

BROOKLYN RAIL

JASON FOX with Andrew Woolbright

Why Are You Sitting In The Dark

David Kordansky Gallery

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Los Angeles

Certain figures are continually recast within Jason Fox's paintings: Homer Simpson, Barack Obama, Joni Mitchell, and George Harrison, to name a few. They audition to occupy the same body as the dragon and the cyborg, the artist, and the artist's dog. Each body becomes a crowd of broken signifiers, a transpositional body of multitude, a valence of skin that seems interested in what new meanings can be derived from detached and ironic assemblage.



Portrait of Jason Fox, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

There's more juice to be squeezed out of the fractured post-modern identity, especially in the space between the infinite stream of virtually accessed images and the history of painting as a resistance to its speed. The artist continued to paint through the nineties, after Expressionism finally crashed and the zeitgeist shifted to sculpture and relational aesthetics. Fox is at once channeling the graphic shape and motifs of artists like Picasso, Guston, and de Kooning while entertaining the critiques of capitalism and the role of the painter within its system, through a careful reading of artists like Kippenberger and Kelley. For Fox, painting is an ambivalent method of dreaming through visual culture, where the symbolic and the real are conflated. The references of Fox are often painted with such speed that they eclipse interpretation, coming out as fast sounds or syllables like "Petty Giacometti," that choose to repress nothing so as to release mass culture's libido. Within this objectless desire, there are strange parallels to be seen between the great painters of the last century and the images of anime and monstrous special-effects merge. Within the pathos and bathos, and the attuned drifts between history painting and the artist's own self-deprecation, there is a method actor—a dedicated hand that discovers singularly derived form, overlaid color, and shape from years of rehearsal.

In his current exhibition with David Kordansky in LA, the artist reshuffles the deck of sixties counterculture with the immediate present. What is depicted is not nostalgia, or a memorabilia of history. Instead, the rigor mortis of American celebrities are resuscitated into new context—the dead images cast as new characters. I was fortunate to see the work in the artist's studio before it was shipped out, and sit down with him to discuss the archetypal nature of his characters, the humiliation of being an artist within our violent American culture, and the body as a drape or re-skin—a shadowed dream of intellectual property and the celebrities of the American hegemon.



Jason Fox, *After Midnight*, 2024. Oil, acrylic, and pencil on canvas, 90 x 62 x 1 5/8 inches. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Andrew Woolbright (Rail): Have you seen that image of James Gandolfini wearing the Homer Simpson mask for Halloween?

Jason Fox: I don't think I've seen that.

Rail: It made me think of your painting *After Midnight* (2024). An almost naked Homer is overlaid with a werewolf and something close to Astro Boy boots, but not quite. The artist in the studio is a motif that you return to frequently. Your idea of the painter is not heroic. It's maybe the painter as "D'oh!" But there's something about it that I don't fully believe—a level of method acting or expertise under the self-effacement. And then there is the presence of the cyborg, as seen in *Phone in Flesh and Stone Crossing Main Street* (2025). You're often posing something that is both human and anti-human, revealing a precision that emerges through the Homer.

Fox: I think a huge influence on me was coming of age during the renaissance of horror and sci-fi—beginning with Cronenberg, going into the eighties with *Evil Dead*, *Terminator*, and John Carpenter's *The Thing*. I remember as a kid going into New York City to see the first *Alien* movie because of the monster. I've always been interested in character design in cinema and comics. In my paintings and drawings of the artist in the studio, I'm bringing that *Cinefex* magazine influence into the painterly tradition of Picasso, Guston, and Kippenberger's treatment of the subject.

Rail: Canonical painters as a horror genre. That's really interesting. To continue the metaphor, how are you thinking about the special effects—the way you play with irony and the masks and transposition within your figures? There's a part of me that sees it, potentially, as a sensuous joy of difference. There's something exciting about ironic configurations on some level. But it could also be dissident, the alienation you feel from all these different siloed ideas of culture kept in infinite competition. Is it an affirmation of the monster of culture, or are you trying to appreciate the artistry in its Frankensteined body?

Fox: I think irony and humor play a big role in the work, and operating in an area where it's difficult to tell if the decisions I'm making are either incredibly stupid or really smart. I like that ambiguity.

