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How an Art Dealer Became an Up-and-Coming Painter

Joel Mesler ran a successful gallery on the Lower East Side for years. Then he left the city and started a new chapter.

Boris Kachka | June 19, 2018



Joel Mesler, a former Manhattan gallery owner, at his home in Sag Harbor. Sean Donnola

ONE SPRING AFTERNOON at the Rental Gallery, a cedar-shingled storefront 1,000 feet from the East Hampton train station and 100 miles from the capital of the art world, Joel Mesler — part-time dealer, late-blooming art star, recovering alcoholic — is in the middle of an anecdote when his iPhone buzzes, nearly launching him off a Nakashima couch. An auction app is soliciting bids on an unsigned print by the illustrator Ben Shahn. “It’s probably gonna go for \$250,” Mesler says, frantically tapping in \$10 increments. “But I will treasure it. It’s great because it says on top, ‘We Shall Overcome.’”

We’re in what Mesler calls his “fake office,” where the 44-year-old former owner of mid-tier New York galleries now closes sales to the city’s summering overclass. An early champion of African-American artists like Henry Taylor and Rashid Johnson, Mesler is selling a Taylor on the far wall, a canvas mounted with detergent bottles painted black, for \$45,000. Mesler’s own recent paintings — lush post-traumatic allegories styled as alphabetic letters — sold out for \$12,000 apiece the previous week at London’s Simon Lee Gallery, along with 40-odd 15-minute stunt portraits (which Simon Lee himself calls “terrible”) that each cost more than the Shahn print. But when Mesler lands the winning bid at exactly \$250, he whoops in triumph. “That’s awesome that I called that!”

Mesler’s “real office” is upstairs, a cluttered nook presided over by paintings of rabbis. Upstairs is also where, in the long Hamptons off-season, he paints. But Memorial Day isn’t far off, and Mesler is transitioning into downstairs mode, a fidgety and neurotic state. “You want to put your bag down?” he asks when I arrive. “You want an espresso?” A neighbor recently gave him a Nespresso machine, “and it’s changed my life.”

In almost two decades as a dealer in both Los Angeles and New York, Mesler has searched for ways to make a small gallery successful in the face of the art world’s corporate greed, deploying a number of tricks, from renting out his space to other galleries, to going into



A section of Joel Mesler's series "The Alphabet of Creation (For Now)" at his recent solo show at Simon Lee Gallery in London. Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery; photo: Todd-White Art Photography

business with more successful ones, to finally decamping from a major city altogether. Until recently, painting was a pastime, overshadowed by his career of discovering and selling other artists. Within about 10 minutes of my arrival, Mesler — healthily pudgy, wearing a two-day beard and the resting expression of a puppy whose owner just pulled up to the house — is already deep in the weeds on his most ambitious project: almost two years of sobriety. "All of a sudden you take away the booze, which was your medicine to cope," he says, "and you're like, 'How do I deal with this?' Most people become terrible, their wives hate them, and they become a mess. You take away the thing, and they become a void."

Mesler is filling that void with paint. He's always been an artist, but he's only gotten good — and marketable — by locating what he calls "the story beneath the story" of his work. Most of his alphabet paintings feature a letter formed by a snake, which slithers through palm fronds evoking both Eden and the wallpaper of the Beverly Hills Hotel. When he first started showing them, "People thought it was a prank: 'Joke's on you, you gave me twelve grand!' Because, to be honest, I've done" things "like that in the past," he said. His paintings are certainly clever, but it's becoming clear, even to those who once dismissed him, that they're no joke.

DOWN IN RENTAL'S basement is the ephemera of Mesler's life — an installation in search of a gallery. There are files from Mesler v. Mesler, his parents' complicated and rancorous divorce case. Mesler's Orthodox Jewish immigrant grandfather made a fortune in wire-hanger manufacturing; his father, Morris, a doctor, blew most of it on pharmaceutical-grade cocaine. His mother, Laura, endured with the help of alcohol and an affair.

The hotel wallpaper conceit came to Mesler as a flash of sense memory, a poisoned madeleine. While brainstorming for a 2017 exhibition of Mesler's work called "Down and Out in Beverly Hills," the art dealer who curated the show texted him a photo from the Beverly Hills Hotel. "I remembered scratching the wallpaper, having it in my nails," says Mesler. He cast himself back to a family Easter brunch there that ended when Morris Mesler tossed the table, splattering eggs Benedict on his wife's lap and shouting, "I can't take it anymore!" Eleven-year-old Joel chased his manic father out the door, while his mother followed behind in their tan Mercedes station wagon. "This is where my next body of work is coming from," says Mesler, "from this exact moment in the Mercedes." Upstairs is a canvas patterned with "caramels and tans and burgundies" — attempts to invoke the car's design.

