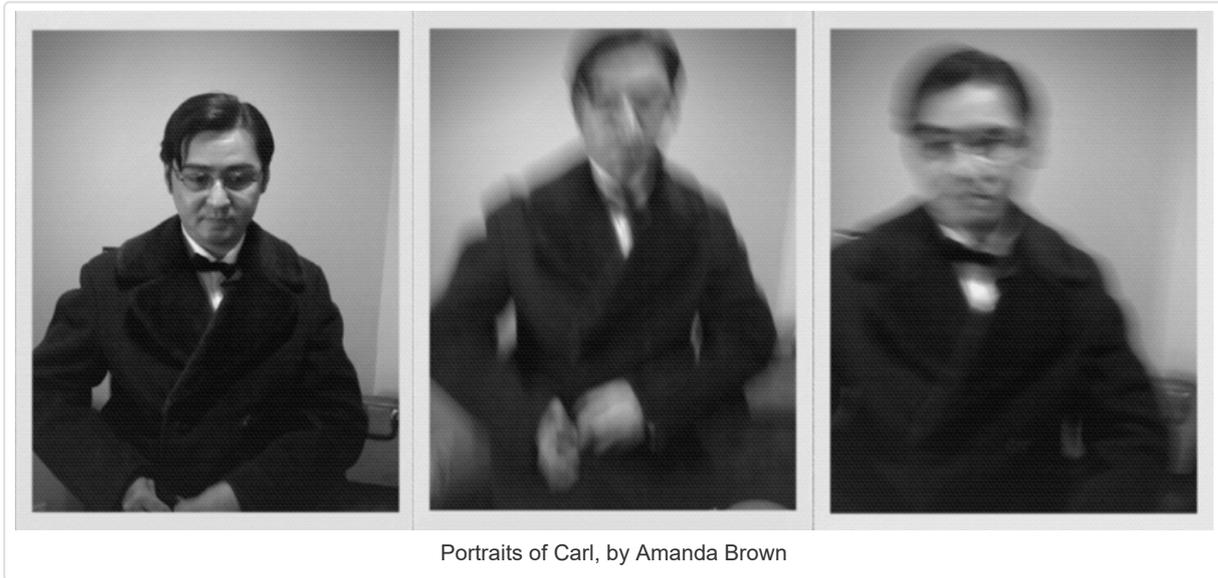
and exaggerated further and further into the realm of fantasy. By retelling current events in the style of these chansons de geste, Gopal subtly insinuates that members of the modern news media are no less influenced by fantasy and magic than storytellers at the dawn of feudalism.

Popular culture, he asserts, has always been a powerful force in shaping societal mores. Just as Hollywood films and Broadway musicals played a powerful role in distorting the American Dream, they can also play a powerful role in reviving it, if we understand them properly. Gopal's whimsical painting *There is Nothing Like a Drone* references the catchy tune "Nothing Like a Dame" from the classic Broadway musical *South Pacific*, highlighting the U.S. military's torrid love affair with the drone. In this case, of course, drone refers not to boring people but to Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), which have played a major role in the Iraq War and were previously used in the Persian Gulf War. By juxtaposing the drone with a decadent wedding cake, Gopal evokes the United States' enduring commitment to the military.

When I spoke to Gopal, who was sixteen time zones away, surrounded by stacks of paintings in his studio, I found his enthusiasm for the power of artistic narrative to change the way we see the universe infectious. If we are able to step back every once in a while and view current events in the context of a Hollywood narrative, we might be able to stop taking everything so damn seriously and gain a little perspective. If we are able to laugh at ourselves a little, we might find the strength to let go of some of the emotional baggage that has kept us at a diplomatic standstill for so many years. The whole world is watching intently, and has been watching since the dawn of Hollywood gave birth to this national mythology. "The narrative of America," Gopal says, "has controlled the narrative of the planet to a very large degree." If Americans wish to restore the trust of a disenchanted international audience, we have to figure out where we went wrong. And part of figuring out where we went wrong is remembering where we came from.

