

Wednesday, February 20th, 2019

Making It in America: Karl Haendel on the absurdities of the Art World

by Seth Orion Schwaiger

Karl Haendel: Masses and Mainstream at Mitchell-Innes & Nash



Installation view of Karl Haendel: Masses and Mainstream at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 2019

Nothing pulls you into a gallery like a six-foot chicken giving you the side eye, nor keeps you in front of a work longer than giving you something to do, even if it's just reading text. With these two strategies Karl Haendel introduces *Masses and Mainstream*, not with a curatorial hang that pulls you into the center of a space and lets you wander, but by arresting the viewer at the entrance. There is a compulsion to use the works there as a lens through which to see and interpret the rest of the exhibition. *How Do I Sell More Art* pairs with *Chicken* within direct line of sight from the door and the two are impossible

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

to ignore, melding into a single piece: A framed text piece operates like a word-bubble in such close proximity to the terrifying and terrified giant chicken, in graphite on cut paper stuck to the wall from the floor up.



Installation view of Karl Haendel: *Masses and Mainstream* at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 2019

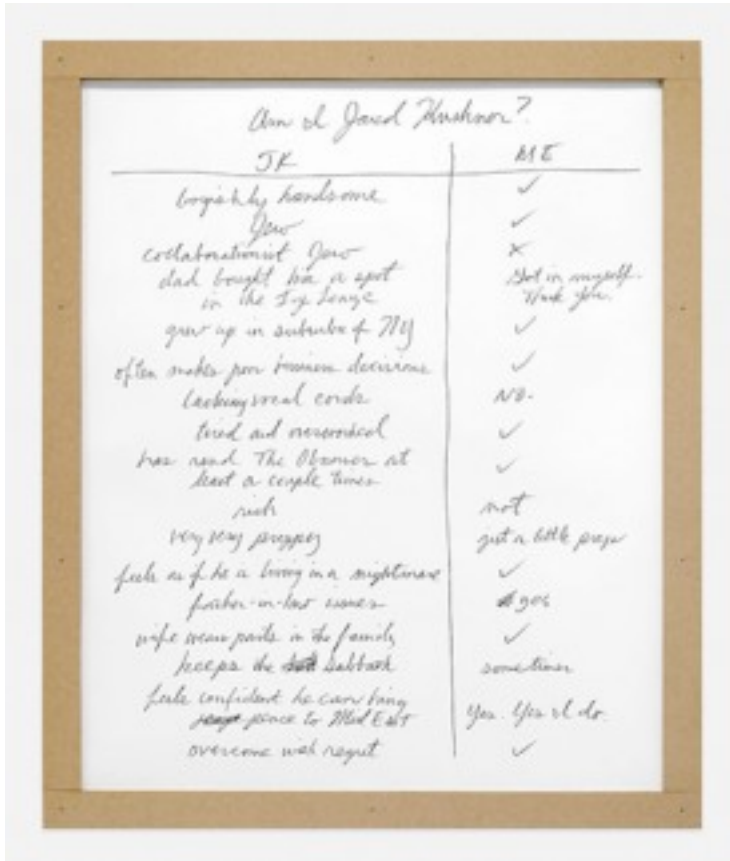
This cluck-cluck shotgun diatribe against the absurdities and unfairness of art world economics hits all of the themes encapsulated within the exhibition: politics, identity, family, consumerism, humor, and value. More powerfully, it replaces rehashed snarky and dispassionate conceptualism with a thin veil of sarcasm barely masking believable and deeply personal desperation. Haendel's pleading orients the artist and viewer as flesh-and-blood people within the breaking world instead of just critiquing the paradoxes of that world from afar.

The exhibition alternates sprawling, sumptuous works in graphite, and unconventional groupings of drawings, more or less photographic realism with the occasional graphic or illustrative element thrown into the mix.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Through the lens of *Sell More Art / Chicken* the larger-than-life works read as pinnacles of American conservative thinking shifting from ostensibly banal idealism to more polarizing stances: a stack of lawnmowers, a pile of football players, a series of childlike hand gestures, a monument to a civil war general, a graphite duplication of a Breitbart news article denigrating leftist academic absurdism. These works span multiple sheets of paper and are stapled to the wall along their seams, usually surrounded by crude frames of MDF strips. Richard Serra has presented work in a similar fashion, but here there is something much more violent, shot through with palpable frustrations. The great implication of the sequence implicates programming within banal Americana that foments if not outright produces our current divisions and angst. The smaller clustered works are less direct, perhaps more scattered, but certainly less pedantic in their arrangement. The strongest of these become personal. *Am I Jared Kushner* answers questions brought up by *Sell More Art* through a comical list of attributes shared and unshared by the artist and the president's son-in-law. In *Richard Nixon's Childhood Home Annotated by my Daughter*, the otherwise flawless depiction of the picturesque home that produced the defamed president is brought to life by stick figures and scribbles in bold black marker scrawled across a pencil drawing. In another cluster a simple thought bubble reading "How do I make more money?*" changes nearby images of WWE wrestler Bill Goldberg and child king Edward VI into the conflicting American views concerning income — competitive mobility, strength, earning it, and paradoxically, inherited wealth.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Karl Haendel, Am I Jared, 2017. Pencil on paper, 51.75 x 42 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

One could jadedly argue that really all these flailing attempts and desperation are just vapid cravings for more money from an artist whose work is listed in the low five figures (low by Chelsea standards and no one else's). But that desperation seems underpinned by a frantic search for any evidence whatsoever to backup Haendel's seemingly intractable belief in some phantom of a merit based system — an American dream still at work — that one should at least be able to game the system if not play the game and win. The exhibition as a whole makes the art world an analogy for the fucked-upness of the rest of the American and indeed global class structure. It's as though the artist is slowly admitting to himself, right in front of us, that despite the incredible draftsmanship and significant amount of labor behind each of his works that none of that equates to financial value. That he has the intelligence to address big, timely concepts, but that no one wants to hear it right now. That he cannot transmute his identity as an American Jewish father into any economic weight. And that he can no more easily change his fundamental ways of working (high labor, high technique, graphite, graphite, graphite) than he can change any other aspect of his identity.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

There is one work hidden amongst the reeds that may represent the show at its most eloquent, a circle drawn freehand over and over again, a dark hard-pressure line spiraling back on itself on standard size paper. The free-hand circle was Giotto's proof to the Pope of his technical mastery, Rembrandt's defiant evidence of artistic genius, Shisui's perfection beyond the death poem. In so many ways it represents a pursuit of craft that should as it has in the past be rewarded. But Haendel's circle is different. It is as though it is drawn with teeth clenched and in brooding repetition. There is just the faintest shadow far beneath it that makes it spectrally levitate, the ghost of an attainment that transcends the punchline in *Masses and Mainstream*. The rules of merit have passed on, but their memory still haunts Haendel and the American people.



Karl Haendel, Richard Nixon's Childhood Home Annotated by My Daughter 2017. Pencil and ink on paper, 34 7/8 by 51 3/8 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash