

White Columns

Theo Baransky

Films for Friends

September 12 – October 25, 2025

Opening Reception: Friday, September 12, 2025 from 6-8pm.

White Columns is pleased to present *Films for Friends*, the first New York exhibition by **Theo Baransky** (b. 2003, Ithaca, NY). Baransky is currently affiliated with Studio Route 29, a Frenchtown, NJ-based progressive arts studio centering the creative practices and perspectives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

For Theo Baransky, the experience of a movie might begin with a VHS tape from the dollar store that drifts into a corner or gathers dust on a shelf before it finally finds its way into the player, and might extend for years afterwards, as the afterimages of a particular film worm their way into the psyche. This process is shaped as much by a movie's material form as by its content. In a recent interview with Mouse Magazine, Baransky described the budget distribution outlet Sterling Entertainment:

"If you've owned VHS or DVD in your life, have you ever bought some of those VHSs or DVDs that are, like, not bootleg, but really bad quality? These often come from dollar stores. I first found Sterling on a DVD of *Misty of Chincoteague* from 1961, which was once a Fox movie, released in theaters in '61. The film fell into the public domain and Sterling re-released it. Sterling was also called United American Video. They founded Sterling in 1992 when they bought a company called VidAmerica. And by this point UAV had moved from Charlotte, North Carolina to Fort Mill, South Carolina. So they were basically based in the South. And I can actually do a Southern accent. Amidst the public domain DVD crash in 2006, Sterling closed its doors."

This is a characteristic Baransky summation of the lifespan of a film, tracing all of its perambulations before arriving on our screens— in fact, how it might have once appeared on other screens, fallen out of circulation and reemerged in a different form. Baransky makes paintings that are "about" movies, but what they mainly depict are the logos, signs and symbols that appear *before* a movie begins. That he sources many of his images from the VHS tapes that he collects is indicative of a particular inflection point in the span of our ever-broadening access to movies. More accessible than when movies could be seen only in theaters, but less so than the streaming services that were to come, VHS tapes are also much more explicitly objects, and as such they bear vestiges of the routes through which they were produced and disseminated. This once made them something to be sought out, bought, collected, traded, cherished. Baransky's paintings restore them to this cherished status. In doing so, he manages to evoke both the swirl of sentiment rustled up as we wait for the action to start and to condense the systems through which the story has travelled to arrive before us, the viewers. That journey, Baransky's work argues, is more than ancillary: it affects and indeed alters the content and meaning of the film itself.

Baransky's paintings are deceptively simple. Uncanny impasto reproductions of familiar but oft-overlooked logos, they distill the labyrinthine whole of filmmaking into condensed, potent works on paper. His work seems to contain far more than the logos that it directly depicts. Studio Route 29 co-founder Hop Peternell has described Baransky's paintings as "semi-devotional," and they are certainly reminiscent of votive offerings or even reliquaries - containers for a quasi-spiritual experience that is both highly personal and evocative of something larger than that which is directly represented, like a fragment of a greater divine object. Because of Baransky's specific interest in dollar store VHS tapes, the ritual evoked is a more domestic rite than that of emerging, bleary-eyed, back into the "real" world after a few hours spent in the dark of a movie theater. And while the VHS tapes that Baransky collects are often rereleases, i.e. slightly altered reproductions of a preexisting movie, paintings, as we know, are unique, one-of-one. Transmuting his chosen images from screen to paper, Baransky makes something intimate and totemic out of the ubiquitous.

Ardent movie fans can have a sort of Pavlovian response to the familiar thrum of the theme music of the big studios like Universal, 20th Century Fox, or Warner Brothers, the logos of each of which can be found in Baransky's paintings. But one gets the sense that for Baransky, a similar feeling is evoked even by the less iconic logos of dollar store video distributors like Sterling or Feature Films for Families (a now-shuttered Utah-based company that, in addition to producing their own films, released heavily edited, "family-friendly" cuts of popular movies.) Now-defunct subsidiaries like Miramax Family, Prestige, and Touchstone Films also make appearances. At times he transposes the content of one logo into the form another: the piece *Films for Friends*, from which the exhibition takes its title, is Baransky's riff on Feature Films for Families, but presented in the style of the logo for the corporation Pioneer. (*Films for Friends* is also the title of a film series, inspired by Baransky's love of film, which takes place bi-monthly at Studio Route 29.) Baransky's familiarity with seemingly every stratification of movie distribution acts like a conduit: though his paintings are visually straightforward, you can nearly feel the wealth of knowledge behind them.

In a time-based medium like film, it would seem unlikely that the instance that occurs before the narrative even technically begins would be the one that best captures a sense of the whole, but that is exactly what Baransky's paintings do. In funneling the vastness of feeling that we get from the anticipation of viewing one type of art into an altogether different form, Baransky's paintings are reflections of the ways we both make and watch movies.

White Columns would like to thank Studio Route 29 for their collaboration in developing this exhibition. *Restricted*, a publication of Baransky's work, will be co-published by White Columns and Beauty Books of Studio Route 29 in conjunction with the exhibition. A book signing with Baransky will be held at 2pm on Sunday, September 14th at White Columns' booth at Printed Matter's NY Art Book Fair.