

**NANDO ALVAREZ-PEREZ**

**SIGNS of AUTUMN**

# Harvesting Data: American Hegemony and the Course of Empire

The tautological character of the spectacle stems from the fact that its means and ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the globe, endlessly basking in its own glory.  
— Guy Debord,  
*Society of the Spectacle*

Kelsey Sucena

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“Harvesting Data: American Hegemony and  
the Course of Empire” by Kelsey Sucena has  
been excerpted from the multi-part essay  
“\*\*NAME OF LONGER PIECE” (June 2023).

All photos courtesy of the artist  
and Rivalry Projects, Buffalo, NY

RIVALRY PROJECTS  
is a commercial art gallery  
and arts production space  
located in Buffalo’s historic  
Allentown neighborhood  
that focuses on exhibiting  
emerging, mid-career, and  
underrepresented artists  
working in all media.



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My friend and colleague Nando Alvarez-Perez and I light up on the rickety structure that my landlord insists qualifies as a proper porch. As he does, the delicate orange cherry of our bowl glows across his face. His brow is furrowed with what I imagine must be a poignant observation. I listen closely, eager to hear what he has to say. We’ve been ranting about photobooks, Instagram, and Walter Benjamin for an hour now and, as usual, I’m having trouble keeping up. The long trail of our stoned conversation feels schizophrenic, recalling the chaotic associations of our own Twitter feeds.

We talk of conspiracy. Of Jeffrey Epstein and Jeff Koons. He whips out a copy of *Space Relations* by Donald Barr, father of former U.S. Attorney General William Barr, and explains its pedophilic plot before revealing its author’s connection to Epstein<sup>1</sup>. *This shit will drive you crazy if you’re not careful.*

1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/12/nyregion/jeffrey-epstein-dalton-teacher.html>

## SIGNS of AUTUMN



PD082622B (2023)  
UV print on aluminum, steel artist frame, hardware  
45 × 30"

## Harvesting Data: American Hegemony and the Course of Empire

Kelsey Sucena

Flight to safety, flight to liquidity, flight to  
quality. The flight has begun; this much is true.  
But we are not adrift on the tides of investor risk  
preferences; we are on the seas of history,  
between the great swells of empire.  
—Joshua Clover, *Sign of Autumn*

I have this theory that you can learn a lot about a place by rummaging through its thrift store bookshelves. Around me, you'll find a lot of Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck books, some old Disney tapes, and manuals for obsolete versions of Photoshop. Nando shows me his collection, appropriated, composed, and photographed in Syracuse, one of many New York hinterlands ravaged by the neo-liberal economic reconfigurations of the late twentieth century.

The materials in the resulting compositions serve as a reminder of the permeability of *Spectacle*. Within them, colorful cartoon characters escape the celluloid of their earliest iterations, taking form as molded petroleum plastic, delicately painted offshore some decades prior, and rendered again as photograph by a digital light sensor. Each piece is made weightless by Nando's lens, fluttering across a spaceless plain of rust, chain, wood, computer board, glass, cardboard, and plastic. Each material, I am told, with its own specific origin story relating to his own Hinterland, Buffalo, and its deindustrialization.

## SIGNS of AUTUMN

Coins and dollar bills join them as though suspended in two dimensions. Plastic calves, puzzles, and presidents adorn each as omens. They float beside books on theory, history, politics, and super-imperialism, alongside VHS tapes serving as a reminder of the inevitability of obsolescence. *Independence Day* and *Armageddon* reflect a different time in Hollywood history while reminding us of the looming threat of disaster or apocalypse which, by virtue of the imagined ingenuity of fictional characters, might be staved off if only with a bit of gruff American leadership. Only one tape within Nando's compositions, *Titanic*, serves as a reminder of that hubristic narrative framework. But even there the inevitable tragedy of death is rendered romantic as, in the end, the American slips delicately below the waves.

Harvesting Data: American Hegemony and the Course of Empire



PD082522A (2023)

UV print on aluminum, steel artist frame, hardware

45 × 30"



History is narrative. It is largely defined by the domination of different powers over pockets of discourse which extend across space and time. Since the advent of Capitalism, discourse has been dominated by a parade of European powers and all of the accompanying ideology (white supremacy, patriarchy, social Darwinism, et al) that justifies each new configuration. Empires emerge when powers manage to centralize the discourse around them through legal, financial, material, military, and cultural means. Capitalism then has always been an imperial system, seeking to concentrate power around oligarchies of production and distribution. Today America stands as the latest imperial successor, proudly policing the course of world affairs. At least this is what I, and I suspect many others, were raised to believe.

History tells us that the life of empires is usually somewhat brief. Most empires far precede their global domination and necessarily come with baggage that eventually bogs them down. Empires that fail to shed that baggage, and which fail to manage the perpetual extension of their reach (all Empires eventually) then witness the succession of power. The passing of the hot potato of global immiseration. Where immiseration reaches those unaccustomed to it, those at various imperial cores, libidinal energies of frustration and shame metastasize into fascisms of various stripes. The resulting political tension tends to tear apart that thin veneer of stability upon which the empire comes to rely, rendering them naked and useless in the eyes of global capitalism.