After the divorce, the family Mercedes gave way to a "Saab with a muffler on the ground," and one of the richest kids in school was suddenly begging to be dropped off a block away. That's when Mesler became the hustler he is today. He started selling Ecstasy and quaaludes stolen from his father and tooth whitener ordered in Dr. Mesler's name. "It's more of a survival thing than it is entrepreneurial," he says. "Just, how do I get the Mercedes back?"



"L" is for Los Angeles — a painting from Mesler's "The Alphabet of Creation (For Now)" series. Joel Mesler, "Untitled (L)," 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery

Mesler was a landlord before he was an art dealer. While earning his M.F.A. at the San Francisco Art Institute, he put his subsidized loan into high-yield accounts, paid the principal back right after graduation and pocketed the interest. After striking out as a painter, he borrowed \$30,000 from his mother and bought a building in Los Angeles's Chinatown, which was transforming into an arts district. One of his renters was David Kordansky, a serious-minded dealer whose gallery soon took off.

Mesler ran a printing press in the front, where he also lived — landlord and squatter both. "Joel was a pain in the ass," Kordansky remembers now. (Mesler agrees.) "He was this pseudo-beatnik, taking showers in the middle of the day while I'd have clients in the gallery — just a dirty bum type character who did nothing but get in my way." When he finally started a space of his own, a 2003 *LA Weekly* profile headlined "The Jester" described a Mesler opening as though it were an "S.N.L." Stefon sketch: "phony 'fashion shows,' lap dancers from Jumbo's Clown Room, guys in dog suits performing pop-rock hits in Scooby-Doo voices; a twisted minstrel calling himself Mr. Banjo, who sat atop a 10-foot-high stool performing murder ballads and sea chanteys peppered with tasteless jokes about child molestation; and, of course, the Nude Breakdancer."

A child of squandered privilege, Mesler agitated against gentrification by "round-eyes" even as he was profiting off white colonizers. When a favorite Chinese souvenir shop closed across the street, he replicated it in his gallery, selling the store's mugs for either \$2.50 (regular price) or \$250 (as "found art"). His eventual journey from gritty preservationist to full-time resident of Sag Harbor, the East Coast's new-money epicenter, makes sense when you think of what survival meant to the young striver — getting the Mercedes back. Soon after moving out here, he bought a Mercedes S.U.V. with a caramel interior.

MESLER'S WIFE, SARAH AIBEL, usually drives the Mercedes, so we take his black Honda pickup to the home he shares with Aibel, their 4½-year-old son and twin 2½-year-old daughters. On the way, he dissects the crisis that hastened their escape from New York. After moving to the city from Los Angeles in 2006, Mesler attempted to paint again, but his work represented little more than "someone hungry and desperate and scared wanting to be an artist." His dealer refused to display it at the Armory Show, so instead Mesler made copies of something truly original, a video of his own birth. He watched as, day by day, the TV monitor was moved further away from fairgoers and eventually switched off for good. "It was literally that torture of 'There goes my art career.'"

Mesler's third attempt at painting preceded his sobriety; it precipitated his dive to the bottom. In 2014, he had merged galleries with the dealer Zach Feuer; inside of a year, Feuer wanted out. "I was hoping he was going to be my enabler," Mesler says now. As he wound down their business, Aibel became pregnant with the twins. Overwhelmed, he started spending nights with a bottle of vodka and some Ambien and making art while the world faded. "I'd give my wife my keys and my phone and be like, 'I'm going away now.'" He keeps a portfolio of those drawings in his bedroom; they look like scrawls made by Egon Schiele in, well, an Ambien blackout.



Joel Mesler at home with his wife, Sarah Aibel, and kids. Sean Donnola



Rental Gallery in East Hampton. Courtesy of Rental Gallery

The artist Rashid Johnson, Mesler's close friend and erstwhile drinking partner, was freshly sober at the time. He gently recommended a therapist who was secretly an addiction specialist. She suggested that Mesler go two days a week without drinking. He couldn't do it. Then, one night, he fled to a painting studio the family owned in Callicoon, N.Y. — a 2,000-square-foot money pit and another fault line in the marriage. He started painting, downed a bottle of Tito's and woke up the following morning with a packet of turkey in his hand and not much of a painting. He quit drinking a couple of weeks later. (These days he paints while listening to recordings of recovering addicts.)

