

Suzanne Treister

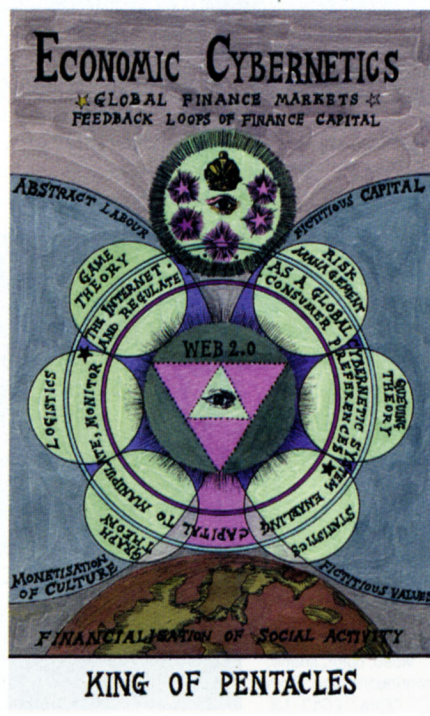
P.P.O.W

The links between Ken Kesey, William Gibson, and Robert Oppenheimer are not immediately apparent; perhaps it is easier to understand the connections among Theodore Kaczynski, the *Whole Earth Catalog*, and Diogenes of Sinope—or maybe not. In Suzanne Treister’s “HEXEN 2.0,” her second solo show at this gallery, each of these is part of a network of thought and threat, of counterculture, conspiracy, and control.

Treister represents such figures and ideas as tarot cards, each one a small, framed giclée print with watercolor additions. Arrayed in a long row around the gallery, the seventy-eight cards cover the full major and minor arcana, and resemble both the crammed, feverish scribbblings of a conspiracy theorist and the dreamily complicated doodles of an adolescent on her notebook, complete with illustrated aspirational quotes. The aesthetic is Blakean, both romantic and dystopian, with Aleister Crowley-type symbols and a bit of Peter Max.

Norbert Wiener, the “father of cybernetics,” is the Chariot; Justice is “one world government”; the Moon is represented by transhumanism in its many forms. The deck continues through cards with figures and ideas both familiar and obscure, such as the Summer of Love, Nikola Tesla, Google, drones, dream-sharing, DARPA, H. P. Lovecraft, surveillance, and utopia, among many, many others. The key individuals in this restless but relentless array are the participants in the post-World War II Macy Conferences, which gathered scholars in the natural and social sciences to shape a discipline of the human mind and which is said to mark the birth of cybernetics. Treister gives these personages—anthropologists, psychologists, engineers, philosophers—formal, yearbook-style portraits accompanied by lists of achievements and significant quotes. She also depicts them in a video work sitting at a cybernetic séance, calling up, one imagines, the ghosts of the future.

These works, together with a set of complex diagrams, draw connections between countercultural movements, social media, and government control: Idealism transforms into idealism run amok. The radical disavowal of society begins with Diogenes (the Emperor), is illuminated in Thoreau (Ace of Chalices), and reaches a dangerous



Suzanne Treister,
*King of Pentacles—
Economic Cybernetics*
(tarot), 2009–11,
giclée print with
watercolor on paper,
11 ¼ x 8 ¾".

apotheosis in Kaczynski (the Hermit). Counterculture comes full circle: The technological utopia imagined by technogaianism (Knaves of Pentacles) contains the seeds of social control; the enforcement of utopian ideals becomes fascist. This is a lot to absorb. The cards demand close viewing and reading—the obsessiveness of Treister’s rendering invites us to take the project quite seriously—but they also repel. Viewing them can feel overwhelming, like being cornered by a visionary at a party. The reasonable connections between ideas start to feel outlandish, and the more outlandish ones, beyond the pale. One wonders what these cards want from us: to persuade or fascinate?

Digesting this constellation of ideas is further complicated by Treister’s choice of tarot as a delivery device, which throws the whole thing into doubt. (Think, by contrast, of Mark Lombardi’s clear, rational, flowcharts documenting corruption.) It posits that the relationships one might perceive among this cast of characters are, if anything, a matter of chance, a shuffling of the deck; her dark counterhistory is no more than a divination. As such, “HEXEN 2.0”—the work and our attempts to engage with it—reminds us just how much of our world remains beyond our grasp.

—Emily Hall