



Art

Why It's Refreshing When White Male Artists Doubt Themselves

Scott Indrisek Feb 7, 2019

It takes a lot of chutzpah to be an artist, to labor over something in the privacy of your own studio and then unveil it to the world, expecting total strangers to pay attention—and maybe even love, purchase, and live with what you've created. While artists may talk fondly of the glories of failure—its unexpected silver linings, its teachable moments—they're not too good at publicly expressing vulnerability and doubt. After all, success in the art world can often come down to how convincing and memorable one's personal brand is; I'm Not Sure If This Is Actually Any Good™ doesn't make for the most rousing slogan.

Yet how refreshing it is to walk into an exhibition and see this sort of wincing, wounded self-criticality on full display, without shame. How *doubly* refreshing it is—in an age when we're asking tough questions about male privilege—when the artist happens to belong to a demographic that has, for so long, called all the shots and won all of the accolades.

I can't think of a better archetype to represent that old guard better than someone like Julian Schnabel, a man who wears pajamas in public, lives in a property he's dubbed "Palazzo Chupi," and makes monumentally scaled paintings full of macho *Sturm und Drang*. It's hard to imagine Schnabel ever doubting himself, at least on the record. Of course, it's not a prerequisite that visual artists be self-deprecating, and there are probably perfectly well-adjusted people who wake up every day, look in the mirror, and see nothing but pure, unadulterated genius staring back at them.

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But a very different attitude prevails in a show of recent drawings by Karl Haendel, on view through February 16th at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York. Walking into the inventively installed exhibition is like entering the artist's own brain, populated by fleeting images, obsessions, and anxieties. A hyperrealistic rendering of the professional wrestler Goldberg is hung next to *Child King 3* (2018), an elegant pencil portrait appropriated from a 16th-century source. These moments of bravado, though, are undercut by nagging doubts that punctuate the show. One drawing, with its casually scrawled handwriting, summarizes the artist's desires: "Taller / Bigger Penis / More Money / More Time." Another simply depicts a thought bubble that asks: "How do I make more money? (*without compromising my morals)."



Installation view of Karl Haendel, "Mass & Mainstream," at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, 2019. © Karl Haendel. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

Haendel is a deft, talented artist—witness his pitch-perfect, detailed drawing of football players mid-tussle—but it's the self-deprecatory asides that make this a nuanced experience, rather than a chance to show off his technical chops. A fantastic, larger-than-life rendering of a bald eagle is placed next to a scrappy drawing showing little more than a faint circle on an expanse of white paper. Is

it a void, a sketch abandoned before it's begun, or an admission that the artist may have run out of ideas?

In terms of creative self-doubt, it's hard to compete with the British artist and prankster Martin Creed, who has made a career out of being unsure of himself. "I don't think I want to make a book of my work," he wrote in a 2014 monograph. "I am scared to look at what I have done in case I don't like it, and I'm scared to show others in case they don't like it." (As Shirley Stevenson has noted, the admission shows a move "from the award-winning artist, to the 'everyman.'")

Creed doesn't give his artworks names, but instead simply numbers them, as if they're less finished objects and more stabs in the right—or wrong—direction. His gestures are simple: lights turning on and off; paper crumpled; paint applied in simple, colorful lines. It's not hard to read a piece like *Work no. 960* (2008)—a ready-made consisting of an ascending row of cacti—as a coy and anxious commentary on manhood. Consider Creed the anti-Schnabel: a man uninclined to celebrate his own genius, and an artist who'd likely be willing to admit that he's occasionally made some serious missteps. Creed's public lectures and musical performances also tend to be hilarious and fumbling, as if the artist isn't quite sure of what he's doing or why anyone is paying attention. Is it all a shtick? Possibly. But then, so is the posturing of the Great Man who can do no wrong.