Then came an even harder challenge. Three children made city life unsustainable even if they could afford it — and they couldn't. While closing out the gallery, Mesler looked for work with the same corporate galleries that had largely eaten up the talent he had discovered. "Every single artist that Joel's ever told me to buy has ended up having a career," says Adam Cohen, a friend who works at Gagosian. "But it is impossible to compete in the art business once the artist gets to a certain level." Mesler was a victim of his own keen eye, and now the mega-galleries told him he'd be a bad fit. They didn't need Mesler; they already had some of his artists.

Once again, Johnson saved them. While showing Mesler's earliest sober work in Montauk, the family stayed with Johnson in Bridgehampton — and had an idea. They could move out here and Mesler could revive a business model he'd tried before, a non-exclusive "rental" gallery. Instead of representing artists full time, he could host shows four months out of the year. The rest of the time, he could paint.

Within days, the couple had made an offer on a handsome gray saltbox on 3.6 wooded acres. As Mesler stops his pickup at the gate leading up to the house, he tells me what surprises him most about this phase of his life. "It's actually working," he says. "We're living."

WHILE MESLER STANDS on the back patio detailing his only moderately grandiose plans for the "little kibbutz compound" — a multi-tiered garden, an amphitheater, a safe room "in case the Nazis come" — Aibel joins us, wearing a stylish black romper and balancing a daughter on her hip. "As soon as we hit on this, we knew," she says. "Joel has this ability to will things into being." Aibel marvels at the quality of her husband's recent art. "I was a curator for 10 years," she says. "I was like, 'These are legitimately good paintings!'" About his earlier "alcoholic oil paintings," she's more diplomatic. "They're amazing but also like, super-unrefined. And you could never have continued making those paintings because you'd be dead."

Death seems to hover over the ensuing conversation. When she says Mesler "could sell ice to an Eskimo," he says, "It's like I'm dead!" He gives an elaborate explanation for stamping all his work "The Estate of Joel Mesler," which involves the art-world obsession with provenance but boils down to a reformed reprobate's newfound respect for the brevity of life. "It's all being made," he says, "until it's no longer made anymore."



Mesler's portrait of the article's author, Boris Kachka. Joel Mesler; courtesy of Boris Kachka

Kordansky, who's seen his work from the beginning ("very poor man's Chagall paintings"), says Mesler has finally learned a language of his own, "more sophisticated in terms of creating a kind of symbolism of the personal narrative." He now collects Mesler's work. "Maybe, just maybe, down the line," the dealer says, "there'll be an exhibition with Joel." Johnson thinks his friend's "palate is beautiful" and his style polished but seemingly handmade, evoking his history as a printer. "I think he's at that point where he's finding his voice," he says.

Mesler is pleased that most of the people who buy his art are not his gallery customers. "When you're selling other people's art, you say what needs to be said, but when you're making your own work, you want to be as honest and direct as possible." Buyers of his work are his "kings," but he's still canny about protecting his market against speculators. "I'm very aware of who has my work," he says, wary of collectors "who buy with their ears," following trends, "and not their eyes."

"The art world's full of people craning their necks and looking for the next thing," says Lee. "People are waiting with bated breath to see if it succeeds or fails. He likes to portray himself as very fallible, and I think it's all bound up into a fascinating boom-or-bust type of thing." The Rental Gallery thrives on that same sense of novelty. "I'm doing more business with people from the city than I did when I was in the city," says Mesler. But Mesler's gallery isn't just about "shopping," as Cohen puts it. "It's the first art-world concept gallery in the Hamptons," says Cohen. "Joel has brought some sense of cool to it."

During my visit, Rental was exhibiting a young artist named Cameron Welch: vivid, jagged mosaics made out of debris from the streets of Brooklyn's Crown Heights. "He's gonna be a star," says Mesler. "You buy him and keep him close. It would be so easy," he says, to slip back into representing someone like him. "But he's gonna find a really good dealer," not a part-timer like him. It wouldn't be a healthy dynamic for Mesler, either. "I feel like I have to have a sponsor to call: 'Put the phone down, Joel, don't do it!'"

We leave the family compound for the gallery with just enough time for Mesler to paint my portrait. "I try to tell everybody I don't know how to paint, that this is half shtick," he says, standing behind a comically tiny travel easel. Trying not to move much, I wonder to myself whether his midlife turnaround, so new and fragile, will really last. What happens when real critics chime in on his work, when the novelty of his art and his gallery wear off, when the busy season ends on Newtown Lane for the fifth or 10th time and winter sets in again? I ask Kordansky this a week later. "It's the Jewish thing to worry about where he'll be in 10 years," he says, before reciting the famous mantra of recovery: "One day at a time."