

Gingerly open the signed and numbered, limited-edition portfolio of prints that accompanies “New Religions,” John Nelson’s new show ... and try resisting the urge to smile at the first image: a big pair of tighty-whities.

As with Nelson’s previous work, his paintings grab the viewer with deceptively simple icons – body parts, commonplace objects like a coffee mug or a gun – and then demand closer attention with layers of meaning, using subtle, almost subconscious placement of words.

In the case of the men’s underpants, which reference to lyrics of Grandmaster Flash’s “White Lines” with repeating script imprinted on them (“rang dang dingity dang adang”), two statements turn the brief encounter into something more intriguing, maybe even scandalous, “Promise keeper,” all in caps, fades into an inky black at the top of the image, while “Restraining Order” primly marks the bottom.

Unpredictably, this is paired with “Verge”, a short text about Mother Earth making a mistake with Father Sky. “New Religions,” indeed.

Exploring different religious myths and traditions, Nelson collaborated with literary couple Eric Susser and Deborah Sussman Susser to create a book full of new deities, martyrs and mythological heroes. The illuminated works of William Blake served as an inspiration.

But neither images nor prose tells the whole story ... Eight more pairings of text and symbol complete the series, each distinguished by its own eloquent irony. “There’s an underlying truth to good irony” says Nelson.

Susser and Nelson talk about collaborating again, perhaps on a large scale installation ... The working title? “Sorry, No Art Today”.

Michele Laudig

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