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Artist Josh Reames reflects on the internet at its worst in ‘Reclaiming the Moon’

His exhibition at Galerie Frank Elbaz examines the highs and lows of pop culture.



Josh Reames' "Many moons," a 2021 oil-and-acrylic-on-canvas painting, is among the works on display at "Reclaiming the Moon" at Galerie Frank Elbaz in Dallas. (Courtesy of Josh Reames and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles) (Josh Reames)

By Christopher Mosley
2:39 PM on Mar 3, 2021 CST



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Have you ever stared at the internet in wide-eyed horror at what a nightmarish place it can be? Artist Josh Reames can paint that feeling.

His new exhibition, titled "Reclaiming the Moon," is currently on view at Dallas' Galerie Frank Elbaz. While the show delves into an astonishing number of references to the depths of politically charged memes and other pop culture visual cues, Reames is adamant that there should be no clear directive.

Asked if some of his punk iconography and obscure band logos may fly over the average collector's head, he is unconcerned.

"I'm sure a lot of it is lost," Reames says. "Some of that is where I dip a bit into being autobiographical, forcing my interests into the paintings. I think it keeps them from being too didactic. In the end, they're paintings," he says. "My job isn't to preach. It's to make paintings."

It would take a record store's worth of vinyl and a stack of music history books to understand the dozens of logos, icons and titles in Reames' brilliantly loaded work. In some cases, he is paying homage to the rebellious artists of his youth, with cult groups such as Dead Moon and the Dead Kennedys making an appearance in the dense amalgamation of text and splattered imagery.

During a visit on opening weekend, two collectors are overheard discussing whether the expletive-laden work *Zztop* would look good in a bathroom.

"Oh, lord," Reames says with a burst of laughter.

The show's title is a soft jab at the extreme far-right's appropriation of Mac Tonight, the former McDonald's commercial star that looked like a smiling piano player with a crescent moon for a head. Mac Tonight, aka Moon Man, became a favorite tool of online hate groups and is adjacent to other previously innocuous characters such as Pepe the Frog. Reames' centerpiece work — also called *Reclaiming the Moon* — is almost poignant when viewed in this context. There is no moon man playing a piano, but instead a half-dark moon floating above the text.



Artist Josh Reames, a Dallas native, is photographed at his studio in Brooklyn. (Josh Reames and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles)

"I didn't use a direct image of Mac Tonight on purpose," Reames says. "The title of the show is about Mac Tonight directly/indirectly. In a more broad sense, the way with the internet, the co-opting of imagery and the shifting of meaning happens. In history, it's been kind of a slow crawl, but with the internet, things flip really quick and meaning changes really quickly. Signs, signifiers, are in this fluid state. I think that Mac Tonight is a really good example of that."

The character does have dark origins. Reames explains that Mac Tonight was originally based on the song "Mack the Knife," the standard by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht. Reames went down many internet rabbit holes to get to the essence of how much the promotional character had been misused.

"The absurdity of that in the first place used to sell cheeseburgers to children, and then a couple decades later being the mascot for some of the most gross racism and violence," Reames says. "It's pretty brutal looking through, having to educate myself, looking through these different blogs and the memes that are made out of this — it's pretty brutal." Moon Man has even made it to the Anti-Defamation League's **list of hate symbols**.



