

SANTA BARBARA CITY COLLEGE

# Jeepers Creepers!

*Christopher Ulivo*

ATKINSON GALLERY



■ *The Tibetans Have Finally Showed Up*, egg tempera on panel, 9.5" x 9.75", 2011

## CHRISTOPHER ULIVO: *Bio*

**C**hristopher Ulivo (Staten Island, NY, 1977) received his MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and his BFA from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University. He has exhibited extensively with solo exhibitions at Susan Inglett Gallery (NY) and group exhibitions including *First Contact* at Field Projects (NY), *Nature, Once Removed: The (Un)Natural World in Contemporary Drawing* at Lehman College (NY), and *Tales of Wonder and Woe: Fable and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Art* at Castle Gallery (NY). Ulivo is also co-curator of the currently traveling exhibit, *In Search Of...*, which has been on view at Rhodes College (TN), Kansas University (KN) and North Branch Projects in Chicago, IL. He has received artist in residence fellowships from the Ragdale Foundation, the Hall Farm Art Center and the Abrons Art Center. His work has also been reviewed in *TimeOut New York*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Philadelphia Weekly*, and *Art New England*.

For more information, please visit his website at: <http://christopherulivo.com> ■



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*Christopher Ulivo*

■ OPENING RECEPTION:

Friday, February 1, 5:00-7:00pm, WC301

■ ARTIST TALK:

Wednesday, February 13, 4:30pm, A211



■ *Confounded Windstorm!*, 13" x 18", egg tempera on panel, 2011



■ *Mummies Return: Sherwood Ball*, 7.5" x 9.5", egg tempera on panel, 2009

## JEEPERS Creepers!

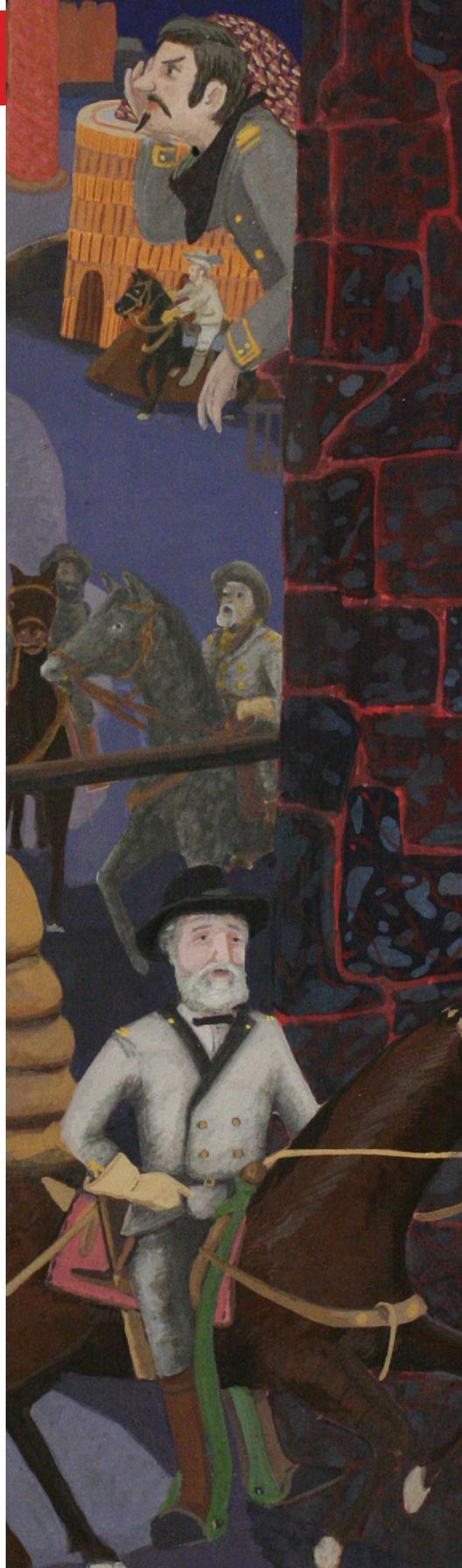
Christopher Ulivo says he is a “would-be adventurer”—except for his aversion to “daring and physical exertion.” However, Ulivo doesn’t shirk the manual labor of grinding pigment for his paints, nor his sometimes offensive, always complicated subject matter. Ulivo is a grand storyteller, a master of “what if” scenarios. What if I built my own prehistoric theme park? What if Mehmet went to a Clinton fundraiser? What if a spy killed General Lee? Ulivo, who combines popular culture, historical tidbits and religious lore with his own musings, is a self-described advocate for complex visual narrative. It is, therefore, easy to imagine the artist as a young LEGO master adding his wrestling figures, matchbox cars and plastic dinosaurs into the mix.

