

Marc Dennis Interview

By Rena Silverman



LEFT: Marc Dennis, *The Measure of All Things*, 2013, oil on linen, 66 x 72 inches
courtesy of Hasted Krautler, New York

RIGHT: Marc Dennis, *A Great Mastery of Privacy*, 2013, 44 x 58 inches, oil on linen,
courtesy of Hasted Krautler, New York

An Artist, a Curator and a Rabbi Walk Into a Bar...

That is the title of Marc Dennis' exhibition at the Hasted Kraeutler gallery in Chelsea. Mr. Dennis, a hyperrealist who paints out of his Brooklyn loft, calls the title a "Meta Joke," or a template joke, one that can be endlessly riffed upon (another example is the "knock knock" joke because anything can follow "who's there?"). Perhaps, part of the joke, too is that you will not find a rabbi, artist, or curator present in any of Mr. Dennis' work in this show. Instead, we find artwork within artwork: a large painting of a painting of a cat, which is protected by Kanye West dressed as a security guard ("why not paint in the protection?" asks Dennis), or the back of a cheerleader who stands in front of Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon." I spoke to Dennis for Whitehot Magazine via telephone about his show, which ran through February 8, 2014 at Hasted Krautler Gallery in New York.

Rena Silverman: Can you tell me about the title "An Artist, a Curator and a Rabbi Walk Into a Bar"?

Marc Dennis: I was at a bar with friends thinking of a title for the exhibition. We were talking about popular jokes. It seems there's always one with, "three guys walk into a bar." I could figure out the first two, an artist and a curator, but I got stuck on the third one. Then, I realized with Jewish humor, there's always a rabbi involved. And including a rabbi in the title puts the work in a whole other context. It's a meta joke, or one that goes on and on. I did not know what a meta joke was before this show.

It is so rare to hear people laugh or smile in the art world. I strive to be happy. I'm sure Goya, when he had a few pints had a good time. We as animals need to laugh and smile at the world around us.

Rena: What about the paintings in the show?

Marc: I paint from personal experience. Everything in the show has happened to me in one sense or another.

Rena: Can you talk about "The End of the World", which is based on *L'Origine du Monde*, 1866 by French artist, Gustave Courbet. What was your inspiration for this painting?

Marc: I was at the Met museum for the Courbet retrospective. It was held in this private room with a disclaimer at the entrance about excessive nudity. It was a darkly painted room. [Laughs.] They might as well have called that room "the womb." Anyway, I wanted to see this painting because I think it must have been quite shocking at the time it was made. And, it was hidden for years in a Turkish collector's home. So, I finally have the opportunity to see this painting one-on-one and I am all excited and then, BOOM! This girl just steps right in front of me.

Rena: What happened?

Marc: Nothing. Well, it became a rare aesthetic experience that was first a very intimate experience and now it was a voyeuristic one. This girl, she was like 18 and she knew she was cutting me off. Well, maybe she didn't. But, all I thought was, wow, that makes a great image. This girl with her beautiful silky long hair, the back of her head and here I am waiting to see the painting, waiting to see her face. It was a like a temptation within a temptation.

Rena: Is this the same inspiration for your other paintings in the show, which also feature the backs of peoples' heads, like "Betty, Lawyer, Pony"?



Marc Dennis, *The End of the World*, 2013, oil on linen, 36 x 40 inches
courtesy of Hasted Krautler, New York

Marc: The experience with the Courbet retrospective got me thinking about viewing art in the museum or gallery context. You know, there's always going to be that head there in front of you. I began to think about paintings that I could replicate and insert heads into. So, "Betty, Lawyer, Pony" is based on a painting called "Betty" by Gerhard Richter of his daughter. It is one of my favorite paintings in the world. Everything is really soft and really sexy and there's this pattern that is pleasurable to look at. I thought I would put this woman in front of it, whom I refer to as a lawyer. I thought, I'm going to layer this painting with sexuality, texture, and seduction. But, at the same time, I'm going to look at how we observe others, how we engage in art, and how we sanctify it.

