



**DUKE RILEY &  
FROHAWK TWO FEATHERS**  
Based On A True Story

When the first American novels appeared in the late 18th century their authors proudly announced these creations as “histories” – presenting said tales as historical documents (i.e. letters or journals) with title pages boasting, “A Tale of Truth” or “Founded on Fact.” Author and Professor Jill Lepore explains that such a practice was anticipated by ancient times where “history was a literary art,” littered with invention, “animated with rhetoric,” and “filled with long, often purely fictitious speeches of great men.” This liberal approach to provenance was extended well into the 18th century where historians acted as artists, with what Lepore calls, “a license to invent.” In this context, so-called serious historians such as Oliver Goldsmith were parodied by writers like a young Jane Austen, who at the age of 16 penned a satirical saga titled “The History of England from the Reign of Henry the 4th to the Death of Charles the 1st, by a Partial, Prejudiced and Ignorant Historian.”

The gradual, often contested renovation of history into an empirical science only gained consensus by the 19th century, aided by the establishment of the American Historical Association in 1884 and its steadfast delineation between truth and invention. And while in today’s environment history is prized as an eminently scholarly and valuable discipline, in his 2008 book *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* Gordon Wood catalogues the writings of “unhistorical historians” as reckless threats to the integrity of a still fledgling craft. He does so on surprisingly shaky ground, in the face of literary theorists who argue, in the words of Lepore, “The past is nothing more than a story we tell about it.” Building an enterprise on a foundation of testimonies from imperfect sources impossible to fully verify, she admits, “Every history is incomplete; every historian has a point of view; every historian relies on what is unreliable.” British writer William Godwin (1756-1836) was more pronounced in his suspicions, insisting that, “Nothing is more uncertain, more contradictory, more unsatisfactory than the evidence of facts.” For him true history cannot exist, and instead, we must celebrate the novelist as the “better” historian who admits he/

“Dismiss me from the falsehood and impossibility of history and deliver me over to the reality of romance”

-William Godwin, *Of History and Romance*, 1797



Above: Duke Riley, *Title*, Year. Courtesy of the Artist and Magnan Metz Gallery.

Left: Frohawk Two Feathers, *Title*, Year. Courtesy of the Artist and Morgan Lehman Gallery.

Far Left: Frohawk Two Feathers, *Title*, Year. Courtesy of the Artist and Morgan Lehman Gallery.



she is partial, prejudiced and ignorant while still retaining the passion and imagination to tell a compelling story. Many of these stories are lived and told by those who have traditionally stood outside the pages (and pedigree) of the official, institutionalized past – “condemned to obscurity,” in the words of novelist and historian Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), “by history itself.” And it is here that fiction “can do what history doesn’t but should,” according to Lepore, “it can tell the story of ordinary people.” Such stories began to proliferate in the latter part of the 20th century, integrating his-tories of women, minorities and the marginalized into what the aforementioned Wood calls “this new social history of hitherto forgotten people.” In his eyes this hybrid discipline has “come to dominate academic history writing,” infusing the archives with artistry and opening up chapters of a book thought to be long shut.

With the goal to celebrate individuals obscured by the aggregates, biases and generalities of history, artist Umar Rashid (aka Frohawk Two Feathers), imagines the colonization of North America through an expansive cast of quasi-fictional characters. In turn, the exotic biographies of figures like Jacques Charbonneau and Little Bear become implicit, if no less empowered avatars in their deconstruction of presid-ing histories and racial inequities. Since 2006 Rashid has chronicled the global contest between imagined empires “Frenghland” (merging France with England) and “Nieuw Holland,” continuously adding new protagonists, battles and events to the evocative fray. The corresponding “Frenghish” iconography en-tangles the past with the present, marrying a motley array of influences including Neoclassical painting, indigenous and folk art, Egyptian deities and period costumes with hip hop, street artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, soap operas and gang culture. Such revisionist tactics extend to the artist himself, translating his early interest in the Roman Empire and his mixed Native and African-American ancestry into the alternate identity *Frohawk Two Feathers*. In Rashid’s words, “Frohawk is the outsider looking in on



Top: Frohawk Two Feathers, *Title*, Year. Courtesy of the Artist and Morgan Lehman Gallery.

