

Jackson Owen,
Untitled (SNAP),
2023
Acrylic on canvas,
4x6 feet

© Jackson Owen


PLEASE KEEP OFF
THE GRASS

Jackson Owen

UNTITLED (SNAP), 2023

Acrylic on canvas, 4x6 feet

Art History is a highly selective system of representation. The global contemporary art scene has been challenging itself to consider the nature of such a system for some time now, particularly the relative presence or absence of certain subjects, with artists like Charles Gaines leading the way. For this mural, I interrogate how art itself is represented as a distinct discipline within high academic environments like Cambridge University, drawing from my experience as a student and artist practicing in Cambridge.

Untitled (SNAP) is comprised of references to Cambridge-based institutions that relate to art in some capacity. These vary from a landscape of Murray Edwards College (which hosts the largest collection of women's art in Europe) to a mention of the Mond Building at the New Museums Site, which displays a relief of a crocodile sculpted on its exterior by the controversial Eric Gill. On the bottom-right of the canvas one can observe an abstract portrait of David Attenborough holding an infant crocodile.

One can witness two figures in a garden underneath a large orange tree. The tree simultaneously divides these figures and unifies them through a general ecosystem of natural elements in the piece. Each engages in a contrasting type of work: one uses a laptop, and the other a hand tool. These figures are largely anonymous, only signified by their immediate preoccupations: a student (left) and a gardener (right). The pose of the left-hand figure recapitulates Francisco Goya's c.1799 etching The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters, which concerns the balance between rationality and imagination.

In portraying these anonymous figures in a historically significant fashion, I highlight how Oxbridge maintains a precedent in the Western Canon of Art through highlighting famous figures such as Christopher Wren, James Gibbs, Edward Burne-Jones, and William Morris. The latter two are alumni of Exeter College, Oxford, and are referenced by the red Morris wallpaper at the centre-left. In contrast, Murray Edwards' brutalist facade suggests architecture

as a superstructure in Cambridge, which systematically informs ideologies about art and the status quo.

Kerry James Marshall's portrait of Henry Louis Gates Jr. (2020) at the Fitzwilliam Museum was a crucial point of departure for this work. Through frequent visits, I closely studied this painting to teach myself how to handle heavy-bodied acrylics on a hard surface. 'PLEASE KEEP OFF THE GRASS' in the foreground references the traditional academic hierarchy in Cambridge, and is my contextualized contribution to Goya's equation of balance. Institutions in Cambridge such as the Fitzwilliam and Kettle's Yard stand tall by showing how various modes of discourse and logic, specifically visual languages, are suitable for intellectual exercise.

At its core, this work wonders about the usefulness of varied logics of academic inquiry in scholarly systems, and thus, their impact on social construction. Many frequently emphasise that one of the most impactful elements of this particular academic system is being around people from numerous vocations. This emphasis on interdisciplinarity lies at the conceptual heart of the mural and illustrates art-making's capacity to cultivate a well-rounded scholarly community.