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Joe Mama-Nitzberg: The Past is an Allied Country

5/3/24 – 6/15/24

Grant Wahlquist Gallery is thrilled to announce “The Past is an Allied Country,” a solo exhibition by Joe Mama-Nitzberg. The exhibition runs from May 3 – June 15, 2024.

Please join us for a reception with the artist Friday, May 3rd, from 5 – 8 pm.

“The Past is an Allied Country” nods to the opening line of L.P. Hartley’s 1953 novel of lost innocence, memory, and forbidden sex(uality) *The Go-Between*: “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” Putting the artist’s own spin on Hartley’s themes, “The Past is an Allied Country” is a riveting new turn in Mama-Nitzberg’s ongoing exploration of the (ab)uses of history, the distortions of fame and anonymity, and the vicissitudes of identity. Featuring 10 new works in a variety of formats, the exhibition is a dense web of cultural, sub-cultural, and personal references that Mama-Nitzberg weaves into speculative or even counterfactual histories.

To varying degrees, all of the works in the exhibition mimic twentieth century advertisements, with particular emphasis on styles from the decades leading up to and during the onset of the AIDS crisis. Many of these works take the form of posters for performances, films, and theatrical productions that on closer inspection reveal themselves to be fictional. For example, *Is Sincerity Enough?* resembles a movie poster from the 1960s and features images of Martin Luther King Jr. and Susan Sontag above the phrase “Sincerity is not enough!” and a promised release date of May 1965 alongside text reading “@sinceritywithoutintelligenceismeaningless.” Like many acts of queer citation, *Is Sincerity Enough?* invites a bit of decoding. King used the phrase about sincerity in a 1951 sermon; Sontag used it her 1964 essay *Notes on Camp* (a perennial reference point for Mama-Nitzberg); May 1965 is the month of the artist’s birth; the use of the “@” symbol from social media humorously flags the work as contemporary. By invoking all of these reference points in the form of an advertisement for a cultural artifact that does not actually exist, Mama-Nitzberg raises a host of important questions: How do we interpret the inadequacy of sincerity when asserted by King versus Sontag? To what extent does our interpretation turn on the intersectional identities of the authors? What value do we ascribe to sincerity in our current moment, and is it (still) not enough?

Framing in all its varied senses and meanings—personal, conceptual, historical, formal—has always been an essential concern of Mama-Nitzberg’s work. Each of the invented “posters” in “The Past is an Allied Country” is framed in a period appropriate aluminum frame implying that each work could conceivably have been retrieved from the apartment of an imagined queer sophisticate. Mama-Nitzberg takes the framing of queer domesticity further in a number of works by placing some “posters” in sculptural tableau suggesting not only removal of the poster from its original context but also the wall on which it sat. *Tears are not Enough*, which summons the “celluloid closet” of the 1950s, the writings of Vito Russo, the early years of online gossip blogs, and even Oscar Wilde’s niece, sits on a retro floral wallpaper adjacent to a yellow light switch;

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Regards, which alludes to Sontag, Wilde, RuPaul's Drag Race, and leather culture, sits on a black wall beneath a red light bulb. Mama-Nitzberg's conflation of constructed and found objects toys with the way in which formal strategies are framed by history and identity—are these Broodthaers-esque decors, or acts of “decorating” (#pejorative)?

In sum, “The Past is an Allied Country” calls attention to the fact that all histories are framed by, and are in fact, assertions of power. “MAGA!,” “Land back!,” or “[insert name here] threw the first brick at Stonewall!”: all are histories that imagine a past from the standpoint of the present to make claims on the future. In contrast with these restorative and reflective forms of nostalgia, Mama-Nitzberg's works are a fresh manifestation of the nostalgic dissidence described by the late cultural theorist Svetlana Boym: “It is up to us to take responsibility of our nostalgia and not let others ‘prefabricate’ it for us. The prepackaged ‘usable past’ may be of no use to us if we want to cocreate our future. Perhaps dreams of imagined homelands cannot and should not come to life. Sometimes it is preferable [...] to leave dreams alone[.]”

Joe Mama-Nitzberg received a B.A. from San Francisco State University in 1989 and an M.F.A. from Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California, in 1995. He lives and works in Catskill, New York. He has had solo exhibitions at Grant Wahlquist Gallery; Basilica, Hudson; Galerie Catherine Bastide, Brussels; and Marc Foxx, Los Angeles. His work has also been featured in exhibitions at venues including: the Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg; the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark; the Renaissance Society, Chicago; White Columns, New York; Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York; and David Zwirner Gallery, New York. His work is in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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.