

HESSE FLATOW

Leiman, Layla. "Everyday Archetypes: In Studio With Nat Meade." *ArtMaze Magazine*. Online. August 20, 2018.



Bathed in warm light, the somnambulant bearded men that figure in Nat Meade's paintings appear revenant, but also ever so slightly ridiculous. Nat explains that he imagines these figures as off duty archetypes, caught in a moment of down-time; smoking a cigarette, having a nap, or staring off into the middle distance. These characters are each slight iterations of the same benevolent fatherly figure, part Christ-like part surfer dad.

While Nat's artwork is figurative, interestingly, his process begins with abstract sketches experimenting with geometric forms. Through these trial and error drawings on paper, Nat develops the base forms that will become the facial features when reinterpreted in paint on canvas. For his color palette, Nat draws inspiration from the over-saturated films from the 70s.

Last year Nat presented two solo exhibitions including his first museum show, and recently attended a summer residency at the Siena Art Institute. We caught up with Nat to find out more about the bearded men in his work, his painting process, career, and more.

AMM: What's the contemporary art scene like where you're based and how do you fit in?

NM: I live in Brooklyn, New York, so there is a lot going on. I don't know that I fit in. I will say that painting and specifically figurative painting is still very much alive in New York. There is a renewed interest in early to mid-century American artists like Marsden Hartley, Forrest Bess, and Jacob Lawrence. These artists were my heroes as a young art student, but I felt very much alone in my admiration. Now there are young artists getting excited about this work and they don't seem embarrassed. I think that is great.



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AMM: Do you remember the first painting you sold? How has your work changed since then?

NM: I do. It was a painting I did as an undergraduate student at University of Oregon. It was a larger than life sized, full body painting of a fat man in a suit smoking a cigarette, maybe 8 feet by 4 feet. The color was mostly grays and greens, I was trying to emulate Manet's full figures. It hung in a bar in Portland, Oregon for a couple of years then someone bought it.

That was 17 years ago, and my work has changed quite a bit since then. But, I will say, the fat man stands out as a successful painting. I have encountered a lot of dead ends and false starts, but my work of the last four years is related to that painting.

AMM: Please tell us about your current process of painting, and how you achieve the rich saturation and tonal range in your work.

NM: I do a lot of layering, covering and scraping. I start a painting with basic shapes and composition – I always do one or two versions on paper before I start a larger painting. As I begin a painting, I am thinking about color and surface. What can I do during the outset that will lead to surprising things later on? I lay down color that will inform the color on top of it. For example if the top coat is likely to be a warm area, I might start with a cool color.

Then there is a lot of covering and scraping and sanding, losing and discovering form, I want the image to be colorful and saturated while at the same time hazy and faded.

AMM: What is your research process and where do you source your reference material?

NM: My imagery comes from my head and is developed through a pretty open ended process of sketching. I draw a rectangle, and divide it with shapes, eventually the shapes become figures.

I think of my figures as passive and incidental actors. Ideas for what might be happening come up when I am reading to my kids or falling asleep. Movies are important to my process. I especially like movies from the 70s. As a kid who grew up in the 80s, movies from the 1970s were what was on TV on a Saturday afternoon. The movies from that era still strike me as peculiar as if they are withholding a secret. I'll watch a movie and notice the way a shadow obscures a face or an object crops a figure. I am looking for something with formal and allegorical potential. I don't use direct reference material in the sense of working from a screengrab. What eventually becomes a painting comes from an idea that is developed through the trial and error process of working on paper.

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'Lost Meal', 2017, oil on linen, 12 x 10 inches

AMM: Who are the figures in your work? Are they real or symbolic?

NM: They are not real, but I would like them to feel familiar. I am screwing around with archetypes, elevating these figures to something divine or hallowed and at the same time questioning, ridiculing and knocking them down to buffoon status. They are confused allegories, focusing on the questions rather than the answers.

AMM: How does your style of brush stroke and paint application relate to the subject matter of your work?