Ulivo exaggerates his jumbled chronologies and far reaching subjects with a flattened style that confuses foreground and background through a willful subversion of perspective, scale and color. The egg tempera itself, his primary media since 2009, creates further flattening thanks to its entirely matte surface. Ulivo’s adoption of this ancient medium, last popular during the Renaissance, accentuates his choice of obscure and discordant subjects. Ulivo most frequently works on small panels, his intimate work a journal of his fantastical armchair travels. Unconcerned with strict representationalism, Ulivo also owes a debt to cartooning—finding humor in both the horrific and the mundane, caricatured subjects, narrative form and small flattened frames. Ulivo’s titles also serve as abbreviated literary accompaniments to his works. While titles often limit or obscure the interpretation of an artwork, Ulivo’s provide the viewer with the coordinates needed to meet the artist on his journey.

*What if I built my own prehistoric theme park?  
And a group of Tibetan monks showed up for the  
opening ceremony?*

In one of his more spare compositions, *The Tibetans Have Finally Showed Up*, the artist depicts himself as an architect ready to christen his theme park. If there’s a crowd for opening day, it cannot be seen within the tightly cropped frame. There’s just the life-sized dinosaur model awkwardly positioned between two telephone poles, a set of prayer flags,

*The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down* (Detail),  
12" x 10", egg tempera on panel, 2012



the architect holding a bottle of champagne (or a forty) and three titular monks approaching obeisantly from stage right. Are they simply there to offer the benediction? Or rather, the Magi reimagined coming to pay their respects to the nascent dinosaur? This piece stems from *Prehistoric Park*, an earlier gouache series in which Ulivo imagines an ambitious theme park scheme almost—but never quite—realized. Instead of glorifying imagined success, Ulivo conducts an intensive study of being just “OK.”

*What if Mohmet went to a Clinton fundraiser?  
And I'm singing on stage?*

Rather than focus on the action on stage during a Clinton fundraiser, Ulivo reveals the backstage antics as a lost Mohmet stumbles in on two lovers in *Mohmet Asks for Help from the Wrong People at the Clinton Fundraiser*. Depicted from the rear, a radiant, turbaned Mohmet approaches Sputnik, the Memphis wrestler, and his paramour lounging on a raised round platform. Through the doorway, there's a glimpse of the fundraising event at which the artist—now cast as a lounge singer—belts out a song for the Clintons. While void of the convention of small lines emanating from the center, the orange dais on which the men lay becomes a mirror image of Mohmet's yellow halo, confounding the matter of holiness. Is Sputnik kneeling before Mohmet ready to repent, or just caught in the act? Is Mohmet approaching the altar of desire, or simply looking to find his way? Ulivo's stories are always in flux. According to notes on an early sketch for this piece, rock and roller “Little Richard shows Mohmet pornography.” Over time, the Little Richard character morphed into alt rocker Perry Farrell and later Sputnik (still, of course, with a porno mag). Again, confounding holiness by underscoring the fickleness of celebrity.

*What if a spy killed General Lee?  
And he's disguised as a geisha?*

An encapsulated dramatization of war itself, *Spy Posing as Geisha Murdering Gen. Lee in a Brothel 1862!* has a comparatively linear narrative for Ulivo. At the center of the painting, the spy strangles the general having recently pulled him off the prostitute. The general reaches for his missing sword, still naked and semi-erect. The guise of the geisha, an exoticized sexual fantasy figure, grants the spy access to General Lee and aligns him with the exploited characters of the prostitute and Lee's horse. However, Ulivo's rendering complicates a banal critique of the white male on his day of reckoning at the hands of objectified culture, race and species. Quiet, beyond the eye of the storm, the prostitute lays on a bare mattress legs still open, labia and mouth red against her dark skin—more like a modern centerfold than a damsel in distress. Perhaps submissively, or perhaps voyeuristically enjoying the general's demise, she and Lee's docile eyed horse observe the scene. The brightly colored floor lifts and pushes the struggling figures out of the picture plane while Ulivo convincingly uses scale and perspective to establish the prostitute's and horse's distance from the situation.