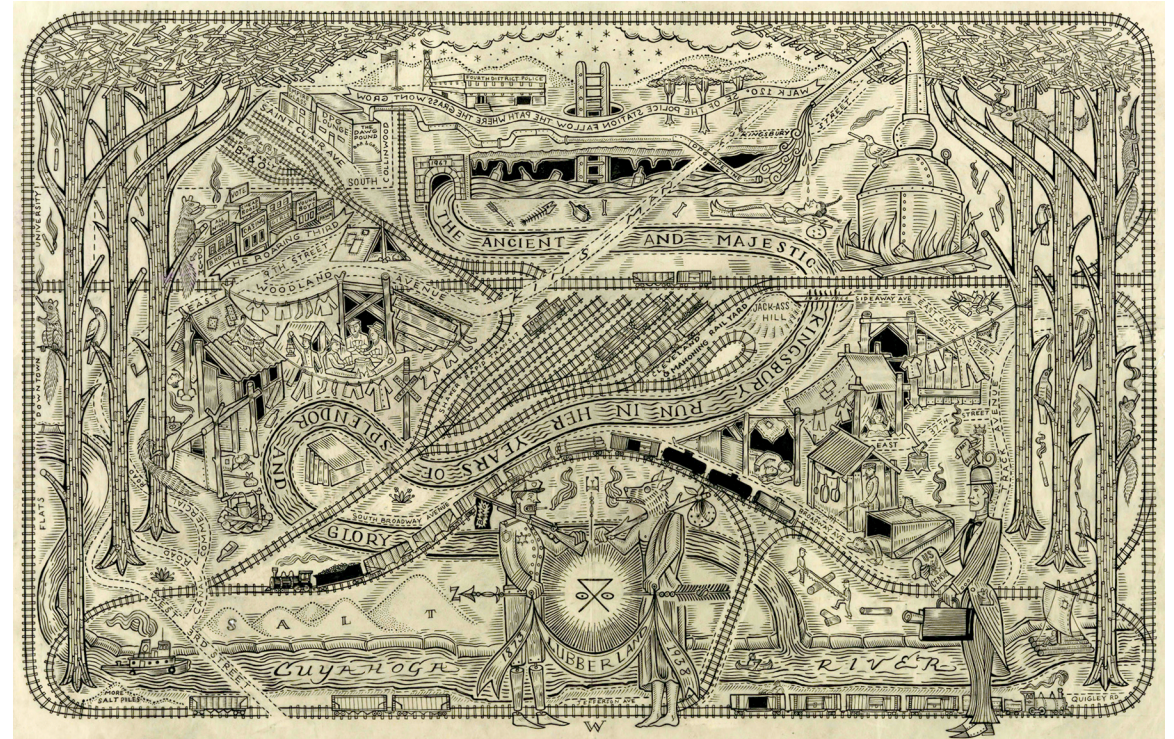
Bottom: Frohawk Two Feathers, *Title*, Year. Courtesy of the Artist and Morgan Lehman Gallery.

the world, the noble savage who relays the stories of great empires and tiny tribes with wit, humor and scathing criticism.”

A calendar Budweiser produced in the 1980s of the “Great Kings and Queens of Africa” was an unexpected catalyst for this persona, inspiring Rashid to see himself outside the paradigm of slavery and inside post-colonial triumphs like Haiti’s 18th century war for independence. Haiti’s ensuing War of Knives (1799-1800), the Transatlantic slave trade and colonial goods like coffee, tea and sugar literally and figuratively color the portraits that establish the inter-personal foundation of Frenghland. The colorful array of lords, sheiks, viceroys, freedom fighters, assassins and insurgents that populate Rashid’s self-described “realistic fantasy” also incorporate tropes of golden age hip hop – turning friends and family adorned with gaudy jewelry and posed in classic “B-Boy”/“B-Girl” stances into his pseudo-historical cast. Rap lyrics influence many of their names, titles and the elaborate tattoos that play a primary role in Rashid’s densely layered iconography.