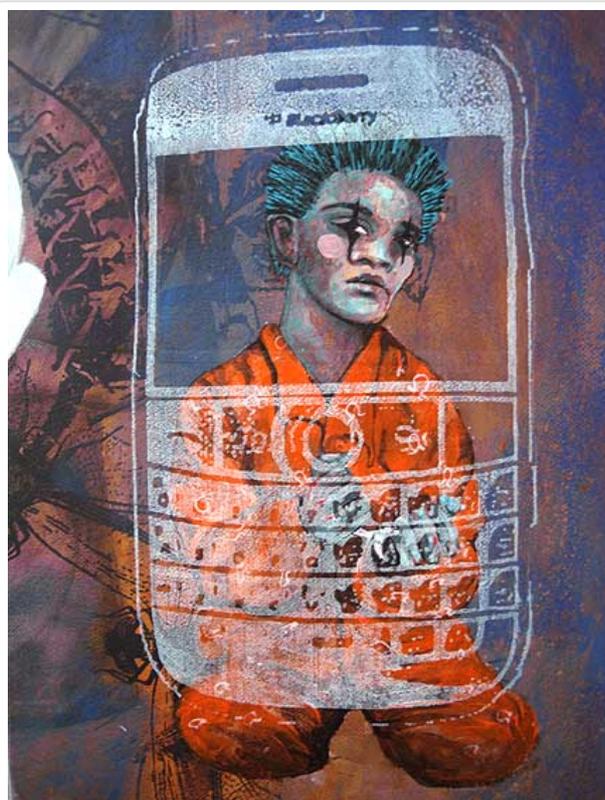


Gaza Wedding



Portraits of Carl, by Amanda Brown

Gopal is a modern Renaissance man — equally enthusiastic about painting, spirituality, and quantum physics, he sees no inherent conflict between the three. He sees parallels between Hugh Everett’s many-worlds theory, and the actions of the Hindu God Krishna of his father’s faith. For those unfamiliar with the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics, it denies the actuality of the wave function collapse, positing that all possible alternative histories and futures are real. Or as Gopal put it simply, “if this Carl takes a step to the right, there is a Carl in another universe taking a step to the left.” The infinite realm of possibility suggested by the many-worlds theory has encouraged him to explore alternate identities in surrealist self-portraits such as, *Dog Deity, Self Portrait*, and *Blue Bird of Happiness, Self Portrait*. He does not claim to be an expert quantum physicist, yet he recognizes that on a fundamental level, art, science, and religion all share an incredible capacity for storytelling.



Blackberry Basquiat

He is currently in the process of developing a new series that investigates the crossroads between science, technology, and spirituality entitled, *Resurrection of the Tin Man — A New Messiah, Part 2*. This exciting new series, he confided, began with a simple thought experiment (a method of rigorous analysis of an abstract possibility pioneered by Einstein, and traditionally associated with the scientific community). Gopal’s thought experiment is quite different. What if the result of our barreling progress in technology and ambitious developments in artificial intelligence accidentally led us to the creation of a spiritual savior?

“What if,” Gopal asked matter-of-factly, “one of these experiments, instead of turning into a monster of war, turned into a messiah of peace?” This fantastical point in the future at which science gets so far ahead of itself that it butts heads with spirituality, at which we realize that the two are inherently linked — this would be the ultimate irony. He points to Einstein’s intensely spiritual worldview as evidence that God and science can, and must, coexist. Gopal is astounded by the mysteries

presented by quantum physics, but believes that God is ultimately smarter than science. An unintentional messiah for the modern era — this would be God’s greatest practical joke. The *Tin Man* series is still a work in progress, but after hearing about the extensive research and eclectic sources that make up the imagery in his

first piece *The Immaculate Conception*, I am excited to see the results. “I don’t know what he or she is going to turn into,” he says, “but I know it’s going to be something good.”

I was struck by Gopal’s ability, in both his artwork and in person, to bring levity to any situation without trivializing it. I appreciate a good sense of humor, and I can only hope that if there is a God out there, God has one too. Through the joy of visual narrative, Gopal creates work that is deeply involved in the messiness of this world without getting bogged down by it. Good storytelling has that effect on people. Says Gopal:

Stories have the ability to not just make us better people, but to physically change the world. Art can be dangerous work, you know, people don’t realize that! In a culture of censorship and fear, one of the first things to go is the creative spirit.

On June 22, 1969, Judy Garland was found dead in her Chelsea, London bathroom due to an accidental overdose of barbituates. Legend has it that a large F3 tornado hit Saline County, Kansas, that same morning, so she might have found her “over the rainbow” at last. Her exact time of death has been disputed. The exact cause has been disputed, too. But it makes for a good story, doesn’t it? We’re all searching for our own personal version of over the rainbow. And if a good story can affect us so deeply that it becomes a part of our daily reality, is that such a bad thing?

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