

Gary Erbe: *Magical World*

by Scott A. Schweigert

Gary Erbe, born in 1944, has been painting the theme of the American flag in his still life compositions for over fifty years. In the lead up to the Nation's Bicentennial in 1976, the artist set out to commemorate the achievement in two monumental canvases. Those works were included in a fifty-year retrospective titled *Gary Erbe: Magical World*. This engaging exhibition includes fifty works—both paintings and finished assemblages (models for the paintings)—with more than a dozen that feature the American flag. The American flag is a particularly timely subject as the nation celebrates its Semiquincentennial, marking 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Gary Erbe: Magical World is on view from January 25 through March 29, 2026, at The Butler Institute of American Art, 524 Wick Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, 44502, 330-743-1107, www.butlerart.com. The exhibition will travel to Reading Public Museum, Reading, Pennsylvania, 19611, 610-371-5850, www.readingpublicmuseum.org, from May 23 through August 2, 2026, and Fort Wayne Museum of Art, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 46802, 260-422-6467, www.fwmoa.org, from August 22 through October 25, 2026. An 88-page catalogue is available at all three museums.

Erbe, who is a self-taught artist, started his career in the visual arts as an engraver in the mid-1960s. He took a bold leap in the early 1970s, becoming a full-time, independent artist, operating a studio in Union City, New Jersey, from 1972 to 2006 and Nutley, New Jersey, from 2006 to the present. He began exhibiting his work regionally and nationally, winning medals—many of them gold—in juried exhibitions. His paintings have entered the collections of

major institutions including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, The Phillips Collection, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, and the Terra Foundation for American Art, among many others.

Above all, Erbe has been celebrated for his innovative contributions to still life and *trompe l'oeil* (fool the eye) painting, a genre rooted in the tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century realism. The current





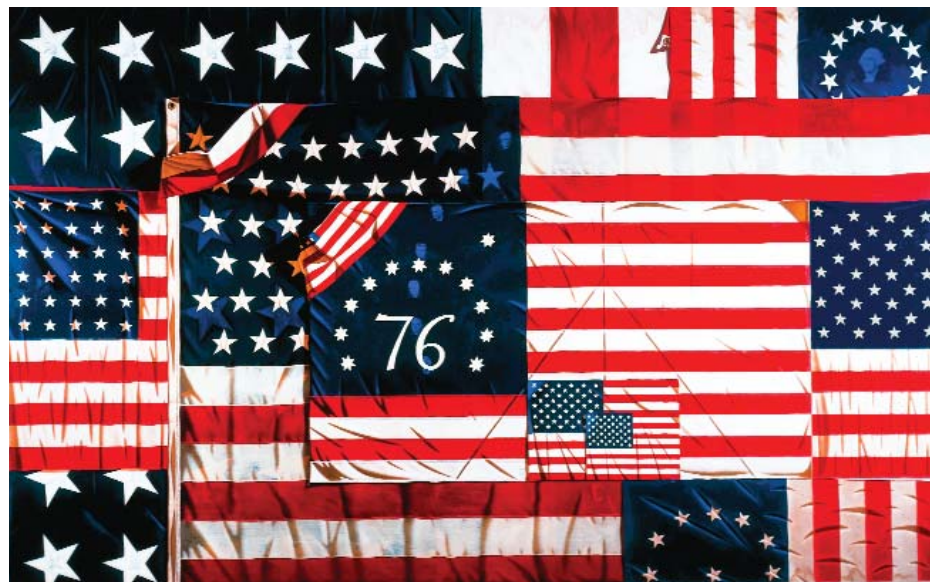
ABOVE: *Pieces of Time*, 1976, 65 x 100, o/c, The Butler Institute of American Art, Ohio.

RIGHT: *Composition in Red, White and Blue*, 1975, 72 x 112, o/c, collection of the artist.

LEFT: *American Heritage*, 2018, 24 x 36, o/c, collection of the artist.

exhibition's title is suitable, since to witness the artist's unique body of work, both his complex and strategically planned assemblages and his highly polished oil painting, is to truly step into a distinctly separate realm, where the familiarity of the objects depicted is somehow subverted by surprising and mysterious juxtapositions. Erbe is acutely aware of the history of art and his position within it. He is a master at skillfully blending elements of still life, portraiture, and landscape, as well as strains of realism, cubism, and surrealism, among other key moments in the panoply of American art.