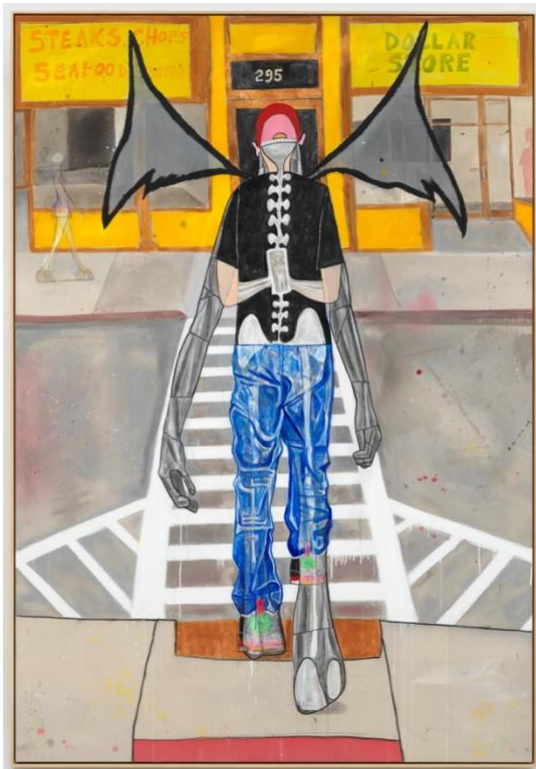
Rail: And that also relates to a history of caricature, and political cartoons like those of Honoré Daumier or James Gilray. There can be a real anger to that. You have to be really used to being angry to tell a joke through it.

Fox: Burying political dissent in humor and absurdity is an ancient and necessary act.

Rail: And that takes us back to Gandolfini in a Homer mask. There's an underlying seriousness, maybe on the level of method acting. Donna Haraway describes irony as a kind of "humor and serious play." Any theorist will acknowledge that comedy is a very serious language model, and the method actor disguised as an everyman somehow gets to that. The standup comedian is maybe more aware of their body and the way they deliver things than anyone. It takes a lot of mirror work to arrive at an idea of the natural, and the recognition of mastery can break the illusion.

Fox: I was just reading this Hilton Als essay about Richard Pryor. He was describing how Richard Pryor's body language while performing expressed a constant state of agitation and anxiety. This made me think of the paintings and drawings I have done with full figures of Barack Obama and Bob Marley. The image of Obama I drew from was from a debate, and his body language is that

of someone trying to appear as non-threatening as possible. The image of Marley is from a concert, and his pose is like a demigod bursting with energy. I find how bodies pose in relation to certain power dynamics very interesting.



Jason Fox, *Phone with Flesh and Stone Crossing Main Street*, 2025. Acrylic, oil, and pencil on canvas. 90 x 62 x 1 3/8 inches. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Rail: Bodies record the politics of the time. I think of that Liz Magic Laser piece where she studies the hand gestures of politicians. Obama and the pointing, Trump with that small accordion gesture he does. She claims that George H.W. Bush was the first president to really use his hands when speaking, and of course he's straight out of the CIA. She traced it back to the 1800s, when François Delsarte wrote a book about public speaking and how to use your hands to generate power. You imagine an invisible box in front of you, and how you place your hands on it—from the top or the bottom or the sides—leads the audience on a subconscious level. Posture has a relation to power, and how that figuration can be used against us also seems like it's in your work.

Fox: Exactly.

Rail: Maybe I'm taking your interest in politics and seeing that too much within the work.

Fox: No, I agree with what you're saying. In my work the body is serving multiple functions. The figure becomes an armature for politics, self-portraiture, the history of painting, and eroticism.

Rail: Especially for figurative painting, that strange overlap between what is political and what is erotic is so potent. I feel like there's been a new effort in reclaiming libidinal desire, I'm sure as a result of fascism and the crowd. Maybe we're leaving the brain and returning to the spleen in painting—whatever we picture holds all of our unregulated impulses. Maybe we are realizing how confining narrative can be.

Fox: When I first started showing in the early 1990s, the only thing more uncool than painting was narrative painting. I think the emergence of Kerry James Marshall and Dana Schutz really kicked open the door for a more narrative-based painting.

Rail: I don't think people understand the difficulty of what Marshall is doing. I think people miss how integral his understanding of genre is to be able to deconstruct it. And early Dana Schutz was so dialectical. Can you paint an inside joke or a dumb thing so it becomes monumentalized, but in an indirect way? So much of painting now is an affirmation of something. Or it starts with something you already believe in instead of starting with a problem and trying to paint your way out of it. To bring it back to you, I'm more interested in the method actor telling a dumb joke. I want to get more into that. Where does that come from? I feel like artists that do that well, who are interested in the fragmentation of the body, do it out of some kind of rejection of purity. That could be a critique—a sort of anti-fascist rejection of homogeny—or it could be a disinterest in how much is left at the level of the individual.

