

# TRUE BELIEVERS



BRIAN MORRIS GALLERY

Koestenbaum, Franklin, Knoll

# *TRUE BELIEVERS*

JANUARY 22 – FEBRUARY 21, 2015



Text by Geoffrey Young

BRIAN MORRIS GALLERY  
163 CHRYSTIE STREET  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK



## WAYNE KOESTENBAUM

Because eye and brain work together with such speed, often we find ourselves on the street, or in galleries, arcades, boardwalks, or back-rooms, wholly vulnerable to what crosses our path, be it beauty or ugliness, banality or the exquisite, well before the rational mind can put this vision in perspective. That we don't lose our balance attests to how normal it is for sight to grab us, how able we are to handle incoming photons as part of what being alive is. There's plenty of time later to think about it, after all, if reflection has its way.

The writer Wayne Koestenbaum is also the painter Wayne Koestenbaum, and if his essays take us on trips through personal memory and cultural reflection, his paintings might be thought to share in a like methodology. It is a truism in writing that first sentences lead to second sentences, just as first paragraphs lead to second paragraphs; the printed word leaves only its linear track. But of painting can it be said that there's a beginning, or an end? And if the viewer is never privy to how a picture is made?

Wayne's wandering line & jumpy color lead us on, it's true, his marks made in the confidence that accumulation itself will be its own reward. The viewer grabs on to any Koestenbaum detail, at any point in the largely abstract picture, and follows the quirky play of movement, collision, pile-up, color shifts, & matter-of-fact brushwork, around and around, the eye restlessly surveying the wondrous space.

Wayne is a celebrant. If he embeds allusions to literary sources, they are private ones, not part of what is immediately, warmly improvised before our eyes. His line can amass, or it can remain edge, touch, contain. His shapes proliferate, nest, cluster, escape, clamber, preen, and move on. A cartographer of momentary pleasures, color makes his day. Then we ask ourselves, where are these sites? Are

they over there (as on a wall), or down there (as in a bird's eye view), or are they right here (like the air), urbane summaries as natural born surroundings?

The primaries lead him on, find ways of rhyming, surprising, sometimes perplexing. Our eyes cover the waterfront, the shoreline, the Easter orgy, the isolate flecks, the growling dog, the fits and starts, and the growing vegetation, as long as things don't add up, nor even show up, as such. Being IN these works is what he wants for our eyes: jostled, seduced, amalgamated. A tour director, Wayne's paintings are exotic locations, visitable by anyone with an appetite for harmonic confession, quirky dislocation, intestinal fortitude.







## PHILIP KNOLL

When is irony sincere, and sincerity suspect? For that matter, when is sentiment sentimental? And when is humor serious? Cartoonists work the seams of these questions (wit, pratfall, dumbness, brilliance), with a long history to support our reading of them. Painters, staged at the edge of popular culture, must negotiate these same codes, exploit various comfort zones in the service of other orders of business.

Philip Knoll's been mining the instability of meaning's terrain for twenty-five years, applying his sly wit and virtuosic drawing in the effort to wow, provoke, and entertain us. It might appear ghoulish, initially, to see him transform handsome matinee idol Rock Hudson into a heavy-browed werewolf with fangs, but isn't that what the culture did to Rock, when it was clear he was dying of AIDS? He became the butt of endless jokes, homophobic, sheepish, mean-spirited. Knoll saw it happen, and remembers what American culture can do to a star.

Sometimes a kitten is just a kitten, even with fur-markings whose stripes resemble a furrowed brow. Not kitsch at all, Knoll's poster-child kitten, besides being adorable (can a kitten be a surrogate self-portrait?), is sober with sincerity, engaging us with steady gaze. Feed me, love me, pity me, but don't forget to value me. The ultimate head-shot, this feline actor is infused with presence, courtesy of watercolor, graphite and the generous eye of the artist.

To be out on a limb: is this the condition of love explored in "Niche"? Joined-at-the-hip monkeys, their long tails (like jungle vines) curled around branches for support, this couple has each other, sharing satisfaction and fate in the misty branches of a forest. How precarious is life in the wild? How important is love in the kitchen? Hold on for dear life!

