The Great Americans

PORTRAITS BY JAC LAHAV

This exhibition organized by the Florence Griswold Museum displays over thirty of the paintings that artist Jac Lahav has created for his *Great Americans* series. Lahav has been producing this body of work since 2009, after seeing the Discovery Channel's series that asked Americans to vote: "Who is the Greatest American?" The nominees demonstrated that "greatness" means many things in American culture—Abraham Lincoln and Harriet Tubman were named alongside Madonna and Tiger Woods. The idea of reaching an apex of achievement, in America, could mean gaining wide, popular fame, or could mean having invented a vaccine for polio, as Jonas Salk did. A word like "greatest" lacks specific criteria—and can morph, including some people because of their notoriety, their talent, or their magnetism; excluding others due to, potentially, the quiet nature of their achievement; societal championing of some traits and qualities over others; and moreover, discrimination.

Originally inspired by the Discovery Channel's list, Lahav's interest in the idea of the "Great Americans" began to evolve as he started to consider those who he himself considered great— and what he considered worthy of memorializing in paint. Although his process has involved deep biographical investigation, his paintings do not aim toward historical accuracy or a reverential view—he instead reads many of these figures through other anachronistic—though quintessentially American—tropes: Andrew Jackson is posed as the Marlboro Man; George Washington wears a denim jacket. Lahav is a technically gifted painter—at times his likenesses are photorealistic. But he is also an eclectic and unconventional experimenter. Just as the idea of American "greatness" has a leveling effect— equating Babe Ruth and Oprah Winfrey—Lahav's research into these figures considers Google images—as well as his own imagination—on par with formal photography as well as biography. The portraits demonstrate these playful dissonances in their treatment of their subjects: for instance, Ben Franklin is immediately recognizable from his face, but his long, strong legs, in their well-worn, fitted blue jeans, seem to be an imaginative (respectful?) gift from Lahav to Franklin.

In front of Franklin stands a boy, as specifically represented as the Founding Father—but while this seems to indicate that he also may be "great," he in fact is a small child dressed as Franklin for Halloween, whom Lahav found through an internet image search for "Ben Franklin Costume."

Lahav's project comments on American values while specifically not serving a documentary function: he shows that facts and fiction are difficult to parse—even lost to time—in our present day, when internet research habitually trumps the comparison of facts across closely researched books. Lahav attempted to paint a portrait of Crazy Horse, whom he considers one of the most famous Native Americans. However, Google misidentifies images of another Lakota Sioux Indian, Charging Bear, as Crazy Horse; taking an interest in this confusion, Lahav painted Charging Bear instead.

How many Americans do we consider "great" from the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, in comparison to whom we remember and choose to memorialize from our own time? Who were the greatest athletes of our colonial era, for instance, or the noted performers of the eighteenth century? Lahav's deftly composed paintings raise questions about the nature of our current values, the accuracy of our memory and our sources of information, and our preoccupation with the present tense.

Nora Lawrence, Guest Author
Senior Curator, Storm King Art Center

Born in Israel (1978) and raised in the U.S., Lahav has probed collective identity in several series, including *Slaves* and *48 Jews*. To learn more about his work, visit *jaclahav.com*.

Amy Kurtz Lansing: Your series, *The Great Americans,* raises big questions about who has been considered worthy of veneration in our culture, and why. How do you think about those choices?

Jac Lahav: *The Great Americans* series started in 2009. At the time I was thinking about what it means to have a cultural identity. I was born in Israel, yet grew up in America. I think a lot about what makes me "Israeli" and what makes me "American." Who is it that gets to decide that I am American? Is it the President? Is it a customs agent? Is it a collective decision or a personal one? This series looks at our shared American identity through the lens of whom we choose as our cultural heroes.

When I first started considering my subjects, I began by looking at who the American zeitgeist thinks is worthy of icon status. How do we choose our heroes? Is it on the basis of their historical achievements, their role in certain watershed moments, or because of their celebrity status? What's more important, fame or actual achievements? As the series expanded, I realized that the canon of American heroes mostly consists of white men. Early on I made a concerted push to depict more women. In the past few years, I realized gender equality was only the first step in an ongoing conversation about diversity among American heroes. What other stories can I tell about America by looking back at the founders, or by depicting Americans today?

There are many overlapping ideas in your work. Can you explain some of them?

This series is a giant onion (hopefully with less crying involved!). It has layers upon layers upon layers, in terms of content, actual paint, and paint that reflects content!

