

Augustus Suite/Trump Tower

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George Gittoes' Augustus Suite is a contemporary reincarnation of his earlier Hotel Kennedy Suite begun in 1969 at a San Francisco YMCA while the artist was ill with Hong Kong Flu. Its immediate prompt has been COVID, but the links go deeper. Febrile, hallucinogenic, half-awake, Gittoes describes catastrophic visions that emerged as if of their own free will from his illness, visions of a deranged world on the brink. That he was ill at the Hotel Kennedy is a strange coincidence, since it cannot not help but recall the 1963 assassination, or what Bob Dylan in a recent elegy called "Murder Most Foul". Dylan's long paean to Dallas 1963 blurs the then and the now. It is of a piece with the relationship between the Augustus Suite and the earlier Kennedy Suite. Now more than ever, since yesterday, on January 6th, 2021, the Proud Boys stormed-trooped their way into the Capital Building of the United States with guns and explosives, vowing to lynch their enemies in Senate and the House of Representatives from the pillars of the building, waving Confederate flags and leading hundreds if not thousands of others on a rampage of destruction and photo ops for social media, glorified by one man in Viking War Costume, as if bringing Game of Thrones into the process of sedition. This call to violence, so deep in the tortured soul of America, has its precedent in the killing of JFK. And so there could be no better, that is, more appropriate place, to hallucinate a grotesque, nightmarish vision of the world than from the tawdry rooms of Hotel Kennedy in 1969, and then to reincarnate it in today's Augustus Suite.

"Most of the ideas and dreams that resulted in the Hotel Kennedy Suite drawings and etchings," Gittoes writes in private correspondence, "originated during this fever. Stains on the dirty walls became faces and monsters which I copied into my diary. One slag mark was the shape of Australia with a marsupial tail."¹ He goes on to say, "The San Francisco skyline, the mattress, the heater in the room all appear febrile [to me]." The net effect is that of a Fritz

Lang/Superman metropolis breeding beasts slouching towards Jerusalem, waiting to be born (Yeats).

Much of the art of the 19th century comes from fever dreaming, thanks to tuberculosis, syphilis and the other ills of that century. Fever blurs the line between dreaming and seeing. It opens the portal of the unconscious, loosens the flood gates of the deep imagination so that the mind spins out images suspended between real things and phantasmagoric projections.

However, it takes an artist of significant talent to control such wild chants of the mind in a way that gives them shape and form. Gittoes is an artist who can draw brilliantly and like lightning, an ability cultivated in New York City during his Warhol days when he drew portraits of people on the streets for money. It is the same talent that has allowed him to draw on site over the years in Rwanda, South Africa, Australia, Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Chicago with the brave rapidity that turns his art into a form of witnessing usually occupied by the global media. In this instance the talent was directed within, to those ghostlike and insistent meanderings of the mind which he projected on the walls, ceilings, and sickbed of his hotel room in 1979, as if the room became the cinema screen of a world out of joint, in many ways the truthful double of the real world he, and we, jointly occupy.

When the dreamlike becomes true it means the world is either a paradise or an uninhabitable disaster. Uninhabitability, or what could otherwise be called the loss of any humanized footprint in the world, is the link between the Kennedy and Augustus suites.

The Augustus Suite had as its precipitating incident the shooting of Harith Augustus in that south side of Chicago neighborhood called CHIRAC by police, where Gittoes and his wife Helen Rose, herself a performance artist, were living in 2018 while making the documentary film *White Light*. CHIRAC is one of the most violent neighborhoods in America. The documentary is about gun violence, community bonding and survival. Gittoes reported that on the fourth of July, America's Independence Day, there were so many blasts he could not tell which were from fireworks and which from guns. That this neighborhood is some four blocks from the University of Chicago, among the most august universities in the world (where I

received a PhD in 1984), is hardly august. Harith, a black man, was innocently on his way to his hair salon when he was shot three times in front of his children.

The Augustus Suite is Mediaeval in its combination of pictorial delicacy and apocalyptic/prophetic intensity. As to the delicacy, Gittoes writes: "Most Gothic portraits such as Jan Van Eyck's 'The Chancellor Rolin in prayer before the Virgin' have a landscape seen through columns in the background – merging interior with exterior ... and, sometimes, there are angels to fill the corners. This tradition continued in the Renaissance. The Mona Lisa does not have columns, but she is on some kind of balcony overlooking a landscape which fills the whole background. Leonardo's 'Madonna with Carnation' has four arches with columns and a landscape similar to the Van Eyck ...I have followed this tradition in the Augustus Tower with all the interior spaces. Usually two columns on either side of a vista of New York City – as if they are in the penthouse on top of Trump Tower."