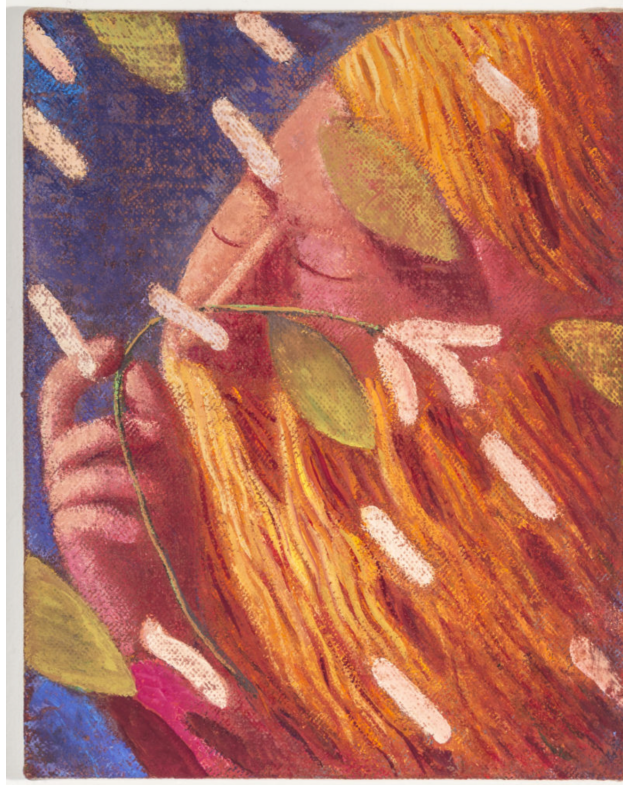
NM: Paint application/surface is key to the expressive power of painting. It can speak to, or contradict the image it describes. I like my work to have an overt history. The surface reveals the physical process: the questioning and decision making, slowly losing and finding the form. We attribute a certain reverence to a weathered surface with an apparent history; this is something I can exploit to reinforce the contradictory interpretation of something elevated or beatific and at the same time lowly or meek.

AMM: Light is a recurring element in your paintings, where the scenes appear bathed in a golden afternoon glow, or a strong shadow accentuates a particular feature. Please tell us more about this.

NM: Often when artists are inventing that they see and not working from observation, light, form and shadow are abandoned. Representing form through directional lighting is a big part of what motivates me to make a painting. I want to invent my images, discover forms through the drawing and painting process, but do so with a strong sense of light and form. In an attempt to solve this formal challenge I have to dumb it down and get it wrong. Again, this speaks to the multiple reads of my work. Directional lighting can be dramatic and ephemeral and shadows can be clunky and solid.

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'Gust', 2018, casein on hemp, 14 x 10 inches

AMM: Other prominent motifs are glasses, cigarettes. What do these and other visual symbols represent in your work?

NM: The guys in my paintings are broad and statuesque. I see these tears, cigarettes, glasses, flowers, as humorous ways to ground the figure. They are props that bring them into our world. It is like sticking glasses on a Mr. Potato Head toy. It makes the figures vulnerable, sad and funny. I think about what these archetypes do during their time off – they cry, and smoke and close their eyes in the breeze.

AMM: What ideas are you currently exploring in your work?

NM: I continue to be interested in skewing the mythos of masculinity. Right now my work is softening. The forms are more curved, naturalistic, less rigid and the environment is starting to take a more active role. I have been making paintings in which the grass is growing around the figure or a pattern of leaves are blowing by. There was a sense of anxiety in my earlier work, these figures are more at peace with whatever is happening. They are withdrawn with their eyes closed.

I don't know what this all means, other than it is a new direction and presents new challenges. Maybe it is a response to the anxious time that we are living in.

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AMM: You've exhibited widely locally and internationally. How do you go about marketing your work and getting your name out there?

NM: Instagram helps. As father of two with a day job, I don't get out much. Social media is a nice way to stay connected. It allows artists to see what I am working on and for me to see what other artists are up to. I hesitated to put my work online, but I have found a real community.

When I have time I see shows and trade studio visits with other artists. I think the best way to network and promote oneself is through a genuine curiosity and interest in other artists.

AMM: What's next for you?

NM: I'm not sure. 2017 was a big year for me. I had two solo shows including my first museum show. Now I am happy to be back in the studio creating new challenges and moving the work along. I have been working with casein (milk glue based paint) on canvas, I like that it forces me to work in a new way.

Find out more about the artist: www.natmeade.weebly.com