

BlackBook



MARC DENNIS' 'HONEY BUNNY' AT THE HASTED KRAEUTLER GALLERY GETS TO THE MEAT OF THE MATTER

By Rena Silverman December 3, 2011

There's only one day left to see Honey Bunny, which features the hyperrealist still lifes of painter Marc Dennis. Subjects include pistols, piles of pearls, leopard print cloth, Jeff Koons' platinum rabbit pendant, rows of frozen carcasses, heaps of Chilean sea bass, and other objects of consideration.

Until now, the exhibition's host, Hasted Kraeutler, represented photography exclusively. Marc Dennis is the gallery's first painter. And Marc Dennis is perfect as a photo gallery's first painter. It's not that Dennis' paintings might as well be photographs, it's that his paintings are better than photographs and detect the smallest amount of detail to which even the greatest macro lens would be immune. "The talent is clear," said Joseph Kraeutler, one of the gallery's owners.

It's hard to determine if Dennis has a bionic eye or a bionic brush. Dennis' paintings are so real, you can feel the slippery edge of his Koons bunnies, or the raw chill of the carcass' locker. Draggonlayer is not your typical side-table still life. Dennis painted a glass of water with ice, pearls, a bracelet, cupcakes, keys, wallet, a lighter, diamonds, and a handgun with the detailed typography of "Smith and Wesson", the largest manufacturer of handguns in the United States.

Dennis, who speaks the way Hemingway writes, only with a husky, Boston accent, referred to the moment after his first child's birth as inspiration for Draggonlayer. "Holding my little girl, I thought I am forever the dragon slayer. I'm forever going to have her back," he said. "It's all at once about being really powerful and really fragile. I thought a gun was the perfect metaphor."

Draggonlayer brings the still lifes of the Italian painter Caravaggio to mind.

Caravaggio, who was in his time dubbed as the "evil genius" by Carducho, was one of the most important painters of his time, having rejected his Mannerist predecessors. Caravaggio showed a remarkable attention to the details of light and shadow, as in *Magdalene (detail)* 1596-97, a still life comprised of Mary Magdalene's things: a jug of water, pearls, a pearl earring, necklaces, all against the patterned background floor.

Dennis paints with a similar precision, but a better ability to replicate shine. And he uses that to his advantage. Remember Jeff Koons' Rabbit from the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade? Before it was a balloon, it was a large stainless steel sculpture which Koons conceptualized in 1986. Twenty years later, Koons teamed up with Jewelry designer Stella McCartney to edition the Rabbit as a platinum pendant (you can learn all about this at the Museum of Arts and Designs in their current show, *Picasso to Koons: The Artist as Jeweler*).

Marc Dennis has put the tiny platinum Rabbit pendant in several of his paintings, including *Honey Bunny 2010* (the painting which inspired the title of the show); *I Love You - You Love Me, 2011*; and *Bedtime 2011*. "I believe deep down in humans love shiny objects," said Dennis. "There are shiny objects all throughout history. Platinum is the perfect platform," adding the irony that "Platinum is also found in weapons."

Another painting in the first room called *Tiny One*, features a small fluffy little dog poking his head out of the top left of the frame. The white ball of fluff is lying belly-up, as if begging for a rub. But, as you turn away from this painting, you might just realize you need a closer look. That dog is lying on a pile of raw meat. But, for Dennis who describes himself as "the guy who painted dead animals" at school, there is an interest in the forces behind life and death, "any kind of extreme dichotomy."

The meat worked into that no other," he said. Most of Dennis'

meat hangs in the gallery's second room, which Dennis calls "The Meat Locker." Here, we see the carrion cows of Sport 2011, Just Because, 2011, and others, which cause a chill in that sort archetypal-flesh-hanging-from-a-cold-metal-rack way.

Just as Dennis has "always been intrigued by meat," so too was the 20th century English painter Frances Bacon, who once said, "I've always been very moved by pictures about slaughterhouses and meat." Bacon went on to refer to the "extraordinary photographs...done of animals just being taken up before they were slaughtered; and the smell of death."

Bacon, who drew on a mixture of influences, from Rembrandt and Velázquez, to van Gogh and Picasso, painted a few hanging carcasses in his time, most notably "Figure with Meat," 1954. Dennis' carcasses bring Rembrandt to mind. One thinks of The Slaughtered Ox, Rembrandt's 1655 three-quarter profile of a suspended carcass.

Like Rembrandt, Dennis displays another dimension of sensitivity when it comes to light and shadow. But instead of adding 17th Century candlelight to his painting, Dennis has stimulated what was there: a modern fluorescent beam above three moving racks of meat, which he found in one of the last meat lockers in New York, just before the meatpacking district became the Land of Throbbing Nightclubs.

Dennis said he had trouble getting access to the meatpacking meat lockers, so he had to paint the backs of the meat. One day, while driving upstate, Dennis noticed a sign with the familiar meat locker logo, so he got off the highway to ask if he could use their meat as a muse. "I told them I was an artist," said Dennis. "They thought it was weird." But, they let Dennis take photographs of the meat regardless.

"That was five years ago," said Dennis, who attributed most of the paintings in Honey Bunny to that highway. The third room shows small, square paintings of extreme ironies, like a cute cat lying on top of a bear-headed rug, while the fourth room, gallery co-owner Joseph Kraeutler called "The Pattern Room." Here, endless rows of firearms and heaps of Chilean sea bass pose subtle political statements. Did you know, for example, that Chilean sea bass are one of the most illegally overfished in the world?

Dennis, a native of Boston, Massachusetts, lives part-time in Brooklyn and part-time in upstate New York, just outside of Ithaca. "It's definitely not Kansas, but it sure ain't hell Brooklyn," he said. "But we're back plenty."

That is, plenty enough to maintain his multiple lives. When Dennis isn't teaching at Elmira College, he is painting. And when he's not painting, he's writing or editing his blog "Creative Footprint," volunteering for Frogwatch USA, watching birds, or cooking bugs (Dennis is an entomophagist). In 2005, he founded the project, "Insects Are Food" making headlines with his famous Bug Dinners in Dumbo.

But, his family and children matter the most. Dennis says

he makes the point to be home every night for dinner and in time to put his children to bed. Of course, there are always those nights when he stays up late and works in his small studio while his family sleeps. "My wife is an incredibly tolerant and supportive individual," said Dennis. "Besides, she gets a painting every Valentines Day."

First photo: Marc Dennis, Biggy Kitty, 2011. Courtesy of Marc Dennis/Hasted Kraeutler. Second photo: Marc Dennis, Tiny One, 2011. Courtesy of Marc Dennis/Hasted Kraeutler

Marc Dennis: Honey Bunny runs through December 3rd, 2011 at the Hasted Kraeutler Gallery. 537 West 24th Street New York, NY 10011.