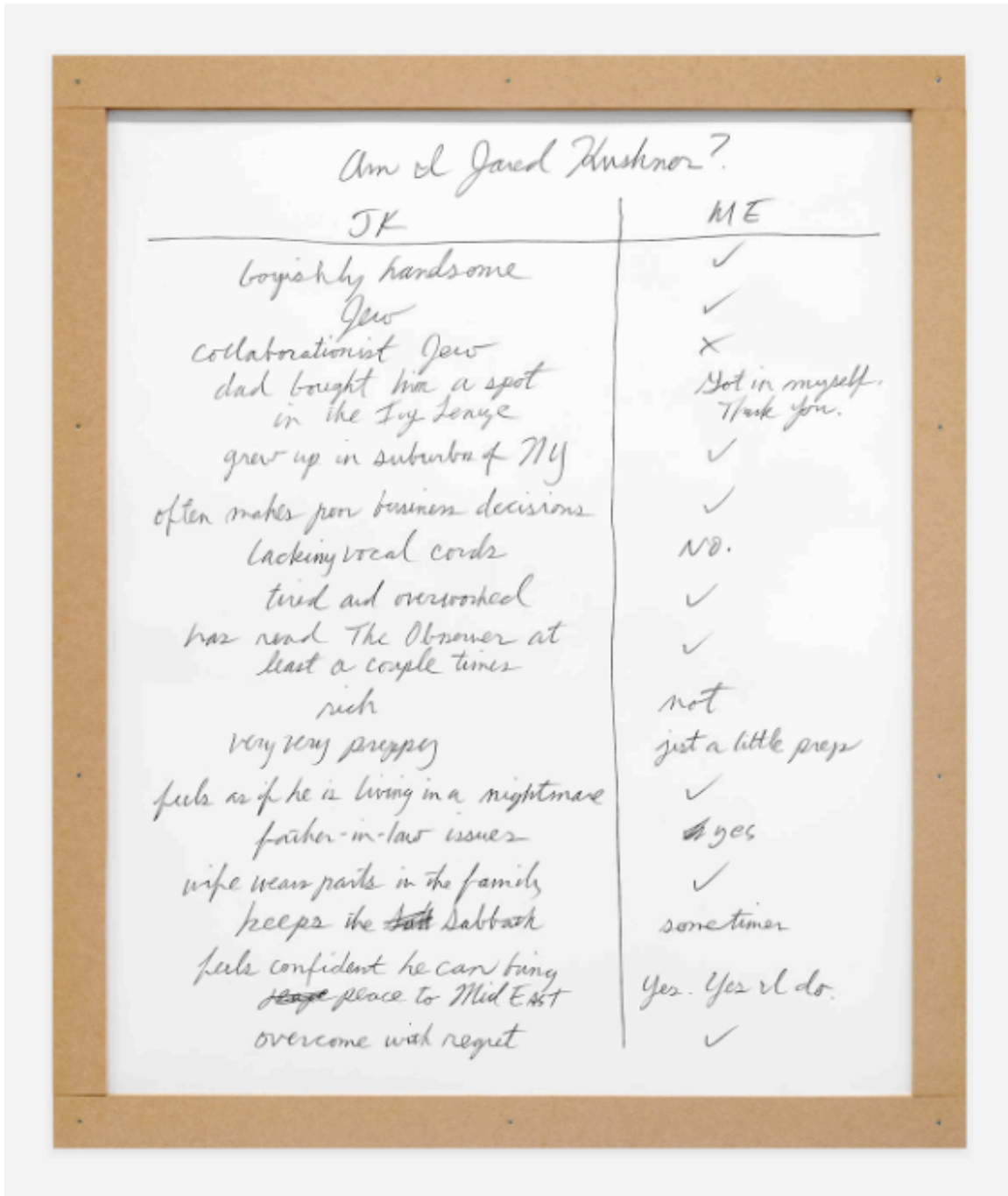
New York-based artist Sean Landers, likewise, isn't afraid to come across as nervous, underconfident, and self-doubting. Like Haendel, he's willing to use his own vulnerabilities as creative fodder. *Happiness is Waiting* (2017), part of a series of mixed-media paintings that resemble giant notepad scribbles, crawls with agitation: "Why am I doing this again?" "Making art is a form of acting." "Is this honest?" In another pivotal series of works, Landers borrows a white male archetype—the cocksure sea captain—and makes him ridiculous, recast as a literal clown. These characters strike heroic poses at the helm, seemingly unaware that they might be the subject of laughter rather than respect. It's hard not to assume they're avatars for Landers himself: the bold artist navigating the ocean of creativity, his self-assurance clownish and almost pathetic.

It's more than possible that the ability to publicly display such self-doubt is just another form of privilege—that straight, white, male artists can get away with this kind of thing because, on such sure footing, it's safe. "Being a white guy probably doesn't help," Haendel writes in a long, confessional text work, *How Do I Sell More Art?* (2018), in which he anguishes over money and career troubles. "Who needs more art by us?"

Regardless, there's something to celebrate in any work that actively resists the myth of the infallible genius. It's no surprise that artists can have enormous egos; their often-solitary days in the studio can lead to a solipsism that's either impressive or downright scary. Puncturing that self-importance always comes as a relief. I'm willing to bet that there are hundreds of creative people out there with Samuel Beckett's now- cliched "Try Again. Fall Again. Fail Better." quote tattooed somewhere on their body, but there's a difference between giving lip-service to failure and truly embracing fallibility. Artists who are willing to question themselves offer something humbler and more honest—and that's its own kind of quiet genius.



Installation view of Karl Haendel, "Mass & Mainstream," at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, 2019. © Karl Haendel. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.



Karl Haendel, *Am I Jared Kushner?*, 2017. © Karl Haendel. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

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Installation view of Karl Haendel, "Mass & Mainstream," at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, 2019. © Karl Haendel. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.



Karl Haendel, *Child King 3*, 2018. © Karl Haendel. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.