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Dear Painter, Paint for Me: Artist and Dealer Joel Mesler Will Make Portraits at London Show

By Andrew Russeth | April 10, 2018



Joel Mesler, *Untitled (d)*, 2018, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SIMON LEE

"This is the first time I've had anyone offer me window or aisle seats," Joel Mesler said in an interview yesterday, enthusiastically describing the preparations that the blue-chip London gallery Simon Lee made for him to travel to his upcoming show there. "I was like, 'Are you kidding?' They were like, 'Is economy-plus OK?'" Mesler laughed in awe. "I'm so appreciative. I've been through the war and know the other side—how, especially for a struggling mid-tier gallery, you want to get them on the cheapest flight you can. They were like, 'Whatever you need.' I couldn't believe it was for me!"

Mesler has, indeed, been on the opposite end of such discussions, historically speaking. He is best known as an art dealer who has operated a number of mid-tier galleries over the years. He was involved in running Feuer/Mesler and Untitled in New York, along with a couple other spaces in various locales, and he now owns Rental gallery in East Hampton. (Full disclosure: he's also a sometimes ARTnews columnist.) But recently he has picked up the art career he set aside to focus on dealing, and has been making spare, wry paintings that owe a bit to New Yorker cartoons and David Shrigley's more deadpan moments. In one recent work, a quick sketch of an elderly man who might be Picasso accompanies cur-sive script that reads, "I was almost someone."

In London, Mesler will offer up paintings of foliage inspired by the leafy wallpaper of the Beverly Hills Hotel, "where I spent a lot of my childhood," he told me. "The darkness of my parents' divorce culminated at that hotel. So when most people see luxury and happiness, I just see destruction and bankruptcy."

A red snake in each painting spells out a different letter of the alphabet, accompanied by various words beginning with that same letter. "What I wanted to do was go through my childhood and do it kind of sys-

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Joel Mesler, *Untitled (k)*, 2018. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SIMON LEE GALLERY

temically through using the alphabet, mining my childhood memories of the streets that were important to me, the places, the things that kind of stuck out," Mesler said. "They started very conservative, and, as the letters went, they got more and more bizarre and strange. B is 'Beverly' and 'Benedict.' W is for 'Willy Wonka,' 'why,' and 'wasted.'" (In total, 20 of the 26 letters will be on view.)

The show opens April 20, a Thursday; on Friday and Saturday, Mesler will on hand from 12 noon to 5 p.m. to paint portraits for £200 (about \$280) a pop. He first began offering these on-the-spot commissions at NADA Miami Beach last December, he said, after selling all three of his paintings, which he presented in his own booth. "I can't believe I have to sit here for another three or four days," he thought to himself. "What am I going to do? More days of this really intense psychological warfare for me. . ." Publicist Adam Abdalla suggested that he paint people, so he went to the art-supply store, set up shop, and began to do a brisk business. "Wow, this just paid for my booth, essentially!" he said.

Almost all of his sitters were friends, but one patron was a man who commissioned a portrait of his wife. "I was like, 'I've got to let you know, I don't know how to paint,'" Mesler said. " 'This is kind of a schtick.' " (With people who know him, Mesler said, "I feel like there's this unspoken wink-wink, ha-ha.") He did his best, but when the woman saw the portrait, "she just gave a look of disgust," he said, adding that the husband was more positive. "But I think he was trying to be nice."

Seeing his London plans through the eyes of a dealer, Mesler noted that the alphabet pieces (\$12,000 apiece) are considerably more expensive than the commissions, but he was able to explain the discrepancy. "The paintings in the show are literally little pieces of me that I've spent so much time on, realizing and uncovering," he said. "The portraits are little pieces of the people I'm painting, where I'm almost trying to be this vehicle for whoever is actually getting painted. That's why I wanted to keep the prices low, so pretty much anyone could walk in and get a painting."

"It's you," he said, "and you deserve not to overpay to have you, you know?"