

Night Journey 36: The Amazing Juggler

The title and principal figure of this painting is appropriated from Yasuo Kuniyoshi's 1952 painting titled *The Amazing Juggler*. I first encountered this painting as a teenager on an art scholarship to the Des Moines Art Center. *The Amazing Juggler* was my first encounter with art that deployed visual symbols to construct a narrative meaning. In my naïve artlessness, the painting was indecipherable, and the museum lacked an explanatory text. What Kuniyoshi had required of me was to stop seeing paintings as objects and to start understanding them as dialogues, created for the purpose of contemplation. As I developed more visual literacy, the painting's cryptic images formed a clear and understandable narrative.

Kuniyoshi painted *The Amazing Juggler* at the height of the Cold War, in the midst of the anxiety of the nuclear holocaust. In 19th and early 20th Century western cultures, clowns were often used as symbols to denote the folly of special interest politicians, with masks representative of their subterfuge. The performers behind the juggler in Kuniyoshi's painting are chaotic, fearful, and out of control, and the tent is disintegrating. The translation I surmise from Kuniyoshi's narrative symbols is that politicians are carelessly juggling the lives of all humanity through their acts of narcissistic self-interest, which will ultimately lead to the disintegration of organized societies and the end of the world.

Night Journey 36 has two agendas: One is to note my reoccurring acquaintances with the painting through place and time; the other is to convey my interpretation of Kuniyoshi's painting and how its narrative meaning remains relevant in my own moment in time.

To represent my cyclical interactions with the painting, I reconfigured the figurative elements of the Kuniyoshi painting to form a circular composition. Embedded within the circle are two remembrances of viewing the painting, depicted as younger ghost images of myself. The multiple echoed line-figure on the right is tethered by line to both to the juggler's bicycle and to my past contemplative relationships with the painting. In the depiction of this ongoing relationship of viewer and painting, what I hope to make visibly evident is that only the Kuniyoshi painting has the sustenance of actual existence, as compared to the transient fleeting moments of my human existence. The painting I had encountered in Iowa was conceived and painted in New York City. When I painted *Night Journey 36*, I was living and working in New York City, which impressed upon me a circular expression of time and space. This impression became the reasoning for the multi-layering ghost imaging of the New York Cityscape, which, like human existence, is always in a state of change and, due to its placement on earth, is in constant motion.

The second intent of the painting was to add a personal interpretation to Kuniyoshi's painting by reinforcing its meaning by referencing the historical event of 911. To clarify the perils of human existence at the hands of our world leaders, I changed one of the juggling balls to the planet earth. The centrally located planet earth has a circular trajectory of smoke emanating from the burning World Trade Center in the cityscape at the right edge of the painting. This

visual device is meant to connect the responsibility for the tragedy of 911 to the actions of our political leaders. In conspiracy with other world leaders, our leaders are directly responsible for the divisive, self-interest policies that created the conditions of resentment and hatred that provoked the violence of retaliation that deepened the irreconcilable differences separating one individual, one religion, and one nation from another, blinding all to the humane common interests that inspire peaceful coexistence.