Fox: I think it is also about creating your own space within the history of painting and politics. Identity and narrative are some of the tools for doing that.

Rail: Well, I do think that paintings—especially paintings that involve the body—are best when you're not supposed to be making them. Or they come at a time when it really is a transgressive act. I think of you and, like, Angela Dufresne, Nicola Tyson, or even earlier, like May Stevens or Vivian Browne or Bob Thompson. There's something about being able to work without everyone watching. That's when it gets pushed.

Fox: When I got out of grad school in the late eighties, I was making photo-based paintings that I thought fit into the moment. After several months, I realized I didn't like what I was doing and I started painting again. I knew that I was heading way off the path, deep into the woods, but I had no other choice.

Rail: Exactly.

Fox: That isolation gives you a lot of room to experiment and develop your own language.

Rail: Experimentation comes through in the work. I like that there are some fixed points of gravity, some recurring figures in the work that continue to be incorporated. The cyborg, the werewolf, the dragon, George Harrison, your dog, Homer. I'm interested in how you think about them. Are they symbolic to you? Are they signs and symbols by the time you use them? Do they operate more as a language or an equation?

Fox: Usually, it's really organic. For example, I made a Homer Simpson painting twenty-five years ago. I was making red on white paintings then. And I was reminded of them when I saw an amazing painting by Katherine Bernhardt that had a Cookie Monster in it, and she makes paintings of Bart Simpson. Homer suddenly popped into my head and I remembered how interesting his head is.



Jason Fox, *C'mon Everybody*, 2025. Acrylic and pencil on canvas. 56 1/8 x 48 x 1 5/8 inches. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Rail: It is perfect. A kind of dome or a bell jar of empty thought. You've said before that the cyborg comes from Alexander McQueen. But how do you define a cyborg? How are you thinking of it when you use it?



Jason Fox, *Monsters in Love*, 2023. Ink and pencil on paper. 16 x 12 inches. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Fox: I think of them more often as something in a state of transformation, rather than a cyborg, or a cyborg in a state of transition or decay. Imagine Francis Bacon or Picasso watching *The Howling*.

Rail: I like thinking of the surfaces of their paintings in that way now; seeing their reworking of shape and form as a kind of transmogrification or channeling of another form. I like thinking of this in relation to the painter's position. For you, the painter is staying in this in-between space of transformation and repetition, between clumsy moves and method acting.

Fox: I see the cast of characters I've developed over the years the way some film directors have a group of actors that they work with all the time.

Rail: Do they have names? Characteristics? Or are they used when you need a shape? Is there some amount of performance or rehearsal involved in this?

Fox: They are a troupe made up of cultural icons and personal icons; for example, Joni Mitchell and Chico, our dog. The private meets the public. The Jason Voorhees hockey mask character functions as both its horror franchise and me, Jason. I do a lot of drawings, and frankly that's what I enjoy doing the most. I'll do a bunch of drawings to develop an image. There's no pressure, and that's where most of the ideas are generated. They stand alone, but in some ways they are like practicing a golf swing. When I was at Cooper Union, Richard Artschwager gave a talk. All he talked about was solving various carpentry and finishing problems. At the time I thought he was really boring, but later I realized that that is what it's all about in the studio: problem solving.

Rail: And I'm sure he thought he was being generous, going that in depth about the materials. But your materials are more cultural. There might be a way of looking at your paintings as a kind of schizo-culture exquisite corpse.

Fox: Surrealism influences everyone, but for me, it's much more coming out of cinema and German painters like Georg Baselitz and Kippenberger.

Rail: It's also maybe akin to dreaming through culture. Like, if you aren't actively thinking about Obama and Joni Mitchell, they can become archetypal. Or they become a kind of sigil, and months later that becomes a type of critique on mediation and the way we take in culture.

Fox: Yeah, I hope so. Living in this country as an American artist, I sometimes feel as if I'm trapped inside the body of a psychopath. I'm trying to make things that I enjoy looking at to lessen that horror.

Rail: But I'm also wondering if cliché is something you're actively thinking about. In some ways, your subjects are the same subjects you'd see in a high school art class. At any given time, someone was making a Bob Marley painting. At any given time there's someone making a Joni Mitchell painting or an Obama painting. And in some ways you're drawn towards these super-saturated or over-expressed cultural figure images to start with, and then you're searching for a way to vex them. But how do you think about that point in the process—of starting with a generalization or a majoritarian idea of culture maybe—because I don't think it has anything to do with pop. Maybe it's like the German painters you mentioned, and their idea of Capitalist Realism. Or maybe it's "How do I take this symbolic image and return it or express it as something enigmatic?"

