

Marc Dennis: Love in the Time of Corona at Gavlak

'Don't call the game in the first quarter,' I remind myself, even though I do it every time, proclaiming a situation's conclusion before it's fully fleshed out. This is a hard habit to kick in a world like ours—my animal mind autopilots to a clamor for some iota of control. Most semblances of dominion over greater forces often prove an illusion, as we collectively witnessed while the pandemic unfolded last year, forcing everyone inside and leaving even non-believers without a regular world to return to. In his latest solo exhibition, *Love in the Time of Corona*, Brooklyn-based artist Marc Dennis works with what remains at our disposal, the one great force humanity can actually command.

Love in the Time of Corona opened on April 22nd at GAVLAK Gallery in Palm Beach, presenting the public with a brand new series of works crafted by Dennis during quarantine. Throughout his career, the artist has honed hard rock sensibilities filtered through immense technical talent, blending his signature high-minded hyperrealism with democratic imagery like Disney characters and tattooed celebrity portraits, common to the more surface levels of this collective consciousness.



Marc Dennis, *When the Sun Hits the Water*, 2021. Oil on linen, 60 x 57 in.
Courtesy of GAVLAK.



Marc Dennis, *Allegory of Admiration*, 2021. Oil on linen, 60 x 62 in. Courtesy of GAVLAK.

Dennis's latest artwork riffs off the Old Masters, employing trompe l'oeil to set meticulous reproductions emblematic of the western art historical canon against mirages of his quarantine trappings—the artist's studio space of paint-streaked walls speckled with thumbtacks and tape. "By co-opting imagery from celebrated paintings of centuries past," the show's press release states, "Dennis's works find new meaning in the hallowed lineage of Old Master painting to explore contemporary questions of artistic ownership, pictorial representation, and the consumption of images." In other words, he's toying with matters of dominion.

Crafting this series was an effort of the artist's spiritual survival. While Dennis endured quarantine, he found himself pining after the in-person experience of these storied artworks, each critical to his own painterly development. Compensating for their absence, he embarked upon their reproduction. In *From a Close Distance*, Dennis recreates *The Princesse de Broglie* by French Neoclassical artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, closed to the public during quarantine. Surrounding the *Princesse*, Dennis has also depicted paint swatches and detail shots, all crafted by his own hand, alongside further "reference" images of Van Gogh's sunflowers and the

famous *Love* sculpture in Philadelphia, where Dennis once earned his MFA. The careful curation of each detail can be obscured by its outward beauty and striking realism.

“An artist’s ability to master trompe l’oeil has dominated romanticized histories of art in the West since antiquity,” the press release points out, speaking to the saccharine snag of obsession society frequently conflates with love. Human beings are drawn to all manner of charlatany because a sly trick proves exciting, rapturous, flashy. Sometimes we see this quasi-magic in another individual and call it romance.

Beauty and love are red herrings here. While the paintings throughout *Love in the Time of Corona* are certainly sexy, as all work by Marc Dennis is, the love they speak to runs deeper than attraction. As an exhibition, *Love in the Time of Corona* encapsulates a workhorse type of love, diligent like the painstaking act of recreating an iconic artwork to cope with the pangs of missing it.



Marc Dennis, *Love in the Time of Corona*, 2021. Oil on linen, 60 x 74 in. Courtesy of GAVLAK.



Nowhere is this intention more apparent than in the show's eponymous artwork, another wall set in the artist's paint-strewn studio which eschews reproductions for emotion from the artist's own lived experience. Over the course of quarantine, Dennis transcribed every single text he received from his loved ones. *Love in the Time of Corona*, the painting, pulls from hundreds of such messages to cull a selection equal parts silly, smart, clever, absurd, and funny. The actual text messages painted on post-it notes throughout this piece highlight an evenly distributed cross-section of comments related to the pandemic, the art world, Dennis's own practice, and his greater life, all embodying and illustrating the art of laborious love through technical and conceptual prowess.

"Our existence is increasingly experienced as a surging stream of images, and the difference between our work, recreation, and love lives has become defined by the shifting of windows on the surface of a digital device," the press release continues. Several great consolidations of power took place last year. Economically, small businesses shuttered while international conglomerates made a killing. On the sociological level, the growing corporatocracy and technocracy flexed their ever-increasing strength, shaping our way of relating to the world. Where screens had already proliferated our daily lives, last year enabled them to dominate, a shift which we cannot call in the first quarter—its effects are still playing out. "It is this dissolution of discernment—and our active participation in these voyeuristic tendencies—that Dennis's work reveals in unsparingly sharp focus," illuminating the path to awareness, and hopefully, action. Through love, even impossible feats of influence can be made real.

As a body of quarantine work, *Love in the Time of Corona* offers a realtime monument to Dennis's distinct method of processing this unpalatable historical development. In doing so, it becomes something greater than itself, even greater than the aesthetic pleasure this work offers. *Love in the Time of Corona* is emblematic of love's ability to sustain us through an utter lack of control, conversely yielding the only hope at dominion available. Love is, one way or another, the origin story of creation.

To build the next iteration of society after this struggle requires the diligent love that moves an artist to recreate his greatest inspirations as a salve for their absence. It requires the tenacious love to build what we want piece by piece until it's right in front of us. Here on the stark white walls of GAVLAK Gallery in sunny Palm Beach, *Love in the Time of Corona* is on view through June 5th for the viewer to uncover something even more real and even more lovely than trompe l'oeil's illusion, if only they linger longer than that first quarter allows.

— Vittoria Benzine