I can't help but read the repetition of history into our moment, to consider the course of recent American political discourse as a symptom of that growing cancer of imperial shame. In his essay "Autumn of the Empire<sup>2</sup>," professor Joshua Clover puts forth a convincing treatise on the possibility, arriving at the conclusion that American power has been waning since the 1970s and that much of what we observe as its day-to-day discourse flows directly from this point.

...the American experience is grand, outsized, but not entirely novel. Industrial growth is bound to undo itself as a profit center, to be replaced by a regime of finance; this regime's profit mechanism is always the bubble and its total crisis inescapable; and this is how empires end... We live in an epoch in which the great question is how to bid farewell to the U.S.-centered empire, and what the transition to another global arrangement might look like.

To consider the question of waning U.S. Imperial hegemony is to evoke the obvious: Wars lost in Vietnam and the Middle East. The offshoring of labor and the collapse of union participation. Compounding infrastructural and environmental crisis. Political stagnation and gerontocratic rule<sup>3</sup>. Inflation. Ideological bankruptcy. The rapid cannibalization of culture within a steady stream of sequels, reboots, prequels, and the like. 9/11. "Insurrection." Conspiracy. Cancer. Mass shootings.

2 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/autumn-of-the-empire/>

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/feb/19/us-congress-presidency-gerontocracy>

Opioid epidemics. Privatization. Intellectual stagnation. Unlike past transitional moments, however, this one is muddied by the emergence of an instantaneous global market in the form of the Internet. What comes next is uncertain at best.

In America, there has been great investment in the idea that digital modalities and the financialized economy that they are accompanying represent the future of production and not, as Clover suggests, a sign of decline. There are no new lands to conquer. No unknown shores upon which to export further immiseration. No planets ripe for colonization, and no nations left unaware of the implications of our knock on their front door. There must be other ways of compromising with the forces of nature and history, right?

Perhaps, through the manipulation of new digital platforms, capital can be generated from thin air. Perhaps, through algorithmic surveillance and data collection, sufficient information may be harvested to open up new investment possibilities altogether. Or perhaps we could create new lands via the bait-and-switch of simulation.

There have been moments in recent history where this arrangement showed promise but by now it's becoming clear to most that there may be nowhere to go. Here we are left with an endless parade of new and supposedly revolutionary technologies (crypto, augmented and virtual reality, NFTs, AI) which seek not to revolutionize, but to replace parts of the world. To subvert its gravity so as to render all of its material infinitely interchangeable

and lighter than air. People, commodities, flows of information, and goods all the same.

This present configuration is considered by theorist and shitposter McKenzie Wark in her inflammatory text *Capital is Dead: Is this Something Worse*<sup>4</sup>. There, Wark proposes a thought experiment in asking us to consider the possibility that the economy we're now operating under may no longer be properly referred to as "Capitalism," but that it might instead be sufficiently different from capitalism as to warrant a new name. Her proposed term "Vectorism" reflects a profound shift from 'the means of production' as the seat of power, to 'vectors of distribution.' This arrangement makes itself evident in everything from Amazon (with its complex networks of shipping), Disney (with its platforms and its growing catalog of intellectual properties), Social Media platforms (with their virtual monopolies online information flows), and the financial market (moving money across spreadsheets from one investment to the next).

Movement, then, becomes the main preoccupation of the contemporary Vectoralist. How goods and information flow, why goods and information flow, and through whom goods and information flow are the questions which, in her model of economy, determine how, why, and with whom real power tends to accumulate. Though Wark stops short of declaring victory, insisting on her argument as a thought experiment and not as prophecy, it's hard not to read her conclusion against Clover's.

4 [https://monoskop.org/images/5/5e/Wark\\_McKenzie\\_Capital\\_Is\\_Dead\\_Is\\_This\\_Something\\_Worse\\_2019.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/5/5e/Wark_McKenzie_Capital_Is_Dead_Is_This_Something_Worse_2019.pdf)

To return to Clover's essay for a moment, in contending with Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century*<sup>5</sup>, he writes:

In [Arrighi's] telling, there have been four "cycles of accumulation," each with its own imperial leader. In each period of something more than 100 years, a leading nation is able to organize the larger sphere toward its own interests — sometimes via force, but in main because it serves the interests of other states and enterprises to align themselves with the leader, a kind of influence known variously as hegemony, soft power, or neo-imperialism.

The four "long centuries" have been led by Genoa, the Dutch, the British, and the United States. Some things about this grouping are surprising, including the earliest: We are more used to recalling the glory of Venice and Florence than we are the Ligurian republic of shipbuilders. Other commonalities are plain enough, such as the reminder that the British East and West Indian Companies were cover versions of the Dutch innovation.

Most striking and most dramatic is the discovery that each of these long centuries has itself been divided into three phases, choreographically consistent: a merchant phase based on trade, followed by a phase of industrial expansion, and finally a period of financialization, in which economic vitality moves to the banking sector. It is a febrile vitality indeed, burning hot and fading away; the shift to finance is always, in Braudel's lovely phrase, "a sign of autumn." And when the finance era runs its course, so does the empire.

