

# JERSEY CITY TIMES



## Artists Explore Pop Music Icons in Two Local Shows

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“An Artist’s Duty,” at SMUSH Gallery (340 Summit Ave.) through tomorrow.

**“Top Ten Hits” at Novado Gallery (110 Morgan St.) continues through the month.**

Among other things, pop music is a form of visual art. Rarely is it enough to mint a melody that makes the world sing. That tune must also be tethered to a recognizable image. The most efficient deliverer of the iconography upon which pop music depends is the artist’s own face. The face of the singer is a kind of brand, which helps to explain why it is often abstracted, and often estranged, from the work and placed on posters and advertisements. It also helps explain why a massive mural of David Bowie now overlooks the Holland Tunnel.

Bowie the human being was a complicated and difficult man who openly flirted with Nazi imagery and ideology in the 1970s, and who may or may not have been in pernicious character when he said that Britain would benefit from fascist leadership. Bowie the icon, on the other hand, has straightforward connotations: generational change, androgyny, transhumanity and sci-fi, artistic freedom. Embracing and broadcasting the icon diminishes and distorts the meaning of David Bowie’s very complicated songwriting, but without the icon, the work wouldn’t have sold, and we might not even know who Bowie was. This is the devil’s bargain that all pop artists make — a reduction and simplification of their personalities into something that can be easily understood and mass-marketed, in exchange for global visibility.

There's a much, much smaller image of David Bowie in "An Artist's Duty," which closes at SMUSH Gallery (340 Summit Ave.) on Saturday, June 12. It was painted in acrylic on canvas by the curator of the show: Stephanie Geremito, a Long Island artist who takes the sociopolitical statements made by popular entertainers seriously. "An Artist's Duty" is one of two local exhibitions that place the image of the singing star at the center of the show. **Like "An Artist's Duty," "Top Ten Hits" at Novado Gallery (110 Morgan St.) contains work that's informed by street art and popular portraiture techniques, and it situates its famous subjects in a volatile world. But the tone of the silkscreened and spray-painted canvases by St. Petersburg-born artist Denis Ouch is sharply different — and so is his understanding of the place of the pop star in the global imagination.**

Not everybody depicted in "An Artist's Duty" is a popular musician. Grace Kim contributes lovingly rendered oil paintings of artist-activists, including the Dakota writer Zitkála-Šá, transgender actress Laverne Cox, and a portrait of Frederick Douglass that, like all good images of the abolitionist, hurls a powerful accusation across time. Some aren't even artists: Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, is here, too, sort of, although she's barely recognizable in a "flat digital rendering by Sara Lauth. But the heart of the show is the series of energetic paintings of pop stars new and old by Geremito, which roar from their canvases like punk rock songs do. There's a recklessness to these renderings that suits the subjects well. At their best, they channel some of the broad, bright-stroke, ungovernable energy that makes pop stars appealing to millions.

Which, if you're a fan of pop, means that there's a lot for you to enjoy here. But the thrills aren't spaced evenly, and that inconsistency might say something about Geremito's relationship to music, or to iconography, or both. While it would be unfair to call some of the portraits of older artists (a poised Jackson Browne, a steely Neil Young, an exhausted John Lennon) overly reverential, she's not adding much to the popular understanding of the public characters that these Hall of Famers endeavored to project. She does better when she pokes the icon a little. Ironically, given her fascination with rock history, her most revealing portraits are the ones of current artists. Sia Furler, for instance, crackles with the childlike impishness and mischievousness that animates her best pop writing; she looks as if she's about to reach through the frame and apply finger-paint to your nose. Childish Gambino emerges, shirtless and strangely vulnerable, from a background of smeared grey and green paint, head bowed, grim, radiating despair. **Harry Styles — the only artist to feature in this exhibition and "Top Ten Hits" as well** — cocks his head with the combination of camp insouciance and near-professorial discernment that always separated him from his group-mates in One Direction. Janelle Monáe, decked out beautifully in a jacket and tie, seems legitimately shocked that she's even under observation.

Geremito's inspiration for the exhibit was Nina Simone's famous declaration that an artist has a duty to reflect the times she's living in. (Simone gets a particularly sympathetic rendering here; she looks dignified, fearsomely intelligent, and a bit exasperated at the shortcomings of the audience.) The curator pairs each of her portraits with quotes from her subjects about the better world they're determined to inaugurate. Yet the most telling quotation in the show comes from R.E.M. frontman Michael Stipe, who points out that the generation of pop musicians that did the most talking about artistic responsibility have presided over an unprecedented deterioration of political and environmental conditions. That's surely not the artists' fault, but it does undermine the claims of political significance that are often made on their behalf. How much of their activism was genuine, and how much was an extension of the altruistic, transcendent characters they were

playing professionally? Were they truly reflecting the times, or could it better be said that they were reflecting certain popular inchoate aspirations that have fallen, like so much else, to the steamroller of capitalist history? As a child growing up in Russia, Denis Ouch, who'll be present at the Novado Gallery on June 19, had a scarier view of those historical processes in action. There, the American and British pop star was marketed like any other commodity: the pop icon was the smiling face on the fearsome battering ram of Western consumer culture. His exhibition demonstrates that Ouch loves pop music as much as Geremito does. But while "An Artist's Duty" is broadly laudatory, "Top Ten Hits" has far darker undercurrents. Images of the impassive faces of current stars, silk-screened Warhol-style, "float atop ghostly representations of weapons, military dictators in mid-salute, tanks, battle#eld barbed wire. As Dua Lipa blows a "flirty kiss from a yellow spray-paint circle, an insurgent in a balaclava lurks over her shoulder, and fighters in photo-negative white march across the canvas. Drake, decked in a sleek



gold chain, is superimposed atop an array of grave, spectral military leaders, the Weeknd appears to be exhaling a strand of huddled refugees, and even the dove of peace turns out to be a company logo. This is not merely ironic juxtaposition. It's also an acknowledgement that the art star, flattened to two dimensions and rendered in high contrast like a corporate insignia, is an industrial export. Because Denis Ouch respects these musicians and understands the power of the images they've made — and because of his arresting use of bright spray-paint color, bright as the painted cosmetics on Warhol's images of Chairman Mao — he's able to keep the elements in his canvases in a kind of eerie balance. The face of the star, and the qualities it represents, captures the viewer's attention and imagination first. Yet the closer you look at the canvas, the more you'll see: foreign street scenes and hooded riflemen, cannons, the gigantic, crushing wheels of armored vehicles. Is pop entertainment just a

**distraction from the horrors of a world in grave danger, and are pop artists, however well meaning, simply agents of that distraction?**

**Those of us who believe in the power of popular music — and that includes Denis Ouch and Stephanie Geremito — would surely argue that it's more complicated than that. Pop stars, even at their most superficial, really do have the ability to unite and inspire millions of people, and that influence is felt transnationally, in defiance of borders and government restrictions. Artists who've got the talent and charisma to project their personality and their ideas across the void of consumer space are vanishingly rare: if it was easy to manufacture a Taylor Swift or a Beyoncé, another one would have been fabricated by now. These artists may or may not reflect the times, as Nina Simone would have them do, but they certainly do channel and shape the dreams of their fans, and maybe even those who aren't fans, but could be if they'd only listen without prejudice. That's why we keep painting them, and drawing them, and silk-screening them, and emblazoning their faces on t-shirts and tote bags. It's why we're desperate to enlist them in our political causes, and why we chase after their fantastic energy like kids with buttery nets. We all know it: what they do is the closest thing to magic we'll ever find in this material world.**