

The 29 works of art comprising *Contemporary Art from the Norton Family Collection* were recently donated to the Haggerty Museum of Art by Los Angeles-based collectors Peter and Eileen Norton. Shown together for the first time, the pieces in this exhibition represent the work of 19 contemporary American artists who employ a diverse range of mediums and processes.

Peter and Eileen Norton began seriously collecting art in the 1980s. Since that time, the focus of their attention has been on emerging artists who pursue new visual forms as a means for expressing socially significant issues. Work that challenges definitions of identity and pushes the boundaries between media and genres is of particular interest to the couple. The Nortons' current collection of nearly 2000 works includes paintings, sculptures, prints, photographs, installation works, and video art. They have been regularly recognized among the world's top collectors of contemporary art.

In 1998, the Nortons purchased a 700-piece collection from Clyde and Karen Beswick. It was this acquisition that served as the impetus for the Nortons' donation of nearly 1,000 works of art from their private collection to 29 institutions throughout the United States – primarily smaller museums and university art galleries outside of major cities. The Nortons' intention, in donating the work, is to increase the visibility and appreciation of contemporary art and simultaneously strengthen the collections of the selected institutions.

"Even the biggest museums," according to Peter Norton, "have very limited funds for the purchase of contemporary art. The many smaller art museums and arts centers are even shorter on acquisition funds. So we thought the most interesting and beneficial thing we could do was to create mini-collections that would be organized in some meaningful way – by region, for example, or by subject matter – and donate them to lean but admirable arts institutions across the country; the university galleries and museums in small cities that have shown spunk and interest in this realm."<sup>1</sup>

The Haggerty Museum of Art is one of only 3 Midwestern museums to receive a gift from the Norton Collection. The overriding theme of the Haggerty donation is nature – particularly, nature gone awry. The majority of works in *Contemporary Art from the Norton Family Collection* were made in the early to mid 1990s by artists who, at the time, were not widely recognized in art institutions. In recent years, however, many of the artists included in this exhibition have attained a great deal of notoriety and success – among them, Alexis Rockman, Gregory Crewdson, Elliott Green, Tim Ebner, and Judy Pfaff.

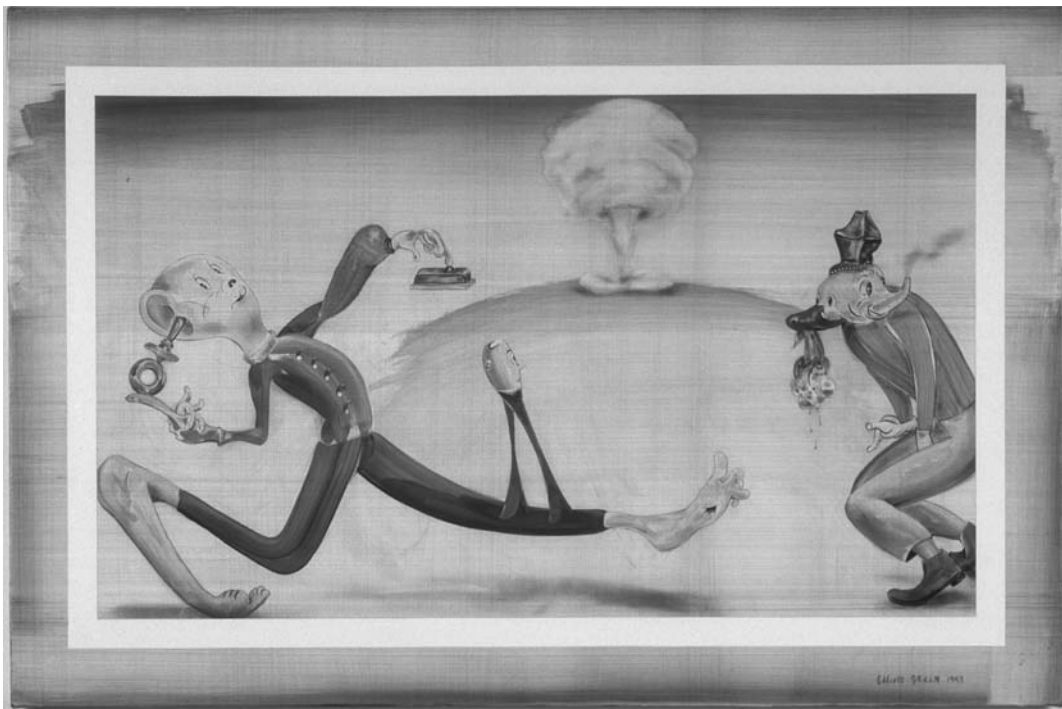
Unlike traditional photography, which is often perceived as a medium for documenting reality or randomly capturing a moment in time, Gregory Crewdson's photographs are the result of a painstaking process in which the artist carefully constructs and manipulates his subject matter. *Untitled (Dead Fox with Grapes)*, like many of Crewdson's works from the early 90s, is actually a photograph of a meticulously assembled diorama that the artist built in his studio.

