

# Michael St. John: The Paranoid Style in American Painting

BY CHRISTIAN RATTEMAYER

Michael St. John might be the best-known artist you never heard of.

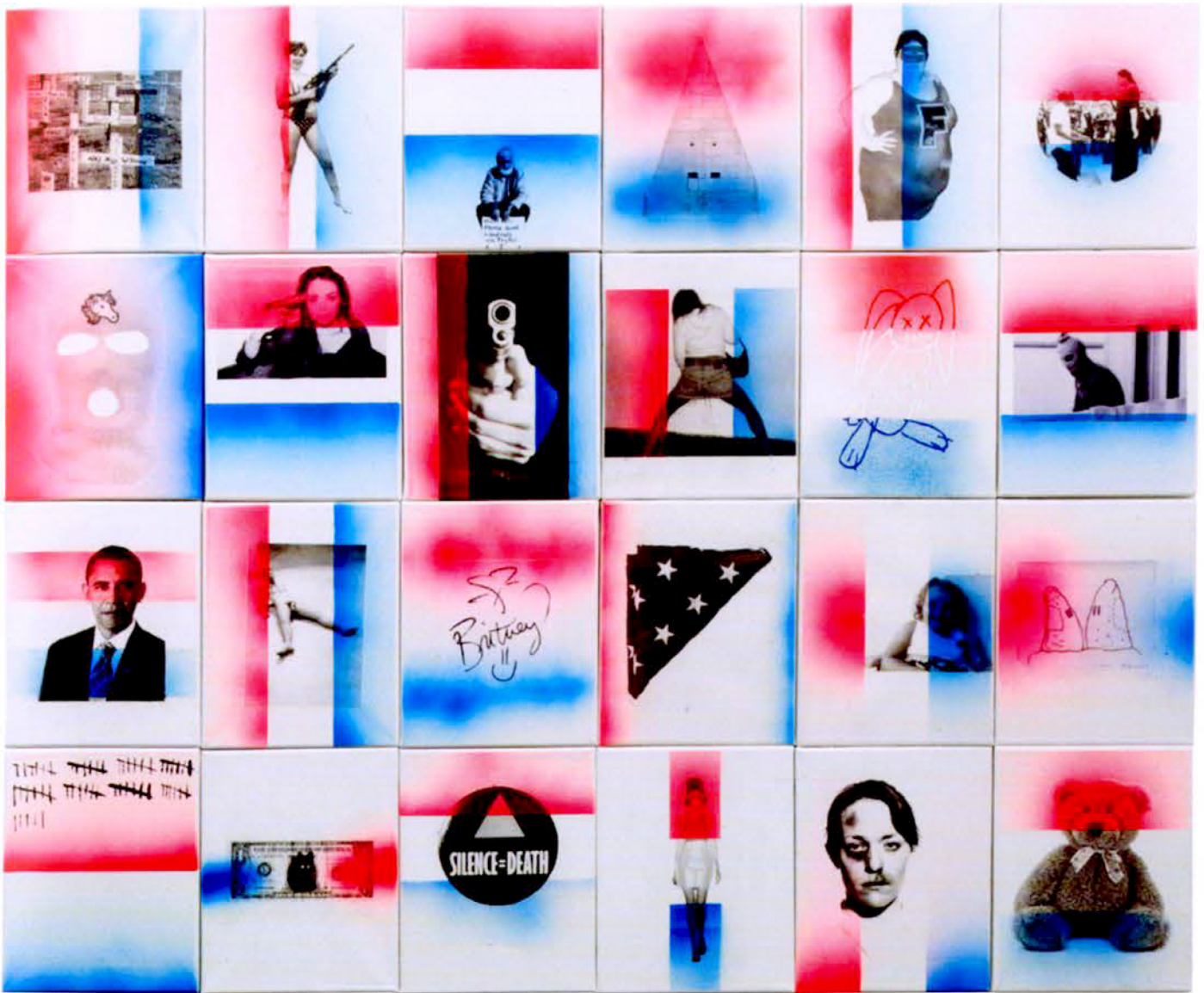
In certain pockets of the art world, he is highly regarded as the teacher, mentor, and loyal friend to a younger generation of artists, including Nate Lowman, Dan Colen, Dash Snow, Alex McQuilkin, and Josh Smith. Though this artistic lineage becomes immediately apparent once the shared trajectory of styles, interests, sensibilities, and subject matter is acknowledged, St. John's own critical vision has often been obscured by the popular success of these younger artists. Furthermore, St. John's peers Richard Prince and Cady Noland are often cited to establish a context within which St. John's performance is relegated to the role of supporting cast. What is lost in both instances is St. John's generationally specific cultural sensibility that I would characterize, in the famous term of Richard Hofstadter, as the "paranoid style." If there is little in St. John's critical reception to suggest this approach and its validity, then it is mostly for the fact that too few discussions of St. John's work have embarked to locate his practice in any critical discourse. In fact, few artists of St. John's seniority and influence have been written about as little as he has.

Michael St. John's work is surprisingly varied, ranging from trompe-l'oeil painting to collages made of cut-out magazines, skateboard stickers, and pop cultural material, to sculptures made of cast plaster and found objects. His motifs often include violent scenes, softcore porn, and advertising images of pop stars and fashion models, graffiti of profanities, slogans, and scribbles, as well as reproductions of menac-

ing, catastrophic, and otherwise horrific messages gleaned from the mediated cast-offs of American life. His strategies of appropriation and assemblage, painting and collage point to the underbelly of the (often poor, white) American experience; it is an aesthetics of trailer trash, a kind of FEMA conceptualism.

In the painting *Dead Body Inside* (2006), the photograph of a flood-damaged house (presumably in the wake of Hurricane Katrina) has been collaged onto the left side of a canvas bearing the titular graffiti; a tacked string of red wool, stretching from the left edge of the canvas across the image at the level of its roof peak suggests the waterline of disaster. The question of race, always connected to the question of poverty and the history of American violence, is never absent from St. John's work. In *Negroes with Guns* (2007), a series of seven paintings, collaged images of African-American radicals, including Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., are overlaid with a transparent red spray-painted square. St. John finishes each portrait with another layer of graffiti by applying variations on the stenciled slogan from which the series gets its name. Maybe most jarring in its economy of means and ambiguous directness is *October* (2014). A torn, purple sheet of paper glued on to white canvas depicts the photocopied image of a young, black woman with a black eye that has been stitched above the brow. The word *october* has been type-written below in lowercase letters. Like a torn sheet from a wall calendar, the work denotes that which has just happened—in this case, an act of casual, daily violence against





women—all the while poking morbid fun at the bible of art historical discourse, *October*.

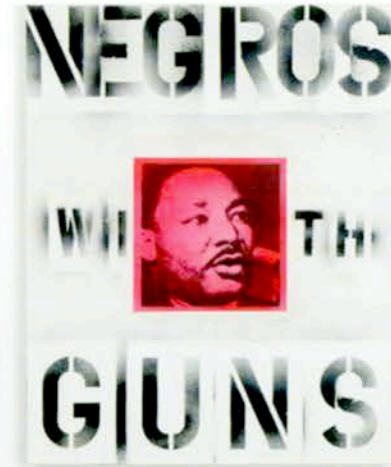
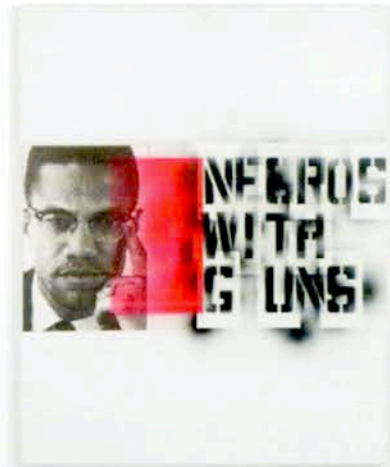
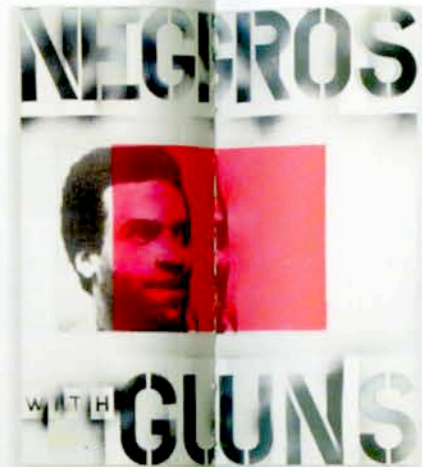
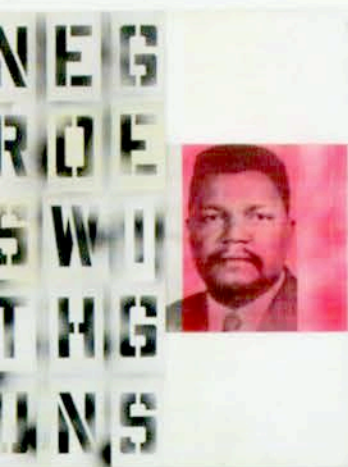
The confrontational nature of *October* is similar to that of a painting made the same year titled *Fear* (2014), of stocking-masked faces overlaid with variously colored bands of spray paint. The graphic ambiguity of these works may have caused them to be dismissed as morally ambiguous, racially insensitive, politically incorrect brute humor. But St. John's work is misunderstood when read as an honest expression of white male revenge fantasies or cheap revolt. Instead, St. John presents us with a symptomatic read of the American visual landscape. His subject is an America of petty crimes and cheap thrills, a country saturated with the imagery of banal evil. The work *An Assembly of Mayhem* (2013) is a veritable inventory of St. John stock material, ranging from images of bikini-clad girls holding machine guns, teddy bears, mug shots of domestic violence victims, his own paintings (such as *Shooter*), a folded American flag, a dollar bill, Philip Guston paintings, icons of AIDS activism, and Britney Spears' fake-spontaneous scribbled signature—all simulacra of stylized revolt.

Michael St. John was an adolescent when in 1964, a year after the Kennedy assassination, Richard Hofstadter wrote his classic essay for *Harpers*, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in which he introduced a provocative term to describe the emergent right-wing shift in American politics: "I call it the paranoid style because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspicious-

ness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind." By tracing the paranoid style from the Founding Fathers all the way to McCarthyism and Barry Goldwater, Hofstadter categorizes it as a quintessentially American trait—an encompassing philosophy of exceptionalism and moral absolutism laced with violence, sexual energy, and renegade redemption. The fact that the paranoid style reared its head at a time when St. John was coming of age—during a time of genuine social change and unrest, the civil rights movement, and a period of political assassinations unbecoming an advanced nation in the late twentieth century, suggests a crucial difference between the generation of St. John and that of his students. It is easy to become tone-deaf to the paranoid style, misunderstand its root in urgent observation, and ridicule its form as obsessive and pedantic: "it is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant," Hofstadter wrote; and St. John inherently understands this.