When viewers encounter my portraits they experience an immediate sense of recognition. The "who's who" is the first layer of my work. The subject's celebrity lends an instant entry point to the paintings, begging the question of whether these are celebrities, championed heroes, or simply people living their lives?

After viewers consider who you have depicted in your portraits and why, what other layers will they find hidden in the series?

I love when a physical aspect of painting reflects a conceptual aspect. So, after discussing recognition I usually talk about how the paint is physically applied to the canvas. This is a literal layer. Are the portraits painted in a realist manner? In a loose, painterly style? Is the paint bulky in areas, or drippy in others? A great example is how the paint dribbles down the canvas in some areas. The diluted nature of the paint reflects how identity can be a liquid thing. An individual's identity isn't contained within a single snapshot, and the biographies of these icons are continually changing and evolving, too.

The more layers of complexity I can add to the series, the closer I get to something truly beautiful. It's like a living organism. Creating something organically with a million moving parts is extremely difficult, but eventually the creation itself can come to life. I hope the series does that—I hope it starts to move and breathe and take on a life of its own, separate from the puppet strings of the painter.

So how the works are painted is as important as whom you are painting?

Yes, the physical layer must work in harmony with the content. Visually, I'm also testing how far I can push and pull a person's image before it no longer represents them. In a way, this approach questions the idea of labels, both the labels we place on our identity and the actual labels of the paintings. For example, in my portrait of Edgar Allan Poe his face is blacked out. By calling this painting "Edgar Allan Poe" I am pointing to Poe through the label, even though it might look nothing like him. In addition, the figure is painted over an earlier painting of Condoleezza Rice. So the label I use for the painting has changed over time.

Another aspect of how these works are painted is the photo-like quality of some of the paintings. I call it "photoreal-isht." Photography is everywhere in today's society, and I think it's important to question its use in creating art, especially painting, which is an inherently hands-on medium.

Must a portrait likeness be informed by a photo? Are photos even reliable? Today, when digital editing software like Photoshop is everywhere, can we trust photos? Probably about as much as we can trust the internet in general. Also, what happens when I base a portrait on an earlier painting? What does a painter do when there is no record of how a historical figure looked? Or better yet, what if I make a painting based on a photo of another painting I found online, which turned out to be mislabeled?

We are in an era when the representation of "greats" from American history is being reconsidered, particularly in the case of Confederate monuments and the recognition of marginalized people. How has your approach to "great Americans" changed over time?

You know, this is a moment of re-examination in America. It's brought entrenched viewpoints to the surface along with disagreements. That's not necessarily a bad thing, since disagreement leads to discussion, which hopefully leads to progress. One of my main goals here is to spark conversation. I think the more we talk about these issues of veneration and marginalization the better off we will be.

The key word here is "representation." I had a show a while back titled *Recognition*, which I think is a significant aspect of my work. I often try to choose subjects for my portraits who are high up on the recognition ladder. At the same time, I also play devil's advocate and show there are multiple angles from which to view these people. In *The Great Americans* exhibition at the Florence Griswold Museum, we see America's most recognizable icon, George Washington (although at this point it's debatable whether the title of "most recognizable" belongs to Oprah Winfrey). Yet, in the same series stands Afong Moy, the first Chinese woman to immigrate to the US in the 1830s. Washington is recognizable simply from his silhouette, while most Americans would be hard pressed to say who Afong Moy is. Also, there are no historical images of Moy, so "representing her" leads to many more questions and choices.

In the final analysis, I really enjoy the dialogue all these paintings have together. Imagine what these people would say to each other if they were in the same room?

Afong Moy—Cloud of Cerise, 2018. Oil on canvas, 80 x 32 in. Courtesy of the artist

What sources have informed your perception of the historical figures in *The Great Americans*? How do you sort truth from myth, particularly in how you use internet searches?

When researching, I like to use as many different sources as possible. I was brought up in an academic household among many law professors. So, an academic thread runs deep in my work. Often I start by reading biographies of the sitters, exploring their histories thoroughly. However, I don't consider myself a historian. I'm a painter. I'm also a child of the internet, and that plays a strong role in this series.

Our reliance on the web is both fabulous and scary. I love how Wikipedia is a crowd-aggregated encyclopedia. I love how Google is most people's end-all source for information. At home we have a snarky saying: "if it's on the first page of Google search results, then it must be a fact!" We must continually question both truth and TRUTH, and examine the nature of facts.

The search for TRUTH on the internet is perhaps echoed in the nature of painting itself. Painting is a search for how we see things and attempt to plasticize them, to hold onto the fleeting in life. Maybe only when facts are written do they become "truth," and only when a scene is painted can it be understood as "fiction."

