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## *Joe Mama-Nitzberg: Picture not Portrait*

10/6/17 – 11/11/2017

Grant Wahlquist Gallery is pleased to present “Picture not Portrait,” an exhibition of works by Catskill, NY-based artist Joe Mama-Nitzberg. The show—the artist’s first solo exhibition in the United States in more than twenty years—will run from October 6 through November 11, 2017. The gallery will hold an opening reception on Friday, October 6 from 5 – 8 pm, and a talk with the artist on Saturday, October 7 at 1 pm.

“Picture not Portrait” presents works in a variety of media that demonstrate Mama-Nitzberg’s engagement with technology, personal and cultural memory, identity, and the legacy of postmodernism. At once deadly serious and tongue-in-cheek, the artist assumes positions and uses forms only to render them unstable.

Mama-Nitzberg adopts Susan Sontag’s seminal 1964 essay *Notes on “Camp”* as a jumping off point for several pieces in the exhibition and explores the cultural potency that this text and its academic champions might (or might not) still possess. Two works engage with Sontag’s essay explicitly, quoting or modifying Sontag’s statement that “[d]etachment is the prerogative of an elite.” To paraphrase Sontag, these inkjet prints on canvas are not paintings, but “paintings”; they both manifest and undermine the privileged position of abstract painting since the inauguration of Modernism.

Two recent looping videos (*Fin de Fête* and *The Artist*) are also on display. Part of a larger body of work in which Mama-Nitzberg utilizes basic technology to “translate” poems, the works are generated by pairing collaged images selected by Mama-Nitzberg from distinct Google Images searches of poetic texts (in this instance, by Charlotte Mew and Oscar Wilde). Funny, scathing, mournful, and occasionally deliberately cringe-inducing, they offer a cornucopia of references and juxtapositions that simultaneously illustrate, honor, and question the original texts while highlighting the magic of poetry and our desire to believe in chance.

The exhibition also features a number of works reflecting Mama-Nitzberg’s interest in the photographs of Carl Van Vechten. The artist removes Van Vechten’s sitters—in this exhibition, Henri Matisse and Tallulah Bankhead—filling in the resulting gaps such that the patterns of the backdrops behind them repeat. On one level, the works meld portraiture and “abstract” photography; on another, they address power relations, cultural appropriation, and the limits of the digital. They also reflect Mama-Nitzberg’s complex relationship with the appropriative strategies of the *Pictures* generation. His work is indebted to these predecessors but also fully aware of the extent to which their once radical gestures have been absorbed into the canon and the market. The title of the show seems to nod to this relationship, but is actually Mama-Nitzberg correcting himself, as he often incorrectly identified the iconic novel as Oscar Wilde’s “*The Portrait of Dorian Gray*.”

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As this self-correction demonstrates, though Mama-Nitzberg adopts and transforms cultural artifacts in order to probe the larger social and symbolic structures that give them meaning, he does so mindful of his own complicity in those structures, and very often with an affectionate laugh. After all, as Sontag wrote, “Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment. Camp is generous.”

Joe Mama-Nitzberg received a B.A. from San Francisco State University (1989) and an M.F.A. from Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California (1995). His work has been featured in exhibitions at, amongst others, Galerie Catherine Bastide, Brussels (solo); Marc Foxx, Santa Monica (solo); Bunker 259, Brooklyn (organized by Regina Rex); Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York; the Salzburger Kunstverein; the Pittsburg Center for the Arts; the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark; Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions; Gavin Brown’s Enterprise; David Zwirner Gallery, New York; the Renaissance Society, Chicago; and White Columns, New York. He is the recipient of a 2015 Art Matters grant and his work is in the collection of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

The gallery is located at 30 City Center, Portland, Maine. Gallery hours are Wednesday through Saturday, 11 am to 6 pm, and by appointment. For more information, visit <http://grantwahlquist.com>, call 207.245.5732, or email [info@grantwahlquist.com](mailto:info@grantwahlquist.com).