In Crewdson's work, nothing is left to chance. Formal elements such as composition, lighting, and framing are scrupulously attended to. This slow and deliberate process is perhaps more closely aligned with that of oil painting than it is to the candidness and immediacy most often associated with photography. Although firmly planted in contemporary art, Crewdson's work can be linked to historical genres such as seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting. In both, carefully arranged objects from nature are often depicted as simultaneously beautiful and disturbing symbols of a human presence or reminders of the passing of earthly pleasures.

These anxieties and suggested story lines are imbued in much of Crewdson's work. According to the artist, "I am interested in the question of narrative. How photography is distinct from, but connected to, other narrative forms like writing and film. This idea of creating a moment that is frozen and mute, that perhaps ultimately asks more

questions than it answers proposes an open-ended and ambiguous narrative allowing the viewer to, in a sense, complete it. Ultimately, I'm interested in this ambiguous moment that draws the viewer in through photographic beauty, through repulsion, through some kind of tension."<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, the film industry has influenced the development of Crewdson's photography. This is perhaps most evident in his more recent images of small-town and suburban neighborhoods. In these works, the artist creates an elaborate stage set – complete with actors, electricians, and stagehands – as the point of departure for shooting his photographs. The end result is a surreal glimpse at life on "the edge," as seen in the films of Steven Spielberg, David Cronenberg, and David Lynch. The artist himself cites Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* as a compelling inspiration for his work.



The profusion of digital technology has produced a familiarity with fabricated images. The photographs of Gregory Crewdson, however, blur the lines of visual perception and call into question our ability to distinguish reality from artifice in a media-saturated culture.

Tim Ebner is an aberration among the group of artists featured in *Contemporary Art from the Norton Family Collection*. Ebner, unlike the others, had established an international reputation in the art world as an abstract conceptualist early in the 1980s. For nearly a decade, he experimented with utilitarian and industrial materials from which he created minimalist forms and painted panels. Much of Ebner's early work was based on the art of deception. For example, in his 1985 *Kuhlschmidt Painting* what appeared to be giant Franz Kline-like brushstrokes were, in fact, mechanically produced marks created by means of a photographic and wax-resist process. What initially appeared to be a spontaneous expressionist gesture was actually a well thought-out effort removed, in many ways, from the artist's hand. As Ebner explained in 1986, "The expectation of the viewer is my principal concern. The work functions within the contradiction of what it initially seems to be and what it actually is."<sup>3</sup>

In 1991, Ebner abandoned his industrial-fused abstract work for richly impastoed figurative paintings. Drawing inspiration from children's nature books, gardening manuals, and religious images, Ebner began creating colorful creatures reminiscent of those seen in illustrated storybooks. Seemingly fanciful characters, like the Wolf and Alligator in *Untitled (Wolf, Alligator and Fish)* embody an odd assortment of human and animal attributes. Here, as in Ebner's other menageries, animals are dressed in descriptive clothing. Monks' robes, clown suits, and military regalia are used as a means for implying character and subsequent acts of kindness, cruelty, or perversity. Endowed with human hands, Ebner's animals mimic gestures borrowed from historic religious paintings. Further eliciting a sense of tension, Ebner's Disney-like characters are precariously placed, waist-deep, in an ocean of sea-capped waves as if teetering on the brink of doom.

Bearing in mind Ebner's earlier work, one might conclude that his figurative renderings are strictly "paintings about painting" where the imagery serves only as a means for exploring the application of paint and compositional relationships. On the other hand, these creatures may be metaphors for an expression of spirituality through which the artist ponders issues concerning man's place in the world, the forces of nature, and religious faith. As Ebner stated in 1997, "Even though it sounds romantic, if you want to connect to something larger than yourself, painting is a vehicle for doing it."<sup>4</sup>

In either case, both past and present work challenges the viewer to forsake superficial judgements and quick interpretations. While Ebner's switch from abstract minimalist to figurative painter appears to be a dramatic transformation, it is evident that his conceptualist perspective has remained unchanged.

