

Christopher Mir / MATRIX 157

Dreams, Memories, Reflections

October 4, 2007 – January 6, 2008



Wadsworth
Atheneum
Museum of Art

THE ARCHETYPAL ARTIST

For his first solo museum exhibition, New Haven-based painter Christopher Mir presents a unique style of painting that emerges directly from his interest in collage and accumulative image making. Over the past five years, Mir has culled hundreds of pictures from random sources—magazines, coffee table books on national parks, calendars, and the Internet. These images, along with Mir's own photographs, form the basis for each painting—a compilation of unrelated scenes stitched together digitally and translated onto canvas. Each painting begins with a landscape, rendered in oil or acrylic, upon which the artist positions figures, animals, machines, and buildings. This careful orchestration of incongruous elements and highly distinct spatial relationships gives each painting a dream-like quality, which recalls the work of Surrealist painters, such as Salvador Dalí and René Magritte. Like the Surrealists, Mir is deeply influenced by psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung.¹ Jung's writings on spirituality, "synchronicity" (the recurrence of closely related coincidences), and dreams provide a rich intellectual framework for Mir's paintings, as do the artist's studies in anthropology. Through his interest in Native American traditions and primitive religions, Mir has developed a distinct visual language of archetypal figures and situations that appear in nearly every painting. His principal cast of characters includes the wanderer, the sorceress, the innocent child, and the spirit animal, all of whom play a critical role in the constructed dramas.



Mir's paintings invite us to experience a series of paradoxical relationships and unsettling juxtapositions. His figures and landscapes are drawn from specific sources yet remain anonymous; his painting style is relatively tight and refined, but his works are emotionally evocative and resonant. Mir's narratives are equally complex and replete with provocative dichotomies such as, the mystical versus the physical, the spiritual versus the secular, and the primal versus the futuristic.

Consider, for example, *Echo* (2007), in which a female figure stands amidst a herd of stallions. In the background, two structures sit on the horizon, a mirrored monolith and a towering crane, representing the dual threats of commerce and industry. Overhead, a black helicopter signals the looming threat of military force. The barren desert landscape suggests the spiritual sterility of corporate culture. In contrast,

the sky is alight with magic. An arc of small glowing orbs unifies the composition, and suggests the passage of time and the spirit world above. The orb is a recurring motif in Mir's paintings, and serves as a counterpoint to the presence of earthly pursuits.² The hovering lights are just one of several mystical symbols in *Echo*. The group of horses in the foreground is similarly portentous, and recalls an earlier painting by Mir, *Skylake* (2006), which features a female figure in the foreground, and majestic line of white horses galloping in the background. In both pictures, the horses represent the primal drives of mankind and the spirit world. Horses were a favorite archetype of Carl Jung, representing power and fertility, like the female figure at the center of each painting. Strong and sensuous, these women offer spiritual nourishment for Mir's psychic world, and yet they remain anonymous and emotionally remote. Their expressions are as enigmatic as the scenes themselves.

In *Believe ESP* (2007), Mir provides even less access to the identity of the mysterious central figure, depicted from behind on a sandy shore. The image is among Mir's simplest compositions, comprised of four primary elements—a child, a horse, an airplane, and a building. The viewer's gaze, like that of the child, is directed skyward toward a jet ascending into smoky gray clouds. In the background, another corporate edifice perches on a rocky hilltop. The picture has haunting associations with the tragedies of 9/11, but this is not the intended message. Rather, Mir describes the profound sense of isolation and detachment that has come to define contemporary society. This message is also conveyed in Mir's group paintings.

