

**ON VIEW: JANUARY 15 - MARCH 7, 2026**

**OPENING RECEPTION: THURSDAY, JANUARY 15, 6 - 8 PM**

## **GALLERY ONE**

### ***William Kent (1919 - 2012): Trust the People!***

**Ricco/Maresca is pleased to present *William Kent: Trust the People!* in collaboration with Damon Brandt.**

William Kent's unique slate prints, created in the 1960s, look as if they were made for this political moment as much as for their own time. Their fluorescent palettes, blunt slogans, and weaponized presidents stage a loud argument about image, power, and consent—who speaks, who is spoken for, and whose silence keeps the whole spectacle running. Set against commercial patterned fabrics, these works twist the cheerful surfaces of mid-century domestic life into a caustic theater of American empire, masculinity, and mass persuasion.

Working at the height of Pop, Kent shared the movement's appetite for mass-media icons and commercial graphics, but he side-stepped its cool detachment. His prints do not simply recycle advertising imagery; they bite. Washington, Kennedy, Johnson, and power brokers appear not as neutral symbols of leadership but as leering mascots for a militarized, profit-driven state. The stars and stripes, campaign bunting, and greeting-card flourishes that frame them feel simultaneously festive and funereal, as if democracy were being sold back to its citizens as a novelty product whose warranty has quietly expired.

Where Pop art often flirted with ambiguity (was it critique, celebration, or both?), Kent makes his opposition unmistakable. His matrices are salvaged classroom blackboard slates, carved in reverse over weeks or months, then pressed onto dress and bedsheet fabrics. Several of the works in this exhibition come from a group he called the "Gravestone Series," in which slogans such as "END YOUR SILENCE" and "BALLS" are housed in formats borrowed from colonial New England headstones, complete with winged skulls, scrolls, and ropes of ornament. In these works, language appears as epitaph and accusation at once, as if each print were a grave marker for a life cut short by war—or for a citizen who has given up the responsibility to speak.

Kent's figures are often performing for us, or perhaps for an unseen camera: hands flourish, mouths open, gestures freeze mid-speech. A patriotic hostess hoists her missile like a parade float, her body posed somewhere between sales pitch and victory march. Politicians gripping microphones or bouquets of rockets appear in rigid profile, their features simplified to masks, their torsos swallowed by expanses of flat, saturated color. A grinning Harry Truman, framed by bombs and colonial motifs, is paired with the chilling sentence "I never lost a night's sleep," a line attributed not to Truman but to the pilot of the Enola Gay, whose bomb helped end the Second World War.

Throughout these works, Kent returns to the question of voice. Some works quote politicians whose bravado reads as chilling in retrospect; others speak in imperative verbs: "TRUST," "SMILE," "DO," "END." Many of the figures are shown mid-utterance, yet their mouths are little more than gaps in a black silhouette. In several compositions, he places plain stenciled text at the heart of an ornamental frame, as if language were the relic on display and the body merely the apparatus that delivers it.

Nowhere is this more pointed than in "Who Am I That I Should Have a Mouth," which Kent conceived as his own gravestone 46 years before his death. Here, a self-portrait of the artist holding a Coke bottle is crowned with the circular colonial motto "When this you see remember me," surrounding his disarming question about his right to speak at all. The work folds together self-doubt and self-memorialization, suggesting that any act of political speech must navigate humility, ego, and complicity. The slates themselves, seen alongside their printed counterparts, read like dark memorial stelae packed with backward lettering and shallow relief: tools meant to transfer, but also monuments in waiting.

*Trust the Peeple!* concentrates on Kent's mid- to late-1960s production, when populist anger and graphic invention were most tightly fused. Instead of narrating a tidy history of the decade, the exhibition offers a chorus of warning signs, each phrased as a joke, a dare, or a darkly comic blessing. It invites viewers to read across works: to track how the same faces reappear in different guises, how ornament is weaponized, how patriotic symbols double as instruments of control, and how cartoon monkeys and smiling children's-book mascots haunt the margins of supposedly serious political speech.

The show also asks what it means to "trust the people" in an era when "the people" is a slogan endlessly invoked and contested. Kent's misspelling cracks the phrase open, making room for both affection and skepticism—for the possibility that the "peeple" are at once the victims and the authors of the spectacle that surrounds them. His gravestone-prints insist that silence is never neutral; it, too, is inscribed somewhere, waiting to be read. Over half a century later, these works still pose uncomfortable questions: What forms of violence are we willing to decorate? What demands are smuggled into the language of gratitude, sympathy, and duty? When we are told to smile, to keep quiet, to do our part, whose interests are being served?

*Born in Kansas City in 1919 and based for most of his adult life in and around New Haven and rural Durham, Connecticut, William Kent came to art obliquely, training first in music before teaching himself to carve and print. He lived and worked largely outside the New York market system, building a dense, idiosyncratic practice in an old farmhouse. By the time of his death in 2012, he had produced hundreds of sculptures and some two thousand prints—a fiercely independent body of work that slowly made its way into major museum collections, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, the Chrysler Museum of Art, Yale University Art Gallery, and Princeton University.*

**Special thanks to the William Kent Art Foundation and Margaret Bodell.**