At the same time, Erbe has masterfully aligned himself with the traditions of classic *trompe l'oeil* artists of the nineteenth century such as William Harnett and John F.

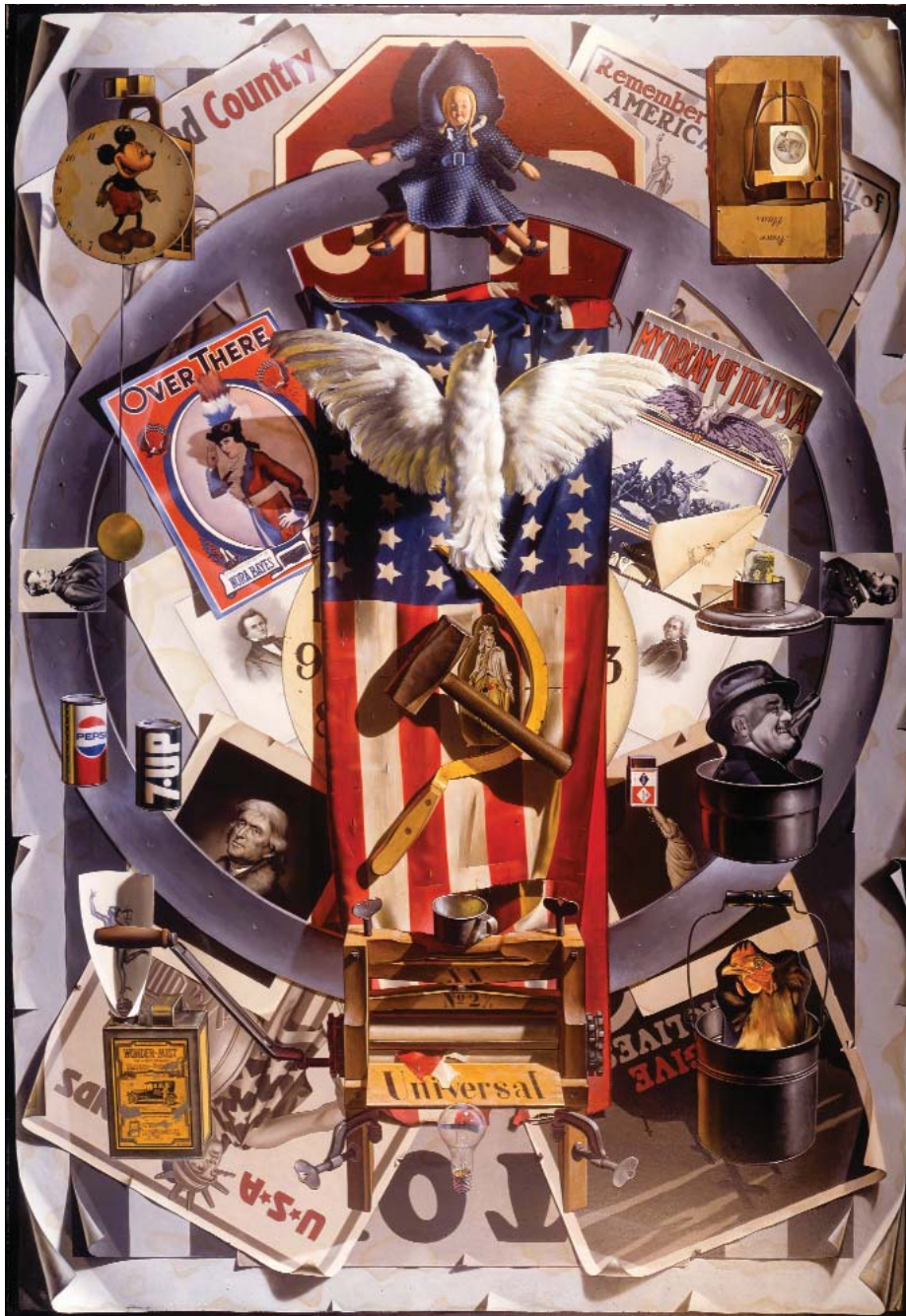


Peto. Like these predecessors, Erbe's work evokes a deep sense of nostalgia, often depicting musical instruments, vintage toys, comic books, and American cultural symbols with naturalistic precision. However, what sets Erbe apart from earlier masters is his distinct blend of historical homage with bold, contemporary sensibility. At the same

time, there is something innately American about his approach to his subjects: Western expansion, patriotism and the American flag, Hollywood actors and screen icons, the golden age of television, baseball and other sports, and American music—jazz, country, and, of course, rock and roll.

