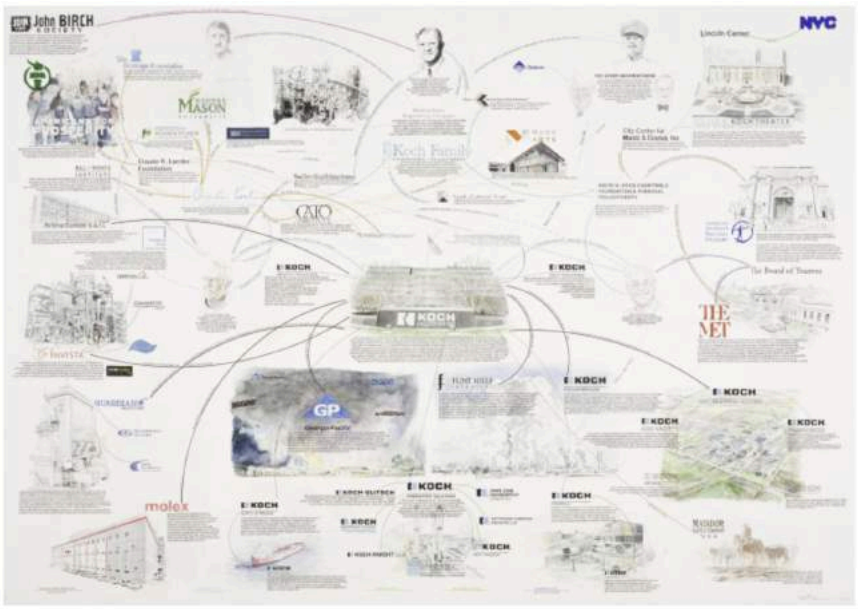
HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Capital and Complicity in the Art World

William Powhida reorients our perspective away from the individuals who lead and fundraise for cultural institutions and redirects it toward international flows of capital.