Since the series is ongoing, whom would you like to paint in the future? What would they add to the series?

Oh, that's such a huge list! Right now I'm interested in the idea of big stories versus small stories. For example, George Washington is a big story in the American mythos. Afong Moy is a smaller story in comparison, although a super important one. The idea of including big and small stories together is challenging because it can change the whole meaning of the series.

Even naming the series "Great Americans" is a challenge. Within the title lies your very first question "who do we consider great" and just as important to me, "who do we consider 'American?'" Perhaps it should be "The Great Americans?," with a question mark at the end, because is your notion of a Great American the same as mine? The same as your neighbor's? Or as a refugee's who just became a citizen?

The entity we know as America has an identity all its own, and that, too, is always changing and growing.

In *The Great Americans,* the subjects are in modern clothes and even costumes rather than outfits from their historical periods. What is the importance of costume in your work?

Costuming is a crucial layer of these portraits. At first glance, we could say their costuming follows the grand tradition of artists dressing their subjects to fit a scene. Yet it also harkens back to our discussion of truth and fiction. Costume can be seen as either lending authenticity or as disingenuous. The word *costume* itself makes us think of Halloween and dressing up, yet the word also talks about any clothing we decide to wear for a specific occasion. The costume you are wearing right now is a symbol of your own identity.

Take, for example, my George Washington portrait. There is a great story from when the Continental Congress was choosing the Commander in Chief for the Continental army. George Washington was the only one who showed up to the meeting in his officer's uniform. He said he didn't want the job, but his uniform said otherwise. I don't know what clearer example of the importance of costuming we can find!

So, I've taken Washington out of his military uniform and put him in casual garb, but I have also started layering symbolic content right into his shirt. Here the costume is reflecting the identity of the sitter with an image taken from an old painting, which is rendered in paint on his shirt. Layers, upon layers, upon layers.

You have often painted in series, including *48 Jews, Slaves,* and *The Great Americans.* What appeals to you about that format?

I love the uniformity of a series. To be honest, it's pretty difficult to paint on a blank canvas from scratch, and when deciding on the size of a canvas, the complexity is compounded. Setting a uniform size is like a "house rule" for the painting game. The serialization gives me borders against which to bang my paintbrush. Conceptually, the serializing of sizes lends coherence and argues for seeing all these portraits as one group.

The genre of portraiture has such a long and weighty history. How do you take on that legacy?

One brush stroke at a time.

Your works combine images and ideas from many sources. In particular, photography plays an intriguing role in your paintings. Do you have any reflections on those mashups?

A lot of my work stems back to my early twenties. I attended Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. I think along with youth came both excessive creativity and stubbornness. Luckily, the university let me devise my own line of study on psychology, art history, and religion. So, I basically majored in Jungian Psychology, universal archetypes, the unconscious, and surrealism. That was really the start to this whole painting thing.

Specifically, I remember a surrealist game called the Exquisite Corpse. To play, three people each draw a different part of a person—the head, torso, and legs. The result is some kind of weird Frankenstein-looking thing. The idea of creating a new being through committee has fascinated me for decades (and perhaps is what the "American experiment" is all about).

Just like in the Exquisite Corpse game, the unconscious plays an important role in the creation of my work. Before I begin composing a portrait, I read biographies of the individuals, yet when it comes time to paint I try to forget everything I know. Think of it like a star athlete. Practice, practice, practice, but when it comes time to play the game, an athlete can't think, "now I put this foot here and that foot there." If they tried to rationalize running, they would fall all over themselves. I think of painting the same way. One must do research and prep work, then forget it all. To create something new and beautiful, one must be simultaneously empty of pre-conceived ideas and pregnant with knowledge.

Humor and odd touches are aspects of your paintings. How do you think of their role in your work?

Humor is another layer of the paintings! I remember fondly a definition of humor as "the reversal of expectations which appear risky but has little repercussion." Sometimes painting seems like the quintessential embodiment of that idea. Painting can be the most triumphant, romantic, grandiose task, yet at the same time it's pretty absurd that we are smearing around colorful mud.

I think if you can hold those opposites in your mind at the same time, both the majesty of life and the funny nature of humanity, then you are winning.

You are a curator as well as a painter. How do those roles overlap in your work and/or practice?

As much as I love creating work, I also love seeing the creations of others. It's even more amazing to introduce the work I love and the work of the artists I love to new audiences. At the same time, I myself am pretty humble. Though I take on ambitious painting projects, I like to remain behind the canvas. So it's usually easier to champion the works of my friends than it is to cheerlead for my own babies.

