

Exclusive Interview with Marc Dennis

HI + FRUCTOSE

by Nastia Voynovskaya // Posted on October 28, 2013

Marc Dennis is partial to the attentive viewer. The artist, who has a penchant for hyper-realist painting, creates compositions where images hide within images, engaging his viewers in a game of pop cultural and art historical references that seems to have no beginning and no end. This kind of painting rewards those who pause to search for the interrelated clues within each piece and in Dennis's over-all body of work, though the narratives are open-ended and the riddle can never truly be solved. Dennis's upcoming solo show "An Artist, a Curator and a Rabbi Walk Into a Bar" opens at Hasted Kraeutler Gallery in New York on November 8. The artist paused to chat with Hi-Fructose over email about voyeurism, Kanye West and the meta-fiction that defines his work.

Your work is centered around the act of looking. Are you trying to impart a message about the ways we view art in today's day and age?

I saturate my paintings with truths and suggestions about human behavior, ways of looking, and the psychological, spiritual and physical relationships we have with art. Walter Benjamin, the famous social critic once said, "To experience the aura of a phenomenon means to invest it with the capability of returning the gaze." I believe that we, as viewers and art lovers, are eager and more pleased when it happens, to find ourselves, or some semblance of ourselves in a work of art. In other words, I do my part in "returning the gaze" that Benjamin speaks of. And in this hyper self-conscious, glamour-driven, sexually-inflated and media-obsessed art culture of today, my works are satirical yet sincere, artificial yet real, and most definitely loaded with personal symbolism yet public pomp — a timely combination and expression.

Do you consider yourself a voyeur?

Most definitely, at least when it comes to making paintings. I aim to heighten a voyeuristic experience and to confound the search for meaning and purpose as to the sanctity of art through various tropes and devices. A good example is my painting titled, "A Great Mastery of Privacy," 2013, oil on linen, 44x58 inches. In his piece I play with our sense of space by creating what I've come to refer to as the invisible foreground, a place for the real viewer, us, to stand, peek, gaze and stare at what's unfolding before us. We are now an active participant in the pseudo-narrative and thus the meaning of the piece. It becomes ours. In all its manifestations and possibilities the



painting is intended to be intriguing, clever and sexy loaded with clichéd cultural suggestions and references.

Some examples of the clichés, suggestions and references come in the form of questions and/or art historical factoids. Who is this woman? How is it that she owns a Caravaggio? Why is it hung in a dressing area or bedroom? Why is she brushing her hair partially naked in front of a Caravaggio painting of a young Bacchus, the Roman god of wine, agriculture and redemption, and sexual exploits no doubt. The painting is known to art historians as the "Sick Bacchus," but I chose to gorge his veins with blood, and put some color into him so to speak. It's a signifier of the possible underlying context. I think voyeurs do one thing in particular as artists, we don't necessarily depict life as it is but rather as we would like it to be. Details matter.

You are a professor of art in addition to being an artist. How does your academic environment influence your subject matter?

As a professor, I am always on fire with offering guidance, insight and information about technical, perceptual and conceptual abilities. And we talk a lot. We share stories. I mostly am the one telling stories but it is a very energized environment where communication is critical. It keeps me on my toes. I am inspired and very grateful to have such a motivated group of students who share many wonderful ideas and interpretations about their own art, my art and art in general. I feed them and, in some way, they feed me. It's a symbiotic relationship. We all learn. It never ends. I love my job.



Your work has art historical references, but there are pop cultural references as well. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe I spotted Kanye West in one of the works. Could you talk about the connections you are drawing between art history and pop culture?

The model I used for that piece, which is titled, "The Measure of All Things," looks like Kanye for a reason. I think a lot about how popular culture impacts us and how we tend to internalize and emulate pop celebrities and players or at least comment on them. Ultimately we throw down judgment and personal critiques on the pop cultural scene. I find it all slightly amusing and strong and steady fodder for my artistic ideas. This painting "The Measure Of All Things," depicts another painting of mine titled, "Biggy Kitty," which is also in the show. The Kanye look-alike guard stands watch over "Biggy Kitty" sitting somewhat defiantly in a massive almost gaudy over-the-top blinged out gilded gold frame. The positioning of the two paintings in the same show plays into the pop culture mystique, and also dances around elements of the contemporary art scene, in particular the Jay-Z performance piece at Pace, Lady Gaga's new album Koons cover, etc. the juxtaposition of my two paintings, referecing and sampling one another is not just about a painting within a painting, but a painting within a painting within a gallery, within a gallery. Just like pop culture itself, it plays on identity while sampling and mimicking others. Everyone asks, "Is that Kanye?" And then they say, "That's a Big Kitty"... "Damn, that's an incredible frame"... "Hey wait a minute, isn't that the same painting?"... "Whoa." And so on. Like the meta epiphany. Gotta love it.

What sparked your interest in painting paintings within paintings?

My admiration for Velasquez, Manet and Magritte is part of it. The idea of a painting within a painting affords me lots of creative room to play, to present staged encounters, and conceptual paradox. I've always been intrigued with the visual manipulation of space and creating a psychic and erotic tension in my works. Paintings within paintings and viewers standing in front of us, the viewer, plays into what Foucault saw in Magritte's paintings, the display of visual and conceptual tendencies towards the thoughts on concepts of resemblance and similitude. We, the viewers, are looking at paintings within the actual painting that other viewers are looking at but not what we are looking at in the entirety. We will always see more as the actual viewer. We are confronted with images within images, context within context, narrative within narrative. I guess on one level it's meta art. Art about art. Painting about painting. The nature of seeing about the nature of seeing.

How do the different levels of images within each work relate to one another?

Like the very popular meta joke about three different people walking into a bar, hence the title of my show, "An Artist, a Curator and a Rabbi Walk Into a Bar," the levels, layers, and figures in my work all relate but are also mysteries. They seem familiar; yet it is unclear as to who they are, where they came from, where they're going, or why they are standing in front of a painting, or in any variety of interiors. You could say that my paintings are pseudo-narratives with missing plots. The viewers fill in the blanks. I tend to believe we all share commonalities concurrent with our own individual personal interpretations and feelings and I'd like to think my paintings level the playing field. The different levels in other words relate on many levels, both personal and public.

Anything else you'd like to share?

I set out to create paintings that are immediate and visceral; reflecting a paradox of dualities — the believable and non-believable, the real and the staged, and the serious and the comical, which I believe I touch upon a genuine, urgent vision about the contemporary art world experience.