Drawn from the pictographic language of prisons and gangs, his “Imperial Tattoo System” relays important elements about a character’s life, loves, experiences, accomplishments and affiliations. Their stories play out on a colorful spectrum of totems, artifacts, garments, instruments, flags and maps – including deer and elk hides discarded by trophy hunters. And while France and England are united in this alternate universe, the era of Frenghland is plagued by the same cycles of pageantry, aggression and greed endemic to our world. “One ill is replaced by another” Rashid explains, amplifying a perpetual state of unrest that – for curator Veronica Roberts – “captures not only the instability of an empire and its colonies, but of history itself.”

Fluid and contested terrain inspires the work of Duke Riley as well, moving from the physical frontiers of colonial North America to modern day waterways, coastlines and islands. And while water’s value as both a commodity and territory accelerates, port cities remain the artist’s muse as “ungovernable,” transitory, stig-



Above: Duke Riley, *Title*, Year. Courtesy of the Artist and Magnan Metz Gallery.



matized places that, for him, “tend to be zones of tolerance and progress.” Growing up on the outskirts of Boston with a fishmonger uncle, Riley developed an enduring interest in maritime fables of sailors and swashbucklers, as well as a love for docks, dive bars and people lingering on the periphery. His work as an artist has grown from these humble, but beleaguered footings: championing the struggle of outcasts, adventurers and marginalized individuals (across multiple eras) to be recognized in history. The ensuing projects interweave historical and contemporary events with elements of fiction and myth, turning hidden borderlands and their mercurial inhabitants into the stuff of myth, legend and royalty. To do so he sidesteps academic remove to revel in performative archaeology, immersing himself in the respective subject to live with, and sometimes as the protagonist for weeks, months and years. And while Riley is careful not to label himself an activist – preferring to agitate amidst the company of collaborators and communities – he coyly admits, “Any opportunity to combine creative and illegal activity is looked upon with glee.”

The most well-known of these episodes came in 2007 as part of *After the Battle of Brooklyn*, when Riley was arrested by the Coast Guard for floating a homemade, Revolutionary War-era submarine towards the Queen Mary II cruise ship in New York Harbor. He could have been arrested three years later (but was not) in his cul-

minating effort to *Reclaim the Lost Kingdom* of Laird by painting a giant mural of the self-proclaimed King’s likeness atop an oil storage tank on Petty’s Island. In *An Invitation to Lubberland* Riley broke into Cleveland’s sewer system to document (and dramatize) the storied underground river known as Kingsbury Run that lived as a “hobo’s paradise” in the 1930s. He has also



restaged a swimming race amongst zodiac deities in China, spent time with pirates and prisoners in East Africa, trained homing pigeons to smuggle cigars between Key West, FL and Havana and staged a mock Roman-era naval battle in the reflecting pool outside the Queen’s Museum of Art. In turn, each of these daring activities becomes the engine for Riley to produce a series of artifacts in the spirit of time and memory. From mosaics, maps and scrimshaw to ceramic plates, rubbings and pseudo-documentaries

he registers blue collar subjects in the language of the museum. He does so without grandeur or self-aggrandizement, serving as the reluctant, but fiercely determined champion of those typically erased by the canons of greatness. Unearthing that which slumbers in the shadows, crevices and endnotes of history, Riley, like Rashid, uproots the orthodox and injects a new and unruly life.

– SM 2014

## CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

### DUKE RILEY & FROHAWK TWO FEATHERS

*Based on a True Story*

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Cover: Frohawk Two Feathers, *New Holland Flag*, 2013.  
Courtesy of the Artist and Morgan Lehman Gallery.

Opposite Inside Back Cover: Duke Riley, *Title*, Year.  
Courtesy of the Artist and Magnan Metz Gallery.

Inside Back Cover: Duke Riley, *Title*, Year. Courtesy of the  
Artist and Magnan Metz Gallery.