

## Alexander Tovborg

*altars of humanity* Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York 12 October – 12 November  
*the symbol has resurrected* Blum & Poe, New York 15 September – 28 October

Of late, many artists and critics have decried the toxic effects of greed on contemporary art and, more cogently, society. Few, however, have broached this fraught subject with the hallucinatory vision, iconographic complexity and references to tradition-rooted morality that Alexander Tovborg develops in these complementary shows: together they form an exegesis on Mammon – the New Testament incarnation of venality that Jesus opposes to clarity of vision and spirit (Matthew 6:19–24) – and its long march through history.

At Nicelle Beauchene, this exploration plays out across a five-panel allegorical painting, *ALTARS OF HUMANITY (the symbol has resurrected) the worship of mammon* (2016–17). Its deeply coded imagery includes figures of dinosaurs, Noah's Ark, satellites, planes, the ouroboros, a map of Pangaea, the EU flag and two clock faces set at 11:58 (which suggest a schematic, if obvious, end of days revelation). Each segment is divided into rectangular units across which patterns repeat, as in Mayan reliefs. Forms are composed

of networks of parallel and concentric lines rendered in luminous colours painted on felt and collaged onto wood. Their effect reinforces a sense of symbolic structure and hallucinatory overload meant, it seems, to surpass literal understanding, or perhaps to induce a spiritual clarity of sight as suggested by the biblical reference, though both goals remain unfulfilled.

Equally complex, the works at Blum & Poe, altars composed of a central panel paired with two drawings, are titled after avatars of Mammon, such as *MAMMON (the symbol has resurrected) neutral angel, atlantis & pregnant capitalist* (2017). These also include, according to other works' titles, 'hérnan cortés', 'the 1%' and 'president elect'. Specific combinations of circles and signs represent most of these evils, though sometimes literalism creeps in: Trump's face is recognisable in the shape of a grotesque, and the 'pregnant capitalist' is represented by a serpent with trucks and ships in its belly. Here again, the repetition of forms reflects a dizzyingly complex cosmology, but the paintings seem stiff. Only the drawings

exude a luminosity that hints at something beyond a highly developed schematic system.

Tovborg's work seems akin to the wide-ranging exploration of styles in contemporary figuration that, in its sum, risks devolving into decorative excess. More historical precedents might include Kandinsky, Hilma af Klint and the visionary Argentine Xul Solar, all of whom sought to link the quotidian with the universal. But his closest parallels might be Matthew Ritchie and Matthew Barney, for their articulations of highly developed, self-referential iconographies. That his five-panel painting contains references to past work as well as portraits that meld his countenance with Mammon's adds self-critique to his exegesis. Tovborg's obsession seems sincere, nor is it preachy, refreshing at a time when much on the subject seems tendentiously theoretical and moralistic. But his iconography, in its complexity, remains obtuse and adds little to an understanding of, or exit from, human enslavement to Mammon. *Joshua Mack*



*ALTARS OF HUMANITY (the symbol has resurrected) the worship of mammon*, 2016–17, mixed media, 300 × 1000 × 25 cm.  
Courtesy the artist, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York, and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, New York & Tokyo