Forced into unlikely being, Ulivo's paintings function in the subliminal space between fantasy and reality largely because, as Ulivo says, “My imagination far exceeds my understanding of the subject.” As such, his paintings are sincerely absurd, each embodying a layered set of contradictions: grand ideas on a small scale, seduction vs. repulsion, finely crafted yet awkwardly composed. Through his tongue-in-cheek narratives, Ulivo consistently picks at our collective scabs while affectionately exposing the inanity of contemporary life with the persistent question, “Yeah, but what if...?” ■

Sarah Cunningham, *Atkinson Gallery Director*  
January 2013



■ *Spy Posing As Geisha Murdering Gen. Lee In A Brothel 1862!*, 27" x 20", egg tempera on panel, 2012



■ *Fondue Ghost Cat  
Massacre, Waltham,  
Mass., 11" x 11.5", egg  
tempera on panel, 2013*



■ *Lars Hansen Midnight  
Sun Ghost Cat Murder  
Mystery!, 13" x 9.5",  
egg tempera on panel,  
2013*



■ *Elder Sputnik Visited By Ghosts Of Christmas, 27" x 22", egg tempera on panel, 2013*

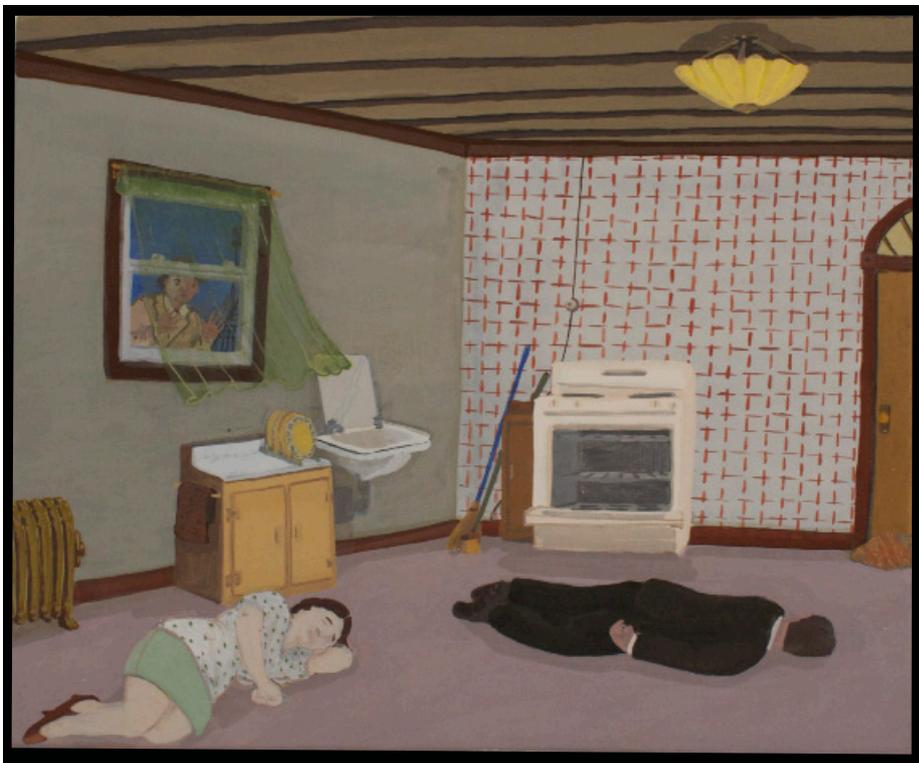
## ARTIST *Statement*

**L**ittle men dream big. It is the discrepancy between their dreams and their reality that drive them to be creative. I know this to be true. Curious intellect, hearty enthusiasm and lack of firsthand experience are my recipe for conjuring up a fertile imaginary existence.

A majestic spirit of adventure looms over my work. I am a “would-be adventurer” that is, I would be if not for the daring and physical exertion required. Instead, I am a top-notch enthusiast. My treatment of history, adventure and exploration has more empathetic humor and awe rather than drama or conquest. In any particular painting one might find wolfmen, archeologists, ghosts, explorers, or cowboys commingling in a primal wood, a medieval cathedral, at sea, or on stage. The worlds they inhabit are hardly naturalistic settings. They are more like overzealous backdrops for an unknown Puccini opera. Through force of will, these men—my surrogates—humbly cultivate their painted landscape and labor to form the essential relationships of their illusory world. We are working together.

