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ART

Mark Joshua Epstein Shapes Paintings as a Way to Push Back on Conventions

By Andrew Huff,
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Mark Joshua Epstein, "Study of First and Last All of a Sudden," 2022 acrylic on artist made metal/temple glass panel, 37.25 x 28.50 x 2 inches, photo by Elvira Frossard, courtesy of the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery.

The career of artist Mark Joshua Epstein is on a decidedly upward trajectory. After relocating from New York City a few months before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Epstein was afforded the physical and mental space to expand upon a multidisciplinary practice that incorporates painting, works on paper, photography, and site-specific projects. This shift has resulted in an impressive evolution of his practice and tactile process of artmaking across his chosen mediums.

A core focus for his current exhibition at Asya Geisberg Gallery, on view through February 18, is a series of new shaped paintings that directly and indirectly refer to many significant elements that the artist has encountered throughout his life: the history of interior design, Art Deco, and cut paper pieces created in Jewish communities in Eastern Europe during the 1700s and 1800s. Epstein's exploration of the shaped painting connects to the history of artists who have pioneered this approach to artmaking through a wholly singular style that expands the genre and offers a delightful and curious experience through which to

experience this body of work.



Mark Joshua Epstein, courtesy of the artist.

We sat down with Epstein to talk about the process of preparing for this exhibition, key influences, and his current residency at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, MA.

WHITEWALL: Can you tell us about the impetus for this show and new body of work?

MARK JOSHUA EPSTEIN: I've been working towards this show for about a year and a half. The shaped paintings and works on paper feel like the culmination of so many lines of inquiry that came together in ways I couldn't have predicted, but when I see them installed in the same space, the disparate threads make a lot of sense to me. I moved away from New York City a few years ago, right before the pandemic, really, and I think since then I've been processing ideas of home and community, and the myriad ways a person can be connected to a space. The current works take

inspiration from a host of seemingly unrelated sources, but they all come together in parts of my own experience.

Recently, I became interested in these amazing, intricate 18th- and 19th-century cut paper pieces that were made in Jewish communities in Eastern Europe that are now nearly extinct. I grew up with contemporary versions of these around my parents' house, but the older works are much more transportive for me. These papercuts were like talismans that hung in people's homes—for good luck or to highlight certain liturgical passages—and you can tell that they were made with such care and love. My grandfather left Poland when he was about three years old and ended up on Long Island, where he eventually became the co-owner of a furniture store. I have memories of hanging out in that store as a kid, walking through a late-80s landscape of pastel-hued laminate home furnishings. Somehow, the elegant curved corners of these moderately priced, low-slung dressers made a lasting impression on me. In this weird way, his journey is in these paintings. He died just a few years ago and we were very much alike (and looked alike)—I think about him daily.

WW: You specifically mention how the interior design magazine, *NEST*, was a core influence both from a young age and specifically in connection to works in this show. Can you talk about your earliest memories of flipping through his magazine, and how those experiences led to this work on view now?



Mark Joshua Epstein, "Using Future Language to Describe the Present," 2022, acrylic on artist made resin/fiberglass panel, 35 x 28 x 2 inches, photo by Etienne Frossard, courtesy of the artist and Aya Geisberg Gallery.

MJE: *NEST* has always felt like a queer publication to me. The first issue came out right around the time I graduated high school, and I can remember driving to a Border's Bookstore in my Maryland suburb and just cherishing these magazines. There is so much there, but issues of the magazine were often exuberantly shaped, so initially, there was a formal attraction. And then it was just a magazine of other worlds—gay worlds, cheeky worlds, colorful worlds, ugly worlds. I remember reading about Nayland Blake covering a room (several rooms?) in gingerbread panels, and Sol LeWitt and David Tremlett's Barolo chapel in Northern Italy, and just being entranced by possibilities that I didn't know existed. The magazine was a portal. Sometimes it had jokey nudity for no real reason other than to titillate. It was a thrilling thing to find as a teenager.

When I came back to it as an adult, reassembling as many of the issues as I could get my hands on, it became clear that all of this interest in interior spaces, in domestic care, in personal style explored through furniture arrangement and wallpaper choices—it was all related to having these Jewish and queer identities, to ideas of spaces where complicated intersectionalities could be celebrated. And the page layouts themselves were often irreverent mashups—photos documenting various places surrounded by ornate borders. It was postmodern graphic design. It felt both ridiculously important and also just ridiculous to me then, and still does.

WW: There is such a significant legacy of shaped paintings in post-war art, with artists like Elizabeth Murray, Ellsworth Kelly, and Frank Stella thinking beyond the constraints of a conventional application or format of art making. Is this something you think about in your work as well?

MJE: All of those artists are touchstones. I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with Murray's "Do the Dance" when I worked at MoMA, and that piece continues to mesmerize me. That painting is a party: it's kinetic, but she's also deadly serious. I got to meet Frank Stella briefly years ago when I was helping record the kid's audio guide for his Whitney show, and he was very gracious. His Polish Village series is particularly resonant to me—they're based in part on a book about wooden synagogues that were destroyed during the war. Ellsworth Kelly, whose work I first saw at the National Gallery of Art in DC when I was

growing up, has always stood out for me because of his queerness. I feel a kinship with him. But I also really resonate with shaped paintings by Black artists like Ed Clark, Sam Gilliam, and Al Loving, who were all, to my mind, encoding their works with history and identity and resistance through the language of abstraction.



