

Roy Mordechay

Heel to Toe

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Life today is liquid. The world, and everything in it, is in constant flux. What you perceive today might just as well take on new meaning tomorrow—if not tonight. And a liquid life, as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes, “is a precarious life,” a life “lived under conditions of constant uncertainty.” Importantly, he continues, “Liquid life is a succession of new beginnings.”

Though they are by definition fixed objects, the new paintings by Roy Mordechay in this exhibition are just as liquid as contemporary life. Figures, objects, mythological creatures, geometric shapes, and doodles swim atop gradient pastel backgrounds. Upon every glance, new shadows reveal themselves, and new perceptions—new potential storylines—emerge. Yet any attempt to congeal these images into an overarching whole will be done in vain. Looking at one of Mordechay’s paintings produces an effect similar to that of existing in a state of semi-consciousness: each painting contains graspable iconography, yet as soon as you think you’ve imagined a narrative, it simultaneously disappears; you are both grounded on Earth and floating in a perpetually shifting make-believe dreamscape. And this fluidity is precisely the effect Mordechay aims to create. “While you are building the stories, I want them to be dismantled at the same time,” the Haifa-born, Dusseldorf-based artist says.

Recognizable symbols recur throughout the works. *Solid Options*, *One of These Days*, and *We Were Self-Assured* (all 2023), for example, all contain at least one Jewish hat, or *Judenhut*, a cone-shaped, pointed hat worn—first by choice and then by force—by Jews in Medieval Europe. In both *The Messenger #01* and *The Messenger #02* (both 2023), however, stacks of these hats could, at the same time, be seen as references to Brancusi’s *Endless Column*. Zooming back out, and seeing the shapes in relation to the gestural lines and bold squiggles infusing the rest of the canvas, they could just as well be triangles simply painted for the sake of painting a triangle. But understanding the meaning of the shapes as Mordechay painted them is not the point. Rather, it is about understanding your own perception of the apparent shapes and symbols, how that perception may or may not relate to someone else’s perception, and how both

our individual and collective understandings of images are used to create—and perpetuate—stories.

The stories from which Mordechay borrows visual points of reference span cultural epochs, from the prehistoric era to the Italian Renaissance, from the history of cinema to superheroes and comics to the digital age. The gradient backgrounds of his works appear like the factory settings for the backgrounds of desktops, tablets, and phones, while the wooden structures they're placed inside echo Italian artist Francesco Clemente's goal of creating a sculpture through painting. While Clemente created large-scale painted tent-like structures to manifest this desire, Mordechay has crafted wooden frames, acting simultaneously as shelves and partitions, that offer a dialectical tension with the fluidity of the painted forms.

It is in this tension, between the functionality and rigidity of the wooden structures and the soft, dreamlike qualities of the multilayered paintings, that the exhibition finds its title. To walk heel to toe, literally and metaphorically, is to walk slowly and carefully; to perceive and consider every step of the way. While a slow and steady heel-to-toe gait might reveal nuances and repetitions, or even lend itself to understanding the details of your immediate surroundings as part of a much larger whole, there's also no turning back. So, crane your head, strain your neck all you wish, but your feet keep moving forward. Embrace what's in front of you. Each step is a new beginning.

– Emily McDermott