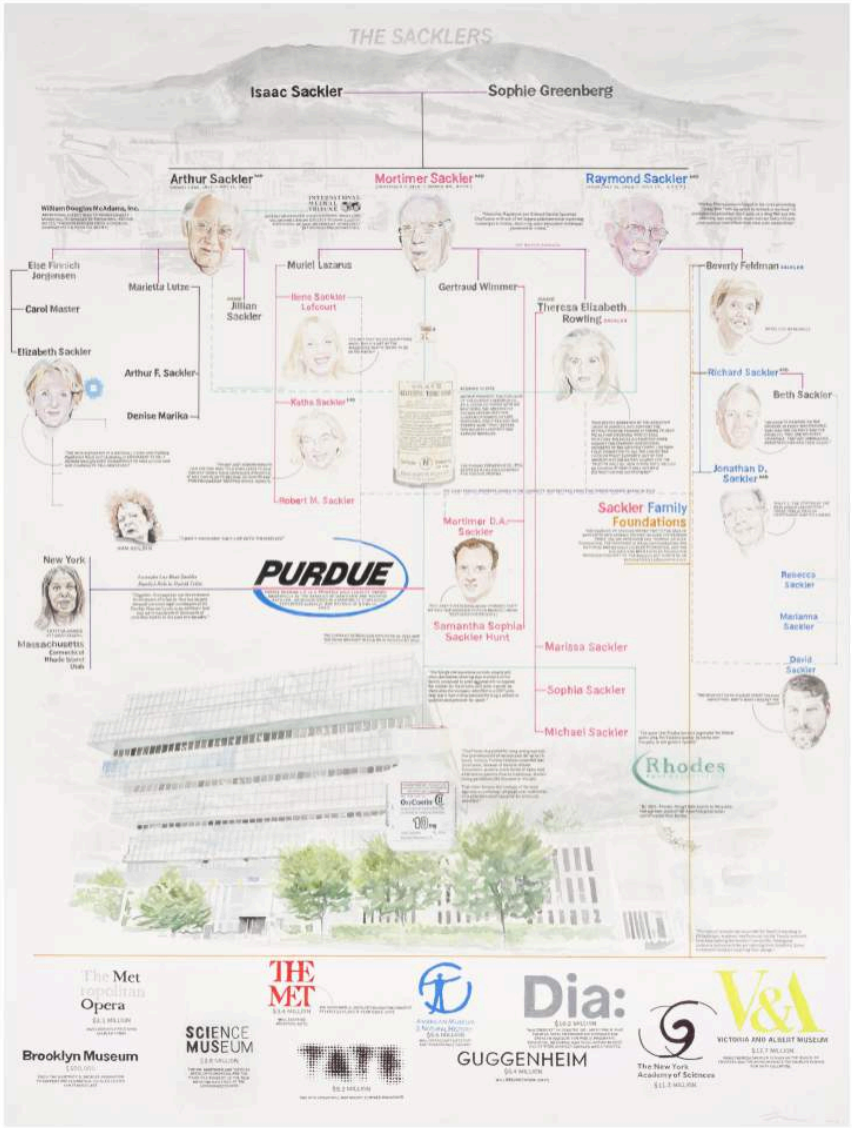
Zach Ritter September 28, 2019



William Powhida, "Koch Industries (Private Company)" (2019), watercolor, ink, *Rolling Stone*, and the Internet on paper mounted on dibond (all images courtesy of the artist and Postmasters Gallery)

Outrage in the art world about the overlap between the military industrial complex and the board of trustees at the Whitney Museum of American Art is an indication that the contemporary art industry is gaining awareness of its political underbelly. The most visible responses have come from artists, eight of whom planned to withdraw their work from the Whitney Biennial, leading to the resignation of board member Warren B. Kanders.

Complicities, an exhibition of new work by William Powhida currently on view at Postmasters, suggests that this response, while effective, misses a larger point. The show reorients our perspective away from the individuals who lead and fundraise for cultural institutions and redirects it toward international flows of capital. In Powhida's drawings, the funding of major museums and public art projects is completely intertwined with the ethical rot of a financial and political elite whose scope of power and influence transcends national boundaries.



William Powhida, "The Sacklers (Family Tree)" (2019), watercolor, ink, *The New York Times*, and the Internet on paper mounted on dibond

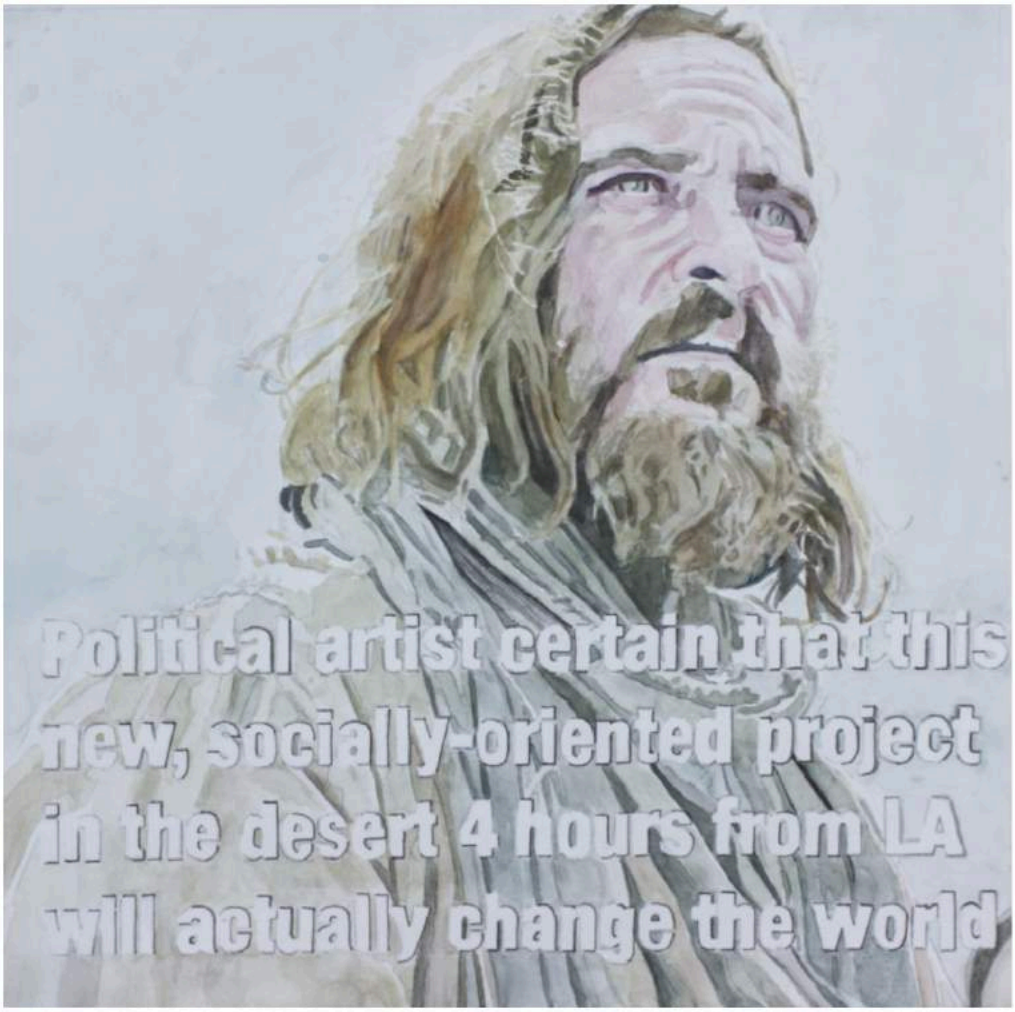
Seven works in watercolor and acrylic on paper diagram this intertwinement and concentrate the exhibition's critical force. They track the political and economic relationships between New York's museums and major real estate developments (for instance, Hudson Yards) with arms manufacturers, corporate tycoons, and pharmaceutical dynasties. Powhida's system of presenting information invokes the work of Mark Lombardi, who pioneered research-driven informational diagrams. In his calligraphic style, Lombardi left the connections between global actors to be investigated by the viewer. (The FBI famously contacted the Whitney Museum shortly after 9/11 with the aim of studying his work.) By contrast, Powhida offers exposition in abundance.