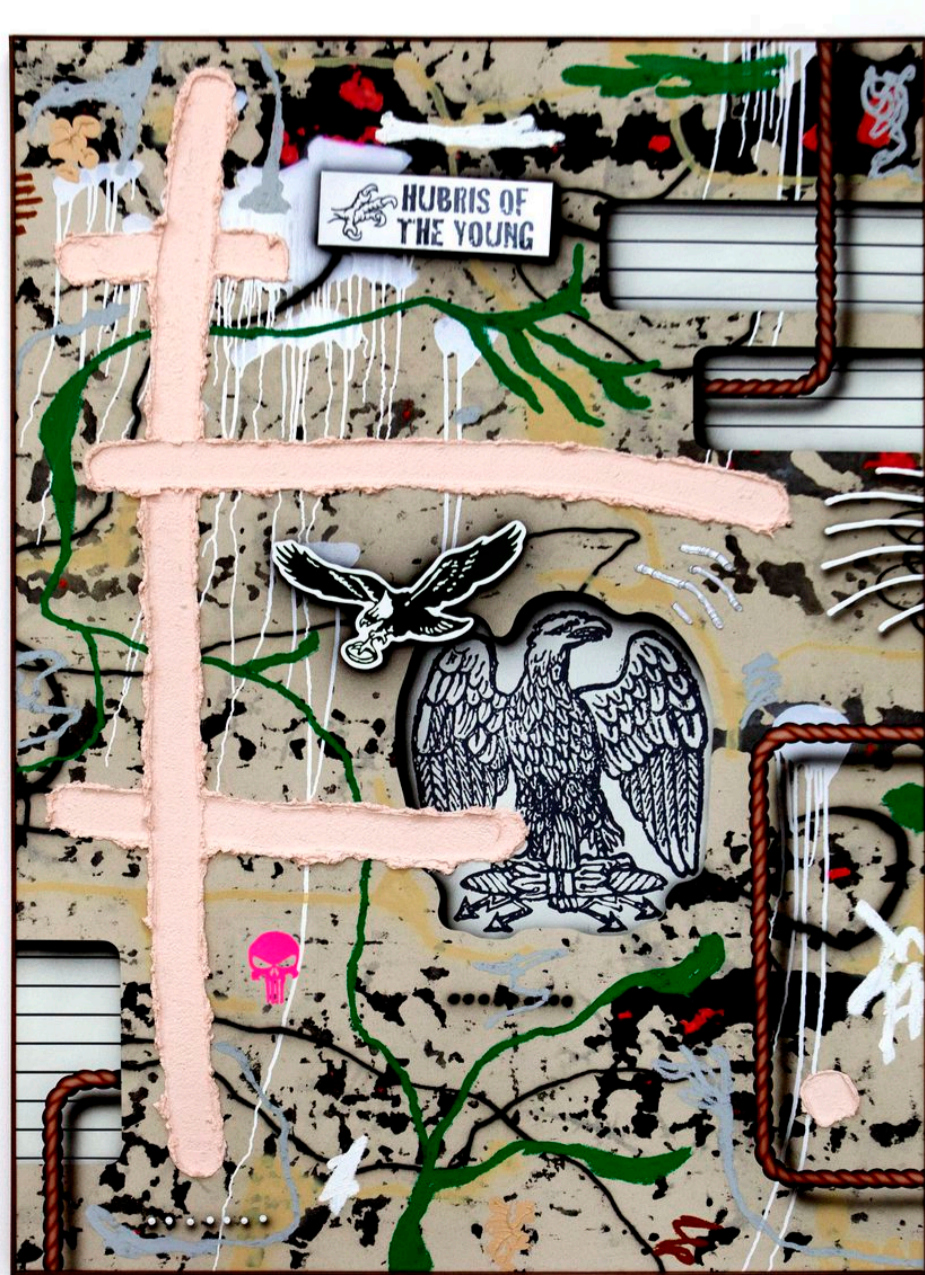
Josh Reames' "Based," a 2020 oil-and-acrylic-on-canvas painting, is among the works at Galerie Frank Elbaz through April 3. (Nan Coulter / Special Contributor)

Reames grew up in Dallas and found his path to art by way of music and printmaking, the latter of which is the concentration for his bachelor of fine arts degree. He played in musical groups such as *It Smells of Sex* and *Mannequins*. He spent summers touring the country, but for music, not visual art.

Reames fell in love with the Catskills several years ago and recently bought a house with his wife, artist Amber Renaye. The two had a joint exhibition at the now-defunct Oliver Francis Gallery in 2015 — Reames' last show in Dallas. While he is now living on the East Coast, his upbringing still informs his work.

"Even in New York, there are going to be things in there included that relate to me growing up in the South," Reames says. "I think there are going to be references completely lost on someone who grew up on the Upper West Side."

Reames views the visual complexity of his paintings as a strength, rather than being willfully cryptic for its own sake.



Josh Reames' "Hubris" is a 2020 work that combines oil, acrylic and cellulacy on canvas. (Nan Coulter / Special Contributor)

"There can be moments of discovery or ahas down the road," Reames says. "All the artwork that I live with, I typically will discover new things in it down the line, and that's a really important experience for me — the kind of experience I want other people to have with it."

Details

Josh Reames' "Reclaiming the Moon" is on view through April 3 at Galerie Frank Elbaz, 136 Glass St., Dallas. 817-925-3176. galeriefrankelbaz.com. By appointment and open Saturdays from 1 to 5 p.m. Email brandon@galeriefrankelbaz.com.

CORRECTED at 1:30 p.m. March 7 to include the credit of Luis De Jesus Los Angeles for the photo of "Many moons."



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