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MATHEW CERLETTY



In the early 2000s, a young painter emerged on the New York art scene, known for his hauntingly seductive figure paintings of friends and family members, executed in bright, bold colors and often set against elaborate wallpaper motifs. Mathew Cerletty, who shows at Rivington Arms gallery in New York, could have remained his generation's premier portrait artist. But in the last few years the 28-year-old Wisconsin native went in a completely different direction, creating strangely confrontational sign and word pieces that range from bizarre koans like "The Feeling is Mutual" to "Diet Coke" logos. Turns out, the words are just as autobiographical.

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN: When you first made your name as a painter, you were doing very traditional figurative work. A couple of years ago, you started making very minimalist sign paintings. Were you just tired of portraits?

MATHEW CERLETTY: There were a lot of practical reasons, like the fact that the people I would ask to pose never really wanted to do it; it was always very awkward and inevitably the person I painted would be really weirded out by the result, like, "Ah . . . You made me look creepy." Also, figure painting was all that I was really taught in school. When I moved to New York, I got a crash course in the last 50 years of art history. I wasn't really drawn to figure paintings when I went to gallery shows.

BOLLEN: There are a lot of labels on your canvases, but rather offbeat choices, like The Economist or Diet Coke. Are you picking things close at hand?

CERLETTY: It's totally just me, whatever I'm into at the time. There's a gestation period I'm not fully in control of. I had a subscription to The Economist, and I thought, Oh, I could paint that, which at the time seemed really stupid. But six months would pass, and I'd look at it, and I could still imagine it being a painting. If some time passes and I can't shake it, then I usually pursue it.

BOLLEN: What about the random catchphrases, like your painting I Love Exercise?

CERLETTY: That's a long story. It's from when a friend and I got trapped in the subway tunnels in Boston. We were there after hours, and we got locked in the subway, and this strange homeless-looking guy let us out. He was really scary. And at one point he said, "I love exercise." It was sort of inspired, I thought. So I painted those words.

BOLLEN: What are you working on now?

CERLETTY: I'm doing a painting of roses. It's an endless painting. It's a pattern from a fabric I found by this company called Scalamandré-Jackie O was a big fan.

BOLLEN: You were brilliant at painting brocades in wallpapers, which is so specialized. But then you have a very quick and simple style of painting, like 1959 x-ed out.

CERLETTY: That was from a picture in The New York Times. There was a woman in a crowd holding that sign, and she was smiling. I downloaded it and then didn't look at it for a long time. But eventually I went back to it and wanted to make my own version of her sign. And I figured out that 1959 was the year [baseball's] Chicago White Sox won their last pennant [prior to 2005]. But what I thought was cool was the idea of protesting a year that already happened.

BOLLEN: Yeah, fuck 1959.