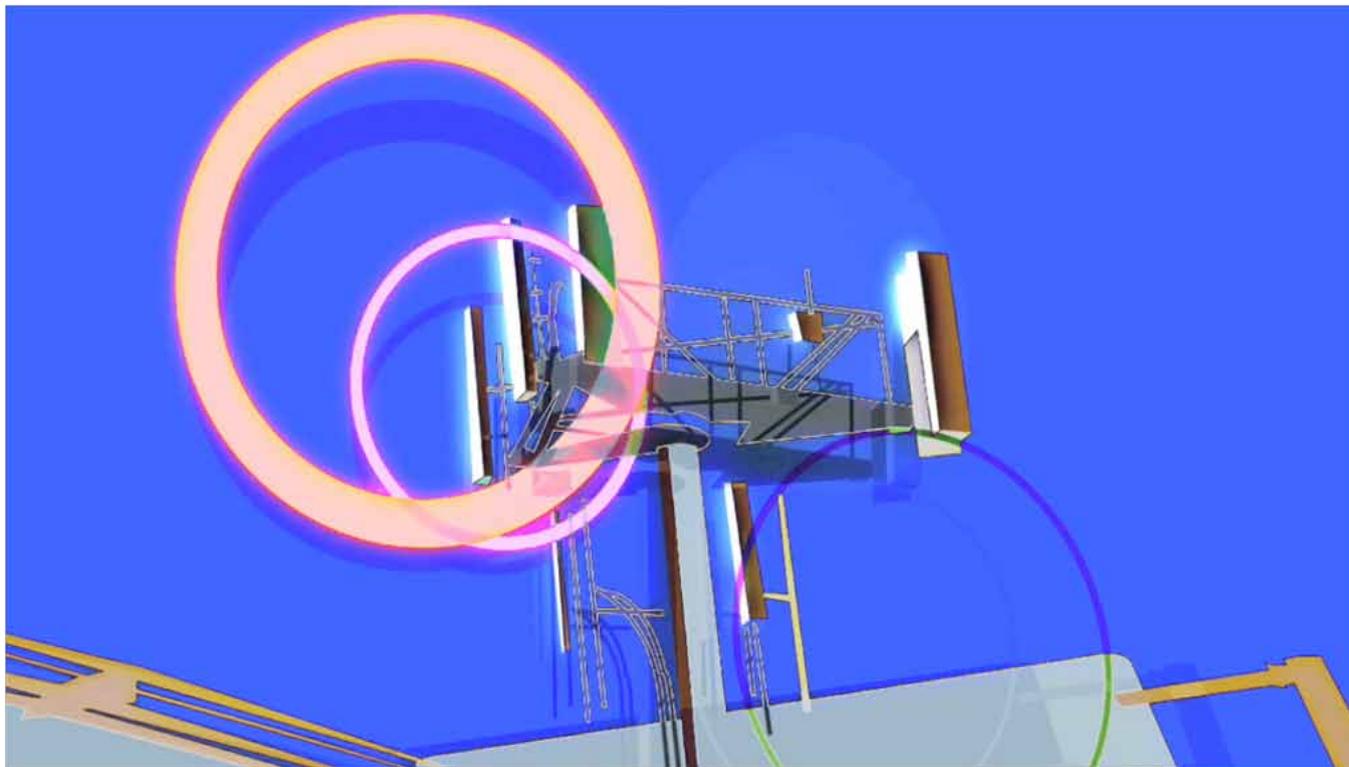


# BRIAN ALFRED

IT'S ALREADY THE END OF THE WORLD





Cover: Brian Alfred. *Riot!* (detail), 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 130 in. © Brian Alfred. Courtesy of the artist and Haunch of Venison Gallery

Inside cover: Brian Alfred. *It's Already the End of the World* (video still), 2011. Video animation, 6 minutes, 56 seconds. © Brian Alfred. Courtesy of the artist and Haunch of Venison Gallery,

Brian Alfred's haunting visual reveries find beauty and trauma in the tissue of culture. He explores the impact of filtered public imagery—newspaper photographs, television advertising, and the Internet—on our perceptions of the world. Cryptic scenes in his paintings and video animations remind us of how these public mediums often show only a tantalizing glimpse of the greater picture; pertinent information is cropped out; ideas and historical understanding are flattened to make them digestible or to conform to an accepted ideological narrative.

With a semiotician's regard for the contingent nature of the signs that influence us, Alfred depicts subjects ranging from architecture and technology to instances of social upheaval and heroic humanism, positing a subliminal connectedness that cannot be known, only sensed. In his video animation, *It's Already the End of the World*, the stringing together of seemingly unrelated events is

at first mystifying; there is no context. The unseen linkages, causes, and consequences remain for the viewer to imagine.

