

The Shapes a Giggle Makes

Wayne Koestenbaum

March 29 - May 10, 2025

If you are like me, *The Shapes a Giggle Makes* at Gattopardo marks your first glimpse of Wayne Koestenbaum's art practice in person. If you are like me, you weren't yet in Los Angeles the last time he mounted an exhibition here, back in 2016. But you have nonetheless been following Koestenbaum on Instagram for some time, and ingest his "content" soon after it is dispensed, multiple times a week, like a multivitamin. The acclaimed poet, painter, novelist, printmaker, novelist, musician, essayist, professor, performer, and filmmaker has been a prolific poster since commencing his art practice in 2010, and his deportment on the social media platform mirrors the manner of his work. Both are fêtes of frisky, unfettered pleasure, pure of heart and liberatory in spirit. Nutrition that the art world sorely needs.

Over Zoom, Koestenbaum told me that he considers Instagram his "main theater." There certainly is a living, breathing, *buffa* quality to his online bricolage of pictures upon pictures upon videos of paintings, monotypes, cyanotypes, assemblages, "movies" and "micro-movies," shot on combinations of Super 8, 16mm, and digital video cameras, in addition to his iPhone. Koestenbaum's grid grows to no end, always aglow in an incandescent palette of pinks and yellows and cyanotype blues. Partial to portraiture, he honors his friends and exalts his muses, in between offering his own *Sprechstimme* soliloquies. Somehow, he does not breathe the digital realm's toxic air, as if immune to our plague of mordant snark and detachment. His sincerity and avidity are genuine, his mood benevolent. His profile is not some staid portfolio, a representation of the thing; it is more alive than that, a whole other habitat, a petri dish filled with gelatin and germs and gouache and acrylic, effervescing with *joie*.

The stakes can feel higher in the physical world, and an empty white gallery can certainly chime more somber. But Koestenbaum is equally nimble away from keyboard, and brings his sprightly stagecraft to *The Shapes a Giggle Makes*. Despite his online inclinations, his work is decidedly tactile, textural, straight from the hand. On the gallery's southwest wall, the artist has pinned up a grid of sixty figure drawings, all male nudes, made with a mix of watercolor pencils and acrylic paint. Most were crafted during virtual drawing sessions held over Zoom, mid-pandemic; a few came from live sittings in Koestenbaum's studio. ("You can tell which were in-person, because they're wearing masks," he informed me.) He traces the chests, thighs, and cocks of his chorus of men in venturesome lines, filling

the surrounding space with exuberant hues and patterns. In-person, his mark-making feels incredibly proximate, as if just dashed off. His figures seem so cognate to their actual subjects, so *alive*, with bodies somehow packed to the brim with interiority.

Elsewhere, Koestenbaum's work wavers between figuration and abstraction. A series of monoprints are jamborees of miniature forms and marks, jazzily improvised. Nearby, a few larger prints are adorned with similar strokes, sketches, handwritten symbols, and, in one instance, an invocation of the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin. More male figures make more cameos. A row of seven small cyanotype assemblages, as the artist calls them, sublimate his own drawings and other chosen objects into ghostly two-tone prints. These prints are adhered to "stiffened" paper, which Koestenbaum has cut into irregular shapes and painted in colorful patterns, creating playful symphonies of figure and ground, image and original.

On a modestly sized monitor, Koestenbaum returns his attention to the screen. Each week of *The Shapes a Giggle Makes* will showcase a fresh selection of his many videos, including the eponymous three-minute film. That work, made in 2023, features Koestenbaum's common technique of painting straight onto 16mm film, creating palimpsests of quick-moving color over empty frames and existing footage alike. Over the dancing forms in *The Shapes a Giggle Makes*, Koestenbaum improvises a keyboard tune, emulating a song he loved at the age of thirteen. At moments, its melody is buoyant and jingly; at others, it turns wistful, searching. It trails off and returns, slows and quickens. It finds delight in its own détournement. As online, on the wall, or on the page, what we are spectating, more than anything, is Koestenbaum's own pursuit—of a pleasing note, a delightful word, a striking brushstroke. That he invites us to join in that journey is one of the more generous, joyful gestures that an artist can make.

—Juliana Halpert