

Tina Braegger has been making large-scale oil paintings of the Grateful Dead's dancing bears for over a decade. November 5th is the opening of her third solo exhibition at Meredith Rosen: *The Dream Relatives*.

As far as fandoms go, Deadheads get no respect. You're forever defending your life choices to people who don't care and didn't ask, but tend to have strong opinions on why the Grateful Dead suck. In recent years, the situation has only gotten worse due to the fact that being a Deadhead is now vaguely right-wing coded (Tucker Carlson and Ann Coulter are fans).

Braegger herself doesn't identify as a Deadhead. She's not interested in the band's output or legacy, or the cult of personality surrounding their frontman Jerry Garcia, though you get the sense he would approve.

What interests her is playing with the possibilities of the dancing bears franchise in a fine arts setting.

There are many angles to this, all of them connected. The contrast between the "elitism of the art world" and the taste level of the aesthetic. The bears as a precursor to memes. Their commercial trendline vis-à-vis their countercultural roots. Their lack of political or moral content. Their Labubuesque cuteness. The "my kid could do that" quality of her work, which she likes to lean into from time to time by using her own kids as studio assistants. The idea that what was once the house critique of contemporary art is now the house style. The eternal questions about "authority" and "influence."

From a technical standpoint, the bears have the advantage of being both highly recognizable and highly reproducible, which as any artist can tell you, is half the battle. They work best as an ensemble, and scratch the itch for pattern recognition that all ensembles do. Braegger's move is breaking the chain up canvas by canvas in a way that feels faithful to the psychedelic spirit and laissez-faire attitude of the original.

*Text by Anna Khachiyan*