This montage of painterly vignettes (produced by using Adobe Illustrator and After Effects, and scanned collages) relates the passage of a single portentous day. The sun rises over a city, exuding a stunning array of expanding circles that denote a sublime Orphic ascendancy—this will be a day like no other. Soon, flashing lights warn of something stirring beneath the tranquil surface. More rings of colored light emanate from a complex of surveillance equipment, either transmitting directives or seeking intelligence.

A large passenger plane—once a sign of global shrinkage, now an omen of terror—fills the screen and is later reflected in a building's windows, gliding silently, dangerously close. Subway propaganda depicts partial figures, whose automatic weapons

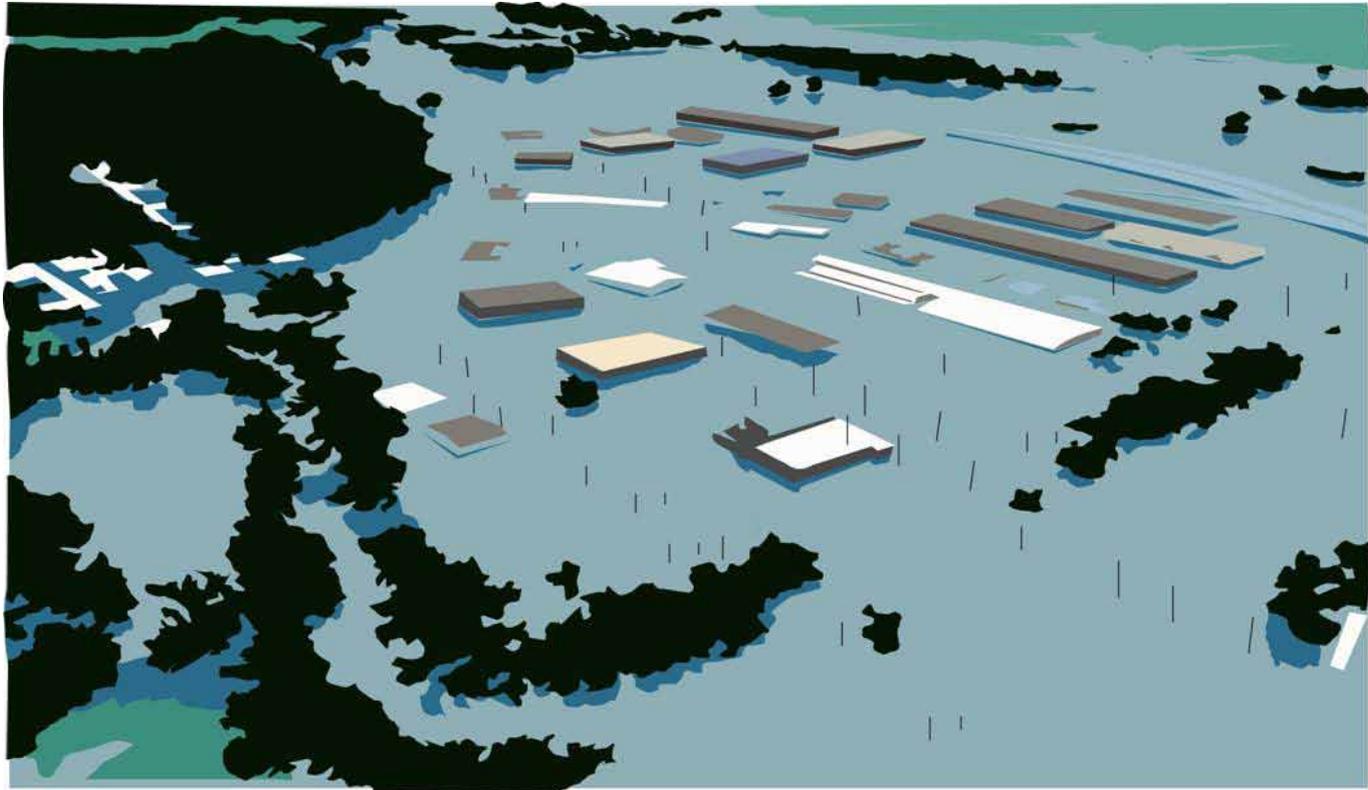
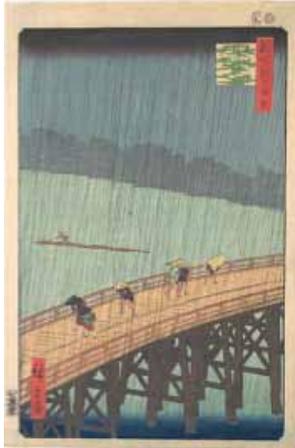


Fig. 1: Brian Alfred. *It's Already the End of the World* (video still), 2011. Video animation, 6 minutes, 56 seconds. © Brian Alfred. Courtesy of the artist and Haunch of Venison Gallery