The works, which can read like flow charts, place cultural institutions in fringe positions, often some distance from a corporate or family center. To assume, accordingly, that the artist wants merely to highlight the degree to which a museum is a paltry entity relative to the global reach of Koch Industries' political and economic power is to stop at the obvious. Powhida wants us to see the contradictory relationship that institutions professing to benefit society maintain with money and power. Likewise, he seems fully aware of the process whereby a corporation incites an opioid epidemic with one hand, and then uses the other to launder its image through the associative benefits of charitable donations to a bevy of cultural institutions. Many of these institutions see corporate donations as a stop-gap against the progressive dwindling of public funding.

William Powhida, "Safariland (Direct Investment)" (2019), watercolor, ink, transfer, and the Internet on paper mounted on dibond

Hans Haacke, that great sociologist of the art world, argued that businesses see in cultural institutions a PR resource, a channel through which to reconfigure their public image, shifting it away from their actual business dealings and onto, say, an exhibition of Baroque sculpture. Powhida's diagrams internalize this critique. "The Sacklers" (2019) demonstrates his strategy of argument-by-organization: the family tree of the makers of OxyContin is positioned on top of an array of six- and seven-figure donations made to seemingly every major New York cultural institution.

In "Koch Industries" (2019), a work that compresses family genealogy and byzantine corporate diversification, Powhida connects the financial largesse of Charles and David Koch to a global manufacturing supply chain, an array of conservative (read: reactionary) political groups and think tanks, and cultural philanthropy. Tucked under the watercolor rendering of the Met's logo and facade is a reminder that the museum aspires to "Represent the broadest spectrum of human achievement." Beneath this is an umbrella of energy companies contained within Koch AG & Energy Solutions. This subtle bit of positioning juxtaposes the Met's hermetic ideal with the real-world destruction wrought by the Koch brothers' decades-long campaign of global warming denialism, and their businesses' massive carbon emissions. Powhida sets down the facts step-by-step and organizes these connections into compositions of total perspective. Their strength of argument comes across up close and at a distance, as names and logos remain legible from afar even as the information linking them together becomes nearly transparent with the paper.



William Powhida, "Political Artist (Mary Magdalene)" (2019), watercolor and acrylic on paper

Seven smaller watercolors, which deploy meme culture with sardonic humor, re-contextualize the systems-thinking of works like "Koch Industries." In "Political Artist" (2019), a portrait of Joaquin Phoenix from the film *Mary Magdalene* (2018), a pensive face gazes out attentively. This sincerity is countered by the superimposed white text: "Political artist certain that this new, socially-oriented project in the desert 4 hours from LA will actually change the world." While the comedy is obvious, the political delusion has a tragic tone.

As Haacke has said, though artists may have no real political power, they can at least focus our attention. While some may balk at this sentiment, Powhida seems to understand its most enduring implication: that although an aesthetic experience is not a politics in any meaningful sense, the ways it can change our thinking about the world can help initiate one.

William Powhida: Complicities *continues at Postmasters (54 Franklin Street, Manhattan) through October 12.*