

## OFF PARADISE

Robert Hawkins, *Dream Mine*

June 7 — August 7, 2023

Opening Wednesday, June 7, 4-8pm



Off Paradise is pleased to present *Dream Mine*, a solo exhibition debuting new and historical work by Robert Hawkins.

### The Golden Glow in the West

*"... in much the same way as the end of the Bible transforms all its contents, our sense of, or need for, an ending transforms our lives between the tick of birth and the tock of death, and stories simulate this transformation but must not do so too simply."*

— Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*

The state of Utah, almost eighty-five thousand square miles, sits just west of center on 19<sup>th</sup> century maps showing what was once known as the Great American Desert.

In 1540, during Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's fruitless expedition to find the legendary cities of gold known as Cíbola, Spanish troops pass through the area. Three centuries later, in 1849, the Mormon Church, which has colonized the land around the Great Salt Lake Valley, raises an unsuccessful petition to create the State of Deseret, an immense theocratic republic that would have encompassed parts of present-day Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon and California. In 1894, a Mormon bishop named John Hyrum Koyle dreams that the Angel Moroni has transported him to a forgotten mine on a Utah hillside and revealed to him caverns bursting with golden treasure,

instructing him to begin work to reopen the mine in order to provide the church, during end times, with financial security. In 1909, Koyle issues stock in the mine, available for a dollar a share.

In 1947, Jack Kerouac drives across the Utah-Colorado state line and, as he recounts later in *On the Road*, sees “God in the sky in the form of huge gold sunburning clouds above the desert that seemed to point a finger at me and say, ‘Pass here and go on, you’re on the road to heaven.’ ” In 1951, the artist Robert Hawkins is born to Mormon forebears in Sunnyvale, California. In 1962, Herk Harvey films the cult psychological classic *Carnival of Souls* inside the Moorish Revival folly known as the Saltair Pavilion resort, abandoned and crumbling along the shores of the Great Salt Lake. In 1978, after making paintings in Yosemite National Park, Hawkins moves to New York City and takes up residence in the downtown punk avant-garde. In 2022, upon the death of his mother, Faye, Hawkins comes into possession of a number of the shares that his grandfather purchased in Koyle’s mine, which remains incorporated to this day, lying dormant at the foot of the Wasatch Mountain Range.

“It’s funny,” says Hawkins, “because when I was a teenager, I actually painted a pretty view of the Wasatch Mountains—it was the view from my grandparents’ home—and the painting hung in their home for many years and when they died I got it back and I redid the mountains as an erupting volcano. Everyone in my family was furious with me because I had supposedly desecrated a family heirloom.”

Since he began painting in the 1970s, Hawkins’ enduring subject has been, as he describes it, “the things you can’t see in real life that you’d really like to see—ghosts, cavemen, monsters, mythical creatures, prehistorical forests, wax museums on fire. And when I paint them it makes me feel really good—it makes me feel like a god.”

When he began a new series in his studio outside London last year based on Koyle’s “Relief Mine,” his primary impetus, he says, was the need to scratch a formal itch. “I had the color gold on my mind—it’s really hard to find a good reason to use lots of yellow in paintings. Sunsets, lava and gold are basically the only three things you use gold for. These paintings are mostly about paint, about painting. It’s hard to dazzle anybody with painting ability these days, let’s be honest. So I wanted the subject to be dazzling. Gold! Treasure! Oooh! I want you to see it and spin around in the room.”

But the drive behind the work, which grew into an obsession, extended ineluctably to family history, American history and the history of the West in particular. “I’ve made paintings over the years about endless wealth, jewels, thrones, things inspired by the *Arabian Nights*, other such tales. In this case, here was a tale from my own life. I’d known about this mine since I was a child, for as long as I can remember. I didn’t believe in it, of course. I thought it was just as much hoo-ha as the rest of the church. But the story had always fascinated me. In the studio, it got me thinking about the Hudson River School, about how all those fantastical, over-the-top, dreamy paintings of the West had enticed people to get in their wagons to follow an image, a vision. And not only did they never find that vision. They ended up eating each other in the Donner Pass! The story of the Relief Mine isn’t dissimilar—it’s also a chase after a vision. But there’s something almost sweet about it. The fact that there are still people who believe the mine will someday reveal treasures untold, who keep it maintained, who go to the shareholders’ meetings, who keep buying the shares, is a testament to some kind of optimism ... a crazy optimism ... come to think of it, a little like the crazy optimism of buying art.”

— Randy Kennedy





*In the '30s, my Grandpa bought stock in a mine, on a mountainside in Salem, Utah. He bought the shares from a fellow Mormon who had a vision of a mine with nine chambers, each filled with all the riches in the world, which would be opened when the world was teetering on the point of collapse, and these riches would be enough to put the whole planet right again. That day would be recognized by a certain headline appearing in the papers, then the digging could begin. The headline had been revealed to the guy who was selling the stock. The guy died a long time ago, so the headline, if it ever finally appeared, went unnoticed, and the mine still sits on the side of the mountain, with a facade that resembles a white marble deco mausoleum, but is just stucco and timber, with nothing inside it, no mine, just abandoned junk. (I went there and checked it out.) But right behind the dirt all these visions of salvation still lie, they say. My Mom's still got the stock certificate, and she has gone to a few of the annual stockholders' meetings. A bunch of cult polygamists in bib overalls, apparently.*

— Robert Hawkins

**Robert Hawkins** (b. 1951, Sunnyvale, California) is a fabled figure of the 1980s and early 1990s East Village art and punk scene, known for a lyrically realistic surrealism that blends humor with biting social commentary and a devious sense of the absurd. Working in a style that been called "pseudo-realism," mixing high and low influences with wry abandon, Hawkins has been an underground hero in the art world since the 1970s, his work collected by fellow artists and writers including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Glenn O'Brien, and Jim Jarmusch. Among Hawkins' first exhibitions was "Lower Manhattan Drawing Show," a group exhibition curated by Keith Haring at 77 White Street Gallery above the Mudd Club, in 1981. More recently, Hawkins's work was included in "Somewhere Downtown: Art in 1980s New York," curated by Carlo McCormick and Peter Eleey at UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2022-23), as well as well as in "NOTHING OF THE MONTH CLUB," an exhibition under the sign of Ray Johnson, curated by Randy Kennedy and Natacha Polaert at Off Paradise (2021). After many years in New York, Hawkins now lives and works in London.

**Off Paradise** is a gallery located on Walker Street founded by Natacha Polaert in the fall of 2019. The name evokes the old neighborhood of Five Points, at the center of which was a small, triangular park, full of hopes and grime, called Paradise Square. It also invokes Paradise Alley, the artists' and poets' colony on the then-godforsaken corner of Avenue A and East 11th Street that is referenced in Jack Kerouac's novel *The Subterraneans*. Off Paradise is a fictional place, right off Paradise, adjacent to it, but not exactly it.