Steeped in the traditions of abstraction and surrealism, Elliott Green's cartoon-like characters cavort in a world of frenetic energy and uninhibited dreams. Human bodies comprised of a combination of exaggerated and sub-

tracted (or missing) body parts are topped with heads of dogs, birds, and other animals. These characters fluidly move across the canvas, one often morphing into the other. According to the artist, "Physical distortions of arms and legs as well as exaggerated looks of longing and repulsion, reflect the dynamics of everyday relationships and acknowledge the familial and sexual feelings that strangely overlap in those exchanges."<sup>5</sup>

Green's use of cartoon imagery allows for greater artistic freedom and serves as a means for challenging psychological preconceptions. "Cartoons," the artist noted, "say, relax, this is not about you. And it's not about me. It takes the ego out of it on both sides. But then later, of course, you realize, well-it is about me."<sup>6</sup>

Green's work is self-referential in its drawing attention to the process of creating art. In *Emergence 46*, for example, the artist started with a pencil drawn sketch placed directly on the gesso. Using diluted acrylics, Green completed the faces and background with a wash of color and built-up other areas with layers of paint. The original pencil line remains visible in some spaces and obscured in others. Also seen in *Emergence 46*, is a one-inch strip of gesso; exposed by the removal of masking tape placed on the canvas prior to painting. This framing device emphasizes the comic-strip nature of the work and, at the same time, draws attention to the hand of the artist. Commenting on this combined process of painting and drawing the artist stated, "The pencil lines got a much wider range than a brush stroke. It's a vernacular. Our friends and families have handwriting, and it's all expressive. You can read emotion and feel the character of shapes."<sup>7</sup>

While Green's imagery appears to be anti-academic, the artist playfully incorporates traditional iconography into his pop-culture tableaux. For example, the wounded bare foot of the character in *Emergence 46* brings to mind images such as Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son* or Le Nain's *Peasant Family* where the foot serves as a symbol of humility, poverty, or being linked to the earth. But quite unlike traditional religious or history paintings, the meaning in Green's work is not easily discernible. Surely there is evidence of lewd behavior, acts of greed and lust, and the playing-out of repressed dreams, but the final narrative is unclear.

Exemplary of many of the artists included in *Contemporary Art from the Norton Family Collection*, Ebner, Crewdson, and Green expect a cerebral response to their work. Although diverse in presentation, all of the pieces in this exhibition assert that looking at art should not be a passive experience.

Lynne Shumow  
Curator of Education and Community Outreach

## NOTES

1. *Norton Family Office press release*, January 18, 2000, p. 2.
2. Bradford Morrow, "Gregory Crewdson," *Bomb Magazine*, Fall 1997, p. 38.
3. Mark Selwyn, *L.A. Weekly*, December 12-18, 1986.
4. Hunter Drohojowska Philp, *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 1997, p. 53.
5. Elliott Green, Artist's Statement, May 2000, Courtesy of Postmasters, N.Y.
6. Lee Smith, "Once Upon a Canvas, The Elliott Green Story," *Modern Painters*, Autumn 2000, p. 48.
7. Ibid, p. 49.



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Front cover: Alexis Rockman, *Kapok Tree*  
Back cover: Tim Ebner, *Untitled (Wolf, Alligator and Fish)*  
Front fold: Alexis Rockman, *Kapok Tree* (detail)  
Inside left: Elliott Green, *Emergence 46*  
Inside right: Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled (Dead Fox with Grapes)*



## CHECKLIST

Olive Ayhens, Phyllis Shafer, and Paul Pratchenko  
*Cadavre Exquis Drawing #465*, 1993  
Mixed media on paper  
14 1/4 x 10 1/2 in.  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.1

Deborah Brown  
American (b.1968)  
*Untitled (Mushroom Centaur)*, 1994  
Mixed media  
9 1/2 x 9 x 5 1/2 in.  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.2

Deborah Brown  
American (b.1968)  
*Queen Hog*, 1996  
Gold leaf over taxidermy mold, rubber, and tulle  
19 1/2 x 21 x 18 in.  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.3

Shayne Chandler  
American (b.1967)  
*Coronation (Carnation)*, 1991  
Mixed media  
6 3/4 x 4 1/4 x 1 in.  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.4

Peter David  
American  
*Bouquet II*, 1986  
Neon  
18 1/2 x 8 1/2 in. dia.  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.5

Robert Dunlavey  
American  
*Winged Devil*, 1984  
Painted wood  
6 1/2 x 10 3/4 in.  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.6

Tim Ebner  
American (b.1953)  
*Untitled (Wolf, Alligator and Fish)*, 1997  
Oil on canvas  
48 1/4 x 42 1/2 in.  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.7

Chris Finley  
American (b.1971)  
*Untitled (Sugarfoot Brown)*, 1993  
Mixed media  
7 x 12 x 12 in.  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.8

Michael Gonzalez  
American (b.1953)  
*Untitled*, 1991  
Tin-plated copper grounding braids with pushpins  
82 in. wide  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.9

Michael Gonzalez  
American (b.1953)  
*Untitled*, 1991  
Silicone, tin-plated copper grounding braids, suction cups  
14 x 11 x 1/2 in.  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.10

This exhibition showcases a significant gift from international art collectors Peter and Eileen Norton to the Haggerty Museum. The Museum will benefit greatly from the infusion of work by leading contemporary artists. Thanks are due to Susan Cahan, Senior Curator and Director of Arts Programs, Norton Foundation and to Tom Solomon, free-lance curator, Los Angeles for his role in selecting the Haggerty to receive this gift.