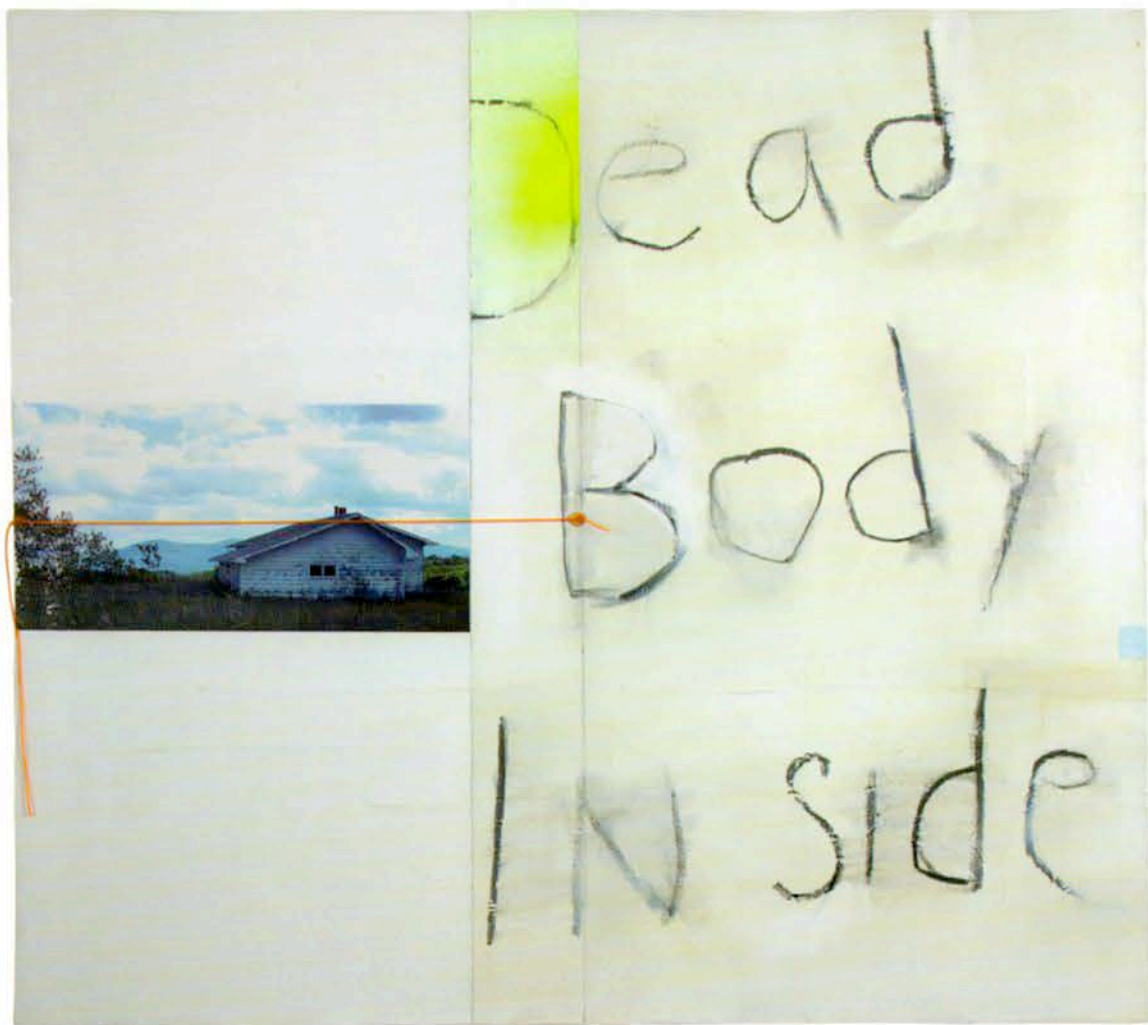
The paranoid style in American painting may be best exemplified in St. John's series *In the Studio Twenty Eleven* (2011): assemblages of pictures of artists and filmmakers, fashion models and "Wanted" posters, scent trees and dog tags, annotated by hand-scribbled messages and neatly sorted by the maniacal order springing from the fantasy of apocalypse and conspiracy. St. John shows us the double suffering of the paranoid that characterizes America today: "afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well."









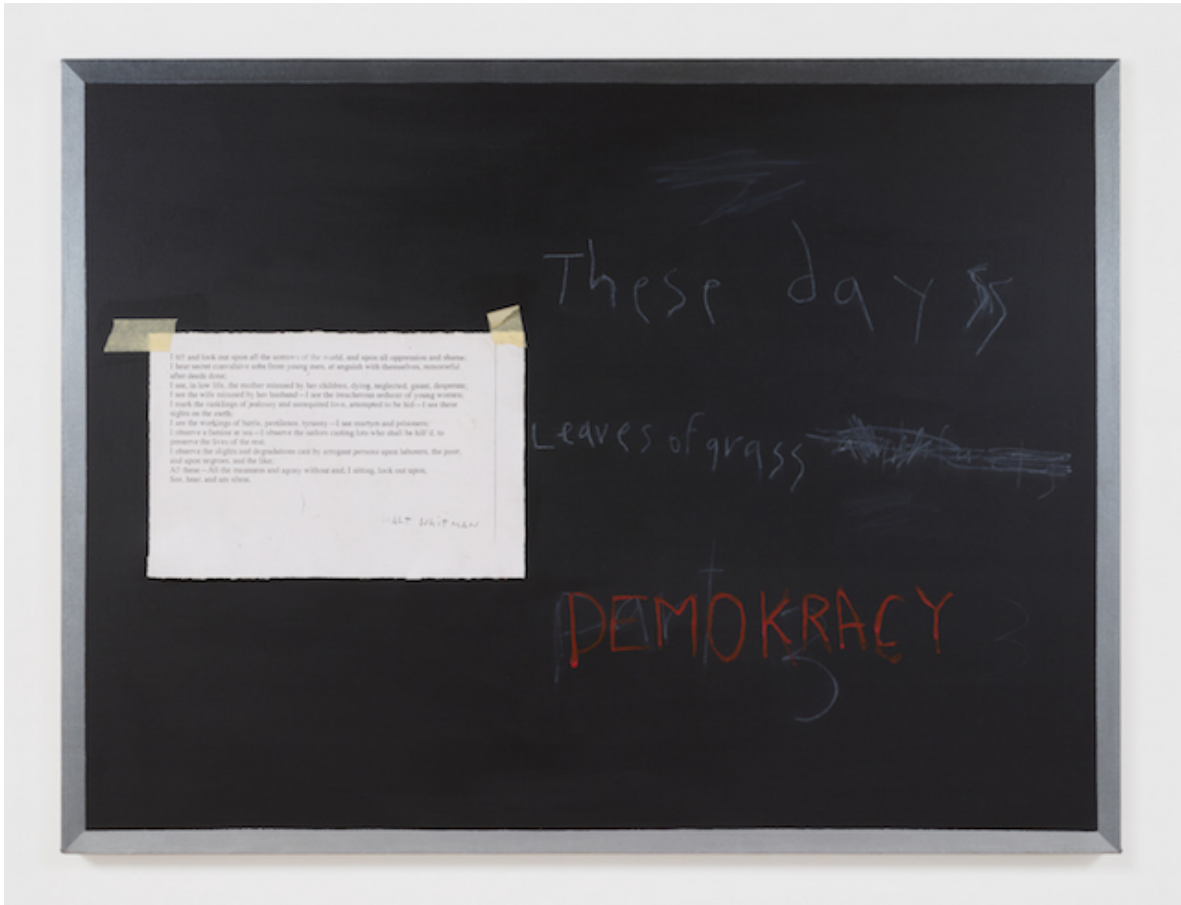




## The Creators Project

# Postcards from the End of an American Era

Emerson Rosenthal — Dec 22 2016



MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Democracy*. 2016 acrylic, chalk, ink on paper, tape on canvas 36 x 48 inches (91.4 x 121.9 cm) © Michael St. John Photographer: Pierre Le Hors

About two weeks after the single greatest upset in American liberalism, on a particularly gusty Thursday, I ambled into the Andrea Rosen Gallery to meet Michael St. John. I was there ahead of the opening of *These Days; Leaves of Grass*, the artist's fourth solo show with the Chelsea institution, and moving with the bustle of someone chasing a perfectly timed arrival. My cab driver had tacked the kind of cross-town course that makes every turn feel like a pull on a slot machine lever. The reason I say this is for anyone who knows what it feels like to enter a room more exciting than the one before it; to pass from New York City at night to somewhere even more vibrant.

A Google search for the artist Michael St. John yields a number of other Michael St. Johns, and not much else, a challenge, no doubt, for a writer running on little more than fumes and gleaned references. On one hand, I'm relieved to find that the work is



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outstanding: digestible 2' x 3' collages; sticker-covered sculptures recalling the verve of the city; newspaper and printer paper assemblages scattered just to make you feel the rush of Manhattan's West Side. On the other hand, I'm terrified: I have no idea *why*.

This is the moment the artist spies me and strides over, smiling in a pea coat, polo shirt, cutoff shorts, and no socks in tennis shoes despite the dark (and darkening) Autumn.



The show begins on the gallery's nearest wall. A black, chalkboard-esque canvas bears the title of the show and a printed excerpt from the titular poem, signed "Walt Whitman" by St. John, affixed with masking tape. In red acrylic paint, the artist has scratched the word "DEMOKRACY". "Walt Whitman was all about this idea of democratic inclusion," the artist kicked off our tour. "So I wanted to continue with that, but I put a 'k' in it, for the 'alt-.' And then, in the main room, I wanted to go from Walt Whitman—you know, out on the street, in Manhattan—and continue that with an idea of the Ashcan School, the New York studio school where they were painting the street, the bars and restaurants, and people from the street, and tenements. So the idea was to have this room become a 3D Ashcan School today."

Here, St. John stops to introduce me to Andrea Rosen, and it's the first and only time I've ever been relieved to meet a gallerist. This is where full-disclosure comes in: I



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needed help writing about this show. Although I only partially disclosed my motivations, I knew St. John was also a teacher. The teacher, in fact, of art stars whose mastery over their crafts is matched only by their art history prowess (Nate Lowman, for one). So I emailed him asking if he had any recommendations for books covering the subject that kept getting repeated, threading our conversation like a tightrope (for me, at least): form.

He did. Four, actually. But I'll spare you the air quotes from Roberta Bernstein's riveting *Jasper Johns' Paintings and Sculptures 1954-1974: The Changing Focus of the Eye*. You wouldn't believe how much I learned anyway.



MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Slaughter House Power to the People*. 2016 acrylic, collage, polymer on canvas 5 1/2 x 24 1/2 x 23 1/2 inches (14 x 62.2 x 59.7 cm) © Michael St. John Photographer: Pierre Le Hors

Instead, I'll tell you what "getting it"—not that I'm saying I do, by any means, though the show became subsequently more enjoyable when my understanding surpassed pure aesthetics—came down to: The whirlwind feeling of this precise moment in history. It's something that could never be fabricated. You would either have to either replicate the exact conditions under which it occurs, right down to the smallest units of social measurement (an obvious impossibility), or understand the properties of the zeitgeist with the same nuance that one would canvas after, say, nearly four decades of painting (and teaching it).

