

BRUCE TAPOLA: BAD TOOTH

JANUARY 12–FEBRUARY 25, 2024
Opening Reception: January 12, 6–9pm

Post Times is pleased to present Bruce Tapola's first New York solo exhibition.

When I was in art school in Minneapolis, Bruce Tapola was our guy. In 2011, the year I graduated, his contribution to a local exhibition was an XXL pair of tighty-whities pinned to the wall and the words RELATIONAL AESTHETICS scrawled in Sharpie across the butt, a giant shit stain below. After years of a theory-heavy art education, I thought to myself, *Now this is the kind of art discourse I can get behind!*

And I wasn't alone. Bruce's artist talks were always buzzing with the energy of a boisterous rally, compared to the usual contemplative lecture. One talk, at Midway Contemporary Art, was advertised with a photo of Tapola's clenched fist gripping a mini-baseball bat, "FREE LECTURE" carved down the barrel in thick block letters. In lieu of the standard litany of professional accomplishments, the opening credits introduced him as a Waylon Jennings enthusiast, President and Founder of the Federation of Outlaw Creatives United (FOC-U), and a Lifetime member of the Society of Concerned Citizens Concerned About The Intersection of Art & Commerce. There is a heroic quality to the man, fighting the good fight.

Tapola's work constructs a parallel world inhabited by characters and cartoons, outcasts and misfits, dreamers and failures. His paintings take playful aim at a variety of subjects, from chauvinistic masculinity and pop culture to New Age spirituality and the American Dream. Yet, akin to the delivery of a brilliant comedian, Tapola's paintings wear a masterful façade of seeming aloofness. They are like a joke told without breaking character—there is a set up, a punch line, and even misdirection—except, as static artworks, the timing and delivery of the joke is determined by the path of one's eye.

Beyond the vivid allegorical images of whimsical heroes and blunt gestures, Tapola's work evokes a poignant sentimentality. Amidst a flood, a man clings to his sinking possessions, his house bubbling beneath him. Two graying artists sit in quiet communion, contemplating an artwork from makeshift seats. A man paints en plein air surrounded by the soft glow of the natural world – but then you notice his canvas and understand you've been misdirected—he is instead painting a busty woman in a pink bikini. It's this emotional range, teetering between humor and pathos, high-brow and low, that makes Tapola's work uniquely compelling. In this world, you're jolted out of expectation and romanticism when you hear a Looney-Tunes-style ahooga horn blow.

While each painting contains its own narrative, the composite experience feels like a meditation on what it means to be an artist. There are subtle references to art history, like a license plate reading "D-STIL" nailed onto the front of a junkyard automobile that's the antithesis of the De Stijl movement, or a diminutive Picasso pontificating to a bewildered audience of one, its face afflicted with the artist's signature cubist distortion. Tapola's works and references speak to the idealism and cynicism inherent in making anything—the comical absurdity of striving. A believer and a lifer, Tapola has been making art since he was 18, building for us a reflective window into the self-deprecation, horror, and helpless amusement at the sight of one's own naked vulnerability in an ugly paradise.

Bruce Tapola (b. 1956, Ohio) lives and works in St. Paul, Minnesota. He has had solo exhibitions at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Midway Contemporary Art (Minneapolis, MN), and Rochester Art Center (Rochester, MN), among others. He has been exhibited nationally and internationally, including the FRONT International (2018), curated by Michelle Grabner. He has been the recipient of several awards, including the McKnight Foundation Visual Artist Fellowship three times (2017, 2001, 1995). His work has been featured in Artforum, The New York Times, New American Painting, Star Tribune, and more. In addition to his studio practice, he has been a member of the artist collectives Paintallica, Free Art School, Northern Forrest Brotherhood, Rat Trap Clay Club (RIP), and Artpolice. He taught painting and drawing at St. Cloud State University for 22 years.

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