Rena: You painted a lot of security guards into your work, for example in "The Measure of All Things". Can you tell me about this decision?

Marc: When there is a guard next to a piece of art you become hyper aware that there is something precious or something valuable to protect. At the same time there is temptation. In the case of "The End of the World", it's open for massive interpretation, but the idea was that I wanted to put a guard into that painting forever. Also, it's Kanye West watching over a kitty.

In the other painting [a painting of a painting of a body builder, which is being watched by a security guard], I was once in Gagosian and the guard looked so small standing next to this massive painting. I had to sneak a photo with my iphone. If the guard were not in that photo, you wouldn't be able to tell the size of the painting. And that's important, since we seem to be looking more and more at photos than we do at real life. So, I thought, what if I recreate this scene in my own painting, but put a body builder in the painting instead. It's all about getting bigger and bigger. It's like a painting on steroids. But, if you noticed, it was the smallest painting in my show.

Rena: So if people see an iphone photo of your painting of a painting, the might think it's big without a guard.

Marc: Yes.

Rena: Can you talk about your recent painting called "Uncontrollable Beauty"? The painting of a flower sculpture?

Marc: Yes, I had a woman [collector] in my studio in Brooklyn once. She wanted to see my work. We spent an hour talking about paintings and got really into a wonderful conversation. Then suddenly, she asked me if I make sculpture. I thought, what an interesting question? I don't make sculpture, I paint. And, I didn't know what to say and as you know, I am rarely shut down.

Well, I had to come back with something. So, I said, "I've often thought about making sculptures," which is true. I told her I would keep her posted. I sat on that comment or question for a while until one day I remembered that quote by Ad Reinhardt: "Sculpture is something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting." So I painted a sculpture. You can't walk around it, but you can imagine walking around it. There's also something about hanging a painting on a wall of a sculpture that is on the floor.



Marc Dennis, *Uncontrollable Beauty*, 2013, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches
courtesy of Hasted Krautler Gallery, New York

Rena: What about the painting that features a football cheerleader standing in front of Picasso's *Le Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*?

Marc: *Dames* [*Le Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* by Picasso] is not one of the greatest paintings in the world, but it changed the direction of painting—if not art—altogether. Here is a painting of these...hookers. Yes, they are whores from the town where he [Picasso] was from. He was homesick in Paris and missed this little town when he was from he painted these five whores. And, who knows how he got his hands on those African masks? I'm not an art historian. All I know is he is declaring something about emotion, prostitution, and this is a loaded painting.

Rena: What do you mean by loaded?

Marc: At the time it was revealed, the painting literally divided art intellectuals in half. [Some thought it was immoral.] And people chose sides. Well, choosing sides to me is like a sporting event. And also, there is a lot of sports terminology in the art world. There's always something about an artist "championing" something else. It's the same thing in football. Everyone loves a champion. I am a huge sports fan, particularly of football and hockey. I am as much a fan of sports as I am of art. That's very rare.

Given the incredible history of the *Dames*, I thought it would make the best example to introduce a cheerleader into this painting. I chose a Dallas Cowboy cheerleader since cheerleaders are sexy, seductive, loud, and they are happy. But this cheerleader is not cheering. She is standing dumbfounded, almost acting as a surrogate for every viewer of this piece in history.

The main game is the piece. Like cheerleaders, we stand outside the field of play, but we also gazing at this cheerleader's toochus, so she becomes part of that experience. Viewers are wondering, what face is she making? What is she thinking? I don't know, maybe I'm just a frustrated or failed jock.

Rena: But, not a failed artist, that is for sure.

Marc: I guess not, this show sold out.

Rena Silverman a cultural reporter, science writer, and renaissance lutenist. She is the author of the book, Women of Vision: National Geographic Photographers on Assignment. She lives in New York City.