

HESSE FLATOW

Benzine, Vittoria. "Nat Meade's Adventurous Paintings Unpack Masculinity and American Myths." *Artsy*. Online. September 22, 2023.

ARTSY

Art

Nat Meade's Adventurous Paintings Unpack Masculinity and American Myths

Vittoria Benzine

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Nat Meade
Homestead, 2023
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Brooklyn-based artist Nat Meade has spent a decade unpacking masculine mythology through painting. Pairing an involved material process with archetypal imagery, his work examines enduring mythologies around manhood through recurring characters: pensive men of a timeless machismo, with bushy beards, bare chests, and stoic sheens on their eyes.

So far, Meade has mostly worked small, and his intensely colorful, dense compositions have earned him spots in notable private and public collections. "Hank Stamper's Bones," Meade's second solo show at Hesse Flatow in New York, on view through October 14th, presents works from this year that all expand his exploration of masculine archetype. The title references the eldest son of the hardscrabble, Pacific Northwestern logging family from Ken Kesey's 1964

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novel *Sometimes a Great Notion*. The show also enlivens Meade's narratives with new adventures, featuring, for the first time, canvases populated by numerous figures, their steeds, and the detailed landscapes they traverse.



Nat Meade, installation view of "Hank Stamper's Bones" at Hesse Flatow, 2023. Courtesy of Hesse Flatow.

As a child in Oregon, Meade encountered Rick Griffin, a West Coast psychedelic artist known for designing Grateful Dead album covers. Later, he discovered *Raw* magazine when he started skateboarding. Such influences persist in the kaleidoscope palettes and playfulness of Meade's paintings today. Though he first pursued college football, he ultimately returned to his childhood home of Portland for his BFA. He later earned an MFA from Pratt Institute, and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

In school, Meade worked at mastering his painstaking manner of painting, applying oil paint on fabric and intermittently scraping at the surface and applying washes between layers. Though he previously executed at a small scale, Meade's works in "Hank Stamper's Bones" are notably more imposing.

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Nat Meade
Interlude, 2023
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"Bigger paintings take longer," Meade said in a recent interview, "but it was really important that if I do scale up, I don't lose the density and intensity of the surface." In *Interlude* (2023), which depicts three bare-chested men and a horse in a windy pasture, seamless shading punctuated by decisive mark-making imbues the surface of the work with visual tension. Shades nest and hide within each other, peeking through the places where Meade has scraped, while the textured jute beneath asserts itself. In *Turning* (2023), intensity flashes out from a fire illuminating what looks to be a campground, the reflective mica in Meade's materials igniting the painting's surface.

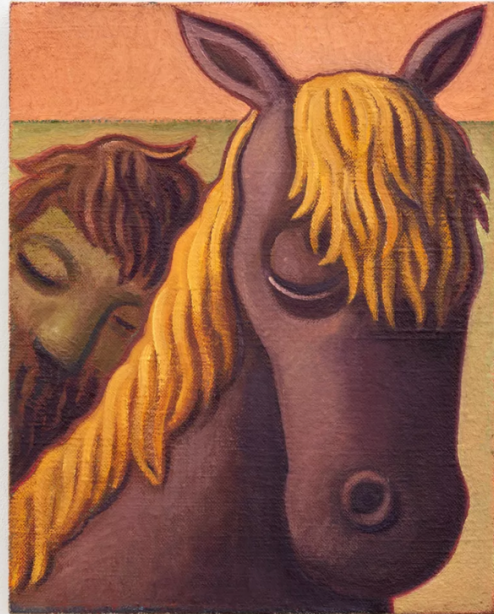
Horses abound in this body of work, displaying physical intimacy with their riders and referencing westward expansion, a project of American masculinity. But of the many figures (both equine and human) depicted in the show's 13 works, only two gaze back at viewers: the subjects of *Heap*, a close-cropped portrait of an aquatic-hued man; and of *Homestead*, (both 2023), in which another man lays on his side while an anthropomorphized mountain smiles serenely in the distance. Downturned eyes on the rest of Meade's subjects suggest shyness, or contemplation, or hiding their true emotions from the world.

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Nat Meade
Heap, 2023
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Nat Meade
Nag, 2023
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Meanwhile, that face in the mountaintop—a sage-like figure—recurs throughout the show. Drawing on lumberjack mythology as well as West Coast tales of hippies and gurus, Meade's dreamy figures are braving nature to seek insight from the mystical man seen in the mountain (and on a sheet pinned to a tree, and in a cave). But the futility of their task nags: In two works where Meade depicts this guru alone, it becomes evident that he is hollow, made of stone—a yawning, empty vessel on which to place hopes of enlightenment.

In this way, Meade honors and lays bare mankind's desire for a guiding authority. Still, these paintings aim to accommodate multiple readings. "I think the color can be seductive, and soft, and say something different than the image, say something different than the surface," Meade said, alluding to these scenes' simmering complexity. "They can all contradict each other." That endless potential might be why his work is finding resonance. In reality, Meade isn't working in men's issues alone.- Vittoria Benzine.