What a treat it is to see the structure of a grid in the service of image rather than geometric abstraction. And don't we humans like to recognize the celebrated? Knoll ranges through the face directory with stamina and cunning, stocking his "Babes" and "Studs" with deathless examples. Whose face is memorable? Which stars will be a challenge to draw and a presence if caught? Who is that next to Steve McQueen? Which movie, what TV program, what canonical photo? These image grids, besides being graphic tours de force, are warehouses of the half-remembered lives we've all shared.

Raphael inherited the subject of Madonna and child as an historical given. Picasso painted his wife and child, shorn of courtly scenes, fully aware of the long history of the theme. When Knoll addresses the subject, he's got choices. Mock it, undermine it, alter it. In "Something Wonderful" he has created a hybrid. Rather than JC, the Madonna cradles a rabbit in her arms, surrounded by art historical putti and gaseous effluvia, through which we can still see the outlines of the subject, if we try. Not satirical, not a laughing matter, but not lacking in critique, either. A subtle use of the primary colors lights the familiar scene, even as conventional notions of representation and God are being questioned.











## JOHN FRANKLIN

Organized into variously colored dots on monochrome fields that suggest forever, John Franklin's pictures are cosmic fictions, chastely cleansed to protect pleasure from being swallowed up in the gas of violent space. Painting is not a contact sport, even if we know the world to be a bumpy place. Rather, painting is a field of inquiry proposing alternate realities. John Franklin's work bubbles up from particular choices: precision-tuned design, elegant color, serene distribution of info (even if metaphorically unstable). His modernism is neither post, nor pre; his abstraction suggests, delights, enlarges. His colors stay where he puts them, even as the soup of his vision seems stirred by a very large spoon in a kitchen beyond human ken.

How does he do it? In the above mentioned "dot" paintings he distributes a wide range of colors on what is "the field," then he affixes a layer of felt over these colors, a sensuous layer of felt with perfectly round holes cut into it. The holes are of various sizes. They permit us to see only the clear bright colors on the field "below." In the making of them, a paper template marks the holes' centers, then the holes are hand-punched, using sharp steel dies.

In successive paintings, Franklin changes the color of the field, as well as the colors of the dots, allowing the works, despite their same layout, to take on unique personalities. It is only curious to note that the works share the same layout, so different in feeling are "Night Whistled Down the Chimney," "All Flesh Is Cream," and "It Is Life I Am Burning With."

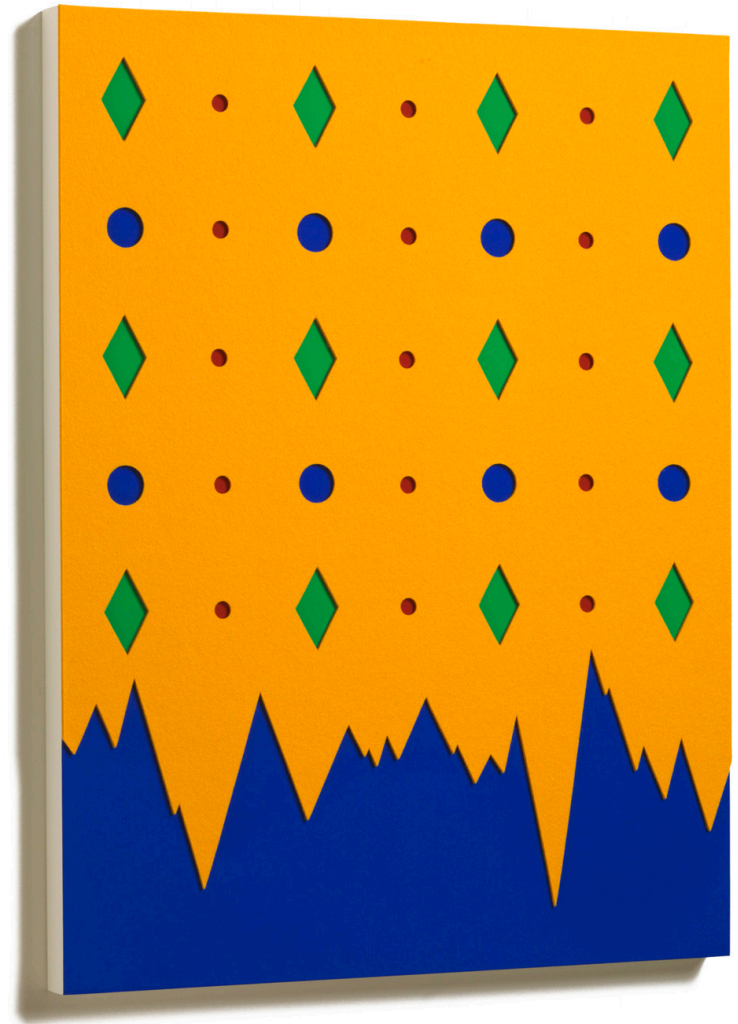
Since no particular dot color predominates, we witness an egalitarian celebration: green, blue, red, yellow, pink, etc. Each color gets its due, in all sizes. The cosmos may be endlessly transforming, but John's versions lock it down, once and for all, because pictures are not raw nature (*pace* Pollock). Franklin's use of felt, itself, as sur-

