

## Dewey Crumpler: *Painting Is an Act of Spiritual Aggression*

By Jonathan Goodman

Dewey Crumpler's excellent show at Derek Eller Gallery comprises many paintings given to his compelling mixture of imagery: quotations of major modernist art, groups of faceless figures in gray hoodies, and science-fiction designs or templates that skew toward something approaching an otherworldly realm. This unearthly feeling coexists in an uneasy but productive tension with culture. Crumpler, who was born in 1949 in Arkansas, started his career in the Bay Area in the 1960s. Since 1989, he has been teaching in the painting department of the San Francisco Art Institute. This show, his first solo exhibition in New York City, presents a body of work that effectively merges science-fiction design with major paintings in Western art history and the social realities of African-American culture.

Crumpler's *20th Century Fountain* (2021) exemplifies the artist's particular amalgam of twentieth-century art historical references, abstract patterning, and allusions to Black life. In the bottom right, we find the artist's ubiquitous hoodie form—a figure that combines references to African-American history and culture with a subversive cosmic perspective. The background is filled with Crumpler's copy of two well-known works of art: Mondrian's iconic imagery of colored rectangles outlined in black against a white background is partially quoted, along with a partial version of Matisse's great work *The Dance* (1910). In the center of the composition are three pedestals supporting objects; the middle pedestal presents Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), another major work of art from the last century. On the right, the hooded figure regards the art before him, while to the left, and on the floor, yellow-green oval patterns embellish the areas they cover. *20th Century Fountain* pays homage to important artworks of the twentieth century, but it also introduces, in the hooded onlooker, the prospect of a new audience for such art. As an homage, the painting works well, but the imagery is just as concerned with the future as the past.



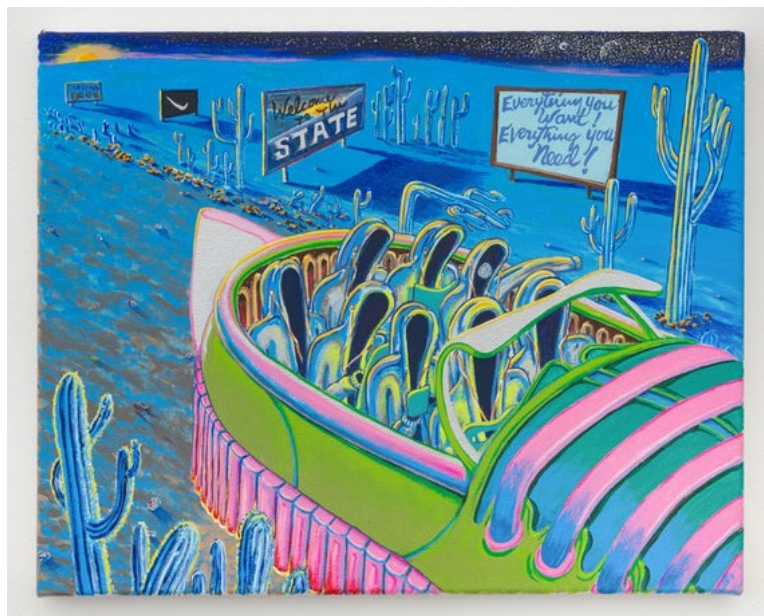
Dewey Crumpler, *20th Century Fountain*, 2021. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy Derek Eller, New York.

ON VIEW

**Derek Eller Gallery**

March 17 – April 23, 2022

New York



Dewey Crumpler, *Sundown*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy Derek Eller, New York.

In *Sundown* (2020), a group of faceless gray hoodies sit in a candy pink and lime green boat that takes up most of the picture. The river the boat floats on, the cacti on its banks, and the expanse of desert extended above the boat are mostly a luminous blue. Commercial signs—the Nike swoosh and a billboard displaying the text “Everything you want! Everything You Need!”—are interspersed among the cacti. Crumpler’s pointed reference to American materialism in this work is clear. In the upper left of the painting, the last moments of a sunset are indicated by the sun’s thin yellow curve. Is this the good life promised us? If so, it appears in a desert whose sterility would argue otherwise. Crumpler often works with this kind of allegory, his vision a corrective to continuing prejudice, the allure of material goods, and even the difficulty of negotiating the artistic past as a painter.



Dewey Crumpler, *Fitting*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 inches.  
Courtesy Derek Eller, New York.

The painting *Fitting* (2021) shows a faceless figure in a white Ku Klux Klan robe being measured by two hoodies with long tapes. We know the figure is white by the color of his hands. On the left, differently colored robes are hung on a rack. Above, on the wall, we find a painting that includes Jasper Johns’s Savarin tin of coffee with stems of brushes. Viewers may be hard-put to assign particular meanings to the details of this painting within a painting; it is hard to identify the work. But who could miss Crumpler’s caustic and absurdist commentary on historical racism as they take in the scene of hoodies measuring a Klan member for yet another racist gown? Again and again, Crumpler vividly and memorably illustrates prejudicial attitudes by embedding them in a matrix of allusions ranging from great art of the past to futuristic extraterrestrial patterning. The results, both troubling and humorous, are visionary treatments of our time.

#### Contributor

**Jonathan Goodman**

Jonathan Goodman is an art writer and poet who focuses on modern and contemporary art.