

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present Surrender, an exhibition of new paintings and works on paper by Joel Mesler. This is the artist's first show at the gallery. Surrender opens on January 23 and remains on view through March 6, 2021.

In Joel Mesler's work, childhood memories fuel meditations on class, design, and popular iconography, not to mention the liquid, fluid, and mutable nature of the painting process. Surrender finds the artist exploring the power of acceptance, allowing emotions—as well as the physical and cultural forms in which they become constellated—to exist at the center of his project. It also finds him broadening his visual range, incorporating new motifs in the patterned backgrounds that provide the foundation for each composition and experimenting with new, increasingly elaborate ways of rendering typography.

The canvases in Surrender are sharply tuned juxtapositions of language and image in which resonant phrases appear in text that is itself a graphic construction, written in letters made to resemble milk, drinking straws, and condiments. In Untitled (Surrender), the painting that gives the show its title, elements from “Snakes and Ladders” and “Candyland”—board games whose images are imprinted upon the psyches of many children—have been recombined to create a document that is surreal and sanguine, menacing and self-effacing, sad and hilarious. Despite its universality, it is highly intimate; Mesler gives the impression that he is talking to himself as well as his audience at large, inviting reflections about the joys and disillusionments of childhood even as he addresses his own ongoing journey of self-awareness. At the same time, he invents a particularly contemporary sort of symbol-making, one that erases distinctions between signs of individual psychological evolution and waypoints in the landscape of consumer culture.

Many of the backgrounds against which Mesler's phrases appear are suffused with autobiographical import as well, evoking key—and often traumatic—moments from his past. Often this has emerged in his work as a localized phenomenon: the banana leaf pattern from the wallpaper inside the Beverly Hills Hotel, for instance, has served as a metonymic stand-in for a traumatic experience that signaled the deterioration of his parents' marriage, thereby fusing the drama of family dynamics and a storied site in Los Angeles. Here, this motif finds

monumental expression in Untitled (You Deserve Great Things), a major triptych that can be considered a culmination of this strand of the artist's project. It also appears in Untitled (In n Out), which evokes a happy-sad reckoning with lost innocence and the creature comforts, in the form of fast food and other cheap thrills, that once surrounded it.

Elsewhere in Surrender, however, Mesler expands this approach and engages more broadly with places and figures in the collective imagination. Untitled (Love, Hate) is one in an ongoing series of works to feature stylized renditions of tie-dye and other icons associated with hippie-style mind expansion. Here, the dark side of the utopian adolescent yearning for communion and its attendant, often drug-induced, catharsis takes center stage: spelling out "love" and "hate" are letters formed from piles of cocaine. As in much of Mesler's work, however, the painting seems to suggest that the melancholic distance provided by age and nostalgia might be able to redeem youthful excess.

A group of works on paper constitute another important facet of the exhibition. Playful and exploratory, with jokey punchlines and sophisticated combinations of color and texture, each has been executed on a David Kordansky Gallery exhibition poster from the early 2000s. This unorthodox choice of support creates a bridge between various moments in time and maps the artist's own internal dialogue onto a public record of artmaking. The capsule history of the gallery, however obscured and redacted by virtue of Mesler's marks and swaths of color, roots his painterly ruminations in the place where they are being shown. Furthermore, it provides a ground upon which he can directly address his journey as both an artist and a dealer—not to mention his formative years in Los Angeles—and the trials and triumphs that have made the last two decades an unlikely story of personal and professional homecoming.

Joel Mesler (b. 1974, Los Angeles) has been the subject of recent solo exhibitions at Harper's Books, East Hampton, New York (2020); Simon Lee, London (2018); and Galerie TORRI, Paris (2016). He lives and works in East Hampton, New York.

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