Fig. 2: Utagawa Hiroshige. *Sudden Shower over Shin-Ohashi Bridge and Atake (Ohashi Atake no yudachi)* from *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo (Meisho Edo hyakkei)*, 1857. Japan, Edo period (1615–1868). Polychrome woodblock print; ink and color on paper, 14 3/8 x 9 9/16 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1918 (JP644). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY



signal insurrection. Shift to a mob with fists upraised, met by a phalanx of shielded police with tear gas, a wall of authority that looks oddly vulnerable. Cut to heavy rains flooding an industrial site. At sunset, a silhouetted row of trees offers the illusion of escape. In the distance, a streak

of light angles to earth, followed by a flash on the horizon, then a plume of smoke. More rain and the day ends, like no day has before.

Paradoxically, this unnerving sequence is rendered in a diffident, even pleasant style, which seems to be aimed at deflecting our full comprehension of the apocalyptic narrative. Saturated colors and flat

forms evoke the elegant harmonies of traditional Ukiyo-e prints. This japonisme merges with references to pop culture, especially music posters and Warner Brothers cartoons; imagery that offers the bright clarity that a child can apprehend, but to which Alfred is also drawn because of the disturbing content that frequently lives under its colorful surface.

The sense of unease is intensified by music. The video repeats nine times, with scores by different composers and performers whose technological sound structures shape an emotional back story. In most of these iterations, the sound tracks convey a subliminal energy that passes smoothly from a melancholic reverb to crackling voice-overs and other electronic sounds: beeps, buzzers, feedback, and short-circuits, as if the events that seem to be invisibly unfolding are driven by ghostly forces living deep in the machine. Other sounds, from jazzy to choral, are more fey, almost sprightly



Fig. 3: Brian Alfred. *Jon Stewart*, 2006–07. Acrylic on canvas, 12 x 9 in.

© Brian Alfred. Courtesy of the artist and Haunch of Venison Gallery

in places, furthering the deception that there is nothing to worry about. Just as our perceptions of the real world are continually modified by shifts in circumstance and our own moods, these sound tracks cause the same episodes to be perceived in surprisingly different ways.

While Alfred's collages and paintings often provide source imagery for his videos, they also function as finished works of art. In his series of 333 painted portraits, *Millions Now Living Will Never Die* (a selection is on view in this exhibition), Alfred continues to focus on the gap between the lulling surface and the forces and ideas behind it. The series comprises an extended homage to people who have influenced Alfred—not just artists, but writers, musicians, politicians, and others. Adapted from Internet sources, the images of their faces channel the affectless portraits of Alex Katz (b.1927) and Andy Warhol (1928–1987), artists who became famous in the sixties for articulating their generation's embrace of celebrity and indifference.



Fig. 4: Andy Warhol. *Self-Portrait*, 1964. Acrylic, metallic paint, and silkscreen ink on linen, 20 1/8 x 16 1/8 x 3/4 in. The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Founding Collection, Contribution Dia Center for the Arts. © 2012 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Fig. 5: Shepard Fairey. *Hope*, 2008. Courtesy of Shepard Fairey/OBEYGIANT.COM

They also mimic the effect of woodblock and silkscreen prints of catalytic figures, which have come to signify cultural activism through the democratization of access and distribution (for

example, the heroicizing propaganda posters of Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Shepard Fairey's famous image of Barack Obama). But the faces are only ciphers, meant to stimulate our awareness of the subjects' life's work and how it might relate to Alfred's, while reminding us that we all exist in a network of creative influences and ideas.

Although he calls attention to the gaps between the management of appearance and the unseen realities beneath, Alfred leaves it to the viewer to fill these spaces. Like the most provocative science fiction, his work is allegorical, neither true nor false, here nor there. It has an uncanny resemblance to the things we know, while presaging things as they might become.

Mark Scala, chief curator, Frist Center for the Visual Arts

**Brooklyn based artist Brian Alfred** was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1974. He earned a B.F.A. in painting from Penn State University (1997) and an M.F.A. from Yale University (1999), and also attended the Skowhegan School of Sculpture and Painting in Madison, Maine. He has had solo exhibitions at Haunch of Venison Gallery, London, New York, and Berlin; Mary Boone Gallery, New York; Max Protetch Gallery, New York; SCAI The Bathhouse, Tokyo, Japan; and the Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix. His work has also been included in exhibitions at such museums as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, the Den Frie Udstillingsbygning [Den Frie Center of Contemporary Art] in Copenhagen, Denmark, the Shizuoka Prefecture Museum of Art in Shizuoka, Japan, the Contemporary Art Center Museum in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Kunstmuseum, Wolfsburg, Germany. Alfred has received awards and grants from the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the New York Foundation of the Arts, and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. His work is included in many collections, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Guggenheim Museum, New York; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado; the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California.

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