face texture, owes little or nothing to Beuys or Robert Morris, for example; their narratives served other purposes. The viewer gets the sense that Franklin likes the feel of felt, that he's happy to exploit its "skin." As a material in painting, his use of felt is not weighed down by mysticism or memory.

In other works Franklin introduces crisply cut diamond forms, and rough horizon-lines of jagged shapes. The world out there doesn't look like a Franklin painting, but we sense his intent to praise nature's bounty, nonetheless. Stars, planets, moons, night skies, and mountain ranges are not so much quoted, as alluded to, obliquely, ordered by the maker's hand to line up as seriously as a Mondrian right angle. Color, always pure, is as specific and telling as the words in a poem.

In "Rain Bathes the Rainbow," the painting is riven (fractured, split, ripped) by a jagged tear (out of the blue), as in a lightning strike. This powerful intrusion divides the orderly and sensitively-colored distribution of circles (dots), leaving the two halves to deal with their fate, their factual separation. This may not be a tragedy, however. It may be the way the modern mind works: divided, subject to doubt, aware of schism and fracture, but essentially "of a piece."





*True Believers*, in order of appearance

**Wayne Koestenbaum**

*Água Viva*, 2014, 48 x 36 inches, oil, Flashe, acrylic, & acrylic marker on canvas  
*The Vagabond*, 2014, 48 x 36 inches, oil, Flashe, acrylic, & acrylic marker on canvas  
*Everything Is Nice*, 2014, 48 x 36 inches, oil, Flashe, acrylic, and ink on canvas  
*A Novel of Thank You*, 2014, 48 x 36 inches, oil, Flashe, acrylic, & ink on canvas  
*Nightwood*, 2014, 48 x 36 inches, oil, Flashe, acrylic, ink, & acrylic marker on canvas  
(back cover)

**Philip Knoll**

*Kitten*, 2013, 41" x 41" graphite and watercolor on paper  
*Niche*, 2012, 45" x 37" watercolor and graphite on paper  
*Verism*, 2012, 22.5" x 83.25" graphite and watercolor on paper  
*Something Wonderful*, 2012, 41" x 41" graphite and watercolor on paper  
*Babes*, 2014, 18.5" x 18.5" graphite on paper

**John Franklin**

*Night Whistled Down the Chimney*, 2014, 40 x 32" Wool felt, vinyl acrylic paint, gesso on wood panel. (front cover)  
*All Flesh is Cream*, 2014, 40 x 32" Wool felt, vinyl acrylic paint, gesso on wood panel  
*It Is Life I Am Burning With*, 2014, 40 X 32" Wool felt, vinyl acrylic paint, gesso on wood panel  
*Rains Bathe the Rainbow*, 2013, 26 X 16" Wool felt, vinyl acrylic paint, gesso on wood panel  
*Pure Mind, Jealous Heart*, 2013, 26 x 20" Wool felt, vinyl acrylic paint, gesso on wood panel

**True Believers**

January 22 - February 21, 2015

**Brian Morris Gallery**  
163 Chrystie St.  
New York, NY 10002

[brianmorrisingallery.com](http://brianmorrisingallery.com)

General Inquiries  
[info@brianmorrisingallery.com](mailto:info@brianmorrisingallery.com)

P: +1(347) 938 2931

Gallery Hours  
Wednesday – Sunday 12-6pm