Augustus Tower/Trump Tower/Augustus Caesar.

Here is the link between the refined and the grotesque. Van Eyck vs. Trump's crass gold plated buildings. And Trump's empire in relation to the Roman, with its absolute authority, its Praetorian Guard, its brutality of rule.

"The Augustus Tower Suite has been a vehicle to allow me to imagine my fears about the world," Gittoes wrote, "a world where 'the bad guys have won'. I have set them in and above a tower of the kind Trump has built in Chicago, New York and Miami."

The work recalls Hieronymus Bosch, Goya, James Ensor, and the great painters of Weimar anxiety and collapse: Max Beckmann and George Grosz. But the quality of drawing is entirely Gittoes' own. Each artist of the grotesque is charged with the task of visually reinventing exaggeration and distortion and to do so through drawing in relation to compositional space. This Gittoes does with the colors of bleached coral and topologically interconnected figurative shapes, whose dense conflagration signals a world without liberty and autonomy, a world where figures should rather have their own separability and integrity. This tendency towards figural instability (in many but not all of the compositions) calls forth

situations which overwhelm individuals: military violence, state control, urban conflagration, global surveillance and of course pandemic. Illness is an aspect, but also symbol of the whole, the whole being a world characterized by global inflammation: the inflammation of inequality, indecency, rage, sexual violence (especially against the naked and fragile women who appear throughout), disease. It is a world where the individual figure is always under threat, the threat of dependency on the crush of the overall figural pattern.

Two shapes predominate. The gun and the insect. As to the second Gittoes says: "the insect represents people like Rupert Murdoch who are so indifferent to normal humans that they are closer to alien insects. They are the perverse ruling elite who deny climate change, send others to war and have unimaginable wealth – the zero point zero, zero, one percenters that run the world, including its political leaders who are no more than front men-their puppets." The insect has no capacity for the moral emotions of shame and guilt, no sense of human responsibility, cares nothing of others, a being whose footprint in the world is one of rage, desecration and violence, as if power were its own aphrodisiac.

This is a world tottering at the precipice of democratic collapse. A world of right wing brutality and communalized fury. A science fiction future that is now, already on the scene of history. Such is the world of neo-liberalism in its most brutal and perhaps purest form. And of fascism. These twin conditions are the world of Trump's America. Hence the Trump Towers so central to the Augustus Towers.

Balzac said behind every fortune there is a crime. Neo-liberalism has upped the ante by turning the very practice of capital into an ongoing violation. Behind all the ideology of dismantling the deep state these guys are nothing but crooks. All they really want is to eliminate regulation so that their capital gains are unimpeded by any article of justice. In an important respect they eschew the nation state and only care about international banking, tax shelters, brands, markets and the like. On the other hand, anyone who says "we love you" to the Proud Boys (as Trump did on January 6 while they were occupying the Capital Building), is clearly a fascist nationalist. His son (the big game hunter) added, speaking of those republicans in the

Senate and House of Representatives who defied Trump, "We're coming for you". This is pure authoritarian threat. Most important, Trump's statement that the Proud Boys and company are the true guardians of the Constitution could only mean: "I am the Constitution and since you are with me, you are its bearers, its foot soldiers". The philosopher Hannah Arendt defined totalitarian thinking as a unified will emerging from a single individual or party (Nazi, Soviet) and expanded outward to encompass the state and population.

And so in Gittoes' imagination the state is an enormous insect with his leader (Trump?) at the center and his foot-soldiers the tentacles.

What of the second motif in these pictures, the gun? It's role in the present is obvious but I would like to call attention to the visual brilliance of this motif in relation to the insect. When you place a long range assault rifle on a tripod it exactly resembles an insect. And so the inhuman, the state and the gun are all unified by this image.

It is well known that spiraling inequality is at the source of all this, since it leads to middle and working class degradation, which in turn reactivates racist fury, thereby giving an anxious if not disenfranchised populace the illusion that they are reclaiming the national center when they are its fallout. Such virulent nationalism, directed at so called enemies within and without, is a disturbing mirror the 1930s. Hence the "Metropolis" art deco look of Gittoes' Superman skylines.

Gittoes' fever dream suite reveals COVID to be what Freud called the "royal road" into another global pandemic, one of the spirit where the very sustainability of the human is under threat.

¹ All quotes from Gittoes come from private correspondence.