Ann Page  
American (b.1940)  
*Green Snake*, 1989  
Mixed media  
Edition 9/24  
24 1/2 x 25 x 12 in.  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.11

Judy Pfaff  
American (b.1953)  
*Kids*, 1990  
Adhesive paper on glass  
Four panels 8 x 6 x 1/2 in each  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.12

Anna-Maria Sircello  
American  
*Cornucopia*, 1993  
Wicker cornucopia and hair  
9 x 11 x 13 in.  
Gift of Eileen and Peter Norton, 2000.10.13

Elliott Green  
American (b.1960)  
*Untitled #104*, 1990  
Acrylic and gesso on canvas  
24 x 32 in.  
Gift of Peter Norton, 2000.11.1

Elliott Green  
American (b.1960)  
*Emergence 46*, 1993  
Acrylic and gesso on canvas  
24 x 36 in.  
Gift of Peter Norton, 2000.11.2

Elliott Green  
American (b.1960)  
*Untitled*, 1995  
Acrylic and collage on wood panel  
24 x 36 in.  
Gift of Peter Norton, 2000.11.3

Biff Henrich  
American (b.1953)  
*Untitled (Turkey)*, 1989  
C-print  
Edition 1/5  
40 x 30 in.  
Gift of Peter Norton, 2000.11.4

Mark Heresy  
American  
*Will to Power*, 1992  
Ink on posterboard  
22 x 28 in.  
Gift of Peter Norton, 2000.11.5

Michael Jenkins  
American (b.1957)  
*Balancing Boy*, 1991  
Steel, wire, felt, buttons, ping-pong balls, and wood with paint and ink  
72 x 8 in.  
Gift of Peter Norton, 2000.11.6

Gregory Crewdson  
American (b.1962)  
*Untitled (Dead Fox with Grapes)*, 1994  
C-print, Edition 2/6  
30 x 40 in.  
Extended Loan, Courtesy of Peter Norton, XL2000.2.1

Michele Oka Doner  
American (b.1945)  
*Winged Chair*, 1989  
Cast bronze  
24 1/2 x 23 1/2 x 15 1/2 in.  
Extended Loan, Courtesy of Eileen and Peter Norton, XL2000.2.2

Robert Helm  
American (b.1943)  
*Garden Wind*, 1991  
Oil on panel  
19 1/2 x 27 x 2 in.  
Extended Loan, Courtesy of Peter Norton, XL2000.2.3

Tom Knetchel  
American (b.1952)  
*Lessons in the Theatre: Ejaculation*, 1991  
Oil on mahogany panel  
41 x 50 in.  
Extended Loan, Courtesy of Peter Norton, XL2000.2.4

DeLoss McGraw  
American (b.1945)  
*Citizen Dressed Up as Herbert Hoover's Dog—President Hoover Feeding his Dogs on the White House Lawn*, 1989  
Gouache with collage  
10 3/4 x 13 1/4 in.  
Extended Loan, Courtesy of Peter Norton, XL2000.2.5

Alexis Rockman  
American (b.1962)  
*Untitled*, 1991  
Ink and watercolor on paper  
24 x 18 in.  
Extended Loan, Courtesy of Peter Norton, XL2000.2.6

Alexis Rockman  
American (b.1962)  
*Untitled (JG 92)*, 1994  
Ink and watercolor on paper  
16 x 20 in.  
Extended Loan, Courtesy of Peter Norton, XL2000.2.7

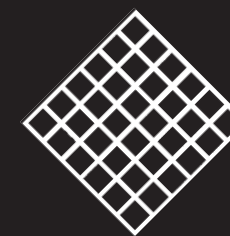
Alexis Rockman  
American (b.1962)  
*Kapok Tree*, 1995  
Oil on wood  
96 x 64 in.  
Extended Loan, Courtesy of Peter Norton, XL2000.2.8

Tom Wudl  
American (b. Bolivia 1948)  
*Taoist Immortals at Home*, 1991  
Oil on canvas  
24 x 18 in.  
Extended Loan, Courtesy of Peter Norton, XL2000.2.9

Tom Wudl  
American (b. Bolivia 1948)  
*Circumstances Leading to the Discovery of the Unconscious*, 1992  
Oil on canvas  
49 1/4 x 39 1/4 in.  
Extended Loan, Courtesy of Peter Norton, XL2000.2.10



# Haggerty Museum of Art Marquette University



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# CONTEMPORARY ART FROM THE NORTON FAMILY COLLECTION

November 12, 2000 – January 14, 2001

