

**Mike Chattem**

***The Persistence of Heaven and Earth***

October 26 - December 7, 2024

Mike Chattem's highly sculptural paintings pull from the image lexicon of consumer culture and mash them together impulsively. The resulting concatenations become fertile fields for readings that drift between the poetic, the autobiographic, the chaotic. American regionalism chimes through in compositions seemingly wrought by someone's unconscious: A glimpse into the brain of a retiree on a riding mower, a prospective parent seeing multiple symbols of fertility and childrearing arranged by accident on the kitchen counter, an Iowa boy pestered by the demonic factory cornfields that extend towards an infinite horizon while forbidding the idea of surpassing it.

*The Persistence of Heaven and Earth* is a phrase referring to the unchanging nature of the physical and spiritual planes. Here it faces down the volatility of advertising language and culture, thereby pointing to essence—the elusive, enduring thing tying it all together, as elusive and untouchable as images themselves. As if to find purchase, these paintings push out into the room just as they push into the objecthood of the images they coopt. Each features a centralized rectangular panel in vertical orientation. To varying degree, the panels are encrusted and encroached upon by aloof poltergeists of advertising. The panel isn't so much framed as it is imbricated into this surrounding material. In one, it is being carried away, lodged in a golf cart garnished with pastries glistening like Norman Rockwell illustrations while the sleek, googly-eyed earthworm depicted on it basks amidst chunky water droplets floating beyond the picture plane. Chattem's meticulous colored pencil rendering enhances voluminosity. Images lodged in the collective unconscious, much of which are barely noticed in everyday life, are made exuberantly, insistently, physical.

Chattem's materials (acrylic, resin, polystyrene) are by choice almost entirely plastic—what he terms a metamaterial. The contents depicted serve a similar purpose, like the scaly ears of corn in *Melting 4U*. Corn Belt midwesterners should relate: it is often overlooked that the endless cornfields blanketing Iowa, Missouri, and Illinois bear mostly inedible grain. Most of it has been engineered solely to be broken down and reassembled into additives, and what's left in the end becomes feed for hog confinements dotting these very same fields, the denizens of which are

destined for a similar treatment. The visual language of consumerism, which we see here in presentations both nostalgic and contemporary, follows a similar path.

There needn't be allegories found in these paintings, but they aren't hard to conjure. This demonstrates both the power and failure of images, especially when it comes to elusive things like essence. Imbricated as we all are in images of any visual language, be they artistic, commercial, or both, in trying to locate an essence that persists through them, across regions and time, we may instead find portraits running through us, of ourselves, of our imaginaries.

*–Reuben Merringer*

