



Rabbi, 2022. Oil on canvas. 20 x 16 in. / 50.8 x 40.6 cm.

Joel Mesler: The Rabbis

January 26 - March 25, 2023

Cheim & Read
23 East 67 Street
New York NY 10065

Cheim & Read is pleased to present *Joel Mesler: The Rabbis*, an exhibition of new paintings and works on paper. The show will open on January 26, 2023, at the gallery's Upper East Side location, 23 East 67th Street, and run through March 25.

With *The Rabbis*, Joel Mesler takes his autobiographical body of work into markedly different territory. Since 2018, Mesler's paintings have featured flamboyantly embellished words and phrases ("Bruised Fruit," "Take It Easy," "Mama," "Burn Baby Burn"), prompting

comparisons with Ed Ruscha and Christopher Wool, or gyrating compositions of Edenic fronds and serpents in the manner of a child's alphabet book (C for Crossroads; Q for Quaaludes; W for Willy Wonka, Why, and Wasted).

In a dramatic shift, the new works, all completed in 2022, pick up where Mesler's earlier expressionistic figurative paintings, with their echoes of George Grosz and Otto Dix, left off, turning their focus on a subject explored by artists as disparate as Rembrandt, Marc Chagall, and Max Weber.

The legacy Mesler evokes through these works is conflicted. His grandfather, an Orthodox Jewish immigrant, lived the classic American Dream of making a fortune in a new land. Yet his own upbringing with his parents was tainted by alcoholism, dysfunction, and divorce — a "child of squandered privilege," as he was described in a profile in *The New York Times*. A collector of rabbinical portraits himself, these images of benevolent and wise bearded men, some sad-eyed and world-weary, others piercing and empathic, seem to function as avatars of a more innocent time. They evoke the joy of bat and bar mitzvahs, the soul-searching of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkoth.

Each portrait is set against a single color, rendered in creamy brushstrokes across the canvas or stained into the surface of the paper, while the marks delineating the individual features are by turns frenzied and calligraphic, with an inventive palette of earth tones, pinks, reds, blues, and blacks. With their emotional immediacy and layers of latent meaning, these images depart from

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the deadpan humor of Mesler's earlier work in a profound and moving way, another unexpected chapter in the artist's narrative of twists and surprises.

Joel Mesler (b. 1974, Los Angeles) earned his MFA in 1999 at the San Francisco Art Institute. A year later he opened his first gallery, Dianne Pruess in Los Angeles, and has since become well known as both an artist and a gallerist operating venues in Los Angeles, New York City, East Hampton, and Hudson, NY. His artwork has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Levy Gorvy, Hong Kong (2021), David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles (2021); Harper's Books, New York (2020 and 2018); Simon Lee Gallery, London (2018); and Kantor Gallery, Los Angeles (2017). He lives and works in East Hampton, NY.