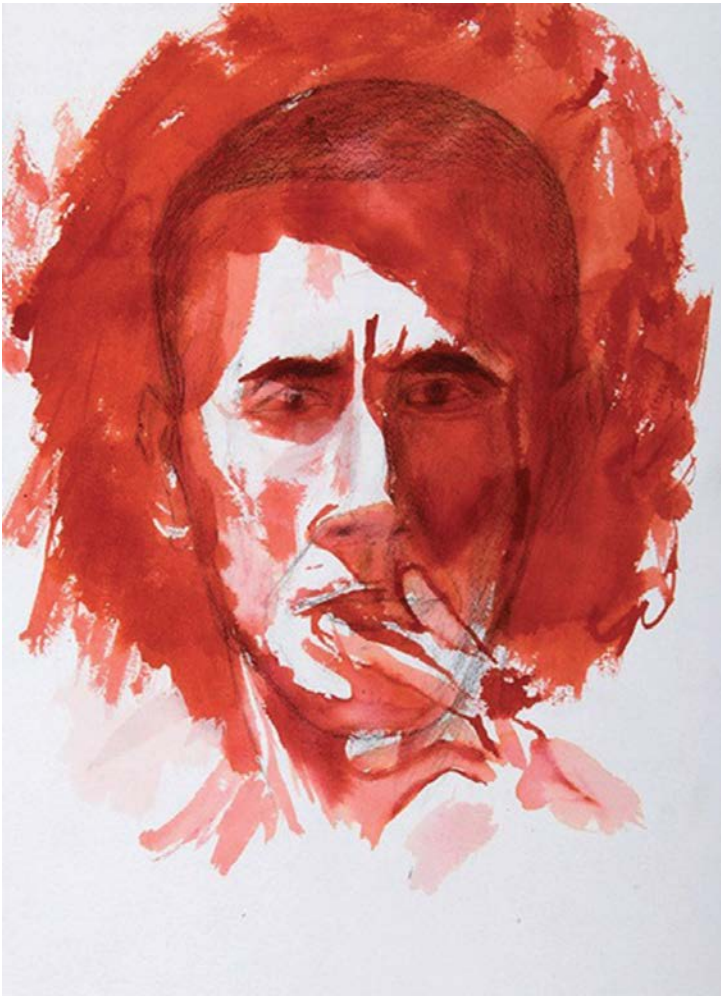


## ARTFORUM

# Jason Fox

PETER BLUM GALLERY



Jason Fox, *Marley on Obama*, 2010, mixed media on paper, 14 1/4 x 10 1/8".

morphized through its proximity to *Alien Tree*, 2009, an explicit commingling of its titular elements. Its ham-fisted, don't-you-get-it-ness leached it of the humor of the red paintings in the adjacent gallery, a group of expressionistic if ultimately irreverent renderings of the family dog: *Dog Spelled Backwards* and *Praying Beast*, both 2011.

Perhaps *Untitled's* clumsiness owes to Fox's comfort level with his repertoire, though the strength of the wholly nonobjective canvases also on view discredit this theory, for as Fox's last New York solo show revealed, he is also an accomplished abstractionist. In any case, the best of these newer works admit a confidence and clarity of purpose—even if that purpose undercuts homogeneity and the unified position that affords; indeed, Fox ranges. *St. George and the Dragon*, 2011, melds the winged figure with that of Harrison, with the latter surfacing in the negative space that constitutes the former. Part *Veil of Veronica* and part acheiropoietic image of Jesus in a pizza, the apparition would suggest a de-skilled process of spontaneous manifestation were it not for the fact of Fox's carefully composed abstractions, whose titles further reflect his abiding engagement with appropriation as a decisively mediated endeavor. Kazimir Malevich-like totems awash with thin layers of paint in overlapping geometric sections and appended with anti-autonomous monikers including *Green Party of Estonia*, *Aspen*, and *Untitled Lake*, all 2011, this last group—interspersed throughout the installation—invoked the religion of high modernism but treated it as idolatry.

It sounds like the setup to a misbegotten revolutionary—or, even worse, adolescent—joke: What do you get if you cross Bob Marley and Barack Obama? But in Jason Fox's most recent show, the seamless transposition of these quite literal figureheads—carefully rendered atop one another, with the latter's tidy hairline positioned at the base of the former's trademark mane—had a surprisingly profound effect, by turns pictorial and social. Appearing at the outset of "Eating Symbols" and recurring in various pieces throughout, this emblematic mash-up managed a slow burn. Like Jasper Johns's targets and flags, the motif—a pretext for formal experimentation—draws on the reservoir of mass culture, and thus ostensibly lacks personal resonance. Yet it becomes intimate through its claims for subjective interpolation. The near-holographic parallax induced by its ever-shifting appearance returns one again and again to the provocation of the content-specific conceit and to its function as a perceptual heuristic. Like the famous gestalt of the duck and rabbit, these portraits were mutually exclusive, such that in order to see one, you had to forget the other. And this is to say nothing of their sites of slippage between representation and abstraction, where, in tandem, they altogether fell away.

If these works—*Marley on Obama*, 2010, and *Head*, 2011, among them—suggest that the play of signification is central to Fox's gambit, so, too, did other efforts incorporate motley, willfully incompatible references. Spread across the multiple supports were allusions, notably, to pop music (the Beatles recurred, with George Harrison playing a starring role) and pop religion (crosses abounded, as did a winged man who might be best described as a kind of false idol). Such queasy iconography should grate, and in its physical embodiment in the lone sculpture, *Untitled*, 2011, it did. A carved trunk positioned atop a metal base, the piece presided over a gallery of small, sketchy works on paper that implied a retreat of private devotional images. At the same time, the sculpture—the two outstretched branches of which seemed to suggest both a peace sign and a cross—was anthropo-