



Identity Crisis, 2009, acrylic and ink on paper



A Is For Allie Who Plunged From A Blimp, 2013, acrylic on panel

MICHAEL MARARIAN • Kinder Kavalcade • September 12 to October 24, 2014

All images courtesy the Artist and Corey Helford Gallery, Los Angeles.

MICHAEL MARARIAN is a graduate of the Art and Theater program at the University of Bridgeport as well having studied at the Arts Student's League in New York City. His work has previously been shown worldwide at Corey Helford Gallery and Thinkspace Gallery in Los Angeles, Bristol City Museum in Bristol England, Galerie D'Art Yves Laroche in Montreal, Last Rites Gallery in New York City and the Antonia Fraunberg Gallery in Dusseldorf, Germany. Originally from Andover, Massachusetts, Michael currently lives and works in Buffalo, New York. He attributes his inspiration to his wife Elizabeth and their nine cats - 99, Charlotte, Lola, Bridgette, Zoey, Suess, Herman, Lily and Mitty-Rawlings.

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MICHAEL MARARIAN

Kinder Kavalcade





cover:
Ancestry Breakdown, 2009, acrylic and ink on paper

above
Post Mort Halloween Costumes (Jon Benet Ramsey), 2009, acrylic and ink on paper

right
Inappropriate Gifts for Children #1 : A Mapplethorpe Calendar, 2013, acrylic on paper

far right
Dawn of the Bullied, 2011, acrylic on paper



Dark Jocularity

If you cannot accept dark humor as a device, you've arrived at the wrong work.

Michael Mararian's paintings are not really about children, but children serve as the central protagonists in much of his work. Painted with equal proportions of grim humor and buoyant charm, children function as the effective dramatic foils for the contradictions, absurdities, and layers of pathos Mararian is fond of exploring. Whether brandishing lit matches and gasoline, wearing inappropriate clothing, wielding dangerous weapons, or just lying in a drunken stupor upon a field of cell phones, children as characters sharply highlight an array of themes and concerns discussed throughout Mararian's work.

In Mararian's paintings, there is often an underlying sense of a world run somewhat amok—or perhaps not so underlying. Sexual identity, class politics, identity issues, violence, fear, phobias—all the wide, wonderful array of contemporary human emotions waft through these works. He often sets his figures against bluntly decorative backdrops, which both softens the severity of some images while amplifying their lunacy. He offers us pleasing means of access into themes that can be troubling to consider and he does this both visually and conceptually. It may appear to be a funny, beautiful painting—and it is—but there is a thin line between earnest guffaw and nervous laughter and it's a space that Mararian repeatedly occupies.

It may at first seem ironic (or even cruel, if you're a parent) to utilize the images of children in this manner, but Mararian is not mocking his subjects. He has generally

painted them in scenarios that elicit great sympathy in the viewer. When he inserts the faces of lost children (most notably, Jon Benet Ramsey) into the packages of Halloween costumes, it is not a gesture of heightened abuse but one of earnest concern. It has the appearance of a cynical, exploitive painting but it is equally a deeply resonant comment on how readily child victims are exploited by the larger forces of the media. It's a tough painting that is hard to "enjoy," but it should be immediately apparent that Mararian's hand, somewhat sardonic, is even more imbued with great concern.

This is no more apparent than in a pair of portraits that portray a bullied young boy aiming a gun of comeuppance (set against a gay-friendly decorative backdrop and wearing a Frankie Goes To Hollywood tshirt, no less) and a young girl in a NYU tshirt and graduation cap with a lost expression and arms covered in self-inflicted cuts. The meaning of these paintings are immediately apparent. They are haunting and heartbreaking images in which the artist demonstrates tremendous empathy for his subjects.

Which does not prevent him from setting children in more mocking scenarios, as with the young girl, crying with hysterical disappointment at the gift of a Mapplethorpe calendar, or the identity-ambiguous toddlers decked out in a Real Niggas hoodie and ill-fitting wig. Or the crying children who people his series of phobia paintings. Or that poor little fella who has not only fallen out of an advertising blimp but has lost his pants along the way, a coy version of that archetypal nightmare

of being naked in front of your class.

In some of these works, children are children. In others, they are something else. It's critical to notice how frequently they are rendered in grayscale and even outlined, formal devices that remove the figures from a sense of realism, despite their realistic appearance. It is almost as though Mararian's children are apparitions—or avatars—who stand in for the rest of us. Which does not mean they are merely satiric, but there is an everpresent atmosphere in the works, an attitude about the subject matter that is serious but always willing to draw out a humorous (if sometimes uncomfortable) edge.

Mararian is concise in his work, rarely overdoing it. In any given painting, there are only a few specific cues or references to direct the viewer. Using a direct, illustrative style, the works frequently read as public service announcements—don't bully, don't pressure your children, don't be a slave to anxiety. The decorative backgrounds that reside behind the figures are purposefully direct and much less painterly, or at least less resolved, that the figures themselves. His backgrounds are usually just backgrounds and the works force our attention to remain on his subject.

In this regard, it's useful to notice that even within grayscale figures, the eyes are colored. In many ways, the emotional impact in many of the works emanate from the eyes and Mararian demonstrates a deep and subtle skill in evoking the emotion behind the expressions. The eyes often establish the tone for the entire painting. Lou Reed kid has those faux monster eyes that express wild, unfettered imagination. Hall Monitor

Kid is unimpressed with your excuses. Frankie Says Kid has had enough already. Epic Fail Kid, laying atop a bed of cell phones, looks glassy-eyed and desperate. Even the fake Halloween mask eyes of murder victim Jon Benet Ramsey, looking remarkably alive, teases out the most acute poignancy from a grim, satiric presentation

As formal, painterly devices, children soften the message and make it more acute. Attracted by the general magnetism of children and hence drawn toward the paintings, we are suddenly caught in an often disturbing scenario. There are abundant comical aspects throughout the works but no pure mockery. Comedy is laced—as it appropriately should be—with a darker edge the points toward another notion. Toward a moment when your laughter awkwardly fades into something more solemn and sullen.

It is no small feat to draw out such a wide array of emotional reverberations from works that are so direct, concise, and fearlessly straddle the comic and the tragic, the horrific and the banal, the innocent child and the absurd, terrifying world. Mararian demonstrates great formal restraint and economy within an expansive emotional landscape.

They are humorous. And very dark. Because life is.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator