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"I love art history," St. John would later clarify. "When I walk down the street, everything turns into art history. For most people, it's boring. But for me it's very exciting. I think about history all the time when I'm making stuff." The canvases in *These Days; Leaves of Grass* are like the vivid trompe l'oeil paintings of 19th century painter John Haberle, but they aren't hard like the surfaces mimicked on Haberle's mock backwards picture frames. St. John's crumpled paper arrangements (actually acrylic and polymer on canvas), carry the same weight as the arbitrarily arranged paper bits plastered beneath Jasper Johns' wax brushstrokes, but without the latter's mania. Instead, the works convalesce in a choir of quiet howls, equal parts perspicacity, curiosity, and chance.



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MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Postings*. 2016 collage, acrylic, plastic, tape, polymer on MDF 72 x 10 x 10 inches (182.9 x 25.4 x 25.4 cm)  
© Michael St. John Photographer: Pierre Le Hors

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Standing in front of one of his 6' tall lamp post pieces, I asked how he decides whether his wall-hanging works are paintings or sculptures. "A lot of my things, when I explain them, I feel are also very self-explanatory," St. John said. "Sometimes I take a picture of something I just like formally. Then I'll add something to it. Well, I have a theme for every painting, but I do use a lot of formal things that people invent for me. The lamp posts are from the same kind of idea; people fill up the spaces and they dance around [each other]. So I started to do these lamp posts and the billboards."

The billboards themselves are pretty dark—gritty, stuck up with actual paper, boarded up, and literally unchained. In *Gun Crazy*, an array of posters for the 1950 caper of the same name, a film pseudonymously written by a then-blacklisted Dalton Trumbo, is spray-painted over with an ambiguous offer: "30min \$7, 60min \$14." For what? Is it a fraction of the film for a fraction of the price? Or, like a soliciting john, the opportunity to flavor the fever of John Dall and Peggy Cummins' firearm fetish?

"I make things with the phrase, 'It is what it is,'" St. John told me. "I think about this as a metaphor for our time, where reality and illusion are on a slippery slope all day long. I've been playing with it for a long time, and collage gave me an opportunity to do that."



MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Gun Crazy*. 2016 spray paint, acrylic, collage, polymer on canvas 48 x 72 inches (121.9 x 182.9 cm) © Michael St. John Photographer: Pierre Le Hors



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What looks like wooden siding in the background of *Birthright* (below) also looks like St. John printed it with gear he borrowed from one of his prodigious students, but decided to not change the ink. "This one can seem not that urban because of all the wood," he told me. "I loved that as the formal device, and then I knew about Oscar Micheaux, an African-American director. He had his own production company, stars, and distribution system. At that time, it was only-white and only-black theaters. [Micheaux] gave an answer to *Birth of a Nation*, the most super-racist movie ever. He made the movie *Birthright*. Given our time, I used this movie poster, boarded it up, and also faded it out." Are the crisscrossing slats boxing up for burial the American dream of racial integration, or boarding it for safe transport like a trapper would a rarity?



MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Birthright*. 2015 acrylic, collage, wood, polymer on canvas 48 x 72 inches (121.9 x 182.9 cm) © Michael St. John Photographer: Pierre Le Hors

"Around ten years ago the world seemed really urgent to me," explained St. John. "I didn't want to do silkscreen like Andy Warhol: get the picture, send it out, screen it all night, and only after, you get the news. So I decided to use collage and get an immediate response. Get up in the morning, and work on it instantly." Packed with visual information, history, understanding, and a willingness to keep negotiating all of it, the experience of *These Days; Leaves of Grass* is akin to an episode of *Jeopardy!*: while you

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may not know all the questions, it's still fun to reminisce over the answers.



MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *No Floor*. 2016 spray paint, acrylic, collage, plastic, polymer on canvas 48 x 72 inches (121.9 x 182.9 cm)  
© Michael St. John Photographer: Pierre Le Hors

"When I do things, I believe that formal things are as important as the content," St. John explained of *No Floor* (above), which depicts both St. John's own understanding of the present and an unchained sidewalk cellar hatch designed for unsuspecting viewers to fall through. "This artwork is pretty dark but formally it is beautiful. So you get both things. This is on my mind a lot of the time: What else makes you look at Rembrandt's face? When you look at him, this guy looks like an old drunk. If you would see him on the street, you would think, *What a mess!* But when it's a painting, it's beautiful."

As part of the show, St. John also curated a show-within-a-show in the gallery's back room, assembling the works of, as the gallery orders it, Leo Gabin, Nate Lowman, Thomas McDonnell, Alex McQuilkin, Lanier Meaders, Pope.L, Borna Sammak, Dirk Skreber, and Andy Warhol. That's right; if the idiomatic assembly of a flat Amerika-within-America was giving you major Warhol vibes, fear not: he's here too, crossing his arms and stepping over the Dirk Skreber bronze floor sculpture all but indistinguishable from the "suspicious package" it was created as a facsimile of.



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*LEO GABIN, Boston. 2013 Polyurethane resin, fiberglass, lacquer 5 1/8 x 9 5/16 x 7 5/8 inches (13 x 23.6 x 19.3 cm) © Leo Gabin Photographer: Pierre Le Hors*

Take, for instance, this hat, by Belgian art trio Leo Gabin. It was made from fiberglass, lacquer, and resin, but you wouldn't know anything about that, would you? Is it "real?" And to what end? "Does it really matter?" You can practically hear Andy sighing.

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Manifest destiny collides head-on with the craggy beak of the end of an era against the gallery's back wall. The final piece is a 12" x 12" collage that features a printout of Kate Upton lounging like a lion, either guarding or holding hostage Ma and Pa in a Walker Evans Depression-era photograph. Clearly I'm winded, because when a gallery assistant asks if I'd like a margarita, the coup de grace for the private opening's showgoers, she reads the answer on my face. The drink comes in an extra-tall highball glass, with a widemouth paper swizzle straw. Red, white, and green.



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*MICHAEL ST. JOHN, in the days of 49. 2014 collage on paper 12 x 12 inches (30.5 x 30.5 cm) Framed: 15 3/8 x 15 3/8 inches (39.1 x 39.1 cm) © Michael St. John Photographer: Pierre Le Hors*

Michael St. John's *These Days; Leaves of Grass* runs through December 22, 2016 at Andrea Rosen Gallery.

Emerson Rosenthal

# artspeak



## Michael St. John

*These Days; Leaves of Grass*  
*Andrea Rosen Gallery*  
New York, 544 West 24th Street

*At the dawn of America's post-Presidential election shock, Michael St. John's solo exhibition *These Days; Leaves of Grass* at Andrea Rosen Gallery seems like it could not have come at a more pertinent time. Yet, St. John says that he's been developing this sense of urgency for nearly a decade. The exhibition provides a pragmatic examination of how Americans visualize their democratic nation. St. John deftly assembles a body of visual language that many Americans will recognize: a lamppost plastered with a disarray of posters, graffitied construction site barriers, and campaign stickers, which have their seriousness diffused by images of alluring young bodies. *These Days* breathes a heavy sigh; a forlorn disappointment in a system that relies so heavily on shorthand advertisement, celebrity culture, and corporate sponsorship to disseminate data and knowledge. *These Days; Leaves of Grass* also includes a compact exhibition St. Johns curated to bring together works by a group of his peers such as Pope L. and Andy Warhol, as well as his previous students Borna Sammak and Alex McQuilkin. In this web-exclusive interview, Artspeak contributor Danielle Wu talked with the artist about the recurring themes in his upcoming exhibition.*

**Within the context of how the United States has handled itself during, and after, the most recent election, how do you think your work taps into how people feel right now?**

I have been watching this election. I think people who have been out of work and who voted for Trump...I can't blame them for their displeasure or the anger about their lives. I find it hard to condemn them just because they voted for Trump.

I grew up with steel workers. I do come from those working class people. They had their



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own little lives. They weren't really bothering people or anything. I was born and lived near Gary, Indiana, which you could say has a race problem. They're in the Midwest. But, the people who worked in mills were just people. We are all people. There are huge disparities and awful things that people do to each other. That to me, is what the conversation should really boil down to is, "Where does this fear of the other side come from?"

**Your work does try to examine how Americans communicate and feel empathy. I see a lot of celebrity culture and advertisement in your work. What does it say about how Americans get their information?**

I try to make things where you can try and see both sides, like in my painting *Wall (Chained)* has Abercrombie ads, campaigns with naked young people. I put a chain and a Bernie sticker on it because I thought that, "both of these things are not going to happen". It was like a chaining of freedom.



Michael St. John, *Gun Crazy*, 2016 Courtesy of the Artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

The *Birthright* painting does not have so much ambiguity. *Birthright* was a novel by TS Stribling, and I used the posters from that and then boarded it up, because places like Camden, NJ or South Chicago are atrocities that neither the Republicans or Democrats will even touch. I made that as a statement of conditions.

**Your art attempts to merge art and life, but a lot of art makes that claim now. How do you think we bridge that gap, being artists working in an esoteric field? How can artists effectively engage with politics in a meaningful way?**

I don't think ideology gets us anywhere. My automatic reaction to anyone who says

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something is the right way is to ask why. Especially given that things are so split now, it is a good time to ask “why?” It’s important to think about everyone as an individual and to acknowledge that everyone has an individual way.

Recognition is very important; just as when you meet someone, you try to recognize them. Instead of projecting a set of presumptions on them, it’s good to take the time to just recognize that person. You don’t have to agree with them, but the recognition opens the door for an empathy between people that I think we lack a lot. That’s where I come from. I like to listen to people and try to understand those things about them.

It also involves pop art in a way that pop art was recording what was going on at that time. The main room is kind of a three-dimensional ashcan school painting. I’m trying to compose a street: the things left by people on the street that record their daily life or life as it is.



Michael St. John, Pirates, 2016 Courtesy of the Artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

**But the show, in exploring the nature of democracy today, and is more concerned with different class struggles than race?**

Right. It does talk about class and value, and in general, conditions of living. Each painting takes on a different sociopolitical topic, so I do think it has to do with that. Focusing on the ashcan school is a political act. The ashcan school really was “from the street up”. They were concerned with the people who were living on the street. They weren’t painting portraits of rich people, you know? It was real people and real situations: scenes on bars and the subway. I think all those things are in my mind when I made this show.



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I like to make things that are experiential, so as you can tell I'm not on the intellectual side. [laughs] When an artwork is really working, the content and formal things come together. Much of political art is prescriptive. It just tells you things. It just talks to the converted. It's important to have the formal construction come together with the content, because that's ultimately what keeps you around.

## **And how do you approach sensitive topics like the racial divide in America?**

I just feel like we're all human beings in it together. We all have common things, and there is such a thing as empathy. Right now, you could think there wasn't any empathy left in the country. But, I do think with empathy and just recognizing that you are a human being amongst many human beings, you're going to come upon things on similar topics. The recognition is very important to talk about your current human condition. I always question both sides. I do feel that, for better or for worse, everybody has a voice. That is something I am very interested in - the way they leave their mark, commemorate themselves, or make themselves heard.

**November 19 – December 22, 2016**

*Danielle Wu is currently the Gallery Associate at Galerie Lelong, New York. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Art History and Archaeology from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, and also writes for CRUSH fanzine and Hyperallergic. Danielle also curates—most notably Wömen (我□): Contemporary Chinese Art at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri. @danie.wu*

# Stephen Collier and Michael St. John



Stephen Collier,  
**SMILEY**, 2015,  
acrylic, ink, found  
sticker, and USA  
pin on canvas,  
approximately 24  
inches in diameter.  
Courtesy of the  
artist.

opposite: Michael  
St. John, **COUNTRY  
LIFE**, 2013, acrylic,  
collage/assemblage,  
polymers. Photo  
by Lance Brewer.  
Courtesy Andrea  
Rosen Gallery, New  
York.





Michael St. John's work is concerned with America's relationship to politics, desire, and violence. He uses techniques including trompe l'oeil and visual puns to redirect our attention toward what would otherwise remain unseen. He works with imagery appropriated from pop culture and the street—advertising, fashion, politics—to create a language that has no hierarchy and explores the way we create history by documenting it.

Suzanne McClelland thought our work had many similarities and introduced us over email last year. Michael and I kept in touch and, a few months later, he dropped by my studio while in New Orleans on vacation. We went out in the French Quarter afterward. What follows is part of an ongoing conversation started there and continued this fall over the phone.

— Stephen Collier

STEPHEN COLLIER: Are you there?

MICHAEL ST. JOHN: Yeah, I'm here.

sc: Let's talk about location. I know that you were in New York for almost twenty years, but you moved to rural Massachusetts.

msj: It's not really rural. As a friend of mine described it, it's like the country, but very civilized. *(laughter)*

sc: A lot of your work has to do with New York City. Has your work changed much since you left?

msj: I did do that series about the country called *Country Life* in 2013. A lot of my work has New York references, because I spent most of my life in the city. It's mainly about culture in general, you know.

sc: How do you go about documenting the urban landscapes that you work with?

msj: I started with a tiny Polaroid digital camera. I would take pictures and then download them and print them out. I used them as references, 'cause I kind of think of myself as an Ashcan School realist artist. I don't make up stuff—I don't have any imagination. I generally make things of what I see. Since I moved up here, I just look at everything online. You can pretty much live in a cave with your computer at this point and see the world.

sc: It's all about the hashtag now, right? I get a lot of my images from the Internet, and Instagram too. And I find images as I walk through environments, or if I'm looking through books or magazines. If I see something I think is interesting, I'll photograph it and save it and put it in a database. I have hard copies too, and use a file system. Do you do that as well?

msj: I collected magazines for years and years. I had stacks of pictures. We had just moved here and the basement flooded and soaked all of them up. Previous to that, I'd used a lot of pictures on my paintings. I covered the whole surface in pictures that I'd collected, then I hung another layer on top of that—just hanging like leaves. I had used up the ones from years past. By the time we moved to Massachusetts, I was already using the Internet for all pictures, pretty much.

sc: Before you visited last year, my New Orleans basement studio flooded. The landlord had warned me that it would get a little water in it once or twice a year during flash floods. I was nervous at first, and placed all my work on cinder blocks. But I got lazy and started leaving things on the ground. Eventually it flooded, but luckily I didn't lose too much.

msj: I am curious: Do you use American history and politics a lot in your work?

sc: Well, American history is not a long history, but it's a pretty interesting one,

When visiting New Orleans, Stephen and I went drinking and eating one night from Canal Street to Esplanade (the length of the French quarter). We spent hours talking about the city and art, both of which I love.

Here are two individuals with similar cultural and iconographic interests, employing and enjoying the freedom of art to completely different ends, in a city known for its individualism. Ya can't ask for more!

Stephen's immersion in art—with his practice in sculpture, painting, photography, and video, and his being a founding member of Good Children Gallery—is as intoxicating as the magnolia of New Orleans.

— Michael St. John

as far as violence and the ideal of the American dream. It's constantly evolving. There's a lot of rich material in our history, and in how people try to control it for their own interest—usually for power and/or money. My work is concerned with how people's lives correspond to history and how they maneuver through it psychologically through symbols, objects, and rituals.

msj: The way I think about it is that we are making history now. Not in a grandiose way, but our documenting of things, like saving those pictures—that is making history. Right?

sc: That *is* making history. It's funny how history just repeats itself. You figure we would learn from the past. It's the same things happening over and over. *(laughter)* In this new election cycle the politicians are saying the same things they said twenty, thirty, forty years ago. It's like a broken record.

msj: Did you ever see *The Candidate* with Robert Redford? It's from the 1970s.

sc: I don't think I've seen that one.

msj: He's running for senator of California. "We need to help the poor. We need to reform education. And we need to reform the government." His speeches are the exact same speeches of politicians right now.

sc: Your work taps into that, especially the political stickers and the buttons,

Michael St. John,  
WALL (BOYS AND  
GIRLS AND PETS),  
2015, acrylic, collage,  
polymer on canvas,  
48 x 72 inches.  
Photo by Pierre  
Le Hors. Courtesy  
Andrea Rosen  
Gallery, New York.

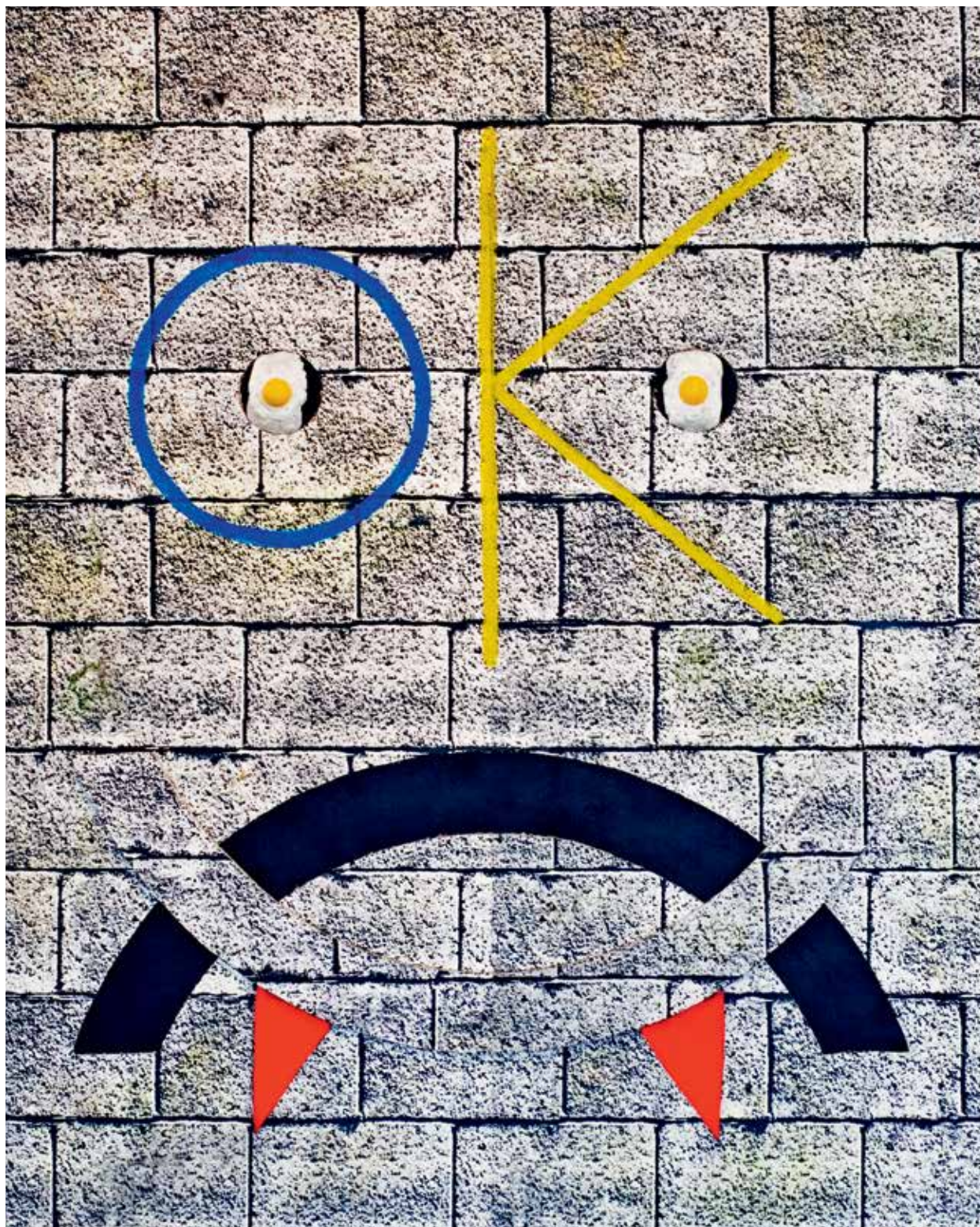




Sometimes I'll have a radio in each room on a different station, so I'm getting all this diverse and segregated information as I maneuver through the space. It's probably not the best way to concentrate, but it forces my mind to change gears.

— Stephen Collier

Stephen Collier,  
UNTITLED (OK),  
2015, oil, acrylic,  
enamel, Sheetrock,  
plywood, photocopy,  
and found rubber  
eggs. Courtesy of  
the artist.





relating to Reagan, Bush, Obama, and now Sanders . . . It's the same with advertising too. People are still saying, "Buy this, your life will improve." (laughter)

MSJ: Advertising is more about creating desire and people buying into it. We've talked about trompe l'oeil and the real versus the fake. It's an interesting metaphor for our times.

sc: What is real and what is fake?

MSJ: José Freire had a gallery back in the '90s that was called Fiction/ Nonfiction. Part of what I do with realism is try to bring out that tension and uncertainty and use it as a metaphor. Realism accommodates that easily, given the tools available from the history of painting, from illusionism to assemblage (and fiction to factual materiality). Reality becomes a slippery slope. Who knows if anybody ever knew what was real?

sc: It takes some examination, right? Looking and thinking...

MSJ: Yeah, like going down the rabbit hole. It is more like you accept "the reality" that you live in. It could be real. It could not be real. It's all sliding in and out of each other, you know what I mean?

sc: I think I do. In a psychological way, it has to do with role-playing and masking and how people take on different roles as they maneuver through their days and deal with power dynamics.

MSJ: Do you mess with power when you make stuff?

sc: I don't think so. I just try to harness it, in a way. I go to estate sales where I find objects, so a lot of my work is about past lives and the power that objects hold. Images are the same way. When you see a certain thing, you can feel the life it's had. Sometimes I try to incorporate it into my work.

I am interested in objects that have been neglected, that are filled with pain or heartache. There are subcultures that use candles to cast spells for love, marriage, to ward off evil spirits and such. The candles come in different shapes and forms, with human figures. I was

casting these partially melted candles in aluminum, attempting to freeze this moment of longing and desperation. The ones I melted myself could be seen as self-portraits.

MSJ: I have a similar interest, but I think you're more interested in whatever that thing possesses. I am very drawn to the overlooked—the dirt from the street, the things that people don't notice in everyday life. I have this great love of William Eggleston for that very reason. He's taking pictures of things that nobody else would ever notice. The formal attributes of the picture make it riveting to look at.

What you were talking about is like the markings on walls, or the way people carve into a tree. They make you go, There was a person here!

sc: It's possessing the thing, in a sense. Not unlike what cats do when they mark their territory. When it comes down to it, we're just animals.

MSJ: Somebody said to me recently, "The difference is we know we are going to die."

sc: It's a great slogan. Words to live by.

MSJ: Right. What was I going to say? I paint lost dog posters sometimes. Something about the way they're handwritten and their urgency is very moving. They're so sincere.

sc: People are creating these extensions of their emotion. I actually have a collection of lost pet flyers that I've been putting together for a while. I may have mentioned it to you last time you were in New Orleans. My favorite one is for a lost parakeet.

MSJ: Oh yeah, that's nice.

sc: It's funny how their styles change as technology changes. Now a lot are digitally made. Every now and then you find a handmade one. I found this gem—you could tell it was done in a frenzy. It said "Lost Female Boxer" and had a telephone number. It was made on corrugated plastic with stick-on vinyl letters and numbers. Each letter was a little bit crooked. It reminded me of a Mark Flood painting, minus the paint. I made a replica of it.

MSJ: (laughter) I like the idea of recording, which is why I like Pop art so much. I don't see it as a consumer thing; I see it as a great record of a time. The best thing I could do is commemorate our time. What was 2015 like? I have this documentary impulse, and my art is my subjective recording.

sc: I see formalism going on in your work, with the way you place images on the picture frame, but there is all this antiformalism happening as well.

MSJ: I like the combination. The content is informal but then I take it and formalize it. Formal choices, color, size, time, composition, etcetera are good tools to keep the viewer around.

sc: Or are they entry points?

MSJ: Yeah, entry points, or holding points. Form holds the whole thing together. I'll go back to Eggleston—he takes a picture of nothing, but he formalizes it so beautifully that you're compelled to look at it.

sc: Speaking about entry points, I like to use humor as a way for viewers to enter the work. Once they get in, there are other things to keep them there, hopefully. That's the intention. You have a lot of humor in your work as well.

MSJ: I like to think of it as dark humor. I found all these selfies with homeless people, and selfies with people at funerals. People taking pictures of themselves beside the body—or with a person's head peeking out from behind the coffin.

sc: That's not new, though. Families used to pose in front of a loved one's body and take one last family portrait before it went into the ground.

MSJ: The humor that I use is kind of in that vein, where there is tragedy and indifference. That's where we're at—sincerely insincere, sincerely ironic, or truly, uncomfortably funny. It's not even funny. I don't know how to describe it. Then there's just chaos. I'll embrace something that's just totally crazy, such as these selfies. It's almost like slapstick: you're laughing when somebody falls down. Or something is so absurd, that you just put it there in the work.

sc: Like good comedies or horror films. They have this absurdness and, at the same time, other things that can make you think, if you want to think, but you don't have to if you don't want to.

msj: Right, you could just laugh it off and be cruel.

sc: You see so much of this behavior on the Internet: trolls that go around provoking strangers.

msj: I'm reading this book by Maggie Nelson called *The Art of Cruelty*. Her references range from movies to dance to literature to art, and I'm like, Wow she has an encyclopedic brain! It seems like cruelty has evolved into indifference. If you could be sincerely ironic or ironically sincere, now you can be cruelly indifferent or indifferently cruel. Or both of those things simultaneously.

sc: Humans have always been cruel to each other, it's just that the Internet helps it spread now. A lot of it is learned behavior.

msj: The Internet has brought it to the fore, but I see it on television, in movies, and even in a word like *whatever*. Your friend falls drunk on the floor and passes out, "Whatever."

sc: Or, "Let's draw on 'em with a sharpie." And photograph it and post the image on the Internet.

msj: You know what I'm talking about, right! It's all in that "whatever"—the politics of disaster, nihilism, violence, indifference, tragedy, comedy, narcissism, and mayhem.

sc: Last time we spoke you mentioned you had a eureka moment putting all these aspects together into one piece.

msj: Yeah. I had been doing these singular paintings for a show at Karma. I'd lined them all up to put them against each other. Then I came upon this idea—you know when you're walking down the street and there are construction walls and people post shit all over them? They become almost like Rauschenberg's *Rebus* painting.

sc: I totally see that.

Michael St. John,  
WALL (CHAINED),  
2015, collage,  
assemblage, acrylic,  
polymer on canvas,

48 x 72 inches.  
Photo by Pierre  
Le Hors. Courtesy  
Andrea Rosen  
Gallery, New York.





I like the idea of recording, which is why I like Pop art so much.  
I don't see it as a consumer thing; I see it as a great record of a time.  
— Michael St. John







MSJ: Going back to realism, I thought I could start making paintings of walls in order to include all these things—movies, politics, celebrity, fashion, music, television. It's all advertised on walls. I could make, to use Philip Guston's phrase, an "assembly of mayhem" or Jim Morrison's *The Soft Parade*. Instead of doing individual paintings, I could make these diptychs of walls where eventually—if I made enough of them—I could have a parade of all this stuff that I've been working with.

I am totally into these pieces, because there's no end. Also, there is always a really interesting formal problem that I get to solve. That's the artist's job, to make up a problem and somehow solve it. I get to include all the stuff that I'm interested in, use a lot of the same things that I've used before, and add new things that when shown do make a kind of parade.

sc: Almost like individual floats lined up together.

MSJ: Yeah! Like individual floats at Mardi Gras! I hadn't thought about that.

sc: You have the collective theme of the parade, and each float is a take on a subject in the theme.

MSJ: That's true. As I've been working on them, the same themes are recurring. I can expand on subjects I've taken on before and make them a bit more open. They're not so iconic. I get to play with Warhol's repetition with the posters on the wall; I get to play with Rauschenberg's *Rebus* ideas; I get to do Ashcan School realism.

sc: One-stop shopping!

MSJ: I just can't believe I fell into this. I love the way they're going. It was also—you'll like this—simultaneous with learning that I could live stream WWOZ from New Orleans. I love New Orleans music, all kinds, so I get to listen to that crazy music while I make these paintings.

sc: My favorite is this great show on Wednesday nights, "Records from the Crypt." It's 1950s and '60s New Orleans R&B, rock 'n' roll, and swamp pop.

MSJ: They have a really good blues show too, and I love that old traditional

New Orleans music, the Cajun music, and the crazy jazz that's all over the place. It's been a great inspiration to listen to that. It's like early cartoon music or something. I don't know if people even like that station in New Orleans.

sc: They love it. It's an institution. Is music a big part of your practice?

MSJ: Yeah, when I can find the right music, things kind of kick in. When I was making all those singular paintings I usually listened to talk shows and stuff.

sc: Same here. In the studio, I like to have stimuli everywhere. I'll have the TV on, and music playing while I'm working. Sometimes I'll have a radio in each room on a different station, so I'm getting all this diverse and segregated information as I maneuver through the space. It's probably not the best way to concentrate, but it forces my mind to change gears, to look differently at things.

MSJ: For a long time I listened to movies, because I would record directly from them. I have all these tapes of movies. I like the narrative thing.

sc: What kinds of movies?

MSJ: A lot of classics; any well-written movie that translated well into audio.

sc: Old black-and-white movies?

MSJ: With the snappy dialogue? I didn't record those. It's more contemporary movies like *Apocalypse Now* or *The Shining*. There must be about thirty movies that I used to listen to.

sc: I also used to play *Apocalypse Now* while I was in my studio.

MSJ: The part where he talks about the horror is the best. "The horror!" (laughter)

sc: Colonel Kurtz's moment of clarity.

MSJ: So how do you feel now that you're in Los Angeles?

sc: The combination of light, urban space, and nature is pretty exciting. I live in Eagle Rock at the moment, so I have hiking a few minutes away. The

house has a giant covered patio that I'm using as a studio. The kitchen is outside, so it's almost like living in a camp-house in the woods, but the woods are LA.

MSJ: That's good.

sc: It's a good change. I'd been in New Orleans for twenty years—things were very familiar. Now everything is somewhat new to me, including the roads and landscape. It's important to remove yourself from your comfort zone. I'll most likely be relocating my studio here on a more permanent basis.

MSJ: Oh, really?

sc: Or I might go back to New Orleans in a couple of months and see what happens.

MSJ: I wouldn't leave New Orleans if I lived there.

sc: I have a house you can move into. You could also use my studio, on the other side of town.

MSJ: I might take you up on that. You'd do the whole thing where you rent both spaces? You own the house, right?

sc: I own the house in New Orleans and I'm renting the studio. But I might hold onto it, even if I stay out here, because it's cheaper than storage. I'll just have to build platforms for any flash floods.

You were talking about moving your studio last time as well; you were in the basement and you were going to move it to the top floor.

MSJ: I'm waiting to build out my garage into a real studio. Are you worried that LA is going to catch on fire and burn?

sc: I thought the fire threat was more for outside the city, but it doesn't matter where you are. There is always some sort of threat.

MSJ: Yeah. What are you working on out there?

opposite:  
Stephen Collier,  
CONCEALMENT  
WALL, 2012,  
framed wood wall,

Plexiglass, and  
mixed medium,  
122½ x 101 x 6¼  
inches. Courtesy  
of the artist.

sc: These smoke-stain paintings. I'm staining canvas with smoke, and then painting imagery on top. The imagery I'm using is influenced by different sources: protest buttons, wartime Zippo lighters, counterculture zines, punk flyers, and hiking trail signs. I'm also looking at a lot of modernist paintings, and mixing those in.

msj: Which modernist paintings are you looking at?

sc: Charles Green Shaw, Judith Lauand. Geometric abstraction from the 1940s and '50s. Artists such as Mira Schendel, Paul Thek, Wally Hedrick, and the Situationalist International. I just saw a great show of Robert Overby's work. Some of this is new to me because my background is in photography.

msj: When you talk about Zippo lighters and stuff, I assume it is more like a subculture thing.

sc: Total subculture. Not many people know about these lighters. They were good luck charms—almost like talismans, sometimes, serving as beacons for these soldiers. They hold this power.

msj: I saw these lighters at Will Boone's studio. He had this collection of lighters from the Vietnam War.

sc: My father served two tours in the Vietnam War and I remember seeing his old lighters when I was younger. I am fascinated by them; I showed you some images and books in my studio.

msj: There are all kinds of weird stuff on the lighters, correct?

sc: Yes. Soldiers used to have them personally engraved with images, slogans, or whatever they wanted to express. They were an extension of their identity and a way to say something personal—protesting the war, for example—or simple reminders of better times. Nonsmokers had these Zippos as well. Some were used to burn down villages. The messages and images were diverse: some being profane, with drug references, while others had girlfriends' names. One of my favorite images is a walking hand shooting the bird [as in "Fuck you"]. Soldiers called it a one-finger salute. Another favorite is of

Snoopy lying on his house saying, "Fuck it."

So when I stain the canvas with smoke and holes get burned into it, it's forever scarred. It now has a past life. It turns the imagery more into objects.

msj: I saw some of these down in your studio, didn't I?

sc: You did. I've also been collecting political and humor buttons here and there, and have been using that imagery as well, sometimes intermixing it with modernist painting too.

msj: You can find all kinds of political buttons on the Internet. I just can't believe there are people out there—maybe I should be thankful—sitting all day long, putting pictures of all their buttons on the web. It's like a great little encyclopedia.

sc: Thank God for all these collectors who like to organize and share!

msj: They make my life so easy.

sc: I'm working on this new project for a show that opens here in LA in a couple weeks [at Champions of Culture]. I'm taking the Harvey Ball smiley face that he designed for an insurance company, I believe, to boost morale. And I'm defacing the image by folding, cutting, and mark-making. I'm approaching this almost like it's a Mr. Potato Head, thinking in terms of what can be added and/or subtracted.

msj: That's good! (*laughter*)

sc: A smiley face can be sad as well. There are more emotions than just happiness, right? So I'm investigating that, in a sense, through this iconic corporate image that's really overused today.

msj: I was just up in Provincetown and there was this shop that had cool modernist furniture. In the back, someone was manufacturing huge buttons—like a foot across. They hang on the wall, like Richard Hamilton's giant button. If Hamilton had his button standing on the ground, it would come up to about his neck. The button said "Slip It to Me," like for the expression "Flip It to Me," like pass me the drugs, or whatever that expression was.

When I saw these buttons in Provincetown I thought, Oh my God, these are so great! Why didn't I think of making big buttons? If you made a cast, you could make the most fucked up ones. Actually all the junk in Kmart and Walmart gives me lots of ideas—all the crap that people buy.

sc: Usually they're impulse buys, so they have this very seductive quality.

msj: I feel the same way about commercial posters, because the people who put them together are super smart. I'm a big fan of formalism, so I love to look at stuff when the design quality is good.

I just used the *Mad Men* poster for a painting. I forget what season it's for; it's a body falling.

sc: The silhouette?

msj: Yeah. I just used the poster across the middle of this painting for 9/11 and Katrina, because the anniversaries are pretty close in time, actually.

sc: You still see markings on some houses in New Orleans ten years later. That's another part of your work that I see that corresponds with John Frederick Peto's [American trompe l'oeil painter]. He too kept images and objects in his work life-size.

msj: I try to use life-size versions of things. It's hard for me to blow things up or make them tiny.

sc: When I make replicas, I change them a little bit, but for the most part, I keep them the original size. Once I made a replica of a fingernail that Lindsay Lohan wore in court. She had the word *fuck* and the letter *u* painted on her middle finger, on top of a candy background. It was subtle, but the press picked up on it.

I put it in this piece called *Concealment Wall*, a collaboration with Brett LaBauve. I was researching mummified cats. I don't know how I got to that, but they were finding mummified cats and shoes in the walls of houses in Massachusetts built around the 1800s. People would put objects in the walls to ward off evil spirits. This came from the prehistoric tradition of putting human sacrifices in the foundations of homes, for good luck.



MSJ: Oh, wow.

sc: They adjusted the ritual for modern times. They would use an object as a stand-in for the human body.

For our piece, I framed out a wall in the middle of the gallery space and filled it with objects. Plexiglass was used on both sides of the wall instead of Sheetrock, exposing many hidden objects, which included playing cards, a leather glove, porn, a bottle of urine, written messages, and Lindsay Lohan's fingernail. There were objects on the outside of the wall as well: framed pictures and light fixtures.

MSJ: Okay. I made a painting of it using a little peephole. I cut a hole in the painting and behind that was Lindsay Lohan's fingernail with "F you." I made it in response to Duchamp's *Étant donnés* piece, in Philadelphia, which I consider a horrible rape scene. It's the most sexist thing I have ever seen. It makes Paul McCarthy look tame. Talk about the art of cruelty!

sc: How big is your painting?

MSJ: Like three by four feet, but I made the fingernail really big. Often I'll take art historical things and will respond to them with a painting or a sculpture. The Whitney Museum had a show called *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*. They had everything happy going on

in the '60s, but at the same time JFK and Martin Luther King were shot and every major city in America was burnt. They left that part out of the show. So around the same time as that show, I made this series of little paintings called *Cities of Fire*. How could you leave all that out?

sc: The dark side of love.

MSJ: New York was on fire, and you're going, "Oh wasn't this a happy time." Really? Revisionist history drives me crazy.

sc: Are you going to come back to New Orleans in the winter?

MSJ: I am, in March.

sc: Okay. I am curating a show at Good Children in March. Would you be interested in having a piece or two in the show?

MSJ: Sure! I could drop them off! What are you gonna do for the show?

sc: I'd like to do a show about signs or messages left in public spaces that contain emotional baggage.

MSJ: I'll stay there for like five days and then I'm going out to California and then, on my way back to Massachusetts, I'm going to stay in New Orleans again.

sc: Well, I might see you in California too. We won't be able to drink on the street out here, though.

MSJ: Are you going to be in California in March? You're gonna leave New Orleans and move to California!

sc: Not for good. This is my second attempt at being bicoastal. I tried it with New York and New Orleans for a bit, but I think this is going to be a little more successful as far as living and working.

MSJ: You could drive across West Texas, it's beautiful out there!

All right, we should get going. The crazy lawn mower guy is here and I don't have a room to get away to. He zooms around the house making a lot of noise.

# Art in America

JANUARY 2014

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Michael St. John:  
*Country Life*, 2013,  
acrylic, polymers  
and mixed mediums,  
49 by 36 inches; at  
Andrea Rosen.

## MICHAEL ST. JOHN Andrea Rosen

During the past five years or so, Michael St. John, something of a veteran on the New York scene, has been presenting small shows in which a mixture of objects—paintings, constructions and altered found objects—aggregate into a witty take on the American obsession with sex, violence and Exceptionalism. While an untitled piece from 2008, in which a cast penis wags at us from a glory hole in a wooden box pasted with a decal of Old Glory, might have been atypical in form, it was characteristic of the artist's penchant for both puns and homages (in this case to Jasper Johns's *Target with Plaster Casts*, 1955). In 2009, St. John collaged a semi-pornographic image of Janet Jackson to a paint-spattered piece of wood adhered to canvas. Such works might be seen in retrospect to hint at his concerns to come, as realized in the nine untitled paintings and one sculpture in "Country Life," St. John's most recent outing at Andrea Rosen Gallery (all works but one 2013).

The title of the show refers in part to the artist's move to rural Massachusetts. That his relationship to rural living might be ambivalent was signaled directly at the entrance by the presence of a cast-plaster red, white and blue bunny with Xs for eyes and a stitched-up mouth placed atop a silver-colored beer keg. All but one of the canvases beyond—pretty much uniform in scale, around 48 by 36 inches—consisted of a faux-wooden painted background that resembles the wall of a shack or barn, to which various elements have either been adhered or painted as if to look that way—a mixture of judiciously selected found fragments and trompe-l'oeil details. Torn-out photos of big-busted redneck girls and other real objects (in one case a bright blue bra) exist alongside numerous painted vignettes, such as a nail and its shadow (this with a lineage

in Western art going back at least to the Cubists).

While the act of perusing these paintings to determine what was real and what "fake" yielded ample evidence of the artist's very real virtuosity, the dichotomy between the two modes fed into the show's contemporary meditation on the erosion of authenticity in the wake of increasingly spectacular modes of being ("ACCESS HOLLYWOOD" reads one ominously scrawled phrase, looking like a threat). Throughout this series, a clichéd vocabulary of country living—the keg, the barn walls, the girls—seamlessly incorporates recurring images of defaced currency and dead presidents (torn, faded photos of Lincoln and Kennedy; a Nixon campaign sticker), expressing the mix of wounded patriotism and deflated economic confidence that has fueled Tea-Party ire.

Were that all, the exhibition might have become sheer messaging. However, St. John is a creature of the art world, and his love of painting and painters, from John Peto to postwar, post-Pop artists, is manifest. One sees echoes of Johns's career-long meditation on mortality, as well as Rauschenberg's darkly political collages of the 1960s. Still, the totality was somehow larger than either topicality or riffs on specific artists. One might, in fact, read the entire installation as a modern-day vanitas. "JUICY COUTURE" reads one tattered logo, placed against turquoise slats (the work a collaboration, apparently, between St. John and the artist Alex McQuilkin). Near the logo is a skull. And, of course, there's that bunny.

—Faye Hirsch

*Michael St. John, These Days.* New York: Karma: 2013. Text by Patrick Owens.

### **The Friendly Provocateur**

When I was introduced to Michael St. John's work some years ago, his paintings featured monochromatic highly detailed images of ordinary objects – a nut and bolt, a screw, a gift bow – floating on brushy fields of white paint. These were followed by paintings of colorful images of well known Chuck Jones and Ed “Big Daddy” Roth cartoon characters caught in mid-action across multi-paneled white surfaces. Familiar images, carefully rendered, seemed to float on the surface of the painting or look as though they were dropped into the space of the painting. St. John's selection of these objects and characters introduced elements of pathos or humor that laid the groundwork for his creation of an expansive visual vocabulary of the incidental and the iconic to challenge our notions of beauty, relevance, and meaning in his paintings and sculpture.

St. John is omnivorous in his selection of imagery, styles, and art historical and pop cultural references. Everything is fair game – from an image of a film still from Warhol's “Empire” to scrapbooking; from Johns' catenary (now a string of triangular flags seen in car lots and carnivals) to the hastily assembled picture and scrawl of a lost dog notice; from Peto's exacting trompe-l'oeil technique to a messy collage of stickers and scraps of paper stuck to a street post. Even snapshot self-portraits of the artist make their way into the mix. St. John further challenges us with provocative but lovingly rendered images of the barrel of a gun or a battered woman's face. All are masterfully executed and carefully arranged within the pictorial space of a painting that may sometimes have stretcher bars exposed or its surface scratched with seemingly random pencil marks, underscoring the physicality of the painting. St. John always reminds us we are not only looking at images in a painting, but at the painting itself.

In recent years, St. John has expanded into sculpture. His objects reflect a similar freedom and facility with subject matter and technique. Cast plaster bunnies are scarred with spray-painted graffiti and fashion logos. Sinister hoods are made from paper bags and tagged with cute cartoon pins. What is cute becomes sinister, what is sinister becomes cute.

The often oppositional combinations of form and content may at first seem chaotic, but St. John's masterful technical facility with materials and his deft combinations of the prosaic, the profane, and the familiar invite us to consider his seemingly eclectic range of subject matter as new icons to be added to a now familiar lexicon of flags and soup cans.

And while it might be tempting or easy to dismiss St. John's works as purposefully opaque and inscrutable remixes of art history and pop culture, they are not. They are wonderfully seductive, deeply personal, accessible celebrations of the familiar and sometimes uncomfortable landscape of Americana.



## Art in Review



At Andrea Rosen Gallery, left, an installation view of “The Wedding,” a group show organized by Ydessa Hendeles, and, above “In the Studio Twenty Eleven,” by Michael St. John.

### ‘The Wedding’

(The Walker Evans Polaroid Project)

#### Michael St. John

‘In the studio Twenty Eleven’

*Andrea Rosen Gallery  
525 West 24th Street, Chelsea  
Through Feb. 4*

The cooked and the raw go head to head in these two exhibitions. The main event and cooked portion is “The Wedding (The Walker Evans Polaroid Project),” an inspired if somewhat lugubrious group show orchestrated by Ydessa Hendeles, a Canadian collector and respected independent (and independently wealthy) curator. Over the last 30 years Ms. Hendeles has become known for staging idiosyncratic exhibitions in her eponymous art foundation in Toronto, increasingly mixing contemporary art from her collection with other acquisitions, including vintage photographs and unusual antiques. At Rosen her first effort in New York pairs effectively with a show of the relatively fibrous collage-paintings that constitute the artist Michael St. John’s latest excursions into contemporary culture and its

discontents.

Characterized as “a curatorial composition,” Ms. Hendeles’s “Wedding” is less an exhibition than an elegiac installation piece. It carefully pits art against craft, the quick against the dead and, to my mind, fact and document (exemplified by photography) against faith and memory (represented by Gothic style). Ms. Hendeles finds traces of the Gothic sensibility in the Arts and Crafts furniture of Gustav Stickley, a photograph of an ancient Paris shop front by Eugène Atget and a monumental 19th-century mahogany bird cage in the form of a square, lavishly domed cathedral, crystal palace or mausoleum.

This magnificent object sits at the center of a large, gray-walled gallery, flanked reverentially by eight diminutive pewlike benches (meticulous reproductions of a child’s settle by Stickley). The mix also includes a lovely 19th-century wood miniature of a cooper’s (or barrelmaker’s) workshop, complete with tiny tools and parquet floor, and a grid of astounding photographs, dated 1887, from Eadweard Muybridge’s “Animal Locomotion” series. In them an adjutant, or giant stork, wings awkwardly akimbo, seems about to take flight.

The big mahogany bird cage

functions as a kind of mother ship for a selection of 68 small images, mostly of Victorian, Gothic-inflected houses that the great American photographer Walker Evans (1903-75) made shortly before his death, using the new Polaroid SX-70. Ringing the gallery in a single closely spaced line, they reiterate his crystalline, groundbreaking black-and-white images of vernacular architecture from the 1930s, but with fuzzy forms, seeping color and fading light. Here they form a relentless march of ghostly mirages that only pauses, at the center of each wall, for a photographic work by the sculptor Roni Horn: a pair of large color images of the heads of exotic, taxidermied birds, seen from behind.

Elegantly clear, with each feather in place, Ms. Horn’s bird images snap Ms. Hendeles’s presentation into focus. Portraying possible residents of the bird cage, they are the opposite of both Evans’s small blurry domiciles and Muybridge’s struggling adjutant. From afar the birds’ silhouettes can bring to mind Gothic arches. Up close they might be looking at the Polaroids; they could also be couples (same sex or not) exchanging marriage vows at the altar.

It is fascinating to parse the web of possible connections, contrasts

and meanings that permeate “The Wedding.” But it helps that the presentation’s slightly precious air is offset by the bracing, seemingly uncouth Americana of “In the Studio Twenty Eleven,” Mr. St. John’s show in the back gallery. Inspired by a Jasper Johns painting, his nine new works teach the old dogs of appropriation and collage new tricks, partly through the use of sparkling, minimally painted canvases. Employing modernist abstraction as a kind of bulletin board that also suggests a chunk of art-studio wall, each presents a spare but suggestive assortment of cheap and expendable items — photographs, trinkets, newspaper clippings, decals, small objects and the odd drawing or note — that, like the works in Ms. Hendeles’s show, form a kind of rebus. Most of the items are real, although the tacks and pushpins holding hold them in place are actually painted on. With the ephemeral as a common thread Mr. St. John slyly fuses trompe l’oeil painting with a small, portable version of installation art. Somehow it is a very memorable lesson.

ROBERTA SMITH

## Michael St. John

by Joe Fyfe

Cynthia Broan Gallery  
23 East 73 Street, New York



Michael St. John, Untitled 2005 polychromed wood, 23 x 13 x 12 inches Courtesy Cynthia Broan Gallery

In the mid-Nineteenth Century, the French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire published his famous essay, *The Painter of Modern Life*. He proposed a new model of the artist as an individual who was simultaneously immersed in and detached from the miasma of contemporary urban life. In our time, Baudelaire's concept is pervasive. It is particularly noticeable among the many artists, whether they are aware of him or not, who make work that has a critical or empathic relationship to our common commercial culture. Michael St. John, a mid-career artist and denizen of midtown Manhattan, is an interesting contemporary manifestation of this formula.

His current show has eight of his own recent works plus 10 contributions by other artist friends. The announcement card consists of a bushy-haired-and-bearded color portrait of him at 19 with the words "I'm a child of divorce. Gimme a break" emblazoned across it, a verbal appropriation from a T-shirt, most likely. He moved to NYC in the very early seventies where he hung out, went to galleries and clubs and took a few art courses. He spent his years "just observing" he states, and his work surfaced in the gallery system when he was older than many of his contemporaries. This is relevant to Baudelaire's model artist, who desired anonymity, though he was a "Man of the World" who derived his artistic experiences outside of the academy. St. John has become an important teacher and independent curator, but he has not been fresh-squeezed from the Yale-Columbia-UCLA fine arts graduate program pipeline.

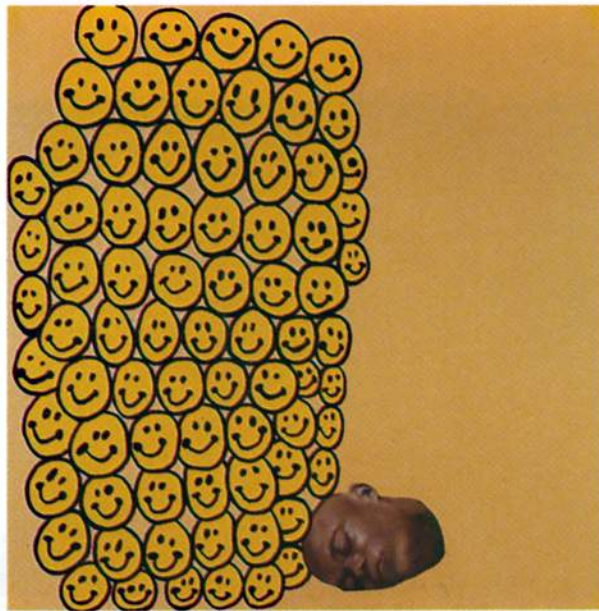


Michael St. John, *A Perfect World, Just Do It* 2002-2004 oil, acrylic, polymers, crackle medium, and atlason canvas, 66 x 72 inches  
Courtesy Cynthia Broan Gallery

Baudelaire's ideal artist was a *flâneur* or stroller, and most of St John's work recreates a stroll through his local neighborhood, Times Square, which serves him well as an intense physical duplication of our contemporary environment of televised and virtual signage and display. The paintings are festooned, to the point of being clogged, with imagery from advertising, pornography, photojournalism and the artist's personal history. To St. John, all these worlds are homogeneous. Most of his works contain real objects as well, and the show also has some of his sculptures, which are derived from everything from sneaker logos to imagery from recently famous paintings.

The work performs a soulful, delirious recapitulation of the constant forced imagery, the manipulations by every product and opinion vying for one's attention, the restless false eagerness of mass media that accompanies what intimacy is available in our day-to day existence. Baudelaire's *flâneur* was an empathetic character who loved crowds, and it follows that St. John would mount other works among his own, as if to indicate that he sees art-making as a social activity: his work communicates alongside other works doing the same. In his life as well as his art, St. John appears to hit all the marks, at least according to one important standard of measurement.





Michael St. John: *Race Riot*, 1999, oil on canvas, 66 inches square; at Team.

### Michael St. John at Team

Michael St. John has reinvented himself as a painter, which, for those who don't remember his work in the 1980s, is exactly how he started out. During the '90s he experimented with deliriously inventive and chaotic installations, incorporating sculpture, video, found objects, even a mirrored disco ball. Obviously unwilling to forgo the excitement of such multimedia overkill, St. John somehow managed to achieve that rollicking chaos within the rectilinear format of the six paintings plus two related sculptures (all 1998 and 1999) in his recent show.

Most of the paintings accumulate images of celebrities of varying kinds and other cultural icons, all floating in neutral fields that tend toward a fleshy beige. In the relatively simple *Heaven*, we see a blonde Liz Taylor and a sideways head of Jesus, as he is presented on the animated TV show "South Park." The two heads sandwich a rendering of a classic Donald Judd box sculpture. A vague horizon line puts the three visual non sequiturs into a theatrical space. While montaging disparate elements is hardly new, this particular trio is intriguing as it hovers, rebuslike, on the verge of making sense. Perhaps it is most amusing to understand

*Heaven* as a literal depiction of this St. John's vision of the great hereafter, and to wonder what strange personal cosmology would result in such a construction of paradise.

Elsewhere, St. John makes some riskier choices, such as placing the head of a seemingly deceased black man under a swarm of smiley faces in *Race Riot*, which seems to refer obliquely to Robert Gober's iconic yet still controversial *Hanging Man*, *Sleeping Man* wallpaper. A roughed-up woman appears next to a tire, a Christmas tree and an anthropomorphized dog bone in *She*. St. John's ambiguous referencing of racial and sexual abuses, without underscoring that these are bad things, may strike some viewers as irresponsible. Perhaps it evinces the artist's confidence that we already know that such things are evil, though they still require our critical attention.

