

## Visual Literacy

A crudely outlined snake appears to float over the inky black backdrop of space. Like a localized x-ray, a pink fleshy lump is clearly visible within the serpentine form. The image is graphically simple, appearing as an unexplained biology diagram or perhaps an illustration of some forgotten idiom. In another painting, a hand cursor points to Earth, establishing a connection between icons, the hand of God and that present digitally with which we peruse the Internet. Third, a diptych offers a smiley and frowny face as contemporary comedy and tragedy masks. These are the winking works of Paul Winker.

Winker mines the meme and emoji-filled landscape of contemporary visual language. In doing so, he creates works that feel uniquely grounded in the now. The artist's oeuvre draws from the contradictory nature of how images are approached today, being so loaded, yet simultaneously taken for granted. For a population so constantly bombarded with pictures, many lack the knack for decoding them. Winker sees his attempts to rectify this as the responsibility of the artist in present times, drawing parallels that are often as inspired as they are obvious.



Photography by Kevin Todora

For the artist, 2017 was a year of reflection. Winker focused primarily on introspection and experimentation. His 2016 closed with a major presentation at The Box Company, Dallas. In the spring of 2017, he partnered with Pierre Krause for the show Bible Study curated by Danielle Avram at Texas Women's University in Denton, intuiting, even co-opting, some of Krause's autobiographical themes and rhythms.

Both shows, in their own way, offered an exploration of childhood, growth, and the human imperative to communicate.

Winker's commitment to making art began at an early age. In kindergarten, Winker had a friend who was constantly drawing? creating elaborate images of air balloons and insects. This creative fervor lit a fire in Winker. He too wanted to be able to invent realities and tap into the potential of imagination. The freedom of childhood creativity continues to inspire him. Winker actively, even classically, clings to this frame of openness often lost in adulthood.



Above: Paul Winker, *Scratch Off*, 2016, enamel on canvas, 39 x 19 in.; Below: Paul Winker, *Untitled (know your worth)*, 2016, enamel on canvas, 67 x 35 in.

Winker's gestures intentionally appear as squiggle lines and simple mark-making. They speak to the elemental need to express one's self and be understood. Winker's codified marks are reminiscent of Keith Haring's symbolic language found in the artist's early diaries and are inspired by the primacy of images in today's hierarchy of communication. As emojis, stickers, and gifs become accepted avenues of interaction and expression, the artist's work draws a line back to the earliest modes of communication such as the Lascaux cave paintings. Winker considers his works as expressions of experience and understanding distilled to their most essential elements.

The artist initially creates his images on a trackpad instinctively dragging his finger over the surface. The digital image is then printed full size, which is then traced and cut out. Winker uses this template to assemble his work. Painting on a flat surface he builds up thick layers of enamel house paint. One could call this his calling card. The

resulting image protrudes from the surface of the canvas lending a seductively smooth and rich physicality to each painting.



Above: Paul Winker, *Something For Everyone*, 2017, enamel on canvas, 55 x 77 in., image courtesy of AND NOW. Below: Paul Winker, *To The Core*, 2017, enamel on canvas, 19 x 19 in.

This technique is heavily influenced by Winker's past experience with creating stencils for street art. In this process, images are manipulated digitally to heighten contrast, then printed and cut out by hand. The exchange between digital and physical platforms is central to Winker's practice. They speak to the translation and tension between the different realities we constantly find ourselves bouncing between.

In Winker's studio there hangs a large canvas that reads fuzzy math? This Bush-era phrase employed to discredit everything from statistics on global warming to election results was in many ways the buzzword precursor to fake news.? It is a phrase that through repeated use has become meaningless. In Winker's presentation, it is now an icon. Monumentalized and untethered to circumstance, Winker highlights

how communities place weight on the familiar even when it is not understood. The painting evokes, even mocks, contemporary outrage and controversy. Now Winker is turning his attention to investigating the iconic painting *Olympia* by Manet. Winker seeks to unearth the tension between historical presentation and contemporary

understanding. The famed painting was seen as scandalous upon its unveiling due to its overt sexuality.



Now it exists as one of the greatest hits of art history 101. Winker's interpretation of the painting focuses in on Manet's model, Victorine-Louise Meurent. Meurent was a celebrated painter in her own right and was a regular subject for Manet, having also posed for *Dejeuner sur L'Herbe* and *The Railway*. Removing her surroundings, the reinterpretation becomes about the sexualization, and anonymity of a woman now written out of history. While breaking new ground, Winker still speaks to the role of visual literacy, promising his most thematically complex work yet.

--LUDWIG, JUSTINE