While it is possible to be an artist in solitude it's much more fruitful to be an artist in a community. Painters need to engage in the artistic traditions that we inherit AND those we are creating now. It is crucial to have a community with which you can have conversations about what you find exciting in artwork, what it teaches us, and where it grates against our values.

What do people misunderstand about your work?

Sometimes people look at artwork a little too literally. The best artwork for me is kind of like a dream. It exists as an emotional story, just floating in the ether, doing its thing. When we try to recount a dream, the explanation never really comes out right. Yet there is great value in trying to analyze that dream. A dream can tell you a lot about what is happening during waking life.

So on the one hand, it's important to remember that these are paintings. They are not the actual people being depicted. They are not full biographies of the person. Paintings are new creations that will eventually go on to have lives of their own.

On the other hand, this series is a grandiose collection of our national treasures. It's literally a collection of famous Americans, and it's much deeper than that. These paintings speak about who we are, as people and as Americans—about how our country is so much more than a collection of its parts.

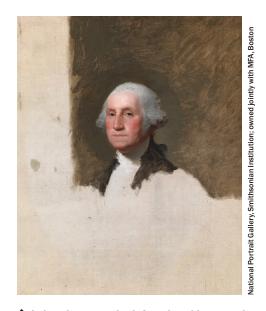*George Washington — Over the Mountain*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 80 x 32 in. Collection of Jeff and Betsey Cooley

The Making of
George Washington

These pages reveal Jac Lahav's process and offer a detailed view of the way the artist moves from an idea to a finished portrait.

↓ Lahav's large canvases are stretched on wooden doors. He applies layers of primer and removes any texture to create the smoothest possible surface. This way, every brushstroke stands off the canvas. Lahav's priming process helps call attention to how flat the painting is, with his portrait laying just on the surface. The artist links the physical construction of his paintings to their meaning, exploring the way that the identity of famous figures like Washington is a veneer we apply to that person.

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; owned jointly with MFA, Boston

↑ Lahav drew upon both American history and art history while composing *George Washington*. The founding father's head comes from one of Gilbert Stuart's many replicas of his so-called "Athenaeum" portrait of Washington, painted from life.
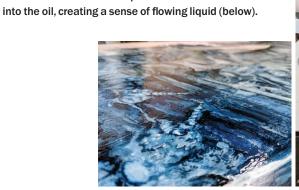

↑ The charcoal under layer is delicate and can be wiped away later if not covered with paint.

← The artist plans the composition on his computer, the modern equivalent of collage. He prints the enlarged design on multiple pieces of paper so it will be the right scale to fit on his 80 x 32 inch canvas. He covers the back of his enlarged drawing with a layer of charcoal and tapes it to the canvas. Then, he traces over his drawing so that the lines of his composition are transferred in charcoal to the canvas. Lahav moves from the top down, using small brushes and strokes of paint applied in a cross-hatched pattern to create his large figures.

↘ To add layers once the figure is done, he often covers portions of the painted canvas with opaque white medium, which he spreads or pours on the canvas while it is in a horizontal position (right). This allows the medium to pool on the surface or leach into the oil, creating a sense of flowing liquid (below).

→ A detail from Emanuel Leutze's history painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851) appears in the triangle. Lahav's Washington stands on the excerpt from this famous depiction of Washington's leadership, prompting us to consider who is greater, the man or the icon?

Washington owned more than one set of false teeth, which have been the subject of many myths and misconceptions. They are included here by the artist on the basis of a photo of a set of Washington's dentures.

The triangle behind Washington introduces a sense of space into the composition. Oil paints sit on the canvas's flat surface, but the triangle shape introduces a tension between two and three dimensions. Lahav's use of these triangles is informed by the work of the modern artist Francis Bacon (below left).

Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion.* Tate Britain

Private collection, courtesy of Christie's

← Washington's shirt is decorated with a detail from Archibald Willard's *Spirit of '76,* a painting made around the time of America's centennial in 1876 and reproduced in prints for generations. Lahav selected an excerpt where a man with a fife marches past a dying Continental soldier, reflecting the price of war, even for a good cause (below).

← An owl and an ouroborus (a snake consuming its own tail as an allegory of origins and regeneration) appear on Washington's belt buckle. Lahav selected these symbols as an allusion to the Freemasons, the fraternal order of which Washington was a member, as well as out of his own interest in myth and Jungian archetypes.

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