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KEITH MAYERSON

by Maika Pollack

I met Keith Mayerson at the eighth-floor café of the new Whitney Museum, where there's a view of the Hudson River and you can glimpse the Statue of Liberty. We were there to discuss his upcoming show at Marlborough Chelsea, entitled "My American Dream." Mayerson is tall, priestlike, and absurdly eloquent. At Brown University he studied semiotics; during his MFA at the University of California, Irvine, he was drawn to classes with Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard. He is a painter who is equally comfortable analyzing Roland Barthes's "The Third Meaning," Kant's first critique, and the Beach Boys' Pet Sounds.

The New York-based Mayerson, in fact, has been showing his idiosyncratic brand of pop figurative painting since the 1990s, and for many of those years he acquired something of a cult following in the art world. That's partially due to his sincere paintings of scattered source material-appropriated imagery and personal photos. Rather than producing cold or slick abstractions, his are self-described "figurative, narrative, and allegorical paintings" that are highly emotional. Walking through the museum, we stop in front of works by artists he admires: Peter Saul, Mike Kelley, Dana Schutz, and Nicole Eisenman. In front of Mayerson's own *9-11* (2007), a charged painting depicting the second plane about to crash into the Twin Towers, a curious thing happens. Others around us gather and talk, telling their own September 11 stories. It's something art has done since *Guernica* or even depictions of the Last Judgment. "The event is way bigger than the painting," Mayerson says. The painting's brushwork is awkward and earnest. The blue- and pink-tinged burning tower dissolves into abstraction in which flesh and faces seem to appear from the smoke. "In a post-postmodern world, we realize how important language is, but have room for the ineffable too," he says.

Mayerson's new show features more than 100 paintings made over the past ten years. It is hung maximally—like a teenage bedroom or a wall of family pictures. "My life is salon-style," he jokes. His subjects range from Jackie Onassis ("my Madonna," he calls her) to Superman ("a Jewish superhero"). Obama, James Dean, Shirley Temple Black, Charlie Brown, Sitting Bull, Marvin Gaye, and Judy Garland are all there, as are dozens of paintings based on photographs of his family. If "art is language and language is power," as Mayerson puts it, "My American Dream" speaks to the new, more inclusive America that has taken form in the past decade. "Hopefully, we can continue to re-describe history," he says, "so it's not always about 'winners.'"