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Joe Mama-Nitzberg: Classes in Optical Art

9/10/21 – 10/16/21

Grant Wahlquist Gallery is pleased to announce “Classes in Optical Art,” a solo exhibition of new works by Joe Mama-Nitzberg. The show will run from September 10 through October 16, 2021. **An opening reception will be held on Friday, September 10 from 5 – 7 pm.**

As they have in the past, the artist’s works in “Classes in Optical Art” adopt and adapt found images from “high” and “low” culture, “mainstream” and “sub-” culture, and images of the famous and the anonymous. Restricting himself in this exhibition to a single format—photographs in custom painted frames—Mama-Nitzberg continues his confrontation of loss, nostalgia, semiotic literacy, technology, and identity with a new intensity, creating affectively layered works in which humor, anger, pleasure, and warmth exist side-by-side. The panoply of references at work in Mama-Nitzberg’s art, sometimes on the surface and sometimes nearly buried, reflect his willingness to risk misrecognition by those who either have not inherited the same cultural memories or who are unwilling to engage in the close looking and self-reflection encountering the unrecognizable or unknown ought occasion. Mama-Nitzberg invites us to encounter art as we would encounter an unknown person, with openness and attention to the ways in which aspects of identity shape our capacity to see.

Take, for example the artist’s treatment of the most popularly recognizable figure to recur in “Classes in Optical Art,” Judy Garland. In each, her face is obscured by a colored dot, as are those of other famous songstresses, borrowing a trope from John Baldessari in order to express the artist’s interest in what he describes as “equalizing the anonymous with those of note.” All three works are bisected in one fashion or another along a vertical axis in a nod to the mirroring and doubling we experience when we express not only our allegiance (or not) to cultural icons, that we draw upon when we identify (or not) as members of their audience. These pictures draw on deep respect for their subjects, a lifetime of consideration of their importance, but also acknowledge knotty feelings about fame, representation, tragedy, aging, and cultural obsolescence.

Four other works continue Mama-Nitzberg’s “equalizing of the anonymous” through use of vintage advertisements from *After Dark* magazine, whose run roughly coincides with the period bracketed by Stonewall and the early years of the AIDS crisis (1968-1983). Three feature text—utilizing the artist’s own voice as well as those of Henry James, Christopher Isherwood (to Gore Vidal), etc.—evinced affinity, mourning, anger, and loss for these forgotten men, many of whom surely died as a result of a mixture of disease, homophobia, and government indifference: “Please accept my apologies for not dying young;” “They had had joys just as they had had fears;” “To become the spectator of one’s own life is to escape the suffering of it.” Taken together, they are powerful meditations on the complicated nature of identification, which always involves a certain degree of abstraction. It is fitting, then that the last of the three riffs on Piet Mondrian,

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and a fourth contains no text at all, only a sleeping male figure doubled such that he echoes surrounding quotation marks. Quotation, too, is a kind of abstraction, one that the artist pushes further in *Emotional/Personal/Historical (Self-Portrait Mid-70s)* and *Total Recall (Self-Portrait late 60s)*, in which he is styled after the men of *After Dark*. Emblazoned with quotes from Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*, they manifest what Boym termed "reflective nostalgia," which "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing" and rebukes the "restorative nostalgia" driving the nationalism run rampant in our present time. As Boym wrote, "the only antidote for the dictatorship of nostalgia might be nostalgic dissidence."

Suffice it to say that "Classes in Optical Art" is a reckoning with power, memory, and death; but it is also warm, optically riveting, and frequently funny. Styling oneself as a 1970s Daddy in a jump suit open to the navel, overtly inserting protest signs digitally in post, taking the piss (or perhaps not!) out of critical theory with the help of Judy and Barbra—all of these are varying degrees of hilarious. Mama-Nitzberg's capacity to use color, composition, and humor to lure the viewer into a complex web of ideas and emotion distinguishes him as an essential voice in contemporary art, one well-worth hearing from regarding the show's final work, *Might Delete Later*.

"You might know this phrase/hashtag from Social Media. You might also notice 'images with beds in them.' You might also recognize who Brenda Frazier or Marcel Proust or Felix Gonzalez-Torres are. You might also know their stories: Frazier's story of wealth, beauty, anorexia and addiction; or Proust's complicated relationship with status and power and his iconic writing on time and memory; or perhaps you know of Gonzalez-Torres's elegant queer artwork, his themes of borrowed time and impending loss and his inevitable death from AIDS. So yes, this piece is about all of those things and my insistence that a recently dated internet caption encompass all of the history of these complicated figures. And you might laugh. Or cry."

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 Pittsburg Center for the Arts; 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.