

KEITH MAYERSON: MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
CLEVELAND

by Grant Johnson



Keith Mayerson, *The Wizard of Oz Quintet*, 2006, oil on linen, 48 x 80"

Disparate faces in the crowd—those of the Dalai Lama, Anne Frank, and LeBron James among them—peered out from the more than 140 paintings dating from the late '90s to the present that filled the walls of “My American Dream,” the first solo museum exhibition of Los Angeles–based artist Keith Mayerson. Mayerson’s compositions, which appropriate images from found photographs, films, and comic books, as well as document personal events from the artist’s own life, might be aptly described as “faux folk” for their familiar, pop subject matter and naive approaches to naturalism and figuration.

These characteristics manifested most appealingly in Mayerson’s depictions of nonhuman subjects, such as *Moving Right Along*, 2014, which retools the famous image from *The Muppet Movie* (1979) of Kermit the Frog riding a bicycle apparently unassisted by a puppeteer. The artist’s careful modeling of Kermit’s green limbs and expression successfully conveys the labored effort of the character’s pedaling. These technical achievements, however, were few and far between; elsewhere, Mayerson’s oddly calibrated palette—which often lends a sickly, waxy quality to his pictures—produced disjunctions between subject and mood. In *Judy with Bows On*, 2005, for example, the work’s pumpkin palette and Judy Garland’s stiff grimace effectively rob its subject of her power. Nearby, the excessively warm hues and clumsy arrangement of figures in *The Wizard of Oz Quintet*, 2006, rendered the icon’s star vehicle as depressing kitsch. Throughout, Mayerson imposed a stylistic uniformity, unevenly standardizing his subjects, as in *Obama’s Night*, 2012,

in which jammed-together, ill-proportioned faces and crudely modeled, flatly colored clothing made what could have been a lyrical portrayal of the former president and his family into an awkward approximation. Although the connections between Mayerson's chosen subjects weren't always immediately clear, the artist took pains to elaborate on the exhibition's unifying themes in a recent interview: "For me, ["My American Dream" is] about [my male partner] and I; we've been together twenty-six years and we got married the first Sunday you could in California. . . . [Thus the show is also about] everything that could have helped make [our marriage] occur. So, historical figures, political figures, [and] cultural figures that helped bring about agency for all people are very much included in the show."

Following Michelle Grabner's solo exhibition "I Work from Home," "My American Dream" marked at least the second show at this institution derived from trends captured in the 2014 Whitney Biennial. There, anachronistic associations—both Julie Ault's elegy for David Wojnarowicz and Martin Wong, as well as Triple Canopy's collection of primitive American paintings—seemed to style Mayerson's paintings as the work of an outlier or outsider. As "My American Dream" demonstrated, while an overvaluation of painterly technique may be passé, Mayerson's sentimental, strategic deployment of signs of a progressive America is no more intriguing. Ultimately, due to the sheer number of works on view and the crammed manner in which they were installed, the exhibition left viewers little room to grapple with Mayerson's paintings as paintings, or to scrutinize the legacy (to start, the critical relativism and "bad" painting we have flirted with since the 1980s) from which they descend. Ostensibly satisfied with its presentation as populist spectacle, "My American Dream" neglected to explain what distinguishes these paintings from the visually similar labor of a club of Sunday painters, or from other nostalgic returns to figuration. While Mayerson's works may conjure the false image of an artist outside the establishment, we do well to remember that this, too, is just another American dream.