

Zara, Janelle, "An Artist Who Makes Absurdist Paintings in a Former Church," *NYTimes.com*, November 14, 2019

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An Artist Who Makes Absurdist Paintings in a Former Church

Calvin Marcus's color-washed works, which feature surfers, bodybuilders and dead fish, defy narrative.

By Janelle Zara | November 14, 2019



The artist Calvin Marcus in his Los Angeles studio with one of his two dogs, Francis, a 3-year-old mutt. Chantal Anderson

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When Marcus found his work space in 2016, the building had long been vacant. Now, after an intensive renovation, he uses the first floor as his studio and lives on the mezzanine level. Chantal Anderson

In Los Angeles, daylight sifts into Calvin Marcus's studio through panes of pastel-stained glass set in lancet windows. The San Francisco-born artist has lived and worked in this cavernous former synagogue turned Baptist church, constructed in 1928, since May. He found the property in 2016, by which time unknown years of neglect had led to severe structural damage. Nevertheless, "I had a vision for how it could be a great studio," Marcus said recently, ahead of the opening of his current solo show, "Go Hang a Salami Im a Lasagna Hog," at David Kordansky Gallery. During a painstaking three-year renovation, he transformed the building's mezzanine level into a private living space for himself, his girlfriend and their two dogs (Bill, a giant schnauzer, and Francis, a small mutt), while the vast ground floor is now a studio with towering exposed wood-beam ceilings. There's ample room for both dogs to blow off steam, and for Marcus, 31, to make the unexpected, often absurd paintings and mixed-media sculptures for which he's known.

"There's not a narrative or linear story line to create from seeing all the paintings together," Marcus said, referring to a handful of five- to eight-foot-tall paintings that hung on the pristine white walls of his space. Dressed in his usual studio attire of a white T-shirt and paint-stained white cargo pants, he was still deliberating the final lineup of works for the show. In washy strokes of watercolor, oil and gouache, the compositions depicted intentionally disjointed, unnervingly bizarre scenes: In one, a crinkled arm reaching upward, locked in a handshake with the divine; in another, a sallow ogre-like figure staring out at the viewer with a warm, wide-eyed gaze. "I'm looking at the overall palette," Marcus said of his selection criteria. "I really want this to be the most diverse set of images."

"Diverse" is an apt description of Marcus's practice as a whole. In the short time since he graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles's master of fine arts program in 2015, his work has mined the same vein of surreal humor that characterizes the paintings in his current show to unpredictable effect. For his first solo exhibition with David Kordansky in 2016, Marcus screen-printed linen button-down leisure shirts with martini glass motifs and presented them in the gallery on dry cleaner's hangers still wrapped in plastic. His work has also included watercolors of bodybuilders and ceramic chickens mounted on monochrome aluminum panels. At the 2019 Whitney Biennial, he debuted five large-scale paintings, one of which depicted an elongated snowman. Throughout, Marcus's source material has remained defiantly uncomplicated: "Something just pops into my head, something that I've either seen in real life or experienced firsthand," he explained. "Then I draw and draw, and stuff starts to happen."

While there's still work to be done on his studio (the original window frames are showing their age), Marcus is happy to call the building home. "It's amazing to wake up here," he said. The stained-glass windows and wall-mounted candelabras retain the air of a place of worship, while the work tables covered with squeeze bottles of paint confirm its new life as an artist's studio. With Francis at his feet, Marcus sat down to answer T's artist questionnaire.

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Marcus's solo show at David Kordansky Gallery features works on a variety of scales. At the smaller end is this sculpture of an East Los Angeles storefront, which has its own working ventilation fan and lights. Chantal Anderson

What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule?

I wake up, drink coffee, take the dogs for a run, and then work until 6 or 7. I try to go to the gym, and then maybe meet somebody for a drink.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

It depends. When I'm working on a show, I'm not really doing creative work — I'm mostly doing the labor to make the objects or painting. But before that happens, I'm being creative all day.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

I've been drawing and making stuff my whole life. I grew up in the sort of liberal hippie community where there are a lot of art classes, and I took ceramics every summer at the community college. But I was probably in grad school when I made my first real piece of art.

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Marcus used himself as a model for this composition. Chantal Anderson

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

Something that I made out of cotton cord that I spray-painted black and strung back and forth in a small wooden frame. I think it was \$1,000 in 2010.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

Each painting comes from a very different place. Sometimes I have these ideas for pictures that I want to make, and then I'll draw it, or take a picture and then draw from the picture. From these sketches I move into a color-study process where I figure out how to build the rest of the picture.

How do you know when you're done?

When the picture or the sculpture is achieved most efficiently. I don't ever have any confusion about whether the thing I'm doing is done or not. It's more that I have this little plan, and as soon as it's been achieved, it's done.

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The artist's large-scale paintings often start out as smaller works. Chantal Anderson

How many assistants do you have?

