

Dafoe, Taylor, "Talk About Vertical Integration! At NADA Miami, Joel Mesler Will Be the Dealer, the Artist, the Art Handler, and the PR Agent," *Artnet.com*, December 4, 2017



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"Am I as successful as someone else with their staff of eight?" Joel Mesler asks. "Probably not. But do I give a shit? Not at all."

Taylor Dafoe | December 4, 2017



Joel Mesler in *The Dry Years*. Courtesy of Rental Gallery.

When Joel Mesler received a call from a reporter recently, he was on the street near his gallery in East Hampton, and had just had a strange run-in.

"I think I just saw Matt Lauer," he said. "I was walking to get coffee. He was in a Jeep, and he stopped and waved me by. I should have let him hit me—imagine that story: 'Matt Lauer Hits Art Dealer, Breaks His Legs Before Miami.'"

This, of course, is typical Mesler. Talking to a reporter for a story is not enough for the Rental Gallery art dealer—he also wants to generate spectacular news and then shape the crafting of the story, playing all angles of the game.

A similar dynamic will be in effect this week at NADA Miami, where Mesler will not only helm a booth in the art fair's "Projects" section, he will also be the sole artist on display, showing a recent assortment of his deadpan-humorous paintings. What's more, the dealer will also serve as the art handler, the registrar, and the gallery assistant. Most galleries—even small ones—bring with them a staff of at least four people; Rental Gallery will have one.

In an era when galleries are suffering from diminished sales and rising rents, such low overhead might make Mesler an object of envy among his dealer peers.

"This is my first fair since reopening Rental out here in East Hampton, and the whole idea is to be a different type of gallery again, to move away from the type of galleries I had in New York," says Mesler, who also co-founded UNTITLED Gallery with Carol Cohen in 2010 before merging with the dealer Zach Feuer in 2015. (Mesler started Rental Gallery as an exhibition project in Los Angeles in 2004 before moving it to New York.)

"I can do it myself. Why do I need to do something a certain way just because other people do? I'm 43 years old, I have no ego, I have no shame anymore. Am I as successful as someone else with their staff of eight? Probably not, but do I give a shit? Not at all."

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Joel Mesler, *Untitled (A)*, (2017). Pigment on linen, 70 x 50 in. Courtesy of Rental Gallery.



Joel Mesler, *Untitled (D)*, (2017). Pigment on linen, 70 x 50 in. Courtesy of Rental Gallery.

Mesler will be showing selections from two new bodies of work at NADA. The first is a series of 50-by-70-inch pigment-on-linen paintings based on drawings, which will be stacked in a corner of the booth. The second is a handful of paintings from a new series based on the alphabet, in which he devotes each painting to a single letter, drawing upon memories from his childhood in Los Angeles and riffing on visual and linguistic connections to names of streets or schools in his hometown. In Miami, he'll be showing *B*, *C*, and *D*. He also has a show at Harper Gallery in January, where he'll show *F*, *G*, *H*, *I*, and *J*. (*E* has already been sold.)

The paintings evoke illustrations from a children's alphabet book, but are underscored by Mesler's dark wit. They're backgrounded by a pattern of overlapping green leaves, based on the wallpaper at the Beverly Hills Hotel—a place that, for Mesler, holds powerful memories.

"It was the beginning of my parents' divorce," he says. "We had brunch at the Beverly Hills Hotel. My father threw the brunch table over; the eggs Benedict ran down the side of the table onto my mother's lap, and he had a nervous breakdown and ran through the streets of Beverly Hills."

"That was my point of arrested development," he said, half-jokingly. "That's when I stopped being a normal person, I think."

The play between sadness and dry humor is at the heart of Mesler's work, and it comes across vividly in a video 'ad' of sorts that he released last week to promote his NADA booth. Titled "The Dry Years," the video features the dealer drolly discussing his art, his alcoholism, and apologizing—as if on step 9 of an AA recovery program—for the time he snuck into a party at the Museum of Modern Art. (Earlier this year he also released a mordent, mockumentary-style video to announce his move to East Hampton.)

A video of an unshaven gallerist talking about his problems may not sound like the best calling card for someone whose art you might want to buy—and from whom you want to buy it. But for Mesler, it works.

"A print ad costs a certain amount of money, and I realized that I could spend less money and actually tell a story," he says. (Nevermind that for the same amount of money, he probably could have paid someone to help him man his NADA booth.)

"I've given myself color, I've given myself audio, and I've given myself a mini-narrative. I think I'm just going to keep doing them, kind of like chapters, letting people know what I'm doing," he says. In other words, stay tuned.