Fox: I am interested in exploring popular images in the way artists like Sigmar Polke and Richard Prince have, and I'm interested in exploring the relationship between celebrity culture and idol worship and questioning these images as potentially false idols. The images are also generated through pure silliness, e.g., *Beatles on Beatles* (2010).



Jason Fox, *Beatles on Beatles*, 2010. Mixed media on paper, 16 1/8 x 12 1/8 inches. Photo: Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

Rail: There it is. They are all false idols aren't they? So it's seeing the body of the psychopath through what the psychopath mistakenly places value in. You're studying the desires of psychopathy. But maybe it's also a relationship to language? A poetic body or a body of words you're trying to turn into a chant or a mumble. You've used rhymes in the past to generate the idea for a painting—like “Petty/Giacometti”—putting together two people because of something to do with their names, or something about the rhymes. And then you make that into a formal operation.

Fox: So many artists that I love, like Joan Mitchell and Jasper Johns, were seriously connected to poetry. My connection to poetry is very secondhand and simplistic, but it's very useful for me.

Rail: “Petty/Giacometti” is like a cellar door. There's such a beauty to the rhythm of it. It's interesting how a body of text can become a body of material.

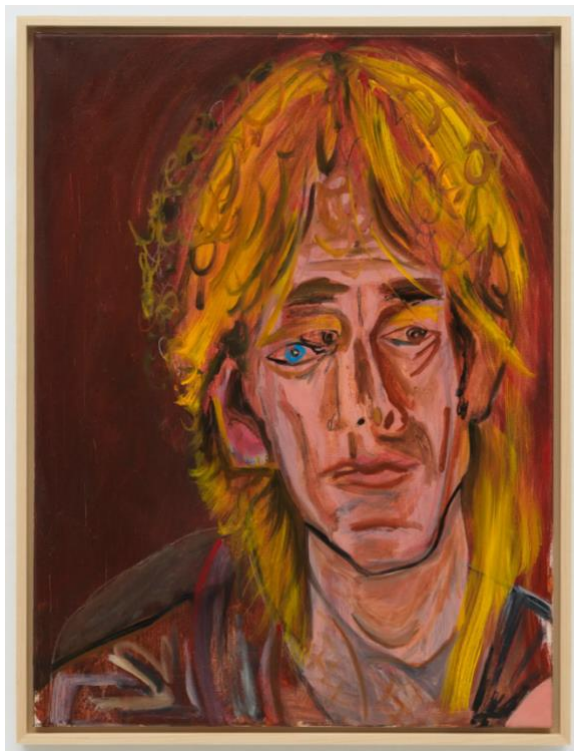
Fox: In the early 2000s, I got tired of generating my own images. Basically, I just suddenly felt my work was getting stale, but I didn't want to directly appropriate images either. I read an interview with Francis Bacon, and the way he discussed photography and some of the paintings that he was obsessed with—I suddenly realized, *that's it*. That's how I can take these images from somewhere else and turn them into my own. I'm not concerned with an identifiable likeness. If someone recognizes George Harrison, as an example—fine. If they don't, I don't care, because it doesn't matter. Some people think he's Jesus. It's just an armature to kind of drape something on top of. But I realized later on that at the same time, there's undeniably some kind of content there, beyond only formal concerns.

Rail: There's a lot there. Figures as armatures and drapes. It makes me think of how some video games are now, like Fortnite, where a Marvel character or a Star Wars character will show up as a skin. I think so much of culture has turned bodies of signification into bodies that are closer to drapes or skins. Obviously there's a post-capitalist critique in there, that you have to make four hundred million dollars off a movie to make it financially work now, so how many IP multiverses can you tether together to do that? But it's interesting to use painting in possibly a similar way. Reskinning playable cultural idols? And then knowing all of the elements of the broken signifiers still comes through but on a delay.

Fox: The skin image makes me think of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* (1536–41) and his self-portrait in St Bartholomew's skin. I started deciphering the work and realizing there was some kind of unconscious critique going on of baby boomer culture and the decline of civilization. I love The Beatles, but the fact that their influence is still so huge in our culture fifty years after the fact is creepy for me. I'm interested in how the images of George Harrison, Joni Mitchell, and Bob Marley become ghosts inhabiting the sunset of the boomer generation.

Rail: I'm interested in how you often deploy images of that time of counterculture. Are you revisiting the crime scene of where things started to kind of fall apart? Or is it this idea of exploring the image culture of the neoliberal boomer generation, and their freedom that was at the expense of the collective?