One.

What music do you play when you're making art?

Neil Young.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

Sardines and crackers. I didn't know that canned fish could be delicious, and then I went to Lisbon. I brought a bunch of it back in my suitcase.

Are you bingeing on any shows right now?

I've just been rewatching "The Sopranos."

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Marcus's 2014 "Green Calvin" series consists of monochrome paintings affixed with ceramic rotisserie chickens of the same color. Each bird's body features a depiction of the artist's face frozen in a different expression. Chantal Anderson

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

I have a bunch of nine-foot-tall agave blooms that I cut down on the side of the Pacific Coast Highway, but I can't tell you why.

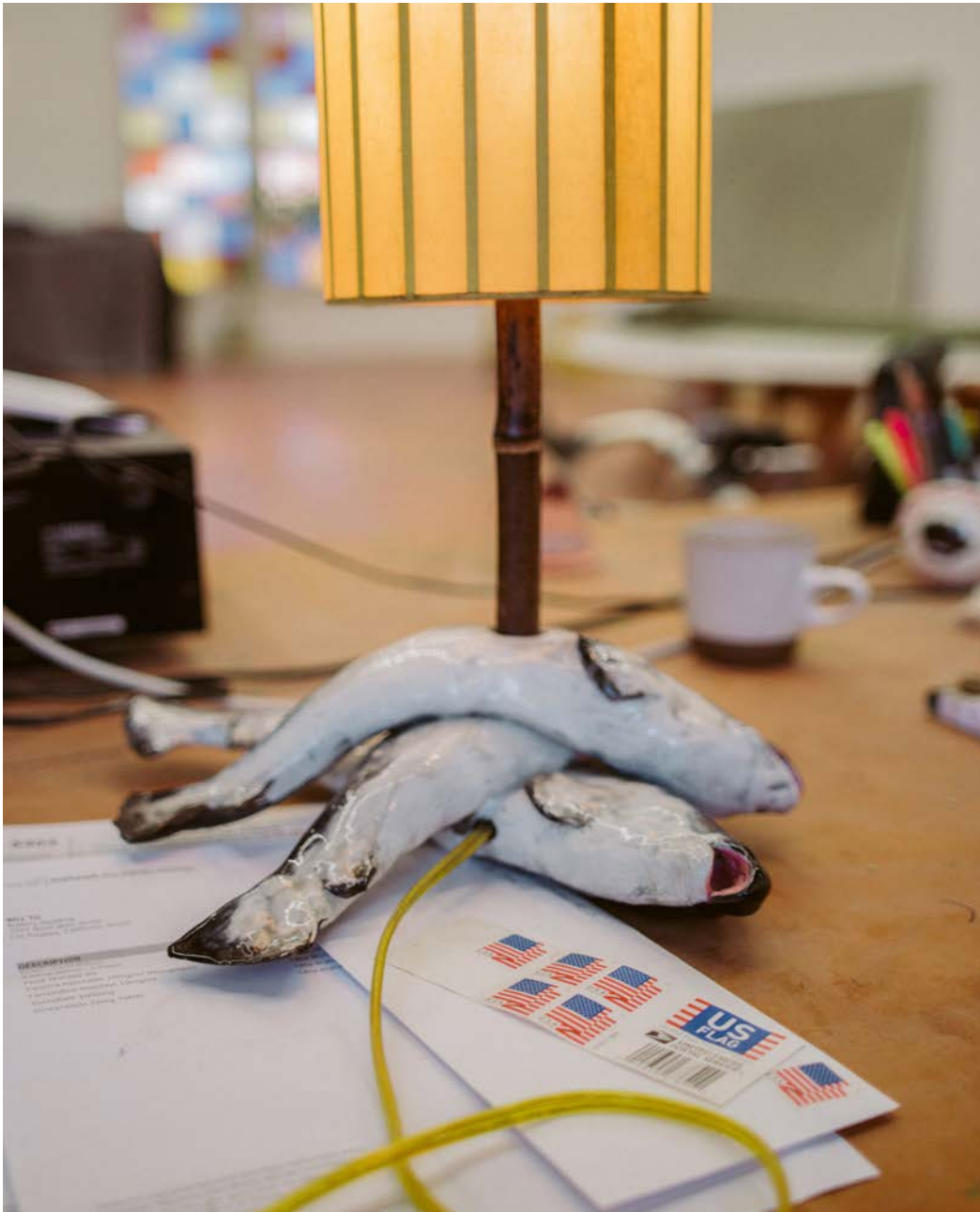
How often do you talk to other artists?

All the time, every day. Some are local, some are in New York. We usually talk about normal stuff, not necessarily specific to art. But if we do talk about art, it might be about some show they are working on, I am working on or some frustration about something that's happening.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

A really not-so-great movie that was playing on an airplane.

