

Marc Dennis: Dances with Old Master Paintings at GAVLAK Gallery



Marc Dennis, Sanctuary, 2021. Courtesy of Gavlak Gallery, Los Angeles.

Marc Dennis: Once Upon a Time

Marc Dennis' hyperreal still lifes of exuberant floral bouquets transport the viewer into an alternate reality, much like a fictional parallel universe. Like a musician who uses sampling in music, Dennis samples flowers from famous masterpieces that we feel we have seen before, but are not quite sure from where.

Dennis told me "I dance with Old Master paintings." He begins by deconstructing a



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masterpiece and then plays with scale to turn the reference into something different. Dennis exaggerates reality (rather than replicating reality, like a photorealist) to create an illusion which is a simulation of reality - but does not, in fact, exist.

Even in the 17th century Dutch Still Lifes the opulent bouquets were fictional, because they included flowers like tulips and roses which do not bloom at the same time in real nature. Dennis revs up this fictional aspect by playing with scale and perspective, throwing an oversized flower in a carefully arranged bouquet, or scattering flowers diagonally. Even the vases Dennis paints are far too small to contain such heavy bouquets. “I want these paintings to be fun to look at, like little visual adventures,” he explains.

In Dennis’ unabashedly beautiful paintings, everything is seen in flux: flowers are seen in full bloom, wilting and decaying. Each flower has its own space but the tension resides in the spaces between the flowers, as Dennis plays with the contradiction between the joy of full bloom and the sadness of decay. His compositions, color combinations, textures, surfaces, shadows and *chiaroscuro* lighting effects are charged against dark backgrounds, so they pop like a starry galaxy. Dennis uses these dark atmospheres to create what he calls “the comforting vibe of a cave” where our ancestors dwelt. Seen from a distance, the colors emanating from floral bouquets, are so mesmerizing they draw the viewer into the paintings for closer inspection. The use of large and small scale, telescopic and microcosmic perspectives, resemble a zoom camera lens that keeps the viewers attention moving up, down, around and across the paintings. Dennis also incorporates bugs which appear hidden in a bouquet or prominently displayed on top of his flowers, recalling Rachel Ruysch, Maria van Oosterwijk and other 17th century Vanitas still life painters who loved to combine entymology.



Marc Dennis, Caravaggio, 2022. Courtesy of Gavlak Gallery, Los Angeles.

Dennis' consummate technical prowess was developed during, highschool when he would draw during lunch breaks, and then every night at home. He initially took his cues from Disney cartoons, then later, from the Old Masters - particularly Caravaggio - after entering artschool (he holds an MFA from the University of Texas, Austin.) However, what separates Dennis' virtuoso techniques from other more literal realist painters, is his emphasis on emotional and political concerns as an extension of the visual illusion. Dennis' paintings are allegories that represent deeper insights into society and human nature. A decaying flower or fruit is replete with subtext about social decay in our time.

Dennis is fascinated by flowers because they are "subtle and exuberant at once." Flowers

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are given on every occasion - births, baptisms, bar mitzvahs, birthdays, weddings, funerals - because they are the most widely-understood way that people communicate feelings of love, admiration, sympathy, compassion and regret when words are inadequate.

Color is the most ephemeral aspect of painting, and flowers have translucent color with more dimension because we look *into* their color, beneath their surface. Flowers also look different under different lighting - and can even resemble human faces. Because Dennis explores these contradictions by using “flowers to speak about strength and vulnerability at the same time,” his paintings also contain a refreshing measure of whimsy.



Marc Dennis, *The Possibility of Death in the Mind of a Cartoon Deer*, 2022. Courtesy of Gavlak Gallery, Los Angeles.

This is illustrated by his incorporation of classic Disney characters, particularly those from early Disney cartoons from the 1930s. By using imagery from *Silly Symphonies* and birds from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), he intentionally undermines the high-minded seriousness of old master painting. In *A Simple Relationship*, Disney birds face

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each other, in the center of a bouquet of exuberant flowers, but their colors could signify any gender or sexual orientation; this reflects our changing cultural attitudes toward love which is no longer gender-bound. Even Bambi appears as an emotional construct in *The Possibility of Death in the Mind of a Cartoon Deer* because love and death are as much a constant theme in Disney as they are in Shakespeare.

In a fresh take on *trompe-l'oeil*, Dennis paints torn sections of canvas which expose the stretcher bars beneath, in what first appears to be a violent desecration of his own paintings. He uses this visual deception as a reference to the climate change protestors who seemingly destroy paintings in museums in order to draw attention to fossil fuels emissions. Of course, these masterpieces are under glass, so they are not really destroyed. But the visceral sense of violation is so shocking, these actions get far more attention in a quiet museum than they would protesting on a noisy street.

In *Sanctuary* Dennis uses decaying fruit and vegetables in a poignant *memento mori* painting, to remind the viewer of the inevitability of death. The rotting squash, tomatoes strawberries and bananas - with a katydid perched on an orange with a human face - subvert our usual expectations of beauty. The incongruity of viewing the grotesque in a beautiful light as a “sanctuary” is intentionally oxymoronic. Skulls are a recurring trope in *memento mori* paintings, but the skulls in Dennis’ paintings are sometimes plastic, in order to underscore their hyperreality.

Dennis pays homage to the floral still life genre, by acknowledging its past while simultaneously updating it. This recalls Shakespeare’s oft-quoted phrase from *The Tempest*, “ what’s past is prologue; what to come, in yours and my discharge.” Dennis’ spectacular exhibition dances with this idea that history sets the context for the present.

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--LITA BARRIE