Facts-n-Prints, painted in 1971, is one





LEFT: *The Final Rinse*, 1971, 72 x 50, o/c, Fort Wayne Museum of Art, Indiana.

RIGHT: *Celebrating an American Patriot*, 2014, 30 x 40, o/c, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania.

BELOW RIGHT: *A Fork in the Road*, 2023-2024, 42 x 46, o/c, collection of the artist.

imploping Americans to “Be Patriotic,” conserve food, and participate in rationing for the common good, the broader theme of Erbe’s composition. Carefully placed kitchen implements: a wooden spoon, electric mixer, rolling pin, and pie tins enhance the symmetry of the work. The American flag in the upper right quadrant seamlessly blends with an antique patchwork quilt and a blue gingham tablecloth.

The Final Rinse (1971), according to Erbe, “effectively reflects the tenor of the times and thoughts about my homeland and the world at large.” The painting addresses Cold War tensions through a prominently placed hammer and sickle, the symbol of the U.S.S.R., set before an American flag and beneath a white dove, its outstretched wings evoking the fragile hope for peace. Erbe also alludes to the anticipated rise of China in the early 1970s through the inclusion of a paper tiger and a mousetrap, noting that “conflicts at home and abroad were on my mind during this period.”

The work exemplifies what Erbe calls “levitational realism,” a technique he pioneered in which objects appear to float in space rather than rest on a physical surface. This subtle, but striking, departure from traditional still-life compositional strategies introduces a new sense of modernity and visual dynamism to his work. By suspending his subjects in shallow pictorial space, Erbe shifts the viewer’s engagement from passive observation to active interpretation, inviting both nostalgia and fresh appreciation of his innovative approach. In the large scale *Final Rinse*, the levitating elements include soft drink cans, a Mickey Mouse clock face and pendulum, a hand-crank clothes wringer, and an image of Franklin Delano Roosevelt emerging from a kitchen pot above a second pot containing a chicken—a pointed reference to the Great Depression-era promise of “a chicken in every pot.”

American patriotism and the imagery of the flag have been central to Erbe’s visual lexicon for decades. *Celebrating an Amer-*

While not always overtly political, his flag-themed works included homages to the Founding Fathers, Presidents, two World Wars, the Cold War, as well as dissent, controversy, and troubling moments in the history of the United States. In *Pieces of Time*, also created in the lead up to the Bicentennial, Erbe notes, “This painting also recalls my own childhood experiences growing up in the 1950s when television made a big splash and had a profound impact on society. I also thought about the plight of the Native Americans, a dark chapter in American history.” Indeed, overlaid on top of the distinctive American flag,

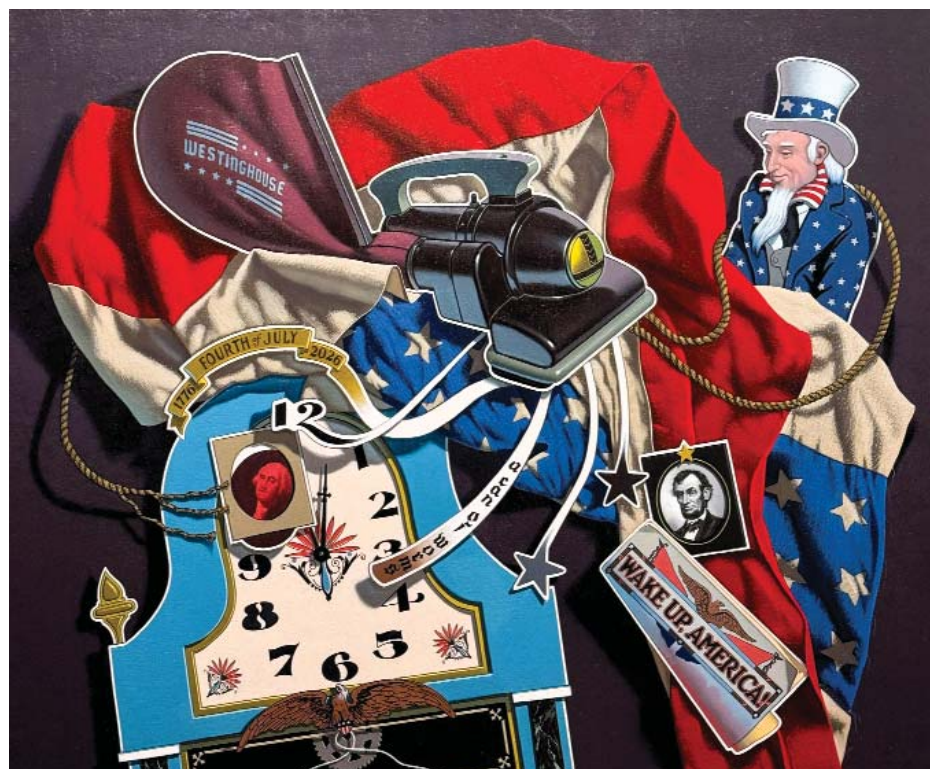
in the upper left quadrant of the composition is a solemn and contemplative bust portrait of an Indigenous man to underscore the totality of the America that Erbe set out to represent.

American Recipe was painted in 1974 during the wake of seismic changes in the world and in the United States: President Nixon’s resignation from the Presidency and the moments just before the abrupt end of the Vietnam War. The painting includes at its center a World War I poster with a female figure, arms outstretched, draped in the American flag. The poster was commissioned by the U.S. Food Administration



ican Patriot serves as a tribute to the president Erbe most admires—Abraham Lincoln. The richly layered composition uses the American flag as a backdrop upon which photographs of Lincoln, including a portrait taken by Mathew B. Brady in January 1864, are carefully arranged alongside a foil horn and festive noisemakers. These elements commemorate the life and legacy of one of the nation’s most influential presidents. Yet disrupting the painting’s otherwise celebratory tone is the inclusion of a model pistol, referencing the weapon used by John Wilkes Booth to assassinate Lincoln at Ford’s Theatre—a sobering reminder of tragedy interwoven with national memory.

A Fork in the Road, one of Erbe’s most recent works to feature the American flag, functions as a canary in the mine—signaling a pivotal moment in the nation’s history. The composition suggests that time may be running out on the country’s fu-



ture, symbolized by a clock whose ticking feels urgent and unresolved. Erbe argues that “A better life for everyone should be paramount for the politicians, at least that’s what is expected of them.” A 1950s Westinghouse hand-held Bakelite vacuum aggressively pulls in banners announcing the Semiquincentennial, “A Can of Worms,” and two faded stars that appear to have been torn from the flag itself. Elsewhere, a sign implores, “Wake Up, America!” as a rope seems to lasso Uncle Sam, only to fray as it extends toward a portrait of George Washington. As always, Erbe places his finger squarely on the pulse of the nation, reflecting both its ideals and its profound challenges.

In *Annie Oakley: Little Sure Shot*, Erbe turns his attention to a unique American icon who just happened to live in the same neighborhood as the artist—Nutley, New Jersey. The legendary sharpshooter resided in Nutley for a little more than a decade and made her mark in the world of entertainment. In the composition, bits of memorabilia, including a rifle and pistol, photographs, films, and pamphlets from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show are displayed on an artfully arranged American flag floating against a butter yellow background. The silhouette of the flag resembles a map of the United States. Erbe noted Oakley’s impact on popular culture, saying that “Oakley became an advocate for the rights of women to earn a living. Her feminist outlook along with the fact that she created a niche for herself in what was traditionally the domain of men, made her an inspiration to all American women.”

Erbe’s other themes explored in this exhibition are deeply personal yet universally resonant, drawing on childhood memories, American history, and cultural ephemera. A painting might simultaneously evoke the innocence of mid-twentieth-century America and a sophisticated awareness of the passage of time. Through his painstaking technique and methodical compositions, Erbe redefines *trompe l’oeil* not as a relic of the past, but a living, evolving form that has relevance to today’s viewer and, more broadly, to contemporary life. Gary Erbe’s art stands at the intersection of memory and innovation. By honoring the scrupulous artisanship

of nineteenth-century painters and infusing it with a contemporary vision, he bridges both eras and seamlessly blends both genres. His work invites viewers not just to see, but also to remember—and in remembering, to discover something entirely new.