

# Gregory Rick, SECA Art Awards Exhibition



By Megan  
Kelly

The California College of the Arts community shines brightly throughout the 2022 SECA Art Award exhibition, and Gregory Rick is no exception. His work is poignant and important, bringing a serious and thought-provoking tone to the exhibition. The Oakland-based artist graduated from CCA with his BFA in 2019 and recently graduated from Stanford University with his MFA in Art Practice. Gregory Rick constructs what he calls “history paintings,” which depict his personal experiences entwined with historical and political events. Through painting, Rick draws on personal stories that also feel familiar to his viewers.

The first piece that the viewer is greeted with in the exhibition is Rick’s painting *Charlottesville* (2022). The background of this painting is a gloomy shade of black, encapsulating the scene inside. Rick’s paintings have a unique motif of overlapping characters, symbols, buildings, and objects to tell his story. Upon first glance, you can get lost in the cacophony of colors and objects layered in the painting, but once you further inspect, the narrative becomes clear. Rick digests political unrest in his paintings. *Charlottesville* is Rick’s interpretation of the brutal events that took place between Unite the Right rally attendees and counterprotesters in August of 2017. The foreground features Heather Heyer, one of the victims who was killed when a neo-Nazi Unite the Right rally attendee drove into a crowd of counterprotestors, injuring at least 35 others. The neo-Nazis are depicted in Rick’s painting with white hooded robes, reminiscent of robes worn by the Ku Klux Klan. One figure wears a shirt that reads “White Lives > BLM (Black Lives Matter),” and another bears “1776” across his chest. A confederate flag and a backwards US flag fly high in the top left corner behind the commotion of the painting. His large canvases explore complex scenes of political unrest that are informed by both US history and his personal experience of current events.

Each of the four SECA award-winning artists—Binta Ayofemi, Maria A. Guzmán Capron, Cathy Lu, Marcel Pardo Ariza, and Gregory Rick—has their own space within the exhibition at SFMOMA. Most of the rooms are delineated by bold colored walls. In Rick’s space, however, the walls are plain and white, allowing the vibrancy of his paintings to shine. The energy of Rick’s space in the exhibition is in stark contrast to those around him. It is a room for a quiet contemplation; a place that allows the viewer to spend extended amounts of time getting lost in the swirling narratives in these larger-than-life paintings.

Combining scenes of violence and protest with imagery of community and love, Rick questions how all these things can

exist at the same time. For Rick, the personal is political, and his paintings are evidence of how US history and the political events he has lived through have shaped his life.



**Gregory Rick, Charlottesville, 2022**

Megan Kelly (she/her) is the 2022-2023 Graduate Curatorial Fellow at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts and first year student in CCA's Curatorial Practice (MA) program. Megan is dedicated to creating a platform to promote contemporary artists, with an emphasis on supporting queer and BIPOC artists.