Fox: George Harrison is a perfect example of trying to have it all—spiritualism, hedonism, wealth.



Jason Fox, *Petty Painting Giacometti*, 2024. Oil, acrylic, and pencil on linen. 24 x 18 x 5/8 inches. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Rail: Well I feel like you got into art when demystification was taught and practiced. The artist isn't an elevated prophet of society or culture, the artist is more like, "Wait, am I qualified to be here?" I see how many artists have become fans of politicians, and I think as artists we should be suspicious of all power, whoever has it. And part of that is self-implication—that's Guston. The distance between New York and the Jim Crow South wasn't as far as people wanted to think it was. The gallery is the interface of empire, to get Marcusian a bit: the artist can easily affirm empire through repressive desublimation—the illusion of freedom that keeps us from being angry like we should be. "Yes, we commit war crimes, but we make the movies you like right? And we have the culture that you read about right?" And I think that that delusion is the definition of psychosis. We are born in a crime scene, a deeply humiliating and terrible scene of violence.

Fox: And that's really my subject matter: American culture and American violence. When I worked at Dia Beacon a number of years ago, the Iraq War was starting and I had to educate myself on the artists in the collection. I found it interesting how some of the writings and interviews of artists like Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer and even Donald Judd to some extent have not aged well. There was a real American triumphalism in their words. I then started rediscovering Joseph Beuys's work in the collection. His worldview wasn't triumphant. The view was: "We lost. How do we reinvent our culture? How do we heal?" There is a

knowledge that is really missing in American culture. And going back to *The Simpsons*, if I wanted to describe America to someone who didn't know it, I would show them *The Simpsons*.

Rail: Well, it's interesting to think of Homer through Polke, and of you being the method actor performing through the head of clumsy Homer. The game is over. What do you do when you hate capitalism but all of the alternatives have been killed? You hold up many of the American practitioners of American Pop, and it is just sublimation. This is something Benjamin Buchloh talks about with Hal Foster in *Exit Interview*. Andy Warhol completely sublimated the commodity, stripped it of its critique. How does that compare to Marcel Broodthaers? And I think what you said is it: one is the reality of having lost, and the other is a misinformed reality without consequence where we never lose.

I like the idea that it's always you in your paintings. That every re-skin or drape is an alienated self-portraiture. But then there's an irony of not wanting to be in front of the work. Not wanting to be depicted.



Jason Fox, *Why Are You Sitting In The Dark?*, 2024. Acrylic and pencil on canvas. 62 x 82 x 1 5/8 inches. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Fox: My least favorite Warhols are his self-portraits. I don't think artists tend to be that interesting or charismatic. We're usually better off being invisible. I think it's rare for artists to be interesting visually or have a persona, like Beuys, who had a look. There's that David Bowie lyric, "What a jolly boring thing to do." And it is.

Rail: I think that young artists feel the pressure to make themselves interesting, or make their work about the search for the interesting aspect of themselves. I think that idea of self is so exhausting.

Fox: I would love to do a coffee table book of young attractive artists posing in front of their generic paintings. It's endless.

Rail: I don't even know when I knew what Sigmar Polke looked like. So many of my favorite artists I really didn't have any interest in knowing what they looked like. I think it ultimately is building a world where the influencer and the person who can afford a PR team will benefit from this. It's already happening. It doesn't benefit any of us in ten years, or now for that matter. I do feel like we have stopped having conversations about the cultural responsibility of being an artist. What does it mean to want to generate a cult of success or celebrity around yourself?

Fox: In a culture where everyone is encouraged to be an entrepreneur and that is aspirational, some artists are going to go in that direction. I'd rather be watching *Dragon Ball Z* than trying to generate a cult of success.

Rail: In *DBZ*, it's more about destruction. Sometimes an explosion builds across multiple episodes and it's the only thing happening. Let's build into dismantling. It's boring work, but it's better than positivism during fascist times.

Fox: We're becoming satellite scraps colliding in the atmosphere.

Rail: And you have to give up on everything to be able to critique it. Or you have to cycle through that to want to see something better. Or build the explosion with the people around you.

[Andrew Paul Woolbright](#) is an artist, gallerist, and Editor-at-Large at the *Brooklyn Rail*, living and working in Brooklyn, NY. Woolbright is an MFA graduate from the Rhode Island School of Design in painting and is the director of the Lower East Side gallery Below Grand. He currently teaches at Pratt and School of Visual Arts in New York.