



June 2013

## CULTURED



## ALEXANDER THE GREAT

As artist **John Alexander**—who splits his time between New York City and Amagansett—gets ready for a solo show at Guild Hall, he takes time out to chat with legendary New York artist and Sagaponack resident **Ross Bleckner** about politics in art and preshow jitters.

**Ross Bleckner:** There's a lot of variation in your work—from vegetation and landscapes to animal portraits to masks—and a lot of political satire. What are you going to show at Guild Hall?  
**John Alexander:** I'll have all of that in this show.

"Three Little Pigs" is a beautiful painting, as well as "Life on a Merry Go Round" and "Melon Fields"...  
"Melon Fields" will be in the show, probably. I don't own it anymore, but it's out here.

It seems to me like a very "Hamptons in October" painting, when you see all the pumpkins...  
Yes, but they're watermelons. More like "Texas in May."

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...CONTINUED **OK, OK, I got my geography wrong—but it's still the same idea! What else will be in the show?**

I'm working on a picture that's 10 feet wide and 7 feet high. It's my version of that painting at the Met, "Washington Crossing the Delaware," but also based on Winslow Homer's angry-sea paintings. It's a boat filled with these strange characters from all walks of life, from politics to business to clergy.

**What's the point of putting them all together?**

It's kind of a ship without a rudder. It's a collection of people—most of whom have misbehaved.

**You sure you just don't want to put members of Congress in that boat?**

You could easily interpret this as Congress. As I get older, I've become more and more perplexed every time I look at any of the actions of the right...

**It's called the governing bodies.**

Take the vote against background checks for guns—you look at something like that and are just completely befuddled. Now, is it the role of the artist to depict that in some kind of cartoony way? I think not. I think you're running into dangerous territory there; but if you're painting something that's deeply personal and that you're emotionally charged about, and you enjoy working that way, I think it's perfectly legitimate subject matter to portray.

**I think anything the artist feels a personal conviction about is a legitimate subject.**

You look back in history at [William] Hogarth, [Honoré] Daumier... There have been



PALETTE PLEASER A Houston native, Alexander made his name living and working in New York City and the East End.

*"In my experience, talent and character aren't often at the same address... John Alexander is the exception. I sleep better at night knowing he's a 'first responder' friend. There is truly no one like him—and I've met just about everybody."*—Lorne Michaels

ample examples—Goya!—of people who used the politics of the time and were portraying it in a heroic way.

**All the way up to early American modernism. In a lot of your work, the painterliness recalls the Ashcan School up to Marsden Hartley.**

Thank you for saying that. I'm very committed to the idea of making the surface of a painting

alive—trying to get some sense of electricity on the surface itself.

**I like the masks and the animals used in a way that references Hogarth and political cartooning, but the way you use them is almost more high-end, like [Chaim] Soutine and James Ensor.**

Ensor is a complete favorite of mine.

**Well, I can see that. I really like how you bring some of your favorite masters from the past into contemporary life, and how you use the politics of today to update the work.**

When you make references to people who were so great and so loved from history, there's always a risk you can come out on the short end. It's very important to me that I've worked and spent an enormous amount of time on my craft itself, because so much of that historical work—as we all know and appreciate—was so brilliantly painted.

**Well, No. 1: You're not coming out on the short end.**

**And No. 2: I think you're kind of reinvigorating it, in terms of our lives now.**

Your enthusiasm is so good to hear—this is what makes me so excited about having this exhibition out here in the summertime. I used to show a lot in New York in the '80s and '90s, and had a fairly large following, but then for whatever reason I chose to just withdraw from it for a number of years. Even though it's not New York City, it's the same audience.

**It's close enough—it's New-York-by-the-Sea.**

That's right. I do shows frequently around the U.S. and in other places, but I haven't had that tough and knowledgeable New York audience for a long time. To say that I'm nervous and worried is an understatement, but I really feel strong about the work I'm doing and I feel strong about this opportunity. *June 15-July 28. 158 Main St., East Hampton, guildhall.org*

*"The man can paint!"*  
—Dan Ackroyd