Mark Joshua Epstein, "Rescue Us, From Level Headedness," 2022, acrylic on artist made resin/fiberglass panel 35 x 28 x 2 inches, photo by Etienne Frossard, courtesy of the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery.

Speaking from my own experience as a queer artist, it seems like when you're an artist from any kind of marginalized group, there's both internal and external pressure to make work that puts recognizable markers of identity front and center, but I've always been suspicious of that idea. I think there's power in camouflage, in not disclosing everything immediately to a viewer. I'm interested in, and deeply in awe of, artists who push back, who do what they're going to do in a time when it might be unpopular. I think for me, making shaped works has always been a subtle pushback to conventional expectations of what a painting is allowed to be, what space it is allowed to inhabit. It still feels subversive, despite (or because of) all of these brilliant artists who've paved the way.

WW: I'm curious about the textural quality of your paintings. How did you start working with these materials to achieve the visceral effects on each surface?

MJE: I knew when I started to dream up ideas for three-dimensional paintings that I didn't want to make the supports in a woodshop. It was a question of flexibility—I needed to create panels in a manner that would allow me to change my mind, refine my forms, and easily add and subtract. I wanted to start with a material I could cut with a box cutter, and so that was going to be some kind of foam. For a few years I worked with green insulation foam and covered it in epoxy clay, but it was wildly laborious. When I made the choice to scale the work up for a show at Ortega y Gasset in Brooklyn, I knew I was going to have to switch support materials. That's when I started researching resins and fiberglass.



Mark Joshua Epstein, "Pulling Threads on Other People's Sweaters," 2022, acrylic on artist made resin/fiberglass panel, 35.50 x 28.50 x 2 inches, photo by Etienne Frossard, courtesy of the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery.

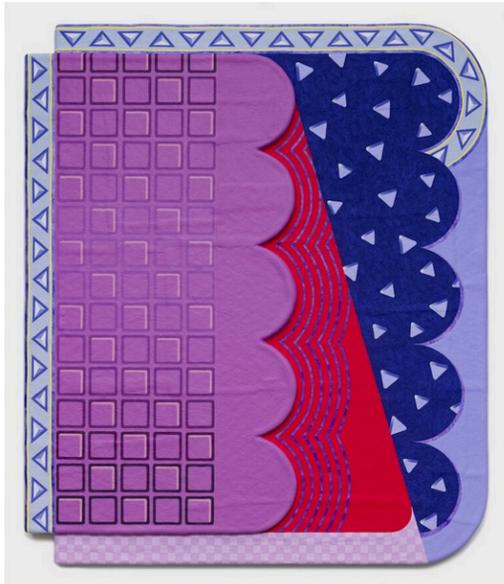
The materials that I worked with before gave the paintings a surface that was textured, and I knew I wanted to keep that aspect of things. Creating intentional speed bumps in a ground preparation to prevent any possibility of perfection is interesting to me because I'm always trying to emphasize the hand—the labor and care that goes into making these works. Fabricating the panels is always a lengthy process, but it's one I enjoy because it lets me get to know each panel intimately. I apply layers of resin and fiberglass to encase an otherwise vulnerable foam material in a shell. Because of the nature of the materials, as the original foam panels are enrobed, their sharp edges become rounded. They start to become more approachable, more organic, more body-like.

WW: How do you approach your works on paper? Do you see these as sketches for future 3D works, or as an organic extension of your multidimensional practice?

MJE: Finishing a group of shaped works is like a crescendo: at the end, the studio is covered in little pots of paint, there are brushes all over the place, it's a mess. Works on paper are made right after this time, in the quiet pauses between shaped works. Often I'm using leftover paint and working with some of the shapes from a just-finished painting in order to play out different compositional possibilities. Works on paper are about discovery. The physicality required to make them is also so much less intense than the larger works, so sitting down with them can be a kind of vacation. It's also really useful for me to return to the rectangular support of the paper and see what I can do to make it more interesting. The back and forth between three-dimensional shaped works and the smaller two-dimensional rectilinear works is typically very fruitful for me.

WW: Can you talk about your time as a current Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center (FWAC) in Provincetown, and how this opportunity has impacted your practice?

MJE: I arrived at the Fine Arts Work Center in early October for a seven-month fellowship which essentially lasts through the entire off-season in Provincetown, which is a big summertime destination since it's right on the tip of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. It's a fellowship I've wanted to do for a very long time, and so it still feels like a dream to be here. The Center is very close to the ocean—everything in town is, really—and just practically, it's an amazing setup for working. I have a small apartment a few yards away from a big, luxurious studio. Being here means if I want to work until the wee hours, I don't have to drive home afterward. I can go for runs along the ocean to refuel. And, best of all, I have the privilege of being in community with 19 other fellows—half writers and half artists—as well as local artists, the artists and writers on staff at the work center, and the visiting artists that have joined us this year: Josephine Halvorson, Duane Slick, Golnar Adili, and Tomashi Jackson. I can already tell that this experience will reverberate in my work for the rest of my life. Just the gift of time, and of conversation—it's unbelievable. I feel very lucky.



Mark Joshua Epstein, "An Amazing Way to Start a Finale," 2022 acrylic on artist made resin/fiberglass panel, 35 x 30 x 2 inches, photo by Etienne Frossard, courtesy of the artist and Aya Geisberg Gallery.

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