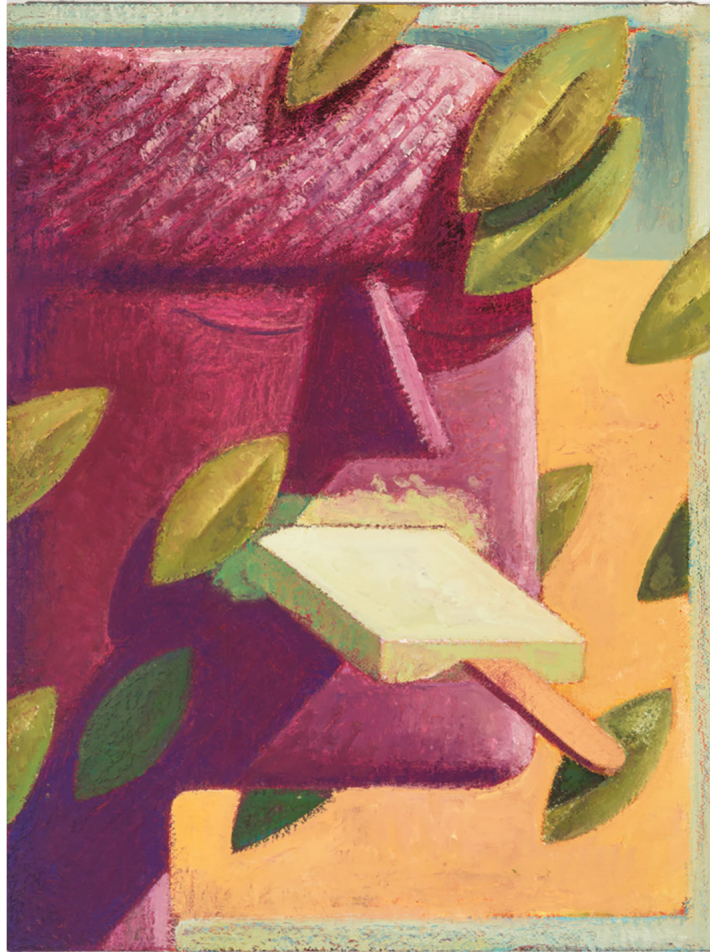


Lippy, Tod. "Nat Meade." *Artforum*. Print. March 2019.

# ARTFORUM



Nat Meade, *Breeze*, 2018, oil on hemp, 24 × 18".

**Nat Meade**  
HONEY RAMKA

“With my kid on my shoulders I try / Not to hurt anybody I like . . . / I defend my family with my orange umbrella / I’m afraid of everyone.”

The National’s 2010 song “Afraid of Everyone” evokes the conundrum of being a self-aware male (and a father) in a moment when masculinity, and gender overall, is under a microscope. The theme is one that permeates many of that indie band’s most resonant songs, and it informed the work of Nat Meade in this breakthrough solo show of paintings.

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The men depicted in these fourteen works were simultaneously heroic—the geometric, angular faces of several invoked the Moai statues of Easter Island—and ridiculous, as some sported far-out tinted eyewear or dozed near crushed beer cans. Many possessed the ultimate accessories of maleness: full beards that reference classic “manly” archetypes and are omnipresent among hipster bros. Meade has claimed in interviews that as a young boy he became fixated on a woodcut of Walt Whitman by artist Antonio Frasconi that hung in his home: “It looked just like my dad. In my head the image was both God and Father, which were probably the same thing.”

Of course, the reified status we afford gods and dads in our childhood is typically downgraded on the path to adulthood, especially in the twenty-first century. Meade’s texturally rich paintings—each the result of a meticulous and time-consuming process of layering, covering, scraping, sanding, and repainting, usually with oil on hemp or linen—seemed to index his own particular reckoning with that reassessment. The paintings’ relatively diminutive sizes hardly seemed accidental.

Meade’s stylized subjects effected stoic, even meditative expressions (their eyes were often closed), despite being buffeted by wind-borne leaves and cigarette-shaped blossoms, enveloped by swirling plant forms, or even partially submerged in water. Is the artist suggesting that a viable approach for men in the #MeToo era is passivity—or just total vulnerability—as a way to make amends for their transgressions? Or are these just sad dads, blissfully unaware of, and perhaps even impervious to, the havoc they’ve wreaked around them? One painting in particular, *Breeze* (all works 2018), supported the first interpretation. It depicts a man with a Thiebaud-worthy, mint-colored Popsicle crammed into his mouth, his rectangular face a deep, strangulated purple—*hypoxic masculinity*? The messy smears of green around the orifice feel like a violation; this sense of aggression is amplified by the sharp edges of abstracted leaves slicing diagonally through the frame.

The exhibition’s title, “Never Learn Not to Cease to Exist,” likely references the bizarre backstory to the 1968 Beach Boys song “Never Learn Not to Love,” which band member Dennis Wilson supposedly poached from a tune written by Charles Manson (“Cease to Exist”). The song’s theft so enraged Manson that he reportedly left a bullet on Wilson’s bed, and some conspiracy theorists have even drawn an indirect line from that incident to the Manson family murders a year later.

Indeed, there is a certain violence in Meade’s work—in what he has chosen as his subject matter and in the labor-intensive manner in which he has gone about rendering it. Yet this dark undercurrent is often mitigated by a kind of tenderness, here evidenced most distinctly in *Cry Drops*, a tour de force image of a weeping man’s face. His crestfallen features are rendered with a startling economy, and the impossibly opaque, azure teardrops streaming down his cheeks cast profound shadows. Walking through this show, I thought several times about Sylvia Plath, especially her poems “The Colossus” (1959) and “Daddy” (1962). Like her verses, Meade’s paintings traffic in both the sacred

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and the profane in their attempt to embrace, dissect, and, on some level, destroy the father figures we all ultimately come to terms with, one way or another.

—*Tod Lippy*