Clover's conclusion is firm and convincing. As an American, pursued through life from kindergarten to College by the eternal specter of austerity, I find myself convinced. After all, what comes up must go down. Clover's conclusion, however, may be in tension with Wark's who seems more or less convinced of the (very bad but undeniable) trajectory of the American (global?) economy. Questions that emerge from this imagined conversation of mine might be "Is it really fair to assume that the succession of American Hegemony will take the form of previous imperial successions?", "Is Vectorialism sufficiently powerful to have toppled old Capitalist orders?" and/or, "Might some synthesis between these competing visions of our moment, and our future, be drawn out here?"

To his credit, Clover acknowledges the messiness of this moment, and its truly unpredictable course:

This has always been the true significance of the epic. It tells the story of transformation between capitals; the gods play the part of destiny, the unseen inner logic of the world-system, into which the hero is tossed in need of a home. However, this takes on a different substance in an epoch when we have reached the limits of the globe, when there is no unfound Rome on which to found a new empire, and the familiar dynamic has run its course. We fancy ourselves done with the gods; are we equally as free from the thrall of destiny, from a systemic dynamic that remains alien to us? And is this not what we should be debating, rather than the merits of management styles for the old capital?

5 <http://www.newconsensus.org/MarxInAmerica/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/G-Arrighi-The-Long-Twentieth-Century-Intro-and-chap-1.pdf>

If American hegemony is in recession (and I am convinced that it has been for most of my life) then how might this be reflected in art? Since the end of the last World War, the coronation of global Americanism, the market for art and culture has operated largely by the logic of American consumerism.

Within this arrangement, paintings serve first and foremost as stock bought and sold as classy investments, symbols of taste to be liquidated when the time is right. But what happens to art under these conditions, and how should the artist respond?



## SIGNS of AUTUMN



Hard Times Create Strong Men. Digital image.

To evoke recognition of this succession, the end of U.S. hegemony, is to evoke something like the *Hard Times Create Strong Men*<sup>6</sup> meme most often associated with fascist shitposters, though I sometimes find it parodied by friends on trans\* Tumblr. This may be because, as I've mentioned, fascism is a reactionary response to the shame and libidinal frustration felt by those within immiserated imperial cores. Wrong though the fascists are about its origins and destiny, fascists do *react* to *something*. It is natural for the fascist to assume that his Empire is in recession and to seek its restoration, stupid, misguided, suicidal, and genocidal as the sentiment is.

6 <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/hard-times-create-strong-men>



Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Arcadian or Pastoral State* (1834)

To evoke the meme is also to evoke art history, as contained within the original meme are the second and third paintings within early American painter Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire* series. There, the Hudson River artist taps into the lofty Americanism of his moment to imagine the classical destiny of the still-young state. Long before America's century, Cole acts something like a fascist himself<sup>7</sup>, imagining the country as *The Arcadian State*, that is, as the noble but tamed "wilderness" beyond the hedonistic boundaries of Britain. For many early European Americans, the country stood as a haven for what they most admired about the British Imperial system, free of its bureaucratic baggage. America's steady encroachment on the vast but vulnerable territories of North America meant that while the British Empire was approaching the final phases of expansion, America was only just beginning its own. "Purified" by their exposure to what was deemed "wilderness", the Americans were optimistic about their country's future.

7 Though I understand this may be an unfair mischaracterization.

## SIGNS of AUTUMN



Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Destruction* (1836)

*The Course of Empire* series isn't Coles' most important work, though it is certainly some of his most ambitious. Cole, who helped to establish an American artistic canon, inserted within his work the themes of transcendence, nature, wilderness, and harmony that would come as a primary foundational logic within the genres of American painting and photography. This ideology is still pervasive in American art, reproduced as kitsch at almost every local art fair.

I can't help but think of the third painting in the series, *Destruction*, when looking at one of Nando's compositions. In one a collage of second-hand prints see George Washington's hair on fire, the burning of Rome, receding beneath the idealized visage of the slaveowning freedom fighter. It's a little nod to our moment, Nando's reaction to the ongoing succession rendered thoughtfully (and schizophrenically) through the deployment of irony and humor.



PD081222B (2023)

UV print on aluminum, steel artist frame  
19 × 12 3/4"

Artists are largely a reactionary class. We wield very little power and find ourselves, more often than not, chasing the markets, trends, and fads that we hope might sell. The most professional among us harbor high hopes for the power of our processes, imagining a kind of metaphysical magic that justifies what we do. At our best, however, we may be thought of as jesters or prophets, privileged to see and to report upon what others cannot because we are already not taken very seriously.

I scan Nando's visions, these feverish not-so-collages rendered in hyper-definition as print upon metal plate, and feel myself sinking in recognition of their message. It's both funny and dark. Thoughtful, alarming, and obvious (though Americans hate to admit it). I spot the Kodak clock and chuckle. How meta: an image of a timepiece marked by a logo evoking a dying company known for timeless Americanistic image production. Its collapse left Rochester to a similar fate as Syracuse. I make note of the clock's missing hands. Timeless, eternal, and useless as such. It reminds me of myself, and my own American anachronisms. ☹