

PICTURES FROM LITERATURE

JOSEPH HOLTZMAN

March 16–April 27, 2024

Joe Holtzman is a passionate reader who returns to his favorite writers time and again. (Perhaps most of all to Marcel Proust, that curtain-loving, French fashion-hermit.) “Pictures from Literature” is the name of his latest solo show, the second with Parker Gallery. – And now it’s the turn of Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, and Henry James.

In “Playwright Humiliated Onstage,” the last-named attempts to bow to a largely jeering audience after the premiere of his hopelessly out-of-touch drama *Guy Domville* (January 5, 1895). Woolf’s modernist novel *The Waves* (1931) is evoked in a pair of works with their hinted elements of beach, wind, and water. These are action paintings: they record slow, meticulous strokes and hatchings as well as very rapid, wispy interventions that come into being “without mental guardrails,” as Holtzman explains. The waves keep coming, each its own unique, swirling, seething event—just as the painter’s brush returns to his marble support over and over—inasmuch as he desires to make himself one with those waves through motions and sea-shades of his own. “Magic Mountain I” and “Magic Mountain II” confront the viewer with Thomas Mann’s metaphorical sanatorium, under threat from the outside world and its warring ideologies (those of 1920s Europe, so uncannily like what we face today). In Holtzman’s retelling, we look up towards the besieged retreat as upon a “towering escarpment impossible to scale.”

Buried in the cliff-face strata of the Mann paintings are images found in nearly every Joe Holtzman work—where, in particular, birds and bird-like silhouettes abound. (The artist admits to a lifelong, fearful fascination with eagles, hawks, and owls and their lethal gaze.) The second of three self-portraits in this exhibition shows his right eye as a bird, while a more obscure bird-figure lies buried at the bottom of the painting. Another recurring Holtzman motif: a pair of eyes, one red and one blue. “Self-portrait II” employs this motif in a striking fashion, but there are many instances in the paintings currently on view at Parker Gallery; they “just pop up, unplanned,” says Holtzman. His own way of seeing is color-discordant, i.e., the right and left eye are not equally sensitive to a given wavelength—one “likes red more, the other, blue.” He believes that this condition lets him tell colors apart with more precision—which to him seems a visual parallel to perfect pitch in music. “Self-portrait II” also demonstrates his characteristic expressive use of exposed, untreated marble; here, the artist’s face is “laid bare” by means of the technique. “It does not let you go back” and therefore constitutes another, purely technical form of (self-)exposure that reminds Holtzman of traditional Japanese ink-on-silk painting.

His parting thought: a war has been underway since ca. 1840 and the invention of photography. War between the image—a moment in time—and the movement of the brush, which traces time itself. Reconciling the unreconcilable may be the purpose of these paintings.

- Carl Skoggard

Joseph Holtzman (b. 1957 in Baltimore, MD, lives near Chatham, NY). Recent solo exhibitions include those held at Nina Johnson, Miami, FL (2021), Parker Gallery, off-site presentation in New York, NY (2020), Bel Ami, Los Angeles, CA (2018), Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA (2015), and Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA (2014). His work has been included in several group exhibitions, including *Chambres d'Amis: Ikea, Office Baroque* (online exhibition), Antwerp, Belgium (2019), *Strange*, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA (2018), and *Color, Form, Unicorn: Recent Acquisitions*, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA. His work is included in the collections of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.