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Marcus has made pottery since his childhood. Here, his sculpture "Lamp" (2017), crafted from bamboo, paper, wood and ceramic. Chantal Anderson

What do you usually wear when you work?

I like Uniqlo's white undershirts, and I usually buy Dickies Double Knee pants. They have a pocket on the side of your leg so you don't have to put your cellphone near your crotch.

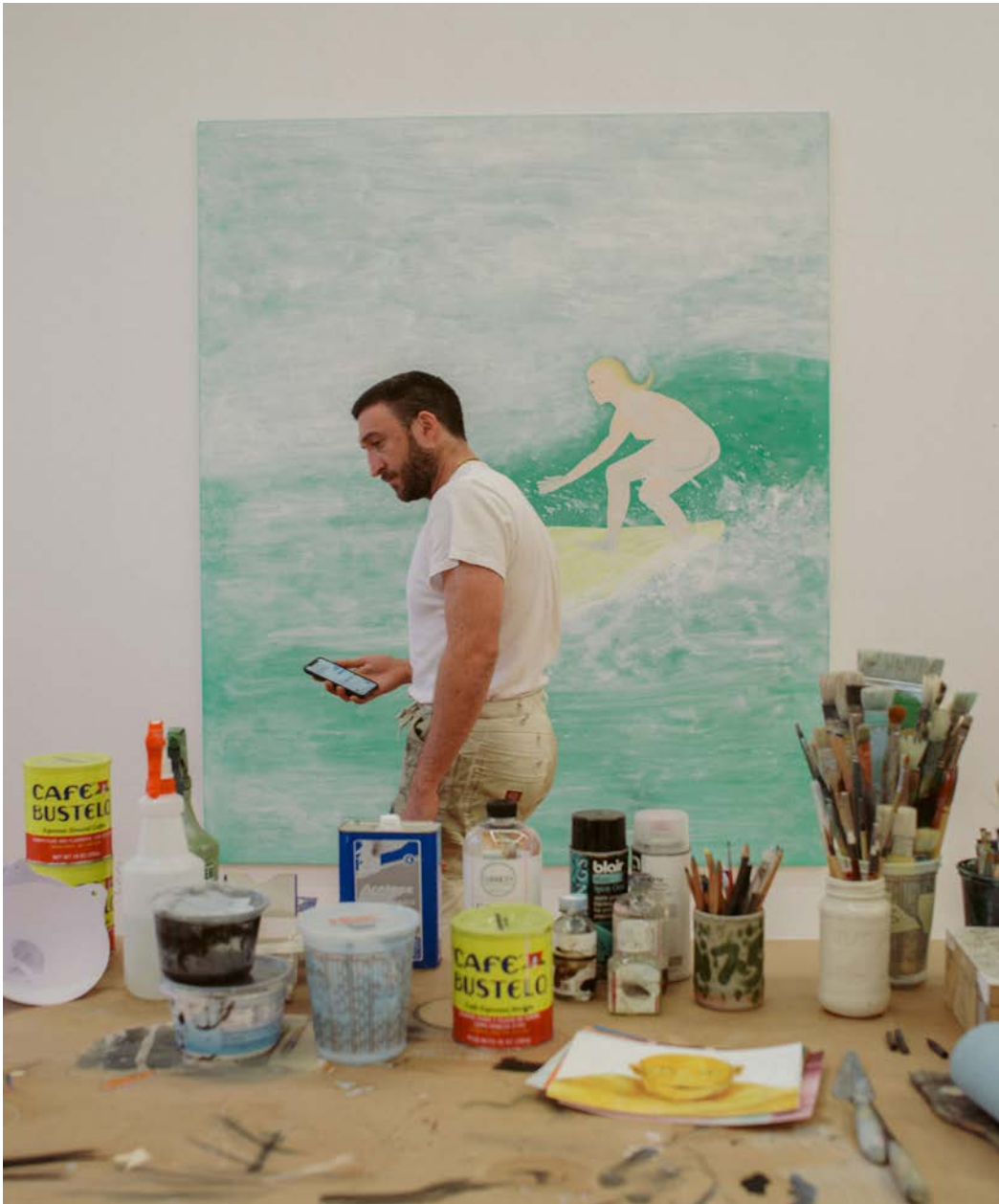
What do you bulk buy with most frequency?

White T-shirts and gallons of watercolor.

What's your worst habit?

Drinking alcohol.

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The artist with an untitled work. Chantal Anderson

What embarrasses you?

Not recognizing someone who recognizes me.

Do you exercise?

I have to run with the dogs because Bill has a ton of energy. He's a working-dog breed, so they're high-strung in the first place, and if I don't take him to get any exercise, he's pretty crazy.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

A poster that Charley Ray made for his 1994 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern. It's an amazing artwork unto itself: He made a plastic cast of himself and dressed it up in his own clothes and generated this poster where he's out on the coast with a sailboat. I just thought it was a genius artwork, a very smart way of thinking about sculpture.