Giving flesh to fantasy is what drives my creative process. I am an advocate for the possibility of complex visual narrative in contemporary art, striving for vitality and believability in each painting no matter how improbable the narrative. As the great Orson Wells said, “To work, a story doesn’t have to be real—it has to be true”. ■

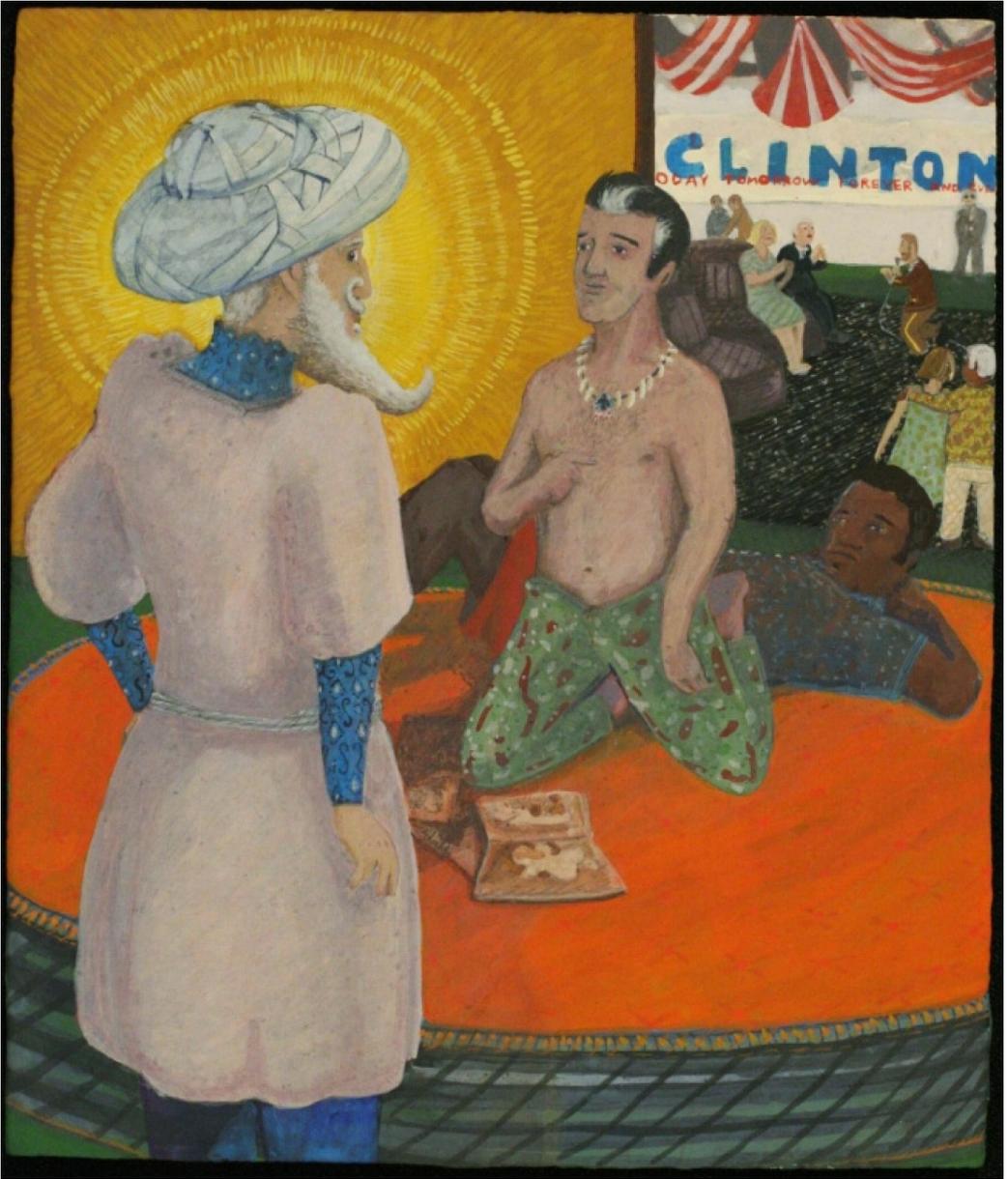
Christopher Ulivo  
January 2013



■ *Private Eye Uncovers Double Suicide*, 15.5" x 17", egg tempera on panel, 2011



 *The Elders Plot To Destroy The Marvelous Unity Of Black And White Egypt*, 18" x 12", egg tempera on panel, 2013



■ *Mohmet Asks For Help From The Wrong People At The Clinton Fundraiser, 11.5" x 9", egg tempera on panel, 2013*

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