St. John revealed his intentions most clearly by choosing to show two similarly scaled, polychrome cast-plaster sculptures. *Dumb Creature* is a 16-inch-high three-dimensionalization of a late Philip Guston hooded Klansman figure. *In dreams you are all mine* shows a man in a hockey mask who evokes Jason from the "Friday the 13th" movies. St. John forcibly joins Guston's haunting vision of human failure and beastliness with the harsh logic of the Hollywood splatter genre, in which the monster is never vanquished for long, and has us

discover that the two share an absurdist pessimism. If he wishes us to look deeper into our culture's big, dumb heart of darkness and see it as a fascinating if horrifying mess, he certainly succeeds. —Bill Arning



**MICHAEL ST. JOHN @TEAM**

until Nov 6th. 527 W 26th St.

by Jane Gang & Millree Hugh

**M:** I get the impression, in his paintings, that all the things coexist, even though they're not painted the same way. Just because in some sense that all of the paintings are just a load of...shit. That some of it's art and some of it's not. That all of it seems equally painful or pointless. The fact that there's a horizon line seems completely redundant. Because obviously there's no perspective point.

**J:** I disagree. I see two perspective points in this one, Heaven; the horizon line and then there's this Jesus head going into this box. Like a graphic arrow indicating a perspective, inviting us in. Look at Liz's beautiful, violet eyes. Is this airbrushed? **M:** No. Michael's big thing is Ingres. **J:** That's not Ingres. **M:** Yeah, but you know. Really super polished surfaces, fleshy and realistic. **J:** Its very airbrush-like

**M:** *She*. Hedda Nussbaum. The woman who was locked in her home and beaten by her husband. The couple who adopted a kid, the adoptive father killed the kid In court she looked like she'd had the shit beaten out of her for the last fifteen years. Her face was more of an indictment of his guilt than the case brought against him by the police **J:** Her skin is 'rocky crags' ... **M:** She takes on this thing like she's some sort of abstract painting. **J:** Its a very powerful image of the abused woman. Actually I thought it was a Hollywood actress looking the part for some cult/horror film. It reminds me of a cheesy film poster where all the action elements jostle around the main character. **M:** The best thing about this painting is the horizon line. **J:** She's got her chin behind it. That gives the head volume and weight. Like Liz Taylor's head in *Heaven*. Otherwise she'd be floating, with a tire on her head

**M:** I think they look like some cheesy slacker 80's painting done by someone who knows nothing about art. Painting like David Salle, by accident. **J:** They don't remind me of David Salle at all. They have such a bare back- ground. They're actually very 'clean'. There's a knot of images in this one, *I Love You, Ingnatz*. Six characters and a brick. **M:** I think there's a reason for all this beige in the background. A blanded, racial anonymity. Once people get to a certain income bracket in this country, color doesn't matter anymore. I think its weird the way he's using sexism and racism; pictorial symbols in a painting but he's not actually saying anything about them

**J:** It seems to me that he indicates, like icons for the file and 'click on this'. His wide ranging paint style speaks volumes. This goes deep, its up to the viewer, he's not making judgments. *Race Riot* a man's head lying side- ways to a mountainous pile of smiley heads. His head is rendered like a photo collage, referencing the widespread use of photographic images to tell a story, open a can of worms or just to exist as a visual image over painting. **M:** I don't think photography has got any more value than painting has, or cartooning has or any of these con- temporary tropes, everything's equal. These seem like very negative and dark paintings. There's something really cynical in it. The fact that they're super nicely painted is irrelevant.

**J:** High and low juxtapositions. All painted well according to its genre: This appeals to my desire to feel inspired, impressed and stimulated by the dexterity of the artist: The creation of an intriguing image on a flat surface. Something that has been given a life. An energy that I can feel, dark or otherwise. He might be bringing all 'stuff' to base level zero, but in a very sophisticated way. **M:** Are you supposed to deduce meaning from these combinations of images together? **J:** I guess you can if you want. I mean he probably has his own reasons, after all you have to keep yourself amused while you paint, but Its not always a good idea to let on what the work might mean to you, the artist. **M:** So its like multiple choice painting. **J:** It could be viewed as a modern version of masterful still life, where the subject matter is irrelevant against the charm of its being.

**M:** But these paintings seem a lot more tactical than somebody who's just painting because they like painting. **J:** Definitely **J:** Maybe these are the still life's of the end of the 20th Century. **M:** Depending on the shit comes into your head, paint it. **J:** Yeah.

**M:** There's something really dark to these paintings, because this woman, Hedda, if you know who this woman is, she's got a Robert Rauschenberg tire, on top of her head, making it look like she's been partially run over, and the tire is being propped up by a 'penis'. In the background there's this kiddie's Christmas Tree image. If you wanted any further reminder of her child's horrible death you need look no further. He's found emotional content. I like that he's dealing with racist stuff.

**J:** St. John's a white guy isn't he? **M:** Yeah. This decapitated black head that looks like Samuel Jackson, is about to be squashed by a falling tower of rave-heads. That rave 'Happy Face' is so much a white image now, like rap- black, rave-white. You can look at these paintings from the top and from the bottom. The formal and paint his- torical aspects; the Guston head, the Donald Judd box, the Rauschenburg wheel. Also, the way of the paint han- dling on these minimal backgrounds, that takes you back to 60/70's painting. Then there's that SO's style where its all thrown together. And then, there's this other level, this teenage attitude, all this 'stupid ass shit'. In a weird way Matthew Barney's who you also wanted to talk about, is doing the same thing, only the other way round: Hugely erudite, hugely meaningful in terms of and relating to, art history. In another way, there's a way of getting into it on a much lower level: Its all about sport, fashion .. **J:** And obsession with one's own genitals. **M:** Yeah, right.

And there's a really dumb teenage level to his work. **J:** Grandiose. Obscured, personal rituals, rendered almost meaningless by the shroud of pomp and seriousness. Berkeley, Derek Jarman on' loads a money'.

**M:** He's a high-class jock. **J:** Maybe all the glitz, elegance and considered, stylized movements dazzle and distract. Perhaps that's the point. He's just a big dandy. **M:** I was thinking that there's a more assumed erudition to Barney's work and a more assumed dumbness to Michael's work. **J:** I find it hard to connect with Barney's work. Its so full on 'high production values', and he's not gay is he? **M:** Would it speak to you more if he was gay? **J:** Yeah, I think it would actually. They know how to set themselves alight.

**M:** But isn't he like the straight man playing with gay imagery? Narcissistic, anal warrior, with vibrators stuffed up his arsehole. That film, like a big fashion show. Wasn't that Helena Christiansen? **J:** That was so lame, so straight-man discreet and uptight, quietly admitting to anal sex pleasures. That part should've been a close up; a big rose bud "hello" and in yer face action, at least to break the monotony. His work is so 'British', like Ascet. So waspy. Maybe that's the point. **M:** Maybe he should've put the dildo up Helena's arse. **J:** That would have been too typical hetro male fantasy. **M:** But like one of those dildo-cam, where there's a camera on the end of the dildo, you can look at the insides of someone's arse. You get them on the Internet. **J:** Too typical hetro male. Barney ought to collaborate with Cathy de Monc aux. That I'd like tp see. What about Michael St. John's sculptures? **M:** This one, Dumb Creature, is a Philip Guston-like head, a KKK figure, that appears in Guston's paintings. And that other one is Jason from Friday the Thirteenth. He's got the two ends covered. That's what I mean about St. John being so tactical, he presents both bases, so we know where we are. **J:** Maybe his dealer chose them. **M:** No, that's Michael. I don't know, but I'm guessing. **J:** A bit anal then ...maybe he needs a plug shoved up his arse. **M:** I think maybe we should ask him how much all these need things shoved up their arses, or how much art you could do about that. **J:**

Is Michael gay? **M:** He has a girlfriend but I think he could be persuaded. **J:** Straight men love those she- males. And don't underestimate yer girlfriend .

**M:** You know what this whole show really looks like? Halloween. I suppose you should really be able to get a Donald Judd box, and a Guston KKK mask. I think anyone walking out on Halloween in a Donald Judd box would be a result. **J:** Would you be more likely to get laid with a Judd than a Jesus of Southpark? **M:** You might get a better class of lay. You might get some svelte-like girl who works at Paula Cooper, who would know what it was and think it incredibly funny. **J:** You'd have to watch out if you take Dumb Creature out of context. **M:** That's true. Michael's got a lot of 18-22 year olds who are into his work. There's a deep kind of resonance for these people.

**J:** There's a reoccurrence of open mouths. **M:** Oral paintings **J:** Giving head. **M:** Whatever sex you are



there's something penetrative about looking at pictures. If you've got a big hole to take it in, you've got the beginnings of a good oral kind of art. What you should probably do is look at the work, run backwards, then run towards it, and run away from it. Over and over again, giving yourself a huge visual blowjob. After a while you'd have to run incredibly fast until your chakra had an ejaculation. A complete visual orgasm. **J:** That's high art

**M:** That's a high appreciation for art. Lacan says we create a shadow version of ourselves, a projection of how we'd like to be, when we're having sex, or fighting passionately. On leaving that place these shadows are discarded. The universe is filled with shell-shadows of us lying around. In Barney's work there's light: redemption. Whereas these, there's none of that, no reason. As you described it earlier, there's no reason for painting except for the act of painting itself, in terms of furthering art history. **J:** I disagree. You can paint to get to that moment of reaching the 'point beyond'. One can produce in a painting a trigger effect which will enable some people to see what hasn't been seen before. To propel the viewer into a place as yet indescribable in words. An experiential place. Which could be dark or light in nature. It's a bit like going to football, Nick Hornby wrote about this in *Fever Pitch*, when you focus completely in the present, you've no idea what's gonna happen next, you just know something important is unfolding right before your eyes. You are completely open and receptive to whatever is next. In the case of a painting, whatever comes next would be something which lies outside of your reality. Because it happens so fast, it will remain fleeting, a feeling or a disturbance for quite some time until we get used to it and can intellectualize it. **M:** Producing something that hasn't been seen before. **J:** You're on the end of the present. Always.

**M:** Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* was making a differentiation between novelty and the new. Novelty he says, is something perpetually regurgitated by consumer culture. But the real new, of art, the point which separates the two, is when seeing something really new, the ground opens up under you and reveals the subjective nature of the abstract truth of art. At that point is this great, liberating, ejaculatory feeling. **J:** The cycle of rejuvenation. **M:** He takes it further: At that moment in the present you experience the art, this symbol of something new, that moment of the present makes the art redundant. It then becomes something that is just added to the general style of art. **J:** There is also the transference of energy, from the artist to the-art. That energy can be very powerful, and people will connect with that. In St John's paintings they have a life of their own, beyond Michael, beyond the plastic icon images they describe. **M:** That comes out of its formal nature. **J:** I think it's imbued with the spirit of the person painting. **M:** There's a place in contemporary culture now for virtuosity, which there wasn't before. That's what separates the obvious 80's references in these paintings from the 80's. The 80's was about being cack-handed and god-fucking awful. But these paintings have taken some of the conceptual aspects of 80's paintings and made the virtuosic paint handling somehow more the subject of the work. Michael really gets to show how good he is. In the eighties people would regard this as vulgar. Michael said that that's what kids of 18/19, kids in collages, want to see now; really well drawn, well painted stuff. **J:** They are the critics of the future.

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