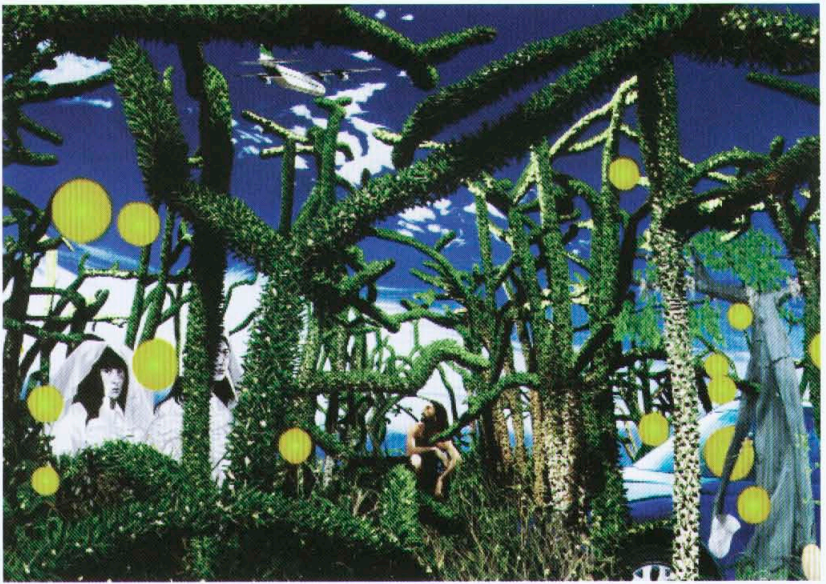


Second Sight and *Mortal Mirror*, both from 2006, are dense compositions populated by a motley group of wanderers. However, the figures appear disconnected from each other and the environment they inhabit. Mir accentuates the tension between figure and ground, and between individual and group by employing specific painting techniques and styles, such as grisaille and photorealism.³ Mir's use of grisaille is particularly evident in *Second Sight*, where two women painted only in gray huddle beneath a canopy of verdant cacti limbs. They are pallid interlopers amidst a chromatic awakening. Similarly, in *Mortal Mirror* an array of hyperreal figures are dispersed across the picture plane. The finely modulated details of each figure contrasts sharply with the loosely painted background. The affect is both appealing and mystifying, as if a Calvin Klein model stepped from the pages of *Vogue* magazine into a fairytale landscape of alpine meadows. In fact, the characteristic strangeness of



Mir's work over the past five years is due in large part to the practice of transplanting figures from magazines and the Internet directly into his paintings. Recently, however, Mir transitioned from using magazine images as inspiration to painting from his own photographs, and the new process has yielded a marked stylistic shift.

Truth Hits Everybody (2007) is indicative of Mir's new aesthetic. While the figures remain isolated from one another, they are now more fully integrated into the scene. This heightened visual coherence is a direct result of Mir's new working method. For the past eight months, Mir has taken hundreds of photographs of friends, family, and even complete strangers who are willing to perform for the camera. The process has brought Mir's invented worlds to life, and allowed the artist to witness the unfolding of mythic dramas that before he could only imagine. Mir's newest paintings reflect the personal connection he now shares with



each figure and scene. His brushstrokes are looser and more expressive, creating an even more convincing dream-like atmosphere. Ultimately, what makes this picture, and all of Mir's art so compelling is the way he negotiates both formal and thematic terrain so adeptly. We are captivated by his recurring images, seduced by his bold use of color, and enthralled by his open-ended stories.

Joanna Marsh

*The James Dicke Curator of Contemporary Art
Smithsonian American Art Museum*

¹ The title of Mir's MATRIX exhibition is based on Jung's 1961 autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, written a year before his death.

² In Mir's most recent painting, *The Message* (2007), a small child and robed woman are connected by a similar array of floating spheres.

³ Grisaille is a painting technique in which only shades of gray are used.



Truth Hits Everybody, 2007. Oil on canvas

Generator, 2006. Oil on canvas

Christopher Mir

Born in Baltimore, Maryland, 1970
Lives and works in Hamden,
Connecticut

Education

1995-1997
M.F.A. Painting/Printmaking
Boston University School for the Arts,
Boston

1988-1992
B.A. Painting and Anthropology
Marlboro College, Marlboro, VT

Solo Exhibitions

2006
Second Sight, RARE gallery,
New York, NY

2004
Hello Daylight, RARE gallery,
New York, NY

2003
New Work, Simon Watson's loft,
New York, NY

Group Exhibitions

2003
Collective Conscious, curated by
Simon Watson, Mavi, New York, NY

The Burnt Orange Heresy, curated
by David Hunt, Space 101,
Williamsburg, NY

Labor Day, curated by
David Hunt, RARE, New York, NY

Proper Villains, curated by
David Hunt, Art Space,
New Haven, CT

2002
The Accelerated Grimace, curated
by David Hunt, Daniel Silverstein
Gallery, New York, NY

2001
Emerging Artists Exhibition,
The Aldrich Museum of
Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT

MATRIX 157 has been made possible by the current and founding members of the Contemporary Coalition: Mickey Cartin, The Cheryl Chase and Stuart Bear Family Foundation, Mary and David W. Dangremond, Emilie and Raul R. de Brigard, Howard and Sandra Fromson, Nancy D. Grover and Robinson A. Grover, Carol and Sol LeWitt, Jeffrey G. and Marcia Reid Marsted, The Ritter Foundation, The Saunders Foundation, Philip and Robin Schonberger, Linda Cheverton Wick and Walter Wick.

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WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works courtesy of the artist and RARE Gallery, New York unless otherwise noted.

Day One, 2006

Oil on canvas
42 x 72 inches
Collection of Malcolm and Virginia Nicholls

Generator, 2006

Oil on canvas
48 x 54 inches

Murmurs of the Earth, 2006

Oil on canvas
46 x 46 inches

Overflow, 2006

Oil on canvas
54 x 54 inches

Second Sight, 2006

Oil on canvas
68 x 96 inches

Sudden Sun, 2006

Oil on canvas
32 x 32 inches

Believe ESP, 2007

Oil on canvas
30 x 40 inches
Collection of Malcolm and Virginia Nicholls

Echo, 2007

Oil on canvas
48 x 72 inches

The Message, 2007

Oil on canvas
48 x 72 inches

Truth Hits Everybody, 2007

Oil on canvas
48 x 72 inches

MATRIX Talk

6 p.m.

Thursday, October 4, 2007

Christopher Mir will give an informal talk about his work in the MATRIX gallery.



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www.wadsworthatheneum.org