

ARNOLD MESCHES: A LIFE'S WORK

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Arnold Mesches, *Three Chandeliers*, 1987. Acrylic on canvas, 80" X 88". Collection of The National Gallery.

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Where does a retrospective begin? Is it with the most recent piece in the show, as retrospection literally means to begin at the present moment and then retreat into the past, or does it begin with the earliest pieces—the scribbles and student work, those made before the artist hit his stride? Or, should one look through the pieces on display to find an exemplary work through which the entire career and life shines crystalline? When choosing a path to enter Arnold Mesches's endlessly American oeuvre, one finds that the earliest work (1945) is an augury of all of the paintings to come, up until the last was picked up from the artist's studio, still wet to the touch, in December 2012.

The painting is “The Plaza Preacher,” a small (30 x 24 inch) oil on canvas featuring a latter-day Jeremiah hollering at the viewer, his hand on the Bible. Behind him are a few men, one wearing a navy uniform, and a taxicab. The arms and legs are positioned to draw immediate attention to the open mouth, thus foregrounding any message being spit past his mustache. Yet there’s a gilt of time separating us from that message and it has nothing to do with the vintage curves of the yellow cab. The painting has developed a gritty craquelure since the end of World War II, and, as you move back and forth, trying to dodge the glare cast by an overhead light, you realize that the mouth is following you, not unlike the eyes of old portraits. Following you through the years.

Arnold Mesches was born in 1923 in the Bronx, and at 20 moved out to Los Angeles, where he attended the Art Center School. A fellow traveler awash in Hollywood Babylon, he drifted towards the picket lines, painting signs for strikers and winding up with an FBI file before he was 25. Since then Mesches has for the most part (there was the 1968-74 hiatus for novel writing) been painting pictures. Pictures is the correct word; his work has long fed upon visual representations of Americana. But it doesn’t go down easy. When one thinks of the politically or ideologically forward work of the time, it’s not usually figurative (social realism had about run its course at this point), but when the same brush paints union posters and canvases, the modernist autonomy of the material takes another turn.

There’s a scene in Bertolucci’s *The Dreamers* where one of the characters spouts some ’68 apothegm: “a petition is a poem, a poem is a petition.” A recent series drives this point home. Iconic paintings, many of them politically charged (Goya’s “The Third of May 1808,” for instance), are foregrounded by depictions of the artist’s materials: palettes, dirty brushes and turpentine-filled coffee cans. It is as if Mesches reduces the representational to paint, only to quickly re-politicize it. And by repoliticize, I mean that he painted protest signs in 1946, and in 1966, and in 2003, on the eve of Iraq. On the flip side, the FBI helped him clean out his studio in 1956.

Long in the belly of the myth-making Hollywood beast, the painter can’t help but glean some of his subject matter from popular cinema. His paintings are of clowns, ice cream cones, car crashes, drive-in theaters. Ships on fire. He appropriates iconic images such as Van Gogh’s smoking skull and David’s “The Death of Marat”

(1793). Taken in total, the exhibition is a collage of the American photographic memory. His proximity to Hollywood affects the work in two ways. The subject matter deals heavily with the American mythology, yet it is his modes of deployment—collage and montage latent inside the traditional picture plane—which most poignantly speak to the ruptures inside the bodies of Americans. The relationship to the viewer is always stable—as in a cinema, it’s a standard chasm between the seat and the screen—allowing the paintings to be seen as unruly attempts to condense multi-temporal narratives into a solid picture frame.

Moreover, Curator Kim Levine’s decisions in hanging the show provide no easy entry points or exits; the galleries all jockey for position, the sight lines are pretzeled. In this bedlam, the paintings’ symbols take decades to manifest out of the celluloid fog, and then slip back again. Mesches cleaves into the American mythology in the same manner, revealing startling connections. It’s not just the use of consumer objects that in retrospect seem invented only to serve as arbiters of our unconscious. He paints with just enough abstraction to allow signifiers to slide.

A favorite of mine is “Three Chandeliers” (1987). The acrylic on canvas shows an anonymous male figure, somewhere between boy and man, mid-step towards the viewer with two dead birds in his hands. Above his head are three chandeliers, the crystals painted almost identically like the feathers of the dead birds. In a moment of felicity, the security guard came up to me and unknowingly proved exactly what I hadn’t even discovered yet. Looking at the young man—he could be out of August Sander or out of John Dos Passos, such is the part of his hair—and then looking at the limp, dead, dangling birds, she turned to me and said, “that boy looks like Ryan Gosling.”

The compositions are dreamlike. Describing the subject matter, they might encompass the group fantasies of the *American Graffiti* cast. But seeing these paintings is another experience. They can be described as the trash heaps of a Hollywood set, which is, as Nathanael West reminds us in *The Day of the Locust*, “a dream dump. A Sargasso of the imagination! And the dump grew continually, for there wasn’t a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn’t sooner or later turn up on it...” Perhaps this direct engagement with our dreams, or our politics, hasn’t always been in vogue, but we can thank Mesches for being there.